

Crude Fictions: How New Nigerian Short Stories Sabotage Big Oil's Master Narrative¹

Helen Kapstein

John Jay College, The City University of New York

“The oil companies,” she said, “they drill our father’s farms and they don’t give we, their children, jobs. We eat okra, cassava, grown in other parts of the country. We use their yam, plantain and palm oil to cook our *onunu*. There are no fish in our rivers, no bush rats left in our forest. We don’t use natural gas in our homes and yet we have gas flares in our backyards. We can’t find kerosene to buy and we have pipelines full of the products running through our land. Some of us don’t have electricity. Some of us don’t even have candles to burn. Are you listening, women?”

—“A Union on Independence Day,” Sefi Atta

In Sefi Atta’s 2003 story “A Union on Independence Day,” Madam Queen tries to mobilize villagers in the narrator’s hometown to stand up to Summit Oil by deploying language that is striking for its fierce bluntness. New Nigerian short stories like this one, more easily available to readers than ever before, call into question the dominant discourse around oil production nationally and internationally as they depict the complex, lived reality of a resource-rich country riven by corruption, greed, and poverty. The struggle over oil resources and rights regularly involves acts of sabotage, shown in the stories ranging from individual villagers siphoning crude oil from pipelines for fuel, to organized, militant attacks on petroleum operations, or, in the case of “Independence Day,” to women occupying the Summit Oil terminal in protest (a storyline borrowed from real-life demonstrations and protests that made international headlines in 2002). Because of their content, their form, and their distribution, the stories themselves can be considered small acts of sabotage. They are textual *saboteurs* in both senses of the etymology of that word: to perform or execute badly (as in, “he murdered that concerto”) and to destroy willfully, as with tools or machinery (*OED*). The stories’ formal qualities—or lack thereof—reflect the circumstances of their production as a tertiary by-product of sabotage. Like the material by-product, the crude oil to be distributed as part of an informal economy, these stories are intentionally unrefined. This textual output, like that commodity form, is more quickly available, less constrained by production, less costly for being raw or unprocessed, and more willfully destructive of disciplinary institutions, corporate, national, and literary.

What we see at work in these stories are truly tactics, in the way Michel de Certeau intended. Borrowing from military parlance to reformulate the relations between power and resistance, in his 1988 volume *The Practice of Everyday Life* de Certeau assigns the term *strategy* to large-scale state, corporate, and other systems, and uses

tactics to describe the small-scale subversions that challenge those strategies. Where strategy has the advantage of being massive and muscular, the tactic has its small size and flexibility going for it. The very nature of the short story allows it to act tactically in the face of corporate strategy; its content undermining the master narrative that has been carefully crafted by a corporate-state collusion, and its compact form allowing for fairly easy distribution and access, especially for those stories disseminated digitally. Contemporary Nigerian short stories move tactically, thematically and structurally, and are coincident to the real-life tactics used by ordinary Nigerians.

Big Oil regularly accuses residents of the oil-rich Niger Delta region of acts of sabotage, including “bunkering,” or siphoning oil for use or sale, and vandalizing pipelines and facilities. The language the multinational corporations use to describe this behavior sets up a narrative of criminality. They talk about the “theft” of oil, of a “black market” (implicitly linking illegality, race, and the color of oil), and both the companies and the press frame the locals in pejorative terms. Royal Dutch Shell’s website alleges: “Criminal activities including sabotage, oil theft and illegal refining are causing huge environmental damage in the Niger Delta. From 2008 to 2012, these activities accounted for around 76% of the oil that escaped from SPDC [Shell Petroleum Development Company] facilities” (“Shell in Nigeria: Environmental Performance”). Mama Queen indicts this habit of calling young men “thugs,” and reminds us of who the true culprits are:

Young men are kidnapping expatriate employees and demanding ransoms. They are locked up. We call them thugs. Young girls are turning to prostitution to service expatriate employees. They are locked up, too. We shun them. We say they bring AIDS. Meanwhile, the oil companies spill oil on our land, leak oil into our rivers. They won’t clean up their mess. All they do is pay small fines, if they pay at all. (Atta)

The “meanwhile” in the middle of this diatribe sutures together independent clauses that might not otherwise be connected—things said and done to the community versus things oil companies do. The conjunction reveals a consequential, casual relationship between these ideas and seems carefully chosen, as a word about time, to comment on the temporal uncoupling of these experiences in the normative narrative, in which they appear to occupy concurrent but separate time zones. In reality, though, negligence and neglect on the part of the companies have so drastically impacted the area that its environmental degradation has been called ecocide (Johnston). The stories act as a corrective to this narrative (one that commands enormous authority since it is backed by enormous assets). They reframe the actions of impoverished Nigerian citizens as tactical maneuvers by people wielding the only weapon they have—using the tools of exploitation against their exploiters. They expose the absurdity of the multinationals blaming the people for their own poor behavior and the irony of a mindset that frames those people as criminals “stealing” back their own oil.

In 1992, Amitav Ghosh asked why there is not a Great American Oil Novel (*The New Republic*), coining the term “petrofiction” and launching a new scholarly industry. In his 2012 article, “Oil and World Literature,” Graeme Macdonald answers Ghosh’s query with the following:

Questions of oil’s visibility and configuration in national literary histories, however, needs [sic] to be reconceptualized on at least two fronts: geographic and generic. What constitutes an American (or indeed a British, Nigerian, Iranian, Trinidadian, Russian, etc.) oil text in an age where the circuitry of literature grows increasingly international, and where many arguments have been made in academic circles to pressurize any national literary outlook as limited or, worse, solipsistic? Following this: what specifically constitutes oil literature? Must a work explicitly concern itself with features immediate to the oil industry? Given that oil and its constituents are so ubiquitous in the material and organization of modern life, is not every modern novel to some extent an oil novel? (7)

While I understand the desire to highlight the globalizing machinations and mechanisms of the oil industry, to say that every modern novel is an oil novel is to evacuate meaning from literature manifestly about oil. The literature read here, primarily recent Nigerian short stories, is demonstrably historically and geographically specific in its concerns, and does something generically different and worth taking out of Macdonald’s brackets to examine.

