“Trespassers Will be Persecuted”: Oil and Property Law in Ben Okri’s “What the Tapster Saw”

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A movement appears to be underway in certain areas of property jurisprudence to recalibrate property law for more equitable and life-sustaining ends. For many legal theorists working from a Global South, indigenous, or minority perspective, international legal frameworks seem increasingly receptive to reformulating laws regulating property ownership to better protect frequently dispossessed communities and sustain ecological, animal, and human life. Perhaps the most promising such example of a potentially substantial change to prevailing formulations of property ownership is found in the area of indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights. Since 2007, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has been working with indigenous peoples to establish greater protections for intellectual and cultural property, a process that builds on the belated signing of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on September 13, 2007. Similarly, from a land rights perspective, a small but not insignificant group of legal theorists has promoted a stewardship model that reframes the human-environment relationship by casting it in terms not of ownership but care. In these two related approaches, which counter the primary strain of at least four centuries of Anglo-American law and its international variants, property is neither something to be owned, nor an entity over which one might exercise exclusive control, but a mutually sustaining relationship between human and non-human actors. In moving away from the ownership model that is so closely aligned with liberal individualism, proponents of stewardship seek to protect peoples and environments that have been most threatened by an international property regime predicated on territorial acquisition and land alienation. Given that the beneficiaries of the Anglo-American paradigm of property-as-ownership are based primarily in the Global North, it is hardly surprising that the most vocal proponents of recasting property as stewardship have worked from a Global South or indigenous perspective.

Ben Okri’s 1986 short story “What the Tapster Saw” participates in the project of reimagining property by connecting this concept’s typically individualist logical structure and legislated appropriative impulses to the specific form taken by petroleum extraction in the Niger Delta. Notoriously, the oil industry has inflicted a particularly extreme cost on Nigeria’s oil-producing regions compared to those of the Global North, the result both of prioritiz-
ing profit over corporate responsibility and of being subject to insufficient or underenforced regulation: common practices include near-constant gas flaring, disproportionately large and frequent oil spills, inadequate clean-up operations, and general disregard for the sovereignty of the region’s ethnic minority populations. Inasmuch as Okri allusively itemizes the variety of ill-effects inflicted by the petroleum industry on all forms of life in the Niger Delta, “What the Tapster Saw” can be understood as one of the earliest examples of what has been variously described as “petrofiction,” “petroleum aesthetics,” “anthropocene aesthetics,” and, in Jennifer Wenzel’s helpful framing of a strain of Nigerian literature, “petro-magic-realism.” But Okri’s story also does something more unusual, too, in that it connects the Nigerian petroleum industry’s extractive practices to the exclusionary and inequitable consequences of a juridical formulation of property inherited from English common law. As this essay will show, the motif of trespass in “What the Tapster Saw” recognizes that individualist and acquisitive philosophies of property ownership have both legitimized and legislated damage to human and ecological life in regions whose natural resources can be easily monetized. Further, the story’s distinctive aesthetic form effectively reacts against the consequences of typically appropriative property law, establishing through its syntactical and figurative modeling of interrelation a mode of interspecies collectivity that coincides with the stewardship model of property. By revealing the similarities between the aesthetic form of “What the Tapster Saw” and the conceptual restructuring currently underway within an innovative strain of progressive property jurisprudence, this essay reveals the significance of property to petro-fiction in particular and environmental critique more generally, and it shows the extent to which literary texts participate in broader processes of epistemological and legal change.

Written in the decade after the 1970s oil boom, when petroleum’s human and ecological costs had already been exposed, “What the Tapster Saw” narrates the near-death experience of a palm-wine tapster after he unwittingly trespasses on land newly owned by the Delta Oil Company. The story is bookended by a conversation between the tapster and his friend the herbalist, both of whose professions are economically and culturally important for the region, while the bulk of the narrative concerns the tapster’s hallucinatory experience after falling from a palm-tree for the first time in his thirty-year career and being knocked unconscious. Whereas the story’s narrative frame is both highly realistic in its representational mode and, through the primary characters’ professions, avowedly localized in its contexts, the body of the story is as fantastical as it is globally situated. Addressing the dislocating effects of world markets and multinational petroleum conglomerates on autochthonous peoples and ecosystems, the embedded episode describes, in Okri’s typically extravagant style, the tapster’s sense of cognitive and sensory
dislocation upon being knocked unconscious. In a corollary to the abuses inflicted upon the Niger Delta by state-owned multinational companies, the tapster in his comatose condition enters a highly polluted and poisonous world where he is assaulted physically and sexually by “foul-smelling” creatures and where transmogrified oil takes the form of a mocking, violent snake (186). In its narrative construction, therefore, “What the Tapster Saw” stages the disjunction between the interests of the local population and environment on the one hand and corporate oil on the other—between two systems that differ substantially in their geographic affiliations, economic functioning, and ecological commitments. Further, through the magical realism that constitutes the majority of its representational mode, Okri’s story challenges and recalibrates both the form of property ownership whose legal codification legitimates extensive oil drilling in the Niger Delta and the anthropocentric consciousness that facilitates fossil fuel extraction and usage more generally.

