



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *An Environmental Unconscious? Nigerian Oil Politics, Autonomous Partial Objects, and Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/100423/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Nicholls, BL [orcid.org/0000-0003-3238-7695](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3238-7695) (2018) *An Environmental Unconscious? Nigerian Oil Politics, Autonomous Partial Objects, and Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy*. *Research in African Literatures*, 48 (4 (Winter 2017)). pp. 56-77. ISSN 0034-5210

<https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritelite.48.4.05>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## **An Environmental Unconscious? Nigerian Oil Politics, Autonomous Partial Objects, and Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy**

To become true environmentalists, we would need to think beyond ourselves. This shift would help us to intuit what is at stake in wider non-human political interests. A theoretical corollary follows on from these starting points. Expressed in formal, philosophical terms, psychoanalysis (a subject-oriented way of knowing) is inadequate to the project of political environmentalism (an object-obliged way of being). In my view, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* pioneers a solution by demonstrating to readers what thinking beyond the subject might resemble. Given that *Sozaboy* is a staging-post in Saro-Wiwa's own journey towards his mature environmental politics, its narrative alerts us to the wider possibility that the environment may be positioned like an unconscious.<sup>1</sup> As a way into Saro-Wiwa's complex insights, I draw upon Kleinian object-relations theory. Klein allows us to think beyond the subject by using its split investments in part-objects. However, I undertake innovative departures from Kleinian theoretical paradigms by suggesting that the primary mechanisms of our self-imaging and relations (introjection and projection) derive from basic and organic bodily compulsions to consume and pollute (ingestion and excretion). This allows me to make the claim that, since consumption and pollution always initiate what we are as organisms, selves, and social beings, environmental despoliation is already pre-comprehended in all of the finer operations of the human. Stated otherwise, we never surmount our instincts, even in our most mature or sophisticated moments. Instincts subtend these moments, too. As a way out of this bind, I try to counter-balance the subject's privatized political interests by venturing that the autonomous partial object<sup>2</sup> offers a

---

<sup>1</sup> Readers may notice here wording that echoes Lacan's formulation that "what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language." (147). Unlike Lacan, I am not pre-occupied primarily with the human subject. Therefore, my focus is chiefly on the non-linguistic and on the extra-subjective modes that the environment offers. These stand as counterpoints to the subject, measurable only in the disturbance or incoherence of the subject. The version of the unconscious that I am aiming for is non-anthropocentric. This version has not yet been attempted in psychoanalytic thought.

<sup>2</sup> The orthodox psychoanalytic terminology from Melanie Klein is "part-object." Zizek later uses the term "partial object." I follow each thinker's terminology separately, while understanding each to be describing a comparable relation to objects. That is to say, I use the term "part-object" where its formation or apprehension is notionally static for descriptively convenient purposes. I use Zizek's term "autonomous partial object" to imply the added valence of the object's autonomous action or animation. For theoretical accuracy, it should be said that this strict distinction between the static and the animated

category of agency that is related to, but independent from, the human. *Sozaboy* is a novel in which human choice is diminished by war and in which the corresponding world of objects becomes increasingly animated. I think that there is a conceptual yield to be had in taking the novel seriously. It is not only a document of extreme and reduced human circumstance. It is also a document of an enlivened object-world. I turn to this enlivened object-world for political lessons that Saro-Wiwa himself helped to initiate in Nigeria during his lifetime. I use the term “autonomous partial object” to model what an enlivened object-world looks like in psychoanalytic theory.<sup>3</sup> The autonomous partial object’s agency, part-human and part-inhuman, I argue, approximates an unconscious environmental agency that exists within and beyond us.

I adopt the term “autonomous partial object” from Slavoj Žižek, who uses it – among other examples – to describe the arm of Peter Sellers’ character, Dr Strangelove, who tries to physically suppress his alien hand’s involuntary Nazi salutes. Žižek dubs autonomous partial objects “organs without bodies” (24m48s to 24m53s) which embody “the dimension of the undead, of living dead, of something which remains alive even after it is dead. And it’s, in a way, immortal in its deadness itself. It goes on, insists” (25m18s-25m31s). In these comments, Žižek follows Freud’s essay “The ‘Uncanny,’” which claims that the autonomous partial object derives from the fear of castration:

Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, as in a fairy tale of Hauff’s, feet which dance by themselves, [. . .] all of these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove capable of independent activity in addition. As we

---

part-object does not exist in Kleinian thought. This is because the infant imbues the breast with both “good” and “bad” attributes. Such attributes indicate that the breast has independent and contradictory moral dispositions. It is already animated, already an agent, already an autonomous actor.

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, in psychoanalysis, an object may be a person or idea or a thing. But these objects are belatedly derived from our very first part-objects – breast (food), faeces, phallus (penis). The breast precedes and shapes the eventual apprehension of the mother. The infant sees the world in parts at first, and only later comes to derive and formulate whole objects.

already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its proximity to the castration complex. (244)

In the Freudian framework of understanding, the autonomous partial object is derived by first proliferating (or doubling) the object in fantasy in order to thwart the fear of castration. Genitals preserved intact in fantasy (for example) provide illusory comfort that they cannot be severed, even as their doubling acknowledges their severance. The return of the partial object in fantasized autonomous form is accompanied by uncanny feeling, because its autonomy reproduces the fearful prospect of castration. However, I depart from Freud's conventional association of the part-object with castration. As we know from Melanie Klein, certain part-objects precede the phallic stage. These are the breast (in the oral phase) and the faeces (in the anal phase). Klein allows a matrifocal approach that is materialistically-inclined towards the politics of consumption and waste, instead of symbolically-inclined towards the phallus and its possibilities. This materialistic psyche is of use, I think, in conceiving of an environmental psychoanalysis. If we are to undo human bounds (especially insular self-interest propped upon individuated embodiment), we might well consider the idea that part-objects are always formed in a state of ambivalence. For instance, if the part-object is loved, like the good breast, it must be devoured or retained, its good contents incorporated into the self. In this arrangement, the good is a site of splitting, since the good is placed both without (the breast) and within (the mouth or gut). If the part-object is hated, like the bad breast or the faeces, it must be controlled or destroyed, its bad contents projected elsewhere. In this arrangement, the mastery of the part-object is a site of splitting, since our fantasies remain invested in the part-object's placement elsewhere (destruction, projection) or our own notional placement within the object (control). From these dispositions of the part-object, all of our introjective and projective identifications proceed. If part-objects are formed in a state of ambivalence as I have claimed, if part-objects are invested both within us and outside us, this means that we are subjects who are only ever made in parts. To fully acknowledge ourselves, to integrate our mixed and

dispersed investments, we would need to come to terms with our own non-centredness. Not to put too fine a point on it, we would need to become environmentally-oriented. Despite a difference of critical emphasis, Žižek offers this clear-sighted assessment of the psychic compulsions at stake, “And the lesson is clear: the only way for me to get rid of this autonomous partial object is to become this object” (30m47s-30m57s).

The autonomous partial object is to some extent environmentally-animated, because its autonomy cannot be entirely reclaimed for the human. As a consequence, the disruptive, immeasurable qualities of environmental agency are not directly readable in human terms. Instead, they contour in relief the world’s negative capacity for thought – an environmental unconscious. To be clear, I am not offering an anthropomorphic model here. Precisely on the contrary, I am attributing to the environment that which the subject cannot recoup of the (partial) object’s autonomy. Thus, I read beyond the category of human tragedy in the Biafran civil war in Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* so as to test whether the novel allows us to undertake a deliberate philosophical wager – reading for its environmental history despite a narrator whose historical and political awareness is scant.