Rob Nixon has recently called our attention to the long environmental aftermaths of corporate colonialism in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), which has two chapters on oil politics. His examples show the burden of ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihoods of the poor most directly. When Madam Queen lectures the gathered crowd in “Independence Day,” she articulates exactly this effect. The first part of her speech, delivered to an initially skeptical but eventually swayed audience, weighs the ironic contradictions of an impoverished oil economy against each other: the oil companies drill on “our father’s farm” but “we their children” have no jobs; they live on top of untold wealth but have to import their food; they have no energy sources but pipelines run “throughout our land.” The second part of her speech accuses the companies of unethical behavior (as they “spill oil on our land, leak oil into our rivers” but “all they do is pay small fines, if they pay at all”) that amounts to murder: “Women, listen to me. I’m telling you this: as we speak, we are dying. We are dying of our air; we are dying of our water. We are dying from oil. We are not benefiting from it.” In Nigeria, domestic exploitation clearly connects to the vested interests of the multinational oil companies she points to; Royal Dutch Shell has at times generated half the revenue of the government, and in turn the government puts its infrastructure and military at Shell’s disposal. Who benefits is manifestly obvious. Nixon calls this “the ongoing romance between unanswerable corporations and unspeakable regimes” (105), emphasizing by doing so their mutual desire and dependency. Michael Watts calls it “the slick alliance of state and capital” (3), as though oil lubricates that relationship in an especially slimy way. If this sounds crude, it is because it really is, in its crass

exploitation of people and places. Since the state has become privatized in this way, distinctions between nation and corporation become more difficult to discern. We have long understood that the novel plays a distinct role in nation-building (via Benedict Anderson, Timothy Brennan, and others), and particularly in postcolonial national identity formation. Perhaps this is why there have been almost no Nigerian oil novels²—because there is no national identity to represent here,³ but instead illegitimate, fractured, localized affiliations better captured by the similarly scaled short story. Where the nation and the novel are monolithic reflections of global capital strategy, the short story is a finely calibrated tactic that sabotages the notion of national coherence. When Ken Saro-Wiwa, who once remarked that “there is no such country [as Nigeria]. There is only organized brigandage” (qtd Nixon 120) was hanged by the state, he cried out: “What sort of a nation is this?” The short stories answer his question as they explode the pretense of national unity and corporate compliance with portrayals of private gain and personal loss.⁴

Uche Peter Umez’ 2006 story “Wild Flames,” available in multiple online versions, dramatizes tensions between villagers, oil executives, and vigilantes; the story rediscovers the ordinary in its exploration of the contradictions, confusion, and violence of life in the Niger Delta. It is also an excellent example of how these stories are sabotaging fictions in the sense of undermining narrative forms and expectations and reimagining how short stories work; in other words, of seeming to execute the story form badly. It is, frankly, a very confusing story to read, with far too many players and parts, but in that way captures its own essence. In “Independence Day,” Mama Queen makes reference to “young men...kidnapping expatriate employees and demanding ransoms” (Atta). Oil executive kidnapping, as a strategy of economic sabotage, is a fairly widespread practice. There has been a rash of foreign hostage-taking for ransom since about 2006, with more than 200 kidnappings, although most victims were returned unharmed. “Wild Flames” puts this ripped-from-the-headlines plot dead center as a group of young men holds Westoil executives hostage while reciting their demands:

Armed with cutlasses, this group rounded up most of the staff, and held them as hostages until Mr. Blimp, the base manager, Mr. Laggard, the community relations manager, and a pinstriped-suited Nigerian came out. The boys were invited into the boardroom. There was a table in a corner of the air-conditioned room with trays of food and drink. The boys refused the refreshment outright and blurted out their demands:

- * community relations fee of two hundred thousand naira
- * half a million naira for youth development
- * one hundred thousand naira as environment protection levy. (Umez)

In moments like these, Umez not only directly engages with current events and crises, but names Westoil directly and then proceeds to list perfectly plausible stipulations. At this point the story seems like a delivery vehicle for local claims and reparations, and begs the question of what the role of fiction is in these politically heightened texts. And yet the short stories are not merely fronts for such demands; Umez is

not hiding behind the screen of fiction. Even in a scene like this, practicality is counter-weighted by the satire embedded in the characters' names, Mr Blimp and Mr Laggard, which lampoons them as bloated, reactionary fools. "Wild Flames" ends with the narrator's future fantasy: "I sat down on the bank of a river and gazed out over the waters. Then I closed my eyes and saw myself in a canoe gliding towards the horizon." This vision cannot be itemized.

"Wild Flames" is a work of realistic fiction, but even in the stories we might typically classify as magical realism or science fiction, the fictional genre is regularly broken with to allow for instructive asides. For instance, in the 2007 story "The Popular Mechanic," Nnedi Okorafor interrupts her plot line to tell us this:

Nigeria was one of the world's top oil producers. Yet and still, as the years progressed, the Nigerian government had grown fat with wealth harvested from oil sales to America. The government, to the great detriment of the country, ate most of the oil profits and could care less [sic] about what the process of extracting the oil did to the land and its people. On top of all this, ironically, Nigeria's people often suffered from shortages of fuel. (166-7)

Fiction delivers fact, and though it does so quite plainly, so too it subtly makes it metaphorical, via the figure of a government "grown fat" by eating oil profits. Uwen Akpan's story "Luxurious Hearses" (2008) is a story told during the course of a bus ride, sharing with many of the Nigerian stories a petroleum-fueled vehicle for its central plot device, thereby signaling an inescapable, embedded reliance on the stuff.⁵ Akpan's story turns didactic too:

But these were hard times. Due to decades of oil drilling, the soil was losing its fertility. Rivers no longer had fish, and, worse still, repeated oil fires annihilated hundreds of people each time. Shehu, fearing for his cows, moved away from the oil-rich villages to other parts of the south soon after the wedding. When ancestral worshippers began asking people to bring animals to sacrifice to Mami Wata and other deities whose terrains were supposedly desecrated, Father McBride told his faithful to forget the pagans. The problems deepened when little children began to develop respiratory diseases, and strange rashes attacked their bodies, and the natives started running away to the big cities. (213)

A break like this with traditional narrative might signify a number of things: an urgency to convey the real circumstances of this fiction; a desire to do so in an unadorned fashion; and an active disregard for form, style, and genre—that is, story-telling sabotaged by design.

