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## Reviews

***Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta*, edited by Tanure Ojaide and Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega. New York: Routledge. 978-0-367-68289-7 (hardback).**

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The Niger Delta is an oil-producing region of Nigeria with a unique history of early colonialism, exploitation, and marginality. Marked by its geographical and cultural peculiarities, the region is home to more than twenty ethnic groups, spread across the modern political states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. The region's name comes from the many estuaries of the river Niger in its flow to the Atlantic Ocean. Since the discovery of oil in the region in the 1950s, and with its unique minority status in the British mapping of modern Nigeria, the region has attracted attention for many reasons. Academic works have focused on oil politics, environmentalism, inter-group relations, and aspects of the arts and culture of the people in the region. However, Tanure Ojaide and Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega's *Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* is the first non-themed volume on the literature and arts of the region.

A collection of twenty-two important essays, the book pioneers the study of Niger Delta literature and culture from different theoretical perspectives. The editors define the scope of the work to include "traditional and modern literatures and arts of the Niger Delta. By arts, we mean here the visual arts and music. We are considering a whole sweep of the people's indigenous productions of literature, arts, and music as well as their modern ones" (3). Their focus on the region's oral, written, visual, and performance cultural productions positions the book in numerous disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. As a very complex and multicultural region, the editors navigate the nebulous nature of their task by taking a bioregional approach to their understanding of the Niger Delta. They declare that "natural environment itself gives rise to the needs, beliefs, fears, and other

responses that lead to myths and practices to be in good standing with it. The artistic imaginative creations that our book deals with are individual or communal responses to the Niger Delta environment” (5). In essence, they think of the Niger Delta through its unique and marked geography and how the peoples of the region respond to and imagine their environment.

The focus on the Niger Delta in terms of physical, cultural, and political geography is taken up in Ojaide’s theorization of Niger Delta identity in the background chapter. Here, Ojaide responds to the cultural and biological diversity of the Niger Delta and operationalizes the term “region” in the context of “the area’s uniqueness geographically and politically as a result of having small ethnic groups occupying the landmass” (13). Central to this position is the notion of minority discourse and how it transgresses the idea of the nation through geo-political and cultural distinctiveness. Ojaide accentuates this point in his further comment that “the numerous ethnic groups, often referred to as ‘nationalities’ by many scholars, had already established themselves as different peoples who were self-governing and relatively self-reliant. These groups that Britain used its imperial power to incorporate into the Nigerian nation have riverine, socio-cultural, and political affinities” (13-14). What is striking here is Ojaide’s subtle critique of the nation as a colonial creation with its binary opposition in the pre-colonial nations. This subversive maneuver confronts what Partha Chatterjee phrases as “derivative nationalism.” Ojaide rethinks the region from a domain that is antithetical to the national narrative of symmetry.

Ojaide’s framing of a socio-cultural identity of the Niger Delta people derives from his historical position that due to the shared geographical terrain, the groups that inhabit the region interacted with themselves prior to British colonialism, and he traces some of these interactions to migrations, notably out of Udo/Bini (15). His historicism further demonstrates how oil politics, marginality, and minoritization led to the construction of a unique identity by the people of the region. He contends that “The shared experience of a dispossessed and robbed people whose land and resources are forcefully taken from them also unites most of the people” (18). In essence, Ojaide’s position is that the unique and shared environment, socio-historical, and cultural elements bind the people of the region and create the conditions for the acceptance of group identity.

The book's other sections treat forms like orature and traditional festivals, visual arts, popular culture, environmentalism, conflict literature, and writers and personages. All the sections are drawn from significant forms and themes in the literature and arts of the Niger Delta. The first segment positions the literary and performance culture of the region as a pre-colonial form. Effiok Bassey Uwatt reveals the functions of Ekpo, Ekpe, and Mbopo traditional festivals in regulating the social life of the Ibibio, Annang, Efik, Eket, Ibeno, and Oron people. He also demonstrates how these festivals facilitate the socio-cultural identity of the Ibibio groups (25). Similarly, Ojaide's chapter on Urhobo Udje foregrounds the centrality of oral satires and satirical elements in the regulation of the social life of the Urhobo. The functionalist context of this reading is accentuated through the focus on Foucauldian notions of madness, discipline, and power. Ojaide writes that "Among the udje-performing clans of Urhobo, the udje institution is a form of disciplinary power to punish deviants in society. Udje satiric songs put socio-cultural pressure on deviants to conform and behave as the community considers appropriate" (65). Through the regulation of the body by the instrumentality of oral tradition, a certain cultural understanding is established.

The second segment of the book focuses on visual art, and here the chapters reveal how art recalibrates notions of identity and bioregional belonging. Perkins Foss examines the art of the groups that inhabit the Western Niger Delta and how they reveal a complex history of precolonial interaction based on shared understandings of physical and cultural landscapes. He contends that "The Urhobo and Isoko—neighbors who share numerous waterways—had closely related styles of personal shrine images and overlapping festival types. The ceramic traditions of the Ukuane Igbo and the Bini overlap; they had especially close connections along the Ase, Ethiope, and Jamieson Rivers" (102). Foss links this web of artistic and socio-cultural interactions to the Benin influence on the entire region. With the examples of Urhobo cultural art forms like the Iphri, Foss submits that "These Urhobo shrine objects—Aggression, Destiny, and Hand—appear in related forms among neighboring traditions: Benin, Igbo, and Ijo. Each of these groups re-formulates the constructs of their versions of the physical images and yet still maintains what can be called the "core values" of the forms" (106). The point here is that prior to the formation of the Nigerian state, the Urhobo and her ethnic neighbours in the Niger Delta shared a sense of cultural continuity that manifested in the visual arts

produced by the people. Through historical connections on land and water, the people of the region had a shared sense of identity that was facilitated by influences, borrowings, and other geo-cultural encounters.

