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Over the Edge: Risk, Ecology, and Equivalency in Will Ferguson's *419*

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Abstract: In Will Ferguson's *419* (2012), apparent equivalencies between Canadian and Nigerian risk-taking characters are contradicted by the reality of an uneven global playing field—one in which risk and reward, sacrifice and suffering, and the autonomy and skill to navigate dangerous situations successfully are distributed following lines of privilege and wealth that derive from colonial history and the globalized economy's North/South divisions. Drawing on risk theorists Mary Douglas and Ulrich Bech, I argue that, at the individual and interpersonal level, risk in *419* is more outsourced and offloaded than shared. Beyond individual risk, this novel of three locales—Calgary, Lagos, and the Niger Delta—details the ecological devastations of high-risk oil extraction in the Delta, links that activity fleetingly to Alberta oil, and yet elides the local effects of Alberta's oil industry. The novel's Nigerian plot makes vivid what Rob Nixon calls the globalized economy's "slow violence" toward the poor, but its lopsided representation of oil economies and ecologies—like its treatment of individual risk—throws off balance the very transcontinental equivalencies and correspondences it seems, on the surface, eager to establish. In the process, the novel compromises its treatment of the moral responsibility, justice, and accountability that Douglas sees as intrinsic to risk while limiting its ability to explore themes of environmental justice comparatively across disparate local ecologies put at risk by oil.

Keywords: Will Ferguson, *419*, risk, ecology, Nigerian oil economy

> "Why should these bankers, these slavers—these *criminals*—not return some of their lootings to the continent they have helped impoverish? Justice demands it. God demands it. *The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon their children*. And not just the children, but the children's children as well. Read the Bible, it's all in there. Make no mistake, . . . we are in the business of retribution. We are in the business of revenge."
>
> Ironsi-Egobia in Will Ferguson (*419* 121)

> Risk, danger, and sin are used around the world to legitimate policy or to discredit it, to protect individuals from predatory institutions or to protect institutions from predatory individuals. Indeed, risk provides secular terms for rewriting scripture: not the sins of the fathers, but the risks unleashed by the fathers are visited on the heads of their children, even to the *nth* generation.
>
> Mary Douglas (*Risk and Blame* 26)

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck has influentially called our interconnected, technologically advanced, but ecologically fragile world a "risk society" full of new dangers and instabilities. Modern society, he argues, has reached an irreversible stage of insecurity in which it can no longer protect itself from the unexpected and unwanted side effects of its own technologies. "[M]anufactured uncertainty," he writes, "means that risk has become an inescapable part of our lives and everybody is facing unknown and barely calculable risks. . . . We no longer choose to take risks, we have them thrust upon us. We are living on a ledge—in a random risk society, from which nobody can escape" ("Politics" 12). Beck may be the gloomiest of the leading thinkers promoting "risk" as a key concept for understanding late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century life, but without elevating his pessimistic views over those of Mary Douglas and other prominent risk theorists, I want to begin this examination of Will Ferguson's novel *419* (2012) with Beck's portentous image of the "ledge" as a kind of vertigo-inducing trap where "everybody" is equally vulnerable to uncontrollable risks "thrust upon

[them]." The plot of *419* is precipitated by a man driving a car over the edge of a cliff and falling to his death, and Ferguson repeats variations on this image to convey his characters' vertiginous feeling when they teeter on the metaphorical brink—the edge or the ledge—that separates, on the one hand, the successful risk-taker's staring-down of danger and triumph over uncertainties and, on the other hand, the failed risk-taker's certainty of a fall into harm.

The novel revolves around the notorious Nigerian email scams of the early 2000s, and when the Canadian protagonist, Laura, risks travelling to Lagos to confront her Nigerian nemesis, a scammer named Winston who ruined her father, this formerly cautious copyeditor quickly and confidently takes charge of the cat-and-mouse game she has initiated. She may have chosen her Calgary apartment "because it lacked a balcony, to avoid the unsettling temptation that vertigo offered" (Ferguson, *419* 27), but in Lagos, after proposing a visit to Winston's parents' house in hopes of gaining information she can use against him, Laura calmly reflects that with this move onto his turf she "had stepped off the balcony, would find out now whether she would float or fall" (313). As her own scam unfolds and she does indeed gain the upper hand, Winston realizes the trap Laura has laid for him and looks at her with "the look of a man being driven off an embankment, a man falling through darkness" (341). The Canadian woman floats, whereas the Nigerian man falls (and through darkness, no less); the scammer is scammed by the person he thought was his next victim but who has become a risk-taker par excellence—one who can control the uncontrollable with all the cool confidence and success of a Jason Bourne or an Evelyn Salt.

There may be equivalency and even a sense of justice in these reversals and shared images: both Laura and Winston manipulate others into unknowingly risking their financial security; both breach the security of the other's home and family; and both are linked to each other and to the original victim, Laura's father, through the image of the precipitous fall. But is "everybody" in this tale of two countries living in the same "risk society"—on the same high-risk "ledge," to use Beck's term? When Canadians encounter Nigerians, are risks taken and rewards shared across a level playing field? Or is risk, like the wealth of those nations

and most of their citizens, imbalanced in its distribution? Put another way, can "[h]orizontal vertigo" exist (Ferguson, *419* 309), as Laura wonders early in her visit to Lagos, or does "vertigo" always imply the vertical: the edge from which a fall can happen or the ledge from which the advantaged peer down at the disadvantaged? In this "widescreen novel" of four protagonists (Peterson), one Canadian and three Nigerian, similar questions beg to be asked regarding the other two Nigerians. Both Amina and Nnamdi are displaced subalterns living precariously and in multiple ways at risk in a society that affords them minimal purchase. Their own tragic encounters with Laura, like Winston's, throw into relief the complex and sometimes surprising ways nationality, mobility, race, class, and gender affect the relative kinds and degrees of risk characters can take on and of justice they can expect in Ferguson's tangled transnational narrative. Approaching the concept of risk as cultural theorist and social anthropologist Douglas does, as "a discourse of responsibility, accountability, justice, and retribution" (Ericson and Doyle 5), and following her lead further in seeing risk as "a concept for blaming and marginalizing an Other who is positioned as posing a threat (and thus a risk) to the integrity of the self" (Lupton 39–40) provides a basis for understanding the novel's conflicted ethics of equivalency.