These moments appear in practically every story discussed here, and they bear strong resemblances to one another. Their presence might gesture towards an international reading audience in need of edification, but they might equally do work for domestic readership, either acknowledging a shared experience, or, perhaps more likely in the piecemeal state that is Nigeria, illuminating (like the repeated motif of gas flares that light up the night sky) for other Nigerians the situation in their own country. A fidelity to reality infiltrates all aspects of the stories, even those which sound fanciful, such as this moment in verse from "Wild Flames": "There was a time he spoke about the future of our village, as though he were reciting an elegy: 'Westoil will

impoverish us/ our condition will be worse/ than Oloibiri/ we shall not live as slaves in/ our motherland/ save we act like activists . . .!’ I’d never been to Oloibiri before, but I had heard of it anyway. In my imagination it was a land of fumes and vultures and corpses” (Umez). This is poor poetry, but that may be because the gap between imagination and reality has vanished to the point of imperceptibility—Oloibiri, the place of origin for Nigeria’s oil operations in 1956, then abandoned when supplies dried up in the 1970s, *is* a land of fumes, vultures, and corpses.

Manipulations of reality within fiction might be a kind of “instrumental aesthetics” (Nixon 109) but they might also be an indication that the very categories non/fiction fail here. This is not about reducing Nigerian literature—or postcolonial writing in general—to the real, the authentic, or the veridical, but rather about a realism that captures material, lived, felt, smelt, *sensed* experiences, like this one from Atta’s story:

In my hometown we had rainbow colored water. It tasted of the oil that leaked into our well. Bathing water we fetched from a creek. This smelled of dead crayfish. Our rivers were also dead. When rain fell, it rusted rooftops, and shriveled the plants and farm crops. People who drank rainwater swore that it bored permanent holes in their stomachs. Our roads had potholes as big as cauldrons because of the rain. Only in the villages on the outskirts of town did we have one smooth road. The road ran straight from a flow station to Summit Oil’s terminal. The villages had perpetual daylight once the gas flaring started. The flare was where cassava farms used to be. Summit Oil bulldozed those farms and ran pipelines through them. The land was now sinking. The gas flare was as tall as a giant orange torch in the sky, as loud as a hundred incinerators. It sprayed soot over coconut trees. From the centre of town we could smell burning mixed with petrol. People complained that their throats were as dry as if they swallowed swamp mahogany bark. (“Independence Day”)

Criticism of the stories as flawed narratives, often in reaction to their bald realism, arises frequently in discussions about them. This might be one strategy for diminishing them and in fact it succeeds in focusing attention on their particularities rather than on the way in which they comment on large-scale processes and international politics. Reviews that call some of the stories in Okorafor’s collection “unfinished” (Mandelo) and Akpan’s stories “merely grim reportage” (Taylor) critique their execution and deny their fictiveness. An unsigned online review of Akpan’s “Baptizing the Gun” disqualifies it as fiction, saying: “If we have not just been told something that happened to Uwem Akpan himself, then we’ve heard a story told by one of his colleagues. The varnish is pretty thin.” The stories are indeed unvarnished, but what these critiques find aesthetically unpolished in the writing is also what makes them compelling; they explicitly extract from their circumstances what is *crude*, in every sense of the word. In “Baptizing the Gun,” the narrator priest suspects a Good Samaritan of being a scam artist and a thief, worrying, “Maybe I shouldn’t have accepted the watch from the oil-company executive who attends my church in the first place.” The stories report corruption, state fact, and show the obscene, including “strange growths, chronic respiratory illnesses, terminal diarrhea, weeping sores, inexplicable bleeding”

(Atta). When a reviewer finds himself “repulsed” by their “grisliness” (Taylor), he objects on the grounds of crudeness, but it is precisely this that is claimed to expose the real of everyday life in the Delta.

That said, “[t]he real is a slippery thing” (Botting), and the real of oil seems especially slippery; more than one critic has noted that that which seems exaggerated or ironic in petrofiction about the workings of the industry is often actually true. Amitav Ghosh and Peter Hitchcock agree that Abdul Rahman Munif’s satire in *Cities of Salt* (1984) falls flat partly because the reality of the situation “pre-empts the very possibility of satire” (Ghosh 9). For Fredric Jameson, “parody finds itself without a vocation” in postmodernism where there is no real to copy, and has instead been replaced by pastiche which is the “neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter” (17). Regardless of whether satire fails because of too much reality or too little, we must contend with both a long local tradition of satire that seems alive and well in these Nigerian stories and a long global tradition of commodity satire in general and oil satire in particular. For the former, Niyi Akingbe’s essay “Speaking Denunciation” (2014) usefully walks us through precolonial, colonial, and post-independence stages in Nigerian satire, concentrating on poetry like that of Obiora Udechukwu, who writes: “They stole the people’s money/ Lent it back to them/ At 1000% interest/ And they talk of philanthropy.” For the latter, we might reach back to Jonathan Swift in the 1700s and the Corn Law rhymers of the 1800s for clear precedents of commodity satire. If oil as a commodity lends itself to satire, we see that in Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927), Munif’s book, Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), and *The Yes Men*, activists who have posed as oil executives in order to perpetrate hoaxes in which they apologize for Big Oil’s behavior: “We are sorry,” they announce, “We are sorry for the oil and gas spills which made your rivers toxic. We are sorry for the gas flares that stink up your villages. We are sorry for the fact that you cannot eat your fish. That you cannot grow on your land, that you cannot drink your water” (“Shell: We are Sorry”).

