

**The Biopolitics of Violence in the Drama of the Niger Delta**

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**AJMOBI001**

**Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy in African Studies**

**School of African & Gender Studies, Anthropology & Linguistics**

University of Cape Town

**Faculty of Humanities  
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN  
South Africa  
December 2018**

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## **Acknowledgement**

A truly special thank you to my supervisor, Professor Harry Garuba, whose guidance and support has been sustaining ever since I arrived in Cape Town. His commitments to thinking across disciplinary lines and deep theoretical insight have made this thesis possible. Thank you to Dr. Irene Oshioke for reaching out to me and offering tremendous suggestions on the work. 'Meeting' him in the Facebook group, African Doctoral Lounge, was a rewarding encounter. Many thanks to Professor Corinne Kratz whose queries about the progress of my work mattered a great deal in the timely completion of the thesis. Her feedback on the first draft of chapter two as well as suggestions during the Secret Affinities Workshop in Johannesburg was instrumental in providing lineament in the work between theory and data. Thanks to my SSRC family – especially Dr. Tom Asher, Professor Charles Ukeje, Dr Steve Akoth and Professor Sarah Ssali – you made the difference through the years of my fellowship, facilitating workshops with such agreeable ease that never upset the status quo with my supervisor. And my lecturers at the University of Ghana who made the transition to UCT a smooth one: Dr. Awo Mana Asiedu who was my Mphil Supervisor, Dr Ossei Agyeman and Dr. Samuel Benagr. I appreciate and benefit from your encouragements.

This project was predominantly funded by Social Science Research in Africa (SSRC) and University of Cape Town International Student Scholarship. The research was further supported by an Ivan Karp Doctoral Research Award through the African Critical Inquiry Programme, a partnership between the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape and the Laney Graduate School of Emory University and funded by the Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz Fund. Also, many thanks to Heinrich Böll Foundation whose travel grant afforded me the opportunity to share my research with International Society of Environmental Ethics (ISEE) at the

University of Kiel, Germany, culminating in long-lasting friendships with environmentalist scholars who continue to inspire my interest in debates around environment and ecology.

I wish to thank my family for their support – sometimes moral, other times directly practical in the everyday business of writing, reading and sorting materials: Fidelia and Leticia, my daughter Vanessa and “the guys” -- Henry Jnr and Richard. Not forgetting my South African family, ‘The Davids’, no less Mama and Papa, who made Cape Town a home in every sense.

## **Dedication**

To my mom, Otubo:  
Whose dream this is!

&

To my dad, too  
Because not to dream  
Is not to be averse...

*Dalu nu sor!*

## **ABSTRACT**

The representation of the Niger Delta insurgency in cultural texts is often registered from the viewpoint of human history, an approach that foregrounds the politics of resistance against the multinational oil corporations in ways that ignore the contribution of the non-human elements in the historical struggles in the region. In this study, I seek to understand the ways that the Niger Delta landscapes and environment are imagined in the works that I describe as the Niger Delta drama. Drawing on a number of plays to reflect on the different historicisations of spaces in the region, I examine and analyse the ways in which these spaces exercise social and political agencies in the unfolding events in the region. I tentatively delineate the region's history into two analytic epochs: pre-oil and oil modernity Niger Delta. Though noting the centrality of the creeks and swamps in both temporal contexts, I argue that the drama of the pre-oil modernity textualised the "ontology of water" as a site of socioeconomic and ecological relations with the people who inhabit the Delta terrain. In the event of oil modernity, these spaces and relationships are reframed in the material transformations of the region's landscape and environment from a site of decay and degradation to that of 'material recalcitrance' and revolt that petro-violence provokes. In that vein, I treat the spaces represented by the creeks as "spaces of exception" – a phrase coined by Giorgio Agamben to explain how political democracies exclude certain zones in order to legitimise state terror – in which biopolitical securitisations are programmatically unleashed on trouble-prone geographies in ways that reduce the citizens to the status of bare-life. Although Agamben has identified the concentration camps as the paradigmatic basis of the modern state of exception, I propose that the creeks of the Delta offer an exemplary case that is consistent with bare life – a space as much excluded as included in the sense of Agamben's paradoxical formulation of *homo sacer*, where life is violently exposed to the state apparatus of repression. Texts situated within the

frame of exclusion and violent geographies deploy a poetics of waste and decay, what I term “environmental scatology” to capture the condition of bare life in the Delta, and reflect on the state of abandonment and invisibility that underwrites the exclusion. At other times, the texts illustrate how the ontology of water and the knowledge that it enables construct the people's mode of resistance, articulating ways in which the seaweeds and crocodiles that inhabit the swamps are entangled in the violent political ecology of the region. I read these texts as inaugurating a truly environmental drama in which the human-nonhuman nature are entangled in the performance of political resistances in the violent geography of the Delta.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION: THE NEED TO RETURN TO THE CREEKS

*The conditions that advanced the need to embrace the creeks have been sadly re-energised, it is clear that a vicious government who may maim and murder the voice of the so-called minorities may have just been birthed... The days coming will be critical, we shall study all the conditions and consult widely before determining the way going forward for our collective existence and survival as a people. The days coming shall either drive the quest of integration or further separate us.<sup>1</sup>*

Alhaji Asari Dokubo, one of the commanders of the ethnic militias that operated during the highpoint of insurgency in the Niger Delta, in the epigraph above encapsulates much of the anxiety in the region after the Nigerian general election of May 29, 2015. His sentiments appear to respond to this anxiety – highlighting a return to the creeks as a means through which the socioeconomic and political conditions of the region can be inscribed within Nigeria’s lopsided federal structure. In an op-ed published immediately after the election, Ogaga Ifowodo underpins this concern as a geopolitical jostle for the centre-stage of Nigerian politics occasioned by the defeat of a sitting president. Titled “So Now What Becomes of the Niger Delta?”, Ifowodo reflects on the electoral loss of President Goodluck Jonathan – an indigene of the region<sup>2</sup> – with the political fate of the region. He argues that “it would be a grave error to mistake the current calm in the creeks for the Niger Delta’s acceptance of its political annihilation to go with its economic expropriation and

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<sup>1</sup>Asari Dokubo. "Buhari's Election: Asari-Dokubo Mulls Returning to the Creeks" *The Sun*, 1 April, 2015. Available at <https://www.latestnigeriannews.com/news/1341240/buharis-election-ataridokubo-mulls-returning-to-the-creeks.html>

<sup>2</sup>Paul Ugor has used the term “an autochthon – a son of the soil” to describe the atmosphere of capitulation and conciliation in the region during the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan, an indigene of Otuoke in Oloibiri village in the Niger Delta where oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in 1956, and to which the “young people in the Delta see as a positive outcome of their armed insurrection against the Nigerian state” (“Survival Strategies” 198). This kind of “subversive acquiescence in the Delta”, as Ugor puts it, underpins the extent to which the contours of resistance are framed by geo-political permutations.

environmental despoliation”<sup>3</sup>. Dokubo’s emphasis on ‘return to the creeks’ – a threat similarly echoed by the other insurgent groups – indicates the implication of the Delta terrain in the process of the struggle. This narrative of return directly alludes to the Amnesty programme implemented by the government of Umaru Musa Yar’Adua in 2009 which marks the event in which the insurgents were officially ‘persuaded’ to suspend violence and evacuate the creeks. In light of this, the invocation of the creeks, or “the simmering wetland”, constitutes a political technology that underscores the intervention of the region’s geo-physical environment in the power relations between the youth insurgents and the biopolitics of the Nigerian state, as well as the manner this spatial power is deployed in negotiating the region into the structure of the country’s political democracy.<sup>4</sup> This perspective of contemplating the Niger Delta inevitably opens up questions of the topography of the region in a manner that draws on the site-specific and geomorphic forces in the performance of insurgency. This fact recalls the theoretical imperative of Jane Bennett’s “political ecology of things”, that Bruce Braun and Sarah Whitmore have also highlighted as “materialization of the political”, one that, in this case, designates the Delta as a space where political transformations are made possible by the material geography of the region”<sup>5</sup>. As Braun and Whitmore write, “materialization of the political has brought into view an ontological alliance between interests in the material propensities, affordances, and affectivities of nonhuman

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<sup>3</sup>Ogaga Ifowodo, “So Now What Becomes Of The Niger Delta?” *Sahara Reporters*, 6 May, 2015. Available at:<http://saharareporters.com/2015/05/06/so-now-what-becomes-niger-delta-ogaga-ifowodo>

<sup>4</sup> The marginalisation of the Niger Delta in the Nigerian federal structure has been a central question in the region’s agitation for resource control beginning with Henry Willink Minorities Commission of Enquiry in 1948.

<sup>5</sup> Other studies that point in the direction of similar scholarship include: Ewa Domanska, “The return to things”. *Archaeologia Polona*, vol. 44, 2006: 171-185; B. Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004; S. Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces*, London: SAGE, 2002; B. Braun and S. Whatmore (eds), *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010; and E. Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanisation of Water: Flows of Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

phenomena and the amplification of embodied human activity” (x). Indeed, this view resonates with the ways in which operations of insurgency in the Niger Delta constitute collaborative forces that underpin significant ontological understanding of the relation between the militants and the creeks and swamps where insurgent operations are planned and implemented. Perhaps, this explains why Raj Desai and Harry Eckstein, in explaining the nature of insurgency, summon the term “syncretic phenomenon” to describe ways in which diverse elements are combined in the act of subversion. In other words, the conception of insurgency underscores a theoretical mix of conditions that include geophysicality of the “operational recipes”. They submit: “The natural habitats of rural insurgents are also those of bandits: mountains, trackless plains, marshlands, and estuaries with their labyrinths of waterways. There they develop skills that are invaluable in insurgent operations” (453). The Niger Delta has a compellingly dramatic geography, or what James Tar Tsaiior describes as “geographic munificence”, that boasts an assemblage of creeks, swamps, rivers, mangrove forests and estuaries, and so on, which affirms the immense biodiversity of the Delta (72). This geographic character fosters a condition of spatiality that makes the Delta terrain difficult to traverse for state operations of military battle or surveillance in the heyday of the insurgency. In other words, the physical geography of the Delta is one that impedes and contests the vulgarity of state power, so that space becomes a stronghold in the construction of the mechanism of resistance in the region. In the essay, “From Oil Rivers to the Niger Delta: The Paradoxes of Dominion and Resistance in Colonial Nigeria”, Charles Ukeje identifies the perspective of geography in the estimation of Niger Delta historiography. He writes: “To sufficiently account for why Delta communities were able to keep Europeans at bay for almost four centuries, this fact of the advantage or otherwise of geography cannot be discounted” (188). He argues that where physical relief of “zones of domination and resistance are mountainous,

waterlogged or plain savannah”, such "vagaries of geography" are wont to determine the option of resistance that the community is able to deploy. Temitope Oriola puts this description of the Delta landscape more aptly “[as] a space that marks [the insurgents] rejection of domination and oppression”. (5) Though Ukeje suggests the need to illuminate the analysis of domination and resistance in ways that acknowledge the different contours and textures of resistance, his survey of the Niger Delta history privileges the nonlinear power relation between colonial authorities and Delta peoples, one that does not account for geography as a critical subject of resistance. Crucially, in a number of important publications that underscore the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta, the American geographer, Michael Watts, also demonstrated the fundamentally anthropocentric dimension of petro-insurgency. This refers particularly to the critical emphasis on the exploits of youth militarism – which proliferated in the region between 2005 and 2009 – such that consigns the geophysical consideration of the region to a condition of absence. He furnishes one such example of the history of insurgency thus:

The shift from non-violent protest to militancy, and ultimately to armed struggle, was in many respects the inevitable result of the Nigerian government’s brutal repression of the Ogoni movement and the murder of its influential and charismatic leader Ken Saro-Wiwa in November 1995. Popular challenges to the so-called ‘slick alliance’ between international oil companies (who operated with total impunity) and the Nigerian state, or more properly a Nigerian military junta (who siphoned oil revenues to powerful ethnic constituencies outside of an impoverished oil region populated by what are referred to locally as ethnic minorities), were met with a lethal combination of repression by notoriously corrupt and violent state security forces and by naked attempts to purchase the consent of the political elites. A decade later the Niger Delta is home to a fully-grown local insurgency. (“Crude Politics” 3).

Though Watts’s assessment tracks the origin of insurgency to the relation of oil and violence, it appears to dwell too much on the culture of arm struggle. A hugely influential figure in the study

of the region, and most renowned for the coinage of the term petro-insurgency, his work contains within it questions of the Delta that opened up a fairly dense body of work that connects crude oil to political subjectivity of youth militarism<sup>6</sup>.

However, Watts' scholarship often seems to register the insurgency largely from the standpoint of what Ewa Domańska phrases as "anthropocentric character of history"—a perspective that fails to account for the exercise of materiality and non-human nature in the history of the struggle in the Niger Delta. Domańska, in his essay, "The Return to Things," reverts to Bruno Latour in asserting that "the social sciences have too exclusively focused on the humans and forgotten about the nonhumans" (184). He makes the point in favour of the hermeneutics of relational epistemology, an ontological proposition in which the human and non-human are related in the exercise of agency. This study attempts to examine the relationship between the creeks of the Niger Delta and the community of people in the region, foregrounding the geography of the region because it is the rallying-point for the theatre of the ethnic insurgents as they seek to contest the biopolitical paradigm of the security apparatuses of the Nigerian State. In contemplating the material geography of the Delta, this dissertation's initial point of reference is the acknowledgement of the "semiotic networks of interactions" in which the "collective of humans and nonhumans" (Latour, "Network" 797) are interwoven in the performance of insurgency. Thus, it is fair to claim that what Dokubo, and indeed other militants who announce desire to "return to the creeks" express is a cultural understanding of the creeks as topographic stronghold and nonhuman co-combatant in the

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<sup>6</sup> Other treatments of the Niger Delta historical struggle in this respect include Caroline Ifejika. "Youth Cultures and the Fetishisation of Violence in Nigeria" *Review of African Political Economy* (2006) 721–36; Augustine Ikelegbe "The Economy of Conflict in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria" *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14(2): (2005) 208–234; Charles Ukeje's "Changing the Paradigm of Pacification: Oil and Militarization in Nigeria's Delta Region." *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, eds. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books, 2011; Paul Ugor. "Survival Strategies and Citizenship Claims: Youth and the Underground Oil Economy in Post-Amnesty Niger Delta". *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 83 (2) (2013): 186–208.

historical resistance in the region. Indeed, the insight that can be drawn from this position is how the topos is constituted by, and constitutive of, the geopolitical forces in the operations of the insurgency, and how the dynamics of this operation suggest a different paradigm in the understanding of insurgency in the region. The reference to the creeks denotes a deep-seated communal and ontological reliance on the material geography in the struggle against the capitalist plunder of the region. It signals a force outside the limits of the human-driven insurgency to engage and exercise agency. This study agrees with Braun and Sandra as they admonish humans “to speak of the performances of things and not just the actions of humans” (“The Stuff of Politics” xx), and to ask questions about ways in which the material environment perform agencies in a volatile political climate as the Niger Delta. How do the creeks, swamps and water bodies of the Niger Delta terrain effectively animate and participate in the collective exercise of political insurgency?

Furthermore, in tracking this function within the context of dramatic representation, it is imperative, then, to interrogate the manner in which theatre refigures a cast of the non-human into a certain kind of dramatic assemblage. Thus, this study maps the boundary of spatiality in the Niger Delta topography in order to capture the shifting contours of geopower and biopolitics as instantiated in the cultural and dramatic imaginations of the Delta. In a sense, this research probes ways in which the terrain of the Niger Delta is inscribed in the centre of dramatic conflicts that in turn transform it into a “performance space” which, in Ngugi’s words, is “a magnetic field of tension and conflict”, one in which the topos is perceived as a site for the “struggle between the arts and the state” (40). The play texts which I examine in this study demonstrate this spatial and geopolitical tension in the Niger Delta by drawing attention to how the agency is invested and expressed in a manner that underpins a bio-centric history of the region's ecological tradition. The

texts mark a distinct critical trajectory of modernity – both pre-oil and oil modernity – within which the narratives are framed to reflect the geopolitics of the terrain, and to reflect on how each phase is rendered in the crisis-ridden eco/environmental drama of the region, each producing a distinct narrative that re-thinks violence within the exercise of the non-human consideration. As indicated above, the timeframe of this dissertation focuses on two epochs in the ecological history of Nigeria’s Niger Delta: “pre-oil modernity” and “oil-modernity Niger Delta” writing. Admittedly inspired by Amitav Ghosh’s notion of oil encounter, Philip Aghovghovwia re-invented the terminologies to mirror the history of petro-imperialism in the Niger Delta through the temporality of modernity<sup>7</sup> (“Dissertation” 26).

In the context of this dissertation, I deploy the terms to understand how significant moments in the region’s history engage differently with capitalist modernity to the extent of highlighting the trajectory of biopolitical violence and insurgency that the history provokes in the region. This consideration is strategic in my selection of the plays listed for this study which demonstrate the different protocols of ecological crises and degradation that each epoch makes manifest in the Niger Delta landscape. Thus, I enlist J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s *The Raft* (1964) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958) to illustrate nature in the pre-oil modernity Niger Delta, a category of periodisation that serves to provide insight into the condition of the landscape and topography of the Delta before the discovery of crude oil. Both plays sketch the Niger Delta as an agrarian space in which the communities struggle in the everyday round of subsistence farming against natural ecological perturbations, privileging the creeks and water bodies as a way of

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<sup>7</sup>The reference to oil in this paradigm of categorisation is crude oil, and not palm oil - another commodity that boasts a grand history in the socioeconomic and political development of the Niger Delta. Indeed, crude oil has since burgeoned to a level ‘culturality’ as evident in the interesting work of Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (eds), *Oil Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. See also, Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the America*, Oxford: University Press, 2014.

engaging not only the vast biodiversity of the Delta, but also the basis on which the region constructs relation with the convergent modernity. On the other hand, plays that belong in the category of oil modernity articulate the oil culture as an expression of the dystopian reality of the Delta spaces and landscape characterised by the insurgency and contestation against violent extractive processes of the multinational oil corporations and the biopolitics of the Nigerian military and other state security forces. In *The Scent of Crude Oil* (2010), Eni Jologho Umuko envisions a new Delta from the ashes and debris of crude oil spillages that caused devastating fire outbreaks in the communities, narrated through tropes of scatological imagination in which the landscapes are subjected to conditions of waste and filth. Binebai's *My Life in the Burning Creeks* (2014) engages further with questions of oil spillages in the creeks occasioned by pipeline vandalism, foregrounding securitisation of the region by the Nigerian military forces in a manner that privileges the creeks and waterways of the Delta as battlegrounds of geopolitical power and territorial resistance. Ahmed Yerimah's two plays considered in the study, *Hard Ground* (2010) and *Ipomu* (2011) explore the landscapes of the Delta by paying attention to how the sea-weeds and species that inhabit the swamps of the region can mediate the activities of the insurgents, and can indeed perform judicial function in the process of militarism. Though some of the selected texts come from dramatists who are not indigenes of the Niger Delta – as Wole Soyinka and Ahmed Yerimah are both from South-Western Nigeria – each of the plays deploys a vital subregional framework in imaginatively registering the region. They all illustrate a tendency to sketch that imagination within a context that underwrites interest in the creeks and swamps, foregrounding ubiquity of place that constitutes a common spatial idiom for all the plays. In so doing, the creeks appear to provide a route for writers registering interest in the Niger Delta. But since oil culture often reproduces a crisis of representation in which “the national frame obscures

the regional impacts” (*Living Oil*12) as Stephanie LeMenager has argued, it is perhaps important to claim that the plays of the non-Deltans offer possibilities to critically interrogate “the regionalist sympathies” (14) that underwrite their interests in writing about the Delta. This thesis ascribes to what Jane Bennett terms giving “voice to a thing-power”(2). Bennett identifies a binary that characterises modern distinction between matter and things as inert on the one hand and human life as vibrant on the other. In this vein, matter exists outside of the purview of history. She critiques this partitioning in the way it has undermined the “vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations” (78). Borrowing from this theoretical conception, I consider three significant approaches through which the Niger Delta theatre includes the landscape and material environment in the history of the struggles. For the most part, these approaches gesture towards the ways in which the spaces are cast as characters in the plays. Hence, firstly, we encounter a moment of environmental harmony which gradual projection into the epoch of modernity offers an apocalyptic glimpse into a world of ecological dystopia.

The second approach is the way in which the landscape is captured with suggestions of decay and pollution often arising from conditions of abandonment, revealing the fullness of the devastating impact of techno-modernity. In other words, hermeneutics of decay and waste are mobilized to give expression to the conditions of the environmental pollution and degradation wrought by transnational oil companies. Finally, the third approach conveys a sense of what Bennett discusses as “material recalcitrance” (1), characterised by a desire for spatial revolt in which nonhuman species in the creeks and water bodies of the Delta are co-opted into the fray of militarism. In a sense, this shift in the mode of dramatic representation in which the nonhuman is invested with

theatrical potential brings this study to the discursive possibilities that rethink theatre within the posthuman<sup>8</sup> context.

## 1.2 THE NIGER DELTA: THE GEOGRAPHY OF RESISTANCE

The historiography of the Niger Delta of Nigeria is profoundly marked by the region's geo-economic relation with oil-based industries. The production of these two types of oil resource – first palm oil, then crude oil – accounts for why the region was once known as “Oil Rivers” (Watts “Sweet & Sour” 7; Peel *Swamp* xvii). Ukeje has informed that the region is the first port of Europe's entry into the west coast of Africa, noting: “Before it was rechristened the Niger Coast Protectorate, the Oil Rivers had the earliest and longest contact with Europeans spanning over six centuries, making it central to the making of the modern entity called Nigeria” (83). This peculiar geopolitical history opens up the region to *along duree* of subjection to Anglo-European capitalist interest such that defines their early insertion into the global political economy as noted by Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas:

It is generally assumed that the exploitation of the peoples of the Niger Delta and the devastation of their environment began when crude oil was discovered in the area by Royal Dutch Shell in 1956. The truth is that Europe's plunder of the Delta, and indeed the entire environment, dates much further back, to 1444, when the Portuguese adventurer and former tax collector, Lancarote de Freitas, sailed to the West African coast and stole 235 men and women whom he later

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of posthumanism that is hinted in this study gestures toward the growing field of contemporary critical discourse – often associated with philosophy and literary theory – that complicates the myths of human exceptionalism in ways that propose the need for non-anthropocentric approach to thinking. Though Cary Wolfe has traced the genealogy of the term to the 1960s (Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), I draw on the inklings of anti-heroism in the early 19th century reflections of modern drama to identify the roots of post-humanist thinking. For more on posthumanism, see Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013; Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008 and Julian Pepperell, *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*, Oregon: Intellect Ltd, 2009.

sold as slaves. De Freitas's trip was to trigger the Atlantic slave trade, which, before it was displaced by the trade in palm oil in the 1840s, saw several million able-bodied young men and women taken from the Delta and its hinterland and shipped to the plantations of North America, South America, and the West Indies (6).

By the nineteenth century the region has supplied tons of palm oil yearly to the burgeoning industry of British economy under the charter of the Royal Niger Company that assumed control of the imperial spheres of interest. The resulting monopoly of the Royal Niger Company over trade in palm oil provoked a revolt by the Ijaw people of Nembe –leading to a British military expedition that recalls the experience of the Nigerian army at the instance of multinational oil corporations in the contemporary petro-violence. In effect, as Ukeje has argued, the paradigm of counterviolence has continued to inform the political strategy of containing dissent by indigenous population in the region since the nineteenth century<sup>9</sup>. However, the dynamics of politics of crude oil in Nigeria since its discovery in 1956 mark the beginning of geopolitical balkanization of the region. As stated in *Oil of Poverty in Niger Delta*: “with the emergence of oil as a major resource in the country, the correspondence of the main oil-producing areas and the Niger Delta has resulted in the delineation of the region to include all borderlands of the delta which produce oil” (1). Thus, of the thirty-six states that make up the Nigerian federation, the region consists of nine states. Though Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers remain the core Niger Delta states, the region encompasses Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross-River, Edo, Imo, and Ondo States in the geographical category presently described as South-South geopolitical zone.

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<sup>9</sup>Charles Ukeje. “Changing the Paradigm of Pacification: Oil and Militarization in Nigeria’s Delta Region.” *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence*. Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, eds. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books, 2011: 88

The patterns of settlements of the communities around the coast have been shaped by the ecology of the terrain, “by the hydrology and by flooding patterns within a massive deltaic basin” (Watts “Sweet & Sour” 8). Hence, major cities such as Warri, Port Harcourt, Sapele, and Ughelli have developed on islands located within dryer portions of the terrain across the estuaries. Occupying these spaces are about 40 different groups - Ijaw, Ogoni, Ikwerre, Itsekeri, Urhobo, Isoko, Andoni, Efik, Ibibio, etc – speaking close to 250 languages and dialects that give the picture of fractious and heterogeneous communities held together by a perceptive sense of being ‘Delta people’. Yet, this multi-ethnic assemblage of people seems united by a common geographic interest, one that is reproduced to a concerted desire of resource-based struggle against the alliance of oil corporations and the Nigerian federal government. This fact is particularly significant in this study in ways in which the multiethnic differences are glossed over to highlight the unifying force of geography and space. I examine these differences to track the manner in which they appear erased by a sense of embeddedness in the watery terrain of the region. Captured geographically, the scholar James Tar Tsaaior has described the Niger Delta as “a neighbour of the majestic, imperial Atlantic to which it pays its watery tributes as a vassal, and in turn, has its shoreline bathed with the effervescent and refreshing waters of the ocean” (72). Indeed, of the Delta’s 28,000 square miles, 150,000 miles protrudes into the Atlantic Ocean (Watts, “Sweet & Sour” 10). To be sure, the Niger Delta is the vast basin consisting of several tributaries where the River Niger empties itself in the Atlantic Ocean. Regarded as one of the world’s largest deltas, the region occupies a large expanse of 70,000 square kilometres that stretches along the nine oil-producing states in the southern coast of Nigeria, and bordering the ‘lobe-shaped’ Gulf of Guinea on the West African littoral countries of Cameroun, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, and Angola (Ugor “Wetland” 4).

Describing the Niger Delta as “a remarkable ecology”, Watts offers an interesting insight into the ecological character of the region:

Mangrove forests – mostly red mangroves with their distinctive prop roots - occupy a coastal zone up to 40 kms wide in an inter-tidal brackish zones of creeks and tidal channels. The third largest mangrove forest in the world, it is shaped by the interaction between the estuarine discharge of fresh water and the tidal movement of saline water.[...] Behind the mangroves is a vast freshwater forest, one of the largest remaining swamp forests in Africa and a zone of very considerable biodiversity and ecological fragility. Accounting for almost half of the region, swamp forests actually consist of two distinct environments: an upper delta flood forest zone in which a diverse array of swamp and cane forests are inundated during the flood period, and a lowland tidal freshwater zone, permanently swampy and traversed by narrow muddy channels. In the non-riverine interior, lowland rainforest predominates but large-scale clearance and long-term human occupancy have produced a mosaic of cropped and fallow areas and derived savanna in which grasses and shrubs have permanently replaced the forest canopy (“Sweet & Sour” 11).

It is in this remarkable ecology that huge deposits of crude oil are discovered in 1956. Given the historical antecedent of Shell Petroleum Development Company's (SPDC) ‘ecological warfare’ in other petroleum- producing nations, about which Nnimmo Bassey has announced that “there is not one stage of oil production that is sustainable or environmentally friendly” (cited in *Where Vultures Feast*xi), the future looked predictably bleak for the ecology of the Niger Delta. Several decades since the discovery of crude oil, Nigeria's economic dependence on this natural resource increased to a point that makes the country a mono-economy of oil and the consequences of the exploratory and extractive processes are completely borne by the region. Okonta and Douglas note: “Oil mined in the area accounts for 95 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings and about one-fourth of Gross Domestic Product” (18).

As Watts states, since the first year of oil production in Oloibiri with 5,000 (b/d), Nigeria's stake as an oil nation has increased to the present day estimate of 2.4 million, constituting 3.5% of world output. Yet, regardless of the huge deposit of natural resources in the region, the oil producing communities are marginalised and unfairly treated by the Nigerian federal government and multinational oil corporations. While the oil companies extract stupendous amount of wealth from the resources of the region with the collaboration of the rent-seeking Nigerian government, the oil-producing communities wallow in untold poverty and squalor. In 2007, the estimated population of the region was 28 million with an overwhelming majority living in the rural communities below poverty level (Okonta & Douglas, 19). And what's worse, the extractive activities of the oil companies render the region's natural environment of no productive consequence: despoiled, polluted and degraded, making it impossible for the majorly farming and fishing population to cultivate the lands and waters for subsistence. The Delta, thus, is a tale of plunder and waste. As Watts puts it: "It is a bleak picture, a dark tale of neglect and unremitting misery" (Sweet & Sour, 3). In a bid to right the wrongs, youths of the community pick up arms to agitate for self-determination. Scholars often draw attention to the revolt of Brass people in 1895 against the Royal Niger Company to track a culture of resistance in the Delta (Okonta & Douglas 2001, Peel 2010). In Peel's account: "The traders had risen up, just as their twenty-first-century successors would take to the swamps in armed protest against oil companies and the Nigerian government" (34). This "warrior ethos", as the anthropologist Martha Anderson described it, is significant in suggesting a dominant trait of 'Deltaness', one that aligns itself with the ways in which the people respond to the circumstances of their collective history. It points to how the physical geography of the Delta has facilitated and shaped the kind of resistance produced in the region. Of course, considering such initiatives as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) by the

government of Olusegun Obasanjo, and the creation of a separate Niger Delta Ministry much later by president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2008, it may seem to suggest that the federal and state government are working towards reversing the deplorable condition of the region. As Lindsay Barrett writes, "the successes achieved in changing the development profile of the Niger Delta have been remarkable – so much so that the picture often painted of corruption-ridden governments refusing to develop the area is vastly misleading". (46). However, the reality of the Niger Delta condition speaks loudly to the abysmal social, infrastructural and ecological condition of the region. And with the judicial execution of the Ogoni environmentalist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa in November 1995, the tenor of the struggle shifted to the option of violence in a way that seems to reject the non-violent strategy adopted by Ken Saro-Wiwa (Ugor "Survival Strategies" 190). This transformation enthrones an economy of violence that sustains a regime of youth militias who took up arms against the Nigerian state and the multi-national oil corporation (Ikelegbe, 2005). Indeed, between 2005 and 2009, insurgencies proliferated in the region such that impact on the steady production and distribution of crude oil in ways that hold huge international and national implications to the Nigeria's economy.

In examining the processes of the Niger Delta insurgency as conveyed by the texts selected for this study, I want to locate my discussion on ways in which the accounts of the struggle have glossed over the material environment of the region. I am interested in the way that the plays invoke the creeks and swamps of the region as resources of dramaturgy to stage narratives that implicate corresponding nonhuman contribution to the regimes of the insurgency. I contend that dramatists writing about the Delta highlight the creeks and swamps of the region as spaces of enchantment to which the insurgents are embedded and connected to forge a fusion of systems of resistance.

### **1.3 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

This dissertation is organised into four chapters:

In Chapter One, I review a range of literature relating to environmental history and biopolitics in order to locate how both verge in the field of eco-drama in ways that identify the knowledge gap that inspires my study. The chapter is further divided into three sub-sections. In the first section, I explore perspectives on notions of geography in how it connects with the natural environment, with a particular emphasis on coastal geographies which include works of Patricia Yaeger, Harworth, and Teresa Shewry, opening up the context for a metaphor of mapping. The chapter's discussion of environmental history provides backgrounds for this study in the sense in which it privileges the agency of the material environment, and I begin by highlighting how it is foundational to the conception of ecocriticism. Analysis of biopolitics brings to focus the structure of power and terror in understanding how volatile places and geographies are subjected to sovereign strategies of terror, and I bring the politics of oil under discussion as providing a normalising condition that is allied to questions of security. That is, oil and terror become twin factors that provoke the biopolitical milieu in the Niger Delta. The chapter then moves to discuss the spaces of the Niger Delta which provide the structures of oil politics in the region, revealing the formations of power that operate in the region via the oil companies in alliance with the Nigeria federal government as well as the forces of several insurgent groups that organise resistance from the troubled spaces. Finally, I address questions of eco-drama that engages with the study of how drama represents the ecological world, drawing on the inherent conflictual character of drama to project into the possibility of concomitant reflection of ecological contradictions. An important focus in the discussion of eco-drama is the observation that drama

and theatre, as opposed to other art forms, have been slow in taking form in the articulation of eco/environmental interests.

Chapter Two takes an ecocritical approach to examine ‘the ethos of water’ in J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* and Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*. These works, which appeared in 1964 and 1958, respectively, represent early interest in ecological literature in Nigeria. As a result, the works weighted critical attention towards a periodisation of pre-oil modernity, and thus point to the dominance of the ontology of water as a foundational analytic in the dramatic imagination of the area. Analysing *The Swamp Dwellers* in which ever-reoccurring downpours of rain flood the farmlands and crops of the Deltans, as well as the story of four lumber-bearing boatmen aimlessly floating on the Niger River in *The Raft*, the chapter privileges the centrality of the creeks in the spatial and ontological construction of the Niger Delta. The chapter is divided into two parts. Part I draws on Clark-Bekederemo's representation of the creeks and rivers to explore the epistemology of the seascape as the basis of daily rounds of life in the Delta, highlighting the different ways in which the several rivers in the region reproduce critical potentials of knowledge that determine relations among the peoples of the region, and between the people and the seascapes. In the second part, Wole Soyinka pays attention to the distinct littoral geography of the Delta in how it contrasts with the arid region of Northern Nigeria, to figure the vast resources that the rivers signal as a means through which different regions of Nigeria may forge sustainable economic integration. The chapter emphasises the ways in which the seascape constructs sub-regional framework in thinking about cultural representations of the Niger Delta, and points to the banality of water as a central marker of the region's relations with Nigeria, as well as the means through which the people encounter and contest modernity.

Chapter Three explores the landscapes and spaces of the Niger Delta creeks from the perspective of pollution and degradation wrought by the extractive processes of multinational oil corporations, and as a violent geography of communities under siege by the security apparatuses of the Nigerian state. Invoking what I term ‘environmental scatology’, the chapter thinks through this collusion of spatial violence as a way of highlighting the trope of filth and pollution in the theatrical representation of petro-activities in the Niger Delta. Outlining how abandonment produces rusts and corrosions that erase the historical landmarks of the Niger Delta, and by implication the environmental history of the region, I suggest that dramatists of the Delta invoke pollution as way of thinking through debilitating consequences of petropolitics. The chapter discusses Ben Benabai's *My Life in the Burning Creeks* and Jologho Eni Umuko's *The Scent of Crude Oil* to offer a critique of petro-modernity in petroleum producing communities. Proceeding on two parts, I argue in the first part that Ben Benabai's use of the scatological idiom in *My Life in The Burning Creeks* offers an inauguration of dramatic environmentalism which verges with faecal categories. He employs waste as a kind of systemic violence that flows invisibly in the social structure of oil capitalism. In this vein, excrement becomes a material source of closure and exclusion of people and land of the Delta. In the central narrative in which the palace of the Gbaramatu Kingdom is raided by the Nigerian security forces, turning the palace into dust, debris and dead bodies - an empty stage for the theatre of terror - the play brings space into the centre of its dramatic situation. *The Scent of Crude Oil* takes up oil's materiality to extend the poetics of scatology. In the play, a fire disaster similar to what happened in the town of Jesse in 1998 is dramatised to implicate a group of militants whose greed initiate them into the dangerous game of syphoning fuel from pipelines. Through the militants who work closely with the materiality of crude oil, the audience is exposed to the nature of crude oil: its ontology of power, physicality and odour. In this vein, I

mobilised Tim Ingold's notion of dwelling to think about how smell is implicit in the complex performative relation of place and people who live in polluted and degraded environments. Crafted as a kind of agitprop theatre under the commission of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), the play appears to weigh in on the side of Federal Government and Oil companies in demonising acts of militancy, ostensibly staging a push against the dangers of insurgency. Hence the militants are cast as all-illiterate, empty-headed crooks. I contend, however, that the play is a dramatisation of the knowable reality of dwelling in the power and knowledge of place. At a general level, the play orchestrates a community dangerously fouled by the smell of crude oil, and dead bodies that decompose from the fire disaster. Chapter Four examines the landscapes and environment of the Delta from a position of agency in which they demonstrate a rebellious force. It explores the relationship between the environment and the militants in terms of collaboration. In *Hard Ground*, Yerima illustrates the vitality of the land as the space and ground of insurgency, paradoxically bestowing it with the resources that not only attract the predation of foreign oil companies who plunder the land with extractive activities, but also investing it with the material enablement for militant resistance. The ground, therefore, is the agent provocateur, the contradictory space of conflict in the “Niger Delta conundrum”, to borrow Lindsay Barrett's expression. In land's relation with the people of Delta, Yerima invests it with the ontological agency that enchants the indigenes of Delta at the point of encounter into militant progression. Once Nimi, the protagonist, is sent home by his parents to “learn the ways of our people”, his experience of the Delta land transfigures him into a greater way of knowing what the land enables. But not only is the land an agent of militant transformation, the land too is transformed in the process of insurgency, a soft marshy ground turns into a hardground with each passing experience of war. Hence, both the land of the Delta and insurgents are subject to alterations of terror and war

that rage in the Delta over oil resources. In *Ipomu*, Yerima sketches a story that continues the reign of terror in the post-Amnesty Niger Delta, appearing to critique the disorderly manner in which the amnesty was administered by the Government of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. He seems to suggest a transformation during this period to an economy of war, a certain sense of monetisation of insurgency as the new regime with a different kind of terror.

Against this background, the play offers insight into the familial and spatial connections of the war-lords. Ipomu - the protagonist, is shown as the prince whose community awaits to take over the mantle of kingship in place of his stroke-stricken father. Back home, the play tracks the prince's journey through the swamps and creeks, revealing a geography of waters infested with sea-weeds that the insurgents are often entangled during operations. The play further reveals a shared nature between Ipomu's royal lineage with the water-hyacinth (which is also called Ipomu in the local parlance), bringing to the play a sense of biological linkage between man and the seaweed. The chapter discusses this linkage as a version of what the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro terms 'multinaturalism'. I suggest that this linkage also helps us to understand how human nature re-incarnates from the seaweed, taking on the immortal nature of the weeds, like a kind of DNA, to construct the character traits that feed the hubris of the warlords.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND ECOCRITICISM: MAPPING THE BOUNDARY OF ECO-DRAMA IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION.**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION:**

In this chapter, I attempt to bring together eco/environmental and biopolitical experiences in the Niger Delta to think about ways in which they are represented and articulated in the plays selected for this study. In particular, I explore how interests in environmental history relate with the idea of space and place broadly articulated in the field of geography, inserting my study in the interstices of the extant works underlying my own enquiry. I discuss key scholars and theorists who have informed my approach and shaped the disciplinary direction of my research. I argue that the imagination of the environment in the Niger Delta produces inevitable connections with biopolitical structures of terror that draw attention to geographies of violence in the region. I suggest that it is the relation of the region's geography – figured in terms of the landscape and seascape – with the Delta people who dwell in it that constitutes a dominant character of the Niger Delta drama.

The chapter is divided into three sub-sections. I begin the first section with a look at the environmental history that remains critical in the development of ecocriticism. It considers how the idea of environmental history is framed on the need to emphasise a complementary approach to the relation of human-non-human world. It further discusses the manner in which this relation privileges a process that underwrites a time-space dimension. In the second section, I inscribe the Niger Delta within the context of biopolitics to account for ways in which the Niger Delta region is reduced to bare life. I outline the background to the state of terror that the Delta people are subjected to, bringing into focus the discussions of Michael Foucault and Agamben on the shifting

meanings of the biopolitical phenomenon in order to capture the power relations in the Niger Delta. In the third section, I discuss literatures that engage with the different debates on how eco/environmental concerns are represented in drama while tracking ways in which the discourse reflects on the Niger Delta theatrical experience.

## 2.2 THE NIGER DELTA LANDSCAPE AND POST-COLONIAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

*The discipline of environmental history attempts ... to undertake studies of environments in a way which highlights the interfaces between humans as agents, acting in the light of all their manifold human characteristics (both social and individual) and the non-human world in all its complexities and dynamics. ... The best studies in environmental history also have one more feature. They carry through an environmental process involving both nature and culture from its beginning to its end.<sup>10</sup>*

One way in which forms of more-than-human nature are brought together in a critical reflection on the processes of agency is through the context of environmental history. In this context, historical enquiry assumes a distinct modelling that casts materiality as actors in the manifestly unfolding drama of nature. The reality of destructive human capacity helps to open up interests in the more-than-nonhuman ecological features of the world, one that necessitates the emergence of a cause-and-effect paradigm in eco/environmental approach to history. In particular, environmental focus privileges a shift from the predominantly anthropocentric approach to the historicity of nature. However, Ian Simmons makes the point that environmental history is not an attempt to suggest that nature overrides all actions to the extent of emptying the humans of all ideas; nor is it an assertion of total freedom from nature because. In fact, humans are embedded in the ecological web in many dimensions. He notes that it is a process that operates in tandem – not in exclusion – which defines the ramifications of a relation. He points out an example with ‘air pollution problem’ in late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries England, noting that it is not an isolated case of atmospheric contamination resulting from iron and steel works.

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<sup>10</sup> I. G. Simmons, *An Environmental History of Great Britain: from 10,000 Years Ago to the Present*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001: 2.

Rather, it is part of a process involving the mining of iron ore and coal together with the consequences of sulphurous compounds which spreads in ways that impact on housing and human lungs. It is, therefore, a history that recognises full resource flow of events that may have happened ‘beyond the coastlines’ of verbal conception. He notes that since words account for history in a sequential order, it will be difficult to treat this relation simultaneously. To that effect, he suggests that the “simplification in time and space is an inevitable part of the account” (2). That is, the perceptions of historical realities are connected to the dimensions of time-space.

In her essay, “Historicizing Nature: Time and space in German and American environmental historiography”, the German historian Ursula Lehmkuhl takes up Ian Simmons’s reflection on time-space dimension to think through the processes of mediating the human relation with the nonhuman. She states that the assessment of time-space in environmental history reveals certain conceptual difficulties precisely because history is clustered with different notions of time, such as, “process, duration, reproduction, change, development, evolution, and transformation” (17). She considers that more than any sub-field of history, environmental history must engage with the fact that human relation with the natural world is not exclusively mental or intellectual, but one that is also premised on space, time and embodiment to place and geography. In short, human and nonhuman, to quote Tim Ingold, “carry the forms of their dwelling in their bodies” (“Building, Dwelling, Living” 17). It is on this account that Lehmkuhl suggests certain questions that I consider useful and informing to my work, questions that seek to probe the historical interaction between human and non-human beings in ways that emphasise the processes that shape their power structures as well as the mutual dependence and interdependencies that underwrite the relations of that power. As she asks: “How is the actor relationship between man/woman and nature shaped? Is it at all possible to conceive nature as a historical actor and what is the specific

quality of this agency? In short: how can we theorise the relationship between the human and the non-human environment?" (18).

In other words, her questions probe the relations of human and nonhuman energies to engage with the processes of how agency is enacted and performed. In "Temporality of the Landscape", Tim Ingold makes a significant intervention in the discussion of time-space. He critiques the epistemological contestation "between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalist view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space" (152). He proposes to replace this oppositionality with what he describes as 'dwelling perspective' which conceives of the landscape as "an enduring record of - and testimony to - the lives and works of the past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (152). In "Building, dwelling, living", he explicitly extends this notion to the nonhuman while occluding human-non-human genetic approach as a form of vehicle in the transmission of information. He notes that "the landscape tells - or rather - is a story" (152). Theorising how this story is layered on the landscape is what environmental historians sought to reproduce from the position of invisibility to an effective process of historical recognition. This is precisely because it involves arbitrating on the process in which the human is placed in relation to the landscape. This convergence of the naturalist and culturalist views that is implicit in the notion of in-dwelling is useful in thinking about the instrumentality and agency of the natural environment.

William Howarth's essay, "Imagined Territory: The Writing of Wetlands", seems to offer the idea of mapping to engage with the views expressed by Ursula Lehmkuhl - by using the wetland as a site of spatial contemplation - at the same time suggesting ecocriticism as the theoretical frame of that enquiry. He states that the deployment of natural limits in the imagination of physical places

and geographies is instrumental in the formation of Anglo-American ecocritical tradition. He believes that this imagined territory is most evident in the distinction between place and person, self and other etc., and tracks the emergence of the school of ecocriticism to the ways in which examination and reading of place in texts started to occupy the mind of many writers in America in the 1990s. He argues that during this period, accounts of ecocriticism suggest loose disciplinary relationships that propose advocacies for green politics, natural theology and ethics. He contends that "[T]o date few have explored the highly relevant fields of ecology, geography, and environmental history" (510). To him, the basis of ecocriticism rests on a better understanding of environmental history such that connects literary texts and the physical landscapes. Taking up the example of wetlands, thus, he raises far-reaching questions on the perception of the wetlands in the Anglo-American literary canon. He explains that the wetland is a category of nature or environment that is very often rendered in Anglo-American literature to designate regimes of transformation that are implicated in the production of literary meanings. Thus, while observing the ways in which literary places change in value and meaning in Anglo-American literatures, he believes that it is important to pay attention to cultural and environmental history in order to track the production of ideas that result from the alterations of the physical conditions of the wetlands. He poses the following questions:

Were there extrinsic forces in earth, water, and sky that altered intrinsic elements of language, rhetoric, and imagery? Did material realities drive these changes, or social conditions, or ideological convictions, or hegemonic systems of meaning and value? Or did aesthetic and psychological representations evolve, mapping a new status for wetlands by replacing masculine priorities of stability, coherence, and power with feminized uncertainty, inconsistency, and fluidity? Is this a canonical issue, with wetlands emerging from centuries of neglect to shine forth as empowered? (512)

Howarth's questions are equally informing in my study. They provide an important entrypoint into the perspective of the mode of eco-critical study that is relevant in the study of the Niger Delta environmental literature, or that lends itself for reflection in the Niger Delta environmental condition, hence consistent with his assertion that "wetlands exemplify natural biodiversity and offer a testing ground for ecocritical practice" (520). The questions draw attention to important readings of the Niger Delta ecological geography – highlighting ways in which the region's geographic composition is altered by the often extrinsic and hegemonic sociopolitical forces of petro-culture. It offers insight into the exceptional idiom of fluidity as a way of capturing the presuppositions of the watery ethos, emphasising an inherent aesthetics of flowscape that is framed by the material reality of the swamps and creeks. Crucially, the focus on the wetlands as an important aspect of environmental history helps us to think through the Niger Delta wetlands in relation to the centrality of the physical and geographic condition of the region's encounter with Anglo-European modernity. Indeed, as Paul Ugor has stated, "The Niger Delta insurrection was, and still is, essentially about space (the Niger Delta wetland), the natural wealth (crude oil) located within that space, and the struggles by both global and local politico-economic forces over control of that resource" ("Wetlands" 4). To this end, the Niger Delta wetland provides a frame of reference to a decidedly spatial and geographical trope, a means of mobilising place in the different cultural shifts that the texts of this study explore.