In the first section of this article, I argue that apparent equivalencies between Ferguson's Canadian and Nigerian risk-taking characters are contradicted by the reality of an uneven global playing field—one in which risk and reward, sacrifice and suffering, and the autonomy and wherewithal needed to navigate dangerous situations successfully are distributed following lines of privilege and wealth that are all too recognizable from colonial history and from North/South divisions in the globalized economy. At the individual and interpersonal level, as in the geopolitical field on which *419*'s characters interact, risk is more outsourced and offloaded than shared. Such outsourcing is a key theme of my second section, in which I show how this novel of three locales—Calgary, Lagos, and the Niger Delta—renders in vivid detail the ecological devastations of high-risk oil extraction in the Delta, links that activity (however fleetingly) on the global level to Alberta oil, and yet elides the local effects of Alberta's industry entirely. As a result, while

419 may be an answer to laments by Amitav Ghosh (75), Stephanie LeMenager (11), and others that the oil trade is woefully underexplored in literary fiction, here too the playing field is uneven. Ferguson is, to be sure, fully committed to rendering the local horrors imposed for decades on Delta people as a result of the Faustian bargain Nigeria's leaders made with Shell Oil and other multinationals; these horrors include, as Michael Watts summarizes, "ecological catastrophe, social deprivation, political marginalization, and a rapacious company capitalism in which unaccountable foreign transnationals are granted a sort of immunity by the state" (16). Despite its lopsided ecological lens, then, the novel does make vivid what Rob Nixon calls the globalized economy's "slow violence" (2)—the invisible, incremental degradation of environments the poor of the Global South rely on for sustenance and income—and the ways "externalized risks are outsourced to the unborn" by capitalist enterprises such as Shell (35). However, in minimizing the presence and entirely avoiding the local impacts of Alberta oil, the novel's representation of oil economies and ecologies—like its treatment of individual risk-taking and putting at risk—throws off balance the very transcontinental equivalencies and correspondences it seems, on the surface, eager to establish. In the process, the novel complicates and arguably compromises its treatment of the moral responsibility, justice, and accountability that Douglas sees as intrinsic to risk while limiting its ability to explore themes of environmental justice comparatively across disparate local ecologies put at risk by oil.

I. Risky Business: Individual, Interpersonal, International

A Canadian novel named after a section of the Nigerian criminal code, *419* was awarded the Scotiabank Giller Prize because, according to the jury's citation, "it points in the direction of something entirely new: the Global Novel" ("Will Ferguson"). While the newness of this capitalized sub-genre is surely open to question, Ferguson's narrative is global insofar as it brings Canadian and Nigerian strangers—all risk-takers—into intimate and often predatory relationships of a kind that the digital-global economy has newly made possible across national borders and that a freewheeling oil economy has enabled within Nigeria's borders.

The novel portrays various kinds and degrees of risk: risk of financial ruin from involvement in internet scams and scam-baiting; risk of physical harm or death at the hands of the army, the police, or the local strongman; risk of irreparable economic distortion and environmental ruin from an oil boom that promises riches to a few at the expense of the hinterland; and risks to health and even life itself from environmental and human dangers. Indeed, Ferguson's thriller-like plot is propelled by acts of individual risk-taking. Henry, Laura's naïvely trusting father, risks his entire net worth to help bring the non-existent Sandra Atta and her fortune to Canada; as he goes over the edge financially he takes out an insurance policy—a risk-sharing tool—that he (also naïvely) believes will replace lost capital for his family after he drives his car deliberately over a literal edge. Winston, the Lagos-based scammer who ruined Henry, risks arrest and worse by Nigerian authorities for perpetrating so-called 419 fraud; later, he is oblivious to the risk he is taking when he agrees to meet "Miss Scarlet," who he does not know is Henry's daughter, Laura, until too late. Nnamdi, the Niger Delta fisherman forced by oil-generated pollution to shift gears on his career, risks his safety to transport illegally tapped oil for sale on the black market; later, he takes a fatal risk in trusting Laura, who betrays him by playing the vulnerable-white-tourist card against him, falsely reporting him for robbery. Amina, the pregnant northern woman Nnamdi meets, has risked everything to travel far from home in search of a better life for her baby; fear is her daily mode of being, and among strangers—especially men—she aims to stay safe by blending in and being invisible. As she leaves familiar roots and routes for southern terra incognita, Amina provides another vertiginous image of risk-taking when she tells herself that "[e]very step now would be a blind step off a tall wall" (Ferguson, *419* 106). Finally, Laura risks her own safety by travelling to Lagos in pursuit of retribution and a rebalancing of the books; later, back home, she risks her reclaimed money attempting to bring a real Nigerian woman, Amina, to Canada, in an effort to achieve what her father never could have with the imaginary Sandra Atta. As she takes this last risk to help Amina, Laura feels "as though she were going to slide off entirely at times—off the edge of the bed, off the edge of the world" (388).