Given that the very concept of trespass appears to unlock the horrors experienced by the unconscious tapster and introduce this story’s fantastical embedded episode, it functions narratologically to mark the structural connection between property’s typically individualist and appropriative impulses and the extensive ecological and human dispossession inflicted upon the Delta region. This story’s pivotal moment occurs after a troubling evening during which the protagonist, having “dreamt that while tapping for palm-wine he fell from the tree and died,” seeks counsel from his trusted friend the herbalist and is persuaded to defer action until the following day (183). Postponement proves unwise, however, and in the moments before the seemingly portentous capacities of the tapster’s dream are proven accurate, he sees a strange new sign, warning: “DELTA OIL COMPANY: THIS AREA IS BEING DRILLED. TRESPASSERS IN DANGER” (184; emphasis in original). The situation’s newness is signaled in the way the tapster “stare[s] at the signboard without comprehension,” seemingly unable to understand the very idea of a once-familiar environment being owned by a petroleum company and drilled for oil. His shock at the new epistemological landscape inaugurated by this noticeboard is likewise registered in the text’s at once sudden and serene shift to a fantastic narrative mode characterized by improbable events and sensory extremes. Immediately after passing the signboard, the tapster “notice[s] a strange cluster of palm-trees” hidden behind “thick cobwebs,” the trees’ “red-green bark” releasing a smell that “intoxicated him” (184). His sense of uneasiness is intensified through a marked disjunction between the quotidian and the unusual, epitomized when the tapster begins his very ordinary task of climbing a tree to tap for wine:

[H]e pulled himself up rapidly, till his chest began to ache. The morning sun, striking him with an oblique glare, blinded him. As the golden lights exploded in his eyes the branches of the palm-tree receded from him. It was the first time he had fallen in thirty years. (184)
In the “oblique glare” that “blinded him,” in the ache of his chest and the “explosion” of the refracted sun’s many “golden lights,” the tapster appears overwhelmed by a newly potent cognitive and physical environment that seems to have been ushered in by the oil company’s proprietorial signboard.

Connecting the legal offense of trespass with commercial oil extraction, “What the Tapster Saw” acknowledges the overlap between environmental law and property law, two areas that are as intricately connected as they might seem to be distinct. Since first discovering oil in 1956 on the cusp of independence, Nigeria has passed a slew of legislative acts that ostensibly protect national and environmental interests by regulating the oil and gas industry but that have instead restricted land and resource ownership in order to maximize oil extraction and control access to profits. A partial list of these legal instruments includes the Oil Pipelines Act of 1956; the Oil in Navigable Waters Act of 1968; the Petroleum Act of 1969; the Offshore Oil Revenue Decree of 1971; the Land Use Act of 1978; the Associated Gas Re-Injection Act of 1979; the Environmental Impact Assessment Decree of 1992; and the Constitution of 1999. Most of this legislation is categorized as environmental law, and several of the aforementioned texts explicitly address pollution concerns, especially the Oil in Navigable Waters Act and the Environmental Impact Assessment Decree (EIA). The EIA is especially significant because it represents a turning point of sorts in the state’s response to oil-inflicted environmental harms. Implemented after an illegal dump of toxic-waste was discovered in 1988, it was followed by government commitments to sustainable development, including a constitutional provision to “protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wild life of Nigeria” (Ch.2 §20). Yet these laws remain largely ineffective because Nigeria’s state agencies are notoriously lax in enforcing preventative or recuperative measures against an overwhelmingly powerful oil industry. Indeed, the lack of effective industry regulation stems primarily from high-level conflicts between statutes affirming human and ecological wellbeing and illicit practices ensuring elite wealth generation. As Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton explain, the combination of oil riches and a rent-seeking economy has created in Nigeria “a comprador class of politicians and bureaucrats, who work in conjunction with foreign companies to siphon off surplus wealth for personal benefit” (184). The profits to be garnered have been substantial: between the 1970s and the early 2000s, most of Nigeria’s wealth derived from the petroleum industry, with oil and gas generating around 95% of the country’s export revenue and approximately 80% of all government revenues. Only since the global economic crash of 2008 has Nigeria’s dependence on oil diminished; today, around 60% of the country’s GDP derives from the service sector.