In the short stories themselves, we have caricatures of oil executives in “Wild Flames,” a sardonic remark in “The Popular Mechanic” that the disabled father is “*very lucky*” not to have been more gravely injured, and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s dark satire “Africa Kills Her Sun” which exposes corruption and ironically anticipated his own death. Satire, itself a mode of slippage between what is said and meant, between the implicit and the explicit, sets out to sabotage the status quo and critique our complacencies. Because of this, it is the perfect monkey wrench in the works of Big Oil’s narrative, and while it may well be true that satire sometimes fails, leaving us at an “aesthetic impasse” (Hitchcock 90), it seems like a fitting mode in these circumstances.

Like satire and its “militant ironies” (K. Njogu qtd Akingbe 48), science fiction gets wielded as a weapon of textual sabotage. And a similar critique is launched against them both: just as satire fails because the truth is already absurd, so the argument goes, so science

fiction fails for an African audience for whom lived reality is already too much like sci fi (Kapstein, 2014). The real of satire and the real of science fiction get in the way. However, what sci fi does in these stories is not simply to represent a dystopian reality, but something much closer to what Jennifer Wenzel identifies as “petro-magic-realism” in Ben Okri’s work: “If petro-magic offers the illusion of wealth without work, Okri’s petro-magic-realism paradoxically pierces such illusions, grounding its vision in a recognisably devastated, if also recognisably fantastic, landscape” (457). The difference lies in the speculative nature of science fiction. Nnedi Okorafor’s fiction, for instance, suggests a latent future potentiality, turning two kinds of speculative practice—that of surveillance and control, and that of economic speculation—on their heads.

Okorafor does not imagine a post-oil future like James Kunstler’s in *World Made by Hand* (2008), one he is positioned to imagine because he is not writing from a place of total saturation. Nor does she give us a space of exemption as in Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), where an island is set aside from the mainstream world of oil. Rather, hers is a resource-controlled future, where the pipeline people control their own oil and “The Popular Mechanic” is popular because he is a populist, “a citizen before his people,” who first opens the pipeline with his superhuman prosthetic and then pinches it closed so as to protect the gathered crowd from “possible death by incineration,” but not before he cautions them: “Go home now.... Use and sell what you have taken for good things. Keep your mouths shut and only tell stories of the Igbo Robin Hood Pirate Cowboy Man who took what was owed to him and shared the wealth.”

The mechanic loses an arm in a pipeline explosion and, acting as a medical guinea pig, has it replaced with an experimental American cybernetic prosthetic, which he uses to siphon off more fuel for the community. He becomes a cyborg, but the text tells us that he and his fellow villagers were transformed by the technology of oil even before the accident: “It was madness. It’s still madness. Look what that damn government has turned us into. Robot zombies scrambling for a sip of fuel!” The mechanic is mechanized; in the language of the *OED*, he is “of the nature of the machine” and “worked by the machine.” The *OED* also tells us that the mechanic, belonging to the lower classes, and because of his manual labor (note the irony of the manual laborer who loses his hand), is vulgar or coarse. The story makes him out to be crude not just adjectivally but substantively. Thrice he equates oil and blood. The first two times, this takes the form of comparison via simile (“See the color?”... ‘Looks like blood! Ha! It is diesel fuel.’” “It was a dark pink, almost like watery blood.”) The third time crude *becomes* blood. He speaks to his daughter:

“You and I,” her father said. “We both like to work with our hands. That’s why I’m a mechanic and you want to be a surgeon and when you are on break, you climb trees and tap palm wine.” He paused. “When someone does something to you and you feel that hot fury, you will react with your hands too. Those Americans were lucky that I chose to spill their pink blood instead of their red blood. Crush necks of steel instead of flesh. Those goddamn Americans. Like vampires, even in the Nigerian sun.

The intimacy of lived relations with oil in the Niger Delta means that the mechanic's "dark brown human flesh" turns into "shiny gold metal," until he realizes that he is still in thrall to the "pink volatile liquid." This substantiates Andrew Apter's theory in *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (2005) that oil figures as blood circulating through the national body, but defigures or disfigures the trope to make it literal again.

In "Spider the Artist" (2008), the metaphor of zombie robots is also made literal. Here, Okorafor imagines a class of Zombie robots "made to combat pipeline bunkering and terrorism." Says the narrator, who alone among humans forms a bond with them: "It makes me laugh. The government and the oil people destroyed our land and dug up our oil, then they created robots to keep us from taking it back" (104). In an attempt to comfort stakeholders (because "ONLY A CONCERTED RESPONSE BY ALL STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING GOVERNMENT, COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY CAN END THE MENACE OF CRUDE OIL THEFT"), Shell informs its readers in a PDF handout published in 2014 that "SPDC's entire area of operations is covered by pipeline and asset surveillance contracts to ensure that spills are discovered and responded to as quickly as possible. These surveillance activities primarily employ members of the communities the pipelines traverse. There are also daily over-flights of the pipeline network to detect new theft points" ("Shell in Nigeria: Oil Theft").⁶ Aside from the fact that robot spiders have yet to be invented, nothing else distinguishes the subject matter of Okorafor's narrative from the reality on the ground. In both scenarios, pipeline surveillance is made possible by technological detection. In the story, Okorafor's robots share the name Zombie with the "'kill-and-go' soldiers" (104)—that is, MOPOL, or the Nigerian Mobile Police, a paramilitary state police force partly dedicated to the protection of oil company assets. In other words, the comprehensive disciplinary techniques of the multinational corporations look very much like the doubled, combined forces of the Zombies. In a sudden reversal, however, the Zombie robots "go rogue, shrugging off their man-made jobs to live in the delta swamps" (112). Like the mechanic, they redefine their relation to the machine and as machines, escaping the techno-corporate-industrial complex. In both "Spider the Artist" and in "The Popular Mechanic," Delta residents turn the conditions of production to their own uses and advantages even in circumstances of capitalist-induced crisis and environmental degradation. "We are Pipeline People" (102), says the narrator in "Spider the Artist."