If *419* is preoccupied with vertiginous edges and risk, it is also, and relatedly, a novel about justice and accountability; as reviewer T. F. Rigelhof writes, *419* "puts flesh on the bare bones of [the] question of distributive versus retributive justice." This is a question that a historicizing postcolonial perspective on the inequities of wealth between peoples—here, Canadians and Nigerians—also opens up, and that Ferguson's multiple protagonists and converging plotlines invite readers to historicize. When Laura's brother, Warren, shows her his Internet "trophy room" of scambaiting triumphs (i.e., posted photos of African scammers tricked by Western pranksters into embarrassing poses), Laura feels "queasy" (273) because "[s]he'd seen photographs like that before. In history books" (274). Old tit-for-tat humiliations and degradations, with their unsubtly racist undertones, are facilitated by new technologies. When Laura meets an official from the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission on arrival at the Lagos airport, he tells her of the damage Internet scams have caused to the country's reputation. Then he adds, "Of course, . . . when it comes to obtaining wealth through false pretenses, the white man is still the expert. I'm afraid the black man is an amateur when it comes to 419ing others. One might say, my entire country was obtained under false pretenses" (304). Fraud and false promises, he suggests, are embedded in the country's colonial history. Ferguson reinforces this context in the climactic scene in which Winston realizes that Laura has conned him—that her superior abilities make him look like an amateur 419er. Winston questions the retributive justice he now sees Laura pursuing as she quixotically demands her dead father back: "Is this what you want?" he asks angrily. "Reparations? From Africa? Justice—*from Africa*? Nigeria is not your playground, madam. Africa is not some sort of—of metaphor" (344; emphasis in original). History is not directly invoked here, but the image of Africa as a playground for white interlopers has a long genealogy; moreover, readers of Chinua Achebe's historical novels will recall how readily retributive justice and eye-for-an-eye revenge were practised by British colonial officials and armies in what is now Nigeria. Winston's anger may begin with the personal—he has lost control because Laura's risks and ruses have trumped his—but it has deep roots in Africa's historical encounter with the West.

Douglas' ways of framing and explaining risk, as a concept rooted in cultural perceptions and social constructions, can help illuminate the novel's approach to matters of justice, moral accountability, blame, and otherness. For Douglas, humans identify and weigh risks in the context of the belief systems and moral positions that frame their worldview. Risks are not value-free facts whose probable danger can be objectively measured; they are culturally determined, and as such rooted, for Douglas, in practices her anthropological work identifies as "taboo-thinking" (explaining misfortune by blaming someone for it) (*Risk* 4), "pollution behaviour" (condemning objects, ideas, or people that contaminate our "cherished classifications") (*Purity* 36), and shoring up purity by warding off danger. Moreover, Douglas proposes that our scientific and technological knowledge gives us greater confidence than earlier peoples had in our ability to know the objective causes of natural events and human behaviour. When bad things happen, therefore, "our blaming behaviour [goes] direct to real causes"; we may even be tempted to assume that any given attribution of blame is "guaranteed by its objective basis in knowledge" (*Risk* 7). This assumption, Douglas asserts, is dangerous because "not just blaming but all cognition is politicized" (8); when combined with her understanding of culture as "a system of persons holding one another mutually accountable" (31), readiness to blame produces a risk-averse society that "is almost ready to treat every death as chargeable to someone's account, every accident as caused by someone's criminal negligence, every sickness a threatened prosecution" (15–16).

Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle draw on Douglas to argue that the upsurge of interest in risk in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as the attendant proliferation of risk analysis and risk management as professions, has produced and been produced by a "logic in which someone must be held to blame for any event that threatens an individual's way of life" (7). Risk is "construed as a product of human agency and therefore controllable through attributions of responsibility and processes of accountability. . . . Singling out a cause renders risky activity subject to moral responsibility" (7). "This view," the Canadian scholars argue, "is underpinned not only by the strongly individual-

istic character of American culture but also by scientific research and legal discourse that individualize social problems in order to attribute responsibility and justify intervention" (8). Laura in *419* may be a more sophisticated thinker than her firebrand brother, but she likewise views accountability and blame in simple, individualistic terms. She attributes the sole cause and therefore the blame for her father's death to an initially unknown Nigerian scammer, even though her father engaged voluntarily with his email interlocutor, decided the extent of his financial involvement, and eventually chose to end his own life. Laura is blind to Henry's agency: someone else must be held accountable for his tragedy and her family's loss, and she sets out to find that someone. She uses her copyediting skills to match the prose of Henry's scammer with one of Warren's scam-baiting targets and then takes over Warren's cyber-conversation so she can secretly pursue this man herself with a more serious goal than ridiculing him. She wants both possible and impossible forms of distributive justice, holding Winston accountable for her father's death even to the extent of demanding, irrationally, that he return not just Henry's money but Henry himself.

However, as readers of the novel learn sooner than she does, Laura is not getting the full "widescreen" picture (to use Peterson's term) in attributing blame to an individual and expecting him alone to pay. When Winston begins corresponding with Henry, he is a sole agent: he works on his own, targeting each carefully researched individual with a tailor-made email he calls "a surgical strike" (Ferguson, *419* 64) rather than "[c]arpet bombing" lists of email addresses with thousands of identical missives (63). By the time Laura meets him, however, Winston is under the thumb of the ruthless strongman Ironsi-Egobia, who tithes his earnings as a protection fee. While there may seem to be justice in Laura's individualistic, one-on-one pursuit of the man she sees as solely responsible for her father's demise, as her Nigerian adventure unfolds it becomes clear that her actions affect others besides Winston, and they affect Winston himself in more than financial ways. This is not just a bilateral relationship; Laura's own surgical strike generates collateral damage just as Winston's did, and others suffer losses much greater than Winston's as a result of her vigilantism. In other words, although she

