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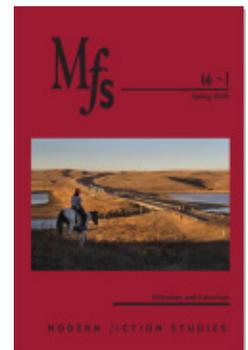
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Resource Wars and Resourceful Resistance: Gender Violence and Irreal Oil Environments in Two Global Novels by Women

Susan Comfort

In the last decade or so, battles over fossil fuel extraction and distribution have become much more prevalent around the world. With the decline of conventional sources of oil and gas, more extreme forms of fossil fuel production—from offshore drilling, natural gas fracturing, and bituminous rock excavation—have ignited movements and protests from the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at Standing Rock to the recent direct actions by Greenpeace in the North Sea and Arctic.¹ Amitav Ghosh has observed that, historically, with a few exceptions, stories of oil conflicts and encounters have been all but absent from global literature.² At the same time, as Patricia Yaeger suggests with the concept “energy unconscious” (306), conflicts over energy resources have been mostly unacknowledged or unconscious in literature of the Global North, even as fossil fuel’s energy powers the plotlines of capitalism’s seemingly boundless expansion. Moreover, even when conflicts surrounding oil are acknowledged, they

mostly are written about in terms of geopolitical contests or resource wars between competing hegemonies, not as struggles of dispossession, displacement, or degradation in daily life.³

Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* and Betoool Khedairi's *Absent* feature two different peripheral sites in the world-system of oil—Nigeria and Iraq—and may be read as accounts of oil's obscured stories and more particularly as accounts of resource wars by which colonized landscapes and lives are forcibly appropriated and restructured, especially by means of gender violence. Both may also be approached to analyze what I call the oil unconscious—that is, the ideological repressions of the ecological regimes built around oil and its extraction. Typically considered a feminist contribution to the tradition of Nigerian Civil War literature, Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* may also be read as an account of oil imperialism's attempt to reorder the country as a commodity frontier of oil, especially through its restructuring of socioecological relations of gender. Through the portrayal of its protagonist Debbie Ogedemgbe and her involvement in women's collective resistance, the novel anticipates major challenges women pose to petroviolence today in the Niger Delta. Regularly cited as a feminist depiction of Iraq during the first Gulf War and the 1990s sanctions, Iraqi-Scottish writer Betoool Khedairi's *Absent* may also be explored as a dramatization of the unseen dimensions of oil imperialism in its retelling of women's struggles for survival amidst the hegemonic instabilities and material degradations, or, to use Rob Nixon's term, the "slow violence" (2) of daily life in the aftermath of a resource war. Much more so than *Destination Biafra*, *Absent* is written as a bildungsroman—or an anti-bildungsroman, as I will explain—in its account of Dalal, a young woman whose life in Baghdad is disrupted by the war. Ultimately, in this vein, both novels dramatize the terrains of ongoing hegemonic struggle of oppression and defiance surrounding oil in daily life. For this reason, both novels should be prized for their prescient portrayals of resistance and revolutionary collectives organized around the possibilities of radical caregiving, sustainability, and environmental justice.

World-Ecology, Gender Violence, and Feminist Petroliterature

To appreciate the critical insights of the work by Emecheta and Khedairi into oil's obscured or missing stories, this essay adopts a critical approach that draws from political ecology, materialist feminism, and environmental justice, as well as recent work in the energy humanities, as I explain below. To situate the two novels' critique and resistance,

a good starting place is political ecologist Jason W. Moore's formulation of the capitalist world-system as a world-ecology, a concept explaining the capitalist development of core-periphery relations as structured by socioecological inequality. Moore argues that, historically, capitalism imposed a logic of the "commodity frontier" ("Wall Street" 44) on colonized zones, whereby a "dialectic of productivity and plunder" (43) operated to produce commodities such as sugar, silver, or oil through the systemic, violent appropriation of "unpaid work" (*Capitalism* 61) provided by "nature's free gifts" ("Wall Street" 43) as well as human reproductive labor, much of it assigned to women to repair and replenish labor-power—both daily and intergenerationally. From the installation of mining enclaves and sugar plantations in the Americas to the seizure and subsequent development of oil fields in the Middle East and West Africa, a relentless logic of extraction has rendered colonized human and extrahuman lives into world-ecology sacrifice zones.⁴ Socioecological formations—or "ecological regimes" (*Capitalism* 158), as Moore calls them—were developed, which generated vast social and ecological devastations, or "ecological revolutions" (150), along commodity frontiers that run the gamut of uneven development—including polarizing wealth and poverty, intensifying social division and civil conflict, dispossession and displacement, as well as catastrophic metabolic rifts of the soil, water and carbon cycles. Eventually, as contradictions mount, social resistance also intensifies at the same time that the sustaining "biophysical conditions" (157), are beset by crisis and exhaustion. In their dramatizations of socioecological revolutions accompanying oil wars, *Destination Biafra* and *Absent* anticipate many of these interlinked political and ecological conflicts in Nigeria and Iraq today. In the Niger Delta, for example, where tributaries and creeks of the Niger River crisscross mangrove swamps and rich alluvial soils for over 110,000 square miles, once-thriving fishing and farming communities of diverse ethnicities struggle to subsist amidst deadly social conflict on land, air, and water despoiled by an extensive network of leaky pipelines and the worst gas flaring in the world.⁵ In the region of Iraq, where a fertile alluvial plain is formed by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and particularly in the area where Baghdad is located, both urban and rural communities deal with ongoing civil strife, as well as toxic pollution to their air, soil, and water from surrounding oil refineries and industrial developments—all of which became much worse during the First Gulf War and the Sanctions Era.

To understand political ecologies of oppression and resistance along commodity frontiers of oil, this essay's approach also draws from

a rich and diverse archive of materialist feminism and environmental justice. Marxist ecofeminists have long argued that the capitalist world-system's exploitation of peripheral environments heavily depends on the violent expropriation of women's labor together with subsistence resources. As Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Marie Mies argue, "The concept of 'subsistence' . . . expresses the historical connectedness that exists, through colonization and development, between . . . industrial countries and the countries of the South. In both cases modern development happened and happens by means of war against subsistence" (19). In her work on capitalist primitive accumulation, Silvia Federici argues this expropriation has historically been activated through an "intense process of social degradation" (*Caliban and the Witch* 100). This process imposes gendered divisions of labor on women that redefine and restructure their political and familial identities, as well as their social status and sexuality, according to rigid delimitations of mother and housewife, or sister and daughter, while their reproductive and ecological knowledges are also marginalized. Just as environmental justice thinkers have, materialist feminists working in postcolonial contexts have also crucially emphasized that gender oppressions cannot be separated from race and class in understanding "environmental vulnerability," as Kamala Platt argues (143). In addition, feminist and queer environmental justice thinkers have done important work showing that women have been disproportionately subject to environmental violence, as toxicity and toxic discourses generate conditions of both material and ideological dread and anxiety while Malthusian population discourses target nonconforming sexualities for discipline and regulation.⁶ Heather M. Turcotte cites Sokari Ekine when documenting how women in the Niger Delta are exposed to "petro-sexual violence" (206), which produces "constant fear of injury and danger . . . substantiated as 'real' through material acts" (207) of sexual assault, abduction, physical abuse, and murder. In Iraq under sanctions, Nadje Al-Ali describes how women experienced environmental catastrophes amid much higher levels of insecurity both from domestic violence and from rising state regulation and surveillance curtailing their reproductive freedoms.⁷

Guided by these theoretical frameworks, the main goal of this essay is to analyze the two novels' representations of war as accounts of the missing stories of oil, particularly those involving violence and the struggle surrounding oil's appropriations of women's labor and commons resources in world-system extraction zones. In this vein, both novels may also be considered world-ecology literature, as