Inasmuch as the main concern of the many legal instruments regulating Nigeria’s petroleum industry is oil ownership, despite a seeming focus on
environmental protection, these aforementioned legislative acts might well be understood as variants of property law. For example, the Petroleum Act of 1969 bestowed ownership of all Nigerian oil on the federal government, not coincidentally at the end of a three-year civil war fought partly over oil rights. The Land Use Act of 1978 further consolidated the state’s property rights by allowing for land to be appropriated if doing so were deemed in the “overriding public interes[t]” (“Land Use” §5(28)). This piece of legislation disproportionately benefited the state and its affiliates not only by extending the nationalization of natural resources from oil to land but also by forcing the sale of private immoveable property without enforcing appropriate compensation. Two decades later, the Constitution affirmed the Land Use Act’s extensive reach, vesting “the entire property in control of all minerals, mineral oils and natural gas in, under or upon any land in Nigeria or in, under or upon the territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone of Nigeria . . . in the Government of the Federation” (§ 44(3)). Nor have the appropriative tenor and consequences of Nigeria’s many petroleum laws gone unnoticed in either popular or scholarly contexts. In an article on the Land Use Act’s environmental harms, for example, Rhuks T. Ako connects political and economic control with resource depletion, explaining that oil resources have been made “the absolute and exclusive preserve of the federal government to obviate ‘minority’ agitation over any form of ownership or participatory rights” (295). Effectively, as Ako observes, environmental laws have turned the region into “a land speculator’s paradise,” making Niger Delta inhabitants “tenants-at-will” of the oil industry (297).

When Okri uses the concept of trespass to prize open his story’s embedded fantastical tale, therefore, he participates in an established practice of acknowledging the mutual imbrication of environmental law and property interests in Nigeria’s petroleum pursuits. Further, by mobilizing the concept of “trespass,” “What the Tapster Saw” implicitly recognizes that legislation regulating Nigeria’s oil industry is predicated upon a highly inequitable version of property ownership that inflicts suffering upon the Niger Delta even as it is presented by the state as beneficial to the nation. In this regard, the tapster’s initially delighted reaction to unconsciousness seemingly registers the government’s insistence that oil and land appropriation is in the country’s best interests: feeling “unbelievably light and airy,” he at first believes that “the fall had done him some good” (185). His reaction proves both false and fleeting, however, and upon seeing a second, more explicitly threatening noticeboard, he realizes the significance of the land’s changed ownership and usage. This second sign reveals a markedly different system of justice, shifting from warning of trespass’s legal consequences to its humanitarian implications announcing, “DELTA OIL COMPANY: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PERSECUTED” (185). The effects of “PERSECUT[ION]” are immediately apparent: “around him were earth-mounds, grave-stones, a single palm-tree,
and flickering mangrove roots. He made a mark on the tree-trunk. Suddenly it became a fully festered wound” (185). If the “earth-mounds” and “single palm-tree” register the environmental damage caused by oil-related logging, the “fully festered wound” on the trunk of the sole remaining tree recalls the physiological damage caused by oil extraction. Further, the “grave-stones” index the human cost of the petroleum industry’s activities, including endemic health conditions ranging from dermatitis to cancer, as well as malnutrition caused by food scarcity resulting from poisoned waterways and contaminated soil.

As this early scene suggests, “What the Tapster Saw” charts the Niger Delta’s experience of extensive, pervasive, and systemic environmental and human harms through descriptions whose chimerical rendering signals both petroleum’s promise of immense wealth and the region’s experience of incalculable loss. As political and literary theorists of petro-capitalism have acknowledged, the potential in Nigeria for owners of oil-bearing land to gain immense wealth with minimal effort is sharply counterbalanced by the degree of human and ecological dispossession suffered in return. Hence, Andrew Apter’s influential cultural anthropology of Nigeria’s boom years and their aftermath uses the metaphor of magic to convey the uncanny simultaneity of exorbitant wealth and profound poverty that together result from the country’s petroleum practices. Arguing that “the magic of Nigeria’s nascent modernity was based on unproductive accumulation that was controlled by the state” (8), Apter draws attention to “the spectacle of opulence” that Nigeria initially presented to the world (2), the “mysterious value” of the country’s oil revenues (8), and the “illusion” of success cast by the petroleum industry—by “what was a symbolic mode of production all along” (16). Like Apter, Jennifer Wenzel’s account of Nigerian literary renderings of petroleum connects fantastical representational modalities with materialist analysis. Examining “What the Tapster Saw” alongside Amos Tutuola’s classic novel The Palm-Wine Drinkard and Karen King-Aribisala’s “Tale of the Palm-Wine Tapster,” Wenzel coins “[the] concept of petro-magic-realism [as] a way of understanding the relationships between the fantastic and material elements of these stories” (450). Wenzel finds “[e]mbedded within Tutuola’s marvelous tale . . . an economic analysis of resource extraction and labour relations” (449), a reading that she extends to Okri’s “phantasmagoric glimpse into a degraded, privatised landscape” (455). As Wenzel persuasively argues, the magical realist form of “What the Tapster Saw” coincides with an oil aesthetic, likewise identified and meticulously limned by Apter, that is predicated upon deep structural inequality.