identifies one person to blame in her pursuit of retributive justice, more than one person pays, and more than one person suffers. For Douglas, as Ericson and Doyle explain, "risk as a rhetoric of moral responsibility" is "a defensive mechanism to protect individuals from encroachment by others"; "[r]isk codes danger as a threat to liberty" (5). Laura's actions and their repercussions in Lagos are more aggressive than defensive, and by seeking payback in the form of money, she also seeks it in the realm of liberty and autonomy: reducing Winston's in retaliation for his encroachment on Henry's, without knowing the complicated ways in which Winston's liberty and autonomy are already compromised. Moreover, in her ignorance of context, Laura also does not see how she is accountable for the liberty and autonomy of others, besides Winston, whose safety her self-serving actions will threaten—and in Nnamdi's case, violently eliminate.

The novel also raises the related question of who has choice and how much. Not surprisingly, Canadian characters have more than Nigerian ones. Henry had choices, albeit diminishing ones, throughout his correspondence with Winston, even as he dug himself in ever deeper financially and psychologically. Laura chooses to undertake the risky journey to Lagos and has the resources to come and go quickly as long as she can retain her autonomy—stay out of danger—while she is there. By comparison, Winston's choices are much more limited, as he has been "on probationary orders" since a previous raid on 419ers that resulted in "a suspended sentence" and, most damagingly, the loss of his passport and the mobility he needed to fulfill his dream of living (and 419ing) abroad (Ferguson, *419* 68). He has neither Laura's independence nor her mobility: while she chooses to enter a dangerous city, she lives in a relatively safe one; he is stuck in the perilous, constraining environment of Lagos. Amina and Nnamdi, Laura's collateral damage, have as few options as Winston or fewer, beholden as all three Nigerians are to Ironsi-Egobia. And Amina and Nnamdi in particular suffer as a direct result of Laura's freedom to invoke her own privileged whiteness and her femaleness, fraudulently, as victimized by (or at risk from) a black man, Nnamdi, who did not, as she claims, rob her; in fact, he has just spared her life. If, as William C. Cockerham writes, "[t]o take a risk is

a social act" (1) that involves "danger for the risk-taker and possibly for others who have risks imposed on them by someone else" (2), then risk's impact must be extended beyond the self and into the world of social relations. An individual's choice to take risks may impact others who do not know they are at risk and would not choose to be so.

As his novel straddles the Calgary-Lagos divide, then, Ferguson establishes a sense of equivalency between his characters that is deceptive: he uses comparable language of vertigo, edges, falling, and risk to describe them, only to throw that seeming equivalency deliberately off balance by differentiating (and hence politicizing) Canadian and Nigerian characters' unequal choices and engagements. Comparing Ferguson's protagonists' relative abilities to cross cultural, national, economic, and racial divides, it becomes clear that the Canadian protagonist (Laura) possesses a greater level of choice, autonomy, freedom, privilege, and mobility than the three Nigerian ones (Winston, Nnamdi, and Amina). And while it should not be surprising that the white, middle-class Canadian's risk-taking is more active and voluntary than that of her Nigerian counterparts, Ferguson creates an even greater imbalance by loading the dice in Laura's favour when she arrives in Lagos as a woman transformed. The *National Post*'s reviewer may feel that "[t]here is no credible explanation for Laura's sudden switch from mealy mouthed wallflower to adrenaline-fuelled risk-taker" in the climactic scenes (Mooney), but if Ferguson risks his readers throwing the book across the room at this point, it is not just because the new, action-heroine-esque Laura so little resembles her earlier self, or because this privileged but sheltered Western woman seems so implausibly in control and not at risk in this dangerous new place, for which nothing in her previous experience could have prepared her. It is also because her impulsive Lagos adventure comes across as a recreational, emotion-driven wish-fulfillment fantasy with real-world casualties. But this is presumably Ferguson's point in including the three Nigerian protagonists' stories: the whirlwind trip may be a triumph for Laura, but clearly it is not just about her. Risk-taking is a social act. Too often, however, particularly in societies that prize individual empowerment and achievement, the origins and apparent effects of risk-taking are located narrowly in the self.

In *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, Stephen Lyng writes of voluntary risk-takers' desire to "control the seemingly uncontrollable" in order to compensate for "the *lack* of control that people experience in their institutional lives" (45; emphasis in original). Drawing on Michel Foucault, Lyng argues that "the exploration of limits or . . . 'edges'" by, for example, gamblers or criminals, often "provides a way to break free of the rigidified subjective categories created by disciplinary technologies that circumscribe almost every aspect of human experience" (43). Voluntary risk-taking, or "edgework," is a form of "boundary negotiation" on the line between sanity and insanity, safety and danger, and life and death (Lyng 4). As it "transports [risk-takers] to a world of sensual immediacy," even "hyperreality," the risky activity, if successful, can give participants "deep feelings of authenticity" (24), of superiority over less skilled or more cautious others, and even of liberation. Psychologist Michael J. Apter argues that humans in an excitement-seeking state imagine the presence of a "protective frame" along the inside of what he calls "the *dangerous edge*," which he defines as the "boundary line between danger and trauma" (24; emphasis in original). This protective frame gives thrill-seekers confidence in themselves, others, and their environment: it allows them to "get very close to trauma without actually being traumatized" (or worse) (26) and to approach that edge with excitement rather than letting anxiety or fear pull them away.