Michael Niblett defines the term to conceptualize global literature that links socioecological relations across zones of extraction, production, and consumption to the capitalist world-system.⁸ Adopting a comparative method with this focus on world-ecological themes, as Niblett argues, “holds out the possibility of detecting likenesses (and likenesses of the unlike) between peripheral literary forms as they respond to the same—yet differentially articulated—world-historical forces of capitalist modernity” (“World-Economy” 16). I use this approach to consider especially the creative methods of social realism that both novels employ in order to connect local and regional socioecological conflicts to larger contexts of uneven socioecological order. Using the tools of social realism, the novels evoke the socioecological totalities of their oil environments. In particular, the authors portray their female protagonists as mediating figures who move across multiple socioecological sites of the world-system, linking these sites in a portrayal of socioecological totalities of oil. Through the mediation of these characters, the typically repressed realms of social reproduction not only become visible but are also framed within a totality of an uneven socioecological order of oil. To different degrees, furthermore, both novels also blend irrealist and social realist techniques to represent disruptions to women’s lives and the environment under siege by primitive accumulation. Irrealism, as defined by Michael Löwy, “describes the absence of realism rather than an opposition to it” (195), and may in fact comele with realism to “illuminate social reality from the inside” (194), following a “logic of the imagination, of the marvelous, of the mystery or the dream” (196). Khedairi, for example, uses motifs of spirit possession and witchcraft to capture women’s feelings of changing conditions. Emecheta’s novel, mostly written in a mode of conventional social realism, also includes subtle, experimental techniques, such as the irruption of irrealist imagery of embattled environments and embodied alienation, to convey feelings of spatial and temporal dislocation. Finally, as I mentioned, both Khedairi and Emecheta use irrealism to illustrate disavowals in dominant discourse of oil dependency and the ecological regimes surrounding oil imperialism. I seek to show that the experimental aesthetics of both novels are comparable as methods of critique and resistance that bring into view the typically invisible struggles surrounding socioecological reproduction under assault by oil: the battles over livelihoods, commons resources, and the bodies of women in oil environments. In this regard, the two novels may be considered feminist petroliterature, which represents uneven incorporations of their peripheral ecologies into the world-

system as commodity frontiers of oil, while they also enable a critical imagination into the possibilities of resistance and revolutionary collectivities organized around priorities of socioecological reproduction, the commons, and environmental sustainability. As I will explain, the novels gesture toward modes of resistance that might be called resourceful resistance, because they defy extractive logics of oil imperialism by inventively reappropriating subsistence resources to meet the goals of collective health and well-being rather than extraction and accumulation. In doing so, they dramatize emerging revolutionary subjectivities that challenge gender roles and norms, which render women as objectified, disposable resources rather than equal subjects of history.

Resource War, Gender Violence, and Oil in *Destination Biafra*

Focusing on events leading up to and during the civil war, *Destination Biafra* depicts a country riven by resource conflict as the British attempt to reorder and restructure Nigeria as a commodity frontier of oil. Part I portrays initial interventions by the British in the divisive 1960 elections and the growing militarism of the first and second coups in 1966 that led up to the secession of Biafra in 1967. In depicting these events, the novel provides insights into the early formation of a petroregime in Nigeria. The novel emphasizes that this petroregime, set up explicitly as part of an effort to map and tap the country, replicated earlier colonial structures of division and militarization that lead to a bitter competition for control of oil and, eventually, civil war. The novel alludes to how Shell D'Arcy sought to maintain its control and profits, most notoriously by supplying arms to the Federal Forces under the leadership of Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon (represented by Saka Momoh in the novel). The Federal Forces exerted control over the oil fields in Niger Delta during the war in the 1969 Petroleum Act, a law that changed the revenue-sharing formula to redirect the bulk of oil revenue to the central government.⁹ Part II of the novel shifts to an account of the civil war, with a focus on the battles and atrocities in and near Asaba, a city situated on the western side of the Niger River just north of the Niger Delta.¹⁰ Part II is constructed mostly through the perspective of the character Debbie Ogedemgbe, an ethnic minority and a young, privileged, Oxford-educated woman recently returned from the UK. Through her perspective, the novel focuses on petrosexual violence experienced by women, as well as the war on subsistence. The novel follows her and a group of mostly Igbo refugees she meets during her travels across the Mid-Western Region

to Biafra as an emissary of the Federal Government to negotiate a peace with C. Odumegwu Ojukwu (represented by Chijioke Abosi in the novel). Debbie's attempt to broker peace was inspired by Wole Soyinka's meeting with Ojukwu, for which Soyinka was imprisoned by the Federal government. Emecheta herself is an Igbo from Ibuza near the border area of Asaba and was in the UK during the war. After growing up and receiving a western education, Emecheta left Nigeria with her husband in 1961 for the UK, where she later divorced and began to write while she raised five children. Significantly, in its portrayal of Debbie's and the refugee's ordeals, the novel provides a social realist account that occasionally uses irrealist techniques to reveal the invisible workings of oil imperialism in daily life that cause women to experience increasing violence and embodied alienation.

The novel opens in the governor-general's residence shortly before the first free elections. Governor Macdonald and his advisor, Captain Alan Grey, discuss the imminent elections with a great deal of anxiety about the coming changes. They plot their plans to maintain control of the country, particularly its oil, and reveal that the British are seeking to reorder Nigeria as a commodity frontier of oil. In a memorable scene, Grey casually remarks, "Nine-tenths of the country is still to be thoroughly mapped, to say nothing of being tapped.' . . . He fished out a map of Nigeria which he spread on the polished table, almost knocking over the whisky glasses in his enthusiasm" (7). Seeing the world through an extractive perspective, one could say that Grey exudes a heady commodity frontier logic, which seeks, in his words, to gain "control of a greater share of the mines of Jos, of the groundnut farming in the North and the tin deposits in Bauchi." Grey seeks to render the landscape of Nigeria into an "abstract social nature" ("End of Cheap Nature" 296), or, as Moore defines it, a "web of relations that capital reshapes so as to advance the contributions of unpaid biospheric 'work' for capital accumulation" (295). Indeed, throughout the period of independence leading to the beginning of the civil war, the goal to reshape the terrain of Nigeria, specifically the Niger Delta, to supply "cheap energy" (297) to core countries of the world-system had begun to be realized. At the war's onset in 1967, twelve enormous oil fields and "300 miles of pipelines had been constructed, and one and a half million feet of wells sunk; output had ballooned to 275,000 barrels per day" (Watts 36).

Shortly after the British consolidated control over the country, they staked an interest in oil in 1914, when they proclaimed that all oil and minerals under Nigerian soil to be the property of the Crown. Oil was discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956, and commercial

production began in 1958 under the control of Shell Oil Company, which at that time was a joint venture of D'Arcy Exploration Company and the British colonial government. Under colonialism, the Niger Delta was devastated by the Atlantic Slave Trade, which, as Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglass underscore, "before it was displaced by the trade in palm oil in the 1840s, saw several million able-bodied . . . [persons] taken from the Delta and its hinterland" (6). Mapped and tapped as a commodity frontier of palm oil through the nineteenth century, Nigeria supplied the main lubricant for the wheels of locomotives and factory machines of the industrial revolution. This process peaked in the nineteenth century when palm oil trade became the main lubricant for the wheels of locomotives and factory machines of the industrial revolution. In the late nineteenth century, the British traded with African middlemen. However, after wars of conquest and colonial consolidation, the British governed this system in Nigeria through policies of divide and rule, with institutions and ideologies that amplified regional and ethnic differences. Through these policies and ideologies, the British created a system of citizens and subjects that served to secure African labor and environment in rural areas for dispossession and exploitation.¹¹