The fourth segment of the book focuses on popular culture as the basis of group identity and bioregional conception of self. James Tar Tsaaior's reading of the place of the Warri and the Niger Delta in Nigeria's stand-up comedic imaginary begins with the premise that Warri is a microcosm of the Niger Delta in terms of its complexity and ethnic diversity (144). Tsaaior also frames Warri as an example of the contradictions that define the entire region; the poverty and neglect that abide despite the abundance of natural resources. Furthermore, he establishes the centrality of "the rich social histories and cultural cosmologies of their Delta belonging" (146) in the performances of comedians like Gordons, Bovi, and Eboh Bomb, and through his analysis of the representations of poverty and neglect in comic performances, concludes that "Nigerian stand-up comedy represents the Niger Delta as a land of opportunities which has been pillaged, pauperized and abandoned. It is a generous, large-hearted land compelled to cede its glory to other lands" (152). Tsaaior's conclusion positions stand-up comedy as a useful vehicle for articulating minority discourse by performers from the Niger Delta region.

Onyemaechi Udumukwu's exploration of environmentalism in Niger Delta poetry represents the focus of the book's fifth section. Here, the chapters read the trope of environmentalist despair in Niger Delta writing. Udumukwu's chapter draws from Byron Camero-Santangelo's notion of "postcolonial regional particularism" and reads Niger Delta poetry to unmask articulations of environmental despair and the "quality of counter-discourse" (159). With a focus on "rivers," "land and land use," and "activism," Udumukwu foregrounds the various layers of environmentalism in Niger Delta poetry and submits that the poems represent the "effect of oil on the rivers, land and land use, and the emergence of resistance against the agents of environmental degradation" (168). His theoretical model of local particularism allows the construction of the Niger Delta as a unique bioregion with an experience that is reflected in its poetry. In many ways, Udumukwu's model positions the region's writing as a form of counter-discourse against a neocolonial power that pushes the people to a position of marginality.

In the sixth section of the book, Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega inserts the Niger Delta's viewpoint into the discourse of the Nigerian civil war. She submits that "The people of the Niger Delta had a unique war time experience as they were probably the only minority groups or region that suffered onslaughts of violence and injustices from both Biafran and Federal armies—double occupation—right in the heart of their homelands" (206). Her position foregrounds how the national narrative has systematically forgotten the precarious position of the Niger Delta people in the context of the civil war, and she proceeds to read novels by Festus Iyayi, Buchi Emecheta, Isidore Okpewho, and Elechi Amadi. These novelists all present unique minority perspectives to the civil war, and Ojaruega's chapter demonstrates how their narratives challenge the dominant construction of the war as one where only the Igbos of the Eastern Region suffered damages. She submits that "Their narratives show that the region and its people were used as cannon fodders at different times during the war by the Biafran and the Nigerian fighting troops. Depending on the occupying army, the minorities who inhabit this space were subjected to oppression, exploitation and vendettas as they were used as punitive against the opposition army's presence in the region" (216). Ojaruega's insertion of minority viewpoints into the civil war discourse confronts the dominant narrative of victimhood and reveals the liminal position of the Niger Delta in the conflict.

The final segment of the book focuses on specific writers and parsonages. Here, Sule Emmanuel Egya focuses on the Saro-Wiwa imaginary in Isaac Attah Ogezi's *Under a Darkling Sky*. Ken Saro-Wiwa was an Ogoni human rights activist who was vocal about the environmental destruction of the Niger Delta and the maltreatment of the Ogoni minority ethnic group by both oil multinationals and the Nigerian government. Since his execution in 1995, his name has become a symbol of the unity and collective aspiration of the people of the Niger Delta. It is precisely this figure that Egya explores in Ogezi's play. Egya writes that "the playwright uses the story of Saro-Wiwa to launch his own eco-activism, anchored on what some might see as an uncritical rendering of the Saro-Wiwa story" (246). His point here is that by presenting Saro-Wiwa as a perfect activist, Ogezi foregrounds his own politics of eco-activism. Egya's analysis positions Saro-Wiwa's activism, in factual terms and as imagined in Ogezi's drama, on the same pedestal as Ogezi's literary activism and concludes that "writers create a Saro-

Wiwa imaginary as a literary character per excellence to pursue their own eco-activism” (252).

One thread that ties the book together is that the people of the Niger Delta have a shared cultural and historical memory that drives the construction of group identity and activism. Focusing primarily on bioregional, politico-historical, and sociocultural notions of group identity, the chapters in the book engage the marginal position of the region and its peoples. In many ways, the book traces the issues that plague the region to the colonial encounter and its subsequent creation of an asymmetrical nation with structural issues that have not been addressed since independence from British rule. The importance of this book is that it provides multiple ways of viewing the region and its literature and arts. Ojaide and Ojaruega’s *Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* is a useful resource in thinking about the Niger Delta region through the lens of minority discourse, environmentalism, postcolonialism, feminism, and identity, amongst others. It provides the foundation for further monographs or edited volumes on any aspect of the literature and arts of the region, and it crystallizes the canonical specificity of the region’s cultural productions.