Like many artists and cultural critics of Nigeria’s petroleum industry and the deeply inequitable legal and political infrastructures by which it is sustained, Okri balances aesthetic representation with realist critique, beautiful art with bleak historicity. If the tapster is initially tricked by the “glittering”
and fantastic world owned by the Delta Oil Company (185), he soon discovers the costs to human and non-human life of Nigeria’s petroleum industry, whose pollution rates are exponentially higher than in oil-producing regions of the Global North. Okri allusively itemizes the many health conditions consequent to oil production and endemic among Niger Delta inhabitants: the tapster experiences chest pain, echoing the oil-related respiratory problems plaguing inhabitants of the Niger Delta; his “eyes itch,” invoking the array of dermatological conditions frequently experienced in the region (186); and he notices “an acid in the feel of things,” recalling the acid rain that results from gas flaring (191). The effects of flaring are also alluded to through this strange world’s unrelenting light: “the sun did not set, nor did it rise. . . . In the evenings the sun was like a large crystal. In the mornings it was incandescent. The tapster was never allowed to shut his eyes” (186). Afflicted by environmentally induced insomnia, the tapster is subjected to the common practice of gas flaring and its intense and incessant light emissions, described by Rob Nixon as “the blazing false sun of interminable flares” (Nixon 113). While Nigeria has taken steps recently to reduce the amount of gas flared during oil production, this practice has been pervasive from the 1970s onward, revealing both a disregard for human and ecological health and a racialized discrepancy between Global North and south. Flaring natural gas, which is a byproduct of oil extraction, is both the cheapest method of disposal and the most dangerous: the process releases a substantial proportion of carcinogens into the atmosphere, resulting in innumerable health complaints and environmental harms, while the intense light pollution it emits disrupts sleep patterns and damages mental health.

Notably, Okri is as concerned with the ecological impact of Nigeria’s destructive extraction of fossil fuels as he is with its human costs, and in this regard “What the Tapster Saw” might be read as offering an integrative account of human, animal, and plant life. Okri records an array of ecological violence that is closely associated with the Delta region’s unfettered petroleum production, ranging from the “whitish ichors” discharged by the tree trunk’s “fester[ing] wound” (185) to an unnerving lack of animals, which he recognizes immediately upon adapting to his strange new environment: “When his eyes stopped itching the tapster wandered beneath the copper bursts of the sky. He noticed that there were no birds around” (189). If the practice of gas flaring registered in “copper bursts” is linked to the absence of birds, the act of clearing forests in preparation for oil drilling is similarly connected to mammalian death: “After the explosion the tapster saw a thick pall of green smoke. When the smoke cleared the tapster watched a weird spewing up of oil and animal limbs from the ground. The site was eventually abandoned. Agapanthus grew there like blood on a battlefield” (189). The “green smoke” caused by this explosion, which evokes the industry practice of planting dynamite to rapidly clear forests and drill for oil, is matched in
unnaturalness and destructive extent through the earth’s “weird spewing up of oil and animal limbs.” Just as macabre, in being seemingly contrary to the laws of physics, is the curiously immobile water, which is “viscous and didn’t seem to move” (185), and in this respect, the river is much like the waterways of the Niger Delta where nearly eleven million gallons of oil are spilled each year (Stephens 391). Finally, the oil itself is peculiar in that it bears transmogrifying properties, emerging from a borehole near the river as a “multi-colored snake” (185). The snake and the river’s unnaturally symbiotic relationship means that with the snake’s immersion, “the colour of the water changed, and it became transparent and luminous. The snake’s skin burned with a roseate flame” (185). Reflecting the many colors of an oil slick, the snake’s poisonous path is rendered uncannily beautiful, described through terms such as “transparent,” “luminous,” and “roseate” that are typically reserved for advertising cosmetics—an industry that is itself deeply dependent on oil.