Despite their different degrees of autonomy, both Winston and Laura experience the protective frame. Winston finds success and even excitement in his work. His surgical-strike technique of careful research and individual targeting makes him superior to others, in his view, because "[h]e was no mere *wayo* man, a trickster, a huckster, a carnival conjurer. He was a true guyman [i.e., con man], living by his wits, outsmarting the odds" (Ferguson, *419* 66–67; emphasis in original). His confidence in his skills increases with the thrill of success; the illusory protective frame seems more real as targets fall, big money comes his way, and his criminal conviction recedes further into the past. All of this makes Winston less vigilant when Laura arrives; too confident in himself and his protective frame, he is not sufficiently wary of her and the risks her physical presence might create, even though this is the first time one

of his 419 scams has progressed from a cyberspace relationship to a personal encounter. Laura, as she successfully bluffs and cons Winston on his home turf, also experiences the high that comes from voluntary risk-taking. Carrying out her high-stakes plan, she at times feels detached from her actions and the precarious situation they have put her in: "It was as though she were outside a window watching events unfold within. . . . [A]s she looked at this young man, this *thief*, she couldn't feel anything resembling fear. Only a certain detached . . . anger?" (312; second ellipsis in original). She is the spectator of her own risk-taking performance, and this detachment becomes its own kind of protective frame that helps her role-play convincingly enough to succeed.

Laura's decision to risk the trip to Lagos in pursuit of reparation and retributive justice is the kind of risk-taking behaviour that John Adams argues is "explicable only as the pursuit of confirmation of moral autonomy" (96). With her father dead and her family home and wealth compromised by a shadowy other located in the virtual space of the Internet and, she knows, the physical space of Nigeria, Laura pursues a financial rebalancing that is also, in her mind, a moral rebalancing and purifying—a reestablishment of autonomy in the face of (and at the expense of) the invading, contaminating other. But because other others are involved and at risk—again, because Laura's encounter with Winston is no more bilateral and contained than Henry's was—she cannot make a clean surgical strike. She creates a bloody mess (literally) and a massive imbalance of payments in framing Nnamdi, the man she has just convinced to spare her life and let her escape, for robbery. Moreover, any calculation of the novel's moral balance—any tipping of its scales of justice—must acknowledge that Laura is at least as guilty of fraud as any other character: she engages in fraudulent self-representation when she puts herself at risk with Winston and when she extricates herself from risk with Nnamdi. The novel's dénouement goes some distance toward re-establishing a just balance, although the money Laura channels to Amina cannot bring Nnamdi back any more than it could bring Henry back when she forced Winston to repay it to her. Amina clearly needs the money more than Laura or her mother do, and readers should not be surprised—Laura herself should not be surprised—that Amina does

not use it, as Laura intends her to, to come to Canada. But however satisfying and just this conclusion may seem, the differences between worlds still linger: the harm to Canadians from risks that they could choose and largely control is, at least in its voluntary nature, outweighed by the harm to Nigerians from risks that were enforced and largely out of their control. After the suicide that sets this narrative in motion, the sacrifices incurred from risk-taking are almost wholly on the Nigerian side. The high-stakes, dangerous games in which Ferguson's characters are engaged, like the territorial games of earlier colonial eras, play out on a terrain that is more vertiginously vertical than level-playing-field horizontal.

II. Risky Business: Economic, Ecological, Environmental

Although Laura's risk-taking, revenge-seeking, and financial-/moral-rebalancing activities in Nigeria eventually turn Nnamdi into collateral damage, prior to that he is a protagonist in his own right, and his story is at the heart of *419*'s preoccupation with risks that transcend the interpersonal ones I discuss above. Drilling down to the layers of plot that underlie the Laura-Winston encounter reveals Ferguson's engagement with the social and environmental impact of the Nigerian oil economy and, albeit obliquely and indirectly, the Canadian one. In his 1992 essay "Petrofiction," Ghosh writes that the twentieth-century "Oil Encounter," compared to the earlier Spice Trade, has surprisingly inspired "scarcely a single [literary] work of note" (75); *419*, published twenty years later, represents one response to that apparent scarcity as it explores the risks and the costs of the Niger Delta "oil doom" (LeMenager 121) that has, "over a half century[,] . . . almost entirely destroyed the marine commons" (16).

The social and ecological risks of Nigeria's oil industry and its wildly uneven rewards have been well documented. For Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, drawing on Ken Saro-Wiwa and others, oil's status as "the life-blood of the nation" (37) has been devastating: "A fragile riverine ecosystem, the Niger Delta, has effectively been laid waste by several decades of oil and gas exploration and production, making it one of the most ecologically endangered regions of the world" (40). An area known

for its biodiversity, once home to "more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa" (Okonta and Douglas 63), has degenerated through the activities of Shell, other multinationals, and pipeline-tapping crews and militants attacking their infrastructure into the site of "a vicious ecological war—a war whose victims are a hapless people and the land on which they have lived and thrived for centuries" (63–64). Saro-Wiwa describes the impact on the Ogoni people:

> Thirty-five years of reckless oil exploration by multinational oil companies has left the Ogoni environment completely devastated. Four gas flares burning for twenty-four hours a day over thirty-five years in very close proximity to human habitation; over one hundred oil wells in village backyards; and a petrochemical complex, two oil refineries, a fertilizer plant, and oil pipelines crisscrossing the landscape aboveground have spelled death for human beings, flora, and fauna. It is unacceptable. (qtd. in Okonta and Douglas 94–95)

As with the palm oil trade that dominated the region's colonial economy in the late nineteenth century, the petroleum trade's consequences are not just environmental but economic, distorting local trading and employment patterns as it hobbles traditional, sustainable patterns of land, water, and resource use. With oil accounting for twenty percent of Nigeria's gross domestic product, ninety-five percent of export earnings, and eighty percent of its revenue base (Igbinovia 4), the loss of diversification over the oil decades created "a monocultural economy dependent on the oil industry" (Onoh 67).