Despite an avowedly speculative and experimental approach, I pioneer an ecological method, theorizing the environment in ways that include the category of the human, but without conceding to the narrow bounds of human self-interest. My argument inaugurates an extra-subjective category, which I term the “more-than-human.” The “more-than-human” widens the human to encompass the partial object, the environment, the involuntary, the inert, and the incipient. Moreover, the category of the “more-than-human” has ecological reach because it refuses the primacy and insularity of the human subject or body. Both subject and body have become convenient shorthands for the privatization of the sensibility and both maintain their bounds in inimical relation to wider communities of life (and death). Within African Studies, the “more-than-human” resonates with familiar, but varied, vernacular conceptions of the subject – ancestors, therianthropes, revenants,

witches, and familiars, the unborn, among others. Such African theories of the subject offer scholarship within the Environmental Humanities an under-explored avenue of enquiry – one which decentres the critic’s casual arrogation of initiative, constituency, and declarative power. My discussion focuses on the long environmental legacy of oil production and pollution during Biafra and its aftermath – a legacy that Saro-Wiwa himself recognized only too well as an environmental activist. In the context of the Biafran war, Saro-Wiwa’s literary account leads me to focus deliberately and counter-intuitively on the unifying politics of the starving child and the avaricious “big eater” in order to highlight the wider economies of appetite that are implicated in this war and in its soiled landscapes.

My primary literary text, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, is useful for more-than-human lines of thought, because it presents us with very regimented subjects – Biafran soldiers – who have renegade organs. Those renegade organs – those organs without bodies or autonomous partial objects – offer a highly plastic interface between human and environmental realms. Originating in oil plunder and culminating in human extremity and environmental disaster, the Biafran project necessitates a meditation on what it means to live among the dead as we persist within and beyond blighted waterscapes and wasted lives. When the autonomous partial object is foregrounded, I argue, it contours the environmental unconscious and gestures towards newly enlivened and more-than-human ways of living among the dead.

My argument proceeds in five stages. First, I challenge a critical consensus that views Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* as a child soldier novel. This critical consensus is well-meaning, but considerably wide of the mark. Second, I analyse the flattening of the subject within the novel’s phenomenology of the soldier. Third, I assess the fluidity of object-choices in civil war, operating as these must amidst the dissolution of the social and in immediate proximity to death. This is a proximity that we all inhabit but which most characteristically deny in the ongoing service of function. Fourth,

adapting and advancing Melanie Klein's work on object-relations, I argue that our basic physiological functions (ingestion, excretion) and our primal identifications (introjective, projective) mean that we are hardwired to consume and pollute in all of our organic and social dimensions. My psychoanalytic model therefore imputes a consistency of relation to Biafra's politics of the appetites and its wider geopolitics of oil production and pollution. Fifth, I suggest that the mechanism of the autonomous partial object allows us to contemplate living among the dead and to acknowledge our own insistent undeadness. The autonomous partial object broaches a porous subject, which is a pre-requisite for an extra-subjective or more-than-human psychoanalysis of the environment.

In one reading of Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, the protagonist accomplishes the act of becoming-partial by living on as a spirit and re-appearing at the scene of his former activities (for similar wording, see Freud "The 'Uncanny'" 248). In general, this is a narrative possibility that has escaped otherwise careful critics and readers who have wanted to read the narrator, Mene, in purely human terms. In part, this is due to the pitfalls awaiting readers of the novel. Self-evidently, the showiness of the narrator, Mene's, language means that this is a book that can only really be read in conditions of estrangement.<sup>4</sup> A case in point is the novel's title, *Sozaboy*, which consciously satirizes the romantic ideal of the "soldier boy" – a gallant boudoir suitor from the 19<sup>th</sup> century officer class. Saro-Wiwa's contemporary African satire of this antiquated European cultural type has been lost in translation and his narrator has been incorrectly attributed with the voice of a child soldier.<sup>5</sup> Quite simply, the critical field overwhelmingly reads Mene as a "boy soldier," instead of as a "soldier boy." Helen Chukwuma, for example, claims that *Sozaboy* features a "naive young boy who enters joins the army out of romantic idealism" (p. 45) and Patrick Corcoran calls Mene a "child soldier" (accessed online, unpaginated). John Marx classes *Sozaboy* among "[m]emoir-style child soldier

---

<sup>4</sup> Boyd writes, "[The] language of the novel is a unique literary construct. No one in Nigeria actually speaks or writes like this" ("Introduction," *Sozaboy*, unpaginated).

<sup>5</sup> Michael North is an important exception, calling Mene a "young Ogoni man" (101). Eleni Coundouriotis cites general agreement that Mene is "young and inexperienced," but makes the important qualification that the "text offers contradictory information about his age" (199).

novels” (78). Maureen Moynagh states that “Saro-Wiwa [. . .] is recognized as a founder of what Martin-Granel considers ‘almost a genre,’ that is the child-soldier narrative (7).” (197). Harry Garuba calls Mene a “young naive primary school leaver” (233) and “an inexperienced young boy” (135). Susanne Gehrmann claims that Mene is “about 18 years old” (38), but calls him a “juvenile soldier” (33) and speaks of his “naive, childish attitude” (38). Gehrmann sees Sozaboy as a “founding text for the emerging tradition of the child soldier’s soliloquy” (34). Iain Lambert sees Mene as a “naive youth” and “virtual child” (289), while Myriam Suchet states, “Le livre raconte à la première personne l’expérience d’un jeune garçon soldat, Méné” (44).<sup>6</sup> Francoise Ugochukwu writes that “Trois autres auteurs, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Uzodinma Iweala et Chris Abani, ont choisi de faire la dure vie de jeune recrue le sujet de leurs romans respectifs” (22).<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Highfield resists naming Mene a child soldier, but implies as much indirectly when he claims that Manmuswak “will appear to Sozaboy throughout the novel as a prescient figure representing the kind of person many surviving child soldiers will become” (45). Philip Joseph assumes that Mene is a teenage soldier (89), but insists on the convenience of reading him as a child, calling him a “representative for child soldiers” (90). In her response to Joseph, Mia Carter refers to Mene as both a “boy soldier” (123, 125) and a “solipsistic adolescent” (127). O. R. Dathorne, one of Saro-Wiwa’s Ibadan University tutors, published the short story, “High Life,” that was the initial precursor to Sozaboy. The entry against the short story in Dathorne’s anthology, *Africa in Prose*, reads, “The language is that of a barely educated primary school boy exulting in the new words he is discovering and the new world he is beginning to know” (quoted in Saro-Wiwa’s “Author’s Note,” Sozaboy, unpaginated). Such critical views are laudable for their attempts to salvage Sozaboy’s idiolect for a seriousness of purpose, and my aim is not to disparage them here. But misreadings of this kind also risk entering into a rhetoric of critical consequence that overlooks the mere detail of the novel and its historical types. It is only by infantilizing Mene and enlisting him in a fight which is not his own that we

---

<sup>6</sup> “The book recounts in the first person the experience of the young boy soldier Mene” [my translation].

<sup>7</sup> “Three other authors, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Uzodinma Iweala and Chris Abani, have chosen to make the hard life of the young recruit the subject of their respective novels” (my translation).



become able to read for a “child soldier.” And if we infantilize and conscript, we produce exactly the child soldier on whose behalf we purport to campaign in the first place.

How old, then, is Mene? Zaza, an ex-combatant in World War II tells us: “That time of Hitla. There was not salt in Dukana. At all. [. . .] Bom, Duzia, you people were here, not so? Ehen. Na only Mene be small picken by that time.” (Sozaboy 26). If Mene is a small child (“small picken”) during World War II (1939-1945), and if we infer that the war in Sozaboy is the Biafran conflict (sparked by the January coup of 1966), then it is clear that Mene must be at least 21 years old. This is no child soldier, and we need to clear the field in order to read him.

We have seen that Sozaboy is not about a boy, nor indeed about a child soldier. At stake in Mene’s age are the dimensions and possibilities of the subject. Mene’s framework of reference is insistently local and insular,<sup>8</sup> and this is what makes his voice a tricky one. He is a narrator who exists in the fabricated medium of rotten English, a narrator who designates no precise addressee and who offers us no signature. Look, for instance, at the stunningly casual way in which the novel begins and at the misplaced formality of its ending:

Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first.

All the nine villages were dancing and we were eating plenty of maize with pear and knacking tory under the moon. (1, my emphasis)

[. . .]