In her 2006 essay "Petro-magic-realism: Towards a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature," Wenzel argues for a connection "between Nigerian literary production and other commodity exports" (449). She focuses on "the troubled state of Nigerian publishing and its fraught relationship to presses and readerships abroad" (455) with a focus on literary prize patronage but, if literature can also be considered a commodity, then Nigerians are interested in controlling

that resource as well. UNESCO's 2014 report, "Reading in the Mobile Era," surveyed Worldreader Mobile⁷ users in seven developing countries in an attempt to determine who reads what on their devices, knowing already that "hundreds of thousands of people...are reading on mobile devices" (UNESCO 9). This, in a marketplace where growth feels like the stuff of science fiction: internet usage in Africa has grown by 3,606 percent since 2000 (Matthews). In one estimate, Nigerian smartphone penetration is among the highest in the world, with predictions that smartphone shipments will be dominated by emerging markets, as they are expected to reach 1.5 billion worldwide by 2017 (Osuagwu). This is a virtual revolution in terms of access to web content, and bypassing traditional means of publication has significant potential repercussions for literacy and reading rates in Nigeria, which has been called a "bookless country" ("Nigeria is..."),⁸ and where illiteracy tops 40% (UNESCO 14).

Of particular interest is the fact that readers actively search for short stories on their mobile devices (UNESCO 52), perhaps landing on *Eclectica Magazine's* site to find Atta's "A Union on Independence Day" (which can also be found under the name "Independence Day" on *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration*), or on international science fiction website *InterNova* to find Okorafor's "The Popular Mechanic," or accessing her young adult story, "The Girl with the Magic Hands," which shows up at #4 on the list of Top 10 Books Read by Worldreader Mobile users (UNESCO 55). Although readers seek out romance, educational, and religious material even more actively, it is worth considering what the short story does that other genres cannot do. In 1842, Edgar Allan Poe, father of the short story, extolled its virtues as the genre which achieves "a certain unique or single effect" in the "hour of perusal [during which] the soul of the reader is at the writer's control," that is, in one sitting. Readers in the UNESCO study, reading on their phones between 10 minutes (for men) and 19 minutes (for women), have just about enough time to read a short story in a sitting or two, perhaps during a *kabu-kabu* commute. The short story format accommodates the demands of labor and the allowances for leisure in ways that longer forms do not, and the medium, the cellphone, allows for an immediate and casual absorption of information. If the defining qualities of the commodity form (which we see in commodities ranging from crude oil to the mobile device) include portability, transferability, and exchangeability, then these attributes converge in the short story form, so much so that the story might look like a capitalist artifact. On the other hand, the story form is in no way commensurate with the commodity form, not least because it is neither uniformly the same nor uniformly divisible. In addition, unlike a commodity, the short story can be quickly distributed and disseminated. Thus it might have the power to generate, through rapid circulation enabled by new technology, alternative solidarities. That said, however, in a potentially contradictory fashion, these particular short stories, because of their crude non-conformities and refusal of coherence, rather than being other to the corporate-state might actually

fit the logic and sensibilities of late capitalism which prefers that there not be an organized counter-narrative.

We turn to theories like Peter Hitchcock's in *The Long Space* (2010) to understand extended works of postcolonial fiction as part of a protracted engagement with decolonization, and we turn to short stories for examples of quick, tactical engagements. These may not be on the scale of subversive collective agency, but they might, nevertheless, offer glimpses of connection above, beyond, or outside the state. The Internet is a burgeoning site of access for Nigerians to stories about themselves: 14% of searches in the UNESCO study were for reading material "from my country" (UNESCO 57). Since the extent to which Nigeria exists as a country has been called into question, and since "country" is UNESCO's choice of words, we can interpret it very loosely to mean less nation-state than land or locale. Elsewhere, I have argued that the postcolonial nation recognizes itself partly through domestic tourism, as locals gain the freedom, mobility, and leisure to tour their own country (Kapstein, 2007; Kapstein, 2009). We might understand the phenomenon described in "Reading in the Mobile Era" as domestic literary tourism, working in much the same way by letting local readers see their land for themselves. Less liberatory though, is the possibility that part of what sells in tourism and in literature is violent, macabre, and graphic content—the stuff of thanotourism,⁹ risk tourism, and war tourism. There is a fundamental difference between a local Nigerian reading of "rainwater... that bored permanent holes in their stomachs" whose experience of violence is affirmed by it and the first world reader who gawks at the description. Oil that is illegally siphoned by militants and vigilantes often ends up being reabsorbed into the corporate-national structure of exploitation—does something akin to that happen to these stories? When Oprah Winfrey picks Uwen Akpan's story collection, *Say You're One of Them* (2008), for her book club, does that mainstreaming negate whatever subversive, tactical advantage the stories might have had?