As this catalogue of ultimate destruction suggests, the version of property ownership upon which Nigerian petroleum laws are predicated entails absolute possession, involving acquisition so extreme as to exclude others not only from using the land but from even being alive to use it. In this nightmare vision of Nigeria’s petroleum industry—a vision whose dystopian representation is removed from reality only in its particulars, not in the extent of its violence—“What the Tapster Saw” excoriates a model of property ownership that both allows for and encourages absolute dispossession. As Okri’s story seems to recognize, modern property law has frequently functioned to decimate ecological and human life in regions whose natural resources can be easily monetized. These processes of dispossession have been enabled by the political thought and legislative acts that fueled and endorsed European colonial expansion and territorial appropriation from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, including the accompanying transportation of European legal regimes around the globe. In Nigeria, as in most former British colonies, property law substantially follows the acquisitive and absolutist model that structures Anglo-American conceptualizations of ownership, a consequence of British colonial administrators enforcing English common law in the early to mid-twentieth century. Anglo-American property law itself derives primarily from seventeenth and eighteenth-century English thought, including John Locke’s Second Treatise of Government and William Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Law of England. Locke’s politico-economic treatise advocates for appropriation and enclosure, famously defending European settler land appropriation in the Americas, while Blackstone’s anthropocentric legal account describes property as “that sole and despotic dominion which
one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe” (3).

“What the Tapster Saw” reveals that the vision of “sole and despotic dominion” identified by Blackstone is acutely apparent in the Niger Delta, where the absolute or “despotic” right to appropriate land to the “total exclusion” of others, along with the right to rule over what Blackstone terms “external things,” meaning plant and animal life, has caused extensive harm. As the legal scholar Lin Heng Lye explains, Blackstone “drew support from the Bible and Judaeo-Christian doctrines which were anthropocentric and proclaimed man’s dominance over all other creatures on earth,” a premise challenged by environmental criticism since the sixties (191). Blackstone’s anthropocentrism coincides with Locke’s, who likewise employed Christian theology in his argument for unlimited land acquisition, claiming that “God, by commanding to subdue, gave authority so far to appropriate” (Locke 22).

More recently, the environmental humanities has mounted a broader challenge to Blackstonian and Lockean understandings of land ownership by developing new models of ecological relationship. Most notably, Donna J. Haraway’s 2016 book, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, develops a rigorous account of “multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship” (2). Like other interdisciplinary ecocritics, Haraway seeks to challenge and reconfigure those forms of thought and being that have facilitated the human-induced ecological event of the Anthropocene, offering instead a non-anthropocentric mode of collectivity that fundamentally rejects hierarchical distinctions between humans, animals, and plant life.

Recent efforts by progressive legal theorists to likewise challenge the anthropocentric and appropriative capacities of variants of property law deriving from Anglo-American legal thought have similarly constructed more equitable, inclusive, and life-affirming models of human relation to land. For example, Lye’s critique of Blackstone derives from her assessment of the environmental consequences of Singaporean property law, which, like Nigeria’s, was inherited from English common law upon colonization. As Lye explains, Blackstonian “absolute rights over the land have led to its ecological impoverishment, as land is cleared for economic benefits and put to ‘productive use’” (193). Observing that land law “was not designed to assure the maintenance of ecosystems and species preservation,” and cognizant of the damage wrought by climate change and the effects of destroyed ecosystems on human health, Lye argues that the very concept of ownership needs to be rethought, maintaining that “land ownership should be recognized as a species of ‘stewardship’” (198). Kristen Carpenter et al.’s assessment of the legal routes to protecting indigenous cultural property in the United States similarly makes the case for conceptualizing ownership as stewardship. As Carpenter et al. argue, “The classic view of property law, including its
ownership model, is intimately tied to a paradigm of liberal individualism. Current theories of property acquisition grounded in this tradition . . . fail to take into account the prospect of group-oriented claims of custody and control that are so critical to the protection of indigenous cultural property” (1028). Their argument develops partly from twentieth century theorizing of property ownership as a bundle of relative rights rather than rights to absolute possession, and, more substantially, from the stewardship principle of assuming responsibility for extending care toward the land independent of title. Drawing on indigenous, corporate, and environmental theory, Carpenter et al. construct a model of responsive and non-absolutist relationship to land as place, arguing that “a stewardship model disaggregates title, possession, and exclusion” (1082). In other words, these attempts to reconceptualize property law in light of ecological and indigenous concerns use stewardship as a way to endorse protective relationships between peoples and their environments.