Ferguson engages with this ugly history in a tale of two cities—Calgary and Lagos—whose inhabitants' fates and vulnerabilities are a function of the degree to which they are, metaphorically and in one case literally, coated in oil—the oil drilled in the cities' hinterlands that is substantially responsible for their wealth. Winston's 419ing occurs in ecologically "clean" cyberspace through epistolary promises, falsified documents, and bank drafts; but in a nation likened to the "Wild West" (Ferguson, *419* 110), the dominant (and sanctioned) economic undertaking, the Niger Delta petroleum industry, is portrayed as an

environmental and social disaster. The novel depicts the industry as polluting water and soil, killing fish and fishing economies, and giving rise to round-the-clock gas flaring, fires, disease, and deadly attacks on infrastructure and people. By stark contrast, in Calgary, "The Heart of the New West" (28), Ferguson limits his representation of Alberta oil to a passing mention of distant "tar sands operations" and the effect of an international price spike on the city's skyline (190). A similar imbalance emerges in the fates of the characters associated with these divergent worlds: Delta-born Nnamdi, the one protagonist fully implicated in oil, who lives and dies steeped in it, contrasts with Calgarian Laura, who inhabits a shiny high-rise attached to a mall and remains as unaffected by oil as she is relatively unsullied by her messy transatlantic encounters.

Do *419*'s ecological dimensions, then, also qualify the transcontinental equivalencies and correspondences it seems eager to establish? Does its lopsided representation of oil economies and ecologies compromise this "global" novel's treatment of the moral responsibility, justice, and accountability that Douglas sees as intrinsic to risk? If disproportionate attention is the measure, then the answer is yes: although Ferguson lived in Alberta and had not been to Nigeria when he wrote *419* (Ferguson, "Q & A") and more of the novel is set in Calgary than any other locale, Delta oil looms large while Alberta oil is barely mentioned. The economic impact of Alberta's oil industry is evident in the visible wealth of Calgary's cityscape and citizens, but this is an effect with no visible cause; despite the province's international reputation as a source of "dirty oil" associated with what many environmentalists have shown to be untenable damage and risk, Ferguson does not explore that thematic or geographic territory. No characters come from or go to sites associated with oil extraction, and no scenes or plot points are located there. Alberta oil remains distant and invisible, and the gleaming city that prospers from oil is not tarnished by attention to the source of its wealth. It seems strange (and is surely a missed opportunity) for a novel that renders in alarming detail the environmental and human harm caused by oil-related activities in the Niger Delta to ignore the parallel instances of gas flaring, deforestation, pipeline leaks, and economic over-reliance on a

single resource that taint Alberta's industry. Yet while Nigeria bears the brunt of the book's localized ecological critique, oil taints and implicates Nigerian people and places in such widespread ways that its expansive reach enables this novel of transnational connectedness and deceptive equivalencies to speak (in an attenuated way) to the global dimensions of oil-based risks and thereby to complement the seeming imbalances in its treatment of interpersonal risk.

"*[P]overty is hierarchic, smog is democratic*," writes Beck in a widely quoted aphorism from *Risk Society* (36; emphasis in original): entrenched economic structures of relative wealth and advantage dissolve in the face of ecological threats that affect human bodies similarly. Privilege and empowerment based on class or nationality are no protection against such threats, including (and notably) those caused by activities the wealthy undertake to further their wealth. As Ursula K. Heise writes while glossing Beck,

> the technological development of modern society has reached a stage where it has become unable to protect itself against the unintended "side effects" of its own technologies, which, formerly latent and invisible, are now emerging into full public view. Even as the socially privileged attempt to export such side effects to the less empowered, in the end they cannot prevent these effects from returning to harm them. Ecological crisis, in Beck's view, is a case in point, as it ends up undermining the means by which any population sustains itself—including those who might have originally profited from ecological exploitation. (147)

While Beck's poverty/smog binary clearly applies at the local level, it is harder to defend at the broader scales of the regional, the national, and the transnational. Even when making the easy leap from literal smog to "smog" as a metonym for the consequences of ecologically damaging development, including the global (and in Beck's sense "democratic") threat of climate change, it is not hard to find cases in which hierarchies of wealth and poverty determine relative exposure to ecological risks. This is because, Heise says,

> [t]he status of the disenfranchised in the international economy—their places of residence and types of work— . . . typically exposes them to hazards from which the more affluent mainstream has better means of sheltering itself. From the location of dangerous industries and toxic waste disposals all the way to the quality of building materials and foodstuffs they have access to, the poor and underprivileged receive a greater portion of the risks and a smaller share of the benefits than the more privileged social strata. (149)

In the Nigeria of *419*, Winston may be economically disadvantaged compared to Laura, but his urban residence and work in cyberspace make him more sheltered from ecological harm and therefore less at risk than the Delta-dwelling fisherman's son Nnamdi.