But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely. (181, my emphasis)

---

<sup>8</sup> Sozaboy “[crops] its perspective to a tightly localized setting” (Morrison, 20)

We begin the novel in mid-conversation and we end with an unsigned letter.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the movement from Mene to Sozaboy is a movement from a subject positioned amidst a familiar “everybody” to a subject estranged in writing among “anybody” who reads. Originating without precedent, Mene’s is a disembodied and decontextualized consciousness. On more than one occasion, Mene reveals a mind in exile from the wider world – a mind whose coincidence with what is going on in its environment is rendered in discordant terms. Take, for instance, two moments during Mene’s first encounter with Manmuswak in the Upwine Bar in Diobu. We begin with Mene’s interior monologue as he drinks palm-wine and we follow with his interior monologue as he contemplates Agnes:

This tombo was special. It was sweeter than all other tombo that I have drink before. There is no water in it. I begin to think I am lucky man after all.

Why is Pastor Barika talking that the world will soon end?

“Oh yes, the world will soon end.”

Ah-ah, I was frightened. At first I think that it is Pastor Barika. But no. It is the men who entered the bar just now. They were sitting in a small table near me.

“Yes, the world will end this year,” that is what the tall man [Manmuswak] was saying. (15, my emphasis)

She walked with style. She is not like all these stupid girls in Diobu, New York. She is neat and beautiful. And slender like palm tree. I think I like her very much. True. I like ‘am. God in Heaven. And she is Dukana girl. Oh, I will marry her. But what about the trouble in the country?

---

<sup>9</sup> Harry Garuba has made this point brilliantly: “Between the beginning and the end of the novel, there is a constant tussle between the structures of scribal narrative and the demands of orality” (233).

“Well, the only trouble is that there is trouble. And we must fight. I hear them talk it on the radio.” The tall man [Manmuswak] was sitting down again and singing and dancing and he was talking again as he was eating okporoko and drinking tombo. (17, my emphasis)

Mene has an insular consciousness in these two passages and it is recalled to the world by the unanticipated echo of Manmuswak’s voice. Mene dreams of love while the world talks of war. Lost in thought, Mene might function as an allegory of the reader – a subject whose pursuits are by definition solipsistic and anti-social. It is as if the environment in these passages accents and inflects Mene’s obliviousness. The environment speaks what Mene himself is unable to think, with obvious antic emphasis. For instance, Mene unquestioningly accepts Agnes as a fine “Dukana girl,” placing her in an ethnically derived moral framework. However, Mene quite ignores Agnes’ employment history as a barmaid in Lagos, and the fact that she has just bared her breasts to him and has selected and played Rex Lawson’s suggestive highlife song Sawale (which Mene dubs Ashewo)<sup>10</sup> on the gramophone. Ashewo translates in the glossary as “prostitute.” Hence, Agnes’ past employment and choice of music submit Mene’s romantic ideals to environmental ironies and to the infidelities of translation.<sup>11</sup> Mene’s focus in these two passages is on pleasures – alcoholic and sexual – and the intrusion of the historical via Manmuswak is, precisely, an object lesson. Mene finds his thought skewed and returned to him in the form of a confusing social demand. If the love-object may be construed as a “person, entity, [or] ideal” (Laplanche and Pontalis 273), then Mene’s ideals are being returned to him as autonomous partial objects that disconfirm his fantasies of narcissistic self-containment. Poised between the paranoiac’s aggrandizing fantasies of “God in Heaven” and prophesying “that the world will soon end,” Mene is recalled to history and to the “trouble in the country.”

---

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Abayomi Awelewa for his insights into the highlife lyrics to which Sozaboy alludes.

<sup>11</sup> Agnes may well have an investment in claiming to come from Dukana if she is in fact a returnee from Lagos. Saro-Wiwa’s own war memoir records how, in Port Harcourt (“Pitakwa” in Sozaboy) in October 1966, it was “impossible to convey the horrid nature of the deeds that were done, particularly to some women who were referred to as “Oturkpo women” and who were largely inmates of low-down bars and hotels” (On a Darkling Plain 60).

We have seen that the environment has agency in such scenes, and that this agency takes the form of autonomous partial object's skewed and returned ideals. It now falls to us to think about the consequences of overwhelming environmental agency for the (human) subject. From this early moment onwards, the arrival of war takes the form of relentless demand. To the extent that Mene concedes to this demand, the book charts his depersonalisation – so that he ends the novel without a home, without a name, without friends, without community, without family, without choices, and very possibly in a dead and disembodied form. As the novel progresses, Mene undertakes a journey away from identity towards the generic and ubiquitous status of “Sozaboy” – an appellation that divests him of the name “Mene” and that construes him simply in terms of his martial functions and his military rank.<sup>12</sup>

Soldiers are subjects whose reflexes are conditioned to compliant response. Following orders without question, they are denied the powers of articulation.<sup>13</sup> Sozaboy tells us, “Obey before complain. That is what the soza captain said. If there is trouble or disobedience, he will shoot all those who cause the trouble” (88). In these conditions of restraint, I would argue, soldiery plays out as tactical psychopathy in Sozaboy. Both the protagonist, Mene, and the universal soldier, Manmuswak, repeatedly alter their military (and national) allegiances throughout the narrative as the events of war overtake them. Such reversals clearly arise from the chaotic breakdown of all social and political logic in the Biafran wartime circumstances these characters inhabit.<sup>14</sup> In Sozaboy, the State's ability to govern has completely broken down. The universal threats to soldiers' lives (threats of violence, disease, starvation) and the shifting theatres of war in Biafra produce a psychopathic response in the subject. Since the demarcations between friend and enemy

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael North insightfully argues that “Sozaboy is a title, held in common with tens of thousands of other soldiers, and not a name at all.” (105)

<sup>13</sup> “‘Sozaboy’ is a name given to our hero by others.” (Lock p. 10)

<sup>14</sup> “At various points in the text, we find both protagonists alternating sides in the conflict, and these shifts occasion no political or ideological mediation. Only once in the novel do we even hear the name of a nation [p. 143]. Though he has lived in it all of his life, Nugwa, that is to say Nigeria, is a foreign place Sozaboy has vaguely heard of.” (Morrison 22)

evaporate,<sup>15</sup> a deep affiliation to one side or another is impossible and all political causes and moral frameworks become unworkable. Instead, we find a repeated affiliation to the local, the momentary, and the immediate, so that Mene cycles through all of the major positions in the war – Biafran soldier, wounded combatant, Federal soldier, refugee, prisoner of war and, finally, quite possibly, one of the dead. Likewise, Mene’s counterpart and nemesis, Manmuswak, operates according to a basic law of appetite – his nickname translates as “man must eat.” Throughout the novel, this basic mode of being means that Manmuswak is required simply to cure or kill for convenience in order to cheat death (see 95) – switching in an instant from Mene’s nurse and ally to his would-be executioner.<sup>16</sup>

In Sozaboy, the subject must become a function of circumstance and environment, calculating its continuing survival upon incremental advantage or optimal pleasure. In this sense, the object-attachments of the libido become insecure, fluid and fickle. Therefore, who one is inevitably becomes a function of where one happens to find oneself. What animates the subject is something outside of itself. To put this another way, both Mene and Manmuswak negotiate a situational micropolitics, in which identity is dictated by the immediate circumstance of power rather than by the deep comradeship of ethnicity or nation. In this wartime situation, identification and affect become very difficult and dangerous to operate. Instead, the subjects of civil war might be said to calculate their affiliations upon the crude and fluid algebra of pure expediency to best ensure their chances of survival. As such, both Mene and Manmuswak might be read as tactical psychopaths, basing their identifications upon whatever will afford optimal pleasure in untoward conditions.

This malleable disposition of the personality accords with Hecht and Simone’s analysis that “contemporary African socio-cultural practices could be said to constitute a new form of political

---

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Gunn astutely observes that “the word ‘enemy’ becomes a matter of perspective in the novel” (10).