However, it is perhaps necessary to mention that accounts of environmental history do not always crystallise into the growing waves of postcolonial eco/environmentalism. As Harry Garuba (2017) has noted in the essay "Landscape, the Environment, and Postcolonial Poetry", a longer history of landscape, land and literary representation exists that is not espoused within an ecological imagination (209). Rather, the texts are read differently in ways that reflect a historical perspective,

emphasising an aesthetic idiom that is anachronistic to the understandable approach of environmentalism. A wholly environmentalist enquiry, Garuba argues, has the tendency to “ignore the other historically grounded entanglements, cultural movements, other critical and theoretical engagements, that created discursive openings at particular points in time for representation of landscape and the environment” (209). If ecocriticism erases some of the dominant poetics that frame artistic creations, what then accounts for the specificity of focus in eco/environmental interest? What is responsible for the explosion of interest in nature that environmental history provokes?

To understand the real traction of the ecological project to the extent in which it animates cultural representation, Patricia Yaeger in the essay “Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and Tragedy of the Commons” draws on the poetics of water to articulate the need for eco/environmentalism. She notes the growing reliance on the metaphor of fluidity in how the contemporary world systems are described, descriptions that seem to lend materiality to an ethereal world. She writes that, “while human bodies seem substantial and geocentric and while many creation myths insist that our fundament is clay or earth, we are mostly made out of water: not geo – but aquacentric” (525). Yaeger continues, highlighting water as an extrinsic and intrinsic component that frames a global culture, observing that “our obliviousness to the gigantic bodies of water surrounding islands and continents is astonishing” (525). In contemplating metaphoric representation of the ocean in literature, its eco-literary inflexions of sublimity, she bemoans the absence of real-life consequences. In other words, rather than function as reflector of the biotic world with substantive ecological consequences, the sea functions in literature as material for aesthetic exploitations. Particularly discussing the sea’s implication with technology, Yaeger poses question about the need to “amend our definition of ecosystems to acknowledge that late capitalist seas are becoming

more techno than ocean” (528). In so doing, ecopoetics is factored to accommodate the dangers of techno-modernities in the world’s deep seas, constituting ecological crises that are framed around what she aptly describes as “techno-ecopoetics”.

Yaeger’s essay is not about the significance of eco-literary approach per se. Rather, it borrows Garret Hardlin’s phrase, “tragedy of the common” to discuss the oceans and seas as spaces that are publicly owned in which interests – national and international – are interlocked in ways that produce ruination and degeneration. It may be explained as an example of how a collectively shared environment produces individual growth that culminates in a common tragedy and where, as Hardlin’s puts it, “Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all”. Yet the essay helps us to pay attention to the consequences of ecological crises in a common world as they inflect literary expressions, privileging the need for environmental concerns as quintessential turn of ecocritical approach, rather than the growing trope of metaphoric plunder of rivers and oceans. To be specific, the essay helps to foreground the purchase of ecological approach, suggesting a focus that brings literature to function as “swarm of agencies”.

The literature on environmental history almost unanimously take positions against the programmatic exclusion of the voice of nature from the function of agency, thus it aims to bring nature to visibility from which it has been occluded by traditional anthropocentric privileging of history. In his book, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and Ecological Imagination*, Donald Worster describes environmental history as “the new history” that makes connections with anthropology and geography, one that considers “relations of culture, technology, and nature through time” as a way of interrogating the dominant historical tradition (31). He critiques the manner in which historians ignore the material reality of the natural world in their account of human experience, describing it as “an ignorance that extends far beyond the cloisters of history

into contemporary popular attitudes” (ix), dubbing the writing of history in that fashion as “an act of distortion” (vii). He notes that the exclusion of nature and the environment from the tradition of human history often results from debates of “what is ‘natural’ and what is not, what is ‘cultural’ in the landscape and what is not” to the effect of questioning the extent of nature's influence on the affairs of humankind. Citing the case of the study of American history in the universities to consider the divergent opinions that frame the course of human history, he writes that while some take “up a position of limited environmental determinism” (viii), others insist “that culture determines all”, hence facilitating a condition that tends to ignore the voice of nature. As he explains it:

There was no nature in their history—no sense of the presence and influence of the land on past human experience, no soil, no countryside, no smell of fungus, no sound of spring peepers trilling from the marsh at dusk. Historians seemed to have forgotten completely that, until very recently, almost all people lived as intimately with other species and with the wind and weather as they did with their own kind. To ignore that long intimacy was to distort history. Writing history is, to be sure, always an act of distortion, imposing on the past the experience and outlook of the present...They had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, the natural things that mattered greatly to people of another era. (vii)

Similarly, in his book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and Ecology of New England*, William Cronon explains that writing environmental history “inevitably brings to center stage a cast of nonhuman characters which usually occupy the margins of historical analysis if they are present in it at all” (vii). He offers an interesting insight into the evolution of ecological history in privileging ways in which the changing circumstances of the material ecology reproduce important transformations not only in how human communities organise their lives – which is more well known to historians – but also the relatively less known but fundamental changes in the plant and

animal communities. He describes it as “a history which extends its boundaries beyond human institutions — economies, class and gender systems, political organisations, cultural rituals — to the natural ecosystems which provide the context for those institutions”(8). This kind of transformation underwrites the complex relations of the cultural consequences of ecological processes – processes that “might otherwise remain invisible”. It is therefore an act of making visible or re-visioning history in a transcendental mode, to account for the different operators — human and nonhuman — in the common world. Thus, environmental history records events of the material and natural environment of a particular place and time in the manner that finds expression in the interaction with the human nature. It accounts for an emphasis on nature, focusing on the correspondence between the materiality of nature with the human population. Its basic assumption is that knowledge is not exclusively anthropocentric, and suggests the need to interrogate history beyond the dominance of the human cultures.

In the essay, “The nature of metaphors in cultural geography and environmental history”, David Demeritt brings environmental history into conversation with cultural geography to understand how nature and landscape can share a common metaphor. He notes that despite sharing a common ground, both endure a condition of disciplinary distance and estrangement. He tracks this problematic to a tradition of “different languages and use of incommensurable metaphors” and suggests “a new metaphorical terrain” that will lend itself to a kind of translation. He writes that “environmental historians focus upon nature as a historical actor” such that it is treated as an independent agent in a way “that reminds us that there are different forces at work in the world and not all of them emanate from human” (163). They see nature differently from the way other historians do, namely, as “object of human contemplation and controversy or as the physical stage for a quintessentially human drama” (164). Thus environmental historians invest nature with the

capacity for the exercise of agency. Cultural geography, on the other hand, privileges the landscape as metaphor of cultural construction in which systems of knowledge are premised on “contested processes of signification”. As he puts it: “They make landscape malleable cultural projections, whose shape and meaning are determined ultimately by the linguistic and social contexts associated with them” (164). However, in appearing to find a connection in what he describes as irreconcilable metaphoric perspectives, he writes that “environmental historians occlude much considerations of the ways in which this agency is always understood through cultural lenses”, adding that “it is this representational dilemma that prompted cultural geographers to take up metaphors of cultural production in the first place.” (164). In returning to Tim Ingold’s intervention, it is significant to note, as he asserts that “the distinction between landscape and environment is not easy to draw, and for many purposes, they may be treated as practically synonymous”<sup>11</sup> (“Temporality” 157). Ingold argues that this sense of homology is discernible in the relation with those who dwell in the places, who inhabit the places, and who experience the place in ways that produce connections. In this study, I am interested in the experience of place, in the spatial connection of the Niger Delta people to place and geography. Hence, I use the landscape and environment interchangeably precisely because both are subject to the same condition of pollution and degradation. I will like to add that the argument of this study that is premised on a shift from a degraded, polluted and decayed landscape to the revolt of nature is not a recognition of this epistemological difference, but rather a way of privileging the spatial transformation of the region from a condition of abjection to that of resistance.

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<sup>11</sup>For other parallel studies of the several approaches put forward to understand the difference between landscape and environment. See Y-F Tuan. “Thought and Landscape: the eye and the mind's eye” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (ed D. W, Meinig) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979: 89-102; Franklin Adrian. *Nature and Social Theory*. London; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002 and William Cronon. “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative”, *The Journal of American History*, 78.4 (1992):1347-1376

Debates on the development of environmental history often revolve around how concerns for natural degradation produce catalysing effects to some kinds of environmentalism. William Beinart and Peter Coates (1995) locate modern consciousness for environmental history in North American national experience that occasions the heroic rise for conservation against the despoliation of nature. They associate this with thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold whose works set in motion institutions and agencies of natural resource policies and protection. During this period, environmental history gained political, administrative and intellectual traction that facilitated not only the emergence of green movements but also pushed the ecological issues to the forefront of public consciousness in the 1960s and early 1970s. Their account of recent interest in environmental history cuts through human destructive capacity – though recognising that pre-capitalist societies are necessarily “not without history” – which highlights the damning consequences of how “capitalism commoditised nature and redefined it according to new notions of value” (5). This point resonates with William Cronon’s detailed analysis of New England between 1600 and 1800 – a period that considers the region’s invasion by the colonising Europe – and helps in diagnosing the role of a growing capitalist economy in shaping environmental history. To Cronon, “capitalism and environmental degradation went hand in hand”, reinforcing each other in ways that put purchase on the expansionist tendency of European commercialism. This fact is very significant as a point of reference in reflecting on the history of the Niger Delta, and how the region is subjected to Anglo-America capitalism. The tragedy of the Delta is such that even though capitalist expropriations have thrown up environmentalists as Isaac Adako Boro, Ken Saro Wiwa, Nimmo Bassey, etc., there is yet no recognisable environment-conscious policy that resulted from their struggle. As we shall show in

the second section of this chapter, government responses to environmental agitations in the Delta have come in form of different kinds of bio-political repressions.

Crucially, the observation that environmental situations are often characterised by comparable transnational and interconnected body of ideas and responses (Peter and Croat, 22) is diagnostic and useful in investigating the impact of Anglo-American capitalism in framing the Niger Delta environmental history and condition. In the book, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil*, Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas account for the environmental pollution and devastation of the biodiversity of the Delta region through Shell's practices which range from the unregulated use of dynamite to prospect for oil and the "obnoxious practice of gas flaring and the oil leakages of Shell's "old, rusty and corroded [pipelines]" (196). Chronicling the history of Niger Delta encounter with Europe in the 1890s when the British naval force attacked Brass (now Nembe) to acquire a monopoly of the trade in palm oil, and the 1985 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the book reveals some decade-old economies of British imperialism that link the Royal Niger Company and the Royal Dutch/Shell in a programmatic agenda of greed and exploitation. In tracking the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity in Oloibiri in 1956, and the concomitant extractive and exploitative activities of the multinational oil companies as the highpoint of environmental degradation in the region, they write: "The plunder of the Niger Delta has turned full cycle. Crude oil has taken the place of palm oil, but the dramatis personae are the same - a powerful European multinational company intent on extracting the last life juice out of the richly endowed Niger Delta"(2). They contend that capitalism is central in the project of Europe's incursion into the Delta beginning with the transatlantic slave trade which ushered the region into "the orbit of international finance capital", laying the foundation for a chain of history of resource exploitation. In the preface of the book, Nigerian author and popular environmentalist Nnimmo Bassey draws

an analogy between the Royal/Dutch Shell and a colonial force to the extent that the former is bereft of territorial concern in the operations of power, an illustration of the overarching nature of Shell's indifference to the environment. He admonishes that:

We must pause and think again. If the experience of the people of the Niger Delta is anything to go by, the entire crude oil business is completely wrongheaded. There is not one stage of oil production that is sustainable or environmentally friendly. None. In Curacao, Shell, after operating a refinery for seventy years, packed its bag and left. Two asphalt lakes beside the refinery turned pristine wetland in the area into wasteland. Clearly, there is worse to come in the Niger Delta, the world's most threatened human ecosystem.(xi)

Significantly, environmental history is prominent in much of the debates around postcolonial ecocriticism, opening up ways in how to situate questions of nature in the field of environmental literature in the global south. In the essay, "Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature", Byron Caminero-Santangelo's co-optation of environmental history in what he terms "the most extensive discussion to date on African literature and ecocriticism" (698), provides insight into the significant presence of environmental history in the discourse of postcolonial ecocriticism. To be sure, William Slaymaker's critique of Africa's response to the growing interest in ecocriticism— and in which he charges the writers and critics of being imperceptible and faint — is arguably one of the most cited polemics in postcolonial eco-literary consciousness. This harsh critique generated responses that shaped and continues to shape the discourse of postcolonial ecocriticism. Caminero-Santangelo aligns with other Africanist ecocritics to engage in the debate that sought to re-assert ecocriticism of the Global South within a significant frame. He maintains that the limitation on Slaymaker's argument is the manner in which it privileges "principles which represent potential ecocritical orthodoxy" of the Global North, one that endorses an aspect of deep ecology that is framed on "attacking anthropocentrism". Thus, he questions Slaymaker's claim

“that ecocriticism is global” when, indeed, his criteria is determined by Anglo-America ecocritical paradigm. He calls for the need to transform “the definition of environmental writing in such a way that the list of such writing from Africa might be substantially expanded and revised” (699). This kind of transformation, he argues, must take into account the manner in which “African environmental history and literary engagement” juxtaposes with Anglo-American ecocritical suggestions to produce a truly global articulation of environmental literature. In other words, environmental history that explores the context of place in postcolonial Africa is instrumental in how the discourse is theorised.

In discussing the Niger Delta from the context of environmental history, I suggest that the geography of the region is an important basis for articulating the Niger Delta environmental literary expression. Howarth has stated that the fledgeling years of ecocritical conception in the Anglo-America literature was occasioned by “a loose affinity” of related disciplines. Rob Nixon echoes a similar view in meditating on the relationship between environmentalism and postcolonialism. In the essay, “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism”, he uses the word ‘schism’ to describe the condition of equal indifference and distrust that both fields of study have generated. On the part of environmentalism, Nixon accounts for the “unselfconscious parochialism” that endorses environmentalism as an offshoot of American literary genealogy. This kind of “national self-closure” that betrays the racist canon of “the wilderness tradition” finds no place for writers from the global south whose works demonstrate “fraught relation between ethnicity, pollution and human rights” (716). Postcolonialism, on the other hand, dismisses environmentalism as “irrelevant and elitist, at worst as sullied by “green imperialism”. In Nixon's view, this tension is most manifest in “postcolonial preoccupation with displacement and ecocritical preoccupation with an ethics of place” and articulated in terms of “cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and

bioregionalism, on the other” (716). If displacement on the one hand, and politics of place on the other, are the separate principles that constitute the disciplinary schism, then I want to suggest that the Niger Delta experience appears to have erased the divide in the manner enacted by the play texts used in this study. In the plays, the creeks of the region represent a site from which the communities in the region are violently displaced, a volatile geography of war between insurgents and Nigerian security forces. In other words, what may be advanced is the point made by Graham Huggan in the essay “Postcolonial ecocriticism and the limits of Green Romanticism” in which he advocated for the process of greening as way of thinking through postcolonialism. As he writes, “there are grounds here for a productive overlap between the tasks of ecocriticism and those of postcolonial criticism, opportunities for a fruitful alliance between the two critical/theoretical schools that opens up new aesthetic horizons” (702).

The geography of the Niger Delta, often expressed in the public imagination as a form of bioregional or subnational politics in Nigeria, offers a consistent grounding for understanding much of environmental literature in the region. Indeed, cultural representations of the Delta reproduce a certain primacy of place that is geographically mapped – a geography that is politically sanctioned and contested. The recurring trope of otherness and marginality in the Niger Delta literature, Oyeniye Okunoye argues, represents a creative strategy in how a sense of location, place and agony is conceptualised. In the essay, “Alterity Marginality and the National Question in the Poetry of the Niger Delta”, Okunoye invokes the notion of geography to think through the political and economic processes that *marginalise* and *other* the Niger Delta region. In his words, “the otherness of the Niger Delta within the Nigerian context, and its strategy is the blurring of any demarcation between the Niger Delta as a geographical space and its inhabitants” (421). He argues that the trope of otherness is significant in the Niger Delta literary expression because it invokes

the strategy through which the people understand their symbolic severance from the Nigerian federal union. In particular, otherness constitutes a kind of mapping and boundary-making that is both geographical and political on which basis the Delta is imagined.

Philip Aghoghovwia's recent essay offers a fascinating perspective to the way in which I employ the notion of geography in this study, a perspective that captures the idea of otherness within socio-economic contemplation. Titled "Poetics of cartography: globalism and the 'oil-enclave' in Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*", Aghoghovwia interestingly takes up the notion of geography to discuss how the international phenomenon of oil that is sufficiently articulated within a broad global context is filtered into a specific geographic particularity. He notes that this geographic perspective is useful in preventing the possibility of unwittingly falling into the trap of globalism that the international character of oil enables. He acknowledges the placelessness of oil representation in culture, which Amitav Ghosh, as he quotes, describes as "lacking in a sense of place". He argues that this placelessness of oil culture can better be understood in how it operates in the industrial complex of deregulated enterprises in which crude oil is significantly entrenched. As he explains it, "the sites of oil extraction are considered neoliberal landscapes of deregulated enterprises, and its environs are deemed international and heterochthonous" (32). He argues that the enclave nature of oil industry in Africa has meant that the surrounding population of the host communities is disconnected from the political economy of oil, incapable thereof in participating in the system of marginality that it institutes. This intrinsically international character of oil, he notes, is antithetical to attempts at capturing the oil encounter in literary terms that will give expression to "issues from a place-based consciousness that is vernacular and autochthonous" (35). In order to engage with the "ancillary effects" of oil encounter "on those that exist outside the political economy of globalism - the indigenous locals", he proposes the term "poetics of

cartography” to understand how global epistemologies can be reframed into the hermeneutics of locality. Thus, “poetics of cartography” mobilises geography as a way of calling attention to locality, and as a strategy for escaping unwholesome and 'insidious globalism', one that complicates local interests and aspirations. The term offers useful insight in my employment of the creeks of the Niger Delta in this study as the site of material contestation in the Niger Delta. In fact, it appears to endorse my privileging of the creeks as the local reality of the Delta people’s attempt to come to terms with a sense of place and indwelling.

In concluding this section, I want to suggest that emphasis on the creeks and swamps of the Niger Delta that underwrites the texts in this study brings to focus the need to understand how the geography of the region points us to the possibility of historicising nature and, as Ian Simmons suggests in the epigram, enable us to track the processes of human-non-human relationship in the dramatic representation of the region. The texts convey an environmental history of the region, mapped in ways that acknowledge the manner in which the people are embedded in the waterways of the Niger Delta river, captured in a sense of flow. The imagination of the flows suggests that the landscape/seascape and environment of the Niger Delta are not empty of history, but populated by people and water bodies that become subject of Anglo-European capitalism. Thus, in reading the texts from the context of environmental history, I attempt to bring the histories that are layered on the landscape into effective theatrical visibility.

## 2.3 BIOPOLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE NIGER DELTA

*Nothing is more important than a revision of the concept of security as basic principle of state politics.... Maybe the time has come to work towards the prevention of disorder and catastrophe, and not merely towards their control. Today, there are plans for all kinds of emergencies (ecological, medical, military), but there is no politics to prevent them<sup>12</sup>*

The Niger Delta is commonly labelled in geographic terms as creeks – a designation of the watery nature of the region in which the communities are located. This material presence of water and swamps is instrumental not only in how people’s lives are existentially ordered but also in ways in which the insurgents implement their systems of resistance. It is the watery realm that invests the region with the strategic stronghold in which military and operational camps are installed. In his book, *Swamp Full of Dollars*, Michael Peel reflects on his dramatic visit to the camp of one of the several militant groups in the Niger Delta creeks, Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) set up by Alhaji Asari Dokubo, and describes the insurgent activities as “the theatre of Asari’s camp” (5). He writes that amid the ritual ceremony in honour of Egbesu, the Ijaw spirit of war, the camp serves as a military base to Niger Delta fighters who take up arms in defence of their resources – crude oil. He observes that the complex nature of the struggle is premised on the strategic significance of Nigeria's oil and geography. According to him “Its crude is much prized because of the ease with which it can be refined into petrol [...]. Nigeria is physically closer than the Middle East to the USA, reducing shipping costs. It is also more of a political friend” (7). He informs that the launching of a special military command in 2007, Africom, is not unconnected with the oil interest in Nigeria and other parts of the African continent. The country is thus

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<sup>12</sup>Giorgio Agamben. "Security and Terror," trans. Carolin Emcke, *Theory and Event* 5.4 (2002):1

inscribed in the fragile global economy of oil, revealing notable examples of poverty and pollution that provoke community protests and militant resistance. He tracks the insurgency to the Ogoni uprising in the early 1990s in which protests over extractive effects of oil prompted the shutdown of Shell operations in Ogoni town. This fact brings about the military crackdown and eventual murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, environmentalist and writer, along with eight Ogoni leaders, on what is often generally described as trumped-up charges of murder. Inspired by the effective mobilisation of the Ogoni people by MOSOP under the leadership of Ken-Saro-Wiwa, other groups in the region found the need for mobilisation only this time with a shift to a more violent strategy against the oil companies and the government, giving the oil companies an ultimatum to pull out of Ijawland by December 1998. Thus, particularly noting the violent protests – and the state reprisal attacks that followed – Peels draws attention to the manner in which biopolitical violence characterises the post- Saro Wiwa approach to resistance in the region. He writes:

violence in the Delta has ebbed and flowed, with the security forces carrying out notorious massacres such as the murder of hundreds of people in 1999 in the town of Odi, Bayelsa State, apparently in reprisal for the killing of a dozen police officers. Olusegun Obasanjo, president between 1999 and 2007, showed no signs of outrage at the action and others like it. He once told a journalist that another security force revenge massacre of hundreds of people, after some troops had been captured and killed in the central state of Benue, was an example of how ‘cause and effect’ worked in life. ‘In human nature,’ he said, ‘reaction is always more than action (8).

Indeed, Adewale Maja-Pearce (2005) in his essay “Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa” gives an account of the operations of Nigerian military in the clampdown on MOSOP members under the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force. He writes that prior to the murder of Saro-Wiwa, Gen Abacha, Nigerian dictator who assumed power after a military coup in 1994, created the task force under Major Paul Okuntimo to supervise “state violence organised against Ogoni”. He illustrates

instances of state terror in the region – which includes ‘raping, maiming and killing’ – through Okuntimo's outburst on a state-owned television. The broadcast outlines in chilling details the first three days of state terrorism unleashed on the Ogoni community upon the inauguration of the task force:

The first three days, the first three days of operation, I operated in the night. Nobody knows where I was coming from. What I will just do is that I will just take some detachment of soldiers, they will just stay at four corners of the town. They ...have automatic [rifles] that sold death. If you hear the sound you will freeze. And then I will equally now choose about 20 [soldiers] and give them...grenades...explosives...very hard one. So, we shall surround the town at night...The machine gun with 500 rounds will open up. When four or five like that open up and then we are throwing grenades and they are making ‘*eekpuwaa*’, what do you think people are going to do? And we have already put roadblock on the main road, we don’t want anybody to start running...so the option we made was that we shall drive all these boys, all these people into the bush with nothing except the pant and the wrapper they are using that night. (23)

The insight to be drawn from these essays resonates with the vital discussion on the relationship between oil and security. (Ross, 2011; Billon, 2001; Campell, 2005), one that is framed on ways in which the oil agenda extends and sustains militarisation and terror in oil-exporting countries. In the essay, “The Biopolitics of Security: Oil, Empire, and the Sports Utility Vehicle”, David Campbell engages with the discussion about the link between oil and security by examining how U.S dependence on oil in the Middle East forms the basis for a strategic interest that promotes their military presence. He writes that with the intent to discipline local consumption of drugs, the Bush administration issues a campaign directive to the Office for National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) that makes a connection between drug use and the dangers of international terrorism.

But in an ironic twist to the campaign, a public response that inscribes oil in the centre of the debate leads to the launch of a lobby group, the Detroit Project, which argues from the opposite view that the ‘oil habit’ that sustains the uneconomical use of Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) can only be assuaged through international crimes. Thus, using SUV to think through a context of US dependence on oil as a major catalyst of state terrorism in the Middle East, particularly the US invasion of Iraq, Campbell emphasises the geopolitical effects that oil provokes. He argues that these effects can be explained as a way of creating new spaces of unequal consequences, spaces that are understood to be distant, wild and unsecured, and that need foreign intervention to ensure that domestic interests are protected. He notes that these spaces “include zones of exploration and the spaces traversed by pipelines, both of which involve the further marginalisation of impoverished indigenous communities” (945-946). In particular, he adds that “The fate of these people and places is subsumed by the privilege accorded a resource (oil) that is central to the American way of life, the security of which is regarded as a fundamental strategic issue” (946). In fact, he describes the securitisation agenda as a kind of “boundary-producing political performance” that is premised on the creation of “geography of “foreign” (even “evil”) others”, a geopolitical marker in which oil-producing regions are mapped and identified as zones of threat. This boundary-making process, and the relations of power that it enables—a “transition from modern sovereignty to imperial sovereignty” a la Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – motivates Campbell to identify a presence of transformation such that invokes a biopolitical basis for understanding the geopolitics of oil.

Campbell’s essay is significant in the way it locates the discourse of oil and security within a geography of violence and securitisation, emphasising a sense of mapping of spaces that connects global interest with sites of oil production. His recognition of transformations between local and

global formations of power in the political economy of oil offers insight to my investigation of the power relations of competing interests in the Niger Delta, helping to illustrate what Michael Watts describes as “governable spaces”. Michael Watts, to whom I will return later in this section, also reinvents the notion of biopolitics to think through relations of spaces in the petro-politics in Niger Delta. The literature on biopolitics often has as an entry point the connotation of how life is introduced into the realm of politics. Commonly associated with the French philosopher, Michael Foucault, this understanding gets extended to include “the means by which the group of living beings understood as a population is measured in order to be governed, tied to the political rationality of liberalism” (Elden, 32). Foucault reflects that the incorporation of life into public politics is a result of a historical transformation of power in territorial spaces from the protection of the monarchical authority to the governance of the population. Such right to kill that modern genocidal states exercise, therefore, is not a return to the killing regime of ancient sovereignty, but an enactment of a new power situation that is exerted on the level of life, species and population. As Foucault puts it, “the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138). He associates this shift with the rise of capitalist modernity at the beginning of 17th century, noting that: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (143). This shift from the sovereign technique of power in taking the life of opponents in relation to the preservation of monarchical authority (sovereign power) to biopower in which forms of life are regulated in order to determine which life is worth living, or securing, is central to the Foucauldian hypothesis. As Foucault further explains:

In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms . . . One of these poles . . . centered on

the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: *a bio-politics of the population*. The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organisation of power over life was deployed. (139)

In the essay, “Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria” (2010), Michael Watts positions the Niger Delta question within the frame of Foucauldian biopolitical paradigm, subjecting it to the neoliberal regime of power – what he describes as “American stenographers of power” – to think through ways in which the region’s natural resource is connected to global politics. He explains that a year before September 2011, the US State Department had declared the Niger Delta as ‘ground zero of Nigerian oil production’ – a volatile space of ethnic terrorist activities involving “abduction, hostage-taking, kidnapping and extra-judicial killings” – and listed in the annual encyclopedia of global terrorism. He privileges Nigeria as the ‘West African New Gulf Oil States’ which emergence as security priority of US government is not unconnected with the fractures in the “Al Qaeda attacks, the crisis in Venezuela and...the Iraqi war”. He describes Nigeria as “an archetypal oil nation” – thirteenth of the World's largest producers of petroleum – for whom oil provides over 80 per cent of the government income, and generating 90 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings. In the increasing volume of petroleum imported from West African fields to the United States, Nigeria accounts for over 10 percent of the import, making 5 per cent of US daily consumption.

In drawing attention to the geophysical advantage of Nigerian oil to United States as well as the “high quality and low cost ‘sweet’ reserves” of the crude variety, Watts endorses Robert Vitalis's claims that “the rapid, complete and irreversible American dominance in Saudi Arabia has so much light to shed on why the Niger Delta is currently in crises” (51). The claim connects international politics of oil with relations of violence, bringing to the fore ways in which oil triggers terrorism, “an ugly pairing” that is increasingly shaping the imaginary of global politics. In particular, he tracks the electoral fraud of April 2003 as the touchstone of the escalating violence that erupted in the creeks on the 12th of March 2003, locating the region at the crossroad of contemporary Nigerian history from which they are politically marginalised and rendered virtually ungovernable. He writes:

Marginalised and excluded from the benefits of oil, the Niger Delta stands at the confluence of four pressing political flashpoints in the current political economy of Nigeria. First, the efforts led by a number of Niger Delta states for 'resource control', in effect expanded access to and control over oil and oil revenues. Second, the struggle for self-determination of the minority people and the clamour for a sovereign national conference to rewrite the constitutional basis of the federation itself. Third, a crisis of rule in the region as a number of the state and local governments are rendered helpless by militant youth movements, growing insecurity and ugly intra-community, inter-ethnic and state violence. And not least, the emergence of a South-South Alliance...at the heart of Alliance politics is the dispute between the federal state and the littoral states over offshore oil revenues. Oil is the theatre of conflict within which Nigerian politics is currently being played out (51).

Though acknowledging the connection between oil and terrorism, the essay proceeds to critique much of the “resource-politics scholarship” that exclusively works to highlight notions of petro-predation such that ignore the political web in which oil spins and sustains the culture of violence. He notes that the epistemologies of these scholarships are marked by “the almost total invisibility of transnational oil companies and forms of capitalism that oil or enclave extraction engenders”

and argues in favour of the relational frame of governable spaces. In so doing, he deploys the term “governable spaces” to describe the power relation in which the oil complex and petro-capitalism are inscribed within the “simultaneity of different scale politics” (54). Identifying notions of “chieftainship, ethnic minority and nation” as constitutive of multiple and simultaneous scales of governable spaces that produces different kinds of violence, he submits that these governable scales function in ways that contradict each other, that project the region as an ungovernable space. According to him, this is precisely because there are slippages in the governable scales to the effect that a particular regime of power can exist in different spaces. As he illustrates, “a youth within a system of Chiefly rule can and often is a member of an ethnic minority; politicised ethnic minorities may become or self-identify as nations” (54). This suggests the existence of a central contradiction within each governable spaces: at the oil community level, a system of gerontocracy is overthrown and replaced by a mafia-structure of youth insurgency. The ethnic communities are implicated in a tension between 'civic nationalism and a sort of exclusive militant particularism'. At the national level, oil becomes the reference-point for massive corruption that underwrites a tension between oil-based state and the fragmentation of the different tiers of the state.

The important point established in this essay is the classification of multiple governable scales to account for the political structures of the Niger Delta. This helps to highlight the different actors in the Delta conflicts, and how these actors are spatially located. However, the discussion ignores the constitutive hierarchy in which these powers are reproduced and exercised. It further suggests that the contradictory nature of the governable spaces, its slippages, complicates the Foucauldian project that is characteristically framed on a panoptical sense of closure. The submission that the Niger Delta is “*ungovernable*” precisely because the spaces “hardly correspond to the well-oiled machine of disciplinary and bio-power” does not sufficiently account for the strategies of power

relations in the Delta enclave. In the essay “The Delta Creeks, Woman's Engagement and Nigeria's Oil Insurgency”, Temitope Oriola appears to pick up on this to discuss the modalities of oil insurgency in the creeks of the Niger Delta, assigning strategies of violence to spatial mobilisation in the creeks, and revealing a kind of militant biopolitics in the camps. He observes that the strategies of power relation in the Delta can most adequately be apprehended in terms of the suspension of institutional and judicial systems of the Nigeria state in the delta enclaves. He argues that the politics of insurgency is framed on a paradoxical transformation of power in which the creeks exist as “entity within an entity” (7). Thus, in spite of Watts’s suggestion of slippages, Oriola insists that militia/militants in the Niger Delta creeks are structured with mechanisms of power consistent with the organisational hierarchy of the political scales in the region. He writes:

Suspending the laws and the entire criminal justice system of the Nigerian state may connote lawlessness at the creeks. However, such a group ‘tends to develop its own standards of conduct by which it seeks to regulate and control the behavior of its members...these rules guide the activities of members, ensuring loyalty, respect and honour. They define the boundaries of acceptable behavior, relations among members and how to handle encounters with individuals from rival groups, security agents and the public (6-7).

Therefore, rather than considering the Niger Delta as ungovernable spaces in this study, I explore the technique of insurgency in ways that reproduce the biopolitical strategies of violent state repression. Contrary to Watts’s argument about the panoptical sense of closure in the governable scales in the Delta, I mobilise the biopolitical suggestion of the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, to identify a paradigm of exclusion that frames the contested spaces of the Niger Delta creeks. The observation of the condition in which militants of the Niger Delta exercise the authority to suspend the law of the Nigerian state from operating in the creeks, a reproduction of sovereign power among the warlords in the insurgent groups – which corresponds with what Giorgio Agamben theorised as “State of exception” – demonstrates the condition of extreme but

*governable* strategy of resistance in the creeks. This approach to revolt privileges the need to assert the human and environmental rights of the Delta communities in a process that inaugurates alternative citizenship as a means of resisting the state's bio-power. It resonates with instances that Thomas Blom Hansen theorises can bring about sharp decline in the sovereignty of modern state. In the essay, "Sovereigns beyond the State: On Legality and Authority in Urban India", Hansen makes the point that, even in zones that are not susceptible to Hobbesian state of lawlessness, competing dynamics of power reproduces coexistence of widely distributed sources of legality and illegality. This view critiques Agamben's submission of the sovereign sphere as the fundamental culmination of power and authority in the practice of modern state. It proposes that "sovereign power is essentially an unstable and precarious form of power whose efficacy as a social authority capable of disciplining and creating subjects is dependent on its constant public reiteration and performance, or the rumors". In addition, it is predicated on the "capacity for excess violence" (171). Anchoring this on the formation of post-colonial systems of power, Hansen draws on urban India to submit that while the state, on the one hand, is an on-going project of control and subordination, sovereignty is a multiple and contested provision, on the other. This social structure of the post colony makes it possible for the coexistence of overlapping repertoires of power that Hansen describes as "informal sovereignties" in which local insurgents and terrorists exercise power. This biopolitical paradigm challenges notions of state monopoly of sovereignty that characterise the work of Foucault and Agamben, advancing insight into contested stateness in the context of emerging localities of power. In the introduction to the book, *Sovereign Bodies Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat make this point clear:

The production of sovereignty through the nation and the state are, in other words, often exclusive projects that inadvertently presuppose and produce large

numbers of poor, marginalised, or ethnic others as outsiders, people who are not yet ready to become citizens or included in the true political-cultural community. The state finds itself in constant competition with other centers of sovereignty that dispense violence as well as justice with impunity—criminal gangs, political movements or quasi-autonomous police forces that each try to assert their claims to sovereignty. In such situations, the state is not the natural and self-evident center and origin of sovereignty, but one among several sovereign bodies that tries to assert itself upon the bodies of asylum seekers, “terrorists,” or mere criminals (36).

To be sure, though Foucault is very readily identified with the conception of biopolitics, however, Giorgio Agamben has suggested its most compelling examples. Indeed, since Foucault the concept has increasingly gained purchase, becoming fashionable and ubiquitous in discussions concerning power and state terror (Virno, 2004; Schlosser, 2008). Agamben proposes to complete the work started by Foucault - by reforming bio-politics as a thesis to be extended to the development of the modern state. In the seminal book, *Homo Sacer* (1998), he tracks biopolitical conception back to the Greek antiquity and argues that life from the time of Aristotle has always been constitutive of the sovereign power. And citing Aristotle *Politics* extensively, Agamben explicitly identifies a distinction in antiquity between “bare life” (mere biological existence) and “good life” (life in political space)— both respectively aligned to bio and zoe – that determine the dialectic of how life relates with public politics in the classical world. Thus, what has changed is that contemporary forms of biopower exist at the moment of sovereign declaration of state of exception, a condition in which the rule of law is suspended. In other words, the shift that Foucault contemplates from the right “to take life or let live” to the power to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death” is, for Giorgio Agamben, the moment of sovereign power. Noting that “Western politics is a biopolitics from the very beginning” (181), Agamben suggests that sovereign law paradoxically governs life by excluding it.

The promotion of security measures in the Niger Delta as the ultimate criterion of governmentality reinforces Agamben's notion of the irreconcilability of securitisation with democracy and the sense in which it results to the state of exception. What is often regarded today in the Delta as "resource war" affirms the fundamental consequence of civil war issuing from the complicity of powerrelations. Indeed, since 2003 when the Joint Task Force (JTF) was set up "as an interim measure to quell rising violence in the Warri area and provide protection to the oil installations in the area, the JTF has remained in the Delta, and to date there are no plans for its removal" (Hazen and Horner, 28). Successive regimes in Nigeria have consistently reinvented the JTF as security template for state response to Niger Delta environmental and human right advocacy and protest. In a significant sense, it can be argued that the institutionalisation of JTF composed of the army, navy, air-force, paramilitary mobile police and regular police, appears to be an endorsement of a satisfactory experiment with the military paradigm after the massive brutal massacres of communities in the Niger Delta between 1990 and 1999. In their essay, "Blood Oil," Ethnicity, and Conflict in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria", J. P. Afam Ifedi and J. Ndumbe Anyu give an expose on the extrajudicial killings that signal the military intervention in the Delta communities of Umuechem, Odi, and Odioma with overwhelming human and architectural loses, pointing to militant provocations as "contributing to an escalation of tension and radicalization of the Niger Delta "struggle" (89). Given the minority status of the Niger Delta in the Nigerian geo-political configuration in relation to the ethnicization of politics in Nigeria, their analysis of the massacre of Odi suggests the ethnic dimension of the "military option":

In 1999, several young men described as "hoodlums" by community leaders in the Bayelsa state town of Odi kidnapped and killed several Yoruba police officers in alleged retaliation for the earlier deaths of Ijaws in the hands of Yoruba militants in Lagos. The Nigerian government's ultimatum to the Odi community to hand over the killers was not honored. The government reaction to this refusal was brutal,

harsh, and disproportionate. Government forces armed with military tanks and armored vehicles entered the town and, as if engaging in scorched earth warfare, razed to the ground architectural structures and killed many. (98-90)

The Niger Delta region, thus, represents a good case for a state of exception, a violent geography which oil resource exposes to biopolitical securitisation of the Nigerian state. Giorgio Agamben's argument in *Homo Sacer* that, in contrast with Foucault, what is typical about modern state is the sovereign declaration of a state of exception – and not the analysis of how life is included in the realm of politics in which it has always been constitutive since antiquity – is an important analytical locus for petro-modern states. Modern political community, Agamben argues, is organised by the process of exclusion, not inclusion. And it is the power of the sovereign to determine inclusion, or belonging, and exclusion. Those who are simultaneously constituted in the community but subject to the sovereign power to the point of exclusion, are reduced to the status of a *homo sacer* - or bare life - a figure derived from the ancient Roman law who must be killed with no recourse to law. Agamben has asserted that concentration camps offer a quintessential *nomos* of the state of bare life.

But the state of political denial and exclusion in which the Niger Delta exist in the Nigerian federation, an exclusion that reduces the lives of Deltans to the status of bare life, and the exceptional measures of state securitisation that have become the norm in the management of petro-violence, all fits Agamben's description of the "state of exception". Hence, the condition in which the Nigerian state constitutes herself into a sovereign power in conjunction with the Big Oil corporations – to consistently reduce the Delta people to the abjection of bare life – underwrites the Delta in the category of what is now described as "new spaces of exception"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>For works that discuss "other spaces of exception", see Gerry Kearns. "Bare Life, Political Violence, and the Territorial Structure of Britain and Ireland" *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror and Political Violence*.

By way of concluding this section, I want to assert that the biopolitics of the Nigerian state in the Niger Delta is constituted in the massive militarisation of the region in order to create order in the chaotic, inhuman and environmentally damaging process of oil production. This technique of governance is aimed at continually marginalising the Delta people from economic and political participation in the Nigerian Federal democracy while their resources are programmatically extracted by the foreign multinational oil corporations with the collaboration of rent-seeking Nigerian state. The communities' modality of response while demonstrating characteristic slippages and sense of ungovernability, evidences a reproduction of violence in the pattern of the state terror, what Agamben describes as "clandestine complicity of opponents". I suggest that the Niger Delta offers a good case for geopolitical state of exception, one in which the region's oil resources is the paradoxical attraction to terror. In this example, it is fair to argue that the Nigerian state favours militarisation as the norm in engaging with the oil politics in the Niger Delta.

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Ed. Derek Gregory and Allan Pred. New York: Routledge, 2007:7-35; See also Gregory, Derek. *The colonial present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004

## 2.4 THE NIGER DELTA CREEKS AS SPACE FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF ENVIRONMENTALISM.

*Ecological theater can reach people worried about pollution, the economy, or war...Critics and scholars who want to investigate the way ecologies-physical, perceptual, imagined - shape dramatic forms stand at the edge of a vast, open field of histories to be rewritten, styles to rediscuss, contexts to re-perceive.<sup>14</sup>*

The theatrical initiatives about the Niger Delta, in varying degrees, register the natural world of the region as a site of historical interplay of the resources of water and oil, one that implicates the people and landscape of the region in the everydayness of living in a world defined by the experiences of these resources. In their essay, “Oil Politics and Violence in Postcolonial Niger Delta Drama”, Oyeh Otu and Anasi Obumneme offer a historical reading of Niger Delta drama such that critiques ways in which crude oil mediates the representational politics of the region. They draw on the pre-colonial/colonial and postcolonial teleological paradigm to outline the manner in which dramatists of the Delta respond to the region’s historical reality. In the pre-colonial/colonial epoch, dramatic reflections about the Delta – such as J. P Clark-Bekederemo’s *Ozidi* and Elechi Amadi’s *Isiburu* – demonstrate a cohesive moral structure of communities that collectively built a system of order and harmony. They argue that this order underpins the basis on which society comes to term with questions of crime and punishment, one that also connects them to a larger cosmic order: a way of recognising the numinous and supernatural universe in the affairs of the community. The theatre of the period, thus, captures “a collective cultural consciousness and ontological affirmation” as markers of the people’s collective struggle against the exploitations of colonial modernity. Yet observing a shift to this tradition with the advent of oil politics, they write:

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<sup>14</sup> Erika Munk. “A Beginning and an End: Green Thoughts.” *Theater*. 25.1 (1994): 5

But postcolonial drama on the Niger Delta reveals how oil politics has eroded the values of the communities, broken the communal bonds such that things have fallen apart and brothers and sisters are fighting one another while enemies within and without have taken complete control of oil resources and the environment is degraded with impurity. And with the degradation of the environment, the lives of the people are inevitably degraded. (172)

The oil encounter – to borrow the popular coinage of the Indian author and critic, Amitav Ghosh – is diagnostic of the significantly revealing transformation in the dramaturgy of the Niger Delta theatre, inaugurating subversive tropes that enact the aesthetics of the collective struggles against petro-capitalism. Illustrating some select plays of this category – J.Ckark-Bekederemo in *The Wives Revolt*, Esiaba Irobi in *Hangmen also Die*, Umuko's *The Scent of Crude Oil*, Isaac Attah Ogezi in *Under a Darkling Sky*, Uzo Nwamara in *Dance of the Delta*, Osonye Tess Onwueme in *The She Said It*, Ahmed Yerima in *Hard Ground*, Eni Jologho Umuko in *The Scent of Crude Oil*, Oyeh Otu in *Shanty Town*, and Chika C. Onu in *Dombraye* – Otu and Obumneme highlight oil as the constant referent point in the theatrical imagination of the Delta. They argue that the plays are shaped by, and respond to, the tragic experiences of the socio-economic, political and environmental ‘terrorism’ inflicted by the alliance of the Nigerian government and the big oil corporations as well as reprobate indigenes of the Delta. For them, the worse tragic impulse of the Niger Delta oil politics is the production of the “enemies within” – described as allies of both the Nigerian state and oil companies – that underpins a growing trope of “tragedy of betrayal” in the representational culture of the region. In particular, the plays not only dramatise the struggles of the Niger delta people, but also foreground the strategies for negotiating the ruptures in their lives, expressed mostly in terms of the need for militarisation.

But in the essay, “African Theatre and the Question of History” the Ghanaian scholar Ato Quayson invokes the pre-colonial/colonial and postcolonial paradigm to discuss the connection between contemporary African theatre and indigenous performance resources. He contends that the approach often presents a number of ‘invisible pitfalls’ that arise from shared resources of “dance, storytelling, masquerade and mime” between the indigenous and contemporary theatre. These pitfalls tend to evince such condition of seamless relationship as to seem to portray an essentially same history that is bound in the same direction. He argues that there may be advantages in sharing common roots in theatrical forms as well as tracking the development of theatre to the same historical processes. However, such exercise presents possibilities to undermine specific transformative agendas that enable theatre respond to a number of influences that underwrite the manner in which reality is mediated. To this end, he notes that deploying a “pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial politico-historical” paradigm in the analysis of the history of African theatre imposes a constraining ethos of loss, what he describes as “a tyranny of teleology”. He writes that:

The central problems in analysing the history of African theatre seem to involve, first, how to describe change without necessarily being teleological, and second, how to define the ambit of theatre practice so as to discuss its lineaments as a form simultaneously working on history as well as being worked by it. The key thing is to perceive theatre in Africa as a form of process in dialectical relationship to wide forces both material as well as politico-historical (41).