Destination Biafra underscores that after independence the British sought to establish a petroregime of rule through the imposition of governing structures that mimicked democracy but in fact merely replicated colonialism in a new form. In the first few chapters, the novel represents the interventions by the British directly through the characters of Grey and Macdonald, who refer to this ruse of democracy in their plan to institute "proportional representation" (9) through ethnicity-based party elections, after which they would make any consequential leadership appointments. At one campaign stop where the poor are bribed with food to vote, Grey worries that the ploy might backfire and ignite class consciousness. Timothy Mitchell explains that after formal independence Europeans imposed political structures on petrostates, first applied in South Africa, where, as a "laboratory for the development of the self-governing colonial state" (81), so-called "separate development" (83) along lines of race and ethnicity, was imposed rather than democracy. Under this system, the British came to regard themselves as humanitarians offering development assistance and guidance, even as they engaged in blatant forms of extraction and nefarious resource wars.¹²

Part I of *Destination Biafra* shows that, under this governing system, and as a result of imperialist-induced competition for revenue from oil, the newly independent Nigeria becomes rigidly divided by

ethnicity. Under these conditions, some national leaders justify organizing a military coup as a necessary precondition of liberation from neocolonialism. However, the dream of decolonization, signified for the coup plotters by the new name of Biafra, after a precolonial West African kingdom, becomes a nightmare of betrayal and counter-coup. In this account, *Destination Biafra* demonstrates how the political arrangements of a neocolonial petroregime were connected to rising militarized nationalism and the formation of petrostate structures that replicate hierarchical command structure of the former colonial military administration. It emphasizes that most of the country's new national ruling elite were also members of the military trained by the British at Sandhurst Military Academy. What is remarkable about the novel, in this regard, is its prescient portrayal of military repression in and around Asaba that anticipates the petrostate repression, especially the petrosexual violence directed against women, in the Niger Delta today.¹³

Part I repeatedly illustrates how oil imperialism is repressed in displays of benevolent humanitarianism in the elite drawing rooms, banquet halls, and homes where former colonial overlords mingle casually with the rising stars of nationalist leadership. What emerges is something akin to what Yaeger refers to as an “energy unconscious” (309), which operates below the surface to generate elaborate disavowals of underlying oil regimes of rule and structural violence. The novel deploys social realist ironies that track the disavowals that will define the elite neocolonial culture of oil. For example, the character of Alan Grey—whose name bespeaks his ambiguous affiliation—maintains the veneer of a peaceful arbiter even as he directs the army to be at ready should interethnic conflict break out after the elections. Along these same lines, one could say that Emecheta's portrayal of Grey is an indictment of the benign face of oil imperialism that obscures its structural violence. As critics have argued, Grey's opaque character evokes the historically covert maneuvers by the British to gain control of Nigeria's oil.¹⁴ Furthermore, Emecheta shows that Grey's public face toward Debbie projects a liberal equanimity of gender equality, even as his inward reflections about her reveal typically repugnant colonial attitudes of race and gender. When Debbie confronts him at the end of the novel with her experiences of sexual assault during the war, for example, Grey's response belies an attitude of casual liberality combined with racialized, sexist condescension that invalidates her experience: “Alan considered this for a while, the stories of torture, of rape, of mass murder, and he looked again at her, but found it difficult to relate such happenings to Debbie. Surely she was being over-dramatic; she had been under great strain.

He shrugged” (229). In these few lines of Grey’s arrogant dismissal, Emecheta tracks the erasures of oil’s violence, the oil unconscious.

If the first half of *Destination Biafra* portrays the dialectics of oil imperialism that explode into a resource war, the second half features a grim chain of causes and consequences. Among these are some of the war’s well-known atrocities, such as the genocidal killings of approximately 50,000 Igbo in the northern areas of the country. The novel’s focus becomes the repressed dimensions of this war—namely the war’s assault on a socioecological order of subsistence and the socioecological relations of gender and sexuality. As such, *Destination Biafra* portrays how oil imperialism subordinates social reproduction to a commodity-based extractive social formation.

As part of its regime of colonial rule, the British reorganized socioecological relations of gender and sexuality to gain material control over land and trade. As Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí explains, the British set up an administrative system based on the “exclusion of women from the newly created colonial public sphere” (123), in that they refused to recognize female forms of traditional authority while elevating male authority as warrant chiefs and codifying a legal system of patriarchal customary law. As a result, for women the “access to citizenship [became] mediated through marriage, through the ‘wifization of citizenship’” (127). The 1929 Aba Women’s War, the most well-known among women’s acts of resistance, involved an uprising of Igbo women in Owerri Province against the proposed system of taxes. At the time, women struggled under newly imposed gender divisions of labor, which, with more men working for wages, diminished the value of women’s work and individual status. Women not only lost access to land due to individuated private property rights that often included provisions that excluded wives and women relatives, but they also sometimes lost control of production, such as when the British introduced mills that mechanized the processing of palm fruit—a development that women resisted in the 1951 and 1952 Ibibio uprisings. Furthermore, Nigerian women had to contend with interrelated structures of gender and race that prescribed a domestic ideal of mother and housewife in opposition to the maligned figure of the prostitute. In a racialized gender dialectic of class that Maria Mies describes as “colonization and housewifization” (74), women’s reproductive resources were seized in rounds of primitive accumulation through an uneven process of gender subjectification that degraded women’s status. As Amina Mama argues, colonial states cast African women in urban areas as “prostitutes” (50) and disciplined them through “periodic waves of victimization and harassment” to provide services to “the colonized male workforce.” In postcolonial

Nigeria, as Mama goes on to argue, “wars of indiscipline” (57) have been waged by the state “which attributed the country’s worsening economic and political crisis to ‘moral decadence and laxity,’” with the result that “dispossessed beggars, homeless people, street hawkers, and women were all subject to all manner of harassment” (57–58). Arguably, prior to the neoliberal era, the worst period of disciplinary action against women was during the Nigerian Civil War.

In the portrayal of Debbie’s struggles, the novel shows how women came under renewed and heightened attempts to regulate their identities, sexuality, and bodies during the war, especially when faced with the threat of rape. *Destination Biafra* is known for challenging the mostly male canon of Nigerian Civil War literature by means of realist portraits of gender relations that undercut binary social constructions of women as either housewives and mothers of the nation or prostitutes. Using social realism, the novel internalizes the conflict within Debbie to reveal how her struggle over gender identity is a product of oil imperialism. Debbie may be considered what Georg Lukács refers to as a mediating figure. For Lukács, the social type represented in realist fiction is not a social average but rather “a central figure in whose life all the important extremes of the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organized” (142). Debbie’s character actualizes her milieu’s contradictions. For example, she is clearly, if problematically, intended to embody a national resolution to ethnic divisions. Emecheta writes in her foreword to the book that, as an Itsekiri, an ethnic minority, Debbie “is neither Igbo nor Yoruba nor Hausa, but simply a Nigerian” (viii).¹⁵ More significantly, Debbie embodies the contradictions of gender, race, and class of her historical moment that erupt into painful internal conflict after she rejects any aspirations for an upper-class life as housewife and mother to become a soldier in the Federal army. After this decision, these contradictions remain fraught, as she is repeatedly subject to social degradation through misogynist insult and assault.