<sup>16</sup> Austin Tam-George states that “this is a confused and muddled war in which the meaning of “enemy” seems unstable, contingent and situational.” (25)

training, one that can correspond to the dissolution of the nation as a legacy of colonialism” (Invisible Governance 23). Read in this light, Sozaboy refuses the normative psychoanalytic criteria for the “healthy” personality in the interests of a viable political future. If a healthy subject in a failed state or in a military conflagration exhibits psychopathic tendencies, we are invited to rethink theories of the subject along micropolitical lines and to dispense with normative conceptions of psychic health or deviance. In short, in a world without secure object attachments, psychopathy becomes the pragmatism of the powerless.

Given the subject’s placement within the schema of immediate and fluctuating power, Sozaboy refuses the purity of metaphoric abstraction. Its projections leave trails. What Mene imputes to his environment remains alive. Notice the movements of language in this passage:

This African Upwine Bar is in interior part of Diobu. Inside inside. We used to call this Diobu New York. I think you know New York. As plenty people for am. Na so dem plenty for Diobu. Like cockroach. And true true cockroach plenty for Diobu too. Everywhere. Like the men. And if you go inside the African Upwine Bar, you will see plenty cockroach man and proper cockroach too. (13)

There is a derangement of equation here. Diobu is like New York, which has plenty of people, whose plentifulness is like cockroaches, who abound in Diobu, where you can see both cockroach men and proper cockroaches.<sup>17</sup> Some other quality of the human is articulated in the cockroach men, who are a residue of the base and the unclean. This residue is secreted into narrative via the ferment of similitude, so that what lingers on the surface is the human become insect. The distance of similitude then collapses into an abject similarity, challenging our anthropoform biases. And yet

---

<sup>17</sup> On the lexical and structural repetitions in Sozaboy, see Doris Akekue (18-21).

we might also enter into a second order of translation in which insects have “cocks,” ghosting the defining phallic attribute of these men. Here, the autonomous partial object – the organ gone renegade – codes for a disturbing environmental agency. As elsewhere in *Sozaboy*, the phallic dissipates into the visceral – “cocks” and “roaches” forming a vague semiotics of the edible. At stake in Saro-Wiwa’s invention of Rotten English, then, is a language which proceeds by decomposing its own terms, and that repeatedly devolves human categories to micro-organisms and to organic processes of decay. Rotten English in this novel decomposes the subject through acts of likening that ultimately collapse the ideal of the anthropoform.<sup>18</sup>

As Mene’s passage through Diobu New York alerts us, the key transformations in this novel are to the body. To the extent that the source of power and its eventual object are co-mingled in *Sozaboy*, we might expect to find objects out of place. While the subject flattens out in *Sozaboy*, the partial object takes on an increasing autonomy. We see this especially in moments when organs start to go renegade. Notice, for example, Mene’s description of Agnes:

Him bottom dey shake as she walk. Him breast na proper J.J.C., Johnny Just  
Come – dey stand like hill. As I look am, my man begin to stand small  
small. I beg am make ‘e no disgrace me especially as I no wear pant that  
night.” (13).

In this passage, the involuntary partial erection of Mene’s “man” or penis produces an independent metonym of self – a self replicated, diminished, and identifiably separable. In a parody of *Bildung*, Mene becomes, so to speak, his own “man.” In other words, Mene’s “man” becomes an autonomous partial object, an organ without a body. The “man’s” distribution from the self extends beyond the body and has the effect of masculinising Agnes – because the pronoun “him” is used for

---

<sup>18</sup> For an example, see Michael North (103).

her bottom and her breasts (which are also named with the masculine “Johnny Just Come”).

Elsewhere, women’s breasts – or “boobies” – are called “bobby” that “just stand up like calabash” (37), misattributing their gender while emphasizing their autonomous gravity-defying movements.

There is a second example of the autonomous partial object, in which animal imagery attaches to Mene’s “man” or “penis.” Noticing Mene’s arousal in the African Upwine Bar, Agnes asks if he is hungry. Upon hearing that he is not, she retorts “[Make] you tell your snake make ‘e no too stand like say ‘e dey hungry” (14). Mene’s erection is repeatedly described by Agnes as being like “snake wey no get house” (35, 37, 59). There is something unaccommodated about the object here. It is not only a partial object. It is also independent, mobile, and distributed. The “snake” is a separate organism, to the extent that it might, if permitted, find its own way in the world. Mene’s “snake” finds its double in his nemesis, Manmuswak, the fifth columnist who leaves Mene’s company “small, small, like tall snake passing through the bush, making small noise” (97). While Manmuswak is idiomatically comparable to a treacherous “snake in the grass,” he also suggests a version of the castrated self once repudiated, but now held in suspension and at one remove from its originating subject. The phallus here becomes a priapic journeyman, adventuring across the landscape’s surface in a non-penetrative manner (it is a “snake wey no get house”). However, the snake is not simply a conventional cipher for the phallic. Indeed, the snake first appears at the African Upwine Bar – the site of Mene’s and Manmuswak’s conspicuous consumption of food and wine. It is after all a snake that stands “like say ‘e dey hungry,” according to Agnes (14). The snake is thus also a cipher of the digestive tract – a “tube with teeth”<sup>19</sup> through which the environment itself travels in avatars of nutrition and waste. In this sense, the snake is a Biafran rudiment – a reduction of the human to its primal circumstance (“Manmuswak” or “man must eat,” which is to say, a “snake must eat”).

---

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Dr Elinor Rooks (236) for this phrase, itself attributed to Alan Watts (7).



Pausing for a second, we should observe that the tension between “man” and “snake” as descriptors for phallus is mediated by a discourse of the appetites. In Freudian shorthand, we might say that “penis = man (who must eat) = snake (which stands as if hungry).” Ultimately, Sozaboy’s emphasis is not upon the phallic organization of sexual difference, but upon the impossibility of visceral object-relations (where introjective and projective identifications are at stake in phantasies of ingestion and excretion). This relay of object-relations means that it is difficult to entirely sustain Emily Apter’s thesis that “Translation is an oedipal assault on the mother tongue” (xi), in which she slightly transforms Barthes’ wonderful dictum that “the writer is one who plays with his mother’s body” (The Pleasure of the Text 37). The trouble that Saro-Wiwa introduces into such suggestive formulations is that neither the subject, nor the body, is presumed to be insular in Mene’s narrative. Like the ashewo, language sometimes plays away and its destinations are contestable. Certainly, Apter has brilliantly drawn attention to gender ambiguities in Sozaboy:

Using a gender-inverted dative case – in which gendered pronouns designating parts of the female body are masculinised, “him bottom shake,” “the corner of him eye” – Saro-wiwa [sic] depersonalizes the body, imaging it as a field of disparate, wildly associative, erogenous part-objects. A phrase like “I dey look am too,” or “man begin to stand small,” or acronyms such as J. J. C (“Johnny-Just-Come”), maps a dispersed, biomorphic erotic animus that dissolves the boundaries of subject and object. A compilation he-woman, she-man emerges from the gender scrambled grammar, suggesting a phobic image of “queer Africa” strategically deployed to flush out homophobia and political anxiety around “Big-Manism” in Nigerian society. (143)

Apter suggestively maps the gender constellations in Sozaboy's language, but she misses the more radical insight. Depersonalization in the novel evacuates the category of the human altogether. The object here is not simply gender-scrambled. In fact, we need to entertain the more radical idea of a posthumous subject, or even an environmental or more-than-human subject.

The human is an insufficient category in this book because the war machine is predatory. War exists to nurture the organism so that it may participate its own demise. Indeed, Mene's analysis of the war is that it exists to "make person fine like goat that they have make fat and ready to kill for chop during Christmas" (127). What is nurtured here is not the human, but something else entirely – cannon fodder. Of Manmuswak's victims, Mene imagines "by now vultures will begin to chook their eyes and to chop them one by one, and ant too plus maggot" (168), and yet he also says of his incarceration in a prison – a "cave or hole for rabbit" (159) – that "it is better to die and buried than to live like maggot as I am living now" (160). The malnourished refugees have "palm oil colour hair" (151) and "mosquito legs" (148), while children with kwashiorkor have "small big belly like pot" (146). The refugees in Nugwa "suffer and die like hen and ant and goat" (145). After the war, the townspeople die of dysentery "like fly" (180), while the survivors hide "in dark corner like cockroach" (174). War here is a consumptive force that returns in dehumanized form humanity's own worst appetites – including an ironic cannibalism in which starving friend becomes more dangerous than satiated foe (145). This derangement of threat means that the complexities of Biafra are repeatedly offered in half-mystified economies of the predatory, the edible, and the inedible. The environment forms something like a gestalt, whose chaotic and hyperbolic return of the appetites culminates in an onslaught on their human originators. In Sozaboy's visceral analysis of the war, a politics of hunger and plenty prevails. The simplification of international geopolitics and national civil war to the basics of appetite highlights the redundancy and disposability of the human in the applications of military power.

