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Storying Ecocenes



Growing Up with Oil

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Growing Up with Oil

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About the Author

Sosthenes Nnamdi Ekeh is a PhD student in the Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta and a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he has taught English and Literary Studies. A former Graduate Assistant at Godfrey Okoye University and Bigard Memorial Seminary, both in Enugu, Nigeria and past Editor of *The Muse Journal*, he has published poems, short stories, and research papers in local and international journals. His research centres, among others, on depression and suicidality in Nigeria, environmental justice, and the intersection of postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and cultural sociology in the articulation of postcolonial subjectivity.

Growing Up with Oil

Sosthenes Nnamdi Ekeh

You want to write a story in response to an assignment on oil inventory. Your professor has asked that you produce a story about your association with oil as a requirement for your graduate course, Energy Humanities. It is not just any kind of story you want to write, but one that is both fictional and true, which captures the presence of oil in your life and establishes you as a key participant in the prevailing petroculture. Call it a story about your evolving consciousness of oil. You have read Jennifer Wenzel, Brent Bellamy, and Stephanie LeMenager—such big names in the energy humanities—and understood their guidelines for producing assignments on oil inventory. But the guidelines don't make you a good storyteller. So here you are, stuck on where to begin! You have browsed through your experiences, trying to recall your specific encounters with oil. But you are bothered about their collective relevance to the overall outcome of your story. How about sifting out the interesting segments of these encounters? You reason. But would it make a good read before your audience? Because of this doubt, you have written and canceled out many sentences: they didn't strike well enough in your model of a story. Now you are back to the beginning, left with this empty white space hungry for words.

To leave you at your own devices, for a concept so ubiquitous as oil, huh! It's like being caught up in a tornado, the experience of which unsettles your mental balance, making you doubt your very sense of self. Bad comparison, right? But your sense of self indeed! What sense of self have you got outside the provisions of oil? The biblical injunction, "Cut off from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5), rings out loudly each time you try to think about your oil inventory because you know it's true: your life is nothing without oil; without it you're nobody. For you are not just connected to oil by relation of dependence; you are so inextricably intertwined with it that your self-identity is cultivated by means of and within the world of oil. So you see, you owe some homage to oil, what could pass for a fair representation in your story. You don't need to be generous with details—you can't even remember half of them. Just focus on your direct contact with oil, on the particular occasions you've had to deal with it, in its material form, and

ignore its infrastructure in which your entire life, to date, has been “soaked.” But that may present you as an ingrate, if you wish to write about oil inventory and sideline its material infrastructure, as not even Ohagu, your own village in Nsukka, where you were born and raised, which is safely tucked away from the Nigerian cities, the hubs of development, is innocent of oil infrastructures.

Though there was no electricity in your village, you had, as a baby, begun to suck oil from the kerosene lantern, draining its content every night. The high cost of kerosene per liter could not prevent you from sleeping without the lantern on, as if the pitch darkness in the room recalled in your delicate mind the original chaos of creation, before light was separated from darkness. You would begin to cry once your mother blew off the lantern to economize the oil, which was never enough, despite your country being an oil-producing nation. But your tears were more precious than oil, perhaps even costlier, leaving your mother to choose the lesser of the two evils: to have the lantern burn out through the night down to its wick, knowing that it would be easier to refill the liter than watch your body temperature rise. She wouldn’t want that, at least not when you were her only child, whom she had to carry carefully like an egg, lest you crash and her whole life would be miserable. Her overindulgence, however, only fueled your dreaded affinity with oil, surrounding you with plastic toys and talking shoes whose company was a perfect substitute for the absence of playmates in your neighborhood.

But having those toys, which you would sometimes scold, in your mother’s fashion, for failing to swallow the gobbet of food you kept thrusting into their ever-smiling maws, does not make you an oil consumer, does it? What have the poor things that would just be there, looking at you, in their unchanging countenance, to do with oil and environment and global warming? You wonder, as you now reflect on it, in your evolving oil consciousness, which the Energy Humanities course has begun to instill in you, making you wish to calculate, as Sougandhica Hoysal did in LeMenager’s book, *Living Oil* (2014), the life cycle assessment of plastic toys, to quantify the amount of energy involved in their production. But no one thinks of the process through which equipment comes into being during consumption, you remember; what matters is whether the equipment serves its purpose. And knowing how energy-intensive a product is, does it make you consume any less of it than could have the danger kerosene posed to your life in early childhood made you avoid it? It doesn’t, even the danger couldn’t, despite that you almost got yourself roasted in the kitchen but for your mother’s timely intervention. You could not make a fire with the wet firewood to warm breakfast and had resorted to pouring kerosene into the hearth to ignite the fire, unknown to you that it was mixed with fuel, as they were wont to, those black-market sellers in your area, which made it spark high flames when you lighted the match. As you watched the makeshift kitchen turn into a

pile of ashes, the saying “You don’t play with fire” began to make sense to you for the first time. Perhaps that saying could have been worded “You don’t play with fuel” instead, knowing that fire is only a witness to, and not the cause of, the danger inherent in fuel.

This inherent danger did not, however, deter you from running a black-market oil sale, as was popular in your village, in your teenage years. Since there were no filling stations nearby, black markets were the available option for most bike owners and generator users who forgot to buy fuel on their way back from town. And your price per liter, unregulated as it was, was always at the whim of each seller, hiking it at the least sense of fuel scarcity in town. You enjoyed an elastic profit margin and were to buy yourself a motorcycle from the huge savings you made from the sales before the crash of the oil business. From being a fuel supplier to a primary fuel consumer, you carved yourself a prominent slot in the oil chain, revving up your engine as you galloped down your village’s untarred roads, puffing out streaks of smoke from your leaking exhaust pipe, which you were reluctant to fix because of the visibility the noisy sound gave you in the okada business.¹ But it didn’t matter anyway, your position in the oil chain, as long as your comfort wasn’t at stake; nor did it matter, as it does to you now, the disaster your commercial cycling constituted to the ecology. If you had not saved up from the okada business, how would you have gone to the university, you see? So, the more ascendancy you gained in the oil consumption ladder, the greater you advanced in your career, defining your self-worth on the basis of energy-intensive products in your possession.

At this point in your story, have you begun to “know thyself, what you really are,” as Antonio Gramsci (1971) would say, in relation to oil? Can you now see that you are where you are because oil enabled it, that without it you would have been nowhere, and that your society in its current state would have been impossible if not for oil’s infinite affordances? Perhaps you are beginning to see it, as evident in those guilty looks now smothering your eyes. There you are! But your Igbo people say, “*The na-atọ ụtọ na-egbu egbu*,” sweet things kill, as a way to caution against excess, which, in your obsession with materials of comfort oil provides, you seem to have forgotten too soon. But hasn’t this become the new mantra of your society to warn against the danger of oil consumption? Or the task the energy humanities has set upon itself, if by doing so a consciousness is created of the consequences of fossil-fuel dependence and possible ways of energy transition? But here you are, a fossilized oil consumer, whose addiction to oil infrastructures can only be cured at the risk of dismantling the structures of selfhood you have constructed through them. Are you now ready for some rude shock? Hey . . . are you?

Notes

¹ Okada is a name for commercial motorcycling; the use of motorcycles for taxi service that is popular in Nigeria.

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