In Winston's workday, fishing is a metaphor. He baits his emails to "snare" distant targets: "[O]nce hooked, it became a matter of playing them, of reeling in the line, overcoming their resistance, giving them slack at certain times, pulling taut at others" (Ferguson, *419* 64). However, "[s]pam filters were like ocean-going trawlers, dragging the sea floor with nets, swamping the boats and tangling the lines of independent fishermen who were, after all, only trying to earn a living" (63). After piling on the similes and metaphors, the narrator explains that Winston, "[a] city boy born and bred, . . . didn't fish with line and hook, of course, but with words, with wonder. In this, the game was more like storytelling than blood sport" (64). In the distinction between storytelling game and blood sport—and between fishing virtually as an opportunistic way to get rich and fishing physically for subsistence—lies the measure of difference between Winston, the urban cyber-scammer, and Nnamdi, the Delta boy whose intended career, family's livelihood, and village's sustainable economy are destroyed by the arrival of Shell Oil. Any equivalency suggested by the shared pursuit of "fishing" is overridden by palpable economic and ecological disparities. Similarly, the novel may suggest a parallel between Winston's and Nnamdi's fishing and the empty fishbowl in Laura's Calgary apartment, into which she "tossed her keys . . . , the fish itself having long since vacated the premises" because

"Laura wasn't good at keeping things alive" (27). But there is a vast gulf between her low-stakes, leisurely fish-keeping (and careless fish-killing) and the economic necessity fish represent (and the tragedy of big oil's careless killing of them) in the Niger Delta. Again, Ferguson places the burden of risk overwhelmingly on the Nigerian side, and while Laura has no one to blame but herself for the death of a pet fish, the death of oil-soaked Delta fish is not the fault of its fishermen, whose livelihood has been put at risk by powerful forces that have not been held accountable for doing so.

Nnamdi's story is an allegory of the Delta's devastating encounter with big oil, from innocent first contact to tragic, oil-soaked demise. In his opening scene, the nine- or ten-year-old Ijaw villager Nnamdi meets a "pink-faced" Dutch "Shell Man" (159, 163), "the first" in his remote part of the Delta (161), though villagers are aware of oil activity nearby from the fish that arrive "belly-up from the oil creeks farther inland, sheathed in crude and already rotting" (155). Years later, after bulldozers arrive and drilling begins, the same Shell Man offers Nnamdi a job as a mechanic; he leaves his village and becomes a well-paid, upwardly mobile company man on Bonny Island until he is let go, considered a security risk as Ijaw militancy against Shell ramps up. As he slides into black-market (but nonviolent) work with "mosquito crews" illegally tapping pipelines—draining the "lifeblood of Nigeria," the president says (199)—and later as a mechanic on a tanker truck filling supply shortfalls with bunkered oil, Nnamdi undermines Shell's economic interests and furthers his own, using skills the company taught him. Alongside this recognizable narrative arc of collaboration with, rejection by, and resistance to a quasi-colonial invader, Ferguson includes a litany of ecological horrors of which the bulldozers are just the beginning: gas flaring and deforestation by the company, explosions of wellheads and pipelines by militant saboteurs, and the death of fish and Nnamdi's fisherman father from immersion in oily water. The drinking water from Amina's jerry can never loses "the taste of fuel" (84); similarly, the water the region's fish, trees, and crops need to survive is contaminated by the oil that, in government rhetoric and economic policy, has apparently displaced water as the nation's "lifeblood."

Moreover, Nigeria has an entrenched culture of theft at many levels, from the ruling elite siphoning royalties, to 419ers scamming Westerners, to road checkpoints demanding bogus fees, to mosquito crews tapping pipelines—the latter prompted by a need to replace income once earned from the "fishing, farming and hunting and gathering" that oil and natural gas pollution prevent (Igbinovia 120). Nnamdi's involvement in pipeline bunkering, prompted by the loss of his Shell job (which itself replaced fishing), makes him a party to theft, as does his transporting of bunkered oil. But while theft by one party means loss to another, Ferguson's narrative suggests at both the interpersonal and ecological levels that thefts and losses cannot be done justice by a tidy balance sheet of debits and credits, gains and losses. Laura's loss-repayment mission is prompted by a theft that can be construed as a gift (as Winston self-servingly sees Henry's payments); at the end of that mission, she deceitfully reports her "gift" of $100 to Nnamdi as a robbery and precipitates his death (367). Indeed, all three transfers of money between individuals in Calgary and Lagos involve valuations of what that money represents, compensates for, or enables in relation to a human life. Henry's payments seem more motivated by a desire to help Sandra Atta—"to be a hero to someone" (390)—than by get-rich-quick dreams; when Laura gets money back from Winston she really wants Henry himself back; and Amina accepts that same money from Laura not to move to Canada, as Laura intends, but to compensate for the loss of Nnamdi, which Laura's actions cause. Any sense of justice in the net tally—Canadian money ends up in Nigeria and a larger debt has been paid—is complicated by an awareness of the rich lives lost in that messy process, for which the money cannot adequately compensate.

Notions of theft, loss, and reparation are similarly complicated when it comes to competing agendas and trade-offs between economic and ecological interests and determinations of culpability in these realms. As Nnamdi joins the mosquito crews that steal large amounts of oil across the Delta, Ferguson allegorizes the lively national argument that ensues:

> The Niger Delta was too vast, too wild, and too lawless for any single authority to stanch the loss. "The lifeblood of Nigeria,"

as the president called it, "was being drained away by ungrateful citizens." As many as 200,000 barrels of crude a week was what they were saying. "Which only leaves another million barrels for the oil companies!" was the response.

"It is nothing more than theft!" yelled the priest from his pulpit.

"They are the thieves, not us!"

"Thieving from a thief is still thieving!"

"And what of our forests? They is clear-cuttin' those as well!" The oil companies had leased their land concessions to lumber companies to clear for them, and the lumber companies had been stripping the hardwood forests bare and shipping the prized wood to Europe and America. "Where it's made into mahogany toilet seats!" someone shouted. "So that the *oyibos* can shit right through us!"

"It is still theft!" shouted the priest. "Thou shalt not steal!"

"Not theft, payment owed!"

But it was theft.

And payment owed.