In his essay “Poetics, Politics and the Paradoxes of Oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region”, James Tar Tsaaor seems to reproduce this pitfall. He describes the continuum of the region's history of depravity as “seasons of throes”, noting, “it will, perhaps, continue to writhe in throes. Perhaps, perpetually”(72). He picks up J.P.Clark-Bekederemo's *All for Oil* to examine “the political economy of Nigeria during the colonial and postcolonial epochs and the strategic role oil has played in this quotidian historical engineering process” (74). He draws on the geography of the

region - an ethereal landscape that is endowed with idyllic habitat of the ancient swamps, creeks and estuaries as well as rich marine life of aquatic splendour - to understand the paradoxical exclusion of the communities from the natural resources bound up in their physical environment. He notes further that the physical environment of the Delta is the source of the black gold- the crude oil - that flows as bestowment of the gods. Yet, it is this same oil deposit that attracts the European oil cartels into the terrain of the region, oil corporations such as oil Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Elf, etc whose exploratory and extractive activities are responsible for the pollution and violation of the hitherto fertile and serene landscape. Insccribing J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's *All for Oil* in the context of this oil politics, Tsaaior argues that the play represents portraiture of theatre in the Niger Delta that dramatises the region's history - a history that records the imperial encounter in the 19th Century. He draws attention to the play's chronicle of palm oil on which basis European imperialists, acting as vandals and plunderers, established political and economic spheres of interest that underwrite repressive monopoly over trade in palm oil. Set in the Oil Rivers (now the Niger Delta), *All for Oil* captures the historical trade in palm oil in which the central character, Chief Bekederemo (not the author) is cast as middleman between palm oil traders and the Europeans. In particular, the story reflects on the trade relations which socio-economic and political interests illustrate undercurrents of imperial monopoly, revealing a "binary oppositionality" of local and imperial conflicts that will continue to mark Niger Delta theatre. Thus, establishing the politics of oil as the dominant poetics of the Niger Delta drama, Tsaaior notes that "oil, whether palm or crude, is at the core of the dramatic proceedings in the play" (75).

Tsaaior's assessment of the Niger Delta history in *All for Oil* resonates with what Ato Quayson describes as "invisible pitfall" ("African Theatre 43) - a pitfall that is lying in the annals of the

different historicities of oil in the Delta. In re-inventing the colonial/postcolonial paradigm to understand the play's deployment of oil as a kind of dramatic resources, he appears to suggest a condition of seamlessness in the history of palm oil and crude oil in the Niger Delta. Indeed, he finds no difference between crude and palm in the character of oil in the Delta. This approach, as Quayson argues, undermines the transformative ability that underwrites specific historical references in African theatre. Because although the historical experiences of palm oil and crude oil seem similar in the manner both commodities are connected to the British imperial capital as well as the programmatic sense in which they provoke forms of resistance (Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, 2003; Michael Peel, 2011), I will argue that they account for different material and spatio-temporal effects. In other words, palm oil and crude oil enunciate different implications of materiality and spatiality as shown in some of the enlisted plays in this study. The result of this is that effort to understand *All for Oil* by undermining the different oil categories masks the specific transformative potentials implicit in the dramatic expressions. This thesis tries to sidestep the 'tyranny of teleology' by focusing more on the materiality of the Delta environment - picking on the ontology of water which embodies the everyday life of the people, and then oil to understand how that life is disrupted by the material encounter with oil - in order to track the specific transformations in the social realities of the Delta.

In surveying the Niger Delta from the viewpoint of theatre, it is possible to state that drama as a cultural text has surprisingly shown much less visibility than other genres – say, poetry, film and novel – in articulating questions of the region. Writing in the introduction to his book, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*, Biodun Jeyifo makes an important argument on what he describes as the “irreducible generic peculiarity” of drama, “the fact that more than the other literary arts, drama deals at a highly concentrated, more intense level with the contradictions of

existence” (7). He contends that it is inconceivable to compose a dramatic piece that does not deploy principles of conflict – “a physical or emotional conflict, a moral or spiritual contest of wills, a confrontation between contending principles” – as a basis of structural compositions. He notes further that beyond the “structural motif” of conflict is a provisional principle that pulls at conflicts towards a kind of synthesis that culminates in a potential resolution. Given these compositional characteristics, it is surprising that drama has not sufficiently emerged as a significant field of activism in the socioeconomic, political and environmental contradictions that frame the vexing conflicts in the Niger Delta<sup>15</sup> - not only in the aspect of registering these contradictions in the idiom of dramatic representation but also projecting a sense of resolution to the age-long conflicts in the region. This point helps to bring the scope of this study in focus, foregrounding the necessity of drama as a quintessential site of mediation for socioenvironmental contradictions. In other words, this contemplation helps to answer questions that invite drama into the scope of works that engage with eco/environmental realities. It is, indeed, diagnostic of the need for drama in initiating a particular protocol of transformation in the Niger Delta crises.

However, in a 1994 essay “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Eco-logical Theater”, Una Chaudhuri offers a different view about the failure of theatre in engaging with ecological consciousness. In the same issue of theatre, Erika Munk has noted, “our playwrights’

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<sup>15</sup>For instance, Ken Saro-Wiwa the most iconic environmental campaigner in the history of the Niger Delta, though closely associated with theatre [haven] written and produced a number of plays for radio and television, is noted to have excluded theatre from his campaigns for environmental justice. Indeed, as Ogaga Okuyade reports, “Saro–Wiwa’s imaginative compositions hardly discuss environmentalism; his environmental consciousness is only well articulated in his political rhetoric”(120). “The Cumulative Neglect of Collective Responsibility Postcoloniality, Ecology, and the Niger Deltascape in the Poetry of TanureOjaide.” *Matatu-Journal for African Culture and Society*, 39.1 (2011): 115-131; Chris Dunton clearly corroborates this view when he writes that Saro-Wiwa's plays are ‘one-acters’ mostly collected into two published volumes: *Four Farcical Plays* (1989) and *Basi and Company: Four Television Plays*. Of these plays, he writes that the “plot is generated from intrigue and counter-intrigue, from the comic motif of “the swindler swindled”: “Sologa, Eneka, and The Supreme Commander: The Theater of Ken Saro-Wiwa” *Research in African Literatures*, 29.1 (1998): 153-162

silence on the environment as a political issue and our critics' neglect of the ecological implications of theatrical form are rather astonishing" (5). Thus, tracking Euro-American theatre origin, particularly since the post-Romantic Darwinist naturalism and Ibsenist realism, Chaudary argues that its humanist paradigm has meant that it is "programmatically anti-ecological". She contends that modern drama has a disguised "complicity with industrialisation's animus against nature" in the manner it proffers a wholly social account of human life" (24). She points out that the deterministic force of the environment that is associated with naturalism masked an inherent incompleteness in its definition precisely on ideological grounds. As she posits, "naturalism was unwittingly acting out 19th-century humanism's historical hostility to ecological realities" (24). Hence, though signs of nature are discernible in the works of Ibsen and Chekov - for instance, "images of cherry orchards, wild ducks, and polluted baths" - they are rendered insignificant as inanimate objects by the dominant ideological discourse of realism. Indeed, she further makes the point that the use of the natural world "as metaphor, is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. Its very ubiquity renders it invisible" (24). Hence, she contests the use of ecology as metaphor precisely because it "can sometimes misrepresent the actual ecological issues at hand" (27), suggesting the need for theatre ecology to "turn towards the literal, a programmatic resistance to the use of nature as metaphor" (29). Crucially, in order to sidestep the human-driven conflicts that characterise the modernist theatre tradition, Chaudhuri suggests registering ecological concerns with works that directly deploy "actual ecological problems of particular environments" (24), that lay emphasis on site-specific protocols of dramatic expressions. Her suggestion underwrites the plays selected for this study and resonates strongly with the site-specific approach in the playwright's dramatisation of the Delta creeks and landscape. I discuss the

ways in which site-specific and spatial inflections in the Niger Delta drama make claims for the nonhuman nature, by bringing visibility to their exercise of agency.

Similarly, in her essay, “Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage” Theresa J. May echoes the burgeoning interest in ecological art and notes that “while literary scholarship has developed diverse discourses in ecocriticism, theater artists and scholars appear to be oblivious” (84). She provides possible strategies in which ecocriticism can illuminate the participation of theatre in ecological cultures. She intimates that “strategies for greening the theater [can be viewed] along two streams - applying ecocriticism to the dramatic canon, and recognising new works of ecodrama” (85). In the following chapters, I will pick up on May’s suggestion to explore the dramatic canons of Wole Soyinka and J. P Clark-Bekederemo – whose works register the Delta prior to the discovery of oil in 1956 as well as ‘new’ and emerging dramatists writing about the petro-culture in the Delta – Ahmed Yerima, Eni-Jones Umuko and Ben Benabai – to register theatrical instantiation of ecology.

In another essay “Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism in Theatre Studies”, May considers what she echoes as theatre’s “tepid embrace of ecocriticism” (96) by theatre studies to track the pattern and strategy of ecocritical trajectory in the field of theatre studies. She writes that implicit in this trajectory is a growing rift in the application of ecocritical inquiry in the different theatrical subjectivities of dramatic literature on the one hand, and performance productions on the other. Though these separate discourses hold possibilities for segregated and exclusive development of distinct ecocritical orthodoxies, however, they position theatre studies to exclusively function as bridge between discourses. May argues for “material-ecological implications embedded in cultural performances” precisely because, as she cites Steven Rosendale, it enables “widening the canon of texts for ecocritical investigation and placing environmental

criticism in a more productive relation with other, perhaps suspiciously humanistic, theoretical perspective and critical practices” (98). She expands on Chaudhuri's contestation of the metaphorisation of nature and insists that “it will be crucial to take care to retain the ontological integrity of ecology; that is, the study of living organisms (including humans) within the earth-based environment on which life depends” (100). In so doing, ecocriticism is enabled to “address injustice felt in the body – the body of experience, of community, of land” (101). It articulates a “theory in the flesh” – by probing how environmental questions are marked on the human bodies – bodies that spin suggestions of skin colour, sexual longing and corporeal relations with land. To be sure, my enquiry takes the literary route while recognising the discursive bridge to the extent that the play texts represent a blueprint for material projections to the realm of performances, projections that continues to validate the interconnectivity between text and performance. Analysing the plays in subsequent chapters, I show how bodies are inscribed in the creeks and landscapes of the Delta. In fact, I reflect on this corporeal relation with Agamben's suggestions of the *homo sacer* as a way of calling attention to the idiom of dramatic representation of the body excluded from the environment, and to illustrate a regime of terror in the Delta. In what resonates with Theresa May's suggestion about the body's experience with the environment, I show – for instance in Ahmed Yerima's *Ipomu* – ways in which the sexual body is stimulated by the seasonality of the water-hyacinth, highlighting the connectivity between sexual longing and natural world of sea-plants.

In the book, *Ecology and Environment in European Drama*, Downing Cless insightfully posits that the presence of nature in the history of western theatre dates to antiquity, arguing that significations of nature throughout the history of drama suggest that the humanist tradition that marked the evolution of European drama does not conflict with ecology *per se*. Rather than

privileging the meaning-making process of site-specific productions to determine the environmentality of theatre, he cites earlier works of Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Anton Chekov and Samuel Beckett to attest to the evidence of how ecology is differently deployed in plays, contending that greening of the theatre is dependent on “innovative interpretations” of stage directors. His argument makes a case for plays about the Niger Delta that is studied in this thesis. The plays offer significant ecological insights in ways in which they survey the littoral universe of the region, yet often interpreted to signify anthropocentric focus by drama critics and stage directors. Indeed, it appears that critical assessments of Nigerian theatre easily lend itself to metaphorisations of the ecology, which is a way of tacitly reading ecological crises in plays as signifiers of socioeconomic and political events<sup>16</sup>. Considering that the ubiquity of ecological signs renders it invisible (Chaudhuri), it may be argued that the banality of these signs has masked the ability to recognise the ecological relevance of the plays. This study privileges the dramatic literature— rather than performance— in taking up “innovation interpretations” of the Niger Delta drama. The plays offer possible ways in which the natural environment of the Delta can be dramatically rendered and performed. Viewed from this literary lens, they suggest an instance, according Downing Cless, in which “Natural environments become dramatic forces, taking action with agency or reacting as enforced victims, not unlike characters” (i). Particularly noteworthy in the plays is the manner in which they seem to underpin a spacio-environmental history of the Delta whereby the ‘non-human-other’ – the swamps, sea-plants and coastal species – are captured to

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<sup>16</sup>Of particular note in this study are reviews of J. P Ckark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* which I shall I be discussing in the following chapter. In adapting the play to *Another Raft* (1988), for instance, Osofisan's reading focuses on the sea as an equivalent of the depth of Nigeria's socio-political atrophy. In an interview with Edde M Iji, he uses Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) to explain Nigeria economic woes from which a sense of purgation is required, as he notes: “This is what I developed in the bigger sense in *Another Raft*. It is the [...] questions that I brought to question in *Another Raft* from Clark-Bekederemo's *Raft*. The same journey of purgation”: *Background to Femi Osofisan's Philosophy of Drama and Theatre*: Calabar, Baaj International Company, 2001: 31

evidence a quintessential environmental theatre, one that foregrounds a representational politics of nature.

Considering the above, it is important to ask: how visible is eco-drama in the representational politics of the Nigerian literature in general, and Niger Delta in particular? Motivated by the tension of 'militant particularism' that started with the state-murder of Ken Saro in November 1995, focus in environmentalism appears to have supported an interesting wave of artistic responses about the Delta condition. In their essay "Environmental Challenges and Eco-Aesthetics in Nigeria's Niger Delta" (2013), Basil Sunday Nnamdi, Obari Gomba & Frank Ugiomoh discuss how "[T]he environment has become a keystone in Nigerian art and discourse since the activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa" (65). They write that Saro-Wiwa's activism, which culminates in bringing the ecological infraction in the Delta to international reckoning and visibility, drew the ire of the Nigerian state under the regime of General Sani Abacha, and subsequently his execution together with the Ogoni eight against widespread global outcry. Noting that their execution was to institute a regime of fear against any form of political agitation, the authors observe that "the design of state repression has failed to cow the people. Several persons and groups have since then risen in the region to confront the state" (66). Consequently, Saro-Wiwa's death was greeted with "a barrage of protest poetry" as well as "visual arts of photographers... whose images extend in visual form the words of the poets" in ways that "call on society to take the baton from Saro-Wiwa and his comrades who sealed a testament of revolt against environmental degradation" (66). The authors consider these works in the light of the failure of human society to sustain the environment, and suggest the agency of artists to provide the aesthetic tenor through which humanity can reconsider its relationship with nature. These works, therefore, though hinged on ethnic politics of the Ogoni uprising, illustrate a larger frame of national tragedy in which art is over-determined by the assault

on the environment. Needless to say, the work points to the evidence of the under-representation of drama in the ecological turn in the Niger Delta literature. Indeed, much of recent studies on cultural representation of the Delta seem devoted to poetry, novels and films to the exclusion of drama and theatre<sup>17</sup>, affirming the views of Arons Wendy and Theresa J May that “ecology and environment are not only underrepresented and underthematized [...], but also undertheorised in theater and performance scholarship”. My study aims to fill this gap. Could it be, as Chaudhuri has indicated, that the realistic and humanistic basis of drama and theatre has made it anti-ecological, hence unsuitable as vector for ecological stewardship? Or could it be a result of infrastructural deficiency of theatre in Nigeria on which basis plays are conceived for staging?

As noted above, a few attempts to theorise the effort of drama in addressing ecological conditions in the Niger Delta are very often reduced to historical paradigms that dramatise human struggles. Osita Ezenwanebe's essay “Treading subtly on volatile Ground: Ahmed's *Hard Ground* and the Dramatisation of the Niger Delta Crisis in Nigeria” discusses Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*— incidentally one of the texts selected in this study— to reveal what appears to reinforce Una Chauhuri's view about how the tradition of realist representation is complicit with the animus of industrial modernity against nature. He notes that regardless of the playwright's avowed awareness of the socio-political and economic marginalisation of the Niger Delta people by the Big Oil Companies, the play seems uncritically fixated on the campaign for cessation of hostilities. Given Ahmed Yerima's position as director of the National Troupe and the artistic director of the

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<sup>17</sup>Examples include Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia's PhD research, "Ecocriticism and the Oil Encounter". *Unpublished Ph.D Thesis*, University of Stellenbosch, 2013, Oyeniyi Okunoye's "Alterity, Marginality and the National Question in the Poetry of the Niger Delta." *Cahiers d' Etudes Africaines*, 191.3 (2008): 413-436; Ogaga Okuyade's "The Cumulative Neglect of Collective Responsibility Postcoloniality, Ecology, and the Niger Deltascape in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide." *Matatu-Journal for African Culture and Society*, 39.1 (2011): 115-131; Sule Egya's "Eco-human Engagement in Recent Nigerian Poetry in English." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49.1 (2012): 60-70 and Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*, Cambridge: Univ of Cambridge, 2017.

National Theatre at time of writing the play - both privileged government appointments - Ezenwanebe considers the possibility of the playwright's complicity with the Oil company which enjoys duplicitous alliance with Nigerian government. He writes:

The fact that nothing much is said about the federal government and the multinational oil and gas companies makes the message of the play sound idealistic and hollow, because it does not address the real crisis. *Hard Ground* is performed before audiences who are informed about the historical reality of the Niger Delta crisis. They are aware of the social reality of the issue, the actions and reactions of the federal might, and the past and present actions of the oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta.

This examination of *Hard Ground* is significant in the interesting attention it brings to the Niger Delta drama, one that seems to stimulate critical awareness in the exploration of how drama contributes to the Niger Delta concern. Adebisi Ademakinwa's paper "Drama as an Analytical tool of Contemporary: Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* and The Politics of the Niger Delta", also published in the same book of essays, and equally based on *Hard Ground*, belongs to this category of critical project. It is possible that these studies might have been inspired by the play's award of LNG Prize for Literature in 2006, yet this does not diminish the critical and theoretical contribution they make to the burgeoning interest in the Niger Delta drama and theatre. However, the studies have failed to read the ecological significations rendered in the play, focusing too much on the sociopolitical conflicts that form the background to the narrative. This fact resonates with Una Chaudhuri's argument about how the use of ecology as metaphors and symbols can mask ecological realities and, in fact, render it invisible. For instance, identifying the 'ground' as the central trope of the play, Ademakinwa chooses a clearly symbolic reading: "This ground symbolizes a state of the social milieu as well as the condition of the people living in the perilous Niger Delta environment". He continues:

the 'ground' that is highly symbolic, there is also the undercurrent idea that this ground has been the cause of conflicts among historical figures that have interacted and are interacting with other historical figures, past or present in the Niger Delta region of the country Nigeria. Secondly, there is also the notion that apart from the ground, the characters in the play are depicted by Yerima as mere copies of current and past leaders in the Niger Delta and these characters have, in one way or other, interacted with the ground and the ground has subdued them (330).

It is important to mention that in the last several years a few writers have taken to drama to express their interests about the Niger Delta situation. Though not examined in this study, some of these plays have offered insights for salient reflections on the Delta. Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) will arguably be credited to have set the stage for the Niger Delta eco-conscious drama. Set in the riverine state of Izon, the play tells the story of a group of angry youths who took to arms in protest against corrupt hijacking by politicians of the sum of three million naira meant to compensate communities whose farmlands have been destroyed through oil spillages. Published in 1989, several years before the upsurge and spread of insurgency, the play appears to be nostrademic in its anticipation of the youth response to the crisis in the region. Very noteworthy about the play in this regard is how the forest is imagined as a basis of insurgency, and the manner in which the retreat of the militants into the forest constitutes a paradigm of strategic exclusion such that will shape my discussion in this study.

Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel*(2009) draws on the 1998 Jesse fire disaster – as Eni Jones Jologho did in *Scent of Crude Oil*– to reflect on how economic and social deprivations drive a community into a dangerous strategy of survival. The play narrates the story of an illegal oil bunkering gone awry resulting to the fire outbreak that consumes the lives of everyone in the pipeline. Okoro and Ewari, the two main bunkerers in the play, are not empty-headed school dropouts — as we find in

*The Scent of Crude Oil*. Ukala's militants – as Irobi's – consider themselves as Marxist ideologues whose dissent is framed on revolutionary consciousness. They view themselves in that state as being “in trenches in the forest, learning Mau Mau tactics”, sometimes including anti-Apartheid slogans in their rhetorics as a way of Africanising the struggle. It is on this score that one can read the play as an open-ended account of the fire disaster, rather than the narrative closure promoted by the popular media in which all militants are economic saboteurs.

That there has been little effort at studying this growing interest in dramatic representation of the Delta is an important motivation for this study. Where available, studies often focus too much on stylistic and social-historical approaches to the dramatic texts in ways that suggest scholarly disinterest in the ecological turn. As I noted, this approach proves insufficient in tracking the transformational possibility of the material ecology of the region. This study seeks to address this gap. My analysis shall pay more attention to the ecological significance of the conflicts in the Niger Delta by co-opting critical resources of space and landscape/seascape to examine the texts in ways that prioritise the relation of place and people of the region.

In conclusion, therefore, environmental history chronicles the history of people's embeddedness to place– suggesting that place has a history and narrative that form a spatial experience of human–non-human relations. In the second section, I suggest that part of the history of place and people is the biopolitics of Euro-American capitalism, which is made possible by the attraction of natural resources in the Delta enclave. In the last section, I attempt to connect this time-space history within the context of ecodrama. I recognise that, in contrast with other genres, drama has been underrepresented and under-theorised as a category of cultural reflection of the Delta. The drama texts that I picked for this study address the Niger Delta condition from the eco/environmental perspectives to show the different kinds of history that happen in the region. They privilege a

relational scope of human-nonhuman contribution to the region's history in a way that inaugurates an emphasis on the ecological turn.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEATRE AND THE ONTOLOGY OF WATER IN THE PRE-OIL MODERNITY NIGER DELTA.

*The universal stillness of the scene was very imposing; unbroken as it was by any sound, save the dashing of our own paddlewheels, and the clear musical cry of the leadsman ... The large and umbrageous trees, with their festoons of Orchidae and purple and white Convolvuli hanging from the branches, formed a combination of forest scenery, so striking, novel, and interesting, as enabled us to forget that the much-talked-of Delta of the Niger had been fairly entered upon.*<sup>18</sup>

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION.

In “Ways of the River”, a preview based on an exhibition hosted in 2002 at UCLA’s Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Marth G Anderson and Philip M Peek invoke the term “watery ethos” to illustrate how the “Delta's myriad rivers and creeks not only define a geographic region; [but] also form a cultural confluence” (12). They argue that this cultural confluence triangulates the linkages between the coastal geography, the water spirits and the community of people whose lives are connected to the ways of the river. In the epigraph above, reproduced in the brochure of the exhibition, William Allen gives account of an early colonial entry into the Delta region in 1848. His account of the expedition gives insight into the perception of the colonial explorers about the environment and landscape of Niger Delta during this period. His description of the Delta creeks as possessing “universal stillness”, and the mangroves as “a combination of forest of scenery” which enables him to justify a ‘fair entry’ into the region, hints at the dominant disposition of colonial explorers about nature in relation to the natives in the colonies. Siba

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<sup>18</sup>Martha G. Anderson and Philip M. Peek. “Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta. (exhibition preview).” *African Arts*. 35.1 (Spring 2002): 12-25

Grovogui and Lori Leonard (2007) have explained this kind of colonial attitude as an imagination of nature that is programmed to undermine the sense of entitlement and claim that form the basis for people's expectations and attachment to nature and environment. Such notions as "forest" or "bush", they argue, undervalue "the extent of villagers' interactions with or activities in nature: hunting, gathering, fishing, and the like" (49). In his book, *Changes in The Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, William Cronon makes a related argument in his discussion of the environment of New England prior to the contact with Europe. He writes: "once European visitors had arrived, their preconceptions and expectations led them to emphasise some elements of the landscape and to filter out certain others" (88). Cronon argues that this strategy of perception was based on the tendency to see the landscape from the viewpoint of mercantile possibilities, one that undermines the ecological potential of the environment. In Cronon's view, this perception, or, "European eye" as J M Coetzee terms it (cited in Garuba "Landscape" 212), offers an incomplete understanding of the colonial landscape in the manner it overlooks the ecological relations of the landscape. Nonetheless, Allen's description of the region as "the much-talked-of Delta" draws attention to an important fact of the Niger Delta as one of the largest wetlands in Africa – a fact that underscores the premise of the exhibition: an illustration of "the importance of water and environment in the daily and spiritual life of the region" (12). The seascape, therefore, constitutes a significant reference-point not only in how the Niger Delta negotiates relations of colonial incursion, but also represents the most important space of the region's ecological reality.

Equally significant to note in the epigraph is the manner in which the account of Europe's entry into the Niger Delta literally resonates with the Cartesian duality with which the tradition of modernity is often understood. As it reads: "unbroken as it was by any sound, save the dashing of

our own paddlewheels”(14). One can very easily imagine the scenery of still waters and the mangroves of the Delta against the dashing of the paddlewheels; a suggestion of contrast that conveys the image of a silent landscape at the point of historic modernist awakening that the boat propeller so loudly announces. This duality of silence and sound, a significant categorisation of modernist assumption, is crucial in the way imperial encounter with the colonial landscape is conceived. In assigning the condition of silence to the status of the Niger Delta landscape and environment, Allen appears to be inadvertently stripping the material environment of agency, foistering it with silence and inertia in order to reframe it for a regime of colonial extraction. This denial of agency echoes what Harry Garuba, following Franz Fanon, describes as “the shadow of colonialism and its multiple forms of dispossessions” (214). Here, the configuration of silence points to another kind of dispossession. Because as Fanon has stated about the colonial project: “colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns on the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Franz Fanon quoted in Garuba “Landscapes” 217). In this instance, the seascape and landscape of the Delta are emptied of ‘all form and content’ that constitute any kind of spatial and ontological history of its relationship with the people that inhabit the region.

Bearing these insights in mind, this chapter attempts to engage with the “ways of the water” – the “routinized everydayness” of living in a place that is defined by the ‘ethos of water’ as a means of restituting the rivers of the Delta as vectors of agency. I draw on Karin Amimoto Ingersoll to revise this experience into what she terms “waves of knowing”, an apt metaphor that directly implicates the seascape ecology in the formation of knowledge. In the book, *Waves of Knowing: A seascape Epistemology*, Ingersoll informs that the sea is the basis for the enactment of identity and

history for those who live within the coastal regions. It is a form of cognitive experience that enables them “to ride [the waves]; read the wind, swell directions, and tides; know the reefs and the seasonal sand migrations”. (1). In this chapter, I argue that like the Kanaka Maoli native of Hawaii about whom Ingersoll writes, the Niger Delta communities are “more agile in the water than on land” (1). I identify the everydayness of water in the Delta to highlight the quotidian existence of the communities – local livelihoods, love, hate, epistemologies of time, etc – paying attention not only to how the ontology of water frames the people’s perception of these realities, but also the manner in which they anticipate and encounter modernity. Ingersoll writes about the power of the sea to produce “an ocean-based epistemology”– notably navigation and fishing – such that offer “cultural awareness and affirmation within the reality of a colonial history and neocolonial systems” (35). She argues that these ocean-based epistemologies are instrumental in mobilising an ontological perspective that speaks to the ever-shifting Western regimes of statehood, capitalism and economic development. It therefore offers alternative ways of knowing the material and spiritual world – ways that endorse political and ethical relationships that are bound up geographically. With this in mind, I track the condition of the landscapes of the Delta – the creeks, swamps and the “neighboring Atlantic Ocean” – to understand the entry-point of collections of Anglo-America multi-national corporations in the way it is instantiated in the plays selected for this chapter. Anchoring this on ecoliterary context, I explore what Stephanie LeManager describes as “everyday coastal aesthetics” (*Living Oil*,48) to offer insight into the manner in which the people of Delta are spatially enabled by the ontology of water and the ways in which they respond to the dynamics and flows that the coastal region imposes. Thus, inspired by recent debates around the subject of decolonial geographies as well as sea/aquatics literature, I deploy the Niger Delta drama to ask: how do dramatists writing about the Delta represent the

seascape/landscape and environment of the region in ways that re-invest it with eco/environmental agency? Given the condition of colonial silencing and exotic narratives about the landscapes –how do dramatists of the Delta demystify ‘the myth of modernity’ in a manner that reverses the order of knowledge that it imposes?

Thus, the task of this chapter is to establish the centrality of the sea in the Niger Delta landscape and environment before the period generally regarded as the petro-cultural epoch, and in a way problematise the colonial report that defines the region with notions of tranquility and calm – notions that undermine its ecological potential. Using J. P Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* and Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*, I argue that the littoral condition of the creeks and swamp provides the basis through which: (1) Though ethnically and tribally different, the people of the region construct their spiritualities, temporalities and epistemologies, relying on the everydayness of water to make sense and meaning of their geography and economy of living; (2) These realities frame and determine their anticipation of early capitalist modernity; (3) The condition of the Delta environment constitutes a kind of geo-resource that marks the manner in which the Delta is inserted in the Nigerian political economy, and ultimately inflects their relationship with other regions of Nigeria.

In the foregoing, I will argue that the seascape is the centre of dramatic representation in the pre-oil modernity Niger Delta. Thus, this chapter sets the pace for how the waters of the Delta frames a specific culture of involvement - one in which the creeks are involved in the exercise of ecological agency. I use the term *involvement* in the significant sense in which Teresea Shewry borrowed it from the New Zealand poet, Gregory O'Brien. In a review of the work of Ralf Hotere – a contemporary artist in New Zealand whose works privilege ecological advocacy – O'Brien has described the artist as “an advocate of *involvement*—political, environmental, social and personal”

(247). Shewry, however, invokes the term to denote the manner in which a collection of poets participates in shared social and aesthetic space with the sea. From this perspective, I note that the early plays about the Niger Delta are challenged into re-imagining the complex involvement of the ecology of the region within the body of their dramaturgies, and capturing it within a broad context of the region's geographies and spaces, which James Tsaaior affectively describes as "a congregation of ageless swamps, calm creeks, and primeval estuaries" (72). I extend the notion of involvement to highlight the ethnic differences of the people who inhabit the Niger Delta area with a view to tracking the ways in which they are bound and connected by the geography of the rivers.

An interesting aspect of discussing early Niger delta theatre is the import of temporality, one that suggests the manner in which a people's landscape reproduces their regime of time. As some of the plays show, particularly Clark-Bekederemo's, the sea lends itself as an apparatus of time. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins speak of the contingency of timescape in the unfolding of history in postcolonial drama, describing it as "mythical time" that occupies the spatial field, that prefigures the landscape as a temporal category of timelessness (137). Drawing on the regime of tides that characterise the Atlantic Ocean, Niger Delta dramatists formulate theatres that articulate the dynamics of the tides in a manner that concatenates with the quotidian life of the characters. Through the tides, nature is endowed with the capacity to exercise agency in which the human subject is drawn in the web of seasonal rounds. Clark-Bekederemo particularly makes the tide the pivot of his dramatic structure, rendering temporality within the context of aesthetic and social agencies, thereby constituting not only the dramatic plot around which the narrative is build, but also the socioenvironmental lives of the characters in the play in ways that evoke and mirror the experience of living in the timelessness of the Delta. To put it perceptively, this can be explained as the nuance of the dramatic structure with which Clark-Bekederemo captures the idea of living in

the Delta, one that is defined in the manner that time-space is unified, and contested, in the geography of the region.

### **3.2 THE WAVES OF THE SEA IN J.P CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S *THE RAFT***

J. P. Clark-Bekederemo has attracted a significant body of scholarship. This is typical considering that he belongs to the first-generation writers in Nigeria whose works provided the grounding for the development of African literature and letters. In considering the imagination of the riverine culture in his body of works, it is important to recognise that Clark-Bekederemo is an Ijaw-born poet and playwright, the largest of the many ethnic nationalities in the Delta. This recognition is instrumental not only in identifying the primacy of the rivers, creeks and swamps in his artistic orientation, but also underpins a sub-regional dimension such that maps the relations of water and the Delta people as the central site of his dramatic preoccupation. As Dan Izevbaye notes: "Clark-Bekederemo's literary burden [is] - his apprehension of the potentially tragic experience of the Ijo in their riverine home" (18). Broadly, he lays the groundwork for the geography of cultural imagination that draws the region into tragic sensibilities woven around the ethos water. Indeed, water is the signifying subject with which Clark-Bekederemo probes the potential agency of nature and environment of the Delta, exploring its relationship with the daily rounds of his Delta people. For him, the depiction of the environmental setting of the Niger Delta represents an autochthonous examination of the history and tradition of the coastal communities that make up the region. His plays not only serve to privilege the flows of the Delta – the sense in which the people's experience of living in the region is espoused in watery terms – but also account for how the

history helps in mapping out the dramaturgy of the plays. Clark-Bekederemo's dramaturgy fits Biodun Jeyifo's insightful epistemological classification of African plays that emphasise a kind of multilayered vision of theatre. Jeyifo draws on the complex inflection of imperial and environmental subjection in African to explain a trope of liberation that is predominant in West African drama. He writes that "Africa has not only to liberate itself and its productive powers from imperialist domination and distortion, it also has to liberate these same productive capacities from their present prostration before the awesomeness of the natural environment" (61). The dramatization of this complex conflict underwrites recourse to knowledge systems that instrumentalise man's efficacious action in wrestling his dignity and humanity from the natural environment, an 'epistemological context' that hacks back on man's confidence in dealing with the material environment. Yet, he states:

I have remarked...that in Africa we confront, relatively speaking the enormously crucial historical fact that the action of man on his natural environment is still very punny, very ineffectual. Droughts, famines, torrential floods and other natural disasters still correspond, imaginatively speaking, to a mythological pattern; and they are largely viewed as such. (*Truthful Lie*61)

Clark's plays offer a paradigmatic example of this wave of human knowledge in relation with his environment. His dramatic oeuvre – *Three Plays (Song of a Goat, The Masquerade and The Raft)*, *The Bikoroa Plays (The Boat, The Return Home and Full Circle)*, *Our Wives Revolt* and *All for Oil*– are marked by sub-regional consciousness that explores the natural setting of the Niger Delta. The experiential nuance of the coastal culture, shaped by the materiality of the geography, often lends Clark-Bekederemo's drama an ethereal significance, highlighting an agrarian ontology that marks the referencing of his dramatic works. In other words, Clark-Bekederemo's oeuvre can be understood in the manner in which the environmental realities shape the structure and aesthetics of

the setting, a kind of heuristic fusion that absolves the tensions of the structure and struggles that inflect the plays. We find these questions more fully illustrated and dramatically rendered in *The Raft* (1964). The play is the last in a sequence of three plays, which, in the traditional sense of dramatic categorisation, cannot be described as a trilogy. Adewale Maja Pearce alluded to this fact when he writes that “*The Raft*, is a radical departure from the first two and can in no way be considered to share anything in common with them” (*A Peculiar Tragedy* 206). However, these analytic categories and the manner in which they are lumped and labeled are often framed on dramatic actions that lay emphasis on the Aristotelian dimension of human agency.

In the case of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s *Three Plays*, if the narrative threads are split and rendered disparate, an implicit privileging of the Niger Delta waters and creeks run through the plays, sufficiently offering a spatio-ecological backdrop that in a way subsumes the human actions. Indeed, Clark-Bekederemo makes the creeks of the Delta a functioning whole in his plays, appearing to elevate the seascape into a fundamental dramatic agent in relation to the lifescape of the human characters. The problem is that very often his plays are read exclusively from the viewpoint anthropocentric idioms, a critical approach that easily ignores the deep-rootedness of the environmental history of his Niger Delta origin. For instance, commenting on *The Raft*, Robert Wren contends that, “[it] symbolizes the human situation in a world no longer bound by traditional laws and values” (quoted in Maja-Pearce *Peculiar Tragedy* 207). Such a reading comes from a skewed and erroneous notion of human exclusivity<sup>19</sup>, one that views the entirety of nature’s complex agency from the lense of human beneficence. At best, it is a display of anthropocentric

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<sup>19</sup>Noting that *The Raft* was written in 1963 to reflect the playwright’s “experience of life in the Niger Delta”, Dan Izevbaye dismisses Abiola Irele’s reading of the play as a political parable of Nigeria - with the four lumbermen representing the country’s four regions in the pre-Civil War period. According to him, an examination of the dates the play was written and produced would have been sufficient in revealing the error of allegorical interpretation since the fourth region was created a year after the production of the play. See Izevbaye, 16.

hubris that captures the dynamics and nuances of nature from a wholly socially-sanctioning context. In this chapter, I offer a contrary reading, paying attention to the playwright's exploration of the seascape as a sub-regional and geographic marker of the quotidian lives of the Delta communities. In so doing, I offer a shift from the exclusively anthropocentric approach that historically-based reading imposes on the play while foregrounding significant ecological questions that underwrite the narrative.

*The Raft* tells the story of four lumbermen - Olotu, Ibobo, Kengebe and Ogoro - who are adrift a boat conveying timber across the River Niger. They have been hired by some middlemen in Warri - a fast growing commercial township in the Delta region - on account of their experiences in ferrying merchandise across the river. To be sure, the four lumbermen represent an assembly of Deltans with which Clark-Bekederemo literally navigates the different nuances of everyday experience of the River Niger to which they are geographically bound up. He presents their individual temperaments and personalities in order to probe the lived experiences of the region. Kengide, the oldest of the four, blabs continuously, and quarrels more frequently with Olotu. He persistently complains about Ogoro's habit of talking in his sleep, describing him as "that blundering bullock", "harassing others in their sleep"/ "That bastard, I could swing his neck/for his endless grunting"(92). Olotu would defend Ogoro, invoking the notion of heredity as a belief system in the Delta: "He got it off his mother. The fellow has told you himself. So how can he stop it?" (92). The constant quarrel between Olotu and Kengide provides a source of exposition in the play, often revealing an opposing binary of Delta's social and economic development. In the argument below - triggered by musings over the raft cutting free of its mooring - what is suggested is that while Kengide has remained bound to life in the creeks, Olotu is well traveled across different cities in Nigeria.

OLOTU: So what will you have us do, Kengide?  
 KENGIDE: Young man, don't  
           You shout my name in this dark!  
 OLOTU: What if I did?  
 KENGIDE: I am the elder of your older brother  
           And have seen more life than you.  
 OLOTU: You forget he who walks sees more  
           Than who just grows old  
 KENGIDE: And you have been to Lagos, Kano,  
           Onitsha or whatever other foul dens  
           You say you have tenanted, while I have  
           Been just a wall-gecko gone grey at home,  
           Is it not so? I don't see the great wealth  
           All this travelling abroad has brought, though (*TR,95/96*)

Their knowledge of the waters notwithstanding, it is unclear to the boatmen what cut the raft loose. They have each fastened the raft firmly to the mooring with reeds in seven places. But “all the knottings are unfastened at once”, setting the raft adrift on the river. While they argue over the accident, it is apparent that Clark-Bekederemo draws on it to emphasise the aspects of the Delta’s culture that place value on technical knowledge of the people's marine life – rather than sheer human strength because, as Ibobo claims, “I'm sure the two/ I tied were fast”. To which Ogro replies: “And mine. Not even a buffalo could have got out of them” (93). Indeed, as Ingersoll notes about living and knowing the sea, the experiences “become not merely practices but critical ways of knowing and doing” (19). The playwright therefore appears to be privileging a cultural resource in which technical subtlety - rather than human force - is requisite in the affairs of the sea. This much is evident in the trade of blames between Olotu and Kengide as their feud is once more rekindled:

OLOTU: It's not stories  
           About sinews of strength we are after. How  
           Is it we have gone adrift like this  
           I definitely said it the evening  
           It was unwise tethering the raft  
           With loops of reeds, Kengide

Will not let me talk because I am  
A townsman  
KENGIDE: Nonsense, township talk  
Had no bearings with this. I simply  
Explained that in rivers with muddy floors  
And swamp banks like this one, it is  
Not always safe to make boats fast  
To a post, worse of all, a raft. To an arm  
Of the trees huddling close to the waters perhaps  
But the danger there is the possible  
Visits from snakes and monkeys or worse

Kengide's reference to the dangers in the outposts of the Delta creeks is key here. It provides insight to the condition of the landscape of the Delta, one in which the mangrove forests and swamps are populated by snakes and monkeys. But as the play unfolds and the canoe continues to float aimlessly, it soon becomes apparent that much of the dangers are sea-based. The spot at which the raft broke off requires several days' navigation to the nearest town – a designation of substantial distance. Ibobo remarks, "I rather fear it's sea cows. We may/Have, without knowing, planted ourselves/Right in the field of their grazing, and now/They have come and eaten us out of our roots" (95). Kengide, on the other hand, fears that the raft may run into "some banks", where baskets and stakes for catching shrimps are accidentally deposited in the river, causing a kind of treachery and danger to the shrimps and fishes. The playwright is perhaps referring to the precarious condition of the sea that result from pollution of the river by local fishermen, a suggestion of ways in which the community of fishermen participate, if in a less pernicious level than industrial modernity, in the act of toxicities that happen in the Niger river. To be sure, this perspective helps to interrogate the often Edenic assumption with which indigenous communities frame the condition of their environment prior to Euro-American industrial modernity.

It is interesting to note that the Delta people believe that the gods and elemental forces animate the landscapes, and inhabit the water bodies in the region. Garuba hints at this belief system when he writes about “the animist spirits that inhabit the landscape” (“Landscape” 213). Invoking what he terms “animist ecology” to describe a sense of consistency with which generations of postcolonial writers capture the landscape in their poetry particularly in the Niger Delta, he contends that the ocean is “filled with the presence of spirit and gods and other mythic creatures whose habitat and playground is the landscape and natural environment”(216). In discussing the place of the supernatural in Ijaw and Urhobo world-views, Asuka writes that “the forest, rivers, creeks, lake, oceans and sea” (13) equally constitute habitats for the deities. Temitope Oriola emphasises this point in the effective way he introduces a kind of spatial formation of power, a Foucauldian surveillance category of power, when he writes that “the creeks represent an otherworldly space, as the gods are believed to constitute their surveillance architecture and paraphernalia” (7). It is probably on this account that Ogro suspects some deistic forces at work in tearing the reeds off the raft, arguing that the “leftover/Dragging in the stream seems smooth/To the touch at both end”. In response, Ibobo asks: “Some ghosts or evil god,/You mean?”(94). Hence, once the raft drifts to a much-dreaded whirlpool in the sea – a site called Osikoro – it is Olotu who calls attention to the insight of mythic habitation and emplacement in the middle of the Niger Delta waters.

...I think  
 You have all gone soft and possessed. Even  
 Kengide's head seems to have fill out  
 In fear of some underscovered merpeople  
 Supposed to inhabit the place. But you wait  
 And see: we'll row ourselves out of here  
 Quick enough, will punt the raft free as sure as the sun  
 Sucks up the morning mist - yes, you wait  
 And see! (101)

The “great Osikorobo whirlpool” into which the raft sinks is described as a pernicious pit in the Niger river from which encounter boatmen “may never find release”. The whirlpool offers an interesting paradox in the epistemology of the sea. It is a flow-less mass of water in the middle of the Niger River that captures the boats and ships with a centripetal force that resonates with the kind of story associated with the Bermuda Triangle, a force that contests and subdues the flowscape of the Niger, thereby making any kind of navigation impossible. Osikorobo invokes fear among the natives of the Delta. Ibobo asks: “my great grand-grandmother. Now/How have you led us into this?”, an apparent reference to the mother deity, Oyin, the Ijaw god of creation that many will recognise in the work of Clark-Bekederemo. The unspoken fear of Osikorobo is implied in the following dialogue which appears to shed light on Olotu’s lack or denial of knowledge about the spiritualities of the

Delta waters:

OGRO: And we are water-logged here  
In Osikorobo - the confluence of all  
The creeks!  
OLOTU: The drain pit of all the earth,  
Or are you too caught by fear to say it?  
IBOBO: Hold your tongue! (104)

The quartet has realized the presence of Osikorobo during a second round of test that Kengide conducted to check the flow of the tides they continue to drift. In the first test, after a long period of aimless floating, and uncertain of both time spent and the direction of the boat, Ibobo asks: “which way is the tide going?”. To ascertain this, Kengide decides to conduct a test. Using a traditional oceanographic practice in the Delta that determines the movement of the tide in the river, the test involves monitoring the way a paddle drifts when dipped in the river. It appears that Clark-Bekederemo is not only fascinated with the trope of exploring the people's knowledge of the

sea, but also privileging the improvisational depth of that knowledge in ways that underscore the everyday practice of life in the waters. This is evident in Ogro's suggestion for the use of a bowl - rather than the paddle - a kind of recognition of the experiential terms of knowing the ways of the coastal culture:

OGRO: A bowl will be best  
For that, don't you think? It's so  
Much whiter, and therefore easier to see  
In this dark  
OLOTU: Well, get one then!  
IBOBO: Here's a pan; I don't think it was washed  
After we ate last evening. (97)

To conduct the test, Kengide places the bowl in the water, revealing a rightward drift of the bowl which is an indication of "ebb tide" - signifying that the raft is "heading to the sea". When Olotu rejects the first test - the reason for which I shall return to later - Kengide slips the bowl back into the water in the midst of the musings, and discloses that it is spinning: "we are in the arms/Of the great Osikorobo whirlpool" and Ibobo affirms, "Right in the pit" (101).

Philip Aghoghovwia has noted that the landscape of the Delta is figured in earlier writings as a hostile geography that colours the work with "luxuriance, beneficence, and magisterial force" ("Dissertation" 80). He identifies the older generation of writers of Delta extraction - notably Clark-Bekederemo and Gabriel Okara - as largely drawing on the imagination of the material reality of the Delta environment. He writes that their conception of the environment accounts for a cultural knowledge of nature that is "beyond human control, something mystical with a superior force and agency in relation to which the human subject is constructed and whose existence is determined according to nature's beneficence or maleficence" (80). This view throws light on Osikorobo vicious and uncontrollable force. The site constitutes such immense geologic and

oceanic force that when Olotu boasts that they can “punt the raft free as sure as the sun sucks up the morning mist”, Ibobo warns that he will “stir up more trouble”. Ogro adds: “Oh, doesn't he know? Ten such poles, /tied end to end, will not plumb the floors/Of Osikorobo”. Clark-Bekederemo is perhaps employing Osikorobo to open up a paradoxical question of a thoroughly arcane knowledge of River Niger that is fixated, unchanging and bound in mystery, highlighting the non-negotiability of ecological knowledge and power in the Delta rivers. He appears to be speaking through Kengide in the following lines:

Now I see why we of the Delta  
Never will make good. You believe all  
The tales tampering with the stars  
That are told you abroad, but never any one  
At home about your own rivers. Truly  
We are castaway people (101)

In *The Raft*, time is largely cast in the mould of the sea and measured in the rhythm and flow of the sea's tidal rise and ebb, producing a broad temporal tradition of seasonality. This way it offers multiple temporal categories, especially for unexpected events that cannot be accommodated within the seasonal structures of time. The scholar, Ato Quayson, describes this category of time as “[T]he implicit déjà vu of rememory [that] is meant to define a momentous event in the past that produces an excess beyond temporality, thus coexisting with the present as thought-picture with a peculiar experiential force” (*Calibrations* 134). In the opening scene of *The Masquerade*, for instance, NEIGHBOURS gossip about the rising tide holding out for too long to suspend the market economy of the Delta, and compare it with a similar event that happened “several floods ago” (51). In a similar instance in *The Raft*, when Ogro denies the possibility of slipping into the sea on account of his somnambulist habit, Ibobo states that, “Surely you lose track of events as swiftly/As the tide washes off all floatings” (92), and goes on to provide him with an account of how he sleep-walked on a particular night: “well, weren't you up/In your sleep that night,

pottering about/With pole erect in your hands, like a girl/Doing the lost fertility dance?” (92). In Quayson’s view, this aspect of temporality is framed around the everyday unfolding of events. He informs that “The passage of time is measured not just by the hands of the clock [...], but by registering impressions of seemingly mundane events” (125). This everyday unfolding of events that dissolve and re-memorialise through time’s alignment with the flow of the river is key in thinking hard about the travails of the lumbermen.