In fact, Mene's analysis of war and the domestic approaches an economy of appetites. He tells us in first person narration, "I think to myself, if trouble begin proper, Dukana go see pepper" (36), following which his free indirect discourse in the immediate new paragraph is "Agnes sweet like tomato" (36). There is a perfectly sensible chain of food associations here. The metaphor "see pepper" – "seeing red" in the glossary (185) – leads to the simile that Agnes is "sweet like tomato." These imageries materialize into a gastronomic ensemble and refuse the obvious conceptual bases for association (the redness of both tomatoes and peppers [or red eyes that have been peppered]). In short, we have a moment of over-materialization that is at the heart of Saro-Wiwa's poetics – an over-materialization equivalent to the edible and digestible qualities of the human, so that Agnes' symbolic beauty is but one step away from Biafran fodder. Moreover, this over-materialization is accomplished in formal terms by relinquishing first person narration to free indirect discourse. The partial object's autonomy is established in this movement, in which free indirect discourse problematizes the attribution of narrative voice and therefore the locus of libidinal investment.

We have seen that Sozaboy evacuates the category of the human and problematizes investments in the object. What, then, might we make of these repeated appearances – as absence or excess – of the autonomous partial-object in Sozaboy? In the classical Kleinian theory of object-relations, the mother's breast is a template for the part-object, since it comes to substitute for the mother herself even before she is wholly apprehended. To the extent that the mother's body is the child's first landscape,<sup>20</sup> the object is a proxy for the environment's silent partnership in all endeavour. To read the object for environmental resonance is always to undertake analysis at one level of remove, at one level of displacement and at multiple levels of distortion. We never quite know what the object discloses, since it always precedes and pre-inflects the larger relation of which it is part. I offer an explanatory analogy. All object-choices in their widest sense (and here I include readerly analysis) are acts of inscription, a little like producing a leaf-rubbing. When the chosen object is autonomous,

---

<sup>20</sup> Paul Shepard claims that "Mother is both the embryonic landscape and the infant environment." (98).

it is comparable to our leaf blowing in the breeze while we seek to capture its likeness. To the extent that the autonomous partial object eludes us, it signals the environment's negative capacity for thought. The world, we might say, thinks in relief. This is felt most clearly in estrangements of ascription (including, but by no means limited to, the ascriptions of Rotten English). Thus, an environmental interest might read for resistance and disturbance, contouring the dimensions of the unsaid. In *Sozaboy*, the unsaid is, perhaps predictably, oil – with all of its attendant geopolitical rivalries. If Biafra staked out the claims of a seceding nation versus the federation, it also mystified a proxy war for oil between the big powers – the United Kingdom, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, France, and – less formally – the United States of America. It is no accident that Mene's lorry "Progres," bespeaks foreshortening and incompleteness – signalling perhaps that in Saro-Wiwa's bewildering universe of Rotten English, we are only ever hearing some of the story. If rottenness is *Sozaboy's* medium and the belly of the big-eater is its political locus, there is no difficulty in establishing the environmental corollary at stake. Look at the dynamics of introjective and projective identification in this passage from Klein:

Also, the attacks on the mother's breast develop into attacks of a similar nature on her body, which comes to be felt as it were as an extension of the breast, even before the mother is conceived as a complete person. The phantasied onslaughts on the mother follow two main lines: one is the predominantly oral impulse to suck dry, bite up, scoop out and rob the mother's body of its good contents. [. . .] The other line of attack derives from the anal and urethral impulses and implies expelling dangerous substances (excrements) out of the self and into the mother. Together with these harmful excrements, expelled in hatred, split-off parts of the ego are also projected on to the mother or, as I would rather call it, into the mother.

(Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms" 9)

If the body of the mother is the child's first landscape, then what Klein calls introjective and projective phantasies might also be termed phantasies of consumption and pollution. To the extent that we are selves, or social and physiological beings, these early phantasies of consumption and pollution form the bedrock from which all of our later relations and dispositions proceed. Since the urge to consume and pollute at some level makes us what we are both physiologically and psychically, an environmental materialism might begin with a consideration of the body and the personality. It is, of course, a key principle that Mene's rendezvous with history repeatedly does not happen, but my argument is that organs gone renegade code for the environment and its history in *Sozaboy*, almost despite human presences.

If the environment and its history of oil extraction are not explicitly evident at the level of narration, how might they emerge in our readings of *Sozaboy*? It is important to emphasize that Saro-Wiwa had to compile in *Sozaboy* a thoroughly imagined and intertextual account of a war whose frontline he did not directly observe. In fact, his memoir, *On a Darkling Plain*, tells us that Saro-Wiwa's war involved fleeing from Biafra to the Federal side by canoe, then returning as the Administrator for Bonny. Saro-Wiwa never saw active military service, and much of what he witnessed in the war had to be third hand by simple virtue of his allegiance to the Federal side. This includes Saro-Wiwa's account of what the Ogoni people had undergone during the war, which he received from Peter Akere in 10 pages of italicized text quoted verbatim in *On a Darkling Plain* (pp. 189-199). *Sozaboy*'s suggestion that food hoarding occurred in the refugee camps (p. 158) is derived from the Akere source in the memoir (pp. 195-196). Saro-Wiwa's friend, George Amangala, who was killed at point blank range while in a boat (*On a Darkling Plain*, p. 157), is a likely inspiration for Mene's friend, Bullet, who summarily executes the Soza Captain at point blank range while on river patrol (p. 108). For the purposes of narrative, it does not matter whether or not the author bases his protagonist's account of the war on directly observed events. But for the purposes of analysis, a

thoroughly imagined and occasionally borrowed representation begs questions about the politics of selection. What Sozaboy does not say might allow an environmental psychoanalysis to observe what I have termed the world thinking in relief.

How, then, might we read Sozaboy for the unsaid? Mene's initial assessment of the inflation of salt prices, "Country don spoil" (23), is a half-mystified ("sp-oil") but multiply resonant reading of Delta oil politics and pollution. Strangely, Sozaboy never tells us that New York, Diobu, where Mene goes drinking, has likely been dubbed New York due to the large number of Americans quartered nearby at the Shell residential estate in Port Harcourt (see *On a Darkling Plain*, p. 176). Sozaboy never tells us that the high salt prices in Mene's Dukana result from the Federal forces' capture of the key oil port of Bonny and their imposition of a naval blockade on Biafra. As a result of that blockade, the price of salt shot up tenfold (*On a Darkling Plain*, 99). But more importantly, Shell BP was left in no doubt as to whether it should pay its half-yearly oil royalties to Biafra or to the Federal Government (*On a Darkling Plain*, 92, 98) – the Federal side controlled, by veto, the supply of oil. So the capture of Bonny averted the flow of oil royalties from Biafra, bankrupting its war (98). Sozaboy never tells us that the expropriation of civilian property in Mene's Dukana follows on directly from that failure by Biafra to retain control of oil exportation. Theft from civilians became the basic fallback position to which Biafra resorted in order to fund hostilities after its lost gamble for lucrative oil revenues. Sozaboy never tells us that Mene's experience as a prisoner-of-war is loosely modelled on Elechi Amadi's account of being detained in Shell BP's residential quarters in Rumuokwurusi (*Sunset in Biafra*, p. 111). Sozaboy never tells us that the plane that bombs Mene's company, killing his comrade Bullet, is a Russian Ilyushin aircraft secured when the Federal side tells the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United Kingdom that without military equipment and other assistance, European oil supplies and investments in Nigeria would be at risk.<sup>21</sup> What is remarkable, too, is that Saro-Wiwa himself