Through the social realist depiction of Debbie, the novel also rewrites the allegory of the African nation, usually represented by an idealist patriarchal heteronormative family, to advance instead a project of decolonization based on liberation from neocolonial exploitations of class and expropriations of gender. Susan Andrade argues that Emecheta’s work represents women’s community organizations as alternative emblems to the patriarchal family in the genealogy of the nation.. In Emecheta’s novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, for example, the protagonist Nnu Ego and her children survive poverty through

her collective organizing with other women in credit cooperatives. In *Destination Biafra*, the patriarchal family model is soundly critiqued in an allegorical rendering of both Nigeria and Biafra as stillborn offspring of privileged families.¹⁶ In contrast, Debbie's decision to remain unmarried to raise children orphaned by the war represents a bold revision of the allegory. Debbie also unmistakably embodies a critique of the Fanonian revolutionary, as her initial step to join the military and become a nationalist suggests. In the course of her struggle, she rejects not only colonial class and racial hierarchies but also colonial gender hierarchies that persist in the nationalist ideologies of an idealized "Mother Africa" (Stratton 39) and forms of "wifeism" (Abdullah 213), which, as critic Hussaina Abdullah explains, attempt to neutralize gender rights activism in Nigeria by requiring women's groups to receive official sanction from the state.¹⁷ In the end, she repudiates these ideals in rejecting marriage and instead dedicates herself to a public role that involves becoming a guardian and caregiver to children orphaned by the war. As Ann Marie Adams persuasively argues, Debbie rejects this "potential role in 'wifeism'" (297) and instead at the end of the conflict "consciously chooses to work independently of the government in order to enact reform." I will suggest later that her actions prefigure revolutionary subjectivities that form around battles of socioecological reproduction.

In its dramatization of the trek by Debbie and the group, the novel stages multiple unreal scenes of gender subjectification, suggesting through the use of repeated motifs an emerging structure of feeling and a systemic pattern of gender violence. By representing feelings of uncanny menace in the most familiar spaces, the novel shows how the war produces structures of fear Debbie experiences in her lived, unreal oil environments. On several occasions, for example, Debbie registers feeling differently, almost trapped, in her family's home, where "the humid air hung thick and tangible like fog" (59) during moments "when all was so quiet that it almost seemed unreal," suggesting the ways that petroviolence evokes feelings of isolation and confinement in domestic spaces. These feelings reinforce boundaries between private and public spaces. In this unreal scene, which directly follows the first coup, there is a reminder that "regulation relies on constant fear" (207), as Heather Turcotte says of petrosexual violence, while it also suggests how systemic gender violence is rendered invisible when relegated to a private space.

On the journey, Debbie has multiple unreal experiences of gender subjectification. For example, she experiences bodily objectification, an awareness conveyed by her detached focalization: "As

she moved she became aware of herself as a woman, a body, different from the mass of all the other passengers in the lorry. She knew that hundreds of eyes were following and watching” (165). Prior to this moment, Nigerian troops have been sent on a counter-offensive. While driving on one of the main roads, Debbie, her mother, and her traveling companions encounter these troops. The troops kill the Igbos accompanying Debbie, rape a pregnant woman, and kill two of the woman’s infants. Debbie is gang-raped as well. The novel describes her reaction with the same focalized detachment and bodily disorientation:

She could make out the figure of the leader referred to as Bale on top of her, then she knew it was somebody else, then another person. . . . She felt herself bleeding, though her head was still clear. Pain shot all over her body like arrows. She felt her legs being pulled this way and that, and at times she could hear her mother’s protesting cries. But eventually, amid all the degradation that was being inflicted on her, Debbie lost consciousness. (127)

In this brief passage, the novel succinctly conveys how sexual assault, as Carolyn Nordstrom argues, undermines “the core constructions of identity and ontological security in its most personal and profound sense” (151). To convey the trauma of this experience, the novel recounts it from Debbie’s perspective, and, as Jessie Sagawa observes, Emecheta thus ensures that rape is understood as “more about power and control than anything else” (32). The novel also minimizes Debbie’s affective response, arguably to avoid an emphasis on an aura of victimization that might play into colonial stereotypes of African conflicts.¹⁸ At the same time, the novel maintains that she suffers from ongoing trauma, as it uses the loaded term “tainted woman” (150) to suggest a process of racialized gendered abjection that assigns blame for women’s victimization to women themselves.¹⁹ As one soldier’s trivializing response to Debbie’s mother’s plea for help after the assault suggests, the rape is considered a normal and natural course of war: “Hundreds of women have been raped—so what? It’s war. She’s lucky to be even alive. She’ll be alright” (129). In this and other scenes of sexual assault, Emecheta critiques the use of the fallen woman archetype in Nigerian civil war literature to argue instead that the war functioned to discipline women who transgressed boundaries of gender. At the same time, she links this violence to the state’s attempt to control territory and to enclose commons. Most importantly, as Florence Stratton argues, Emecheta is ensuring that gender-based violence becomes part of the historical record of the war.

Part II of *Destination Biafra* is punctuated with several scenes of horrific, spectacular violence, but it also dwells on the aftermath of violence, such as in scenes of eerily abandoned unreal cassava fields. Examining the aftermath of violence brings attention to lesser-known stories of oil imperialism. At one stop, Debbie and the group of refugees come across “a cassava farm [that] looked like a battlefield [with] corpses and trampled cassava plants” (204). Not only does this scene evoke the quiet terrors of the war, but it also is suggestive of objectives and consequences of primitive accumulation that will become a regular feature of life in parts of Africa under globalization. In particular, it addresses the displacement of rural women farmers from the land. Federici observes that there are “two objectives [that may be discerned] in the prevailing patterns of war in Africa. . . . First, war forces people off the land, it separates the producers from the means of production, a condition for the expansion of the global labor market” (*Revolution* 79). Second, “war reclaims the land for capitalist use, boosting the production of cash crops and export-oriented agriculture.” Women’s testimonies from the Niger Delta provide evidence that state violence has been used to intimidate communities to consent to displacement, oil production, and environmental degradation.²⁰ For example, Sokari Ekine has documented through interviews with members of the Federation of Ogoni Women’s Organizations that the army used brutal sexual violence to suppress their involvement and, generally, to demoralize the Ogoni movement in the 1990s.

In similar scenes of the aftermath of violence, the novel uses haunted imagery of irrealism to evoke the neglected stories behind wartime famine. The imagery evokes the resource war’s effects on daily life, which registers as losses of the commons, subsistence knowledge, and local ecologies. Emecheta provides an early account of this dynamic when the group comes across another deserted farm that had been thoughtfully cultivated following cultural traditions to provide convivial sociality:

There were signs that the farm was still being worked on; the young yam stalks looked well tended. In the middle of the farm was the usual resting hut known as *uno ogo*. Every farm had one these, where farmers gathered in the middle of the day to cook the fish they caught on their way to their farms and to roast the yam taken from their *apata*. They would eat, and drink and drink and then gossip. (197)

During the civil war, as safe access to the commons was lost, many communities came to rely on international aid for food and shelter far from their villages. As a result, as Federici argues of more recent

wars, “food aid contributes to the displacement and the relocation of rural communities, by setting up feeding centers organized around the needs of the NGOs” (*Revolution* 80).