A result of this is that the condition of precarity that underwrites the tragic experience of the lumbermen is as much sea-borne as it is temporal. The play suggests that to lose track of the flow of the tide is symptomatic of loss of time. Given the limit of human ability to control the navigation of the waves particularly at the pitch of the night, knowledge of time becomes necessary in tracking the drift of the raft. To be sure, the raft appears entangled not only with the sea’s hostile turbulence, but also with the fissures of time. Olotu doubts Kengide’s test because he believes that the sea and time are complicit in the tragic derailment that occurs to the boat. He asks; “What if the raft/Had swung completely round while we slept? It then would mean we are moving inland – in the direction of Odi.”(97). This doubt prompts them to request for alternative modalities for telling time that is not implicated in the sea’s order of temporality. Using the wrist-watch, Clark-Bekederemo introduces the modernist temporal paradigm:

OLOTU: Why can’t you rely on my watch? I bought  
In Lagos – at the Kingsway stores, in fact.

KENGIDE: As if it is not common knowledge  
Hausa men hawk the best of them in the streets  
And will barter them for a pair  
Of tattered trousers.

IBOBO: Now, who was it that wanted some sign  
In the sky?

OGRO: I said I want to hear the crowning  
Of a cockerel, welcoming in the dawn

## Of another day (98)

In *Waves of Knowing*, Karin Amimoto Ingersoll writes that knowledge of the sea as an existential modality of the riverine culture is presumed on the cognitive relationship with the sea that informs “one how to move through it, how to approach life and knowing through the movements of the world” (5). She argues that it an approach to *knowing* that draws on the visual, intellectual and embodied literacy of the land and sea in ways that pay attention to how this form of knowledge recognises the material cultures of the seascape. This recognition, she avers, is implicit in the manner this knowledge is expressed in the people’s quotidian relation with the seascape, one in which knowledge of the “birds, the colors of the clouds, the flows of the current, fish and seaweeds, the timing of the ocean swells, depths, tides, and celestial bodies” (2) circulate to contest the western-dominant modernity. She presents the seascape epistemology as a form of philosophy of knowledge

and theorises that:

As a philosophy of knowledge, seascape epistemology does not encompass knowledge of “ocean” and “the wind” as things. Seascape epistemology is not knowledge of the sea. Instead, it is a knowledge about the ocean and the wind as interconnected system that allows for successful navigation through them. It's an approach to life and knowing through passage ways. Seascape epistemology organises events and thoughts according to how they move and interact, while emphasizing the importance of knowing one's roots, one's center, and where one is located inside this constant movement...[it] enables us to observe and interpret diverse knowledges from our own native perspectives. The power of seascape lies in its organic nature, its inability to be mapped absolutely, and its required interaction with the intangible sea(6).

*The Raft* finds interesting expression in the epistemology of the sea. In the play, Clark-Bekederemo highlights the ways in which the lumbermen deploy their knowledge of the waves and waters to negotiate the mysteries of Osikorobo, to ride the whirlpool to the safety of the nearest shores by monitoring and timing the waves. He is not content with merely showing the intemperate

power of the sea over the riverine community; he presents this power to offer insight into the spatio-temporal force of the Niger river in order to demonstrate the latitude of the human effort at manoeuvring the force of the waters. In so doing, he privileges the sea as a site of interconnection between the elemental force of the tides and human cognitive control, foregrounding a poetics of relation between the tides and the lumbermen. In reading the tide, Kengide predicts the coming of a “swift ebb tide” and announces that with some “better lot”, they will escape the pit before sundown. But aware that an ebb tide will predictably take them further to the sea, Ibobo cautions that it “calls for careful navigation”. By careful navigation is meant the ability to read, time and surf the tide between successive tidal shifts. Kengide describes this as locating the crest of the whirlpool in order to “court and hug the tide”, so as to control it. As Ingersoll puts it, [T]he sea, and all that was encountered in it, needed to be controlled in order to “get across” (38). Ibobo compares the control of the tidal shifts to the acrobatics of a monkey swinging between trees, pointing to the swiftness with which the lumbermen engage with the rhythms of the river:

IBOBO: It's not as if a monkey were swinging  
From one tree to another. Eight rivers empty  
Themselves into the Ramos here. It seems  
To me if their combined current can sweep  
Us out here, it will not stop till we are  
Past Age and right in the ocean.

KENGIDE: You two apply more water than is necessary  
To float a ship. Only five of them carry all  
The force, since these two flow a parallel course  
While the drain-back goes into this- which is  
Where we are going, if we must get to Burutu.  
To ride one into the other and so skirt  
Into our creek without being swept off  
In the central on-rush of the Ramos,  
That certainly will need great care and skill. (105)

.It is worth remarking that the invocation of the popular Ramos River into which the multiple rivers empty, together with the coastal city of Burutu, underscores a geo-spatial knowledge of the

region, both of which signal a possible route of escape from the Osikorobo pit while pointing to ways the rivers are linked to the shorelines of the bordering city. Crucially, Clark-Bekederemo frames the knowledge of the sea on the hermeneutics of interaction and interconnectivities, in this case a geo-spatial connection of the several rivers.

Patricia Yaeger identifies the different ways in which writers' deployment of the "aqueous metaphor" have taken an important theoretical turn that lends materiality to a world that is increasingly assuming ethereal disposition every day. She cautions that this imaginary should not mask the real materiality on which the world is based: ocean. In introducing the premise for an oceanic turn, she observes that "we have grown myopic about the role that seas and oceans play in creating ordinary histories and culture" (524). She attributes this fact to our obliviousness to the astonishing bodies of water in our environment and in our bodily formula. She argues that we deploy

the sea as metaphors that may reproduce "ecstasy but seems otherwise featureless". In her view, understanding the sea in metaphoric and symbolic terms erases its ecological intensity and agency, a clear indication of aesthetic plunder and exploitation in which the subject is reduced to "a cheap pastiche". Consequently, she suggests the invention of a more effective eco-poetics that will function in literature and cultural representation as a biotic subject that is framed on agentic functions - rather than as a trope - because "even shadowy or unnatural tropes have real-world consequences". As she adds: "Figures of the boundless sea or the oceanic sublime encourage humans to treat it as an inexhaustible storehouse of goods" (535).

In *The Raft*, Clark-Bekederemo gives us a valuable glimpse into the seascape of the Niger Delta rivers that is a mix-tape of ecological agencies. On the one hand, it illustrates what James Tsaiior describes as “blessed, ethereal landscape” that is populated by “magnificent marine creatures which the area lays claim to, making it a haven of aquatic splendor” (72). And on the other, is the manner it stages the precariousness of life implicit in the eco-animist and other spatial formations of power in the region’s landscape.

This paradox coalesces in the play<sup>20</sup>, altogether constituting an agentic force that determines the reality of ‘beneficence and malfeasance’ that is embodied in the rivers of the Delta. In considering the agency of water in the novel of Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, Divya Anand appears to echo Patricia Yaegae’s argument on the limits to the representation of rivers in literature. In this instance, Anand invokes the American critic Lawrence Buell to contend that literary texts designate “refractions of physical environments and the human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artificial properties of textual representations and their mediation by ideological

and other socio-historical factors” (22). In identifying ways in which water performs agency in Sundarbans - the setting of Ghosh's novel - Anand proposes that “water is both motif and agent, shaping not only the story but also the geography and history of land”. She further notes that it is in this dual capacity that water’s usual agency is established, “its potential to act, as well as to

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<sup>20</sup>This analytic position draws appreciably from previous works that have discussed the Niger Delta condition from the poetics of paradoxes. Notably, Okechukwu Obeanu's essay, “Janus Unbound: Petro-business & Petropolitics in the Niger Delta” which states that “Indeed, the Niger Delta seems to be inherently paradoxical. Like Janus, there are always two faces to everything in the Niger Delta”. In “poetics, Politics and Paradoxes of the Oil in Nigeria Niger Delta Region”, James Tar Tsaiior gives it a discursive framing to explore the region's abjection in the face of abundant natural resources in reviewing Clark-Bekederemo's latest play, *All for Oil*. Citing Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri, Aghoghovwia's use of the term “productive contradiction” offers a more theoretical account of the condition in the way it stimulates human-nature relation, even though it comes short of thinking through it from the viewpoint of non-human agency.

move from object/other position to that of the subject and, in doing so, reverse the object/subject status of the characters” (23). In Anand's view, this floating matrix of water elides the possibility of moral or ideological positioning, thereby highlighting the function of water in how it produces existential conflict while it moves from a literary motif to an ecological actant. *The Raft* transcends ideological and metaphoric restrictions to the agency of water in the riverine culture of the Niger Delta, frontally engaging the shifting paradoxes of the Delta waters in the manner it involves the communities of people living in the area. Teresa Shewry expresses this as clear example of involvement. She writes that;

*involvement* designates the making of partly directed associations with the sea, or more specifically, with the social forms that shape it, such as oxygen, fish, poets, fishers, water, stories, and images. In recognizing involvement in the sea, these artists move beyond framing the ocean as entirely other to human life, or as a frontier, an idea that has been appearing in New Zealand media recently and that reflects international political and economic interactions and discourses about the sea. As a limiting term, involvement also suggests that they understand the sea as a common, as an environment where they are in the company of others: at times, they try to imagine the sea as entangled among the poems' narrators, fish, birds, waves, and winds, or among specific artists and poets; they mingle this with concern for involvement in a sea that is shared at the scale of “the universe” or the “whole world” (248).

The play portrays water as offering a central material presence in the Delta. It explores the agency of the multiple rivers and tributaries in the region, highlighting the manner in which they flow into the ocean to explain a corresponding metaphor of multi-ethnic Delta. Water is therefore a kind of metaphor only in the heuristic sense in which the playwright uses it to articulate the flows of human life in relation to the environment, but more significantly, it is an important material factor in the way life is organised around it in the Delta. To be sure, the play continually makes references to the distinct nationalities that make up the region, exposing a sense of characteristic differences among the peoples that occupy the lower Niger river. For instance, after breakfast on

board the raft, Kengide announces: “the meal/May well be our last”. But Ogro accuses him of “playing the tortoise” in not disclosing the low stock of foodstuff on time. When Olotu says, “it is the bile bitter Ijaw/Story the man has told you” (103), it is apparently to draw attention to Kengide's Ijaw origin as a way of emphasising the ethnic statuses of the characters in the play. About his Ijaw origin, Kengide later boasts: “we/Upriver people are more upright”. And when Ogro tells his childhood story of how excrement serve as bait in his early fishing expeditions, Olotu states: “Now I understand why in all the creeks/You Okrika people are called bad names” (107). Perhaps it is around Ogro’s persistent songs that the playwright most develops a Deltaic stereotype of Okrika people, one that particularly associates them with a threnodic cultural urge. Because throughout the sailing, Ogro who cuts the image of a poet-sailor, continually composes tragic songs with his instrument that often valorise death. Kengide describes this as “sob-songs”. Ibobo's question below appears to provide the playwright with a leitmotif for extensive exhibition of multiethnic insight about the Delta:

IBOBO: Do they ever sing to laugh in your part  
of the country?  
OGRO: No, each day some poor fellow is either  
Going out with a hiss or making his brief  
Entrance with a howl, and the women wail  
Going to bed and wake up wailing, for their seeds  
Are eaten up by the black beetle.  
IBOBO: Forgive me, Ogro, in my place, too, plants  
Wilt and die, wilt and die, but all  
The same, we have our happy seasons  
KENGIDE: That is because, like the very creeks  
You live on, your ways meander like the pythons  
You worship. Thus, you drink where you  
Defecate, and will have others believe  
It's living water. (113)

In this vein, *The Raft* reveals the ethnic disparities in the Delta, but explicitly weaves them together in a narrative that unifies them in a commonality of water. In their book, *Where Vultures Feast*, Ike

Okonta and Oronto Douglas explain that the area - now home to “several nations and ethnic groups” - was originally mainly inhabited by Ijo (Ijaw) people until the encounter with Europe. They trace the intermingling of ethnic groups in the area to the massive migration occasioned by transatlantic slave trade, trade in palm oil and colonial conquests. They write that, “Today the Niger Delta is a fascinating collage of ethnic nationalities, clans, and language groups that, while still relatively distinct, nevertheless have many cultural similarities” (18). *The Raft* identifies the Niger river as a cultural link of the Delta people, connecting the characteristic diversities of the nations within its floating geography. The rivers help us to think about the everyday life of the Delta people in terms of flows - flows that can be apprehended in the manner in which the different peoples of the region manage the tensions of diversity. Crucially, the play highlights these diversities in order to foreground the connecting power of rivers, enabling what Lesley Green describes as “democracy of rivers” (53) to assert the modality with which the network of rivers and creeks map the spaces of relation among the Delta peoples. In keeping with Teresa Shewry's recoining of *involvement* to explain the act of “shared social and aesthetic spaces related to the sea”, *The Raft* exerts the Niger river at the core of involving the communities of the area - on a shared space of human and nonhuman riverine culture. She argues that the sea is “framed as “common to all life” – which, in the case of the Niger Delta, constitutes the geography of the creeks and rivers that are bound up and entangled with the coastal communities.

As I have already hinted, *The Raft* is largely a chronicle of the impressions of the everyday life of the characters. In focusing on the characters' quotidian habitus and memory of the rivers, the playwright invokes direct ecological consequences of the dystopic realities of the seascape. In so doing, he occludes the oceanic sublimity and fluvial grandeur that undermine the precarious

realities of the sea, foregrounding instead the agentic treacheries of the sea as well as the human-induced marine toxicities. The play presents a human community struggling within and against the tide of a volatile river. Indeed, Clark-Bekederemo shows that it is at the level of the everyday that one apprehends nature's dystopia, that one captures it in terms that transcend the veneers of metaphor. Because according to Michel de Certeau, every place is inhered with a constraining order that requires everyday routine to negotiate - a negotiation that compels a space and situation in which one must produce unexpected results while deploying inevitable choices of plurality and creativity (168). Clark-Bekederemo appears to emphasise this point in the play, privileging it as a kind of eco-drama of everyday coastal experience. In a bid to control the turbulent river, to read the tidal waves, or cultivate the river's fishes - as the play narrates in different accounts - the playwright demonstrates a plurality of creativity and improvisation. As Teresa writes, "an oceanic eco-poetics will have to start with the recognition that our relation to the sea is always already technological" (527). In *The Raft*, Clark-Bekederemo shows that the technique often adopted by the Delta people in managing their experiences of the sea are drawn from everyday objects in their environment, emphasising a connection between lived experience and the technological demands of the sea. Throughout the sail, every material is called to question in every relation with the river. Ogro's bait of excrement offers a good example. On discovery of the dearth of food supply, he worries endlessly about hunger. Kengide notes that it is impossible to catch fish without baits. Having lost a boat earlier, it is equally impossible to go ashore in search of worms. Hope of pilot fish jumping on board the raft is slim because, as Kengide reminds us, the logs now smell rot. It is apparently the idea of the smell of rot that triggers Ogro's childhood memory. He recalls how the youth of the town often build themselves special fish traps after heavy rains - just before the disruptive flood settle on the reeds. The fish traps are carefully constructed to "sail down the tide

which at this time/Of year sticks to one course". In such auspicious occasion of the rain tide, excrement offers ready bait to great effects. As Ogro boasts, "before you sail the length of the town three times, your keel/is threshing with all kinds of fish" (107). This is the technique that Ogro reinvents in the moment of the unavailable baits. Here, he fills the empty can of cigarettes with excrement which he makes the others to inspect. Ibobo swears that, the "Smell's more/Than an old woman's backyard" while Kengide vehemently refuses to participate - but admits that, "[A] few fish have fastened their gills to the filth/Bobbing there among the waves". However, Kengide's statement that, "Ogro's is not/The only fruitful, if somewhat unfamiliar/Manner of fishing" (108) points towards in which *The Raft* recognises the 'unfamiliar' and unorthodox techniques with which the Delta communities mobilise everyday experience in surviving the region. This emphasis on the everyday life in the rivers is diagnostic of the commonality of water as site of life's exigencies and sign of interconnectivity and involvement of the different nationalities of the Delta people.

Reflecting on Olotu's death offers a way to think through questions of disconnection and detachment from the seascape. As the raft continues to sink in the pit of the whirlpool, Olotu persists in punting it free against Ibobo's caution. In this vein, it is tempting to say that his action to liberate the raft from the whirlpool is metaphorical. He appears to represent what Alp Hornborg describes as "ecologically alienated individual" ("Ecological Embeddedness"<sup>4</sup>), illustrating a detachment from the cultural involvement with the seascape epistemology. In representing River Niger as a form of flowing episteme, a waterbody of knowledge, Clark-Bekederemo suggests the impossibility of sustained experience in the occasion of rupture and alienation. Thus, Olotu's alienation from the Delta, which the play figures in his sojourn in the lands of the Fulani, Hausa and Lagos, appears to offer insight into how the project of modernity aspires to change the natural

order of things. Because when the raft breaks into half, Olotu is borne away in the tide to his death as he refuses to abandon the logs. Later on, Kengide informs, “Mark me, the truth/Is that he can’t swim. Which of you has seen/Him bathe without his clinging to the raft/Like a snail” (111-112). In this sense, Olotu contrasts with the other boatmen, especially Kengide, described as “wall-gecko gone grey at home”. Perhaps Clark-Bekederemo is stating, as the decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo has done, that, “[T]he point... is not where you reside but where you dwell. Césaire and Fanon... dwelled in the history of the Middle Passage, of the plantations, of slavery and of the runaway slaves”(xiii). Tim Ingold makes a similar point with his “dwelling perspective”, suggesting that human genes do not account for how knowledge of place is transmitted, but rather the process of dwelling (“Building, dwelling, living” 77). Olotu may be an indigene of the Delta - and may in fact have the genes of Deltaness - yet he dwells in the many cities of his sojourn across Nigeria. His indwelling in the city appears to have stripped him of involvement in, and connection with, the sea. He appears cut off, not only from the spatial link with the seas, but also emptied epistemologically. For instance, to insist on his wrist watch as a way of reading the rhythms of the tide is to lay emphasis on the universal rhetoric of modernity. His claims of the superiority of the wrist watch – which he bought at the Kingsway chain of stores - over indigenous temporal orientations, resonates with what Catherine Walsh terms “subalternizing and invisibilizing other epistemes” (224). And in “On animism, Modernity/Colonialism and the African order of Knowledge: Provisional reflections”, Harry Garuba brings ecology in perspective to reflect on Africa’s order of power and knowledge as an antithesis of modernity. He privileges ecology and environment as instrumental to the resurgence of interest in a relatively challenged epistemology by acknowledging ways in which eco/environmental movements invoke indigenous knowledge systems. Citing the Latin American decolonial thinker, Ramon Grosfoguel, he argues that the

success of modern/colonial world-system is premised on how subjects, socially located on the colonial divide, are conscripted to “think epistemically like the ones in dominant positions” (44). He therefore suggests the need to assert the epistemic legacy of Africa's order of knowledge against its experience of modernism, and asks: “can subjects previously defined outside the modern construct an epistemic position that does not re-inscribe the dichotomies [...] that define the "colonising structure?” (44). Clark-Bekederemo's answer appears to be no. Of course, Olotu's insistence in punting the raft aligns with the modernist design that negates the epistemology of the sea.

The play therefore provides some kind of revolt against western scientism and modernity, offering a dramatic enactment that sought to demystify what Walter Mignolo describes as “colonial matrix of power” (xvi). Mignolo locates the origin of western modernity in European Enlightenment period and argues that it “serves not all humanity, but only a small portion of it that benefits from the belief that in terms of epistemology there is only one game in town” (xii). He argues, for instance, that the notion of time is “caught and woven into the imaginary of the modern/colonial world-system”. In a related argument on the evolution of material objects in the post-Enlightenment modernity, Alf Hornborg critiques the “cultural assumption that material objects are politically innocent” (“Technology as Fetish” 133). Altogether, Clark-Bekederemo uses Olotu's watch to investigate the manner in which modernist objects are politically and culturally implicated to mediate and subjugate indigenous temporal systems. The play asserts the trope of multiple temporalities and, in so doing, ostensibly subverts modernity's scientism and universality of time. It is this recognition that provokes Kengide's mockery of Olotu's watch when he asks, “Has paralysis/Ever left that brat of a machine?”, and later on describes it as “that brat/ Of a

machine has probably been at work without/Stop, and so outstepped the old woman in the moon (98)". If the reference to an old woman in the moon inscribes time in the body of Delta fables, affirming time as "a category belonging to culture" (153) as Mignolo has argued, it also draws attention to aspects of cultural interactions that undermine modernity's "denial of coevalness". Environmentalist Rachel Carson, in like manner, informs that "the story of how the young Earth acquired an ocean...The story is founded on the testimony of the earth's most ancient rocks, on other evidence written on the face of the earth's satellite, the moon" (1989:3). Carson's description of the moon as "great tidal wave" resonates with Clark-Bekederemo's enactment of the seascape. In *The Masquerade*, Clark-Bekederemo imagines the moon like the earth, able to tilt or upturn, in ways that synchronise the human condition with the earth's movement. One of the Neighbours gives account of a particular year of disaster: "That year the earth-one was all over/The place, land and water...he occupied them all" (51). While the Niger Delta lays claim to the involvement of water, the moon represents an ethereal archetype in the imagination of writers of the region and, as *The Raft* shows, inspires fables that infuse perspectives of time and water.

It is important to note that the critique of modernity in *The Raft* does not imply that the lumbermen are grouped characteristically to reflect the social categories of the modernist duality. Indeed, the home-based Kengide has worked with the Niger Company - probably the British hegemon Royal Niger Company which dominated the monopoly of trade in the early nineteenth century - that continues to foreshadow the Anglo-American imperial interest in the Niger Delta. He recalls the Great strike of the 1940s against the management of the Niger Company and his role in the labour movement:

It was In the furious forties - at the of the Great  
Strike. Now, you didn't know I worked

For the Niger Company at one time, did you? Always  
 Making money for some man other  
 Than myself, that has been my fortune. Well,  
 You didn't possess a wife as mine and forget  
 About finding some extra funds. That was how,  
 Personally, I got in the strike deep to my neck  
 But you know how like the waters at Bussa  
 The whole thing went. The politicians  
 And papers who had promised Jericho itself,  
 By their own divisions, caused a breach  
 In the wall, we workers had at their incitement staked  
 All to build. So, Government or Niger  
 Company, two faces to one counterfeit coin,  
 As usual won the field. Not only that,  
 They went on to raise taxes and prices on  
 Everything money could buy in the shop – from buckets  
 To umbrellas – they raised them all, while lowering  
 Those on our crops(130-131)

Incidentally, it is also a 'lumbering ship' of the Niger Company that caused the death of Ogro. His story appears to be a cautionary tale against the déjà vu of modernity. After the death of Olotu, Ogro becomes depressed. Consequently, he turns to his instrument. The theme of his songs changes from that of 'sob-songs' to a wish to arrive the shore of Burutu safely. The shores become the new spirit of hope. He repeatedly sings about the port, but this again infuriates Kengide. Out of frustration he retires into the cabin of the Raft. But once in the cabin, he has distant but clear view of an approaching Niger Company vessel, *Naragula*. Ogro understands the Anglo-American behemoths that sail the River Niger, “between Burutu, Warri/And Lokoja as well as Makurdi/Or Yola - the red-funnel boats of John Holt, /coat dirty fleet of the Niger Company/And the slow tugs of the French line”. This knowledge is symptomatic of the people’s involvement with River Niger as the gateway of industrial modernity into the area. In his excitement, he tells the story of his growing up in a way that buttresses his community's early encounter with Anglo-European shipping fleets. He recalls that as youths, the boys of the town will swim far in the river to board the sailing boat.

Ogro has fond memories of the “good people on the deck” coming to help them climb up the ship as well as “the loud cheers of the sailors” as they jump, making sport of climbing the deck time and time again. After some distance of sailing, they often return with “arms full of gifts from the kind captain/and his men”, taking a final plunge back home as the stream bears them safely back to town. Here, Ogro relives the childhood memory in form of a trance, and calls out, as if possessed: “I am coming out to you my captain” (117). Then immediately, he plunges and jumps overboard. Though Kengide suggests that “he ought to have jumped much earlier on/To be planted in the path of the ship” (118), he concedes that, unlike Olotu, Ogro is a strong swimmer. Indeed, recognising this in how he ducks under the river and surfaces at the ship’s flank, Obobo asks: “Isn’t he a real fish?” As Ingersoll has argued, entering the rivers provokes time-space ontology among the riverine people that anchors them “in a historical existence as ever-shifting and negotiating beings”(10). In describing Ogro as a fish, Clark-Bekederemo not only illuminates the spatio-temporal ontology of negotiating the act of swimming, but also endorses the assumption of life that has become completely aquatic. It is little wonder that he survives the plunge into the sea, successfully swimming on board the ship, but ironically beaten off with coals and bars of iron by the irascible crews. He dies “caught in the mortal arms/Of that stern-wheeling engine” (119). “[T]he ocean symbolizes the wildest kind of nature there is” (ix), writes Stefan Helmreich, but it is tamed by the expedience of dwelling, hence offers a space of escape and survival. Ogro's survival of the river as a result of attunement to the environment of water, and eventual death on the steam-boat engine, provides one way to understand the difference between nature and techmodernity in relation to the lives of those who dwell in the coastal world. It is not explicit in the play how the remaining boatmen, Kengide and Ibobo, die. What is obvious, however, is that at the play's end,

both appear to submit to an overwhelming timelessness of being lost in a vast fog that descends on the seascape.

IBOBO: Burutu is there floating past - I hear  
Voices of people as in a market  
And the beating of drums, the smell of food  
In the air, and we are drifting past - I  
Shall jump and swim!

KENGIDE: No, Ibobo, no, not when you yourself  
Say you cannot see your own hand! Why, here  
We are, holding hands, but can you see me?  
Fog has stuffed its soot and  
Smoke in our eyes, has shut up the world  
Like a bat its wings. Don't you see?  
All is blindness and scales! Besides,  
These waters teem with sharks and starfish  
And there must be barges, tugs and ocean liners  
Lumbering about -

The fog spreading over the seascape at the end of the play is of central importance; it provides a sense of dominion of the sea. This dominion manifests “a domain proven to be tranquil and tumultuous, nurturing and deadly” (Ingersoll, 2016:21). However, this dominion has not refrained human attempt at exploring the river, at *involving* with the water's performance of agency. Indeed, human involvement with the agency of waters in the Niger Delta is inevitable. It is the human option of coming to terms with his immediate environment in which he is geographically bound. It is the existential category of embeddedness to place. In fact, a Deltan is expected to conquer water, to rise above its dominion in order to stage a claim of Deltaness. As Kengide states after the death of Olotu, “you know as well as I do/That an Ijawman's death, especially by water/Drags like ivy” (114). In the course of exploring the waters, the Delta communities have established a way of knowing the seascape and, correspondingly, an existentialist culture of the waters. In this culture, they develop creativities and technologies from everyday practices of living in the rivers, they

forge aquatic nuances of life that infuse oceanographic perspective in how they encounter self and other. As “ever-shifting and negotiating beings”, they become one with the waters.

In conclusion, I sought in this section to establish the environment of the Niger Delta in ways that re-invest it with the ontological history of its relation with the inhabitants of the area. To that effect, I track the connection between the seascape and the Niger Delta communities, and argue that the multiple rivers of the region constitute the commonality of that relation. I contend that though the Niger Delta consists of different ethnic nationalities, they are linked and connected with the geography of the rivers in the region. I explore the dramatic representation of the rivers in privileging ways in which it offers a riverine culture that the Delta people engage with on the everyday basis of living. I further argue that it is the quotidian modality of living in the riverine culture that Clark-Bekederemo highlights in engaging with the ecological consequences of living in a coastal region. More so, in re-investing the spiritual and temporal ontology in the landscape of the Delta, I privilege the people's knowledge of the sea as means through which they encounter and critique European modernity.

### 3.3 THE GEOGRAPHY OF DIFFERENCE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE SWAMP DWELLERS*

*What might "natural" disasters tell us about the ecology of nationhood? How might the flash of environmental catastrophe illuminate the meaning of borders and the tortured politics of belonging?*<sup>21</sup>

Considering his global reputation and legacy as one of Africa's conscientious writers, it is not strange that attention is often directed to Wole Soyinka's concern for nature and environment. In his vastly cited essay, "Echoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses", William Slaymaker identifies Wole Soyinka's response to the political execution of Saro-Wiwa in November 1995 as the turning point in the playwright's relative indifference to questions of environment and nature. While critiquing Black Africa's lack of interest in the global awareness in ecoliterature as we discussed in chapter one, the paper inscribes the Nobel laureate in the category of such writers. He locates Soyinka's post-Saro-Wiwa publications such as *The Open Sore of a Continent* and *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* as particularly strident in their critique not just of the execution of Saro-Wiwa, but also against ecological exploitation of Ogoniland perpetrated by indigenous and foreign interests in Nigeria. Nonetheless, he announces that "Soyinka's expressions of concern about ecology and environmentalism in his essays have few direct equivalents in his plays, poetry, and novels" (136). According to him, this is because Soyinka's works focus too much on his "Western Nigeria" natural sites while ignoring ecoactivist themes.

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff. "Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse, and the Postcolonial State". in *Sovereign Bodies Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*. Eds. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005:120

It may not be argued that Soyinka draws extensively on his 'Western Nigerian', or, more specifically, Yoruba cultural background, which forms the basis for much of his drama and poetry. But his interest in eco/environmental consciousness – and attentiveness to the Niger Delta question – can be gleaned from his writing in the late 1950s. The publication of *The Swamp Dwellers* in 1958 evidences this fact, and points to a significant shift in the interest of the playwright from his Yoruba-Ogunian preoccupation. Hence it is fairly safe to say, as Senayon Olaoluwa has done in his article, 'THERE WAS A TIME' Postcolonial ecology and mourning in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*", that ecological imagination has always been apart of African literature. Crucially, Slaymaker's charge has been contested in many fronts<sup>22</sup>, but what has given Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* an ecoliterary impetus is the way it invokes Nigeria's ecological schemata in order to put the Niger Delta riverine culture in perspective, by centering the swamps and creeks in the dramatization of the region. James Gibbs has noted that Soyinka began working on *The Swamp Dwellers* at the instance of the discovery of crude oil in large commercial quantities in the Niger Delta. The discovery, he states, prompted the playwright to craft a narrative that privileges the impact of natural wealth on the relationships among subsistent communities (39). I will like to add that though Soyinka is not from the Niger Delta like his counterpart J. P. Clark-Bekederemo but, as Isidore Diala states, "Deltans and non-Deltans alike, with the representative plight of the Niger Delta" produce works that instantiate increasing fascination with the political and ecological

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<sup>22</sup> See also, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, "Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature", *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, eds. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007: 698-706; Sule E. Egya, "Eco-human engagement in recent Nigerian poetry in English" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49.1 (2012): 60-70; and Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia, "Ecocriticism and the Oil Encounter: Readings from the Niger Delta" Asking questions about the indices by which global understanding of ecocriticism is measured, Aghoghovwia notes that "In fact, what constitutes environmental writing in Africa is indeed of global concern, for it is an ecological advocacy against the global industrial complex and corporate capitalism, it is one that laments environmental pollution and the destruction to agrarian life in local, indigenous landscapes" (33). These scholars privilege a culturally sanctioned notion of ecocriticism.

situation of the region (317). This view, therefore, presents the Delta as an ecological niche around which Nigerian writers articulate environmentalist conditions as a way of thinking about the broader economic and political situation of Nigeria. Egey Sule makes a similar point when he contends that the concern with nature in Nigerian writing is “not a shift from the broadly political base of Nigeria's literary tradition, but rather an extension of that tradition in order to encompass the earth on which the people live” (60). In this vein, eco-literature becomes a kind of symbolic reflection on the larger protocol of a literary culture that is over-determined by a political struggle for social justice. Diala puts this more succinctly when he points out that, “the Niger Delta has become *symbolic* of the Nigerian nation itself” (317), highlighting a relational synecdoche that emphasises a homological context of reading Niger Delta ecological writing. In this section, I will maintain the relational premise in analysing the Niger Delta literary tradition, but not in *symbolic* terms. At least, not in the terms in which that tradition is viewed as an extension of Nigerian literature. Instead, I will consider the Niger Delta theatre as a subregional reflection of a geography of difference, offering a distinct interpretation of how the Niger Delta relates with other regions of Nigeria. In so doing, I will ask: How do the rivers emerge in the context in which they condition how the Niger Delta is integrated into the Nigerian socio-economics formation? How does water form the basis for the environmental relations between Deltans and other parts of Nigeria?

In invoking the trope of relationality to read Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*, I will deploy the play's insight into a political ecology of sub/regional relations by acknowledging the way in which the ontology of water is inscribed in the modality of these interactions. I note that the play is a compelling enactment of the environmental life of people and their material environment in ways that further a world in which the scale of beneficence of the environment is mediated by a sense of

regional integration. I argue that the world of human-nature relation is reproduced in the play to mediate the way in which the Niger Delta people interact with other parts of the Nigerian federation.

Drawing inspiration from David Harvey's (1996) discussion of how difference is constructed within the frame of geography, combined with Ingersoll's (2016) focus on the sea as passageways and “instrument of migration” that brings the ‘other’ into the enclave of the waters – including Teresa Shewry's emphasis on the discourse of hope in exploring eco/environmental perturbations in oceanic places - I outline a critique of Soyinka's *Swamp Dwellers* to think through the manner in which the playwright dramatically centralises the creeks in aspiring toward a national agro-economic integration. In so doing, I argue that Soyinka's dramatic engagement with the Niger Delta illustrates a geography of ecological difference from other regions of Nigeria, highlighting a shift from the symbolic representation of homologous economic and political conditions that characterise ecoliterary aesthetics in Nigeria.

The play is set in “[A] *village in the swamps*”. It further highlights the significance of the riverine environment of the Niger Delta in the way it announces the sound of “*frogs, rain and other swamp noises*”. This theatrical exteriority of the Delta's coastal ecosystem offers insight into the playwright's intent in mapping the story within a distinct natural setting; it offers the geography of a region that is marked by the sight and sound of water. In connection with the riverine background, the actions of the play take place in a hut placed on stilts in the centre of the swamps. The hut is made of marsh stakes and tied with hemp ropes. In it, the old couple Makuri and Alu, relive the experiences of life in the Delta in the midst of vicious “swamp flies” as they attend to their work: While Makuri makes baskets from rushes, Alu designs dye on *adire* cloth.

In addition, Soyinka appears to introduce the presence of a different world into the natural environment of the Delta: an ancient barber's swivel chair as well as “*a pair of clippers, scissors, local combs, lather basin and brush, razor*”, altogether announcing the assumption of a contrasting occupation that is linked with the external world of the objects. In bringing this other world to awareness, Soyinka seems to impose a sense of infraction that the world of the objects makes with their presence in the Delta, one that designates a contact that invariably alters the Delta space. That is, it may seem to provide a certain kind of intervention to what Garuba describes as “the fragility of island economy” (69), however, it reinforces the incursion of a corrupting otherness.

As the play opens, Makuri and Alu are arguing endlessly over fetching one of their twin sons, Igwezu, from the swamps. Informed upon arrival from the city about the tragic flooding of crops in the village, Igwe hurries off into the swamps to inspect the extent of damage to his farmland. The play presents an atmosphere of double consciousness of loss because Igwezu's trip to the city was in search of his brother, Awuchike, who left for the city ten years ago. As Alu complains, “I am going out to shout his name until he hears me. I had another son before the mire drew him into the depths. I don't want Igwezu going the same way” (5). Alu claims that Awuchike is dead, and blames the Serpent of the swamp, even though Makuri continues to remind her of how visiting traders recognise Igwezu has a look-alike in the city. She enjoins Makuri to go out “like a true father” and bring Igwezu back home, stating that the swamp is a mesh of waters from which he may never find his way. But Igwezu has spent barely eight months in the city - a period of time Makuri claims cannot unmake his knowledge of the swamps. As he asks, “Him? Get lost? Woman, isn't it your son we're speaking of? The one who was born here, and has lived here all his life?” (5). However, they both recall how slippery the swamps can become; often taking the inhabitants unaware in the manner they spread and flood into the stream, sometimes overrunning the land.

Indeed, both acknowledge the precariousness of the swampy landscape; Makuri thinks he will die of cramp – while Alu fears of dropping dead – if exposed to the open seascape of the swamp.

Thus, *The Swamp Dwellers* unfolds the topographic character of the swamps, revealing its spatial contradictions in relation to the experiences of the swamp dwellers. The swamps offer an emotive force to the swamp dwellers, a force that sanctions the familial life of the inhabitants, protecting it from the infraction of the city dwellers. Makuri describes how traders from the city lustfully long after Alu with allures and promises of the good life in the country. And as he boasts, “If only they could see me take you out into the mangrove, and I so strong that I could make you gripe and sweat and sink your teeth into my cheeks” (8). In the past, as Makuri reminds Alu, “You never feared the swamp then. You could walk across it day and night and go to sleep in the middle of it” (8). In fact, generations of Deltans regard the swamp as the site of life beginning, possessing existential capacity for human symbolic and biological copulation. Inspired by her mother, Alu lures Makuri on the night of their wedding to “the point where the streams meet” to perform the first act of love-making. Recounting her mother's words, Alu confesses, “she said I had to say it on my bridal bed... “Where the rivers meet, there the marriage must begin. And the river bed itself is the perfect bridal bed”. The twins, product of that union, who the villagers say bear “the very colour of the swamp”, represent life crafted in the cradle of the rivers, designating the swampy environment as the basis and origin of human life, and hence affirming swamps as the genealogy of life in the Delta.

But the younger generation appears uninterested in the life of the swamp. In Makuri's words, “They are no sooner born than they want to get out of the village as if it carried a plague...I bet none of them has ever taken his woman into the swamps (10). Holding such vast biodiversity, the

swamps of the Niger Delta is the economic hub of traders from the city who often visit to hunt crocodile skins. These visitors lure the youths to the city, a space that promises possible economic redemption from the drudgery of the coastal subsistence. Indeed, among the younger generation of Deltans, “there is a growing touch of loss” with the riverine life. Alu thinks that Igwezu's wife, Desala, made “him promise to take her there before she would wed him”. But the space represented by the city is a brutal illustration of disconnection and ruination, contrasting with the spatial and ontological bonding that the swamps offer. If the city is as Jie Liu has described it, “a physical emblem of industrialisation and modernisation” (324), then Soyinka's imagination of the city is one that turns modernity into an emblem of dystopia and disconnection, where, as Igwezu laments — “knife sever the ties and love of kingship, and turn brother against brother”. Thus, Awuchike is much transformed in the city by the time Igwezu found him, wealthy from trade in timber and indifferent to ties of kinship. Bemoaning how his wife abandoned him for the lure of his brother's wealth, Igwezu announces, “Awuchike is dead to you and to this house. Let us not raise his ghost” (32). But on leaving the city, a double tragedy awaits him upon discovery that his crops to which he returned after the disappointment in the city have been damaged by the flooded waters of the swamp. Indeed, as Makuri describes the devastating ruination of Igwezu's harvest, “Not a grain saved, not one tuber in the soil...And what the flood left behind was poisoned by the oil in the swamp water” (16-17). Igwezu's cry is one that adumbrates the anguish of betrayal of place, a place with which he shares a history of resistance against waste:

Does it not suffice that in the end I said to myself...I have a place, a home, and though it lies in the middle of the slough, I will go back to it. And I have a little plot of land which has rebelled against the waste that surrounds it, and yields a little fruit for the asking. I sowed this land before I went away. Now is the time for the harvesting, and the cocoa-pods must be bursting with fullness...I came back with hope, with

consolation in my heart. I came back with the assurance of one who has lived with his land and tilled it faithfully (32).

Beggar arrives the swamp from the North same night as Igwezu while searching for land to cultivate in the Delta. Through Beggar, Soyinka reflects on the Sahelian north of Nigeria that is prone to climatic condition of desertification and drought. He appears to support Michael Watts's assertion that the drought is a factor in the evolution of the Sahel region, a notion that inflects the play's enactment of the cycle of environmental fluctuation in the Northern region of Nigeria resulting in Beggar's migration to the Delta. As Watts explains further:

Disasters generally, and famines in particular, are not new to Hausaland. In the nineteenth century, crises of under-production occurred in which basic biological requirements could not be fulfilled - usually as a result of famines, disease, locusts or warfare - and well documented in the historical chronicles. During the middle of the eighteenth century, moreover, a disastrous series of droughts and related epidemics which spanned a twenty-year period, struck the northern savannas from Senegal to Somalia producing economic disarray, mass evacuation...Superimposed on the pattern of major climatic disturbances were epicycles of more frequent but localized drought and food occurring perhaps in the order of once every seven or eight years and usually regional in character ("The Etiology" 96).

Beggar's story about the North is fraught with this banality of drought. As he discloses; "we are used to droughts. Our season is one long continuous drought. But we are used to it" (24). And sometimes when it rains, the soil is unable to retain the waters to enable the community cultivate crops. Hence the people resort to begging and live mostly on alms, the reason people regard them as "village of beggars". It is therefore a modality of subsistence that connects the region's geography with the economy of underdevelopment, poverty and unyielding ecology. Watts's reference to the outbreak of locusts in the quotation above resonates in the play through Beggar's story about the pestilence that struck the village on the harvest day: "The feast was not meant for us, - but for the locusts...They came in hordes, and squatted on the land. It only took an hour or

two, and the village returned to normal” (26). He remembers the event as unprecedented in the life history of the community, as he tells the story:

one day, about a year or more ago...then we had more rain than I had ever known in my life. And the soil not only held water, but it began to show off a leaf here and there...even on kola trees which had been stunted from birth. Wild millet pushed its way through the soil, and little tufts of elephant grass appeared from the seeds which had lain forgotten season upon season...we could smell the sweetness of lemon leaves, and the feel of the fronds of dessert palm was a happiness which we had never known...The thought was no sooner born than we set to work before the soil changed its mind and released its moisture. We deserted the highways and marched on this land, hoes and mattocks in hand-and how few of these there were! The village had been long unused to farming, and there was no more than a hand full of hoes. But we took our staffs and drove them into the earth. We sharpened stakes and pricked the sand and the pebble until they bled...And it seemed as if the heavens rejoiced in our labour, for their blessings were liberal, and their goodwill on our side. The rains came when we wanted it. And the sun shone and the seeds began to ripen... Nothing could keep us from the farms from the moment that shoots came through the surface, and all through the months of waiting. We went round the plantains and rubbed our skins against them, lightly, so that the tenderest bud could not be hurt (25-26).

Given the above outline, *The Swamp Dwellers* helps illuminate important aspects of agrarian experiences in two contrasting spaces of Nigeria's regions – in what I will tentatively describe as ecological geography of difference. This suffices as an enactment of the struggle of subsistence economies against the scourge of ravaging ecosystem, and makes categorical the different ecological processes that the geographies of the coastal Niger Delta and the arid North of Nigeria produce. In a way, *The Swamp Dwellers* signals the insertion of nature and the environment in the subsistence categories that geographic and spatial differentials make manifest in Nigeria.

In his seminal book, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996), David Harvey discusses the connection of justice, nature and geographies of difference. He raises important questions of “spatial and ecological differences [that] are not only constituted by but constitutive

of ...socioecological and political processes” (6). He notes that the production of geographies of difference is a result of human actions (how capitalism treats places differently), and aims to enquire into “the justness of such relations and how the sense of justice in turn gets historically and geographically constituted”<sup>23</sup>. Drawing impetus from his participation in a labour movement against the sale of Cowley Car Works in Oxford, England, Harvey observes a conflict of interest between focus on the short-term gains of suffering workers – which the local labour movements are more desirous of – and the long term-strategy for global transformation. To be sure, the sale of Cowley by the British Government to British Aerospace, which subsequently re-sold to BMW, started a scheme of liquidation which redevelopment plan offered no prospect for the several thousand workers that dedicated their lives to the car plant. This development set the stage for mass movement of workers in the socialist tradition organised around the car plant and its ancillary installations. Considering that the plant is a source of ecological pollution while building cars for the super-rich, Harvey proposes the need to sacrifice the instant gains of place-based militarism – an option against the interest of his activist partner – for an abstraction of a broader socialist, global transformation. Inspired by the work of Raymond Williams, he theorises this as a way of inserting nature in the recognition of Capital's ability to map geography of local and global difference, and mobilising this recognition to produce an encompassing transformational approach in contesting the capitalist politics. Put in his own words, it is a contestation of “place-bound

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<sup>23</sup>By this, I refer to how the dramatist reproduces the ecological difference of the Delta and Northern region in capturing their contrasting geographies. My deployment of Harvey's geography of difference, in this instance, is mainly for notional convenience. That is, while Harvey's discussion proposes a social constructivist approach to the production of space and geography, I find this ecological difference a suitably template in understanding the order of material nature and environment that Wole Soyinka invents in the imaginative representation of the regions. Thus, I am more attuned to what Malpas describe as "structure of a particular place". Or, the sense in which Cresswell sees place as "the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a priori label of identity."

politics” and “placeless, abstract politics” (332) that are fixed to illustrate the spatialities of capitalist social formation.