---

<sup>21</sup> This, at least, was Ojukwu's analysis (see Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain* 120).

records an air raid first hand in his memoir: the bombing of the Shell BP oil farm at Bonny (p. 137). But this is not the air raid we find in Sozaboy. In fact, it is more likely that Sozaboy's description of the air raid that destroys Mene's company is based on Elechi Amadi's account of the execution of Delta minority men in his war memoir, *Sunset in Biafra*, in which oil is again conspicuously present. I quote both Amadi's and Sozaboy's passages:

Joining the considerable stream of sightseers, I reached a large pit into which waste crude oil from an oil-well hard by had been diverted. Floating on the oil were many bloated bodies turned face downwards. Blood was still oozing out of bullet holes in some of them. None of the dead wore any uniform. They were dressed in singlets, shirts and wrappers. [. . .] The sides of the pit bore the marks of hands and feet that had vainly tried to claw their way out. [. . .] Who were these men who went to war in wrappers? [. . .] The victims were in fact natives of a riverine village. They had been carted away and slain thirty miles from their home on the pretext that they were aiding the enemy. (*Sunset in Biafra*, p. 69)

All our camp don broke down well well. Everywhere was full of pit and pit and pit. And inside one pit, you will see the head of soza, and in another pit, the leg of soza and in another pit, the hand of soza. Everywhere, soso human flesh in small pieces! Finger, nail, hair, prick, blokkus. (Sozaboy, p. 111)

In *Sozaboy*, we see not oil, but strewn body parts. If Amadi's pit of death is saturated with oil, Sozaboy's re-presentation of the pit of death is littered with part-objects. It is remarkable that Saro-Wiwa edits oil out of his novel's account of the air raid. Even more remarkably, there is no oil

present anywhere in the novel.<sup>22</sup> By contrast Saro-Wiwa records two air raids in his war memoir: a first-hand account of the bombing of the Shell BP oil farm at Bonny (On a Darkling Plain p. 137) and the second-hand Akere account of air raids on Ogoni settlements, in which like “a vulture ready to pounce on a corpse [the aeroplane] hovered at low altitude ‘laying eggs’ of very solid bullets” (190).<sup>23</sup> Neither of these air raids is accompanied by descriptions of the loss of civilian or military lives, and nor is the artillery bombing of a petrol tank in Ogoniland – a bombing succeeded by “dirty ‘oily’ rain” (p. 139). In short, Sozaboy nowhere shows or remarks upon the oil-saturated landscape in the Delta. There is something in Saro-Wiwa’s Rotten English that scrambles our grammars, that “proposes, in the very language it uses, an alternative model of national representation” (North 99). But what Rotten English itself is unable to name or say<sup>24</sup> – oil – poses Saro-Wiwa’s own deeply considered impediment to Ogoni national belonging to Biafra or Nigeria.

Oil is a key omission in Sozaboy. Oil is almost like the unconscious of the book. It motivates key narrative events and minor metaphoric details alike. It is in the margins of the text. Oil is everywhere in evidence and yet somehow nowhere to be found. Saro-Wiwa replaces something that should be there, but is not (oil) with something that should not be there, but is (the autonomous partial object). In other words, the exaggerations, distortions, animations, and outrageous postures of the body come to substitute for environmental despoliation in Sozaboy. This is consistent with what I have suggested is a flattening of the subject in the novel. A self oriented towards and ceding to its circumstance – a self that is an outcome of its situation – is above all an environmentally-obliged self. In the autonomous partial object, we witness the liquification of self and world, so that, in extremity, an oceanic subject emerges. Mene himself undergoes several moments of

---

<sup>22</sup> For Erin James, Saro-Wiwa “references oil only once in the text, in passing.” (90). In fact, as James is aware, it is technically-speaking petrol that Mene invokes in a cautionary homophonic simile: “as petrol burns, that is how this patrol kills.” (Sozaboy 104)

<sup>23</sup> The Akere passage is the likely source of the aeroplane that bombs Dukana, descending “like hawk wanting to catch hen” (133).

<sup>24</sup> Lock makes the ingenious argument that linguistic purity has always underpinned capitalist expansion and its pollutive consequences. Read in this way, Rotten English showcases language’s own corrupting qualities and has the larger aim of environmental decontamination (Lock 15).



deliquescence, one of which occurs when he is punished for being late to parade: “by the time I finished double quick march, water was running from my body like River Jordan. I was shitting inside my trouser” (74). The body become riverine is also the condition of Manmuswak’s victims, whose “blood was running together like stream, I think” (169). A confluence of streams is, dare one say it, something like a delta, and the saturations and leakages of the body here approximate its riverine environments.

Sozaboy’s sweating like the “River Jordan” and his involuntary shitting half gestures towards the pollution of the Niger Delta by oil extraction. Look at Malcolm Fabiyi’s striking description of oil pollution in the Delta since the discovery of oil in the Oloibiri mangroves in January 1956:

Oil, that resource that has brought progress to Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Egypt, Bahrain and Venezuela, has brought nothing but pain to the peoples of the Nigerian Delta. Their lands are ravaged, their farms are oil soaked, and the pores of their red earth are locked tight, every crevice and every pore flushed through with oil from spills. Their environment is a blazing inferno of flares. The sulphurous gases that emanate from these flares join with the incessant showers of the Niger Delta to form acid rain. Whatever the oil spills are yet to kill off, the acid rain finishes off. (51)

Here, the clogged pores of the land’s surface and the excoriating acid rain suggest an afflicted body. Tellingly, when Sozaboy first enters the field of combat in a mangrove swamp, this is precisely the habitat in which oil extraction and waterborne pollution has already been underway for a decade.<sup>25</sup>

One of the key motivations offered for prospecting for oil was that the landscape itself was of no practical human use. In fact, P. C. Asiodu, a former Permanent Secretary in the Federal Ministry of

---

<sup>25</sup> See Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain*, 11. Saro-Wiwa also notes that oil was first discovered “in commercial quantity at Bomu in Ogoni territory in 1958” (*On a Darkling Plain*, 46), a mere 3.5 miles from his birthplace in Bori.

Mines and Power claimed in a speech in 1980 that: “Like many other areas of the world, the regions where oil is found in this country are very inhospitable. They are mainly in swamps and creeks” (cited in Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain*, p. 11). It is therefore no accident that Sozaboy emphasises water impurity in the mangrove swamp:

And something was very bad for that place, you know. Water to drink no dey. Common well sef, you cannot get. So that all the time, it was the water in the swamp that we were drinking. And that is also the place that we are going to latrine. Na the same water that we are bathing and using to wash some of our clothes. And na the same water we were using for cooking. (91)

One has to wonder why the water is undrinkable, even prior to its multiple uses as latrine, and for bathing and washing clothes. If the “common well” is not to be found there, is this a marker of uncommon (oil) wells in the vicinity? We have the outlines of water pollution underpinning Mene’s experience of war and, as Saro-Wiwa’s memoir tells us, the politics of water in this region is always already interlaced with the extraction of oil:

Every oil well drilled by Shell has enough water to drown the entire Ogoni people. Thirty or forty oil wells later, the Ogoni still drink water from guinea worm-infested streams. Shell flares all its gas and has destroyed the Ogoni environment in the process. (*On a Darkling Plain*, 12).

In Saro-Wiwa’s conception, oil extraction is placed in direct equivalence to human affliction. This is perhaps why the postures of human suffering in Sozaboy’s refugee camps at Nugwa and Urua come to reflect the oil-bearing mangrove swamps. In fact, there are signal moments in which the

onslaught of the appetites morphs into Biafra's environmental substrate. Dwell for a second on Mene's description of the Nugwa refugee camp and then the subsequent one in Urua:

And many of them were crying either because of sickness or hungry or because dem brother was dying and all of them with black body so, so that when you look far, it is like either bad forest in the night or like mangrove swamp when the water have gone to visit the ocean.

[. . .]