Stewardship presupposes a relationship of ongoing care between humans and the natural world of which they are a part, so it functions in similar ways to Okri’s rendition of collective life. Much like Okri, proponents of stewardship impugn the absolutist system of property law because of the widespread human, material, and ecological dispossession it permits, offering instead a system of conceptualizing property that is based not on ownership but on ongoing, non-proprietary care. Hence, theorists of stewardship reject one variant of property law while also advocating for another. “What the Tapster Saw” arguably proceeds in a similar fashion, in that it at once excoriates the effects of Nigerian property law, including this legal regime’s associated economic and political impulses, and assembles an alternative mode of land habitation and meaningful life that involves protections for all living beings. This variant relationship to local environments and ecological communities is established through Okri’s fantastical aesthetic mode, which constructs not only a documented sense of unease, as this essay has already shown, but also a non-abolutist, non-possessive form of relation between the human, animal, and plant life that together makes up the Niger Delta. The aesthetically produced collectivity that is thus constructed in “What the Tapster Saw” pales very differently than Nigeria’s reigning system of exclusive and absolutist property ownership, instead modeling a relationship of constitutive care and co-habitation that echoes and extends the stewardship model proposed by progressive property law theorists working from indigenous and Global South perspectives.

Okri’s aesthetics of constitutive care and the open collectivity that he thereby constructs is built through figures of repetition and amplification that together suggest the unavoidable connectedness of all living beings. The tapster, for example, experiences “a curious serenity” when the herbalist, Tabasco, begins the protracted process of his rescue (186). While the herbalist’s efforts are unknown to the tapster, they are communicated to the reader
through the presence of three turtles, one of whom “ha[s] Tabasco’s face” (185). Implicitly, Tabasco’s treatment triggers a phenomenological process that causes the tapster to “fe[el] the substance of his being dissolve” (186). Not much later, the tapster realizes that “he had multiplied. He was not sure whether it was his mind or his body which flowed in and out of him” (186). In the tapster’s cognitive and physiological expansion, in his “dissolve[d]” and “multiplied” being and the “flow” of his mind and his body “in and out of him,” Okri registers the possibilities for human and ecological collectivity. The dissolution and multiplication of the tapster’s body serves not only to expand his physical and psychological space, and as such to function as a figure of amplification, but also to facilitate the physical and cognitive connections between his own being and that of other organisms in his environment.

A generalized sense of multispecies being is elsewhere established both by invoking the multiple worlds of Yoruba cosmology and employing the connective rhetorical device of anaphora, wherein the same word appears at the beginning of a sequence of sentences. In the passage detailing the tapster’s new awareness of the petroleum industry’s ecological impact, for example, Okri repeatedly begins sentences with “Then . . .,” marking this story’s narrative trajectory through a traditional oral storytelling device:

*Then* one day he dared to count the eggs. There were seven. He screamed. The river heaved. . . .

That night he fled. Everything fled with him. *Then*, after a while, he stopped . . . *Then*, as the eggs tormented him with the grating noises within them, . . . he learned patience. He learned to watch the sky. . . . He learned to listen to the birth groaning within the eggs. He also learned that when he kept still everything else around him reflected his stillness.

*And then*, on another day, the voice came to him and said: ‘Everything in your world has endless counterparts in other worlds’” (188-9; emphasis added).

Echoing the apparent pairing of all living things with “endless counterparts in other worlds,” the anaphoric repetition of “then” builds connections through time and space during the period of the tapster’s unconsciousness. Okri thus invokes the chronological movement of time and the teleological structure of narrative even as he advocates for psychological serenity in a passage where the cumulative logic of knowledge acquisition (“he learned . . . he also learned”) is balanced by appeals for “patience” and “stillness.”

Just as rhetorical devices establish connectivity throughout “What the Tapster Saw,” so repeated tropes likewise function to construct a sense of constitutive ecological collectivity. The recurrence of the cobweb motif is both particularly noticeable and structurally significant. Appearing just after the tapster has passed the first trespass sign, cobwebs weave the story together: first, the tapster observes “thick cobwebs” through which he has to cycle
to reach a palm-tree to tap for wine (184); he then notices their “glittering” form in his early enamored response to his new environment (185); still later, they are used by “a foul-smelling creature” to “stuff his eyes,” causing an itching sensation as well as awakening his consciousness to the harms caused by the petroleum industry (186). When the tapster seems to be on the cusp of awaking from his coma, the cobwebs work to maintain his necessary unconsciousness: “a creature came and stuffed his eyes with cobwebs. His eyes itched again and he saw that the wars were not yet over” (188). Indeed, he comes to adapt to the cobwebs, resorting to counting them when his “im-patience reach[e]s new proportions” (190), remembering that if he remains still, “everything else around him reflected his stillness” (187). And the last thing he notices, after observing the birds’ absence from the copper sky, are “[s]reamers of cobweb membranes weaved over the wounded palm tree” (189). As this provocative image suggests, the cobwebs that bind together this story also signal loss, marking through their “stream[ing] . . . membranes” the injuries suffered by the palm-tree as a result of oil extraction. These melancholy membranes, fluttering in the breeze like naturally occurring streamers to honor the dead, signal the unnerving absence of creaturely life in the Delta Oil Company’s terrain, including not only the birds who would typically rest on the area’s trees but also the spiders that presumably produced the webs but whose existence is never noted.