In the chapters that follow, especially in the chapter entitled “Women’s War,” the novel presents a critique of oil’s assault on subsistence and a dramatization of women’s collective resistance that recalls Nigeria’s most famous women’s protests against colonialism, the Aba Women’s Uprisings, while also anticipating the many actions taken by women on the Niger Delta. In the stories of Debbie’s and her group’s struggles to survive amidst the violence around Asaba, the novel depicts the invisible stories of oil, its war on subsistence through the death of children from kwashiorkor, the refugee crisis, and widespread food insecurity. For Debbie, the key shift in perspective toward what may be considered revolutionary subjectivity comes when, after a nighttime struggle in a muddy swampland with the group of refugee women, the women emerge in the morning relieved to be alive:

This swampy grove was the type the sun never reached. Thick green vegetation hung over head, and around them were many creeping plants with superficial roots. They all kept very still, holding their breath. Though the sound of shooting had stopped they could not tell where, let alone who, the soldiers were. Were they Nigerians or Biafrans? . . . They spent the rest of the night on their feet in the swamp, holding tightly on to one another so no one would be lost. What looked like a gleam of light worked its way through the intricately entwined tropical forest. . . . They all looked like masqueraders covered in chalky mud as if ready to celebrate some festival. . . . This triggered in Debbie memories of a face-pack she had once applied when she visited a beautician in London. Now she tentatively peeled mud from her face and felt the skin underneath. It was a smooth as it had been on that day many years before, when she had had to pay a large amount of money to get the same effect. Now she paid nothing. (201)

Multiple layers of material and symbolic meaning assemble here to articulate a critique of oil imperialism. First, evoking Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, the novel depicts this community of women becoming culturally liberated from colonial ideologies of racialized gender as they emerge into a new gender ideology of solidarity across class and ethnicity. At the same time, the author conveys Debbie’s decentering experience from bourgeois white femininity through irreal figurations of peripheral aesthetics. Benedict Anderson has called figurations like these “spectre[s] of comparison” and “incur-

able doubled vision” (qtd. in Graham 467) because they register disparate core and peripheral realities. In this case, they contrast core and peripheral realities of racialized gender. Furthermore, the moment marks a turn toward an identification with embattled subaltern women in a revaluation of non-commodified peripheral ecologies, knowledges, and the reproductive labor of women. In this space of solidarity, Debbie’s change in perspective represents a shift toward a revolutionary subjectivity forged through collective survival and caregiving amongst other women. Superficially rooted notions of gender, race, and ethnicity from colonialism are transformed in a socioecological space of regeneration and, allegorically, the women are reconstructed as revolutionary subjects of a new nation. Indeed, by using the word “mud,” originally from the German *mutter* meaning both “mother” and “swamp,” the novel suggests that both colonial and nationalist notions of gendered reproduction are rejected, especially ideals of motherhood.

The events in the swampy grove are also a reminder of the double character of social reproduction, since its activities provide for capital’s labor-power but at the same time sustain and reaffirm the worth of the lives and living systems capitalism seeks to appropriate and devalue. Reproduction, as Federici argues, is “ground zero” (*Revolution 2*) for revolutionary practice. Always a potentially subversive practice, social reproduction may include a creative capacity for developing skills and knowledge that enable one to fulfill basic needs—including the need for freedom from alienation and expropriation that Marx insists is fundamental to species being. This is resourceful resistance that refuses the expropriation of energy, labor, and knowledge by capitalism. It instead inventively reappropriates those resources toward the collective goals of socioecological health and well-being. This was the case historically, during the 1929 Women’s Aba Riots or the 1950s uprisings in Ibibio when women fought colonial control over subsistence activities, and this is also the case in the Niger Delta where this revolution is ongoing today. Presently, women-led movements are struggling to reclaim the common resources of land, water, and air. Current movements reflect the 1984 Ogharefe and 1986 Ekpan women’s protests of oil production pollution and land expropriations in Warri and the dramatic 2002–03 occupations by women of Chevron/Texaco facilities, which eventually led to a national general strike in Nigeria, international consumer boycotts, and, notably, became connected to anti-Iraq War protests.

At the end of the novel, Debbie carries forward this vision of decolonization. She finally arrives in the East to meet with Abosi,

convinces him to allow her to bring food and medicine to Biafrans, and later blocks his attempt to arrange delivery of more weapons to Biafra. She also rejects marriage to Alan Grey and decides to adopt children orphaned in the war. Thus, she again rejects the subordination of reproduction in naturalized notions of motherhood and instead adopts a proto-revolutionary subjectivity of caregiver citizen.

Resource Depletions and Toxic Gender Violence in Betool Khedairi's *Absent*

As one of the main sites of global oil production since 1908, the modern Middle East has been shaped by petro-imperialism's resource wars. During and after World War I, most of the Middle East came under the military occupation and political control of European colonizers, which would later help to secure huge oil profits for oil corporations. Around the same time, Nigeria was amalgamated as a British colony. As Rashid Khalidi observes, "a pattern of unequal relations" (82) established in the nineteenth century between European powers and the Middle East was reinforced and extended in the twentieth century under the dual mandate, a mode of governance designed by British colonial administrator Frederick Lugard in Nigeria. In Iraq, in particular, the British imposed this style of rule after invading the country in 1916 and confronting widespread revolt in 1920. Even after Iraq achieved formal independence, the British controlled the pipelines and petrostate apparatus, rendering the country into a commodity frontier of oil. Iraq took control of its oil resources under Law Number 80 after the 1958 Revolution as the country underwent a few years of democratic sovereignty and socially progressive changes. For instance, the Personal Status Code that gave women more inheritance and marriage rights under Qasim's government. However, since the Baathist coups of the 1960s, the rents from oil enabled governing factions to rule brutally with impunity, most often in alliance with reactionary forces and with the support of foreign powers to ensure the huge profit windfalls for multinational oil companies. All of that changed with the Gulf War, the most immediate cause of which was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, an act that threatened not just Kuwait oil supplies to core countries, but also the entire world-system of oil. As Daniel Yergin argues, "If [Saddam Hussein] kept the grip on Kuwait, Iraq would be the planet's dominant oil power, and . . . he would gain a decisive say over the world economy" (755).

Iraqi-Scottish writer Betoool Khedairi's 2005 novel *Absent* is narrated by a young woman, Dalal, and provides an account of the obscured stories of oil's resource wars in its dramatization of daily life in Iraq during the years following the Gulf War in the Sanctions Era. Orphaned when a forgotten landmine killed her parents, Dalal is later disfigured after her family postpones high-cost medical treatment. In addition to her story, the novel gives us stories of other residents of a middle-class apartment block in Baghdad when Iraq was reeling from sanctions, intermittent bombing by the US, and rising militarization and reaction in the 1990s. In its dramatization of the slow collapse of the country's infrastructure, its health, water, and food systems, the novel is a particularly vivid critique of the invisible toll of war and sanctions on the material agencies of women and the Iraqi environment. Specifically, the novel dramatizes the disproportionate impacts on women as they bear the effects of toxicity and pollution. Women experience burdens of labor, marginalization, and insecurity as forces of militarization and reaction become overwhelming. Through a social realist account that frequently experiments with irrealism, *Absent* links causes with consequences in a portrayal of the slow violence of oil imperialism. Like Debbie, Dalal is also a mediating figure. Moreover, through its focus on Dalal's interrupted life, the novel experiments with realism to subvert the classic realist bildungsroman. Similar to Emecheta's novel, *Absent* engages with irrealist tropes and figurations to register oil's hidden stories of socioecological reproduction in crisis in order to focus on gender and environmental violence in daily life.

Absent opens with an account of slow violence, the absurd death of Dalal's parents from a landmine leftover from the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Landmines, as Rob Nixon observes, may ignite decades after a conflict amid "ecologies of the aftermath" (199), which inflict violence on civilians "long after the troops have gone home, long after a war's soldiers have been demobilized" (223). This opening scene situates Dalal's story in an "ecology of the aftermath" and a wider, ongoing and systemic geopolitical conflict of oil, suggesting among other things that she will not follow a conventional path of gender interpellation. Dalal's name, given to her by her adoptive parents, means "the absent one" (2). The spectral quality of this name represents her as a figure that not only hauntingly reminds her uncle, Abu Ghayeb, or "father of the absent one," of his dashed hopes for patrilineal descendants but also signifies more broadly Iraq's crisis of futurity and socioecological collapse. As I will explain, it is through the reordering of socioecological relationships in daily life, especially socioecological relations of gender and sexuality, that the novel nar-

rates the losses and absences created by war, as well as the possibilities for collective change and resourceful resistance.