The everyday practice of siphoning or bunkering fuel denotes a different kind of reappropriation. Bunkering as a term has suggestive associations: traditionally, on board ship, you fill bunkers with fuel for your own consumption (here that becomes taking fuel for yourself), and it can also mean being placed in a position difficult to extricate oneself from (*OED*). Read one way, Nigerian locals are clearly bunkered by their circumstances, but read in reverse, the oil companies find themselves at the mercy of bunkering, which we see in their high anxiety about loss of revenue to the practice, manifested in ever-escalating accusations. The Shell "Oil Theft" PDF contends that¹⁰

Crude oil theft, sabotage and illegal refining are the main source of pollution in the Niger Delta today. In 2013 the Nigerian government estimated crude oil theft and associated deferred production at over 300,000 barrels of oil per day (bopd). Intentional third-party interference with pipelines and other infrastructure was responsible for around 75% of all oil spill incidents and 92% of all oil volume spilled from facilities operated by the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) over the last five years (2009-2013). Much greater volumes of oil are discharged into the environment away from SPDC facilities through illegal refining and transportation of stolen crude oil. In 2013 the number of spills from

SPDC operations caused by sabotage and theft increased to 157, compared to 137 in 2012, whilst production losses due to crude oil theft, sabotage and related temporary shut-downs increased by around 75%. On average around 32,000 bopd were stolen from SPDC pipelines and other facilities, whilst the joint venture lost production of around 174,000 bopd due to shutdowns related to theft and other third-party interference. This equates to several billion dollars in revenue losses for the Nigerian government and the joint venture.

A very keen sense in this of leaking value shows up in both the figures and the diction (“theft” alone is used five times here). It clearly conveys the perception (however insincere) that “third-party interference” poses a clear and present danger to the SPDC. The final sentence of “Spider the Artist” reads: “You should also pray that these Zombies don’t build themselves some fins and travel across the ocean” (115). What sounds like a figurative threat in fact reflects the scope of local sabotage; as the *Wall Street Journal* puts it, bunkering does have “far reaching consequences for global oil supplies.” We recall that the word “sabotage” traces its roots back to the shop floor, where workers, in their heavy *sabots*, maliciously damaged or destroyed machinery during labor disputes. By extension, we can think of the people on the ground, the “pipeline people,” in that labor position and the authors of these short stories as cultural workers in their own right, positioned, at the moment of production, to disrupt and delay the flow of commodity and capital.

Although Big Oil’s master narrative would have us believe that it is made economically vulnerable by sabotage and personally vulnerable by executive kidnappings, the aesthetic risks these fictions take are more than just analogous to economic speculation or a risky investment, they expose who is really at financial and personal risk (that is, who is most likely to be indebted and injured) in the structures of petro-capitalism.¹¹ In Okorafor’s story, the mechanic

was burned on his face and his entire right arm was burned to the bone. He was *very* lucky. He’d not been that close to the gasoline pool and the burst pipe, and the bodies of the plump laughing women in front of him had shielded him from the giant fireball that rushed past them all like an unleashed demon. All of those women died. Anya’s father was one of fifteen survivors. All together, ninety-nine people were killed in the explosion, including an infant who’d been strapped to her mother’s back. (3)

Nigerian pipeline explosions of this magnitude are so common that the Internet furnishes multiple chronologies of such disasters, but even then violence is more often slow than spectacular. The narrator of “Independence Day,” trained as a nurse in Nigeria and working as a nanny in the United States, tells us generally: “We had too many miscarriages in our town, stillbirths, babies dying in vitro, women dying in labor. People blamed the gas flare,” and more specifically about “the story of one little rascal nicknamed Boy-Boy. Boy-Boy wore glasses that belonged to his dead grandfather. He was always with his homemade catapult trying to kill birds. He burned in a gas flare fire. His family held a funeral for him. They had nothing but his ashes to bury. They buried them in a whitewashed wooden casket” (Atta). The Catholic priest who narrates “Baptizing the Gun,” a story

predicated on a fundamental misreading of a situation made violent because of a culture of violence, has come to Lagos “[a]fter an oil fire killed hundreds of my fellow swamp-dwellers in the Niger Delta, after the mass burials, after negotiating with the leaders of the scores of tribes that make up our church to insure that everybody’s burial ritual was presented during our week of mourning” (1). These catalogues of fictional hurts match real damage that will not ever be sufficiently recompensed with financial damages¹² (if such a thing is even possible) and might even be further capitalized on. Ample evidence shows how Big Oil and other global players profit from poverty and pollution—for instance, large-scale bunkering lets companies extract crude in excess of their licensing agreements under cover of sabotage; proceeds from small-scale bunkering goes to buying other commodities on the global market like guns and drugs, which in turn further destabilize the region; and general environmental degradation allows for the absorption of spills, decaying infrastructure, and other leavings of resource exploitation (Asuni). The destruction of the region is thus not just a waste by-product of a capitalist machine but further speculation in it. Okorafor’s mechanic embodies this phenomenon when his tragic loss becomes a new investment for “the American scientists” (1) who “had since worked out enough of the kinks to safely experiment on their own citizens” (4). These are the material equivalents of global capital’s preference for narrative instability.

The stories—and petrofiction in general—make us as literary critics struggle with genre in a way that puts us on notice. Throughout recent scholarly production in the field, the same struggle is called by different names. Ghosh, writing both as critic and as novelist, confesses: “I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence” (3), and goes on to say: “[t]he truth is that we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression” (4). Hitchcock, taking up Ghosh’s gauntlet (82), argues “[i]t is oil’s saturation of the infrastructure of modernity that paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation” (81). His essay, “Oil in an American Imaginary,” reflects on “the question of an appropriate cultural form” (94) for our petromodernity. Macdonald, in turn, critiques Hitchcock for “viewing the problem as one of pervasive mystification” (7) even though he himself writes, “[t]he fantasies of oil culture continue in part because...oil *is* fantastic” (17). To some extent, that slippery quality inherent to all aspects of oil—its material being, its extraction and production, its sales and advertising, its taken-for-grantedness—explains the category crisis it produces in cultural representations and their analyses. Across the critical board, fault is found in oil fictions even as those flaws are celebrated. Thus, they have “chaotic surfaces” (Hitchcock 84), “many critical detractors who question whether these are novels at all” (85), and a “calculated messiness” (89).¹³ The Nigerian short stories embrace this crisis. Although they are eager to explore oil’s metaphoricity (figuring it as blood, for instance), they do not sublimate it. Although they present themselves as fiction (by the way in which they are classified online or gathered together in short