Of interest in David Harvey's conception of geography of difference is the notion of "militant particularism" which, borrowed from Raymond Williams, implies a kind of place-based militarism against corporate capitalism. It constitutes a basis for socialist struggle that is enabled by local relation to a particular place or geography, one that requires a modality of transformation to make sense of general effects. As Harvey informs, it is “contracted at one scale, in one place and in terms of a particular structure of feeling, [that] cannot easily or simply be carried over without transformation or translation” (90). The question of militant particularism is vividly portrayed in the characters of Igwezu and Beggarmostly in the manner their actions resonate with what Harvey describes as “Lived lives and sense of value[that] are embedded in an environment actively molded and achieved through work, play, and a wide array of cultural practices” (85). They represent different abstractions, or ‘structures of feeling’, acquired in their deep-rootedness to places and geographies of lived experiences, and drawing therefrom to stage some kind of struggle against ecological afflictions in their communities. Crucially, it is this local bonding with the swamp that prompted Igwezu’s return to the Delta after suffering betrayal in the city. In fact, before migrating to the city, Igwezu made sacrifices to the Serpent of the Swamp, through Kadiye, the Priest of the Serpent, to protect his crops from the recurring flood in the Delta. On account of Kadiye’s promise to put an end to the flood, the community is often coerced to offer sacrifices of different kinds of fat animals to the Serpent of Swamp. Soyinka makes the Serpent the source of the swamp, hence when sacrifices are offered it is “so that the Serpent might not vomit at the wrong season and drown the land, so that He might not swallow at the wrong moment and gulp

down the unwary traveller...” (37). Perhaps, this is why Garuba describes that aspect of the play as exemplifying “local centers of power and authority that keep the people oppressed and hold them in permanent subservience” (“The Island Writes Back” 72) because the community continues to experience ceaseless flooding even after complying with the priest's demands for sacrifice. People's harvests are thus destroyed including Igwezu's. Yet, in the face of growing poverty resulting from the flood-ravaged crops, Kadiye continues to grow fat on the people's bulk large of sacrifice. This betrayal of the swamp to which he is bound –more than the experience of the city – provokes a revolt that is considered sacrilegious in the community. In the end, he asks, “Do you think that my only strength was that of despair? Or was there something of a desire to prove myself?” (40). Perhaps it can be argued that the disappointment in the city has bestowed on Igwezu the distance to stage a revolt against Kadiye's regime of corruption – an activism that evidences translation of the strength acquired in the city. And as he prepares to escape from the swamp, he appears to interrogate the need for bridging two different unyielding geographies: “Is it of any earthly use to change one slough for another?” (40). This question is vital in understanding Beggar's struggle, a struggle that is framed on the abandonment of an increasingly oppressive ecology in seeking out survival in contradictory places.

In considering the two positions of geography, Soyinka imagines rural people in different regions of the country not only caught in ecological crises but also in endless circles of devastating agricultural life. Beside ways in which the communities' disasters are captured through loss of harvest, there are supernatural factors to which they are wittingly exposed that demonstrate untoward mediation in their agrarian spaces. While the historic intervention of rain in the North provides the impetus for the creation of the clan from the enlivened households, bringing to life a

clanforged “by Allah in one of his large hands and kneaded together with the clay of the earth” (26), life in the Delta involves the guardianship of the Serpent of the Swamp. In somewhat the same sense, Makuri states about the Delta: “the land that we till and live on has been ours from the beginning of time. The bounds are marked by ageless iroko trees that have lived since the birth of the Serpent, since the birth of the world, since the start of time itself” (17). Crucially, Soyinka brings together people and their myth of origin in a place in which they are bound – to understand their struggles – against ecological and supernatural abjection.

As I have noted, the play’s central focus seems to substantially draw attention to the sense in which these spaces represent a production of geographies of difference, emphasising how the coastal and arid regions produce different ecological conditions. The play uses water to map this geography of difference in ways that highlight its instrumentality as a mode of bio-regional marker. Hence, while the geography of the Delta is marked by excess water in the creeks, swamps, and several rivers resulting in unabated flooding that destroy farm crops, the Northern region is a terrain that constantly experiences desertification. Beggar expresses this stark contrast rather incredulously when he arrived the swamp to learn about the flooding of the tide: “How thankful we would have been for the excess that you had here. If we had the hundredth of the fall you had, I would not be sitting under your roof this moment” (24). Indeed, the Delta’s rivers and its wetlands are known for their slippery, floating plane of raparian flows, in contrast with parchment of the North. Soyinka draws attention to this slipperiness in the play when Makuri tells the story of Alu’s slip on the river-bed when they took a walk in the swamp, and in which she crashed into the mire of the swamp-flooded stream. Beggar, on the other hand, laments the absence of rain in the North: “We had known nothing but the dryness of the earth. Dry soil. Dry crumbs of dust. Clouds of dust

even when there are no wind, but only a vulture flying low and flapping its wings over the earth” (25). The play therefore produces a relation of differences that privilege water in patterns of drought and flood, presence and absence, wet and dry, slippery and fixated, waves and dusts; altogether invoking water in a narrative that sought to reproduce difference in geo-spatial terms. This implies that the agency of water is located in the manner that designates the geographical turn - emphasising the flood and drought as alternating markers of rural subsistence. By this token, the play demonstrates an ecological commitment that engages water as a geo-strategic factor, drawing from the environmental history of regions where peasant communities struggle for survival. Illustrating what Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters describe as the “wet ontology” which highlights “how thinking with the sea can assist in reconceptualising our geographical understandings” (248), the play offers example of an eco-theatre in which catastrophic effects of ecological hazards in Nigeria are addressed within delineated cultural and geographic contexts.

The river, thus, represents a kind of sign to the centrality of the Delta in the scheme of socio-economic and agro-ecological development of Nigeria. While it emphasises a distinct sub-national geography of the people of the lower Niger, it equally denotes possible hope for economic transformation in other regions. Because in what resonates like the biblical Magi following the star to the birth-place of Jesus, Beggar’s journey follows the sign of the river to the Delta area, a regenerative journey to an ecologically enlivening landscape. As he states: “I...set my face towards the river. When I said to the passing stranger, Friend, set my face towards the river, he replied, which river? But I only said to him, Towards any river, towards any stream; set my face towards the sea itself”(26). It is therefore an imaginative diagnostic of the Niger Delta as the site of Nigeria’s economic recovery; a suggestion that Beggar’s migration is an illustration of the extent

to which the country depends on the natural resources of the region. The playwright emphasises this as the motif of the Beggar's migration while alluding to the 'end of the river' as a way of underscoring the region's ethno-geographic location in the Atlantic Ocean into which all the rivers and tributaries empty and terminate. In other words, in attempting to draw attention to the distance covered by Beggar in traveling from the North to the end of the Delta where there are no 'human soul' but swamps, the playwright seems to invoke what Anthony Giddens describes as "time-space distancing" (14). Because as Giddens has stated, in contrast with modern societies, agrarian and agricultural systems organise themselves in relation to resources in how they connect presence and absence in geographical terms. This stretch of time and space finds expression in Beggar's migration that sought to locate water till the endpoint of the Delta. The following conversation between Beggar and Makuri explains this:

BEGGAR: I have been journeying for longer than [...several weeks].  
I resolved to follow the river as far as it went, and never turn back.  
If I leave here, it will be to continue in the same direction.  
MAKURI: But this is the end - this is where the river ends!  
BEGGAR: No, friend. There are many more miles left of this river.  
MAKURI: Yes, yes...But the rest is all swamp. Between here and the sea,  
you'll not find a human soul.  
BEGGAR: I must stay here or walk on.  
I have sworn to tread only where the soil is moist (13)

Although youths of the Delta community are fleeing the region to the city – an indication of how changing times respond to ecological hazards of the material environment – the Delta and its rivers continue to attract hope for Nigeria's agro-economic development. Indeed, Beggar's migration resonates with what the geographer, Jean Gallais, terms "*condition sahe'lienne*", which explains ways in which "the ecological and economic conditions of the Sahel area promoted the ability and disposition to develop the high degree of spatial mobility that characterises all groups in this

region” (cited in Boesena *et al*,2). Invoking Mitchell Thomashow's coinage “environmental refugeeism”, Erin James makes a similar point about migratory consequences of ecological disruptions in subsistence economies. He coincidentally diagnoses the case of the Delta and Northern region, and writes that “environmental refugeeism is particularly high in coastal and delta areas such as the Niger Delta due to sea- level rises and storm surges, as well as regions susceptible to drought such as north and west Africa” (271). Soyinka precisely draws on this acute phenomenon while re-inventing the Delta as landscape of hope in which the several rivers function as link. Ingersoll writes that in riverine places the ocean “serves as instrument of migration; as transportation” (8) through which colonisers enter the colonial landscape as well as the pathway to the incursion of modernity. In *The Swamp Dwellers* Soyinka imaginatively captures this view when Makuri tells Kadiye the story of how Igwezu bought him the swivel-chair from the city, a story that explains the connection that rivers make in the contact between techno-modernity and the Delta communities. In his account of the shipment of the swivel-chair, he states that, “when they are bringing it over the water, it knocked a hole in the bottom of the canoe and nearly sank it...But that wasn't all. The carrier got stuck in the swamps and they had to dig him out” (20).However, in view of Beggar's migration from a neighbourly region in Nigeria, the play seems to articulate Ingersoll's assertion that, “it is the same pathway that connects us in a familiar constellation of islands to our Oceanic neighbors” (7).It is this network of rivers and swamps that surround the Niger Delta, making the island communities inaccessible to indigenes and visitors alike who must go through the pathway of the waters in order to visit the area. Indeed, movements to and from the communities are dependent on a small group of local fishermen, like ‘old Wazuri’, who ferry travellers across the rivers with their boats. In the events of flooding when the streams

are said to be ‘swollen’, travellers without the luck of a ferryman often turn back from entering the Delta.

If Beggar’s migration is driven by the desire for agro-economic recuperation, it is possible, then, to understand the region to which he fixes his gaze as a venue of hope, as a site with the resource enablement for possible integration with people from displaced places. As observed earlier, it is as well a choice destination for “green-eyed traders” from the city drawn by the vast biodiversity of the several rivers and mangrove forests. All these affirm the region in what in popular imagination is regarded as “the food basket of the nation”, a buzz-phrase that emphasises the centrality of the region in Nigeria's economic fortune. Although the playwright presents the ecological and agricultural fragmentation of the Delta, he seems to draw hope from the regenerative power of her rivers. Regardless of the realities of pollution, of different categories of oceanic abjection, hope inheres in the rivers, as Teresa Shewry has argued. In herbook *Hope at Sea: Possible Ecologies inOceanic Literature*, she discusses the Pacific region to engage ways in which subjectivities of hope are refracted from stark realities of oceanic pollution that complicates the lives of the riverine beings. She argues that the discourse of hope underscores the manner in which this pollution is imagined to evoke a promising future, one that is attuned to environmental and oceanic changes. She contends that in the Pacific and elsewhere hope offers salient modality in engaging with environmental struggles, often providing impetus for powerful stories that are rendered to probe a future that is devoid of alternatives to unjust environmental crises. She observes that the resources of the struggles underwrite people’s habitation of an ordinary life in the riverine communities, and reflects ways in which rivers support human and nonhuman beings in the area as well as pitch the future as a site of possibility. In her view, literature can creatively imagine environmental changes,

offering potentially new ways of apprehending the world, “not as blueprints, but to clear space for a relationship with the present world and future that includes possibility and experimentation” (9). Soyinka offers a fragile economy of two ecologically differentiated communities that – if brought together by paying attention to its relations of subsistence – promises an integrative, yieldable economy. Thus, he situates hope for economic sustenance in the realm of geographic integration. He appears to emphasise an approach that recognises the ecological hazards of the communities, by reproducing a spatio-ethnographic blueprint that is imagined to weather the crises. That is, the play figures a dramatic imagination of different geographies that implicates a strategy for Nigeria’s agro-economic transformation. Beggar makes this point in offering his services to cultivate Igwezu’s plot of land, an offer that underscores a synthesis of the different material environments of the region. As he puts it, “I have stood where your soil is good and cleavers to the toes like the clay of bricks in the mixing; but it needs the fingers of drought whose skin is parchment” (20). This looming imagination of the regions that evokes geographic binaries – ‘cleavers to toes’/‘finger of drought’ and ‘clay of bricks’/‘skin of parchment’ – highlights the regions in spatial and ecological terms. It demonstrates hope as a transformative agenda that mobilises a mix of places to forge an economic bond. It is therefore in the fusion of the two geographies of the North and the Delta, an intermingling of resources, that a productive economy can be sustained. This option constitutes a significant shift from Igwezu’s kind of activism – as well as from the culture of silence that marks the older generation of Deltans. Unable to recover from the betrayal of land, Igwezu insists on the hopelessness of trusting the swamp. As he puts it, “I know that the floods can come again. That the swamp will continue to laugh at our endeavours. I know that we can feed the Serpent of the Swamp and kiss Kadiye’s feet - but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn” (39). It seems, then, that Soyinka is primarily concerned with the ideals of national integration as

the underlying strategy capable of guaranteeing economic recovery rather than autochthonous claims of belongingness and feudalist spiritualities. Drawing insight from the economic crises that are tied to ecological differences in Nigeria, Soyinka sought to present an appeal for some kind of co-optation of differences in harnessing a resourceful economy, one that translates the volatile ecology into a working agro-economic system. By extension, Soyinka presents an economic vision that side-steps the environmental calamities that plague the peasant communities in Nigeria. Indeed, the play seems to represent a dramatic critique of the subnational tendencies that mark the country's economic and political development since independence. In the dialogue below, the play emphasizes on the notion of faith as a dramatic therapy for an ailing economy:

BEGGAR: Will I return with you to the city?

IGWEZU: No, friend. You like this soil. You love to scoop it up in your hands.

You dream of cleaving ridges under the flood and making little balls of mud in which to wrap your seeds. Is that not so?

BEGGAR: Yes, master.

IGWEZU: And you have faith, have you not? Do you not still believe in what you sow? That it will sprout and see the harvest sun?

BEGGAR: It must. In my wanderings, I think that I have a healer's hand  
(41)

To be sure, the sea and the littoral worlds are often imagined to articulate a nation, as Meg Samuelson has argued. She speaks about the transformative and transforming character of the sea in a way in which it acts as agent of national discourse. Invoking the St Lucian poet, Derek Walcott's formulation that "the sea is history", she contends that deploying the sea in the imagination of the nation is tantamount to a reclamation of history. On this point, Beggar's focus on the rivers represents faith in the resources that they signal in the region, a signification of hope for national economic sustenance. Thus, the notion of "healer's hand" working on "dream of cleaving ridges under the flood and making little balls of mud" is suggestive in thinking about socio-natural problematics of the swamp, offering a compelling dramatic vector for enacting a

relation of contrasting national geographies. Altogether, Beggar's migration is suggestive of a programmatic translation of a homeland struggle. It is the desire to continue the struggle against the drought in which his land is left dry, crusted and dusty, translating the struggle into a kind of activism that sought to reclaim a flooding swampland. Thus, rooted in the lived experience of dust and dryness - that David Theo Goldberg's aptly describes as "dust people"- Beggar rallies against an impoverishing topography. As David Theo Goldberg has noted, the trope of dust has dotted modern literature and letters as "bearer of dirt and disease, contagion and the clogging of breath and life, obscuring perception and clarity"(59). But he acknowledges further that, "[T]he conditions of precarity, of living in and traveling through the dust, ontologically speaking, is a condition of knowing epistemologically, a dis-position. As too must be the counter-condition, which metaphorically I will call a "green" life"(56). Perhaps it may be argued that Beggar's mode of knowing is not necessarily a recognition of the ecological fragmentation of the North, or of knowing the Delta upon arrival, but the awareness of the ability to heal the lands, to bring the geographies into a scale of national resourcefulness. His ultimate struggle, therefore, relies heavily on the construction of a national discourse of hope from the tensions of contrasting geographies. On his way to the Delta, he remonstrates to a stranger, "But let there be water, I am sick of dryness". It goes to the motif of hope derivable from the creeks and rivers of the Delta that in deploying an ethereal metaphor Soyinka constructs a cartography of different geographies in the dramatization of nationhood.

### 3.4 CONCLUSION

So far, I have discussed pre-oil modernity Niger Delta plays in a manner that tracts the presence of creeks and rivers as centre of dramatic imagination. I highlight ways in which water constitutes the existential reality of living in the region, ways that inflect temporal, spiritual and epistemological framings of the quotidian formation of the riverine culture. Water provides the culture of everyday living as well as existential resources to interrogate colonial modernity. The overwhelming reality of water in the Delta privileges the region's coastal Belt as the entry-point of European industrial presence. Hence, we notice the way in which the plays of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Wole Soyinka illustrate the incursion of industrial modernity into Nigeria through the instrumentality of Anglo-Euro shipping fleets. The creeks and rivers, therefore, are presented as multivectoral site of contestations. It is particularly a pathway into the Delta, and constitutes a pattern of tidal rhythm, of flows and ebb, with which nationhood is geographically mapped and narrated. Thus, the presence of swamps and creeks in the Delta endorses a kind of sub-regional identity that offers the region a particularism of the sea, one that frames ways in which the communities of people living in the region respond to the crises that water unfolds. In subsequent texts, we shall explore the manner in which the watery ethos shifts to a position of background in the theatre that petro-culture introduces.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HISTORICISING SPACE: THE BIOPOLITICS OF VIOLENCE IN THE NIGER DELTA CREEKS

*it is perhaps imperative that we pay attention to the spatial articulations of power and/or agency in relation to state versus non-state actors in the Niger Delta rebellion. It appears all the more imperative to pay attention to these articulations when one considers that the Niger Delta insurrection was, and still is, essentially about space (the Niger Delta wetland), the natural wealth (crude oil) located within that space, and the struggles by both global and local politico-economic forces over control of that resource.<sup>24</sup>*

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

While the exploration of the ontology of water in the works of J. P Clark-Bekederemo and Wole Soyinka set in motion a basis for understanding the ecological dimension of pre-oil modernity Niger Delta, decades after the discovery of oil in Oloibiri town in 1956 witnessed a number of dramatists whose portrayal of the Delta takes an entirely different form. The playwrights considered in this chapter – and the next to a significant extent – draw from the petro-cultural context to develop works that underwrite the region’s experience of oil modernity. They unravel the history of crude oil in Nigeria, how its extractive processes devastate, pollute and impoverish the Delta region in whose land it was discovered. Indeed, in spite of the huge wealth generated from the mineral resources in the Niger Delta, the over 30 million inhabitants of the region do not have access to basic social services like electricity, pipe-born water, good healthcare system, and other social and economic rights deserving of a region whose resources sustain the entire Nigerian state. The sordid conditions in the Delta are further complicated by a prolonged history of

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Ugor. "The Niger Delta Wetland, Illegal Oil Bunkering and Youth Identity Politics in Nigeria", *Postcolonial Text*. 8.3 2013:3-4

unregulated gas flaring, oil spills, air contamination and other environmental degradations which have had negative implications on water resources, agricultural land and the people's lives and their cultures. The oil sector in the Delta remains an enclave industry, with very little involvement of the locals. This condition of socio-economic and political marginalisation experienced by the people of the Niger Delta has produced a specific kind of response by young people seeking social and economic rights which have been denied them by the Nigerian state and transnational oil corporations. And as Paul Ugor writes, "between 2005 and 2009, almost an entire generation of youth in the oil-rich Niger Delta area in Nigeria took up military weapons against the Nigerian state and multi-national oil corporations" ("Wetland" 1). Yet it is important to ask how this "purely human struggle" reflects on the spaces of the Delta. How do we imagine place – the material world of the Delta – in the representation of this political struggle? This crisis, which turns the creeks of the region into what Joseph Mascot describes as "theatre of operations", alerts us to the need to pay attention to the ways in which dramas re-value our perception about the place of the natural world in petro-violence. In other words, plays of this epoch draws on the agency of the creeks and swamps that characterise the tradition of the pre-oil Delta as discussed in the previous chapter, but they do so in ways that historicise the spatial affordances of the natural environment in the politics of oil. In these plays, therefore, protocols of insurgency are rendered as dramatic actions registered in the interplay of reciprocity between the human characters and the more-than-human physical world. The works represent a good starting point for thinking about the recovery of the contribution of the natural world in the history of the Niger Delta struggle, a historicisation of the dynamics and complexities of how the landscape of the region is inscribed in the dramatic enactment of petro-insurgency. The chapter poses questions of how people and landscapes conjoin as agentic forces of insurgency, how they mobilise the landscapes in the processes of the on-going

conflicts. Indeed, the ontology of oil presents a different ecological reality to the Delta people and landscape – distinct from the pre-oil era. Alf Hornborg and Andreas Malm give insight into the scale of the invidious force that oil culture makes possible when they write that “a clique of white British men literally pointed steam-power as a weapon – on sea and land, boats and rails – against the best part of humankind, from the Niger delta to the Yangzi delta, the Levant to Latin America” (64). Thus, the plays discussed in this chapter depict ways in which, as Warren argues, “nature, once changed, requires people to reshape their cultures, economies, and politics to meet new realities” (1). This view gestures toward a re-shaping of the naturalist and culturalist view of the landscape – disclosing a kind of dialectic insight in how the landscape and environment are invested with political affordances in the Delta conflict. In particular, I will be discussing how these affordances and agencies are reflected in the works of Benedict Binebai and Eni Jologho Umuko and ways in which – in such works as Umuko’s *The Scent of Crude Oil* and Binebai’s *My Life in the Burning Creeks* – they underwrite a sense of ecological relationality.

The “dwelling perspective” which the anthropologist Tim Ingold introduced offers a way of bridging the naturalist and culturalist understanding of the landscape such that puts purchase on the functionality of the material environment. In his book, *The Perception of the Environment*, Ingold hails James Gibson’s *The ecological approach to visual perception* as a revelation in his quest to construct an essentially complimentary model of analysis. In seeking to know “how people come to perceive the environment around them”, Gibson departs from the assumption of his contemporaries in the 1970s which identifies ‘inside of the head’ – the mind – as the means through which the representation of the world is constructed. As Ingold elaborates:

It was supposed that the mind got to work on the raw material of experience, consisting of sensations of light, sound, pressure on the skin, and so on, organizing it into an internal model which, in turn, could serve as a guide to subsequent action. The mind, then, was conceived as a kind of data processing device, akin to a digital computer, and the problem for the psychologist was to figure out how it worked. (2-3)

The significant shift that Gibson makes, according to Ingold, is not only a rejection of the age-old idea of the mind as a distinct organ of the functionality of the bodily system, but in advancing insight that perception is the achievement of the whole environment in which the organism is implicated. For Ingold, “if mind is anywhere, then, it is not ‘inside the head’ rather than ‘out there’ in the world” (3). The mind “is not limited to the skin”, Ingold asserts, echoing yet another anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, but connected to the larger environment in which the perceiver is immersed through a network of sensory pathways. To be sure, Ingold identifies the sensory systems as characters implicit in places that manifest in the experience of those who dwell in it. He writes: “A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience”. (*The Perception* 194). These characters, Ingold argues, “in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage”. Hence the act of dwelling reproduces a specific significance that draws on the relational context of people’s activity in the natural world. To the extent in which the notion of dwelling is significant in providing a place-based insight, I turn to the presence of oil pipelines in petroleum-producing communities – particularly in *The Scent of Crude Oil*— in order to reflect on the materiality of oil modernity in the natural environment of the Delta. To be sure, the material evidence of the technology of oil modernity in the landscape of the Niger Delta – represented by the network of pipelines and oil well-heads – offers an interesting insight to ways in which the play registers material environment.

The dwelling perspective is also useful in thinking about the smell of crude oil as one that results from such activities as petroleum spillages in the Niger Delta. Joshua Estyn has observed that the poetics of smell has a formative presence in the development of postcolonial African literature. Citing Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreter* (1965), and Ayi Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), he makes the point that “the remarkable currency and symbolic versatility of excrement in the postcolony” is an affirmation of failed or flawed postcolonial nationalism. (23) It is probably on account of the failure of the Nigerian state in dealing with the environmental problems in the Niger Delta that dramatists of the region rally the excremental tradition to invent what I describe as environmental scatology. Estyn has explained, however, that early postcolonial deployment of the scatological motif “marks the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside, between the self and the not-self” (34). This is precisely because these writers seem motivated by the awareness of their own implication in the condition of the failures that provoke the scatological expression. In this chapter, I argue that the self-reproach does not apply in the Niger Delta literary experience. Framed around the pollution of the Delta environment by the big oil corporations, I suggest that dramatists of the Delta re-invent the poetics of scatology to draw attention to ways in which the people and landscapes of the region are consigned to the abjection of bare life. Drawing on the two plays, I contend that Niger Delta dramatists deploy environmental scatology to articulate how petro-degradation and pollution underwrite the condition of self and environment. These dramatists are remarkably different from the early postcolonial writers whose works provide illustration of the symbolic metaphor of moral pollution. In the poetics of eco/environmental scatology, crude oil provides the material reality of the odour with which pollution is captured in the oil modernity literature. The works often extend to the physical impact of pollution that is wrought on the landscape of the Delta through petro-related disasters. They emphasise a sense of

flow to conjure the smell of crude oil, an imagination of pollution that inflects the material and sometimes metaphysical modes of living in the Delta. This chapter explores the particular kind of scatological imperative that appeals to the Niger Delta dramatists, and attempts to examine its impact as an important way of thinking about how stories of decay and pollution signal the condition of places and environment.

#### 4.2 THE SPACE OF EXCEPTION IN BEN BINEBAI'S *MY LIFE IN THE BURNING CREEKS*.

Ben Benabai is one of the most consistent playwrights that have emerged from the trouble-zone Niger Delta region in Nigeria. Studied under the tutelage of Femi Osofisan at the University of Ibadan, his plays retain the oral idiom and poetry that mark the Ibadan drama tradition. The reference to Ibadan is in the historiographic sense in which it is a cultural axis in the West of Nigeria, the other being Nsukka in the East, both of which are noted to have provided what Adesanmi and Dunton describe as “sites of generational beginnings” (2) in the Nigerian literary and cultural periodization. Although Adesanmi and Dunton observe the dominance of poetry in the third-generation writing, pointing, *inter alia*, to the cultural politics of Association of Nigerian Author’s (ANA) “seeming legitimation of poetry as the major genre of its emergent members” (9), drama evidently flourish with interesting contributions that reflect the heyday of post-independent cultural renaissance. Crucially, these emergent members of the writers’ body double as dramatists, what the Nigerian critic Oyin Ogunba, in reference to J. P Clark, poignantly describes as “poet in the theatre” (91). This analytic strategy of locating Binebai’s dramaturgy within the strand of Osofisan influence is not only a hint at the substance of his drama, but also helps to inspire ways of thinking about the connection of his drama as vehicle for political intervention in the Delta. Some of his plays include *Corper’s Verdict* (2004), *Beyond Nightmare* (2011), *Drums of the Delta* (2010) *The Seventh Virgin* (2013) and *My Life in the Burning Creeks* (2014), and his dramatic focus privileges the Niger Delta of his birth in a way that recalls Saro-Wiwa’s transformation from a patriot to a champion of Ogoni ethnic-nationality. This suggestion is significant because it helps to inscribe the Niger Delta sub-nationalism in perspective in his drama, and also instrumental in

the diagnosis of the region's contestation with nationhood, serving the function of tracking the trajectories of their discontent with the Nigerian federal system.

In his essay, "Literature in the time of Tyranny: African Writers and the Crises of Governance", Adebayo Williams argues that the inevitable involvement of writers in postcolonial politics produces tragic consequences of political crisis that often inflect their cultural productions. He notes that since the 1990s the crisis of governance and democratization have swept across the African continent. He states that this crisis has taken its toll on African literature precisely because African writers have important roles to play in the political evolution of the postcolonial state. He writes that "historical conditioning" very often brings writers to "mounting the political soapbox" (349), emphasising that the political instability and its attendant infraction on the economic and social health of many African states imply that the crisis of governance has shifted to a crisis of failed states. Crucially, writers operating within the provenance of collapsed states in which components are denied freedom and politically excluded easily establish political relevance in the ideological logic of ethno-nationalism. Drawing attention to Ken Saro-Wiwa and the manner he was executed by the regime of Sani Abacha in 1995, Williams notes that the level of artistic involvement in the crises of governance determines the portrait of a writer's political life. To him Saro-Wiwa offers a good case of how a writer's artistic transformation is borne of exposure to a vulnerable postcolonial politics. He writes that:

Ken Saro-Wiwa's writings, notably *Sozaboy*, *The Prisoners of Jeb* and the dramatic sketch *Basi and Company* were all suffused with pan-Nigerian consciousness. Indeed, masterpiece *On a Darkling Plain* chronicle's how Saro-Wiwa, as a loyal Nigerian patriot, forced his way through Biafran lines in order to fight the attempted dismemberment of Nigeria. But the ethnic bitterness had begun to seep through *A Month and A Day*, prison diaries... Within a period of 27 years, Saro-Wiwa had

been transformed from an exemplary Nigerian patriot to an Ogoni super-patriot, a sworn enemy of the Nigerian state and ultimately its victim (361).

The dramatic oeuvre of Benedict Benabai evidences this pattern of transformation. His debut play, *The Corpers Verdict*, for instance, is an illustration of Pan-Nigerian consciousness such that conveys a sense of cultural nationalism. The play enacts dramatic intrigues that characterise the interplay of “the evil dividends of capitalism” and the industrial action of unpaid workers – a conflict which resolution is emblematic of the contrivance of an imagined nationhood. In the end, the workers, who constitute the deprived, unpaid and dehumanized victims of the bourgeoisie class, sing of national rebirth:

I love National rebirth  
It is a great struggle  
I want to be a rebirth fighter  
I love my country...(*Corpers' Verdict*, 54)

However, Binebai's subsequent plays appear divested of interest in nationalism, lending themselves to the prevalent regional politics in the Delta that is framed on the provocations of petro-imperialism. The plays tend to renegotiate and redefine the place of the Niger Delta in the Nigerian geo-politics; making the evolution of his oeuvre capture the unrelenting marginalisation of the Delta region, what Williams describes as “retreating into an ethnic 'laager’” (360). This recoiling into ethno-nationalism in Binebai's drama conveys spatial significations of the Delta that highlight nationhood as a site of contestation. “To imagine the nation”, writes Emmanuel Yewah, “is to focus on its physical structure, that is, as a landscape with fixed boundaries, rather than as an inscape, amorphous and fluid” (45). Thus, to talk about sub-nationality (such that characterises Ken Saro-Wiwa's campaign for Ogoni nationhood), then, is to reflect directly on forms of territorial and spatial contestations that are evident in the oil modernity Niger Delta plays. It is

therefore no accident that *My Life in the Burning Creeks* hints at a sense of situatedness in territoriality. The play's title discloses this spatial significance in relational terms, invoking the experience of human life against the natural environment of the Delta creeks. In fact, drawing attention to the experience of the creeks in petro-fire disasters, the play highlights the landscapes as site of the dramatic action, as the fulcrum of the region's history of disaster. It registers the lands in which the crude oil is deposited as the centre of the narrative, constantly explored and drilled with consequences of despoliation and destruction of the living environments. Indeed, the play gives a historical account of a "land of beauty" that is caught in the inferno of oil spillages by big petroleum corporations. As Pereware, the narrator laments:

Our generation has risen against the  
Continuous oil exploration without  
Corresponding development our land.  
The struggle against corporate irresponsibility,  
State corruption, balkanization, poverty,  
Neo-colonization and bio-regional damage  
Has transformed our land of beauty  
Into a roaring and burning Zone (49)

The play tells the story of a different scorching of the creeks, an unexpected aerial bombardment of Gbaramatu Kingdom that targeted the palace which, in the process, is reduced to rubble while displacing the indigenes and neighbouring villagers who are gathered to celebrate the coronation of the traditional ruler of the kingdom. Shortly after the attack, the military took over the community in search of suspected militants – the attack is considered one of the several reprisal efforts of the Nigerian state against armed youths of the community. Pereware, as well as many indigenes of the community, escaped into the mangrove forest. His account of the airstrike, perpetrated by "three low flying helicopter", reverberates with what Michael Watts describes as "a tale of terror and tears" ("Petro-Violence" 196). In the midst of such "theatre of operations", a general effect of displacement is conveyed:

People screamed and ran without direction.  
Many ran into the forest for safety  
And got trapped. The invaders bombed  
Everywhere, anywhere, everything and anything.  
Humanity crumbled callously;  
Thousands of people were displaced,  
Badly injured; hundreds of people died  
Including women and school children,  
While the cry of agony and  
Calamity was posted in the air...  
It was a national calamity for my people,  
The rich and poor, men and women  
The young and the old even  
Domestic animals were not spared  
I was at the dead end in the forest as the invaders  
Mounted blockade on both land  
And waters of the community (46-47)

The air-attack serves to reproduce the volatile condition of the region, the wars that the Nigerian security apparatus wage on the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. The story is probably based on the real-life air-bombardment in 2009 of the palace of the Gbaramatu Kingdom by members of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in connection with the hunt for Government Ekpemukpolo Tompolo, commander of one of the insurgent groups in the region, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The journalist Simon Ebegbulem, reporting the event as a manifestation of the politics of oil and terror, compares the offensive with the familiar instances of violence and precarity in petro-states. He writes that “the Gbaramatu invasion by the JTF was similar to the operation Desert Storm of 1999, when American forces launched an attack against Iraq for invading Kuwait” (4). He reports that “the entire community was razed down including the palace of the king” and describes the devastating situation as that of “a case of a king without a palace” (6). The bombing further recalls a pattern of reprisal attacks on some Niger Delta communities in relation with militant activities such as the case of Odi town in which hundreds of people were massacred in 1999. In Chapter One, I discussed Michael Peel’s report on the Odi massacre in which

the Nigerian President of the time, Olusegun Obasanjo, “showed no signs of outrage at the action and others like it”, but rather boasted that the vengeful massacre of hundreds of Deltans by security forces is a typical example of how cause and effect function in human societies. Such is the violent strategy that frames the politics of oil in the Delta, a certain pattern of normalisation of security that the play illustrates. Thus, the play suggests an attempt to give voice to the militants, a performance of what Egya Sule figures as “aggressive realism” (102). In this instance, it offers an experiential justification for acts of militancy by enacting the struggle in ways that invest it with “a voice for those denied a voice”:

Our youths took to militancy  
Conscious of the reality that  
For decades upon decades upon decades we were  
Ignored and exploited by the society  
And authorities of power  
We expected protection from  
They became products of bitter generation,  
A generation of disinherited,  
Disenchanted and destroyed youths  
They were turned into fearless Tigers  
Against a cannibal people, age and fury  
That held sway in the joy city  
Today’s bombing of our kingdom  
Is not unconnected with the position our  
People have taken against  
The oppression of our land (51)

Yet the emphasis on the land, represented by the creeks, portrays a spatial perspective of the state violence on the oil frontiers of the Niger Delta. The bombing of the palace of the Kingdom is no accident in the context of land sovereignty as the basis for place-based resistance. It emphasises the palace of the Kingdom as the locus around which ideas of indigeneity are organised in the articulation of Delta nationhood. Indeed, as Michael Watts has argued, the power brokerage of traditional institutions in the rentier structure of the oil complex is one that prefigures the chieftainship space as an important factor in the politics of the Delta. Also, reflecting on the sense

of paradox that chiefdoms reproduce in relation to Africa's colonial history, Achille Mbembe describes chieftaincy power in oil-producing communities as — “the new oil frontier” (“At the Edge” 279). This is precisely because traditional orders of power which the colonial indirect rule encouraged are still dominant, and subsequently constitute a front for contestable notions of homeland and communities on which “multiplicity of local conflicts” are organised. It is to the proportion of the defence of land and resources that the Deltans have conceived of their histories — and heroes. It is perhaps on this account that the play sketches a legitimising narrative of the Niger Delta colonial history, laying emphasis on the region's first encounter with Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a way of understanding the continuum of governmentality surrounding the people and their natural resources. As Peraware recalls:

History reveals that this area  
Has struggled for social justice consistently  
A history of political activism  
That dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Our ancient leaders who opposed the colonialists  
Were dethroned, killed, or sent abroad to die...  
King Jaja of Opobo, King Frederick Okoko  
The Ofrima Lekeleke of Nembe,  
Tainyan of Oborotu, Nana Olomu of Itsekiri  
Bekederemo of Kiagbodo,  
Onduku and Agia of Ayakomo  
Educated elites who were patriots and  
Nationalists were the second set of people  
Who struggled for the region. Prominent  
Among them was Chief Harold Dappa Biriye  
Then came Isaac Boro, Ken Saro Wiwa and  
Youths who resisted domestic colonialism (48)

This compelling enactment of the history of the Niger Delta, from the imperial mandate of the colonial powers to the petro-imperialism of the global oil complex, attains historical legitimacy in ways in which the narrative is land-bound and place-sanctioned to the extent that each epoch, together with the heroes associated with it, is tied to specific places and communities. This

means that the histories of the Niger Delta have been kept alive in a very relational modality in which people and geography are bound and recorded. This place-layered approach to history concurs with Ingold's indwelling perspective, namely, that "landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in doing so have left something of themselves there" (152). This viewpoint enables Ingold to undermine the characteristic distinction between humans and nature since both manifest a sense of unison that is made possible by dwelling. For Ingold, the landscape is neither nature nor culture, or mind and matter, inner and outer, or any such Cartesian dualities. Rather, it should be apprehended as "the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them" (191). He explains:

the landscape tells – or rather is – a story, 'a chronicle of life and dwelling'...It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation. To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past. (189)

It is thus an ecologically-layered history that sanctions proportions of each Delta hero in a way that is implicated in the account of imaginable geographies. Katryn Brown echoes this viewpoint when she writes that, "history occurs in place, not, as historians commonly believe, in time. Or rather, time and place have been mixed together metaphorically so that everything, past and present, *takes place* in a particular *space* of time" (6). In invoking heroes from different epochs and communities in history, Benabai appears to suggest that the Niger Delta is consigned to a spatio-temporal entanglement with historical subjection to Anglo-European industrial capitalism. This is precisely because differing moments in the history of the region are conjoined in a space which resource endowment exposes it to the tension of industrial capitalism. As Ursula Lehmkuhl has noted,

“historians conceive of history as not simply something that happens to people, but something people make – within, of course, the very powerful constraints of the natural, social or cultural world within which they are operating” (2). In that vein, the Niger Delta heroes are constrained by their in-dwelling in the geography of the region, their challenges are defined by the paradox of the landscape: a space as much a source of beneficence of the natural endowment as a place of precarious resource wars. The invocation of the pre-modern heroes of the Niger Delta in the same historical account as Isaac Adaka Boro, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the youth insurgents – characters of distinct ethnic nationalities in the Delta region – allows us to track the manner in which geography converges in Binebai’s dramatic imagination. These heroes of different times in history seem to interact with one another on the basis of a common reference to the vernacular of the homeland. Binebai appears to suggest that the experience of the land has been the same for those who dwelled, those who still dwell, and those that will dwell in the creeks of the Niger Delta. For these heroes that Binebai invokes, the creek, as Ingold notes, “is experienced as a journey made” (191). Hence, their lives are informed and shaped by the physical demands of the environment for protection, and to which they are committed in defence. As the narrator laments about this historical continuum in which the landscape is the experiential marker: “The political tradition of the burning creek/Is that of bitterness, of violence/And politics which sang battle/ Songs and produced life-terminating bullets”(34).

The story of the narrator, Pereware, is a typical account of the exclusion and marginalisation of the Delta people. Several years after graduation from the University with a degree in Petroleum Engineering, Pereware is unable to secure a gainful employment in any of the multinational oil companies hosted in his oil-producing community. His life contrasts sharply with that of his friend

from the northern region of Nigeria, Abubakar, who, though studied Islamic and Arabic Studies, easily secures a place at the Public and Corporate Affairs unit of Escravos' Chevron, one of the several oil companies operating in the Delta. The story resonates with what the scholar, James Tsaaior describes as “decimal of a tissue of paradoxes” where indigenes of the oil-rich Delta live “on the margins or fringes of Nigeria’s national life courtesy of perennial institutional and state neglect” (2). By the time the airraid occurred, Pereware is still hunting for job, hopelessly trapped in the mass of displaced people in the forest. His lament resonates with instances of abjection and bare life to which indigenes of the Delta are paradoxically reduced:

PEREWARE: But Abubakar, how do I make it  
When I don't have a Godfather?  
I need the job, would you take me  
To a godfather who can offer me the job?  
PEREWARE as ABUBAKAR: The bitter truth is that you  
Need to become a Muslim  
And truly bear a Muslim name before  
The assistance can come  
PEREWARE: What? I did not bargain in life  
To change my religion  
And biological identity because of a job (21)

In order to dramatise the bare life of the Delta people, Binebai conceptualises the setting of the play as a spatio-theatrical resource by productively using space in articulating the political phenomenon of the region. That is, he turns the creeks into a theatrical component of the play's exploration of displacement and violence. Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* and Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* have shown that the creeks are fundamental to the vision and style of Niger Delta drama. The plays that follow – such as Binebai's *My Life in the Burning Creeks* and Eni Jologho Umuko's *The Scent of Crude Oil* – consolidate on the centrality of the creeks and swamps in how the Delta is theatrically represented and performed to the extent in which they translate into mechanisms

of enactment. Accordingly, *My Life in the Burning Creeks* is set “[A]t the public square in Gbaramatu in one of the creeks of the Niger Delta”. It further describes the narrator thus: “Pereware, a fairly tall black skinned youth of about thirty years comes out to the deserted public square” (18). In her book, *Theatre's Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space*, Joanne Tompkins discusses how space might become an imaginative way of creating a narrative with and through setting in performance. She theorises this as heterotopias (which derives from utopia as connected to what she defines as “better known aspirational 'topos'”) and argues that it embodies theatrical possibility of understanding performance in its relation with its physical and historical community. She identifies heterotopias as a spatial marker in a performance that signals a relationship with the actual world, one that may continue beyond the universe of the play and performance. To Tompkins, heterotopias is useful in ways in which theatre creates what Kevin Hetherington terms ‘spaces of alternate ordering’, a suggestion of how “spaces that are distinguished from that actual world, but that resonate with it” (1). This way, she notes, structures of power and knowledge that are associated with spatial production of political and cultural meaning in theatre are revealed and performed. The image of the ‘deserted stage’ as the play opens draws attention to the bareness of the stage in the Brookian sense in ways that deploy the setting of the play in addressing the historical reality of violence in the community. It is an attention that mobilises the spatial reality of Niger Delta theatre in the narrativisation of displacement, precisely because the public square is laid bare as a result of the air-raid on the community by the Nigerian Security forces. Thus, drawing on the tradition of the Niger Delta theatre, the playwright manages to stage a post-modern spatial phenomenon that invokes the creeks in terms of what Peter Brook describes as “bare stage”. In his book, *The Empty Space*, the British theatre director charges: “I CAN take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst

someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (7). In understanding the theatricality of a bare stage which Pereware re-enacts through “the deserted public building”, Benabai reproduces a theatre that makes sense of emptiness and bareness. Thus, as Pereware “walks across this empty space” to begin the story, the playwright appears to orchestrate a drama of an environment that is violently ruined and destroyed, making the wreckage visible in order to provoke the telling of its history of bareness, of the ruin and the destruction that rendered the community empty. In effect, the bare stage seems to correspond with the bare life of the protagonist, suggesting a kind of spatio- political dimension in which both geography and people of the Niger Delta are subjected to the performance of violent displacement and disconnection from place. If inspired by the bombardment of the Gbaramatu Kingdom into staging a trope of displacement in the creeks, Benabai aims to connect the empty space with the contemporary narrative of the unfolding acts of state terror in the Delta. Hence, using the bare stage to reflect upon human relation with the space that is void and empty of inhabitants, the play engages with what Michael Foucault addresses as “a heterogeneous space” (23). In the essay titled “Other Spaces”, Foucault discusses how space can draw out and erode human life, history and time in a manner that creates a void, and describes such empty space as “set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (23). Ngugi makes a similar argument when he asserts that, “the performance stage is never empty” but occupied with the history “of what has gone before” (41). In opening the story on a deserted space of a ruined landscape, Benabai reinvents the spatio-temporal category of life in the Delta, to acknowledge the extent in which space shares in the becoming and tension of history. In fact, he presents a drama that orchestrates an act of state terror to fill the void and emptiness of Delta’s ruination. As Ngugi explains further:

the performance space, in its entirety of internal and external factors, may be seen in its relationship to time, in terms, that is, of what has gone before – history – and what could follow – the future. What memories do the space carry and what longings might it generate? ...It is clear from this that the performance space is never empty. Bare, yes; open, yes; but never empty. (41)

The creeks offer an important way of understanding the Niger Delta in terms of dwelling, and in terms of the people's knowledge of place and surrounding of their living environment. In deploying the creeks as a form of theatrical setting, Binebai invests the play with a performative possibility of multitudinous characters in relation to setting in place and time: an assemblage of human and more-than-human world in a habitation of exclusion and violence. The emphasis on the decimation of the landscape inexorably reveals Binebai as a dramatist who is very fascinated in exploring the spatiality of the Delta, whose penchant in thinking about the more-than-human world brings his plays to a critical point of natural historicity. He advances theatrical possibility for epic conflict that acknowledges the more-than-human characters, rendering them not as any less historical in the construction of an ecological narrative. He invokes the landscape in order to expose the realities of petro-violent predation of the Big oil corporations, and to hint at the contrast with the pre-modern past during which period the landscape was the source of Delta's economic and social life. He therefore idealises the pre-oil modernity Delta, describing the encounter with crude oil in different tragic appellations:

...the king without a crown  
The emperor without clothes,  
The peacock without feathers and like a  
Bloated cash cow in the trade  
Garden of some capitalists  
This land of mine hosts fishing grounds  
And farm lands that diminish everyday as  
The liquid gold slicks flicker the creeks  
And rivers and bursts into  
Dazzling and deafening flames (19)

William Cronon has indicated that nothing could be further from the truth of the assumption that when Europeans arrived the New England they encountered virgin landscapes and idyllic forests that existed for eons without the influence of human hands. He writes that though the encounter with Europe brought devastating and destructive ecological changes to the Indian communities, the landscapes have experienced significant modifications for the thousands of years the Indians have lived on the continent to the extent of their existential purposes. The proper account of such history, he argues, “would describe precolonial New England not as virgin landscape of natural harmony” (43). In dealing with the history of the landscape in relation to how its transformations are culturally represented, Cronon advises that, “[T]he choice is not between two landscapes, one with and one without a human influence; it is between two human ways of living, two ways of belonging to an ecosystem” (240). This argument speaks to Binebi’s idealisation of the pre-modern history of the Niger Delta landscape, a representation that appears to delineate the Delta landscape into the binary of pre-modern harmony on the one hand and capitalist degradation on the other. In perceiving the landscape thus, he looks back on the possibility of a dramatic reversal to the idyllic days of the landscape. As Pereware warns, “The bubbles in a cooking pot/Disappear when the hot coals/That heat up the steaming pot die./History will keep alive villains and heroes/Of the burning creeks” (59). Arguing about the ecoliterary representation of the landscape and homeland, Ogaga Okuyade writes that “[T]he writer has a homeland, which is always green in his or her memory. To ascertain the extent of damage done to the ecosystem, the writer re-members how it was, in order to caution society on the dangers of the wholesale depletion and destruction of the environment” (117). For Binebai, his homeland is the vast creek that is burnt, and “polluted by oil that renders them barren” (57), though was once “waters flowing to every tributary”. Much of the enactments in the play unfold with the exhortation of the hitherto greenness of the land as a way of thinking in

contrast about the destruction perpetrated by the Big Oil corporations. Crucially, the play suggests that the destruction of the creeks and its inhabitants are mutually reinforcing, and impossible to decouple:

My creeks has been stripped in flood blood  
For generations and devils laugh from the covens  
A creek where giant bees climb and sting people  
Where destiny is forced not to keep  
The fat of lilies alive  
A creek with destiny that scares,  
It is a creek where warriors and people have died  
Trying to speak regarding their pains.  
Children and mothers,  
Who escape death, mourn.  
This creek has been burnt  
Its citizens murdered  
The world of the creek is filled with darkness (58)

Nonetheless, this historicisation of the Deltascape not only help to imaginatively recapture the history of the non-human nature in the region – a history that is consigned to the margin of an essentially anthropocentric viewpoint – but also functions as a kind of metaphor through which the spatial implicates other questions that the region is grappling with. Within this context, Binabai employs the creeks as a transcendental metaphor that affirms the centrality of space in the Delta conundrum. “how people have conceived of and striven for justice” Sylvia Hood Washington, Paul C. Rosier, and Heather Goodall have written in their introduction to the book of essays, *Echoes from the Poisoned Well*, “is shaped by the ways in which place and environment are understood, the ways in which places carry meaning for the people who live within and across them” (xxii). In this play, beginning with the title, Benabai inoculates space into the events of Delta’s history, emphasising it to explore the sense in which the creeks are connected to the political manoeuvrings in Nigeria and how it bears the direct brunt of the environmental degradation in the region. In other

words, he makes the creeks the melting-point of different phenomena of pollution that sediment from oil spillages to the human politics:

This oil that has polluted  
The burning creeks  
Has also polluted politics and democracy  
It has polluted national unity  
It has polluted the lives of youths  
It has polluted our rulers, elders, girls  
And has turned into a colossal catalyst  
For crooked politicians and mercantilists (53)

An interesting way of chronicling this spatial history is the particular geographic perspective with which the play pays attention to the account of the natural world, a perspective that sets in motion a process that interrogates the anthropocentric history by calling forth deserving places and geographies as signposts of history in the dramatic representation. Through this narrative process, Binebai gives voices to the voiceless geographies in the Delta; he provides visibility in a culture in which abandonment and decay is gaining political traction. He therefore uses his drama to challenge the politics that programmatically consigned significant geographic markers of history in the Delta to categories of ruin and dust. In his book, *Swamp Full of Dollars*, the British Journalist Michael Peel has noted in his visit to the oil communities in the Niger Delta, that a major prism of viewing Nigeria's impossible democratic structure that occasions the lopsided manner in which the Federal system marginalises the region, is the tell-tale condition of decay and deprivation that the region is subjected to. His account of Oloibiri, the historical town where crude oil was first discovered in the region, particularly elaborates on the abandonment of place and space as an overarching democratic culture of decay and deprivation in the Nigerian petrocultural modernity.