Through Dalal's often grimly ironic narration, the novel records myriad forms of socioecological crisis and slow collapse during the Sanctions Era, including epidemics of respiratory and intestinal disease from gas leaks, pesticide poisonings, and sewage spills after facilities are bombed; increased cancer deaths from depleted uranium and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) leeching into soil, water, and air; food and medicine shortages; and mental illness from chronic fear. In the beginning of hostilities, in August 1990, when sanctions were imposed by UN Resolution 661, "70% of all foods, agricultural necessities, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies that were imported could no longer be obtained" (Dabrowska and Hann 93). During the first month of the war, US-led coalition forces conducted an "average 2000 bombing raids a day, [with] U.S. aircraft alone dropp[ing] 88,000 tons of explosives on Iraq, the equivalent of nearly five Hiroshima nuclear blasts." "So-called smart bombs" (92) are reported to have missed seventy percent of their targets, landing instead on schools, homes, mosques, churches, and farms. Those that did land on their targets destroyed bridges, roads, sewage treatment plants, generating stations, and other vital infrastructures. Weaponry included cluster bombs and highly lethal depleted uranium. The United Nations reports that "just over 290 metric tons of DU projectiles were fired by the US during the Gulf War" (68), destroying farm land and contaminating ground water. More than 46,900 children died from the Gulf war and trade sanctions between January and August 1991 (Ascherio 931). UNICEF estimates that, from 1991 to 1998, an estimated half-million children died from respiratory, intestinal, and malnutrition-related diseases. Even after the United Nations implemented an oil-for-food program in 1996, imports of medicines, hospital equipment, and educational materials were mostly restricted under dual use concerns that they may be used to manufacture weapons.

Absent paints a dire picture of how deteriorating material realities force changes to the routines and cultural rhythms of the city, as bodies and living systems are increasingly burdened to the point of exhaustion. In the novel, the environment of Baghdad—its buildings, trees, plants—is depicted as atrophying from neglect and degradation. At the same time, many of the novel's images of nature are graphic reminders, both symbolically and materially, of the war's direct and brutal violence. One such image that is repeated throughout the novel is a grove of date palms that stands with bare trunks, the

tops sheared off by a bomb. Abu Ghayeb, once an aspiring painter and admirer of the Iraqi modern art movement *Al Ruwad*, collects paintings and posters by Iraqi artists, which evoke socioecological changes through surrealist imagery. One such painting depicts a tank firing depleted uranium shells at horses with bodies made of “striped barrels” (72) that leech bloody blue chemicals. These conditions are registered in the bodies of Dalal’s friends and family: her uncle suffers from psoriasis, an inflammatory immune-deficiency condition; her friend Ilham develops breast cancer; her neighbor Sami is debilitated by diabetes from shortages of insulin and medical care; and Dalal deals with facial palsy from a lack of medical treatment. They all must engage in daily resource battles in order to survive.

In contrast to direct imperialist intervention and war in *Destination Biafra*, *Absent* focuses on the slow violence of oil imperialism. That is to say, the emphasis of *Absent*, as the title suggests, is the evocation of absent or invisible systemic violence that unravels lives and living systems. In doing so, the novel critiques an oil unconscious behind oil imperialism—in particular, the rationalizations and disavowals of oil imperialism that do not acknowledge its structural or slow violence. For example, Abu Ghayeb and Dalal critique an oil unconscious through their uses of irreal imagery vividly satirizing western newspaper articles that downplay the war’s civilian deaths and destruction of infrastructure by celebrating so-called smart weapons and related technocratic innovations like genetic engineering. After reading about a lab that has grown human ears on the back of a mouse, Abu Ghayeb mockingly observes that “our fields are full of human limbs and appendages of all varieties. Some people try to grow limbs while others are born without them” (66). In evocations of an oil unconscious, Khedairi’s *Absent* also portrays rampant uncertainty and paranoid speculation on the war’s causes and consequences. For example, Dalal’s friend Ilham remarks, “Don’t you believe what they tell you, Dalal; that this is a military operation. We’re the real targets” (58). In another example, Dalal’s neighbor Sami, blind from untreated diabetes and traumatized by the loss of his wife, critiques the western media’s suppression of the horrors of the war in an irreal testimony: “How can people die smiling? Cluster bombs have rained down on soldiers. . . . One of them was turned into charcoal in an instant. All that remained were his teeth that smiled out to the camera” (76–77). Just as Sami’s irreal documentation interrogates western media’s obfuscations and its oil unconscious, Khedairi’s novel uses irrealism to challenge dominant accounts of the war and sanctions as actions intended to protect human rights, especially women’s

rights. The novel reveals instead how the war's slow and structural violence undermines social and economic rights while also evoking oil as the war's irreal, secret subtext.

In a narrative that often reads more like a diary than a novel, Dalal registers systemic effects and irreal alienations in her daily encounters with the ironies of living under sanctions.²¹ Much of her estrangement is traced to alienation from gender norms in her atypical familial relations and from her struggles with facial disfigurement. This estrangement leads her to question gender norms, particularly gendered aesthetics of beauty. Deriving much of its bleak humor from the gap between gender expectations and the reality of her life, the novel may be considered an anti-bildungsroman because it is not a story of how a gender education culminates seamlessly in life as a conventional housewife or mother. Rather, it is a story of how gender education in oil environments, amid frequently extreme conditions, potentially leads to a revolutionary subjectivity engaged in collective caregiving and change. Andrade has examined how postcolonial African women writers subvert the classic bildungsroman, drawing on Fredric Jameson to explain that the classic bildungsroman becomes "the epitome of highly charged technological innovation. Its technological innovation is a machine for producing [bourgeois] subjectivity" (120). Andrade argues that, in novels by African women writers, female characters are unable to resolve the problematic and conflictual gender and race interpellations of colonialism toward a coherent narrative resolution and instead either utterly fail or postpone a resolution. Dalal's story utterly diverges from the classic bildungsroman in her failure to follow the conventional trajectory of gender interpellation. Even as she studies French literature at the university with the hope of becoming a translator, the crisis in socioecological conditions created by war and sanctions make any conventional future highly unlikely. Also, her engagement with repetitive tasks of reproduction run counter to the linear patterns of self-development represented by plotlines of a conventional bildungsroman.²² As a collation of days in which nothing seemingly significant happens, *Absent's* diary-like narrative form represents the spatio-temporal pattern of life organized solely around reproduction.

Absent situates Dalal's story within Iraq's history of oil imperialism, as it looks back to the heyday of Iraqi oil wealth in the 1970s. The novel repeatedly invokes the ironic metonym "Days of Plenty" (2)—which is also a common expression in Iraqi culture—to show that the petroregime under the Baathist Era depended on gender divisions of labor and of private and public spaces in daily life. In the 1970s, Abu Ghayeb and his wife live a prosperous and socially

rich cultural life as part of the urban middle class. This life is defined for Dalal's aunt, in part, by conventional bourgeois roles of mother and housewife. At the same time, she does have some social power outside the home. As Valentine M. Moghadam explains, during the 1970s some Arab states, including Iraq, attempted to appease their conservative political bases by passing stringent legislation restricting women's rights, despite the fact that there was a need to bring women into the work force. Nonetheless, amidst militarization by the Ba'ath Party in Iraq, there were significant new opportunities for women in professions and government.

Absent's portrait of Iraq under UN sanctions shows that life for women changed dramatically in the 1990s, as they dealt with much more hegemonic instability, crisis, and contradiction, particularly surrounding conditions of social reproduction. For example, enormous male casualties from the Gulf War and the preceding Iran-Iraq War left many women alone to survive and support children on their own. At the same time, women often had to find ways to become more independent even as they faced increased attempts to regulate their sexuality and bodies. Notably, during this period, Saddam Hussein attempted to maintain legitimacy after the Gulf War by appeasing conservative patriarchal constituencies with oppressive gender legislation, such as "the 1990 presidential decree granting immunity to men who had committed honour crimes" (Al-Ali 202). As Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali observes, "On the level of government discourse as well as within society, Iraqi women became the bearers of honor of the whole country. They became 'potential prostitutes'" (201).