If I think I have seen black forest or black swamp before, it is lie. Because the only black forest or black swamp in this world is Urua. (149-150)

It is a bit odd that the massified extremity of human suffering returns us to the oil-bearing environs of mangrove swamps, and yet this is consistent with my claim that the environment in Sozaboy chaotically and hyperbolically rebounds the appetites so that they morph into an onslaught on their human originators. In this way, Sozaboy places the environment and its despoilment in covert relation to what it terms the "bellymen":

[Terr Kole] said that it is very bad for young man. Because some people have sold their eyes and their ears to the big sozas for their belly. He said that these people have big big belly, big big ear, big big nose and big big eyes. They see everything. They smell everything. And they hear everything. So they chop everything. Because they want to chop for today, tomorrow and even for many tomorrows to come, they even hear things which nobody have said and they smell things according to how their belly tell them to smell. So these bellymen are friends of the sozas and of the politicians and the traders. (156)

Quite simply, the postures and distortions of the body in this passage – “big big belly, big big ear, big big nose and big big eyes” – express the extremities of power and the monstrosity of self-interest. Elsewhere, we are told that the “[refugee] camp is proper human compost pit and all these people they are calling refugees are actually people that they have throwaway like rubbish. Nothing that you can use them for. All their children have big big belly like pregnant woman. And if you see their eyes or legs. Just like something inside cinema or inside bad forest in dream” (148). The big eater and the victim of malnutrition image the body in equally partial, distorting and exaggerating ways. They differ only in their outcomes and possibilities. But in the distortions of the body, in the animated partial object of the belly, much more than a simply human plight is revealed. Indeed, Saro-Wiwa’s war memoir, *On a Darkling Plain*, relates the belly directly to oil politics:

“Indigenous colonialism and the blind materialism of international capitalism which prospects for oil in the belly of the delta ring the death knell of these peoples [Delta minorities]” (11).

At stake in *Sozaboy* is not a child soldier, but a multiply-spaced subject – a subject ceaselessly submitted to action outside of itself. The environmental agency at work in the autonomous partial object is what I would call an unreflective – and unreflexive – criticality, a kind of critique without consciousness or dialogue, an obdurate critique in the face of which it is impossible to remain oneself. Unusually, *Sozaboy* sustains and overlaps three alternative protagonists. The first is the Mene who undergoes the action of the novel. The second is *Sozaboy juju*, who twice dies in the forest midway through the novel (113, 117) and is twice deemed a ghost by his people at its conclusion (130-137, 174-181). The third is *Mene adream*, whose narrative contains experiential elements from both of the other narratives – specifically, escaping approaching armed forces from river to forest, and finding that his mother’s and Agnes’ mother’s houses have disappeared (pp. 44-49). As we might expect, the final outcomes of Mene’s mama and Agnes exist in three versions: Agnes has become a war wife, accompanied by the mother (135-136, 154), or Agnes and the

mother are refugees (136, 146-147, 156), or Agnes and the mother have died in an air raid bombing [like Bullet] (178-179). Regardless of their fate, Mene somehow witnesses his mother's house both standing abandoned (129) and thereafter razed to the ground (181). After mother and wife have disappeared, the house has both not been bombed and already been bombed. There are no false choices here, no impossible inconsistencies, because this environment proceeds from an unstable ontology. Its circumstance alters according to the changing narratives that Mene himself receives.

Why are there two endings? Why are there two outcomes for Mene (ghost or survivor) and three outcomes for his mama and Agnes (kidnapping, flight or bombing)? The ambivalence of the object allows us to understand how the novel entertains discrepancy without self-contradiction. Good and bad object are both sustained as twinned psychic realities via the mechanism of splitting. Mene only partly listens to his mother's demand: "[. . .] I want you to return to me. Do you hear? I want you to return." (67). As ghost or revenant or autonomous partial object, Mene returns, but never to her. All versions of this story are true – it is just that some stories are true for the self (introjection) and some are true for its others (projection). What matters is that, at the end of the novel, Mene finally becomes the subject of Duzia's pestilential and deathly projection as "Sozaboy, juju smallpox" (178). Mene, that is to say, becomes a repository of what Sozaboys like himself have visited on civilian victims.

### **Living among the Dead**

And yet, as always, other visions or versions are possible. To become true environmentalists, we would need to live beyond our anthropoform biases. Sozaboy, Ken Saro-Wiwa's afterlife, helps to fashion this project. Mene's priapic "snake wey no get house" (35, 37, 59) devolves to other Biafran actors – the refugee who "no get house to stay in" (147) and the unburied, whose ghosts "move round like porson wey no get house" (180). Both "man" and "snake" are separable selves ceded to

other stories. These organs without bodies persist as phantom limbs. Indeed, it is never quite clear that Mene himself makes it out of the forest, given that he has already twice died in it (113, 117). Wandering figuratively among the “lomers” (Sozaboy’s chapter “numbers,” but also, homophonically, “lumbers”), Mene remains imprisoned in a theatre of affliction – Biafra’s proliferating man groves. His lifespan plays out across the history of the Biafran war, but he also dwells arrested amid its course. Coming into being in the moment of publication (1985), Mene is a belated spirit-subject<sup>26</sup> whose Biafran moment is somehow out of time, a spirit-subject whose repeating history is of life-in-death. I concur with Sarah Lincoln’s speculation that:

[R]eading the novel in a certain light, we can see this “living dead” remnant, the one who lives to tell the tale but must become an exile to do so, as indeed a kind of melancholic ghost – a literary revenant that speaks in the voice of another, keeping alive in suspended, literary time the hopes, struggles and expectations of Saro-Wiwa himself. (85)

At one level, Saro-Wiwa himself is the missing destination of the book, a future with which Mene is never reconciled. I would offer the supporting evidence that Mene goes to visit his friend, Gbole, who he never reaches because he meets Bom, Duzia, Zaza and Terr Kole en route (61). “Gbole,” whose name appears nowhere else in the narrative, was a pet-name used by Ken Saro-Wiwa’s father for his son.<sup>27</sup> Mene sets out to visit his author-originator (Gbole Saro-Wiwa), but never arrives. In this sense, the Mene of 1985 might be seen in terms of his creator’s unfulfilled consciousness, an immaterial presence whose missed destiny leaves him orphaned to time and change.

The environmental unconscious is all that is unacknowledged or cannot be known of the object-world. Some of our part-objects are spectrally introjected into the self, ghosting their material

---

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Dr Sam Durrant, who is the originator of this term (private communication).

<sup>27</sup> See J. Timothy Hunt’s *The Politics of Bones: Dr Owens Wiwa and the Struggle for Nigeria’s Oil* (360 n.10).

origins, and some of our partial objects have (autonomous) minds of their own. Invested in multiply-sited part-objects, the human can only finally amount to a distributed or dispersed subject. Its acts of self are relayed, much like Saro-Wiwa's wayward glossary in *Sozaboy*, where the translation of Rotten English is occasionally referred to yet another entry. Likewise, the spirit-subject is a remnant or a harbinger that is incipient within any larger structure. In its trans-historical poise and in its wandering expressive instances, the spirit-subject's corresponding rhetorical figures are the acrostic or the anagram. Rotten English may decompose our ideals of the human, but it also generates unanticipated presences – autonomous partial objects. To conclude, I offer a simple and highly experimental alphabet of *Sozaboy*'s autonomous partial objects.<sup>28</sup> In the disparate imageries applied to human extremity, a remarkable catalogue gathers:

Anmal, ant, beetle, chicken, cockroach, coconut, cow, dog, elephant, fish,  
fly, forest, goat, hawk, hen, hill, house, leopard, llama, lumber, maggot,  
maize, mangrove, monkey, moon, mosquito, ocean, okro, palm, palm oil,  
pawpaw, pear, pepper, rabbit, rain, rat, river, salt, snail, snake, spirit, stream,  
swamp, tiger, toad, tomato, water . . . (you get the picture).