Together, the connective tissue of Okri’s magical realist aesthetics thus constructs an expansive collectivity composed of human, non-human, animal, and ecological life. “What the Tapster Saw” constructs, through its aesthetic form as much as its narrative trajectory, a symbiotic connection between its human characters and the ecosystem of the Niger Delta. Indeed, when the tapster is finally brought out of his coma, seven days after he is knocked unconscious, it is largely through the herbalist’s capacity to reconnect his patient to his lived environment. In the traditional West African tradition marking the beginning of a ceremony, Tabasco breaks a kola nut and then lights a pipe, but “[i]nstead of tobacco, he use[s] alligator pepper seeds” (192-3). Rejecting a substance that represents colonial trade and instead using seeds that are local to the Niger Delta and to West African wetlands, Tabasco symbolically and sensorily reconnects the tapster to the materiality of his lived environment, thereby saving him from the nightmare of phantasmagoric oil and the transitional existence of unconsciousness. The “black ticklish smoke” gradually brings the tapster out of his coma, “making [him] float into a familiar world” (193). If the “familiar[ity]” of this world is conducive to his awakening, it seems to derive both from the use of locally grown alligator pepper seeds and from the herbalist’s commitment to traditional medicine. In other words, the tapster is brought out of the nightmare experience of ruinous methods of petroleum extraction nourished by global commodity markets and enabled by colonial-era property laws, and he is reconnected to the “familiar” world
through local ecological and cultural practice. On fully reawakening, all the markers of his nightmare, including the oil-spill snake and the signboard warning against trespass, are blown away by “green liquids” that “[s]pe[w]l” like vomit from the borehole (194). Framing this dystopian tale of environmental ruin, then, is a utopian story of autochthonous triumph.

As this essay has suggested, “What the Tapster Saw” poses a challenge to the traditionally exploitative relationship between art and oil. Inasmuch as “What the Tapster Saw” reveals much of its political critique through its hauntingly beautiful depiction of oil extraction, it stages the enduring connections between aesthetics and the petroleum industry. International oil conglomerates have been particularly supportive patrons of the visual arts, one of the most generous being Nigeria’s largest and most active oil company, Royal Dutch Shell. Like its competitor, BP, Shell holds many corporate sponsorships in Britain, which has been Okri’s home since 1978, including the British Film Institute, the National Theatre, and the Southbank Centre. Notwithstanding the sustained activist pressure that brought other similar sponsorships to an end, including at the National Gallery, the Tate, and the Natural History Museum, these corporate partnerships are testament to the longstanding connections between the consumption of art and literature in the Global North and predatory resource extraction in the Global South. From an advertising perspective, Shell’s sponsorship of major art galleries and museums in the Global North serves to publicize the brand while engaging in image recuperation. From an ethical perspective, however, and as activism mobilized against petroleum sponsorship has recognized, particularly from visual arts groups like Platform London, Liberate Tate, and the Art Not Oil Coalition, Shell’s patronage of the arts simply sustains the long tradition of colonial and neoliberal powers consuming in leisure what it takes from the Global South.

In revealing through its aesthetic form the commitments its shares with progressive theories of property jurisprudence from indigenous and Global South frameworks, which have inspired recent juridical revisionings of human-ecological relation, “What the Tapster Saw” stages literature’s capacity to enact new forms of political and environmental life. Most importantly, its connective aesthetics, when considered alongside its allusive yet trenchant critique of Nigeria’s petroleum industry, can be seen to offer a notable alternative to the appropriative, exclusionary, and privative understanding of land that is charted in Nigerian property law. Further, through the aesthetic and narrative construction of ecological connectedness, “What the Tapster Saw” reveals its shared concerns with the environmental humanities’ more recent efforts to dismantle the anthropocentric division between human and non-human life. As such, in the shared structures and processes of this story’s aesthetics with current efforts to conceptually restructure both property
law and ecological thought, it might well be seen, as this essay has argued, that literary texts can function not only to challenge but also to recalibrate existing forms of thought.