As Peel writes:

As I approached Oloibiri one typical Delta morning already thick with sticky heat, I passed an anonymous-looking clearing hacked from the

jungle. A rusty barbed wire fence surrounded an equally dilapidated oil-wellhead, known in the industry as a Christmas tree because of its branching network of pipes and valves. The accompanying signboard, rendered barely legible by corrosion, was as understated a historical landmark as you could wish to find...anywhere: 'Oloibiri: well number one,' it read. 'Drilled June 1956.Depth, 12,008 feet.' (25)

Binebai echoes this narrative of decay and abandonment to enact the exclusion and deprivation of the Delta, to explore how abandonment brings about rusts and corrosion such that erase the historical landmarks of the region, and by implication the history of the environment. Writing in the same context, Aghoghovwia asserts that the invisibility that is produced by the process of abandonment of the geographic markers in the Delta is symptomatic of the region's erasure in the context of social and political development ("Dissertation" 5). If, as Bruno Latour has noted that "visibility is the consequence of lots of opaque and 'invisible' work." ("Mediating Political Things" 98), then the state of invisibility to which the Delta is subjected suggests a greater opacity in the political conspiracies that worked together by the agentive forces of capital and politics to abandon the region<sup>25</sup>. In presenting this trope of decay, Binebai appears to deploy a narrative

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<sup>25</sup>Recent developments around the clean-up of Ogoniland ecosystem can be cited as an example of the political conspiracy against the Niger Delta environment. When in 2011 the Nigerian government commissioned United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to provide an assessment of the impact of oil extraction on Ogoniland, little did the unsuspecting public know that the implementation of the report will play into the system of Nigeria's carbon democracy. The report has been damning, diagnosing "severe and widespread contamination of soil and ground water across Ogoniland", and implicating the government and oil companies for discarding institutional control measures. Announcing President Muhammadu Buhari's \$1 billion clean-up and restoration programme on the 2nd of June 2016, Minister of Environment, Amina Mohammed declares that "Buhari would return to Ogoniland where he inaugurated a fish pond in 1984 where the once flourishing pond regrettably had been destroyed by oil pollution. The Federal Government is coming back to restore the ecosystem to what it used to be and as such restore the peoples' source of livelihood"(CF:<http://saharareporters.com/2016/06/03/10-reasons-why-president-buhari%E2%80%99s-no-show-ogoniland-bad-bad-pr-kennedy-emetulu>).Indeed, commentators have not overlooked the underpinning of partisanship in the minister's announcement, and interpreted it in the context of Buhari failure to visit Ogoniland to flag-off the clean-up programme, describing it as a re-enactment of the regime of indifference and neglect that attend the Niger Delta questions. As Kayode Oyero, in an op-ed that anticipates Buhari's disappointment, has asked: "Would this not be a talk and no

strategy that the German scholar, Walter Benjamin, styles as “literary montage” to ask questions of the broken territories and silent topographies of the Delta. In his magnum opus, *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*), a famously unfinished project on the subject of the arcades in the nineteenth century Paris, Benjamin reflects on the theory of montage as a methodology of writing history. He explains about the technique thus: “I have nothing to say. Only to show. I will steal no valuables, nor appropriate any clever turns of phrase. But the rags, the refuse: not in order to take stock of them but to use them – which is the only way of doing them justice” (574). To be sure, Benjamin’s obligation to merely show the rags and “the refuse of history” as a way of seeking justice parallels Binabai’s dramatic representation of the ruination and despoliation of the Delta landscape. Perhaps Binabai indulges in the clever turn of romanticizing the Delta landscape in order to hold the mirror up against the refuse that history has made of the region, but the suggestion of the theatrical details through which the play turns its gaze on the ruination underscores a quest for environmental justice against the predation wrought by industrial capitalism. Hence when the narrator, Pereware, invokes signposts of environmental and geographic history to tell stories of the decay and death of place, it is to provoke what Benjamin ascribes to the montage methodology as “the technique of awakening”, a socioenvironmental awakening of the audience to the abandonment of the region. As the narrator laments about the predominantly spatial subject of history that underwrites places and the more-than-human entities at the threshold of decay and extinction:

I went dry like Oloibiri, Burutu, Ganagana  
And Forcados, prosperous ancient communities  
In the burning creeks, used and  
Dumped by the European traders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
I attended primary and secondary

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work white elephant project like the Goodluck Jonathan’s Hydrocarbon Pollution Restoration Project (HYPREP) established to oversee the clean-up of Ogoniland but which was never flagged off?”(CF: <http://ynaija.com/end-agonies-ogonis/>)

Schools at Burutu, fondly called  
The Island of No regrets.  
It was home to all Nigerians  
For more than seventy years  
This Island town was the nerve centre  
Of commerce and industry throughout  
British West Africa  
Burutu the Island town, the port  
Town with the largest slipways,  
The Island that is designated as the ideal base for  
The largest ship building and  
Repairing centre in Africa,  
Is now a shadow of its old self like  
Forcados which served as the first capital of  
Colonial Southern Nigeria.  
The death of these towns of industry and  
Economic hub is a monumental blow to  
Our hopes of survival in the burning creeks. (53)

The emphasis on the history of the major towns in the Niger Delta, a signification of places that are geo-strategically connected to, and later disconnected from, the Anglo-American relation with natural resources of the Delta, makes this play a remarkable geopolitical drama. It unmask the European interest to a basic question of resource exploitation for which the lands are the material victims. In fact, this geographical mapping of historical Delta towns that are soon forgotten once drained of natural resources brings this play to a concrete sense of land politics, and underlines its gesture towards an account of the region's environmental history. It seems significant that the play speaks about "The death of these towns", a suggestion of possibility of thinking of tragedy in spatial and territorial terms. Because not only the humans, but also the living environment, that experience the tragic consequences of oil exploration and extraction.

*My Life in the Burning Creeks* is an important case study of how conditions of the landscape and environment are portrayed with metaphors of decay and rust—what I describe as poetics of

scatology. At different points, the play signals spatial violence and decay of the environment, servicing as a metaphoric device for destruction and despoilation. It might be supposed that what Binebai has done is to draw from events of the destructions of the landscape and environment, and project them into a narrative idiom of scatology. Through Pereware's constant references to excrements in relation to his condition of living, Binebai brings the lifescape and landscape of the Delta to a category of rottenness. He seems to forge a dramatic formula that aligns with the subversive strategy of scatology in enacting an eminent environmentalist theatre against the polluters of the region. In one example, while "looking for a soft paper" in a heap of waste to clean his anus after defecation, Pereware discovers a photocopy of his master's degree certificate with which he applied for a job. This heightened abjection of the indigenes of the Delta underwrites the neoliberal marginalising structure that is constituted to render life into waste. "Wastes" writes Marcel Henaff, "evoke dull, ordinary horror of what is vile, worthless, and contemptible—a pile of shit, in the vulgar phrase that indicates an act of foreclosure". He notes further: "Of all the foreclosures on which culture is founded, [waste] is the most violent..." (196). In this sense, narratives of vulgarity work together with what Slavoj Žižek describes as "the systemic violence". For Žižek, systemic violence flows invisibly and anonymously through the social structures that capitalism has enabled and instituted. He defines it as, "the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence" (10). The play, thus, makes visible the subtle systems that sustain the different kinds of violence that is unleashed on the Deltans. It invokes images of faecal matter as a physical manifestation of the subtle, invisible interplay of marginalising power relations. It is instructive to note, for instance, that Pereware's unutilised

certificate is found as a discarded detritus in the toilet of one of the several oil corporations hosted in the Niger Delta communities:

I squatted to ease myself and  
When I finished defecating,  
I found comfort in looking for a soft paper  
To clean my anus. I eventually  
Saw one and was going to use  
It straight away but I saw  
The reverse side of it  
I was devastated emotionally  
Something strangely familiar...  
What an irony of fate  
The certificate I submitted  
For a job in the oil company  
Operation in my land was returned to  
Me through the toilet. (23)

This kind of representation that locates aesthetics in decay as a way of articulating a certain kind of power relations resonates with Achille Mbembe's discussion of obscenity and vulgarity. He calls attention to the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in order to find an appropriate way of thinking about obscenity within the context of postcolonial cultures. He appears to agree with Bakhtin in the understanding that obscene expressions function as a modality of power relations. In this vein, he concedes that obscenity and vulgarity can be deployed as vehicles of fun, joke or satire devised to make mockery of the conditions of violence and domination that characterise systems of power. However, he departs from Bakhtin in the question of the location of obscenity. He claims that whereby Bakhtin understands the use of vulgarity as an aspect of the "non-official culture", it is actually instinctive to the structure of domination. Rejecting the assumptions of binarity that characterise conventional analysis of power relations, he suggests a certain kind of conviviality precisely because systems of domination and postcolonial subjection occupy the same living space. In operating within the same spaces, he contends that both the dominant and the dominated rob each other of vitality to the point of mutual

'zombification'. He explains that this fuzzy character of power relation is in line with the condition of the postcolony which, though "chaotically pluralistic", has the tendency for "internal coherence". This character reproduces further contradictions, as he states, "Those who laugh, whether in the public arena or in the private domain, are not necessarily bringing about the collapse of power or even resisting it" (108). Thus, his view conflicts with Bakhtin's analysis in which the obscene is a vocabulary of the ordinary people deployed to ridicule the dominant culture in ways that function as a mode of resistance. Given the condition of conviviality together with the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, Mbembe advances a scenario in which ordinary people identify vulgarity in official cultures which are inverted in ways that make no claim to resistance. Indeed, he maintains that a manifestation of resistance or hostility is not the privilege of obscene culture in the postcolonial context per se. He explains that:

It is unnecessary, then, to insist, as does Bakhtin, on oppositions... or, as does conventional analysis, on the purported logic of resistance, disengagement, or disjunction. Instead, the emphasis should be on the logic of "conviviality," on the dynamics of domesticity and familiarity, inscribing the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme. (110)

In the essay "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture" Renate Lachmann offers an interesting background to Bakhtin's life leading to the formulation of the official and unofficial binary. He writes: "Banished from the center of official Soviet culture because of his involvement in an unofficial circle of philosophers, Bakhtin recognized from his marginal perspective in society the emancipatory power of that which pulls away from the center" (116). And in his study of *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Bakhtin sanctions this binary while discussing the imagination of scatological subjectivities in literature. Describing this as "grotesque realism", he defines shit as "the most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted" (152). This way, he argues, it functions to degrade the monological disposition of the official cultures. He believes that

excremental matter illuminates the laughing aspect of the world such that resists the authority through the instrumentality of ridicule, producing regenerative and renewing principles that are often glossed over by critics. Hence, he explains: “The images of feces and urine are ambivalent, as are all the images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time” (151).

Bakhtin’s interest in the binarity of official and non-official cultures opens up the possibility of discussing how Binebai invents the faecal matter as a way of expressing the degradation of the landscape and people of the Niger Delta. In *My Life in the Burning Creeks*, Binebai seems to undermine the principles of ridicule and laughter in the face of the tragic climate of the real-life pollution of the region. However, he co-opts the ruin and decay of the ordinary people in the Delta to speak broadly about the material rot of the landscape in which they dwell. In other words, to speak of decay is to address the industrial predators together with their Nigerian government collaborators. Mbembe aligns the faecal discourse with the body as vehicle of its contemplation, noting for instance that, “The obesity of men in power, their impressive physique or, more crudely, the flow of shit from such a physique— all these appeal to people who can enjoy themselves with mockery and laughter, and, sometimes, even join in the feast” (107). In a similar manner, Bakhtin invokes the “grotesque body” while emphasising shit as one of the important products of the body. Indeed, Bakhtin offers an ecologically relational perspective to the discussion of scatology that is useful in thinking about Binebai’s approach in the play. As he puts it: “dung is a link between body and earth, urine is a link between body and sea” (335). Binebai’s interest in the anus as the body’s site of waste is symptomatic of the general waste and decay of the region. As the Pereware announces during the funeral of his mother: “I perceived the reeking scent of dipping/my finger into my anus” (43). In keeping with a sense of ecological vision, I would suggest that the play

evinces an aesthetic interface that connects the decay of self with the pollution of the environment. That is, the lifescape and landscape of the Delta are implicated in conditions of decay and pollution that function in a system of relation. As Pereware, for instance, declares about the occupational closure of the largely fishing community whose subsistence are incapacitated precisely because of the pollution of the rivers: “Becoming a fisherman is futile because oil/Has polluted the waters;/ What about the flora and fauna/That have been deprived of their fertility” (52). *My Life in the Burning Creeks*, thus, explores the trope of scatology in ways that juxtaposes human decay with environmental pollution. It identifies obscenity in the everyday life of Deltans who are economically and spatially displaced. Indeed, Binebai appears to explore environmental pollution by giving expression to the experience of human decay.

In highlighting ways in which pollution is both human and spatial, given purchase to its economic and political implications, the play appears to enunciate a kind of resistance. It articulates the Bakhtinian paradigm of the grotesque as a mode resistance, but one that reflects on the tragic consequences of decay and waste. In fact, the excrement gives profound expression to a certain kind of exclusion, what Slavoj Žižek calls an “excremental/sacred outcast”<sup>26</sup>. Thus, excluded economically and politically, Binebai’s dramatic consciousness enacts the destruction of the creeks of the Niger Delta to ask questions of nationhood:

Day in day out, our creeks are burnt  
By oil fire, the fire of greed  
Guns and grenades,  
Fire of repression and resistance.  
Like what is happening to us now.  
Are we Nigerians or enemies of the state? (49)

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<sup>26</sup><http://fivebooks.com/interview/slavoj-zizek-favourite-plays/> "Slavoj Žižek on His Favourite Plays" interview with Liza Thompson

In this sense, Bakhtin's assessment of the scatological image and how it engenders a sense of exclusion – rather than conviviality and inclusiveness – appears to anticipate the discourse of what Agamben famously describes as “bare life”. In the second section of this chapter, I will discuss Bakhtin in light of the notion of multiple voices in which he uses the dialogic discourse to lend critical weight against a dominant culture of monological exclusion. What this points to, however, is a suggestion of how Bakhtin's ideas gesture towards the kind of enquiry that underwrites my focus on the state of exclusion, one that draws on Giorgio Agamben to present the creeks of the Niger Delta as a good example of a space of exclusion. The way in which Agamben understands biopolitics as implicated in the distinction between life and forms of life, or between *zoe* and *bios*, provides a clue to the notion of scatology. For Agamben, this distinction corresponded to that of the classical Greek thought that defines *zoe* as life as such, and *bios* as form of life that is qualified. Because, implicit in the condition of odour is the attention it draws to forms of life that is figured as polluted and degraded. In other words, smell emphasises the barelife of the Niger Delta people, their exclusive from the enclave nature of industrial oil capitalism. This fact brings to focus Agamben's submission of how the dynamics of this distinction prompts regimes of exclusion and hierarchies such that determine the value of life in western political systems. The reference to Abubakar, Pereware's friend from the north of Nigeria, identifies the form of good life that is distinct from the barelife of the protagonist – and, by extension, the indigenes of the Delta. The culmination of political communities, Gregory Derek cites Agamben, is based on exclusion, not on inclusion or belonging (62). According to Agamben, then, the basis of modernity is the reproduction of these acts of exclusion, privileging the concentration camps as the quintessential example. However, Derek Gregory and Allan Pred in the introduction to their book, *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence*, write that: “When people flee violence in its

different forms, however, seeking to escape famine, poverty, or war, they often find that they are trapped in new spaces of exclusion” (4). In the same book, Gerry Kearns seems to echo the state bombing of Gbaramatu Kingdom as dramatized in *My Life in Burning Creeks* when he states that: “When civilian deaths from high-altitude bombing are treated as collateral damage, when people are held without charge and abused in pursuit of evidence in a war on terror that sets aside international law and human rights, then, truly some lives are being treated as if they were either not worth living or not worth protecting” (7). The bombing of Gbaramatu Kingdom as narrated in the play is symptomatic of how the Niger Delta enclave, and indeed most oil-producing communities, represent a good case for “space of exception”. The play suggests how the life of the average Deltan is reduced to ‘bare life’ as a result of the exercise of sovereign power of the Nigerian state with the collaboration of multinational oil corporations. As we have shown, the aerial bombing of the palace is one among many of the acts of biopolitical violence performed against the region. Pereware sees himself as a typical *homo sacer* – one whose life is not worth living – whose life “*may be killed but not sacrificed*” (Agamben, 83). The instance in the play when Pereware contemplated suicide – declaring: “I was almost tempted/ To dance the dance of death,/That dance that would have/Freed me/from all the/Pains wreaking havoc on my heart” – appears to be a subversive strategy expressed to affirm his humanity. Indeed, Kearns describes suicidal situations in biopolitical contexts as: “ironic reversal of the reductions implicit in bare life” (8). According to Kearns, staking own’s life illustrates a kind of theatricality that contests the lack of respect accorded that life by those who could treat it as one not worthy of sacrifice. But as the play shows, it is a life that signals ways of understanding the more-than-human world in which it is located, a lifescape that offers an opening-point to the possibility of a broader ecological relation with the landscape. To be sure, *MyLife in the Burning Creeks* provides an interpretational

means in thinking about the abjection of communities in the heterotopias of programmatically violated geographies. But it does so in bringing the creeks at the sensorial level of odour and rot. This aesthetic perspective helps us to negotiate the effect of abandonment and pollution on the material environment, identifying odour as the condition of exclusion, invisibility and marginality. To be sure, odour gives expression to ecology of waste, a foreclosure of architectural, industrial and political experience of the material world of the Delta. It speaks directly to the pervasive reality of petro-culture.

### 4.3 ENVIRONMENTAL SCATOLOGY IN ENI-JOLOGHO UMIKO'S *THE SCENT OF CRUDE OIL*

Eni-Jones Umuko's role in the development of African theatre derives mainly from the ritual models he provided for directing plays in the context of explicitly mythical motif, what he describes as the "ritual icon". He appraises this theatre paradigm in his experience of directing Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1987. He considers drama as "a ritual for the stage", a crucial element of propitiation and regeneration in time of crises. To him, then, the environment presents an important interface of human-induced crisis that requires dramatic and theatrical mediation. Born in 1955 in the city of Warri, Umuko studied English/Dramatic arts both at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN), Nigeria, and the University of Ibadan (UI). He taught at the UNN between 1986 and 1993, thereafter requesting a transfer to Delta State University. In the introduction to the play *The Scent of Crude Oil*, he explains that this move is to enable him come "closer home and help the new Performing Arts in my state university grow" (6). This decision can be appraised to support a certain kind of pan-Delta consciousness that ultimately inspired a new interest in the "murky waters of politics". However, after two years in politics, Umuko joined Sullivan and Sullivan Consulting in Port Harcourt in 2005 during which period he facilitated a tour of oil-producing communities with drama skits. The tour targeted Delta youths under the aegis of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) framed on policy initiatives and directives on sustainable development of oil-destroyed communities, as well as presenting stories that highlight the ugly consequences of violent militarism. The play, *Scent of Crude Oil*, is one of the products of the campaign.

The play is set in Esidi, a fictional town located in "the backwaters of one of the creeks of the Niger Delta", and tells the story of a pipeline fire disaster that is ignited by petro-spillage.

However, it makes significant allusions to the city of Warri – a commercial hub in the Delta State of Nigeria to which victims of the inferno are evacuated for treatment – as well as Okidi and Jesse village that have famously experienced pipeline fire outbreak in the past. The invocation of these town in relation to Esidi provides the narrative with critical motif for interrogating the idea of “time-space convergence” in a manner that privileges economic and social survival of communities that are connected by networks of petroleum pipelines. It brings the narrative to the geographic awareness of the benefits – and consequences – of the implications of oil modernity among the Niger Delta communities. In presenting the story of communities that share in the tragic experience of fire disasters from crude oil spillages, the play can be appraised as an environmental history of places caught in the disastrous presence of techno-modernity. In that sense, the play orchestrates the tragedy of places that offer a spatial understanding of how oil-producing communities are subjected to harrowing experiences of displacement. This fact resonates with what Kate Brown describes as the use of “particular place to explore the histories of communities and territories that have been silenced, broken, or contaminated” (2). In other words, the play privileges Esidi to think about other communities in the Delta region that have shared experience of petro-fire disasters, drawing on the experience to tell a cautionary story of how oil bunkering can reduce a village to a massive scale of human and environmental destruction. The play, thus, imagines historical places that have recorded incidents of fire disasters in the Niger Delta as a way of advising caution against acts of pipeline vandalism. The following conversation by the militants discloses this much:

Maku-maku: Make we still dey manage this bunkering business small small. When we don hammer well well, den we fit stop.

Aluta: What if we burn die for the fire before we hammer? For Jesse na over 2,000 human beings roast to death. What of Lagos, Ijala for Warri

and the plenty fire accident we e dey happen for inside creeks here every day wey nobody announce or write for newspaper?

Pepele: No be lie. Remember the one for Bennet Island where pipe burst catch fire and kill fifty people? Na God save us say we no go burst pipe that day but...

The story opens with the event of an election into the Youth Executive Council of Esidi Community on which basis the audience is introduced into the two categories of youths in the play. On the one hand, is the articulate group of educated youths whose manifesto recalls Ken Saro-Wiwa's strategy of non-violent approach to the political and economic exclusion of the region. The group includes Tafa, Sodinye and Amparo – cast as unemployed university graduates – whose manifesto proposes how the God-given natural resources “will be equitably distributed among all Esidi people” (15). On the other hand, is the militant gang, comprising of Maku-maku, Jugunu, Aluta and Pelele, represented as school drop-outs, whose life of terror points to the peculiar condition of youth restiveness in oil producing communities. Presenting Tafa and Maku-maku as representative candidates for the election, the play attempts to illustrate a kind of dialectics in the Niger Delta crisis, bringing into direct conflict Tafa's ideological campaign of environmental sustainability and Maku-maku's seemingly irrational radicalism. The election ends in a violent disruption with Maku-maku claiming victory in what opens up a paradigm of violence in the community. Bearing AK-47, pistol and shotgun, the militants fire shots in the air to rig the election. Shortly after the election, Maku-maku's gang embarks on illegal operations in the creeks – targeting expatriate oil workers in kidnap and extortion schemes as well as oil bunkering from well-heads – resulting in tragic consequences of the fire that engulfs the community.

Reflecting on ways in which the activities of these militants are implicated in the creeks, particularly in how operations of kidnapping and oil bunkering are launched from the camps, I interrogate the relation of these spaces with acts of insurgency. How might the exclusion of the

creeks illuminate the processes of terror that the insurgents inflict on the petro-facilities? Through the activities of the insurgents at the points of petroleum pipelines, the play pays attention to oil facilities in the Delta communities, and asks questions of how these facilities mediate ways of knowing the Delta environment by those who dwell in the region. In other words, it revisits the dwelling perspective to think about how living in the region energises acts of insurgency. It further consolidates on the scatological motif, this time offering insight into possibilities of environmental cleansing in the context of eco-spirituality.

Reflecting on the history of place and landscapes in what appears as the announcement of the spatial turn in the modern world, Charles W. J. Withers writes that the modern world has become more homogenised so that “One place is now much the same as another” (639). He notes that globalisation has spurred a greater desire for “questions of locality, sense of place and of identity in place” (638). This argument finds literary anchor in what Philip Aghovgovwia theorises as “poetics of cartography”, a place-based tendency that reveals how literary representation undermines the urge of placelessness that neo-liberal systems impose as a globalising culture. Drawing on the work of Malpas and Sack, Withers argues that people cannot construct ideas without connection to place, without the experiencing of place, because meaning is primarily linked to the phenomenon of place. According to him, “Place is primary because it is the experiential fact of our existence”(642). The Esidi accident therefore provides a fictional resonance of the numerous fire disasters that happen across the Niger Delta communities, an account of place that discloses a homogenous experience of petro-modern tragedy. In view of how the play dramatizes the consequences of displacement, what happened in Esidi speaks to the cases of Jesse, Lagos and Ijala and Warri to the extent that the historicisation of place becomes a way of registering the spatial dimension of the fire disasters. To be sure, the landscapes and environment

of these communities often connected by network of pipelines open up insight in how the more-than-human world become subject of the Delta fire tragedy. In her paper, “Slow dissent and the emotionalgeographies ofresistance”, Amber Murrey-Ndewa writes that communities connected together by their proximity to oil pipelines are implicated in effects and experiences of dispossessing projects as united by large-scale capitalist-intensive extractive projects. She argues that narratives of the pipeline reproduce a “framework of structural violence [that] captures the pipeline’s situated-ness within, as well as its contributions to, larger structural exclusions and dispossessions experienced by people” (225). Her assertion that the pipeline is narrated in a way that illustrates “one project” that is “similarly experienced and similarly understood” by the communities illuminates the mutual experiences of Esidi and Okidi communities in the play. What this discloses is that similar accounts of the pipeline fire disasters in the region – for example the much-publicised Jesse fire outbreak in October 1998 – enable one to come to terms with the playwright’s imagination of how people dwelling around sites of petroleum pipelines engage with consequences of displacement. This agency of place resonates with Tim Ingold’s dwelling perspective in how it constitutes the landscape around people who dwell in it, one that accounts for the quotidian reality of life framed by the physical presence of the swamps and rainforests. The play develops this theme of place in order to offer insight into ways in which the militants manoeuvre their ways in engaging with the different spaces of the neighbouring communities in their operations of insurgency. When Tim Ingold speaks about the notion of place and landscape in terms of temporality, he also emphasises the knowledge of the manifold sites that those who dwell in these places journey in order to connect with these places and landscapes. Although the militants are cast as naive and unschooled – for instance, they are neither able to recognise what Oriola describes as the ‘kidnappability’ of the white-man nor able to write a letter to the oil

company to demand for the ransom – yet they have intimate understanding of a sense of homeland. Indeed, Oriola has argued that insurgents of the Delta rely on what he terms “appeariential ordering” to determine the suitability of subject position in terms of kidnap operations, drawing on a cognitive ability of knowing the different kinds of nationalities who populate the region as “meddling aliens” in the oil transactions. The militants in the play are bereft of this cognitive sophistication. In fact, considering their regime of gun-wielding terror in Esidi village, they fit what Michael Watts has described as “the masked militant armed with the ubiquitous Kalashnikov, the typewriter of the illiterate” (“Blood Oil” 62). After kidnapping Ibobo, a mulatto, mistaken for an Italian, they are unable to proceed with the demand for ransom because none of them has enough education to compose a letter. In many scenes in the play, they are shown expressing ignorance about notions of development and environmental sustainability such that frame Tafa’s slogan during the election into the youth council. What may be suggested is that the playwright uses the condition of their naivety to speak against insurgency, to debunk the currency of violence in the Niger Delta conflict, thereby bringing affective power to bear on the audience. However, the trait of illiteracy that characterises the insurgents is not reflected in how they engage with the creeks. Indeed, the ease with which they move in the marshy terrain of the Delta creeks across the different pipeline installations, as well as their ability to recruit boys to function in the complex technique of uncapping the oil well-heads, reinforce the knowledge associated with the experience of living in the region. Living in the creeks imposes an important regime of knowing, one that makes possible the activities in the pipelines and flowstations. Such activities, therefore, are a culmination of the multi-layered process of local technology of petro-ecology that the experience of living in the oil enclave enables.

The play's emphasis on pipeline vandalism offers a good reason to think about how petro-materiality triggers insurgency in the Delta. Although pipelines are visibly displayed on the landscape of the Niger Delta – and indeed are entrenched in the natural environment of the region – ideas and discourses of petro-violence in the region often undermine the relations between materialities and politics. In the essay “Materialist Politics: Metallurgy”, Andrew Barry echoes this reflection in thinking about a shift in social theory that relegates the concerns for materialities to the background of critical focus. Taking up metallurgical materials, he writes that “One reason is simply that there is something of a neglect of the politics of metals today, whether in terms of their extraction, manufacture or use, or repair” (89). He complains about the absence of metals in a discursive world that is marked by increasing flow of ideas and information. This flow occasions a shift in interest in metals, he argues, though its malleability was once significant in thinking about the transformative capacity of capitalism. However, Barry proposes that failures in metals and material structures, such as toxicity that may occur on oil pipelines, might offer a possibility in bringing to centre-stage a relation of metal and corporate capitalism. Such condition may be seen to operate in *The Scent of Crude Oil* as well, which, in the play, understands the landscape as disfigured by the ways in which pipelines are installed in the substratum of the region. Installed on the surface as well as underwater, pipelines signal the visible presence of crude oil in the Niger Delta, particularly emphasising its materiality in how the networks of the several oilfields are linked to the refineries via the pumping stations. The pipelines, thus, are the symbol of destruction of the Delta landscape that bears physical witness to how oil extraction pollutes the natural world of the region. Rob Nixon writes that because the pipelines are spill-prone, it jeopardises the health and livelihood of the fishing and farming communities who live in the increasingly 'fragile intertidal ecosystem' (28-29). To this effect, pipelines represent the material target of insurrectional

anger, one that is often provoked by ways in which the presence of technological modernisation is framed as an extractive theft. In other words, pipelines epitomize an increasingly provocative presence of an elusive modernity that imposes itself on the region's landscape. Nixon explains:

Under such circumstances, visible reminders of theft through modernity's infrastructural invasions—by oil pipelines or massive hydroelectric dams or toxic tailings from mines—foment rage at life-threatening environmental degradation combined with the state's failure to provide life-enabling public works. Often, as a community contends with attritional assaults on its ecological networks, it isn't granted equitable access (or any access at all) to modernity's basic infrastructural networks—piped clean water, a sewage system, an electric grid, a public transport grid, or schools—utilities that might open up alternatives to destitution. Such communities, ecologically dispossessed without being empowered via infrastructure, are ripe for revolt. (42)

According to the militants in the play, pipeline vandalism is the preferred choice of insurgency precisely because it is more lucrative. They attribute this to a thriving black market that has boosted an informal oil economy. Maku-Maku says this much as the group plans to increase the scale of bunkering on account of increasing JTF surveillance: “buyers full everywhere dey wait. I don get buyers we dem go come carry product this night” (100). However, it is admittedly risky. With the failure of the kidnap operation, and the resultant excommunication of the gang from the community by elders and youths of Esidi village, they turn again to oil theft. Once out of the village, they retreat to the creeks in the border zone between Esidi and Okidi and set up a camp to resume oil bunkering. These movements in the creeks bring to mind Ugor's assertion that “the Niger Delta wetland functioned both as refuge and site of resistance” (“Wetland 7). To be sure, the use of refuge to describe the landscape points to what Tim Ingold coins as “a building perspective” in which the human mind constructs or builds a perspective that is imposed on the world. As Paul Cloke and Owain Jones further explicate, this perspective represents a shift from the dwelling perspective that recognises a relationship between people and the environment. They

define the dwelling perspective thus: “any act of building, living, or even thinking, is formed in the context of already being-in-the-world which, in turn, affects that forming. (“Dwelling, place, and landscape” 651). The creeks, thus, represent more than a refuge or site for the performance of resistance. Rather, it is implicated with the affordances of geographic resources that are considered in the process of resistance. In this context, it is pertinent to think about the politics of revolt in relation to the creeks in the region. How might one articulate the weight of the impact of the creeks on the protocols of insurgency in the Delta? In what way, to be more precise, might one consider the creeks in the context of the more-than-human world as characters in the unfolding conflicts in the Delta? To be sure, the play reveals how knowledge of the creeks and topography of the communities enable the operations of insurgency. It depicts how, in spite of the awareness of the presence of Joint Military Task Force (JTF), the militants seem insulated from the calculations of security in pursuit of subsistence. It is therefore imperative to look at the different ways in which the militants are entangled with the Delta terrain, how this entanglement privileges the creeks as a significant character in the Niger Delta drama. Temitope Oriola has noted that the functionality of the space represented by creeks can be understood as invested with “symbolic transformation” from a public space to a securitized space in which it serves social and political roles in the operations of insurgency. He draws on the French philosopher Lefebvre to explain ways in which spaces reproduce social relations, highlighting how the Niger Delta creeks underwrite this function as a kind of non-verbal but mutually understandable design of spatial exclusion and inclusion. In this context, he describes the creeks as essentialized spaces, one that is framed on ethnic and religious forms of belonging and identify. To this end, he coins the term “*ita eewo*” or abominable space” to reflect on the experience of exclusion and abomination that the creeks represent to non-Nigerians, non-Deltans or those not initiated to the Delta struggle. To be sure, this accounts for the

difficulty in engaging with the militants for purposes of anti-insurgency by members of Joint Military Task force (JTF). He further explains:

For the JTF, the creeks are no less of an abominable (*eewo*) space. As the home territory of insurgents, the JTF understands that the creeks have been effectively colonized by insurgents. The *eewo* status of the creeks is intensified vis-a`-vis the JTF because it is the fortress for repelling any attacks by outsiders, particularly the Nigerian state, that the JTF represents. The creeks constitute an uncharted dangerous territory for the military. (5)

This view echoes in Paul Ugor's analysis of the spatial signification of the Niger Delta struggle. Describing the creeks as "strategic counter-geography" – that is, the sense in which the material topography of the wetland is transformed into new resistive identities – he identifies the creeks as possessing a treacherous character that coalesces into a military advantage for the more than fifty insurgency groups that operated in the region between 2006 and 2009. He writes that:

This peculiar spatial character of the region thus makes it not only difficult to traverse but also one of the most difficult places on earth to engage in military battle or even to mount effective state surveillance. Former Commander of the Joint Task Force (JTF), Major General Sarkin Yarki Bello, acknowledged this much to me in an interview I had with him in his office on 26 August 2010. He said coastal insurgency was new to the world's military and that it posed enormous challenges for the Nigerian military personnel on the ground. (4)

The play makes attempt to invoke the creeks as key in the process of insurgency – both in the practice of kidnapping and oil theft. In that vein, insurgents strategically install their camps such that accessibility requires intimacy with place to manoeuvre the waters and swamps. Part of what enhances the camp as abominable space, as Oriola has describes it, is the spatial complicity of the swamps that disable strangers and non-Deltans in venturing into the area. Within the play, two camps are operated to function in different ways: first, is "the camp...used for illegal bunkering of oil products, crude oil and others" and the second is labelled "kidnapper's den" or "Camp 2". In

both instances, the play shows the consideration of water and swamps as protective mechanism against the surveillance of JTF officers. They constitute part of the dynamic, “uncharted dangerous territory” in which “discriminatory regime of differences” are sorted on “ethnic, religious and linguistic forms of belonging and identity” (Oriola 4). In this sense, the creeks become a political matter, one which territorization of danger responds to questions of inclusion and exclusion. This perspective of thinking about the creeks of the Delta is useful in illustrating the ways in which nature play social and political roles such that opens up possibilities in how the dwelling perspective can further enhance the interface of nature's relation with politics. The kidnap of Obobo provides an interesting case for understanding these linkages. The choice of Obobo – a mulatto – as the kidnap victim may represent a way of satirizing insurgency, a way of enacting the futility of violence that insurgency enables. In his early twenties, Obobo, whose mother is an Esidi woman, has no knowledge of his father. He was born in the city of Warri where he lives with his mother but continues to yearn for his place of origin. This is because in the context of youth involvement in oil politics, the city is a negation to the aspiration of place. Rather, it serves as a social and commercialised space that complicates the rootedness of those who dwell therein. For this reason, Obobo continually pesters his mother with questions of his paternity and place of origin. As the following dialogue shows:

OBOBO: I want to know my village, my own community but anytime I ask you, you will just say it's Warri but there several towns and communities in Warri. From which particular one are you?

MAMA OBOBO: Wetin you wan take your village do? Your papa na Oyibo from Itaali and na me your mama. Dat one suppose reach you.

Obobo: No, Mama. I want to know my very own community, so I can go there and join the youth executive. That's the way to make it now, Mama. There are so many runs that the youths understate, particularly with all these companies, and if I am one

of them, wow! Mama, I want to go and join them so that I can hammer with them, can't you see? (94)

Later in the play, Mama Obobo reveals how she abandoned her husband in the village and eloped to Warri with an Italian seaman whose ship came through Esidi river. Once in Warri, she became pregnant with Obobo but her lover – Stefano – equally abandoned her and returned to his country. It is on account of this experience that she vows to remain in Warri to avoid the shame that her action might cause in Esidi village. As she tells Obobo: “your papa, stupid man, come run leave me go back to im own country for Itaali. E come be big, big shame for me to go back to my village because everybody go dey call me ashawo” (96). Thus, if considered in terms of biological relation with place, Obobo is an indigene of Esidi and, to that extent, embodies the responsibility of inheritance by virtue of origin. Although he is not aware of this connection at the time of visit to Esidi village where he was kidnapped, this fact provides an important basis in thinking about biological factor with regards to notions of identity and place. What possibility of relations are there between the natural environment and human claims of biology and autochthony? In what way does being “a son of the soil” reframe the ways in which the natural environment reflects on the lives of the Niger Delta peoples and their struggles against petro-imperialism? These questions find expression in Ingold’s reflection on “the orthodox dichotomies between evolution and history, and between biology and culture” (“Building” 77). Drawing on three traditions of western theoretical formulations that set out to complicate the new-Darwinian traditions – which are developmental biology, ecological psychology and phenomenology – Ingold forges a synthesis of what he describes as “a new ecology”. He argues that, among other things, these three approaches have two significant principles in common. On the one hand, is how the approaches take on the tradition of western thought that privileges form over process, and reversing the order to the extent in which form is inscribed as a category that is generated by a system of process. The second

shared principle, on the other hand, is the aspect of the dwelling perspective that acknowledges the notion of ‘being in the world’ in which lived experience – rather than mental construction of the world – is the meaningful human environment. To that effect, he dismisses the conventional account of biology that stipulates “the phenotypic form” as the outcome of a specific genotype in which biological endowment at the point of conception are inscribed with materials of heredity that is labelled as genes. “[E]very organism”, he writes, “begins life with its complement of DNA in the genome, but on its own, DNA ‘specifies’ nothing” (76). This is precisely because the development of an organism in its environment – human and nonhuman – constitutes part of the ways of understanding the genetic code. What is essentially passed on through generations of human relations is not only “a genome ...[but also] a segment of the world”. In other words, Obobo may carry the biological genome of Esidi community, a “son of the soil”, yet he cannot be located within the experience of the community. He came to Esidi in search of work like most youths in the region, as he describes it, “[to] hustle around there to make ends meet” (80). Being kidnapped by the militants is diagnostic of the fact that his biological link with Esidi people cannot re-order his lack of intimacy with the community. Notwithstanding the phenotypical difference that prompted the militants to mistake him for a foreigner, Obobo is bound to Esidi by gene. His travail is essentially not a matter of the phenotype, or differing appearance, but one in which the absence of intimacy with the creeks has marked and ruptured him from the community. This condition underwrites the account of Obobo’s escape from the camp such that even though the gang showed him hospitality – by serving him food and women for the purpose of keeping him healthy for high ransom – his consciousness for escape is marked by the uncertainty of the geographic surrounding of the swamps in which crocodiles and sharks inhabit. In fact, he considers the possibility of his escape with such sense of incredulity as in a film. As he reports to his mother:

“Mama, you need to have seen me, it was like a film. I ran to the creek and dived inside, then swam the full distance across to the other side. I did not care whether there were crocodiles or sharks.” (93) In the end, Obobo's request to be permitted to live in Esidi village in order to join the youth executive illustrates the potential of indwelling in the exercise of agency. More broadly, the play figures the experience of living in Esidi land as crucial in advancing ways in which human life is entangled with place, either in form of militant particularism or communal initiatives of the youths in the village. Obobo's request, which solicits the elders to upturn the state of excommunication to which he is placed at the time of the kidnap intrigue, emphasises the need to efficiently contribute in re-building the community. This contribution is based not merely on claims of (biological) belonging but on the necessity of living and becoming one with the land.

Beginning with the title, the play predominantly conveys how the sense of smell of crude oil pervades the environment of the Niger Delta. The smell is most perceptible in the border between Esidi and Okidi where Papingo, the village hermit lives, emphasising its spatial dimension and permeability. That is, the two villages are connected by pipelines as by the smell of crude oil so that the networks of pipelines serve as vectors of petroleum and the odour that it bears. The playwright's engagement with the ways material presence of crude oil serve to denigrate the landscape of the Delta and, at the same time, produce odours that smell all over the community is itself in keeping with the logic of the dwelling perspective. In “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel”, Amitav Ghosh identifies a spatial character of crude oil that underscores the manner its bad smell travels at street level such that gets worse in the process of representation. He writes: “And to make things still worse, it begins to smell of pollution and environmental hazards. It reeks, it stinks” (30). Such characters may be apprehended through Papingo, one of a twin born in Esidi town whose brother was removed from the town by a missionary after their mother died in the

process of childbirth. Papingo lives at the border between Esidi and Okidi where Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) has a network of pipelines that run between the neighbouring communities. Papingo and his estranged twin brother, Keni, who resides in the city of Warri suffer “crisis situation”<sup>27</sup> that is rooted to their condition of birth which is explicable in metaphysical terms. This condition makes Papingo and Keni strong breeds, a hereditary phenomenon that resonates with Soyinka’s dramatic suggestion, in which birth process must consume the life of the mother<sup>28</sup>. The strong breed tradition is associated with spiritual dirt and filth, and advances the possibility for regeneration. In drawing from that tradition, Umuko summons a metaphysical paradigm of cleansing to address the issue of an environment polluted by the stench of crude oil. Through Papingo who lives by the network of oil pipelines between Esidi and Okidi, the play reveals a disturbing detail of the stinking smell of crude oil such that pervades the landscape of the oil communities, a lived experience of heavy odour that continues to linger from a decade old fire disaster, and which perhaps apocalyptically portends an impending disaster:

But what sort of smell is this sef? Every second, every minute, every hour, every month of every year for the past ten years I have been in this place, na so so this rotten eyanwo, the smell of native egg; this smell just hangs permanently in the air. It smells like, like when a rich man farts in the morning after a feast...Hmm, come to think of it, it is also like the smell of those dead bodies roasted to death in that oil pipeline fire incident at Okidi community ten years ago...Uhm, this smell...Oh, could it be the crude oil that gathered in the pit under this house following that spillage many years ago? (27)

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<sup>27</sup>Isidore Diala has borrowed the term from the anthropologist Ake Hulkrantz to describe conditions that are implicit in ritual forms, stating that “but there is not always any crisis involved. It will be better to speak of sacred situation”. *Esiaba Irobi's Drama and the Postcolony: Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Performance*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2014

<sup>28</sup>The phenomenon of the strong breed has been a reoccurring trope in postcolonial African drama since Wole Soyinka play's *The Strong Breed*. Framed around the myth of human sacrifice for guilt expiation and communal cleansing, dramatic variations of that mythopoetics have been identified in such plays as Femi Osofisan's *No more the Wasted Breed* and Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* (1991)

The closeness that the militants face in their operations at the pipelines while breaking and siphoning crude oil means that they deal more often with the smell of crude oil. Their description of the character of crude oil – which echoes that of Papingo in comparing crude oil with rotten egg and fart – highlights imaginings of the material dynamics of petroleum activities in the region. They often draw attention to the physical nature of the liquid crude as it pumps in the hose, “like a big snake we e dey pass bush”, a connotation that references the context of what Watts describes as the “discursive peculiarities of oil” (“Petroviolence” 191) in which the motion of the material flow of crude oil is compared to an object of fear and violence. In referencing money and the smell of crude oil as exemplified in the following exchange, the play suggests an important imagining of commercialism that refracts from petro-materiality:

PELELE: Na wa o, see as the hose dey move up and down like big snake we e dey pass bush. Na wa o!  
JUGUNU: Na the smell dey tire me. E dey smell like rotten enyanwo. Uhm! (snorts). Make una hurry dey fill the jerrycan.  
PELELE: Na so some money dey smell like shit but people still dey die to get am.  
JUGUNU: Me I no wan die for money but I go bear the smell because I wan enjoy life. (103)

The cleansing of Papingo and Keni by Tomrifa, the chief priest of Esidi, towards the end of the play suggests recourse to a symbolic transcendence. It underscores the ritual of purging the Niger Delta of spiritual and material filth that culminate in the physical destruction of the landscapes, drawing on the region’s traditional model of addressing existential decays. This relational approach in engaging with pollution recalls the strong breed phenomenon as I have hinted earlier. What is re-invented in the play, therefore, is a kind of eco-spirituality, one that addresses questions of socioenvironmental filth and pollution as a way of thinking about the political ecology of oil. Hence the play considers the logic of the spiritual practice as a viable strategy of environmental transformation. But as Alex Latter has noted:

“This is not to say that an appeal to transcendent spirit is the answer to earthly socio-ecological dilemmas – such a move would only invoke a new dualism”. Drawing from Bronislaw Szerszynski, he argues that “the very notion of transcendence, particularly as it emerges within western religious philosophies, is part of the problem”(333). Yet, he concedes that spirituality can function as a powerful cultural technology in mediating between humans and the material agency of the more-than-human world. He writes: “spiritual experience and discourse offer powerful channels for the disruptive assertions of socionatural agency”. In *The Scent of Crude Oil*, it seems to offer insight into the spiritual truth of the decay of the Delta landscape, a spiritual truth that demonstrates the mythical suggestions of transcendental cleansing. The spiritual cleansing of Papingo and Keni references a symbolic act, yet resonates with a broad gesture of socioenvironmental dimension. It is a way of transposing the metaphor of polluted personhood into the structures of the oil complex, invoking filth not merely as individual myth but also as a collective reality of Nigeria’s political economy of oil.