story collections), they experiment with bald facts, background histories, and direct accusations. Although they do not always speak explicitly about oil, they are always literally about oil. To have an “energy unconscious” (306) in the way that Patricia Yaeger means is a luxury these stories cannot afford—they are utterly and completely energy conscious, which is not to say that they are not simultaneously other things as well: satirical, fictive, and science fictive. “Oil... clearly has form,” says Macdonald, but it has not been fully realized (9). Is he talking about the material stuff that is oil or its textual presence? Oil itself, of course, has substance but clearly has no form—as a viscous liquid, it takes on the shape of its container. If oil as materiality generates specific formal effects, then, contained by Nigerian writing, oil’s form has been realized as necessarily crude.

Notes

1. This essay was supported by a PSC-CUNY Research Award and by a Faculty Fellowship with The Center for Place, Culture, and Politics, The Graduate Center, CUNY.

2. Some novels, like Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1985), make no mention of oil but are implicitly in every way about it. *Sozaboy* is set during the Biafran War, the scene of an internal struggle over resource control. Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010) stands alone as a novel explicitly about Nigerian oil.

3. This is both a product of a history of colonial acquisition and of modern economic circumstance. Nigeria is an extreme example of an artificially constructed country, having had its borders drawn at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, by European powers vying for control of territory and resources (then rubber and people) with total disregard for existing political, linguistic, geographical, and other boundaries. The result was a cobbled-together nation that never cohered. Skip through multiple generations of dispossession first by colonial rulers and then by post-independence military regimes to the present-day disposition of corporate-state collusion.

4. Different models describe this process of corporatization. Whereas Nixon predicts a return to nineteenth-century “concessionary economics” where “the nation-state will become ever more marginal to deals negotiated between local chiefs and transnationals” (119), Jean-François Bayart, in *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, identifies an “economy of plunder” in which “state power is the key condition for the accumulation of wealth” because it appropriates national assets and resources (as explained by Federici, 78).

5. See the ironically titled bus “Progres” [sic] in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s “Home, Sweet Home” (1986), the car that runs out of petrol in “Baptizing the Gun,” and Okorafor’s *kabu-kabus* (unregistered taxis, here sometimes magical).

6. This particular PDF file can be located at the far bottom right hand side of your screen when you are accessing the Nigeria page (“Nigeria: Potential, Growth, and Challenges”) of the environment and society section on the Shell Global site, not to be confused with the Shell Nigeria website. Also not to be confused are “Royal Dutch Shell plc. and the companies in which it directly or indirectly owns investments” since these “are separate and distinct entities. But in this publication, the collective expression ‘Shell’ may be used for convenience where reference is made in general to these companies.” In other words, although ‘Shell’ is widely understood by those whose lives it directly impacts to mean one thing, the name itself is part of a dissembling shell game of quickly moving parts. The website mirrors this discursive sleight-of-hand by constantly moving material around, adding and removing images, and burying information.

7. Worldreader is a free app provided by a non-profit of the same name seeking to eradicate illiteracy. It is worth noting that Nokia, the multinational communications and information technology company, was a partner in the study.

8. Nigerian publisher Henry Chakava has argued that “bookless” societies in the North are post-book societies, where the same term in the global South means pre-book societies (Matthews).

9. Thanotourism, dark or grief tourism, is usually associated with historical sites and memorials. It is interesting to think of it here for places that are actively being traumatized.

10. We cannot trust in any of these numbers presented as fact despite the nifty graphic provided alongside them (they are as fictive as anything Okorafor writes): Shell has been repeatedly made to recant its claims in recent years as Amnesty International and other groups contest its claims. Shell is motivated to assign blame for spills elsewhere because it bears no legal responsibility for damage due to sabotage.

11. There are political risks as well, though while it is true that “[i]n countries like Nigeria where official brutality and paranoia feed off each other, unofficial writing begins to assume the status of latent insult” (Nixon 121), and that, as a result, writers of all stripes have been censored, arrested, and, as in the case of Saro-Wiwa, worse, it is also true that we must stave off the temptation to equate political risk with worthwhile writing. Even a critic like Wenzel, who writes thoughtfully about how Nigerian writing gets assessed and rewarded, seems to suggest a connection like this in her review of *Oil on Water*, when she notes: “In addition to the Caine Prize, Habila won a Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Waiting for an Angel* in 2003, a feat that he repeated in 2011 with *Oil on Water*—without even getting arrested” (“Behind the Headlines”).

12. In the latest news, Shell has agreed to pay one Delta community \$80 billion in compensation for two oil spills but according to one report they are “upbeat” at the ruling because they believe it will ultimately be resolved in their favor (Chinedu). The scale of the problem—Shell has admitted to more than 550 spills last year, according to Amnesty (“Nigeria: Hundreds”)—coupled with the protracted legal disputes over each claim, bode poorly for any hope of real reparations. Lastly, Shell has conveniently just divested itself of a 30% interest in its decaying assets in the region (“Shell Completes...”).

13. In this way, they exist on a continuum with a postcolonial vexing of form as habitual practice—see, for example, Katharine Burkitt’s *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique* (2012), where she reads prose novels, poetry, and epic for their unconventional subversions of form. Stephanie LeMenager, in the course of reflecting on *Oil on Water*, makes a similar leap from novel to poem when she proposes that “[i]f what a novel produces is a set of lingering sensations tied to the reader’s everyday memory through improvised situational analogies, perhaps it can be called a poem, too” (130).