Nnamdi could see that clearly enough. (199–200; emphasis in original)

Nnamdi comfortably straddles the contradiction. Indeed, debates over whether multinational oil operations are a gift to Nigeria or a theft from Nigerians, whether the mosquito crews are stealing or taking back, and whether the militants are terrorist outlaws further destroying the Delta or heroic resisters defending it can seem beside the point. Ferguson's abundant rendering of the environmental and human devastation of Delta oil operations and of the attacks and counterattacks they provoke confounds simple contradictions and attributions of blame. As he conveys the despair of those caught up in a zero-sum blame game, he represents Delta oil as a lose-lose exchange of retributive justice in which the biggest loser is the environment and the futures it could have sustained.

If Ferguson's environmental consciousness seems obsessed with the risks of Delta oil and barely aware of Alberta's equivalent, he does make

a direct connection when the narrator slyly remarks, at the end of a four-paragraph litany of ecological violations and retaliations that drastically curtail production in the Delta, that "[t]he price of oil spiked on the world market. On the other side of the globe, tar sands operations rumbled back to life, began chewing up the oil-rich soil again. From Laura's window [in Calgary], she could see the cranes turning faster and faster" (190; cf. 28). In this nod to the globalization of the oil economy, Ferguson acknowledges, however fleetingly and generally, that there are those who gain from what is, after all, not only a lose-lose exchange. As Anna Zalik observes, Shell has contradictory goals in the Delta, given that "an optimal level of security is necessary for maintaining production, at the same time [as] 'threats' to production contribute to rising oil prices and thus rising profits" (407). Presumably there is a sweet spot for Shell and its shareholders as it attempts to offset enabling security with a profitable degree of insecurity, but it would not be a sweet spot for local ecologies and peoples—especially when, as in Ferguson's scene, insecurity and damage are on the ascent and control over local impacts is largely lost.

However, this important moment of global connectedness in the novel also edges into territory covered by oil-sands advocate Ezra Levant, for whom Nigeria's oil industry becomes a foil for Alberta's. Indeed, Nigeria is Levant's poster child for corruption and for human rights and environmental abuses in an oil-producing nation. Noting that "Nigerian crude has one of the highest carbon 'footprints' of oil produced in the world" (25) and that Alberta oil's footprint is "20 per cent smaller" (119), Levant concludes that Canada is "hands down the most ethical major exporter of oil in the world" (33). Every barrel of Alberta oil that Canadian or international customers use, he says, is one less barrel sold from Nigeria and therefore better for the environment. However, in *419*, Alberta production increases *because of* environmental and human rights horrors in Nigeria, not in lieu of them. If an escalating war of attrition between Delta oil companies and militants creates more environmental harm for less oil produced, and this reduced production causes the "chewing up" of more oil reserves in Alberta, then not only will Nigeria's carbon footprint increase, but the world's will. Nigeria's

zero-sum game thus becomes a global one with global economic and environmental consequences.

Ferguson addresses global warming only by such oblique inference, however. Direct representation of ecological damage remains limited to immediate local and regional effects on the Delta that, I suggest, stand in for the much longer-term "slow violence" enacted upon the region by multinational oil and those objecting to it (Nixon 2). Moreover, *419* is not the answer to what Timothy Clark sees as the surprising "absence in ecocriticism of its most serious issue": climate change (11). For Clark, "the novelty and scope of the problem . . . eludes inherited ways of thinking"; given the "huge gaps in space and time" between climate change's "diffuse" causes and its effects, "the issue does not present an easily identifiable or clear-cut political antagonist" (11). But if Ferguson's novel teaches us anything about our interconnected world, it is that individual, morally differentiated antagonists are a will-o'-the-wisp, whether we focus on Laura's pursuit of justice and reparation from Winston or on the militants' and mosquito crews' backlash against Shell's depredations. However different these ethically and economically motivated pursuits are, both involve seeking punitive and retributive measures against those blamed for seeking reward by putting others at risk, and yet both inevitably put further risks and harms on others—including innocent others—implicated in that story. To take a risk is a social act, and in a globalized world, risks can proliferate and exceed our control.

In both the interpersonal and environmental narratives of *419*, Nnamdi emerges as the chief victim, dying as a result of others' tit-for-tat pursuit of justice, reparation, and risk-management. In the image of Nnamdi's oil-soaked, "charred and stumped" black body floating in Lagos Lagoon (Ferguson, *419* 379)—dead because of both Laura's dispute with Winston and the environmental crisis that drove Nnamdi to the city in the first place—Ferguson powerfully coalesces his individual and ecological risk narratives. Cavalierly sacrificed by more privileged others seeking to reduce risk to themselves, a person-turned-thing whose bobbing corpse causes those nearby to close their curtains, Nnamdi at the end of the novel encapsulates the unseen (or ignored)

collateral damage to people and ecosystems that risk-takers—whether individuals, corporations, or governments—may be unable or unwilling to prevent, predict, or even comprehend in a globalized risk society. In the hotel room shortly before his death, Nnamdi tells Laura a parable involving debt and repayment: a hunter gives his gun as collateral on a debt, and his multiple borrowings to repay it set off a chain of rapacious killings that neither he nor the lender anticipated. The story serves as an unheeded warning of the unforeseen perils and proliferating casualties Laura's Nigerian adventure involves. Laura's sanguine response to Amina's later theft from her represents a belated recognition of what she herself owes for the damage she has done and the mess her relative privilege has enabled her to make in Lagos—the extent and implications of which she is just becoming dimly aware of. In a novel in which apparent equivalencies between individuals are upended by differences of race, class, mobility, and nationality, yet where ecological non-equivalence is qualified, at least inferentially, by a reality of global integration, Nnamdi's tragedy resonates outward to challenge narratives of autonomy in the risk-taking and risk-prevention acts of individuals, corporations, and those who would oppose them.

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