Taken as an assemblage, this catalogue of fauna, flora, and topography reconstitutes a riverine imaginary – a spirit-realm gathered from extremity and cohering in image-sense. While it is notional at best, this coherence admits of the environment's proper constitution in more-than-human foundations. The partial object's autonomy from the human is ceded to wider environmental destinations. There may be a future in these destinations if we embrace our own monstrosity, if we do not reject that from which we have parted, if we convert the lost object into its revenant parts, if we learn, like Mene, to live among the dead. This riverine imaginary holds no pristine world –

---

<sup>28</sup> I thank Thando Njovane and David Attwell for their invitation to speak at the inaugural Finding Africa seminar at the University of York. The idea for a reconstitutive alphabet first occurred to me during audience questions at this event.

dreams of the reserve or of Eden contain an unspoken genocidal impulse.<sup>29</sup> This riverine imaginary expresses no fallen world – pronouncements of cataclysm invite an unspoken managerial impulse. Instead, this is a world in which the dead remain half-present, in which the inert are part-enlivened. Like ancestors or shades, their ways and relations are opaque. All told, Sozaboy’s distorted extremities of the human (patterned for instance, in Mene’s dropsical “elephantiasis” (114) or in his priapic “snake”) amount finally to modes of environmental restitution (received, for instance, via the elephantine and the serpentine tout court). In Biafra’s figurative throes of the human, a habitable landscape returns startlingly upon the page-plane to assert its viable alternatives of promise. Perhaps, in our own good time, we might imagine an embattled partial object or two happening upon this spirit-scene and offer our determination that these animated newcomers will flourish – a “man,” a “snake,” standing “small small,” a “Johnny-Just-Come.”

### Works Cited

Adebanwi, Wale and Obadare, Ebenzer (eds). *Encountering the Nigerian State*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.

Akekue, Doris. “Mind-Style in *Sozaboy*: A Functional Approach to Language.” *Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. Ed. Charles Nnolim. London: Saros International Publishers, 1992. 16-29. Print.

Amadi, Elechi. *Sunset in Biafra: A Civil War Diary*. London: Heinemann, 1973. Print.

Apter, Emily. *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006. Print.

---

<sup>29</sup> “[Popular] conceptions of wilderness landscapes often exclude the presence of people.” (Spierenburg and Brooks 153).



Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Print.

Carter, Mia. "In Mene's World: Ken Saro-Wiwa's Vision of the Mercenary Marketplace." *English Language Notes* 50.1 (Spring-Summer 2012): 123-129. Print.

Chukwuma, Helen. "Characterization and Meaning in *Sozaboy*." *Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. Ed. Charles Nnolim. London: Saros International Publishers, 1992. 39-52. Print.

Corcoran, Patrick. "'Child' Soldiers in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah N'est Pas Obligé*," *Mots Pluriels* 22 (September 2002): unpaginated. Accessed online 8 October 2015. <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP2202pc.html>

Coundouriotis, Eleni. "The Child Soldier Narrative and the Problem of Arrested Historicization." *Journal of Human Rights* 9.2 (Apr-June 2010): 191-206. Print.

Eke, Maureen N. "The Novel: *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*." *Ken Saro-Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist*. Ed. Craig W. McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2000. 87-106. Print.

Fabiyi, Malcolm. *My Mind on Nigeria: A Collection of Essays*. lulu.com, 2011. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 17*. 1919. Trans. James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press, 1955. 217-256. Print.

Garuba, Harry. "Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy and the Logic of Minority Discourse." *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria*. Ed. Abdul Rasheed Na'Allah. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1998. 229-39. Print.

Gehrmann, Susanne. "The Child Soldier's Soliloquy: Voices of a New Archetype in African Writing." *Etudes Littéraires Africaines* 32 (2011): 31-43. Print.

Gunn, Jeffrey. "Inside 'Rotten English: ' Interpreting the Language of Ambiguity in Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy." *eSharp: Electronic Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts Review for Postgraduates* 11 (Spring 2008): 1-22. Accessed online 8 October 2015.  
[http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_81288\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_81288_en.pdf)

Hecht, David and Simone, Maliquelim. *Invisible Governance: Art of African Micropolitics*. New York: Autonomedia, 1994. Print.

Highfield, Jonathan, "Refusing to be Fat Llamas: Resisting Violence through Food in Sozaboy and Purple Hibiscus." *Kunapipi* 28.2 (2006): 43-53. Print.

Hunt, J. Timothy. *The Politics of Bones: Dr Owens Wiwa and the Struggle for Nigeria's Oil*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005. Print.

James, Erin. *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. Print.

Joseph, Philip. "Literary Lawlessness: Sozaboy and the Case of the Child Soldier in Fiction."

English Language Notes 49.2 (Fall-Winter 2011): 89-100. Print.

Klein, Melanie. "Some Notes on Schizoid Mechanisms (1946)." *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*. Vintage: New York, 1997. 1-24. Print.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. 1977. Routledge: London: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Lambert, Iain. "Chris Abani's *Graceland* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*: Nonstandard English, Intertextuality, and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*." *Language and Literature* 20 (November 2011): 283-294. Print.

Laplanche, Jean and Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. 1973. Karnac: London, 1988. Print.

Lincoln, Sarah L. "'Rotten English': Excremental Politics and Literary Witnessing." *Encountering the Nigerian State*. Ed. Wale Adebani and Ebenezer Obadare. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. 79-98. Print.

Lock, Charles. "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger" *Ken Saro- Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist*. Ed. Craig W. McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2000. pp. 3-16. Print.

Martin-Granel, Nicolas. "Le Plomb et La Plume." *Etudes Littéraires Africaines* 32 (2011): 7-15. Print.

Marx, John. *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890-2011*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Print.

McLuckie, Craig W. and McPhail Aubrey (eds.), *Ken Saro-Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000. Print.

Morrison, Jago. "Imagined Biafras: Fabricating Nation in Nigerian Civil War Writing." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* Jan-Apr; 36.1-2 (2005): 5-26. Print.

Moynagh, Maureen. Review of Martin-Granel, Nicholas (ed.) "L'enfant Soldat: Langages et Images." *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 197-199. Print.

Na'Allah, Abdul Rasheed (ed.). *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria*. Trenton, New Jersey; Africa World Press, 1998. Print.

Nnolim, Charles (ed.). *Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. London: Saros International Publishers, 1992. Print.

North, Michael. "Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy: The Politics of 'Rotten English.'" *Public Culture* 13.1 (Winter 2001): 97-112. Print.

Rooks, Elinor. "Vernacular Theory, Deleuzo-Guattarian Theory, and Cultural Historicism in West African and Southern African Literatures" Diss. University of Leeds, 2014. Print.

Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*. London: Saros, 1989. Print.

—. *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. Harlow: Longman, 1985. Print.

Sellers, Peter, perf. *Dr. Strangelove; Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Dir. and Prod. Stanley Kubrick. Hawk Films, 1964. Film.

Shepard, Paul. *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967. Print.

Spierenburg, Marja and Brooks, Shirley. "Private Game Farming and its Social Consequences in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Contestations over Wildlife, Property, and Agrarian Futures." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 32.2 (2014): 151-172. Print.

Suchet, Myriam. "La Voix de Sozaboy (Pétit Minitaire) Ou Comment Passer du Leurre de 'la Langue' à la Construction d'un Ethos?" *Etudes Littéraires Africaines* 32 (2011): 44-54. Print.

Tam-George, Austin. "Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and the Gamble of Anomaly." *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa Special Issue on Transnationalism and African Literature* 10.2 (2005): 24-34. Print.

Ugochukwu, Françoise. "Enfants-soldats au Nigeria: Les Romanciers Témoignent." *Etudes Littéraires Africaines* 32 (2011): 20-30. Print.

Watts, Alan. "The Human Game." Lecture Transcript. Accessed online 21 March 2016.  
<http://ajgraves.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/44571851-Alan-Watts-Memoirs.pdf>

Wiwa, Ken. *In the Shadow of a Saint*. London: Doubleday, 2000. Print.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema: 1, 2, 3*. Dir. Sophie Fiennes. Charlottesville, VA:

Lone Star, Mischief Films, Amoeba Film, 2006.

DRAFT (WORKING PAPER)