Absent represents Baghdad under sanctions as an unreal city pervaded by threats of petrosexual violence in order to convey the conditions of women during this period. In one memorable image, as black rain falls after a bombing that causes the soot in the air to run black along the city's buildings, people say that "Bagdad is wearing eyeliner today. Eyeliner provided by the Allied forces" (3). This complex, surreal image evokes multiple conflicting meanings, combining pervasive fear with attitudes of increasing hostility toward women. In comparison to the women's experiences depicted in *Destination Biafra*, the women of *Absent* experience acute bodily estrangement and unreal moments of gender subjectification as they become subject to greater social discipline and surveillance.

For Dalal, who is mostly confined to the apartment block, life under sanctions consists alternatively of tedious boredom or bouts of anxiety. She wonders about the fate of a sculpture of Shahrazad, whose metal interiors were once a source of playful and open fas-

ination for her when she was young. In a revelry connoting early curiosity about her body, Dalal recalls dropping a lollipop into the sculpture's torso, leading to a desire to "to climb into her, to wander around inside her chest and abdomen" (27). Now living with threats of constant violence, the bombed-out pavements remind Dalal of "the dislocated shoulders" of women. According to Al-Ali, "Domestic violence, as well as street violence targeting women increased particularly during the embargo, adding new risks and dangers to the continuous threat of state violence" (198). Also, women came under more scrutiny amid generally increased internal repression by the secret police and military agents. This scrutiny becomes especially prevalent in the spring of 1991 when the Republican Guard retaliated against Kurdish and Shia uprisings that had been encouraged by the US-led coalition. In the novel, this climate is referenced in one of Abu Ghayeb's posters, *The Blockade*, featuring an irreal figure of a young woman's body "bearing on her shoulders" (46) an older woman's head surrounded by glass eyes and oil pipelines radiating outward toward a receding horizon. In the most traumatic event representing harsh gender subjectification, Dalal becomes romantically involved with Adel, a friend of her neighbor, Saad, a gay man running a salon in his apartment. Brutal betrayals follow: Adel turns out to be a military agent whose relationships with Dalal and Saad have been screens for surveillance of the building. After the military detains her friends and neighbors, the fragile commons created by the residents of the block is shattered.

Like *Destination Biafra*, *Absent* focuses on the story of a young woman's struggle to resist gender subjectification, while the novel also addresses more broadly the socioecological crisis of reproduction brought on by sanctions and war. Under circumstances of sanctions and war that destroy civic and community infrastructures, Dalal begins to recognize and revalorize the resourcefulness of reproductive labor through her apprenticeships in a range of social reproductive practices and logics, including Dalal's aunt's work as a seamstress to rejuvenate old clothes and the healing work of Umm Mazin, a resident of the building originally from Southern Iraq, who tells fortunes from coffee grounds and dispenses herbal remedies and the occasional spell used by women with abusive or wayward husbands. Dalal and her neighbors engage in a wide range of reproductive labor across social divisions of class, religion, and ethnicity. At the same time, Dalal mediates the gender divisions of formal and informal labor, as well as productive and reproductive labor, thus prefiguring a new commons and new collective organizations of production. The novel's focus

on social reproduction recalls earlier women's movements in Iraq, such as the Iraqi Women's League, *Rabitat al-Mara' al-'Iraqiya*, which was affiliated with the Iraqi Communist Party to build a revolutionary movement that provided healthcare, literacy, and social support for women and their children. Haifa Zangana recounts that how the Iraqi Women's League was allied with anti-imperialist and workers' movements against "landlords" (15) and "coterries of monarchical ministers imposed by the British."

Dalal's involvement with one experiment for reorganizing social reproduction and creating a new commons stands out: the beekeeping enterprise, started by her uncle, Abu Ghayeb, when he tries to establish an apiary on one of two tennis courts at a former private elite club, the Alwiya Club. To get started, he purchases 30 colonies of Carniolan honeybees, sets up the hive boxes, plants them with sunflowers, digs small irrigated pools, and waits with the hope that the bees will collect pollen from a grove of nearby date palms. The beekeeping becomes the basis of new skills and growing detailed knowledge of bee anatomy, which is internalized in bodily imagination, especially by Dalal who recounts: "I close my eyes to imagine myself as a worker bee. When my glands start to develop, I start to secrete royal jelly, and I must feed the young larvae, and the queen. I put my hand on my neck to feel for them, then I remember that they're located in the lower abdomen" (99). Other related changes are small but profound as Dalal becomes attuned to the subtle ecological rhythms in the city and starts to reconnect the metabolic rifts of country and city. The enterprise, however, eventually fails when they discover that the bees have been feeding on human corpses from a makeshift morgue the government has set up to store bomb victims in the opposite tennis court. An unreal and horrifying image of honey despoiled by human blood from bomb victims condenses the novel's thematic focus into an allegory of violence under oil imperialism. The honey, which is a renewable substance, and its production by the bees a model of cooperative structure, contrasts dramatically with the blood, a metonym for oil and its violent, hierarchical extraction by a petroregime. Also, as honey is for the bees—the source of their regenerative stock for socioecological reproduction—so the economic surplus is for the human community—the source of their health and well-being. Its bloody degradation represents the wounds to the community subject to violent extraction.

Absent ends with uncertainty and loss after Abu Ghayeb and Umm Mazin are both detained by police—Abu Ghayeb because he is charged with smuggling when he tries to sell his art collection to a

buyer in Jordan and Umm Mazin because she is suspected of practicing witchcraft. The novel suggests that the disciplinary petrostate crushes dissident experiments in subsistence, labor, and gender. Dalal's emotional and physical depletion are emblematic of a community stripped of its capacities for social reproduction; she remarks at the end of the novel, "After two years of an exhausting physical routine, I flow into my work like a machine that doesn't think" (209). Resourceful resistance in this environment is to defy the appropriate, exhausting logic of extraction, as Dalal does when she begins to teach reading and writing to an illiterate child who was orphaned like her when his father, a poet, was killed by exploding ordnance. Dalal's resistance manifests the value, epistemology, and labor of resourceful resistance—of revolutionary subjectivity not engaged in conventional mothering, but rather collective caregiving and change.

In this essay, I have suggested a rereading of two novels by women from the Global South in order to appreciate their insights into oil's obscured stories of gender violence. They both develop techniques of social realism, some experimental, to dramatize the emergence of world-ecological processes that set in motion patterns of civil conflict, militarization, racism, gender violence, and environmental crisis. I want to close by suggesting that both novels, in prefiguring resourceful resistance around a postcolonial feminist ecology, may connect to the statement articulated by the 2006 Abuja Declaration for Energy Sovereignty. It was in the Nigerian city Abuja where community groups and NGOs from Nigeria and 51 other countries gathered for an International Conference on Climate Justice in 2006 and drafted a declaration that calls for "another energy future" (243). The goals that the declaration identifies include eco-restoration, economic reparations, decentralized development, fair trade, the protection of local livelihoods, and democratic governance and dialogue with equal participation from women, the redirection of revenue toward sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels, and entitlements for basic needs that will secure "a just and human existence" (qtd. in Salleh 243–44). This document imagines a future neither as an abstract utopia nor as a neoliberal dream of endless growth and accumulation but, instead, one based on immediate freedom from want and where resources are not just renewable but may also renew the possibilities for democratic commons.