Works Cited

- Akingbe, Niyi. “Speaking Denunciation: Satire as Confrontation Language in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry.” *Afrika Focus* 27.1 (2014): 47-67. Print.
- Akpan, Uwen. “Baptizing the Gun.” *The New Yorker*. 4 Jan 2010. Web. 3 Dec 2012. Print.
- . “Luxurious Hearses.” *Say You’re One of Them*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008. Print.
- Apter, Andrew. *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.
- Asumi, Judith Burdin. “Blood Oil in the Niger Delta.” Special Report. United States Institute of Peace. Aug 2009. Web. 21 Mar 2015.
- Atta, Sefi. “A Union on Independence Day.” *Eclectica Magazine*. (Oct/ Nov 2003). Web. 13 July, 2015.
- . “Independence Day.” *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration* 4 (Jan 2011). Web. 20 Mar 2015.
- Botting, Fred. “Relations of the Real in Lacan, Bataille and Blanchot.” *Substance* 23.1.73 (1994), 24-40. *JStor*. Web. 22 Mar 2015.
- “Bunker, v.” *OED Online*. Oxford UP, Mar 2015. Web. 6 Nov 2014.
- Burkitt, Katharine. *Literary Form as Postcolonial Critique*. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. Print.
- Chinedu, Okoro. “Shell Upbeat at Nigeria Spill Ruling.” *CAJ News Africa*. 23 Mar 2015. Web. 23 Mar 2015.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988. Print.

- Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland: PM Press (Common Notions), 2012. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Petrofiction." *The New Republic* 206.9 (2 Mar 1991). *EBSCOhost*. Web. 1-9. 31 May 2014.
- Habila, Helon. *Oil on Water*. New York: WW Norton, 2010. Print.
- Hitchcock, Peter. *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*. Stanford: Stanford UP: 2010. Print.
- . "Oil in an American Imaginary." *New Formations* 69.4 (2010): 81-97. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 1991. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. Print.
- Johnston, Ian. "Campaign to Put Ecocide on a Par with Genocide in an Attempt to Curb Environmental Destruction." *The Independent (UK)*. 21 Oct 2014. Web. 26 Mar. 2015.
- Kapstein, Helen. "The Hysterics of *District 9*." Spec. issue of *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, "Hysteria Manifest: Cultural Lives of a Great Disorder." 40.1 (2014): 155-75. Print.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. New York: Oxford UP: 2014. Print.
- Macdonald, Graeme. "Oil and World Literature." *American Book Review* 33:3 (Mar-Apr 2012): 7 + 31. *Project Muse*. Web. 14 May 2014.
- . "Research Note: The Resources of Fiction." *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 4.2 (2013): 1-24. Print.
- Mandelo, Brit. "We All Tell Stories About Her: *Kabu Kabu* by Nndeli Okorafor." 8 Nov 2013 Tor.com. Web. 25 Oct 2015.
- Matthews, Chris. "Will E-publishing Help Africa to Switch on to Reading?" 2 Dec 2013. BBC News. Web. 25 Mar 2015.
- "Mechanic, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford UP, Mar 2015. Web. 6 Nov 2014.
- "Nigeria: Hundreds of Oil Spills Continue to Blight Niger Delta." *Amnesty International*. 19 Mar 2015. Web. 25 Mar 2015.
- "Nigeria is a Bookless Country—Prof. Emenanjo." *Vanguard (Lagos)*. 7 July 2013. *LexisNexis*. Web. 21 March 2015.
- "Nigeria: Potential, Growth and Challenges." *Shell Global*. N.d. Web. 25 Mar 2015.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: MA: Harvard UP, 2011. Print.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. "The Popular Mechanic." *InterNova: International Science Fiction*. Ed. Michael Iwoleit. 2011. Web. 5 Jan 2012.
- . "Spider the Artist." *Kabu-Kabu*. Germantown, MD: Prime Books: 2013, 101-115. Print.
- Osuagwu, Prince. "Nigeria has highest smartphone penetration, says Lenovo." *Vanguard (Lagos)*. 12 Feb 2014. Web. 12 May 2014.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "Twice-Told Tales: A Review." *Graham's Magazine*. May 1842. Print.
- "Sabotage, n." *OED Online*. Oxford UP, Mar 2015. Web. 6 Nov 2014.
- "Shell Completes Divesting 30% Stake in Nigeria's OML 18 to Eroton for \$737M." *Rigzone*. 20 Mar 2015. Web. 25 Mar 2015.

- “Shell in Nigeria: Environmental Performance—Oil Spills.” Shell Companies in Nigeria: Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited, Shell Nigeria Exploration and Production Company Limited and Shell Nigeria Gas Limited. Apr 2013. Web. 25 Mar 2015. PDF file.
- “Shell in Nigeria: Oil Theft, Sabotage and Spills.” Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited, Shell Nigeria Exploration and Production Company Limited and Shell Nigeria Gas Limited. Apr 2014. Web. 25 Mar 2014. PDF file.
- “Shell: We are sorry.” YouTube. Web. 28 March 2010.
- Taylor, Charles. “Can I Get a Witness?” *New York Times*. 27 July 2008. Web. 25 Oct 2015.
- Umez, Uche Peter. “Wild Flames.” *Poor Mojo’s Almanac(k) Classics 2000-2011*. 16 Feb 2006. Web. 5 Jan 2012.
- Watts, Michael J. “Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology.” *Institute of International Studies*. 1999. UC Berkeley: Institute of International Studies. Web. *eScholarship*. 20 Mar 2015.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. “Behind the Headlines.” *American Book Review* 33.3 (Jan 2012): 13-14. Print.
- . “Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature.” *Postcolonial Studies* 9.4 (Dec 2006): 449-464. Print.
- West, Mark and Han Ei Chew. “Reading in the Mobile Era.” Ed. Rebecca Kraut. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014. Web. 20 Mar 2015.
- Yaeger, Patricia. “Editor’s Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources.” *PLMA* 126.2 (Mar 2011): 305-10. Print.