The perspective of environmental scatology that I deploy in my analysis in this chapter though aligns with the Bakhtinian model that locates the obscene in the unofficial category, is inspired by Amitav Ghosh’s suggestion of the relation between the smell of petroleum and cultural representation. Following Ghosh, I offer insight into the very nature of crude oil, its odour and foulness, as a way of framing the reality of environmental pollution. That is, the condition of the environment assumes the language with which petro-culture is expressed. In articulating the problematic of oil through this perspective, the vulgarity of expression produces a sense of resistance, implying a paradoxical notion of purgation in petro-cultural representation. It is a case where the material reality of oil is invented to

capture its experiential encounter in literature; an experience of odour that percolates from the point of extraction, through “the street level” to the writer’s moment of literary production. In the Niger Delta theatre, this performance of scatology probes the recesses of filth and pollution as an expression of bare life. The two plays discussed in this chapter focus on what happen to places hit by petro-violence. One, the bombing of the palace of the community by the state security operatives; and the other, the tragic incident of a pipeline inferno that burns the community to the ground. Both stories demonstrate the history of places and people, showing how spatial history inflects and impacts human life. In each case, the human population appears the visible object of violence and decay. Indeed, it is often the human bodies that are ostensibly caught in the middle of the economy of violence that occurs in the Delta. Yet, it is the natural resources that constitute both the target of power and economy of insurgency. The plays chronicle this spatial history in ways that privilege the oil fields and pipelines as the target of power in the Niger Delta. The chapter attempts to understand how these bio-political acts, often tied to acts of petro-insurgency, deploy poetics of scatology as a way of expressing environmental decay, and by extension *bare life* of people who live in polluted landscapes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### LANDSCAPE AND POWER IN THE NIGER DELTA: THE AGENCY OF THE SWAMPS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter registers a shift in focus on the Niger Delta landscape and environment from tropes of decay and degradation to aspects of the creeks and swamps that elaborate what Jane Bennett describes as “thing-power materialism” (348). It examines the ways in which ideas and discourses of material things considered as inert and passive are re-imagined and reframed in a context of power and agency. Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore, following Bennett, have explained this transformation in the perception of thing-power as “congealments of matter –energy, from the epistemological terms of that which we cannot know to the ontological terms of agentic capacity or vital materiality” (xxix). In the Niger Delta context, I speculate that the shift is one that underwrites a sense of invisibility – social, political and economic abandonment as I have purposefully argued in the last chapter – to “the condition of possibility of visibility” (Bennett, 138). Bennett’s notion of material vitality is useful in bringing to awareness the agency of the creeks and swamps of the Delta in ways in which they are provoked into historical visibility in how insurgency is mediated in the region. Her work helps us to locate agency (and I dare say political life form) in nonhuman matter – what she calls positive ontology – to the extent in which the creeks constitute the source of protagonist force. In fact, she coins the term “ontopower” to emphasise that force. This approach to materiality that moves beyond Bruno Latour’s challenge of the “solidity of the link between political ecology and nature” (*Politics of Nature* 9) is significant in re-examining the relationship between the landscape of the area – creeks, swamps and mangroves – and the armed militants, and how this relationship, in turn, shapes the kind of

insurgency that is produced in the region. By staging an encounter between the operations of the armed militants and creeks, I hope to read productively the protocol of the militancy provoked by such encounters. I want to highlight and adopt the idea formulated by Ewa Domanska in which nonhuman beings are assigned existential categories, one that points to “the agency of things, accentuating the fact that things not only exist but also act and have performative potential” (173). Crucially, Domanska identifies a resurgence of interest in materiality as signalling awareness in the capacity of the nonhuman to function in epistemological and hermeneutic terms. He invokes Latour to claim that “the social sciences have too exclusively focused on humans and forgotten about nonhumans”, a claim which suggests that “hermeneutics has only been using half its capacity” (176). This approach, therefore, helps to broaden the understanding of the full impact of insurgency in the Delta, to explore the full potential of all the actors – human and nonhuman – that are engaged in the performance of the environmental struggle. It further reflects on ways in which material affordances of Delta’s coastal environment is framed by the theatre as the protagonist of the region’s narrative of petro-politics.

The chapter enlists two plays of Ahmed Yerima, *Hard Ground* and *Ipomu*, to call into question the processes of how drama has evolved and influenced the condition of material recalcitrance in the Delta. Seen in this way, the chapter appears to seek restitution for the “lost innocence” of the Delta’s landscape. The idea of lost innocence gestures towards what Kenneth Foot terms “innocent places” to explain sites of tragedies and disasters that “happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time” (114). Indeed, the creeks of the Niger Delta share in this spatial condition of innocence – a consequence of resource location that makes the region an entry point of Anglo-European economic and political incursion to Nigeria. As I have noted in the previous chapters,

this spatial complicity of the Delta is useful in explaining the region's history of conflicts that inscribe the landscape as a "theatre of operations" (Joseph Mascot 20014). The plays in this chapter engage this history of violence at the point of connection with the nonhuman beings. Crucially, Yerima's plays of the Delta appear to reveal preference for non-human nature in ways that critique overweening anthropocentric defence of the region's land and resources, privileging the material agency in a manner that highlights a sense of revolt. *Hard Ground* and *Ipomu* seem to represent this recalcitrant force of the landscape in a way that is staged as a performance of counter-violence.

In addition, I reflect on Giorgio Agamben to explore the manner in which insurgent groups reproduce state biopolitical structures particularly in ways in which operations of militarism illustrate cases of bare life. In a post-9/11 essay, "On Security and Terror", Giorgio Agamben has argued that an important consequence of security as paradigm of state politics is the tendency to unwittingly reproduce complicity of terrors. He cites Foucault's lecture at College de France in 1978 to show a history of how the practice of governance has continually opposed security in preference to the instrumentality of discipline and law. He writes that when a state reduces itself to securitisation as normal measure of governance, it threatens to discount the difference between state and terrorism which forms a single deadly system working to justify and legitimate each other's operation. According to him, "[T]he risk is not merely the development of a clandestine complicity of opponents, but that the search for security leads to a world civil war which makes all civil coexistence impossible" (3). I identify this complicity in the manner the insurgent groups operate structures of terror akin to Agamben's formulation of the homo sacer. The plays in this chapter orchestrate these biopolitical imaginations of life and death that locate agency in the

politicization of the material terrain, sea-animals and plants dwelling in the area. In taking up the non-human things to think about the biopolitical states of exception, I raise questions about the manner in which nature is introduced into the protocol of the insurgency occurring in the region in ways that underpin its capacity to function in judicial terms. In *Ipomu*, I identify Yerima's ontological unification of human life with that of the sea plant, emphasising its corporality to interrogate notions of death and violence in terms of sexuality and insurgency. He draws on the water hyacinth – *Ipomu* – to explain the genealogy of Delta life so as to track perceptions of immortality that feed into the hubris on which insurgency is framed. That is, the play explores the ontology of life in the Delta to highlight the spatial energies from which insurgents draw in the enactment of the struggle. In so doing, it locates an ontological synthesis of humans with the water-hyacinth as sharing a constitutive DNA, a common naturality. In this vein, it could be said that the play precipitates a new kind of tragic reflection, one that shares some principles with the crises that environmentality occasions in the Delta. Yerima, therefore, skilfully develops a protagonist force whose subjectivity of power and resistance are drawn from the natural environment, from the empowering possibilities of seaweeds. Hence the chapter helps to answer questions of how the natural environment of the Delta reproduces dramatic principles in the narrative of insurgency. It sought to locate the processes through which the human element is decentred as protagonists of the Delta struggle in order to reconstitute the non-human elements. This reflection is significant in the imagination of the anthropocene in cultural and theatrical terms, and helps in posing questions that interrogate ways in which the dramatist critiques the human hubris that feeds the violence of insurgency.

## 5.2 THE AESTHETICS OF PLACE AND PLACELESSNESS IN AHMED

### *YERIMA'S HARD GROUND.*

*Sex and blood receive continual social recognition, and horror of sex and blood is continually raised to the grandeur of a poetics, or of a tragic theatre.*

Ahmed Yerima is probably one of the most committed of the third-generation dramatists in Nigeria. He was born in Lagos, and studied theatre at the University of Ife. In the last decade before his present position as Dean of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Yerima has become the quintessential establishment theatre practitioner, serving at different periods as director of the Nigerian National Troupe and Director-General of the National Theatre. Indeed, observing Yerima's directorship of the National Troupe during the pariah years of Nigerian military dictatorship of Generals Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and Sani Abacha (1985-1997), Julius Adeoye draws attention to the regime of artistic censorship of the time to question the limit of independent theatrical expression (1). In an interview with Ngozi Udenwa, Yerima notes the distrust that the involvement with the ministry of culture imposes on his theatre as a result of the popular awareness of how cultural institutions are recruited to provide political legitimacy for unrepentantly undemocratic regimes. He states that, "People questioned my sincerity; some members of the public and journalists from the media felt, "Oh, he is still a mouthpiece of government. He is writing plays appearing to be critical of government, but if you look at Yerima's plays, they are really institutional plays." Nonetheless, he has quite a reputation as a prolific dramatist that spreads across at least thirty-seven plays that he admittedly published, notably, *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *Mojagbe*, *The Sisters*, *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops*, *Ipomu*, *Attahiru*, *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*, and *Yemoja*. The two plays that are the subject

of this chapter, *Hard Ground* and *Ipomu*, are published together with *Little Drops* under the title *Three Plays*, giving the collection a loose label of a trilogy. Indeed, though Yerima makes reference to them as “the trilogy of my Niger Delta plays” (119) in the Author’s note, the plots are no more related than their invocation of the consequences of militarism in the Niger Delta politics.

In his study of Ahmed Yerimah's plays, Julius-Adeoye has invented three discursive categories to understand Yerima’s dramatic approach. These are: historical realist, religious realist and socio-political realist dramas. Observing the fuzzy character of these categories, he writes that the “plays can be discussed as socio-political realist because their thematic preoccupations are current issues within the society” that are premised on “the struggle of the generality of the people”(15). It is precisely on this point of socio-political interface that the two plays I will be discussing in this chapter will be located, an interface that connects Yerima’s drama to subjectivities of Nigeria contemporary history in ways that throw up the Niger Delta question as a national challenge. As Yerima remarks in the interview:

people were paying lip service to the whole issue of the Niger Delta, and I felt this thing will destroy us; it will eat us up. If we do not take time, children will begin to kill their parents, and we are going to find ourselves victims. People were spectators, because people were drawing this line of dichotomy: it is not us, I am Hausa, am Ahmed. It is a Niger Delta thing—it is not us. I am Igbo but I am not Niger Delta. I am Yoruba, and it can never get to us. And as long as we didn’t treat it as a national problem, we are going to have a problem, and that’s why I had to follow it. It became an obsession for me. (“Interview” with Udengwu).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Yerima's plays about the Delta have been faulted in many fronts by mostly critics from the Niger Delta who describe him as lacking understanding of the Niger Delta situation. For instance, Akpos Adesi picks on *Hard Ground* to discuss the representational insularity of the characters in the play, one that "lends credence to the lack of understanding of the Niger Delta situation by most outsiders (people of the Hinterland)" Indeed, he describes the play as a prejudice against the Delta people such that reveal the manner in which some literati "stand aloof in their ivory towers and align themselves to the hegemony regarding burning national issues in their quest for universal verities". Akpos Adesi. "Crisis of Characterization and Setting in Ahmed Yerima’s *Hard Ground*. In Atakpo, U. and Inegbe, S. (eds.). *Making Images, Re- Making Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima*. Lagos: Modern Business Press, 2007:117-123

But how might a struggle conceived by the indigenous people as a regional question be represented and staged in ways that privilege challenges that are national in outlook? How may the boundary of the Niger Delta struggle be re-mapped to reproduce a narrative that spread out into a national setting? In other words, how can one neutralise minority nationalism at the behest of broader national interest? These questions seem to be answered by the play's setting because, unlike the plays we encountered in the previous chapters, the opening scene of *Hard Ground* does not have a designated setting – an exception to what has become the vogue in which the creeks and the littoral character of the region impose a naturalistic setting on the region's theatre. In place of a typical stage tableau that offers insight into a backdrop of implacable geography and landscape, this play simply obliges the scant liner: “[T]he lights come on. It is a sitting room. The mood is *pensive*”. The consistent use of the creeks in the Niger Delta dramata establish setting in ways that represent a sense of poetics of homeland makes this a curious elision. Osita Ezenwanebe has noted this silence on setting in his analysis of the play, describing it as a mark of ambiguity. He raises the following questions:

Why is Yerima silent on the setting? Is it one of the ways he rearranged history? Or is it an attempt to universalise the play? If it is an attempt to universalise the play, then there would have been no need to mention real places like Lagos and Nigeria; a completely fictitious name would have been more appropriate. The fact remains that the setting of the play is ambiguous. (318)

In this discussion, I suggest that this assessment may have glossed over the narrative potential of the landscape and how it can be devised to function as a dramatic setting – a gesture towards the historicisation of space – which inclusion or exclusion signifies a kind of dialectics of narrative. If, as Tim Ingold has stated, that “the landscape tells – or rather – is a story” (“Temporality 52), then how the landscape is theatrically structured, its presence or absence, is an important modality of

narrating a story. Because as the dialogue progresses, we understand the silence to be a way of suggesting the exception of the Niger Delta creeks and camp from where the story has spilled to the sitting room in Lagos. The play opens, therefore, at a site of dramatic reaction, a kind of spatial residue to the main action of the story – a dramatic mechanics I will return to in due course. At this point, it suffices to state that it is a way of de-territorializing the consequences of the struggle, a way of re-mapping the Niger Delta question into larger national considerations.

When the lights come up on the room in Lagos, the play opens with Nimi being quizzed by his parents, Baba and Mama, together with his maternal uncle, Inyingifaa, on his role leading to the massacre of twenty militants in the creeks. While six of the boys in the case have been executed, his uncle has paid some ransom to the Capone and rescued him out of the camp to Lagos – or, in the parlance of militancy, to momentarily buy his life. But the death-threat still hangs over him because several accounts of recent atrocities in the camp are linked to him. His family now needs to clear his name. His uncle Inyingifaa is sore that the tension in the creeks is crippling his gun-toting business – as the creeks have increasingly become more bloodied and securitized. In his defence, Nimi absolves himself of the charges of guilt, insisting that the presence of a mole in the camp is responsible for the series of information leakages about their operations. He explains that the twenty militants were massacred by the soldiers upon their arrival to commence a well-planned pipe-line vandalisation. The plan for the operation has been kept close among the insurgents, so the presence of the soldiers in the oil pipeline installations indicates that a spy, or what they call vulture in the Niger Delta militant underworld, has given them away. Nimi takes responsibility for the incident because they died under his leadership – under his command as the capon. In fact, his leadership started like a personal coup, eager to assume the rein of power after the Capon of their

faction was shot to death in a cross-fire with another group, the Canoe Boys, Nimi made himself Capon before their leader could assign a replacement. Now he needs to justify his decision and position by planning an operation, as he puts it, “to please the Don”. But with the failure of the pipeline operation, this did not happen. In fact, the murder of the boys further strains his relationship with the Don, leading him to quickly plan a face-saving operation. The second operation – the kidnapping of four whitemen – ended in a similar fiasco, because when they got to the oilrig for the raid, policemen have arrived. Now, Nimi is convinced that a vulture is in their midst, and names Father Kingsley, his uncle and Catholic Priest to whom he went for confession before the operation. His suspicion of Father Kingsley is based on the grounds of his girlfriend Pikibo’s information when she visited him in the police detention that the priest visited the camp two days before the raid, and left after their arrest. Though defraying charges of guilt against him, Nimi’s opening lines which unfold the tragic consequences of being rescued rather than face execution with the six members of his group, offer insight into the dark world of the Niger Delta insurgency:

I did not ask anyone to rescue me. Now, I shall be labelled a vulture. And any child with a knife can butcher me, tear me apart, or even hang me by the neck till life drips out of my body like river water, and I shall be left to die a slow and painful death. Ha, Ibinabo! They should have let me die with my friends for the sake of the land. Huum, I smell now, like bad rotten fish, I smell. Tamuno e!..I smell the stench of a coward in the swamp forest of green leaves and black oily soil. They shall smoke me out like they do all vultures. They will track me down, slowly and steadily, I will be chased like a trapped rabbit. They shall fling me to the wolf boys who will spit on me first, like hungry crocodiles, their watery fangs shall await the bitterness of my flesh. Oh God Why did they rescue me? I should have been allowed to die for the glory of the land like my six brothers...the true warriors of the land (11)

Beside the reflection on Nimi’s activity in the creeks, the play tells a filial story – Baba, Mama and their only son, Nimi – in relation to their lives in Niger Delta. Ten years before the story of the

play began, Nimi had been sent back home to the Delta to learn the language and ways of the land and people of the region. Nimi was only eight years, so it is the mother's hope that going to school in the Delta will provide the opportunity for that knowledge. But once in the Delta, Nimi found himself in the enchantment of the landscape, "the deadly swamp, the murky waters, the heavy rain forests. The pockets of little villages separated by salty water. The black oil under the ground" (15). The Delta that he encountered is one that profoundly illustrates the evidence of decay and abandonment. As he puts it, "[T]he school you sent me to was made up of wasteland and poverty" (13). The condition of the landscape therefore provides a certain kind of influence on the indigenes that asserts itself in the course of encounter with the land, that radicalizes them into defenders of the landscape and people of the region. Garuba illustrates the notion of enchantment by citing Max Weber's famous discussion of the modernist evolution and the rise of capitalism in which the phrase "disenchantment of the world" underscores a sense of rationalization ("Exploration" 281). According to Michael Saler, the phrase implies "the removal of magic and meaning from life through the processes of rationalisation, transforming modern existence into, [...as Weber puts it], "an iron cage of reason" (138). But for Garuba, because Weber's theory is based on the experiences of the western society, it cannot sufficiently represent modes of rationalisation that are emerging in third-world countries in which alternative histories of modernities are being constructed (267). Hence, Garuba describes enchantment not in the Weberian sense of displacement, but rather as a continual process of assimilation and appropriation of magical and mystical worldviews. Also arguing about enchantment as a category of nonhuman effect and agency, Jane Bennett writes that "the figure of enchantment points in two directions: the first toward the humans who feel enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that produce effects in human and other bodies."

(xii). This notion of enchantment can enable understanding of the relation between the youth insurgents and the Delta land. To Nimi, it is the encounter with the land that energises the Deltans into the act of militant heroism, hence he perceives this influence as the ultimate form of knowing the ways of the Delta. Thus, when Mama says: “we sent you home to learn the language, to be properly brought up in our ways, not to become a scorpion” (12), she clearly pits education of the Delta youths against the violence that the struggle has produced as solution to the transformation of the region. “School”, she says to Nimi, “I want you to go back to school. With education, you can still fight. That time more people will believe you. People always believe these days that a man who did not go to school should not be believed” (31). Mama is probably invoking the instrumentality of intellectualism, the Saro-Wiwan kind of activism that is framed on what Rob Nixon describes as “savvy sense of [environmental] strategy” (110). Michael Watts (2008) equally draws on the image of Ken Saro-Wiwa to echo this kind of transformation in the struggle when he states that “The pipe-smoking writer equipped with the power of the pen has now been replaced by the figure of the masked militant armed with the ubiquitous Kalashnikov, the typewriter of the illiterate” (“Sour and Sweet” 8). Nimi’s generation of insurgents, therefore, recognise militarism as a distinct and superior form of expressing knowledge of the Delta, that is, a recognition that invests the land with forms of knowledge that implicate one in the process of encounter. To experience the Delta landscape is to bear witness to the history of the violence that is inflicted on it, and be instrumentalised by that history – a shared experience between a landscape and her people. This view draws attention to Basso’s assertion that “[k]nowledge of places is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one’s position in the larger scheme of things, including one’s own community, and securing a confident sense of who one is as a person” (34). As Nimi notes that “[Y]ou cannot grow up in our ways, as you put it, Mama, and not feel what I now feel, unless

you want to hide in the folds of your wrapper, like Baba, and pretend that all is well” (13). In this chapter, I will return to the point of the enchantment of the landscape as a way of thinking through a key motivation for the violent insurgency, and to track the processes through which the creeks and swamps respond towards the multiple conflicts that militarism provokes. But, first, I will consider Nimi’s view about Baba’s sojourn in Lagos as a way of thinking about the Niger Delta struggle from the lens of other places; indeed, as a way of giving the struggle a national perspective. To Nimi, Baba’s residence in Lagos not only expresses indifference to the Niger Delta cause, but also shows a sign of cowardice to the hard experience of living and dying for the land. As the play reduces pace on Nimi’s rescue in the second scene, Mama tells the story of how Baba, then a young army officer, captured her by the stream to make good his boast that “he would rub my body one day in the mud”, an episode she recalls with a mix-feeling of affective violence. She states: “That was exactly what he did. He waited for me by the stream, and in one swift move, he captured me...forcing himself...forcing me...and I took” (30). It took her intervention to save him from her brothers, who planned to drown him in the river, and who compelled him to marry her thereafter. The couple has since moved to Lagos and living in the army barracks where Nimi was born. However, Nimi's encounter with the struggle in the Delta provoked him to examine his father's role in contrast, for example, with the Don. He says to Mama: “The don is god in our part of the country. He feeds and clothes us, he is not like some men that we know, who stay in Lagos and do nothing about the future of their land and children” (16). Although Mama reports about Baba having another woman, Amatu, in the barracks because of her “sickness of grip”, (and much later admitted the shaming factor of the sickness in sending off her only son to the Delta), Baba's sojourn in Lagos holds a more disconcerting impression on Nimi. His actions are therefore driven by what Robert Brustein, in reference to Bertolt Brecht, describes as “double revolt”. In his

influential book *Theatre of Revolt*, Brustein has explained that Brecht's approach to revolt in his theatre is characterised by a dizzying split that vacillates between reason and instinct, producing a sense of doubleness that marks the revolt of his main characters. As he sums it, "Brecht's revolt, in short, remains double" (271). This doubleness inflects Nimi's revolt: one, an unconscious impulse against his father's perceived cowardice, and the other, a militant urge against the powers that render the Delta landscape into a wasteland. As he states in a conversation with MAMA:

MAMA: I don't know you anymore. I am afraid of you. You are becoming like your father. I want my son, not an animal. A hero... my hero, not one set to die in a shallow grave of swampy water. You are all I have, son. Your body is too young and supple for the crabs to have for dinner. Promise me you won't go back, son.

NIMI: Mama, I do not want to be like my father, ever! He is seen as a coward back home. I have had to live out the shame. Son of a coward they would whisper. I bore the humiliation with a sense of pain. Never, Mama. I must go back for Pikibo...and my son. I must go back and bring them here to you like a true father. (30)

The Don's name invokes a tragic memory in Mama's family; as ten years ago, she recalls losing a brother, Soibifaa, through the Don's order of death sentence. Here, Yerima plays on a tragic foil that approximates events around Nimi's own death sentence. He appears to reinvent the murder of Nimi's uncle to trace the circle of insurgency in the family in ways that predictably imagine the fate of Nimi. As Mama recounts; "His blood is still splashed on the doorway of my family house when he was killed trying to run into the family compound. He was butchered like a dog by the same men who played with him as a child and fed with him as an adult" (17). The pain of Soibifaa's tragic death runs through the play, serving to modulate Mama's mood, hence that of the play. Within the context of the play, it functions to interrogate the whole notion of violent militarism as sustainable strategy for the emancipation of the region from petro-imperialism, as Deltans turn

against themselves in the regimes of insurrection happening in the region. Inyigifa puts this view in relief:

...the deaths in the camp worried all of us. The tribesmen in particular. It was as if the swampy forest could not be trusted. And too much money was passing from hand to hand and nothing being achieved. There was no trust anywhere. The air of mistrust was choking, and the toll of dead bodies was mounting. One could smell it, and almost touch it. The stream of blood was beginning to mix with the oily black soil. This was sad. Even the police could not believe their luck. We are supposed to have one common enemy, not flight one another. (25)

In the previous scene, Inyigifaa returns from the Camp to announce that the vulture has been caught and killed at the Don's order. He explains to Nimi how a trap was set for the vulture: "They told the vulture wrong information and the police were waiting as always. They had suspected the vulture all along, but there was a strong cover. They could not touch it. The vulture was a police spy living in the camp with you" (51) In describing the death by hanging of Pikibo, Inyigifaa employs the most banal and inanimate of patois, as if to rid her of the privileges of humanity and reduce her to the inconsequence of bareness and inanity reserved for things: "First they hung *it* by the neck with a string of wire, and cut *its* skin slicing *it* out of the body, piece by piece, so that *it* could feel the pain of all lives *it* had sold out to die". (51). He adds; "The vulture was pregnant. Since the child of the vulture is also a vulture, they cut out the unborn child and beheaded it" (all emphases are mine 52). This description of the murder of Pikibo and the unborn *foetal matter* overwrites that of Sobifaa in highlighting the Niger Delta as the theatre of bloody metaphor in which the Delta subject is vulturised - culminating in the thingsification of the body. In *Hard Ground*, Yerima represents the Delta body as the symptom of *a thing, a matter* that is removed from its corporeal relation with humanity. Once labelled a vulture, the body is transformed into the enemy of the land, and becomes one with the oil corporations. Because as Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas have argued in the book *Where Vultures Feast*, Shell, Texaco and other Big Oil

Corporations operating in the Niger Delta are the vultures that feast on the region's resources. The resources of the region – beginning with palm oil that was the subject of a devastating monopoly of the Royal Niger Company as early as 1900s to crude oil that was discovered in 1956 – have turned the region into a tragic prey for multi-national Anglo-American behemoths. Holding up Royal/Dutch Shell as the primary culprit for the company's history of indifference to territorial concerns during petroleum extraction activities, Nnimmo Bassey writes that “Nothing is allowed to stand in Shell's way: not trees, not swamps, not beast, not man. The people of the Niger Delta have been forced to live with a highly polluted environment: the result of practices that would not be permitted in Europe or the United States” (xi). The authors use the notion of the vulture to convey something metaphorical about the imperial relation that feeds on the God-given resources of the Delta. In the Niger Delta petro-culture, particularly among the insurgents, it has become a buzzword used to label a betrayer of the struggle. Thus, it measures the consequence of betrayal – perceived as an act of negation of militancy – with the destructions reserved for Anglo-American capitalism. At a related level, it appears to assign the betrayer with the status of a collaborator with the oil corporation, making both predators that feed off insatiably on the resource-rich region. This perhaps explains why James Tsaaio states that, “Vultures are predatory birds of prey and are an apt metaphor for death” (79). Taking the Niger Delta context into consideration, he notes that the presence of vultures “anywhere, everywhere necessarily suggests the presence of carrion or carcasses” in which the one so designated “has lost legitimate claim to life and is in death throes” (79). Yerima draws on this metaphor of death to enact a dramatic engagement of judicial paradigm of insurgency, one in which militant members who are found culpable of betraying the struggles are summarily executed. He conceives of militants in a war against themselves that turns the

operations of insurgency into a condition of terror. In this situation, the vulture is a subject position of identification for those condemned to die by their act of betrayal.

This paradigm of exceptionality that is located in the governmentality of the Niger Delta insurgency is significant in thinking about ways in which forms of resistance can assume biopolitical structures. Because as Agamben has noted, “Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being”. (140). Hence, what is at play in the Niger Delta creeks is the instantiation of bare life in a category of resistance. It suggests that in response to state securitization and terror, resistance can develop into what Jean Comaroff describes as “mutating, mimetic forms of violence and counterviolence” (198). Insurgency certainly imitates and clones state disciplinary institutions in its modality of exclusion by deploying technologies of death and life. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben famously reworks Michael Foucault’s thesis that modern politics came into being by the increasing inclusion of natural life into the political realm at the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Identifying the linkage of sovereignty and biopolitics – that is, life at the stake of politics –as well as the observation of sovereign power over life and death in modern politics that contrasts with the Aristotelian antiquity, Agamben underlines Foucault’s enquiry of a critical process in the evolution from the classical to modern times that involves forms of subjectivization. He notes that despite this ostensible pattern of subjectivization in which the individual objectifies “his own self, constituting himself as a subject and, at the same time, binding himself to a power of external control”, Foucault was unable to bring his enquiry to bear on significant case-studies of twentieth century totalitarianism that signal exemplary biopolitical forces. By contrast with Foucault, Agamben locates biopolitics earlier than the incursion of modernity, arguing that since classical time questions

involving determination of life and death have always been implicated in sovereign power. He contends that the significant moment of modern politics is the emergence of the *homo sacer*, the enigmatic figure of the Roman law whose life is reduced to *bare life* on account of a crime. He writes that the structure of the *homo sacer* is framed on the conjunction of two significant elements: “the unpunishability of killing and the exclusion from sacrifice”. This ‘double exception’ of the sovereign decision underlines the *homo sacer*’s exclusion from the representation of the law to the extent that he may be killed with impunity without a seeming sacrificial value. In effect, the *homo sacer* belongs to the sphere of sovereign decision in which laws are suspended to implicate the bare life of that community.

To Agamben, therefore, modern politics occasions legitimate re-emergence of sovereign paradigm of power that is exercised in ways that continually reproduce bare life within the democratic order. It is hence a biopolitical perspective that articulates not only the banality of the sovereign's violence and ‘subjection of life to power over death’ but also, very essentially, the decision that determines the value of that life. Indeed, an important premise of Agamben's argument is the manner in which modernity has led sovereign power to increasingly revert to the state of exception. This development explains a situation in which state of exception becomes the norm as growing number of citizens are reduced to a condition of bare life. In effect, Agamben’s revision of Foucault’s thesis presents an argument of an increasingly normalizing tendency of modern exceptionality in which everyone is a potential *homo sacer*. As he explains:

If it is true that the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree, then the bare life of *homo sacer* concerns us in a special way. Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones

increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*(114-115).

Through Nimi, we have insight into the technique of militancy in which the Capone is the supreme overlord, exerting control over life and death of all insurgent members. He has the power to declare death sentence over any militant found culpable of betrayal. Inyigifaa offers an example of a vulture as such whose death demonstrates the Capone's earlier fatwa and whose death is suggestive of the reach of the Capone's legitimation. Temitope Oriola emphasises the exercise of this power when he notes that insurgency in the Delta has developed "unique laws and regulatory framework" such that "The institutionalized legal system of the Nigerian state as well as its appurtenances like the criminal codes, the police and the courts is suspended, hence not applicable at the creeks" (6). Hence, Nimi discloses that, Capone is: "The head of everything. Everybody. The man. At least he heads our part of the creek. He is the Supreme Commander" (16). That a militant declared a vulture is reduced to a state of bare life and excluded from the protection of the Capone, is underscored in Nimi's statement that: "*Now, I shall be labelled a vulture. And any child with a knife can butcher me, tear me apart, or even hang me by the neck till life drips out of my body like river water, and I shall be left to die a slow and painful death*". This statement aptly fits the condition of the homo sacer, and helps to explain the manner in which the structure of revolt duplicates state machinery of terror. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat remind us that in the history of modern sovereign power, "bare life" needs bodies to manifest itself. These bodies, as Temitope Oriola insists, are spatially produced and territorially delineated and exercised. In considering the rise of competing models of authorities in territories and neighbourhoods that have come under the control of warlords and insurgent heroes, Hansen and Stepputat use the terms "informal sovereignties" to think through repertoires of power that the territories make possible.

He explicates: “Decisions on life, death, punishment, rewards, taxation, and territorial control are made every day by dispensers of justice that owe their standing to their own reputations, the fear and respect they command, and their capacity for violence” (30). The creeks of the Delta, thus, offer a spatial leveraging for the Don's exercise of sovereign power in the camps, investing on the creeks the power that sustains the control and surveillance of the insurgent activities. This contemplation of the creeks as contested site of multiple governmentalities is instrumental in negotiating the different modalities of agency in the Niger Delta struggle.

The representation of Lagos as space/refuge for those disconnected from the landscape of the Niger Delta, “men” who fit the category of what Nimi describes as those “who stay in Lagos and do nothing”, is significant in thinking through the play's dramatic technique. Perhaps it is chiefly important in explaining the elision of the stage direction/setting in the play, offering insight into how to understand Lagos in what Edward Relph, in a different context, phrases as “placelessness”. In his book, *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Relph reflects on ways in which local colourations in the landscapes of pre-industrial societies are being diminished and replaced by a condition of placelessness – described in its broad sense as a place that is empty of geographic significance. In this context, I find it useful to invoke placelessness to describe the spatial insignificance of Lagos in the narrative of the Niger Delta struggle, emphasising its negation of the struggle in the manner it offers space to those outside the narrative history of the insurgency. It is perhaps this consideration that enables Yerima to exclude the stage direction from the entire scenes of the play, an exclusion that conveys the idea of placelessness in the understandably limited sense of dramatic representation<sup>30</sup>, and that expresses the othering of Lagos as a space for those unfit for the Niger

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<sup>30</sup>Here, I also take into account the representation of Lagos as a site that signifies the culture of extravagance that oil boom elicits, what Andrew Apter describes as the “spectacle of culture”, to understand the ambivalent function of Nigerian cities in the Nigerian petro-tragic expressions. Andrew Apter offers an

Delta struggle. Lagos is presented as a site that inhibits the struggle by portraying a population of Niger Delta community – who live in the city – as lacking agency. For example, one of the indigenes explains to Nimi: “Death is not working. The world does not listen to young men in head bands, with AK47 guns, in swamps. They will call them terrorists, guerrilla fighters and both words mean killers, not heroes to them” (40). This form of representation points to a certain kind of aesthetics of place, that is, the dialectics of place and placelessness are dramatically deployed in order to retain focus on the creeks as the site of dramatic action in the Niger Delta tradition of theatre. The playwright explores this aesthetics in ways that reproduce contrastive binaries of war/peace and insurgency/pleasure within the respective spatial interface of the Creeks/Lagos and place/placelessness. It appears that Yerima wishes to invoke the binary to inspire a reflection on action and reaction in the mechanics of drama. One may find this style vividly illustrated when gifts of traditional dresses and cartons of brandy are offered to Nimi by the Lagos residents for his acts of heroism in the camp, highlighting how Yerima traces this spatial boundary along lines of contradictory dualities. As Nimi announces while receiving the gifts: “So this is how it feels. I had forgotten the feel of good wool. It is the opposite of the feel of war. War is harsh, and bitter, it tastes always of death. While the feel of wool and the taste of good brandy is one eternal bliss” (37). This feeling underpins a general sense of refuge that Lagos offers to the Deltans – insurgents and non-insurgents – who escape the tension and wars that occur in the creeks. Throwing more light on Relph Edward's notion of place and placelessness, Mahyar Arefi argues that “while ‘placeness’ embedded in rootedness connotes belonging, envisions fate and destiny and embodies will and volition, placelessness signifies loss of meaning” (183). In this vein, Deltans who live in

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interesting insight to this phenomenon of oil and the spectacular explosion of the city of Lagos in his book, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Also see Karin Barber's essay, “popular reactions to the petro-Naira”, *Readings in African Popular Culture* (1997: 91-98).

Lagos, showing no will for the militant contestations back home in the Delta, appear to have no sense of meaning in the struggle for which the insurgents envision their fate and destiny of a crises-free region. By the same token, the creeks is a giver of meaning to the lives and struggle of those who dwell therein, it offers a sense of purpose that culminates in the militant particularism of the insurgents who draw on the experience of the landscape to imagine new possibilities for the region.

The claim by the Delta youths that the motif of insurgency is the defence of land –a claim that is reinforced by contestations against capitalist expropriation of that land– is a dominant trope in the play. This claim, which brings questions of land into the politics of insurgency, resonates with Bruno Latour's charge for a re-examination of “the link between political ecology and nature” (*Politics of Nature* 9). In order to think about the solidity of this relationship in his book *The Politics of Nature*, Latour reflects on the nature-culture divide that is foundational to western thought, and suggests the need to let go of ecological philosophies or ecosophy that advance the nature-culture divide. In proceeding to think comparatively about non-western cultures, Latour contests anthropological discourses that reproduce complex cultural categories that claim to “established *correspondences* between the order of nature and the social order”. He writes that:

Among these peoples, it was said, nothing happens to the order of the world that does not happen to humans, and vice versa. There is no classification of animals or plants that cannot be observed in the social order, and no social classification that cannot be observed in the divisions between natural beings (44)

Latour further contends that the conception of the correspondence between nature and culture in non-western societies complicates this distinction and, indeed as he posits, “To be unaware of a dichotomy is not at all the same thing as combining two sets into one—still less “getting beyond” the distinction between the two” (45). Such correspondence is common in the ecological

worldviews of the Niger Delta people, often underpinning a sense of harmony and interconnectedness between the people and the natural environment. Nimi's enchantment with the landscape of the Delta illustrates such claims, the magical oneness that the land instantiates at the point of encounter is broadly emphasised. Thus, as Latour implies, this correspondence appears to mask the exclusion of nature in the human and nonhuman collectives in such cultures. It is, for example, difficult to recognise the voice of nature in the separatist and centrifugal agitations that characterise the militant struggles in the Delta. As *Hard Ground* appears to emphasise, not only are the voices of the nonhuman inaudible, to use Latour's words, the insurgency is also increasingly reclining into broader sociopolitical crisis that slips into valorisation of violence. For Nimi, insurgency has become a means to his aspiration to the status of a warlord, as he frequently boasts, "You wait until I meet with the Don, and I too shall become a warlord. Then action! You wait and see me fly" (41). Narrating the story of a political rally to Delta residents in Lagos, Nimi recalls the charged atmosphere of agitation for the revival of Kaiama Declaration, a historical event of December 1998 in which Ijaw youths issued a notice of vacation to the Nigerian government and oil companies by the New Year of 1999. Indeed, Kaiama Declaration is the political precursor to the recent uprisings in the creeks, helping the insurgency locate historical bearing for secessionist agitation. Nimi expresses the terms of the secession in the following discussion:

NIMI: ...Oh, my blood boils, I long for the smell of the swamp.  
Breaking up this country is our next agenda.

ALABO: Which country? This one? This our country?

NIMI: No! No man from this swamp area is from this country. Any man from the swamp who says he is a Nigerian is a traitor! They take our God-given gifts and share unequally and now you want us to share the same birthright with them. Death! To the last of us standing. Death until we get back our freedom. (39)

When *Hard Ground* takes us, then, into the underworld of militancy, exposing the mafia-like hierarchy of the leadership from Don to Capone and the spy-boys in the creeks, Yerima sketches the structure of power that mediates the world of the Delta, suggesting a Latourian postulation of a cultural regime in which the militants assume the role of defender and “sole speaker” of the natural world. Notably, the crisis is framed around the defence of land of the Delta – the mangroves, swamps, tributaries and estuaries – on which their God-given resource is deposited. Nimi speaks of the land in terms of possession to which the militants are enchanted; “Oh, my blood boils, I long for the smell of the swamp” (39). This kind of longing that invokes the senses of the swamp draws attention to the complex relation between the peoples and nature in the Delta. By highlighting the separatist agenda of the militants and the battery of terror that it elicits in the region, the playwright appears to question the concern for the environment in the protocol of insurgency, seemingly advocating for the ecological condition that Latour advocated for: “the collective as an assembly of beings capable of speaking” (Latour *Politics of Nature* 62). In this context, the play proceeds to identify nature in different forms in the creeks and waters to make them speak and, as it was, to bring them to focus from the “regime of invisibility”. Thus, Mama’s fear that Nimi’s body “is too young and supple for the crabs to have for dinner” announces perhaps most strongly the implication of this visibility in ways that explain the vitality of the nonhuman nature as a form of revolt against the tradition of invisibility and silence. The operations of the crabs and crocodiles in the creeks point towards Latour’s diagnosis of how violence can take the place of discussion in the recognition of the non-human as citizens of the common world (62). Indeed, Yerima’s practice of investing agency on the non-human beings in the swamp appears to highlight a sense of ecological carnivores that haunt the militants in ways that are consistent with what Tim Mortorn describes as “spectre of the nonhuman”. This is certainly the case when Nimi speaks about the mode of

punishment that awaits him in the creeks for the perceived act of betrayal – an act for which he is considered a vulture– that will subject him to the predation of the crocodiles. He laments: “the hungry crocodiles, their watery fangs shall await the bitterness of my flesh”; a lamentation that draws attention to a chain of jungle justice in which the crocodile retains the finality of death. This function of crocodiles in the play brings to mind the inauguration of “Operation Crocodile Smiles” in August 2016 by the Muhammadu Buhari-led administration in response to intensified campaign of violence by the militants equally code-named “Operation Crocodile Tears”. These initiatives point to the different ways in which species of the Delta swamps inform systems of violence and counter-violence in the region. The Nigerian Chief of Army Staff, General Tukur Buratai, highlights the situation in an interview thus: “That is what they are (militants) terrorists, they want people to be in tears. We (military) want people to smile. They are just terrorising us” (2016). This is diagnostic of a tradition that recognises the potentials of the crocodiles in judico-political terms, a recognition that is both metaphorical and existential in how it draws interesting attention to the relations of power in the creeks between the militants and the Nigerian military. The play therefore serves to inscribe the nonhuman nature in the space of political insurgency and, in that sense, interrogates the often mainly anthropocentric narrative of militarism in the region. Thus, the play gestures towards ways in which forces of the seascape are co-opted into the performance of revolt. As Nimi explains in the following conversation with Mama, highlighting a sense in which the practice of insurgency underpins the awareness of the nonhuman presence in the game of terror, a presence that threatens the daily rounds of dangerous revolts:

MAMA: I never knew our God also listens to people like you!

NIMI: He listens, mother, but even Him has become disillusioned with our ways. He has, Mama. he did not create all those sufferings. No. God created fine life for us, mama, but a few people say no, we must live a hard life. We are the natives, and they, the well-to-dos. So we have to survive. The deadly swamp, the murky

water, the heavy rain forests. The pockets of little villages separated by salty water. The black oil under the ground. One thing we know is that if we die fighting or accepting the way we find ourselves, it is six feet down on the hard ground that we go. Lika.

MAMA: Lika? That is a soft marshy ground.

NIMI: Yes. The muddy land of periwinkles and mud-skippers that glide every day searching for food such as our flesh when we are buried. So we dig deep, we we bury, and we walk tall when we are alive. In our foolishness, we like to think it is hard ground. To us, at least God made it that way, marshy by firm, and we stand on it. (14-15).

Thus, the play illustrates most clearly the vitality of the land, underscoring a certain sense of paradox that marks the wetland in relation to the physicality of the struggle. Reflecting on “The vulnerability of human bodies in oil cultures” Stephanie LeManager writes that “their endangerment is also a symptom of their capacity to make (and be) energy, of their potential Power” (“Eden if we Dare” 43). The material condition of the deltascape, its endangerment and precarity, also seems symptomatic of power. Yerima appears to highlight the wetland in ways in which the experience of war transforms it into a hard-ground, a position of power. He articulates the contradictions of the wet ontology and, as Nimi describes it, a deltascape that is “marshy but firm”, a soft ethereal surface that is hardened with the several thuds of dying militants. *Hard Ground*, thus, is suggestive of the participation of the marshy surface of the Delta region in the acts of violence. It is the story of hard life of struggle, of war, and resistance in a landscape that is nominally soft, but historically fraught and hard. In Nimi’s words, “God made it that way”, fully invested with the “fine life” that affirms itself in the geography of one of the world largest wetlands. That is, though the Delta is one of the world’s largest wetlands, the experience of war has turned it into a hard terrain. The suggestion that a marshland can become a hard-ground through encounter with insurgency, demonstrates the process through which history alters the landscape. *Hard Ground* emphasizes the consequence of war on the marshy terrain of the Delta –

the implications of the power relations of petro-politics on the landscape of the region. The play demonstrates that the land which the insurgents are bound in defence has become a symbol of death. It signals the reversal of nature from inertia, no longer a docile landscape that is unresponsive to the violence of the human politics. Yerima invites nature to action, to shed off scales of innocence in ways that inscribe it in the survivalist logic of the Delta politics. By so doing, the landscape ceases to be subject of inevitable gross of decay but, rather, a force of predatory periwinkles that feed on dead militants.