Notes
1. For an excellent overview of the history and debates, see Kristen A. Carpenter et al, esp. 1024-5, 1027-9, and 1032-8.
2. See Lin Heng Lye, esp. 198-9 and 208-211.
3. On the disproportionate impact on the Niger Delta, see Rob Nixon, esp. 113. Nixon describes Shell as nothing less than racist, explaining, for example, that “in Africa, [Shell] waives onshore drilling standards that it routinely upholds elsewhere. Indeed, 40 percent of all Shell oil spills worldwide have occurred in Nigeria” (113).
5. Amitav Ghosh coined the term “petrofiction” in his 1992 review of literary representations of oil, since named one of the first literary assessments of the field and of climate-change fiction more generally.
6. In Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century, Stephanie LeMenager uses the term “petroleum aesthetics” to name oil’s cultural import in U.S. national narratives.
7. Thomas S. Davis uses the term “anthropocene aesthetics” in an essay on the Bakken oilfields in Minnesota (U.S.) and Saskatchewan (Canada). By invoking the Anthropocene, Davis connects petroleum production with human-induced climate change, a charge that implicitly underpins the entirety of “What the Tapster Saw.”
8. Wenzel’s influential term refers to magical realist Nigerian texts, including “What the Tapster Saw,” that engage with the country’s petroleum production.
9. Nigeria secured independence from Britain in 1958. Oil was discovered by the Shell-BP Development Company, a colonial consortium owned by Royal Dutch Shell and British Petroleum, in 1956. Royal Dutch Shell remains the dominant oil company in the region. See Falola and Heaton 181.
10. See Stephens 394-5.
11. Lisa Stephens describes Nigeria’s environmental laws as “weak and underenforced” (387) and as “providing only the illusion of environmental protection and sustainable development” (406-7). Likewise, Barisere Rachel Konne argues that Nigeria’s environmental laws typically fail because of a lack of independent monitoring and because fines for breaking existing regulations are too low to prove a deterrent; see, esp., 190-196.
12. See Falola and Heaton 183-4 on the role of the oil boom in Nigeria’s developing into a rentier state.
years oil and gas have comprised over 90% of Nigeria’s exports and more than 70 percent of consolidated budgetary revenue. . . The share of the service sector has risen steadily from 50 percent of GDP in 2011 to more than 60 percent in the first half of 2015” (2).

15. On the Nigerian Civil War as in part a resource conflict, see, for ex., Falola and Heaton 157-8; see also Watts 59-60 and 66-7.

16. See Ordinioha and Brisibe 13-14; see also Konne 185;

17. See Ordinioha and Brisibe, esp. 11-13.

18. The political geographer Michael Watts is a noted authority on what he terms “petro-capitalism” and its sharply divisive effects on Nigerian society. See esp. 50-55.

19. More recent work has taken a starkly realist approach to the harms caused by the petroleum industry in the Niger Delta, with Helon Habila’s Oil on Water being the most widely read such example.

20. During the oil-rich years during which “What the Tapster Saw” was written and published, the Delta region suffered a documented “2676 spills between 1976 and 1990,” while “Shell alone accounted for 1.6 million gallons of spilled oil, 37 per cent of the company’s spills world-wide” (Watts 68).

21. See “Flaring Data.” The data provided covers the period 2013 to 2016.

22. See Nixon, esp. 113. “A 1995 World Bank report noted that 76 percent of the natural gas resulting from petroleum production in Nigeria was flared (at temperatures of 14,000 degrees Celsius), while in Britain only 4.3 percent and in the United States a mere 0.6 percent was flared” (113). More recent reports (per footnote 17), suggest that the United States has substantially increased its own gas flaring practices; however, given that many U.S. gas fields are located in or near indigenous lands, it cannot be easily argued that gas flaring is now occurring regularly in the Global North as well as the Global South, as the U.S. would, in this regard, seem to be continuing a pattern of land exploitation that does not map onto the North-South nexus.

23. See Watts 67.


26. See also Lye 191-2, esp. footnote 12.

27. Lye draws particular attention to Lynn Townsend White Jr.’s important historical work of 1967.

28. English common law was imposed on Singapore in 1826; see Lye 190.

29. The “bundle of sticks” theory of property as a relative right derives from the early twentieth century work of Wesley Hohfeld. See Carpenter et al. 1066-7.
Works Cited