Notes

1. See chapter 9 of Klein, "Blockadia: The New Climate Warriors," for an analysis of the protest movements that have emerged on nearly every continent to challenge the construction of pipelines, mining operations, and oil drilling in some of the world's most fragile ecosystems. The term "Blockadia" was first used in 2012 to refer to the alliance of groups, including Indigenous groups and cattle ranchers, trying to stop the lower segment of the Keystone XL pipeline. See also Carrell for a report on Greenpeace's actions to stop oil production in the North Sea and Arctic.
2. Ghosh suggests that few global novels have focused on themes or issues related to oil production, likely because, as he writes, "the experiences associated with oil are lived out within a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international" (142).
3. Probably the most influential exposition on the "resource war" (25) as the global contest between militarized states for material resources is Klare.
4. According to Lerner, the term "sacrifice zone" was first used in a report by the US government on the country's National Sacrifice Zones to describe areas contaminated by nuclear waste from uranium mining and nuclear weapons testing. In addition to the term's now-common usage for Appalachian landscapes scarred by coal mining and mountaintop removal, it is also widely applied to urban and rural areas across the Global North and South that have endured disproportionate burdens of pollution from extractive industries or toxic waste disposal.
5. Watts reports that, since oil production commenced in 1958, Nigeria has become the eleventh largest producer and eighth largest exporter of oil in the world. Since the beginning of production, federal government revenues are thought to approximate one trillion dollars even as the Niger Delta region has borne ecological devastation. From the 1950s until the early 2000s, over 7,000 oil spills have polluted waterways and soils in the Delta region; natural gas flaring "produces 70 million metric tons of carbon emissions a year, which contributes, according to Watts, "a substantial proportion of worldwide greenhouse gases" (44). The region has also dealt with extreme corporate- and government-sponsored repression, most infamously in the 1990s when Ken Saro-Wiwa, a popular writer and a lead organizer with Ogoni resistance movement, was executed by the Abacha government.
6. See Gosine for an important analysis on the uses of population discourses and mainstream environmentalism to blame environmental degradation on non-white reproduction and same-sex eroticism. Gosine argues that "in white nationalist projects, including European colonization,

homosexuals and non-white reproductive heterosexuals are ‘strange’; they make no contribution to the building and expansion of—and in fact threaten—white nations” (156).

7. For a more extensive description of the conditions of women’s lives in Iraq during the Sanctions Era, see Al-Ali 198.
8. Niblett’s concept of world-ecology literature builds on the term “world-system literature” from the Warwick Research Collective (WReC). World-system literature is WReC’s concept for global literature that “mediates” (49) the capitalist world-system’s inequalities that develop between core and peripheral regions.
9. The Federal government formulated a legal infrastructure for resource extraction with the 1978 Land Use Act and the 1979 Constitution. This legal infrastructure ensured that the growing profits from the 1970s oil boom went to Shell Oil and the Nigerian elite. Right after the civil war, oil production skyrocketed from 295 million in 1965 to 2.5 billion in 1972, and by the mid-1980s, it was booming. In the years after Nigeria joined OPEC and the control of oil was formally nationalized under the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), the country increasingly suffered, as inequality grew and class divisions widened. A crisis of oil prices and debt ensued later in the 1980s, followed by austerity measures imposed by Babangida’s agreement to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), including the adoption of punishing structural adjustment policies. The country was convulsed by student uprisings, worker strikes, and protests by minority communities in the Niger Delta. For more on this historical context, see Okonta and Douglas.
10. Bird and Ottanelli describe the advance of federal troops on Asaba in early October 1967, initiated by shelling and followed by atrocities committed by federal soldiers: “As troops took control of the town, groups of soldiers went from house to house looting, raping, rounding up boys and men accused of being Biafran sympathizers, and demanding money from those who were spared” (8). To construct their account, Bird and Ottanelli rely on eyewitness testimony, just as Emecheta does in *Destination Biafra* (as she discusses in the foreword). Both report that many townspeople fled to the bush to escape the slaughter, with some families disguising their young daughters as older women to discourage sexual assault.
11. Mamdani examines the bifurcated historical development of colonial governance into two major forms: one, direct rule through the colonial repression of colonized people’s civil rights, and, two, indirect rule by means of “incorporating natives into a state-enforced customary order” (18). Nigeria under Frederick Lugard was a significant site of this dual-form of colonial governance.

12. O'Sullivan explores how the proliferation of relief organizations in Britain and Ireland during the Biafra War enabled "humanitarianism [to become] a vessel through which society could construct a new sense of national purpose; it amounted, in essence, to a benign reimagining of imperial compassion for a postcolonial world" (304).
13. Ekine astutely observes that militarization of the Niger Delta under the civilian government of President Olusegun Obasanjo may be traced to Obasanjo's participation in previous military regimes going back to the Federal Forces formed during the Civil War. See especially 69.
14. Citing a secret memo by the Ministry of Defence that outlined British strategy to supply arms to the Federal Forces in order to ensure access to oil, Morrison argues that Emecheta's portrayal of Grey "cut[s] uniquely close to the bone in its portrait of British thinking and strategy towards Nigeria" (16).
15. Hodges quotes Emecheta's foreword to argue that the novel's suggestion that Debbie's identity as an ethnic minority makes her "simply a Nigerian" has the unfortunate effect of obliterating minority ethnic identities" (5). Ethnic minorities were targets of attack by both the Nigerians and the Biafrans. As Hodges emphasizes, "The erasure of ethnically based state divisions in the newly-declared Biafra was a source of considerable apprehension amongst minorities." See also Saro-Wiwa's novel *Sozaboy* for a critical perspective on the war from a minority perspective.
16. I agree with Adams's response to criticism of Emecheta's use of childbirth allegory as heavy-handed and flat. Emecheta does not represent women as abstract symbols of the nature but rather conveys their losses in childbirth as painful, embodied experiences.
17. See Stratton for an important discussion of the "Mother Africa" trope in male African writers' work as well as an analysis of Emecheta's critique of this trope in her fiction. In addition, see Abdullah for an examination of "wifeism" (213) in postcolonial Nigeria, particularly her analysis of the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLP), founded and chaired by the wife of military dictator Ibrahim Babangida, which emphasizes how the organization propagated a "conservative image of women as wives, mothers, and secondary income earners" (215).
18. Turcotte discusses how contemporary representations of petrosexual violence frequently reinforce neocolonial imagery of endemic chaos and conflict in the Niger Delta and hence justify militarization and intervention.
19. On the difficulties of representing black women and sexual violence, see Jean-Charles. Jean-Charles proposes a feminist intersectional approach to "victim-survivor" (59) narratives to analyze historically fraught imagery denying humanity to black women as either "eternal victims of

- rape rather than individual subjects” or as survivors “invulnerably and eternally strong” (41).
20. Turner and Browhill discuss three phases of women’s protests at the Chevron/Texaco oil terminal in Niger Delta in order to show how women built coalitions linking women’s struggles for the environment, oil worker strikes for wages, and consumer boycotts to protest oil’s role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.
 21. See al-Radi’s *Baghdad Diaries: A Woman’s Chronicle of War and Exile* for a testimonial account that adapts the conventions of the western diary form to relate the accretion of losses and the creativity of women’s collective responses to war and sanctions. Al-Radi created her sculptures with recycled machinery, stone, and sand. In considering her recycled materials, she has wryly commented, “Hopefully we will recycle ourselves and survive” (216).
 22. Niblett’s analysis of Janice Shinebourne’s *The Last English Plantation* (1988) contrasts the disjointed rhythms of the linear ideal of the conventional bildungsroman with the “parabolic rhythm” (279) of daily life near a sugar plantation. A similar discrepancy in *Absent* becomes a source of irony: Dalal’s story is an account not of educational progress, as in a bildungsroman, but rather one of frustratingly repetitive setback and daily routine.

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