### 5.3 THE VIOLENT SEXUALITY AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF SEAWEEDS IN AHMED YERIMA'S *IPOMU*

In her book, *Plants and Empire*, Londa Schiebinger reminds us that “historians, post-colonialists, even historians of science rarely recognise the importance of plants to the processes that form and reform human societies and politics on a global scale” (3). Particularly drawing attention to “a frenzy of plant movements” in the early colonial explorations and “the political struggle surrounding slavery” in which plants are mobilised in many fronts, she considers that plants boast a grand history of heroic proportion in the colonial narratives. Indeed, as cultural and natural artefacts plants occupy the centre of high intrigues in global politics and history. It is, therefore, surprising why “plants seldom figure in the grand narratives of war, peace, or even everyday life in proportion to their importance to humans” (3). Though they both share a belief in the relational epistemology of plants, Londa Schiebinger’s discussion and Anna Tsing’s work on mushroom as “companion species” differ in terms of the analytic processes of restituting the historicity of plants. In both cases, the slave plantations serve as the quintessential site of historical action: while Tsing speaks to the vitality of plants in “the romance connecting people, plants, and places” (148) in slave plantations under the condition of forced labour, Schiebinger describes plants as a “heroic being” deployed as material for resistance, making it a central trope in transatlantic expeditions. Schiebinger focuses on the peacock flower – *Poinciana pulcherrima* – to tell the story of “long eighteenth century” bioprospecting of plants for medicinal knowledge by the colonial powers. In the account, the peacock flower emerges as hero in the particular way in which it forms the basis for withdrawing botanical knowledge from the European gaze, and at the same time using that knowledge for the surreptitious purpose of abortion-inducement among the slave women. As he explains:

[The peacock flower] is not a heroic plant of the historical stature of chocolate, the potato, quinine, coffee, tea, or even rhubarb, much used in the eighteenth century as a laxative. Nonetheless it was a highly political plant, deployed in the struggle against slavery throughout the eighteenth century by slave women who used it to abort offspring who would otherwise be born into bondage. I lavish attention on this plant not because it is exquisitely beautiful and grows in stunningly inviting places, but because a number of naturalists independently identified it as an abortifacient widely used in the West Indies. (4)

One of the tasks that I set out to accomplish in this section is to provide a sense of nonhuman heroism in thinking about the representation of the seed-weeds in the Niger Delta theatre. I take my point of departure in the notion of plant heroism to ask what it entails to represent the seaweeds in the Niger Delta theatre and to what extent their heroic assumptions suggest a dramatic transformation in the anthropocene context? Reading Ahmed Yerima's play, *Ipomu* (2010), I identify the water-hyacinth – *Eichhornia crassipes* – as a heroic plant that mediates and engages with the violent insurgency in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. In *Ipomu*, Yerima brings the dramatic action back to a village in the waters-ways of the Niger Delta. The central character Ipomu, a prince in one of the creek towns, has returned to the village on the mother's summon. However, he is not returning from the war-front in the camp – as the case with Nimi. He is visiting from Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State, one of the three core oil producing states in Nigeria, where the politics of disarmament is being vigorously played out. In *Ipomu*, the several militant groups have been coerced by the government of the Nigerian state to lay down arms and embrace the Amnesty Programme instituted to bring peace to the region. Hence in terms of the temporality of the oil culture in the Delta, *Hard Gound* and *Ipomu* belong in different epochs of the region's contemporary history. In the amnesty era, the protocol of insurgency has shifted from the war-front

in the creeks to the amnesty centres in the capital cities of the oil-producing states where peace is violently commodified and negotiated.

Ipomu's mother, Ebiere, has summoned him after viewing a live streaming of the disarmament program on television. Shown on nation-wide network channels, the program exposes some of the dark sides of the militants that are previously unknown to the public. The sight of the militants as they dance on air while surrendering their guns and bombs, especially Ipomu's, is frightening and unrecognisably devilish, revealing a great deal of alienation between the groups, the people and land they claim to defend and represent. As she states, "I did not recognise you at first. Then you took off your dark glasses, Igege and some wild looking boys, red eyes, too, dancing behind you, like the Devil's Angels themselves...Soaked in fear, I never said a word to your father when I returned. That was when I started to worry" (124). Subsequently haunted by nightmarish images of a family funeral days after the event, Ebiere has offered sacrifices to the river goddess, and much still consulted Izaguna, a seer from the lower creek, to interpret dreams in which she was repeatedly invited to cover the face of a dead family member. As she describes the dead body during the funeral:

EBIERE: It was wrapped up in large water Hyacinth leaves. Very large ones. It was prepared as it was food for the big fishes of the sea. And I was to perform the last rites and duty of a wife. Cover his face, in order to spare him the acts of the sinful world. Igege stood there, unhurt, unharmed, a smile of relief on his face. May the gods forbid. As I refused, a group of elders tried to force me. I fought them with my last strength. It is supposed to be the other way round. I kept crying and struggling, my wrapper falling off at intervals.

IPOMU: Who, Mama.

EBIERE: Your father's face appeared at first. Then yours, and that of a little child. In flashes, they came one after the other. His, yours and the little child...I do not know. I screamed and fainted! How can one dead body have three faces I kept asking myself? But it

is you I fear for...you my son! Oh by the gods, I am confused,  
son. (125)

Being the prince and heir-apparent to the Kingdom, Ipomu has a traditional entitlement of a deputy, described as “the Prince’s shadow”. Ipomu describes the responsibility of this traditional office thus: “He is to walk with me. Eat with me, and if and when possible, die with me”. Ebieri has selected her sister’s son, Igege, for this role which requires him to tie a “sacred bead on his left hand and left foot”, a mark of bondsman-ship to the fate and destiny of the prince. Reflecting on the role during the insurgency, and also in the post-insurgency period of the disarmament programme, Ipomu admits that Igege has carried his task “with uncanny pride even in the city”. This traditionally sanctioned bond between the two is illustrated in Ipomu’s account of their journey to the village, a journey embarked upon through the waters at the inclement season of the tide. The account provides a narrative interest that appears to synthesize their bond with the operations of the river. Describing the dirty swamp in which they are “soaked up, [like] swollen water log”, causing leeches to clamp over their dirty body, Ipomu explains how they “walked in the oily stained river, the oil river mixed with shreds, carcasses of dead fish...and burnt crayfish half fried with the river oil and the basking heat from the sun” (121). In the process, the fan blade of their speedboat gets entangled by the river weeds. Igege takes charge of pulling off the water hyacinth, tying the rope of the speedboat on his waist in order to free the grip on the machine. As Ipomu elaborates Igege’s energy in that task in dramatic terms; “we pulled with our last breath, until Igege panting, his broad shoulder collapsing”, and as if “inspired by the water spirit”. It is, indeed, tempting to understand the entanglement of the sea-weeds as a way of explaining how the two characters are bonded with a sacred bead.

Thus, Ebieri’s nightmares appear to pit her against this tradition, as she now considers Igege a bad influence on the son’s continual involvement with militarism. Following Izaguna’s revelation that

the dreams portend the death of Ipomu, Ebiere pleads with her son not to return to the dangerous game of insurgency. Thenshe adds: “And don’t let Igege persuade you.He was in my dream...jeering...laughing at my painful loss...while I rolled on the floor, soaked in tears and clay mud...he spread his teeth and jeered. I swear, I shall cut the damn sacred breads that bind him as your shadow” (125-126).

But Ebiere’s life seems to have many more complications. The husband – the king of the creek town where the play is set –has taken a second, younger wife, leaving her lonely and abandoned. She speaks of herself in that condition as “a framed doll fit only to carry his beaded crown at the New Year festival”. She draws attention to the emptiness of her ceremonial role as a queen, and juxtaposes it with the fact of being left, as she compares it, like a wall gecko, “to pick little flies and climb from wall to wall unperturbed” (123). Then she introduces the idea of sexuality that will become a dominant trope in the play, when she asks: “when last did I hear the grunt of love or that of a man? Now it is twilight and I long for that grunt”. Indeed, her complaints chiefly draw from her son’s dangerous game of insurgency, and loss of husband to a younger woman. And when Ebiere speaks about her husband, it is often to evoke a love that is nurtured by the culture of the sea, one that is reminiscent of Alu and Makuri in Clark-Bekederemo’s *The Raft*, as she recalls: “when he was nothing but a common boat builder, and I a common fish seller, we found happiness in our simple nothingness. The trappings of royalty confused us” (144). But such experience gives expression to the creeks as slippery social spaces in which the trope of loss figure centrally.

The politics of the amnesty programme is beautifully rendered in the play, forming an important framing to the petro-cultural moment that the play attempts to capture, a moment that designates a political option of bringing lasting peace in the region. Adegboyega Ajayi and Adesola Adesote

argue that the amnesty programme is one in the long chain of reactive options that the Nigerian state has employed to placate the restive youths of the region. Tracing these measures to the recommendation of the 1958 Sir Willink Commission which, inter alia, acknowledges the distinct development needs of those ‘who live in creeks and swamps of the Niger Delta’, they note the rather palpable strategy that successive regimes have adopted since the discovery of oil to undermine the economic and political interests of the region, culminating in the youth stepping up in “their degree of restiveness”. This attempt is indicative of the failure of the securisation measure of the previous regimes in managing the crisis in the region which inadvertently aggravated the disruptive activities of the militants (506). Putting the history of the programme in perspective, Ugor makes a similar point and writes that:

it had become apparent that the so-called ‘military option’, brutally waged by the Joint Military Task Force (JTF), a combined army, navy, air-force and police team created to police the region, was increasingly proving insufficient/inefficient for curbing violence and restoring industrial peace in the Delta. Thus, on 25 June 2009 the late Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, then President of Nigeria, announced ‘an unconditional pardon to all persons who directly or indirectly participated in the commission of offences associated with militant activities in the Niger Delta’ Accordingly, all militants were to disarm willingly, demobilize from their bush camps and submit their entire weaponry to designated centres in the five core oil-producing states in the region....But what has happened so far...is the replacement of one kind of economy, ‘the economy of violence’ with ‘the economy of peace’, where the Nigerian state and transnational oil corporations have literally bought peace in the Delta region in order to ensure smooth exploration and production of crude products. (188)

*Ipomu* depicts this “economy of peace” in a way that questions the terms of the amnesty agreement from both sides of the divide, turning the subject of peace into a trade-off commodity in which the stock of violence is continually quoted. Ebiere, for example, suspects that the program is a trap for the militants to surrender their arms and, thereafter, get arrested and pushed into “fast running confluence” to die. She notes that the women of the community are worried because after their

sons are shown on television posing for the camera, “they have not returned...and no one has seen them”. Though Igege explains that the boys have been sent to different training schools, the true situation, as he reports to Ipomu in the following scene, is that it is fraught with insincere promises culminating in the lead negotiator staging an attack on the Joint Task Force (JTF) because “the boys were not taken care of as promised in the agreement of the amnesty”. Ipomu is incensed with the Leader: “He tells us to surrender...We do, and they promise us money...and he goes back to plan an offensive without the field boys. What does he want? More money? I will kill someone with my bare hands if I discover I was cheated” (132). Ipomu’s anger is directed, first at the Leader for starting a post-amnesty aggression when he had disbanded his fighters; then, at the disorderly administration of the compensation. Indeed, what Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1999) describe as “the political instrumentalisation of disorder” aptly captures instance in the play where war-lords who declined the amnesty agreement are incorporated in the scheme of payment. Through the play, Yerima appears to signpost the condition of charged monetisation that underwrites the amnesty programme, one that affirms the political economy of peace. This is exemplified in the dialogue between Ipomu and Igege:

IPOMU: ...How about my money? My settlement fee...that’s my issue...who settles me? Before I start my own private...? Who?

IGEGER: The Crab.

IPOMU: The crab...what kind of game are they playing? The crab never surrendered. How come our money is with him? We played their game, didn’t we? We disarmed the boys. They brought television to take pictures and broke my mother’s heart. Then we went to Obobra for reintegration. The processing, passport photographs and questions. More questions....What dreams do you have for your people? Dreams are for those who can afford to sleep, I told them. A hungry man, scared, unsure when death will come does not sleep... (131)

The subplot around Preye, the boatman, calls to question the activities of the militants prior to the declaration of amnesty. For thirty years, he made a living ferrying guns and ammunitions across the

creeks for militants. Thus, he provides insight into the kind of insurgencies prevalent in the Delta prior to the declaration of amnesty. As the boatman recalls his first encounter with Prince Ipomu and his gang during a kidnap operation in the heyday of insurgency: “They told me they were workers of an oil rig taking their new whiteman on an inspection tour of the creeks, not knowing their own boat had been ambushed by government soldiers”. In the cross-fire that occurred, all the soldiers were massacred. Suspecting complicity, Ipomu and ‘his men’ visited the boatman three days after the event and murdered his wife and two sons. The event remains a tragic testimony of the wars that happen in the creeks, a bitter experience which blame he takes as the hazard of a dangerous duty. In the course of the play, he has taken another wife who is now pregnant, intent to rebuild the family in the atmosphere of peace that the amnesty offers. It is a new phase of life that must account for the failure of the past. As he said, “I want to atone for their deaths by being with this new son and his mother, till life departs from my body” (155). But in causing Ipomu and the boatman to meet again, the playwright sketches an encounter that foregrounds the process of atonement: compelled by the mother's nightmares of family death, Ipomu desperately wishes to travel to Yenagoa where his woman, Sinivie, is due for delivery. Preye turns out to be the boatman that Ipomu's uncle recommended to ferry him to the city, locking them in the dramatic juxtaposition of fate and judgement. As Ipomu puts it, “We are two of a kind. I too leave for the city to see my woman give birth to our first son, so I must keep to the time we have agreed” (156). But the trip didn't happen because both women delivered earlier than scheduled: Sinivie, “a stillbirth”, “a wicked and strong child, [who] came to the world tearing and pulling along the womb of his mother”; and Preye's wife, “two bouncy hungry boys” that “cried like a chorus of bullfrogs”. Thus, Ipomu's desire for atonement may be read as deriving from a consciousness of enlightenment about the tragic consequences of war, and of guilt in his involvement with

insurgency. Indeed, Yerima seems to suggest that the operation of the militants in the creeks is an anti-heroic enactment of human destruction. The play, therefore, is an appropriated dramatisation of an anti-hero, a paradigmatic illustration of contemporary drama that marks the condition of evil and guilt in ways that, as Esther Merle Jackson points out, questions the “symbol of humanity”. Merle Jackson further explains that:

The enlightenment which the anti-hero experiences is not the perception of the exaltation of man; it is rather, a new consciousness, the development of sympathy for the innate complexity of the human condition. What the anti-hero comes to understand is his own culpability, his complicity in the evil which is native to the world, and most important, his responsibility to his fellow man. Heroism, knowledge, and understanding for the anti-hero, all, must lead to the acknowledgement of guilt.(98)

Merle writes that the history of western thought from Freud, Darwin and Marx to Schopenhauer and Bergson developed along lines of social conflicts and shifting realities that are incongruous with the classic image of man. This climate of thought underwrites the “disintegration of the heroic image of man” (95) that dominates the tradition of western (now mostly universal) theatre tradition. Yerima’s plays about the Delta find artistic ferment in the long tradition of theatre’s awareness of human propensity for self-destruction, one that signals effort towards the post-human perspective. In this vein, *Ipomu* orchestrates a shift to planetary concerns in which man is consigned to the inconsequence of an anti-heroic category. What may be argued, therefore, is that the question of turning away focus from human exceptionalist heroism that characterises the disposition of modern drama significantly anticipates posthumanist claims.

Crucially, *Ipomu*’s visit to his town coincides with the tragic news of his father’s sickness. Three months ago, the king, suffered a bout of stroke, what the villagers describe as “a swipe of the wicked strike of aging”, leaving him in a condition of living-dead, in which he can longer perform

his royal function. Ipomu learns that a woman, his father's new and younger wife, is responsible for the ailment which judgment duty imposes on him in his capacity as the heir apparent. His decline to pass the judgment may be read as a statement of unpreparedness for the royal duty. He states that, “[M]y father, at this age dug his own grave, and now you place the weight of his act upon my innocent head...Yet it will be nice to see the maiden who tamed a once wild lion until he became a common docile sheep grazing at the valley of death”. Ipomu further learns that the king will remain in this condition, because he made a pact with life to live forever, “dead after living out the time god gave him on earth, but will continue to live until he rots, knowing no peace” (138). But for this pact, it is believed, the king would not have survived that particular kind of stroke which, according to the chief priest of the community, “a milder one will have killed an elephant”. The community therefore awaits Ipomu to resolve the conundrum, by performing one of two functions – both of which constitute the ritual protocol that can terminate the king’s pact with life. He must either bring down the sacred calabash in which the ritual pact is stored, or mate with the father’s new wife to give the community a son. Assured that the woman was untouched by his father in the course of their marriage, and of the biotechnical certainty in the ritual production of a male successor, Ipomu chooses the later in order to return to militarism in the city, a choice he considers much less involving than the option of terminating his father’s life. To the effect of choosing the option of mating with the young queen, Yerima offers insight into a certain kind of seductive violence that is inflicted on the king, a way of incorporating violence into the structure of sensuality such that invokes Batteille Georges’s assertion that “[E]roticism opens the way to death.” (24). The connection between death and eroticism underscores Bikiya’s account of the king’s near-death stroke:

BIKIYA: All I did was to wear a silk which clung to the curve of my  
dark well, oiled skin. The flimsy jumpy night dress stretched

and wrapped itself round my body, threatening each second to drop off my shoulder. His eyes wide open, his mouth agape, his dry old fingers, shaking, eager, dying to undress and touch me. I saw saliva form in his mouth, his eyes full of lust rolled from one edge to another. Then suddenly, he let out a yell, and stood there stupefied like an effigy of stone. From then on, everything went dead, except his breath, I ran out screaming for help. I have had not had courage to see him after that night.

IPOMU: He remains the way you left him. Only this time, he is seated. He has a sad smile in his face. I think he still sees you...that image covered in silk waiting to be devoured by a spent Lion. I assure you that I shall be different. (149)

Bikiya's description of the King's response to her naked body is important in considering the notion of sensual violence in the play, and in anatomising the body as an agentic mode of tragic paradox. Considering the body's encounter with sensual violence, Marcel Henaff (1999) notes that "[T]he body is finally reduced to its "natural state" ...its barest materiality: a mass of flesh, a network of nerves, an expanse of skin from which torture, for the sake of [erotic] pleasure, extracts the last vital movements" (166). This material condition of the body explicates the King's tragic state, and highlights how he is reduced to a liminal space of living-dead. As Ipomu puts it, "He is alive and dead...dead and alive. Neither here nor there...holding nothing. Staring at everything and seeing nothing" (114). In one scene, Ebriere, ostensibly pained by loss of husband to a younger queen, complains about Bikiya's body in ways that invoke the violence of warfare: "I knew that young witch will kill him when I saw her protrude everything that should have been covered like spears and daggers. Did she stab him? Serves him right" (143). Paying attention to the King's pact with life, however, Yerima appears to present the specimen of a particular breed of life that proposes to resist the circle of natural existence, articulating a life that defies the finality of death. It is therefore a life that paradoxically cannot be killed by violence. Indeed, in the liminal space in which the king is trapped, he becomes insulated from the libidinal violence of sexuality. The pact with life subverts death and makes the life an eternal subject of the existence.

In considering the intersection of sensual and political violence that are reproduced in the Delta, the play appears to privilege what Amber Murray (2015) describes as “multiple forms of structural violence [that] converge within the same landscapes and lifescapes” (15), while underscoring the manner in which violence is mediated and narrated. The play's focus on water hyacinth is central to this suggestion, particularly the sense in which the factor of time is mobilised to mediate the agency of the natural world. “Ipomu” means the water hyacinth as the playwright discloses in an interview with Ngozi Udengwu, designating the centrality of the aquatic plant in the narrative, and making the nonhuman nature visible in the multiple layers of the violence that the play illustrates. When Ebere complains to Ipomu about having sleepless nights because of the endless cries of the bullfrogs, she draws attention to how the water hyacinth provides refuge for the bullfrogs: “once the water Hyacinth is spread all over the river, they spread too. Using the leaves as camouflage, waiting for the innocent fingerlings, and in their joy for a good meal...buuu...buoo...buuu...buoo. I could not sleep a wink because of those good for nothing wretched things” (122). As a child, Ipomu recalls Ebere stating that the songs signify the “bullfrog's mating season”, designating sensual connectivity among the more-than-human species. So, too, do the songs connect with the human community. In the early period of marriage with Ipomu's father, it served to stimulate moments for mating. It is perhaps this sense of sexuality that best explains Ebere's restless nights, as she reflects: “now it is my twilight and I long for that grunt” (123). Tsing has described this as a way of “reintensifying plant dependencies and forcing fertility” (148) in interspecies relations of sexuality. This complex sexual ecology casts a penetrating light on the many ways in which sea-plants can trigger a chain of social and political relations, enabling us to come to terms with how material things can function as “actants”, as Bruno Latour terms it, an invitation to invest historical properties on the nonhuman species that inhabit the Delta landscape.

This ecological relation is consistent with what Jane Bennett describes as “vital materiality” in which the power of things, “not only [to] impede or block the will and designs of humans but also [to] act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Bennet’s analysis engages with the nonhuman forces in ways that they alter the human bodies: highlighting “the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the *us* and the *it* slip-slide into each other” (emphasis mine 4). This fact speaks to the phenomenon of the nonhuman as vital player in public politics, one that subverts the modernist habit that describes them in passive and inert terms. When Bennet speaks of the figure of an acutely inanimate matter posing impediment to the emergence of sustainable modes of ecology, she points to the need for human awareness of the “complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies” in the common world that requires “wiser interventions”. The word, “actant”, coined by Bruno Latour from semiotics, enriches the discourse of materiality with emphasis on the *relational* as source of action – a notion that illuminates the agency of the nonhuman. In this sense, Yerima sought to give “the force of things more due” (viii), privileging the nonhuman entities in the creeks (bullfrogs, water hyacinth, swampy terrain) in the process of enacting material agency. Owain Jones and Paul Cloke provide four basic insights into particular ways trees and plants exercise agency that I find useful in understanding the water hyacinth in *Ipomu*:

- (1). *Agency as routine action*: trees are associated with a series of ongoing processes of existence which enable them to grow, reproduce, bear fruit, spread, colonise and so on [...]
- (2). *Agency as transformative action*: trees can be seen to make new directions and formations [...] Trees can act autonomously in seeding themselves and growing in unexpected places and in unexpected forms and when remixed with the social aspect [...]
- (3). *Agency as purposive action*: intentionality is a key threshold by which agency is often limited to the social realm. Indeed, ascribing intentionality to non-human agents can lead to dangerous forms of reductionist essentialism. However, nonhumans do exercise a kind of purposive agency, for example, in the way that trees are able to influence future courses of action; their DNA clearly entertains a plan

which purposes particular forms of being and becoming – an implicit blueprint with instructions for its construction and physiological functioning [...] (4). *Agency as non-reflexive action*: the socio-ecological world exhibits significant creativity and creative potentials and non-agents such as trees participate fully in creative being and becoming. In particular, trees have a capacity to engender affective and emotional responses from the humans who dwell amongst them – to contribute to the haunting of place via exchanges between the visible present and the starkly absent in the multiple and incomplete becoming of agency. (80)

Jone's and Cloke's paradigm is significant in how it captures notions of growth, reproduction and the tendency for plants to spread, autonomously seeding themselves to affirm a sense of indwelling and rootedness. In *Ipomu*, the mode of reproduction of the water hyacinth in the swamps, which determines the schedule of its seasonal spread, inexorably inflects movements of the militants in the creeks. Through *Ipomu*'s account of the journey to the village we have insight into the play's exploration of the seaweed's seedling and “enmeshment” with other entities in the Niger Delta rivers. Within this context, the water hyacinth and other seaweeds proliferate, constituting navigational threat to human movements as well as providing space for the colony of aquatic animals, like the bullfrogs and fingerlings. *Ipomu*'s and *Igege*'s movements in the creeks are planned within the course of the inflow and outflow of the water-hyacinth – navigating the creeks only during the periodic outflow of the seaweeds. When *Ebiere* pleaded with *Ipomu* against returning to the city because of the dangerous turn of insurgency, his promise figures the consideration of the seaweeds: “I shall be here until the water hyacinth clears, and there is a smile on your face again” (127). *Ebiere*'s awareness of this seasonal trend enables her to employ it in keeping her son from leaving the creeks: “I have him trapped here at last. He will not leave until the water hyacinth clears. Wait a minute. Today is the third day. The water hyacinth only covers the river for six days. A trick. A childish trick!”. Indeed, *Ipomu*'s deployment of the seasonal knowledge of the water hyacinth hints at a certain sense in which phrases of everyday life are

marked by temporalities of nature, what Jones and Clark-Bekederemo describe as “corresponding life rhythms of animals and plants”. In *Ipomu*, the rhythm of life between the water hyacinth and the Niger Delta community often describes a kind of interaction. That is, it reveals awareness of the self-danger that movements against the tide provoke. Thus when, resulting from the intrigues of the amnesty payment, Ipomu dispatches Igege to the Amnesty Office in the city of Yenagoa, they both are fully aware of the risk in crossing the river during the outflow of the water hyacinth. Hence Igege’s exclamation, “Now? My prince...I thought I should go tomorrow when the hyacinth have cleared a little...”. Ipomu’s reply affirms this danger even further, “Hear yourself talk like a child. I don’t care how you waddle through. Pull the leaves with your hands if possible. The Leader wants to cover my eyes with cotton, and you ask me to sit down and remain a fool. Just go!” (132-133). Perhaps Yerima sought to underscore the political significance of the water hyacinth in how it reorders the political struggle and resistance through the processes in which time and place are imposed on the region’s involvement in activism. In many ways, therefore, the spread of the water hyacinth is a significant factor in the political ecology of the Niger Delta people, representing performative moments in the manner insurgency is spatially engaged and contested. Indeed, the play engages with this mode of contestations to reflect on the quality of the intervention that the water-hyacinth provides, calling into question what Paul Shepard terms “the silent autograph of plants”, to interrogate its role as a certain kind of myth or irrationality of the Delta people. This is discernible in the dialogue between Ipomu and Preye as they plan their trip across the river to the capital city:

IPOMU: I want to get to Yenagoa. I must be in Port by the time the day is half gone. I want a Boatman who is not intimidated by the myth of the water hyacinth. Are you that man?

PREYE: Yes, my prince, but we too must dwell on the myth. We must leave early. The water hyacinth has taken over the whole river.

Using a speedboat could be suicidal. The leaves could tie the propeller of the machine and we could go for miles, and find nothing but a covered mass of water with the large leaves. Four in the morning will be best time to leave, even before the leaves spread and begin to move with the morning tide. (153)

The manner in which Preye describes the movement of the seaweeds, giving credence to Jone's and Cloke's assertion that "trees can themselves be seen to be "on the move" ("Non-Human Agencies" 87), appears to "dwell on the myth" in ways that rationalise it, that hold the myth up as an important aspect of negotiating the political reality of living and dwelling with the seaweeds. As Ipomu credits him, "you speak like a man who knows his river". Yet, in spite of knowing the rivers and creeks "like the back of his hand", the play orchestrates the danger of running into "government soldiers" who parade the waters in search of militants and gun traffickers. It seems that Yerima presents the story of Preye in order to recognise multiple perspectives of danger in the Niger river – and, in so doing, acknowledges the threat of the water hyacinth in eco/political terms. To Preye, narrative of the water hyacinth is not merely a myth or some kind of irrational narrative, but, in an important sense, a representation of what the Brazilian anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, describes as "indigenous theory according to which the different sorts of persons - human and nonhuman (animals, spirits, the dead, denizens of other cosmic layers, plants, occasionally even objects and artifacts) - apprehend reality from distinct points of view" ("Exchanging Perspectives" 466). In bringing the reflections and narratives of the water hyacinth as a form of indigenous theory and philosophy into focus with youth militarism, Yerima re-imagines the perspective of environmentalism in the region. The play therefore suggests that insurgent activities in the Delta creeks are exposed not only to state repression, but are also mediated by the agentic functions of the seaweeds. Thus, in inscribing plants and other life-forms in articulating ideas of social and political agency, the playwright tends to critique the monopoly of the human subject in the account of insurgency. This fact resonates with what Cloke and Jones

describe as “the desire to take nonhuman agency seriously” (“Turning in the graveyard” 314) so as to advance insight into a broad context of relational possibilities of all the actors in the Niger Delta conflicts.

The invocation of the water hyacinth, thus, is instrumental in articulating ideas of social and political agency in ways that express or, perhaps, reinforce a relational ontology of the Delta people. One of the most obvious of these relationalities is the play's title, *Ipomu*, which is a reference to the realities of the plant and the central character, each associatively linked to claims of resilience and immortality. It echoes what Viveiros de Castro describes as: “a single meaning and multiple referents” (3). To be sure, he coins the term “multinaturalism” to explain an ontological category in which “human as well as nonhuman, [are] each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities”. (“Perspectival Anthropology” 6). Viewed from this context, the play invites us to understand how the multiple natures of humans and seaweeds – *Ipomu* and the water hyacinth (*Ipomu*) - are invested with same volitional reality. In so doing, it provides a useful way of responding to what Bennett’s terms “thinking beyond the life-matter binary” by proposing “a representative unity” of man and plant. *Ipomu* announces this unity in a conversation with Ebieri while denying the seer’s prophesy of death:

And I want to say this, Izaguna lied... I cannot die...neither can my father. Not him! We are the plantain stem, when you cut us...we wait for a while and spout anew. Wipe your tears, Mother, remember the meaning of my name? *Ipomu, the water hyacinth*. We never die, we move with the stream, floating from one river to another, from one season to another. (127)

Viveiros de Castro proposes the term “original state of nondifferentiation” (“Exchanging Perspectives” 464) to explain the condition of this relational unity in the Amerindian mythology. He notes that indigenous Amazonian myths often tell stories of “beings whose form, name, and

behaviour inextricably mix human and animal attributes in a common context of intercommunicability”(464). In the most part, the myths seem to reproduce a kind of human-nonhuman dichotomy that is analogous to the nature-culture version of western modernity, yet markedly different in the evolutionary process that occasions a crucial separation of animality from humanity. As he puts it: “the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity...the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans. Humans are those who continue as they have always been” (465). This idea of “spiritual unity and corporeal diversity” as Viveiro de Castro describes it, is useful as a way of understanding the relation between the “water hyacinth” (plant) and Ipomu (human). Reading Ipomu’s claim above, the play seems to suggest a reverse trajectory of human transformation from the riverine plant species – while retaining the shared immunity to destruction and death, an attribute that runs in the lineage of the royal family. Yerima thus attempts to orchestrate a narrative that synthesizes the sea plant and the human nature as a form of multiple ontologies in the Delta, demonstrating how perceptions of resilience and deathlessness frame the hubris of the Niger Delta militias. In fact, the central myth of the waterhyacinth that Yerima advances in this play, its undying, immortal nature as it spreads throughout the coast of River Niger, is split between the plant and the human nature of the royal bloodline. Ipomu’s hubris in challenging death – which also reflects in his father’s metaphysical suspension of death when it is reported that the king made a pact with life and hence cannot be killed by a life-threatening stroke that he suffered – is significant in how it serves to provide insight not only into the lifescape of Ipomu’s family, but also the landscape of the seaweeds. Indeed, I read this as signalling a dramatic transformation that functions to reconstitute the seaweeds as the central protagonist of the play.

Thus, Ipomu's multinaturalist claim offers an interesting starting-point for thinking about the plant-human relation that preoccupies the playwright's imagination of the Delta. It draws out questions that highlight the "ontological order" in how the nonhuman and the human subjects are associatively organised and apprehended in relation to the sociocultural and political experiences in the Delta. How might the ontological transformation implicit in the relation facilitate a theatrical milieu towards which Yerima configures the dramatic protagonist of the play? Jane Bennett has argued vehemently that philosophical reflections on vital materiality of nonhuman systems also have sustainable political possibilities – the manner in which political events change in relation to the recognition of the vitality of matter. Although acknowledging Bruno Latour's coinage of the word 'actant' – "a source of action" that is attributable to either human or nonhuman – she argues that the process of nonhuman vitality is premised on "distributive agency". She theorises "distributive agency" as that which "does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect". As she clarifies: "There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits"(32). The manner in which the seaplants and the humans share in existential principles and condition is useful in thinking about distributive agency. It is also indicative of the play's enactment of the contours of human-nonhuman relation in ways in which they are ontologically bound. But Ipomu's comparison of his lineage with the plantain stem, one that emphasises the stem's material immortality –as well as the identity of the royal lineage that is extracted from the DNA of the water-hyacinth –privileges the plants as the subject on which human action is rooted. I suggest that the trajectory of human transformation is one that makes the seaweeds the source of the relational force, what Robert Pogue Harrison in a different context terms "the original nature in ourselves"(10). In other words, Yerima draws on the attributes of the water-hyacinth to orchestrate a dramatic hero whose

resilience and claims of immortality derives from the significations of the sea-weeds. He presents the sea-weeds as the natural protagonist, and mobilises it as such in form of dramatic mechanics that feed into the narrative of the play. To be sure, in co-opting the sea-weeds in order to construct a protagonist and hero of the Delta conflict, Yerima advances a quintessential eco-drama in which the sea-plant is privileged. He locates the plant as the source of the tragic action, identifying it as the basis of the human effect. Hence, by eco-drama, I refer to the planetary presence of the plants in the orchestration of the play's tragic paradigm, how the world of plants is filtered through anthropomorphic possibilities in the conception of the play's protagonist force. In a sense, Yerima mobilises the tragic view of drama to probe the processes of agential transformation, to interrogate the dominant notion of human exceptionalism on which the anthropocene epoch is framed. Dipesh Chakrabarty and Elizabeth Deloughrey have noted that the worlds that the anthropocene is producing "are increasingly [becoming] spaces of transformation" (Deloughrey 42), one that encourages a rethinking of the anthropocentric bias that is associated with it. Yerima forges this transformation in a way that acknowledges the water-hyacinth as the source of the tragic action, rather than the human actants. He brings drama to that space of transformation – what Dipesh Chakrabarty terms "planetary conjuncture" (199) – to instantiate an eco/environmental drama in which the planetary concerns constitute the basis of heroism in the Delta insurgency. Indeed, Dipesh Chakrabarty, discussing about how the turn of the anthropocene occasions a gap between climate issues and humanistic focus, sues for some kind of "overlapping process" (2002). If, as broadly discussed, the anthropocene is the epoch of human exceptionalism in the planetary change that is understood in geologic terms, *Ipomu* orchestrates an interesting case for this transformation. Viewed from the lens of drama, the climate of thinking has shifted completely to the awareness of human anti-heroic destruction of the universe, bringing to the fore

a new planetary order of things. Because as Robert Baker-White has noted, “nature are hardly ever innocent of particular forms of interest, and when modern drama dethrones humanity, significant shifts occur in that drama’s political and social landscape” (33). William Rucckert makes a similar point when he explains that:

in partial knowledge or often in total ignorance (the basic postulate of ecology and tragedy is that humans precipitate tragic consequences by acting either in ignorance of or without properly understanding the true consequences of their actions), we are violating the laws of nature, and the retribution from the biosphere will be more terrible than any inflicted on humans by the gods. In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing.(113)

The tragic ecology that Yerima presents is one that co-opts the crocodiles and sea plants as characters in the Niger Delta crises. He questions human history by way of privileging the non-human species in the Delta creeks, by way of asserting the agency of the plants, and by inputting that agency with a vital force in the collective efforts of the struggles. It seems that in this context, the human agency only mirrors that of the nonhuman, and that the potential of the human agency is dependent on the energy of the natural environment of the Delta. As Esther Merle Jackson notes, the tradition of anti-heroism in contemporary drama is precipitated by developments that occasioned shifts in the image of man, world views that question the validity of human place in history. To be sure, the anthropocene is the age of man, but it is man as the agent of planetary negation, a reversal of the order things; an anti-hero. In *Ipomu*, nature manifests in the human character, serving to offer a shift that appropriately illustrates a paradigm of an anti-hero, one that privileges the potential of the sea-weeds as a way of turning away from the human hero.

## CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, this chapter looks at the landscape of the Niger Delta differently from the perspective of questions of environmental decay and degradation. It re-examines the landscape in how it frames a particular kind of power formation, one that privileges a sense of revolt of the nonhuman category in the delta struggle, highlighting ways in which the sea-weeds and other species in the delta swamps are drawn into the different fronts of the insurgency. To that effect, the chapter attempts to revalue the narrative of insurgency that is primarily based on anthropocentric history, bringing to the fore ways in which the struggle is spatially mediated, as well as drawing attention to how nonhuman species exercise judicial function in the game of insurgency. To put it perceptively, if the previous chapter deals with what happened to the natural environment of the Delta, this chapter highlights how the environment reacts: the implication is the affirmation of the centrality and ubiquity of the creeks and material environment in the theatrical representation of the Delta.

In *Hard Ground*, Yerima takes us through the modalities of the violence and counter-violence that petro-politics provokes, and offers insight into how each paradigm of violence reproduces complicities of terror that share similar operational structures such that are geographically and spatially implicated. Consequently, he delineates the narrative in ways that reflect notions of place and placelessness, action and reaction; a kind of boundary-making that enables him to pay attention to the creeks as an emotive geography of insurgency. It is within the boundary of this swampy geography that non-human species are figured to perform judicial functions in ways that stem from their *othering* in the protocol of insurgency, projecting them into position of power and agency. In *Ipomu*, the playwright highlights ways in which the sea-weeds are reproduced theatrically in multiples forms of nature, appearing both as human and nonhuman, thereby

constituting a commonality of character for the formation of a quintessential environmentalist drama. He mobilises a certain kind of 'multinaturalist ontology' that is implicit in the riverine culture of a Niger Delta community in forging a trait of hubris that frames the protagonists of insurgency, synthesising a breed of human beings and sea-weeds to explore claims of immortality. I suggest that in creating protagonists that transcend violence and death, the playwright appears to invent an aesthetic technique that may be understood within the tradition of anti-heroism, a tragic paradigm that privileges a shift in focus from human nature as the reference-point of artistic conception.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### 6.1 CONCLUSION

*[T]he creeks are an environmental reality in the Niger Delta...*<sup>31</sup>

This thesis has focused on the dramatic representation of the Niger Delta landscape and environment, the different experiences of these spaces in the history of the region and how they inform the particular kind of stories that are narrated and staged. I have shown how the theatre captures the different schemes of resistance in the Delta beyond the usual anthropocentric focus, showing ways in which both the landscape and the human communities in the Delta are subjects of the violent capitalism of the big oil corporations. I have drawn on the spatial and material experience of the landscape and geographies of the region to consider violence outside the standard notion of human agency. I explored play-texts about the Delta that illustrate operations of violence in the geography of the region in a manner that recognises the different contours of insurgency. The plays offer a critical map for the mediation of the boundary between the human subject and nature in their collective performance of hostilities in the Niger Delta. In the process of this preoccupation, the creeks of the Delta become a site that is deployed to enact a bio-politics of violence, a zone and space of terror that involves human and nonhuman ecological participation.

I began in the Introduction by calling attention to the politicisation of threats by ex-insurgents of the Niger Delta, threats that particularly gained traction after the defeat of Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 general election. The verbal threat, consistently issued to the Federal Government of Nigeria, warns of the readiness of the insurgents to mobilise again and “return to the creeks”

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Jimoh. "Three Bards in Search of a Prize" *ThisDay* October 8, 2017  
<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2017/10/08/three-bards-in-search-of-a-prize/>

should the conditions that promote marginalisation of the region persist. I noted that with the defeat of Goodluck Jonathan – an indigene of the Niger Delta, affectionately described as ‘son of the soil’, under whose government the Deltans felt a sense of participation in the Nigerian project – a vicious regime of marginalisation was envisaged. I suggest that in invoking the creeks as the myth-centre and reference point for the renewal of militant struggle, the insurgents seem to have provided insight to the fundamentals of the creeks and natural environment in the Niger Delta struggle. In other words, I contemplate the threat as a kind of political strategy meant to negotiate greater socio-political deal in the infighting that characterises the Nigerian federal system. In particular, then, the threats ostensibly privilege the creek of the region as an important machinery of political negotiation, hence pointing to possible ways in which the natural environment and landscape of the region participate in the Niger Delta struggles. Against this background, the study attempts to show how this preoccupation with the creeks and landscape of the Delta is brought into the theatrical discourse, how it is factored into the cultural and dramatic strategies of what I can describe as Niger Delta drama.

In the first chapter, I explored the field of eco-drama in relation to the Niger Delta, suggesting ways in which the mechanics of conflict and resolution that characterise dramatic composition might implicate possible resolution for ecological crisis. My study has sought, at least in part, to re-invent aspects of the social struggles in the Niger Delta that emphasise representations of the landscapes and creeks, but to do so while paying attention to the trajectories of the region’s environmental experiences. Indeed, it is in thinking through notions of ecological history that I come to terms with what William Cronon describes as “a history which extends its boundaries beyond human institutions”, one that “inevitably brings to center stage a cast of nonhuman characters which usually occupy the margins of historical analysis if they are ever present in it all”

(xii). Thus, I sought in this study to purposively locate this cast of more-than-human characters in the selected plays, to bring them to the centre-stage of a growing milieu of ecological turn that underwrites histories of spatial politics and violence. Chapter Two offers a way of thinking about the processes of this experience by recognising the nature of the Delta environment, a recognition that emphasises the centrality of water in the everyday round of living in the region. The ontology of water, I argue, constitutes the basis of existence for the communities of the Lower Niger people, helping to underpin a sense of involvement and hope for the different nationalities that co-exist in the region. Captured dramatically through plangent processes of flows, the ethos of water offers the Niger Delta people not only the mode of existence, but also a way of knowing the world. It is this epistemological basis of water's ontology, which I describe as waves of knowing – after Amimoto Ingersoll – that provides the Delta people with experiential protocols with which to engage and contest modernity. In Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft*, the four boatmen draw on the everyday rounds of living in the coastal geography of the Delta to contend with both the materialities and spiritualities of an angry sea into which they are stuck while roaming aimlessly in the river Niger. The sea also becomes essential in the boatmen's reckoning of time – a temporal tradition that is implicit in the sea's regime of seasonality – hence seemingly invoking multiple notions of temporality to contest colonial modernity. The play, thus, designates the means with which the epistemology of the sea represents multiple ways of apprehending reality in contrast with the modernist fixation with scientism. In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Wole Soyinka extends the ontology of waters in the Delta to think in terms of the agro-ecology of the region's resource endowment, highlighting the centrality of water to figure the manner in which the Delta connects with other regions of Nigeria, making water the touchstone of the country's economic integration. Drawing attention to the geography of difference between coastal Delta and the arid North of

Nigeria, Soyinka stages a drama that mobilises water as a reference point of national integration, literally orchestrating a relation of contrasting ecologies in which the Delta is privileged as site of economic stimulus, a food basket of the country.

Anderson and Peek have asserted that in the cultural representation of the Delta, the water ethos is often complimented by an equally significant figuration of war, making the trope of "water and war" a recurring binarity of the region's mode of cultural articulation. They write: "warrior ethos" manifests itself in virtually all Delta cultures in a group of related images and practices that emphasise masculine strength and assertiveness. Sometimes the two merges" (9). This convergence appears definitive in the plays discussed in chapters four and five. In these chapters, the playwrights highlight a sense of strength and assertiveness in the struggles that emerge in the wake of petro-imperialism while deploying the creeks as watery presence against which the insurgency is staged. In *My Life in the Burning Creeks*, Benabai showcases Pereware's resilience, his struggle for survival in the creeks, in ways that seem to locate this assertiveness in the life of an individual who is not a militant per se. But drawing on Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective, I argue that the landscape and environment of the Delta is instrumental in framing the human action, particularly informing in bestowing vitality to the agency of the past Delta heroes who fought in defence of land and resources. The narrator reflects on these heroes to ground his struggle of for survival, to assert his will against the marginalising presence of global capitalism. But it is a struggle in which the land is ostensibly implicated. However, I argued that central to the play's conflicts is the way in which it is spatially constructed and staged, beginning with the bombing of the palace of the Ebenanawei of Gbaramatu Kingdom by the Nigerian armed forces, displacing the oil-producing community, and turning the creeks into what Amitav Ghosh describes as "a space that is no place". In enacting the displacement of the communities from homeland, the play re-invents the

scatological motif to illustrate the bare life of the Delta people. But it is Eni Jones Umuko's *The Scent of Crude Oil* that offers a more heightened sense of environmental scatology. In the play, he deploys the material smell of crude oil, and the decomposed bodies of Deltans burnt in a pipeline inferno, to constitute the decay and pollution of the environment. The sensory potential of smell becomes a way of bridging people and environment, highlighting decay as a condition of despoiled environment. In effect, odour signals a form of life that is figured as politically excluded and bad.

In the fourth chapter, Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* and *Ipomu* draw on the sea-plants and species that populate the coast of the Niger Delta to stage a performance of the non-human agency, to engage the nonhuman nature in acts of social and political intervention in the crises fraught region. The dramatist creates a world in which the nonhuman actors are privileged cast in the history of the insurgency happening in the Delta particularly in the manner they constitute a kind of geopower. The plays demonstrate what Jane Bennet describes as "vital materiality" to explain ways in which the material nature is inscribed in the processes of hostilities. In *Hard Ground*, Yerima maps a situational boundary of the narrative between the war-torn Delta and the city of Lagos to which most Deltans escape for refuge. In effect, it is a cartography of place and placelessness, of action and re-action, that enables the playwright to locate the Delta's geography as a site of violence and counter-violence. He renders the Delta as site of enchantment for indigenes who sought to defend the land against the predation of capitalism, yet are drawn against one another in a similar kind of terror as the state unleashes on the community. In such condition of chaos, he appears to mobilise the species of the swamp – crocodiles, crabs and other dangerous sea-animals – in judicial capacities to mediate the conflicts in the creeks. In a similar vein in *Ipomu*, it is the water hyacinths that spread across the waters and swamps of the Delta that Yerima mobilises to provide possibilities for the nonhuman to participate in the politics of insurgency. He

conjures up the seaweed through the instrumentality of its material presence in the waters to mediate and participate in the mobility of militants during hostilities. In addition, Yerima imbues the seaweed with an evolutionary matrix of the human nature, making it a source of the force that animates the human character. I argued that the playwright sought to inaugurate a distinct tragic paradigm that takes the anthropocene moment into account in defacing the human hubris, thus privileging the sea-weeds as the ultimate protagonist of the struggle from whom the human cast draws his identity and character of dramatic representation.

In collocating the threats of the militants with the theatrical representation of the Delta, what becomes clear is that drama provides artistic enunciation of the processes through which the creeks and swamps enter into the service of the political technique of negotiating the region into the Nigerian federal democracy. Drama rallies the creeks as much as the insurgents, re-inventing and co-opting its spatial possibilities as theatrical resources. Within this frame, it effects a reiteration of the geo-power of the creeks and swamps, sanctioning its ubiquity in the political and aesthetic discourses about the region. The plays examined in this study are all set in the creeks of the Delta – at different points of the region’s history - affirming its topographic significance, and bringing to the fore the different ways in which it is implicated in the narrativisation of the region. Through the creeks, this study grapples with the environmental history of the Niger Delta as illustrated in the plays. The attempt, therefore, is to shift the discourse of history from the exclusively human focus to the exigencies of time-space that the creeks and landscape underwrite, to capture the historicity of its pollution and degradation as well as its exercise of power and agency, and to do so in recognition of its relational potential in the ecological world of the Delta people where biopolitical violence is also undifferentiated.

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