Victor Ehikhamenor: Undoing the City, Making Home

1
Uwa-Uwa (Home is home) i-ii 2026
found materials

2
So far, so near 2016-2026
ink on hand-made paper

3
Call Home when you arrive safe 2026
wood, telephone

4
Not Home 2026
furniture, cloths, personal objects

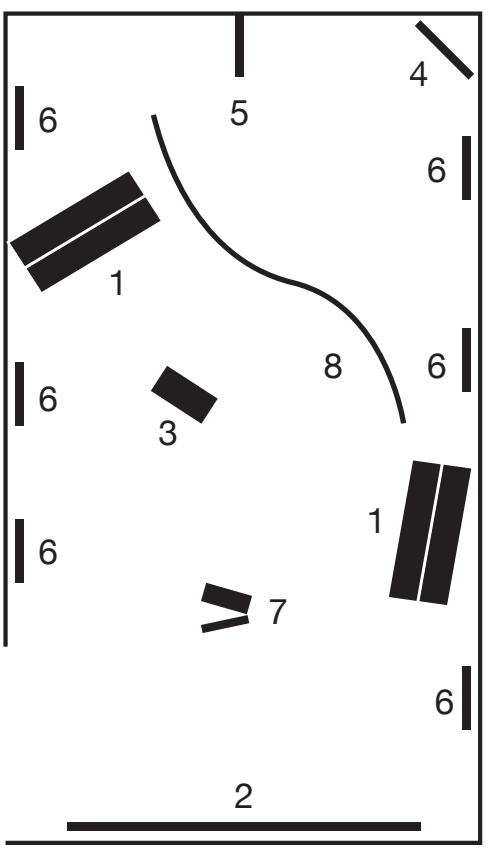
5
He Left 2026
door, shows, clothing, personal effects

6
Fragment of memories on the move i-vi 2026
windows with stained glass, drawings, fabric, string

7
Stories untold 2026
found suitcase, clothing, hangers

8
Numinous night 2025
tapestry of fabric, lace, string and rosary beads

VICTOR
EHIKHAMENOR



Penelope Gallery

Thursday 15 October 2026 - Monday 26 April 2027
Chau Chak Wing Museum, The University of Sydney

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY | CHAU CHAK WING MUSEUM

VICTOR EHIKHAMENOR: UNDOING THE CITY, MAKING HOME

Victor Ehikhamenor: Undoing the City, Making Home is a meditation inspired by conversations between renowned Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor and a team of historians who for over a decade have engaged in cultural exchange with community activists in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, Egypt and Australia on the power of art to illuminate stories official archives too often obscure or exclude from historical records.

Focusing on the propulsive damage fueled by oil extraction in the Niger Delta, the flows of people it has long precipitated towards coastal Nigeria and outward to the world, and their desire to remake home – be it in the creeks of the Delta or in the suburbs of Sydney – the exhibition illuminates the role of the artist not just as narrator and interpreter of the human experience and the world, but as an archivist who put into the record of history the stories of people that would otherwise been forgotten.



Victor Ehikhamenor, *So Far, So Near,* Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

I. A CONFLICTED HISTORY: FROM DARK CARGO TO GARDEN CITY, AND CENTER OF EXTRACTION

While working with CMAP, a local community organization in the creeks of Port Harcourt, in the summer of 2019 we found ourselves having dinner with Professor Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, a towering figure and the revered godfather of Nigerian oral history, and Professor Julie Nnwanadi, a British geographer who had dedicated most of her life to the region. The two elders, both well into their eighties, conjured up the rose-colored rememberances of the "good old days" in Port Harcourt during the transition from British rule to independence, before oil extraction and civil war took their toll; a time when Port Harcourt was still "the Garden City" known for its lush vegetation and classic self-contained, green belt design.

This elegiac memory was fundamentally irreconcilable with the city we had come to know. Port Harcourt today is the epicentre of Nigerian oil extraction: a landscape defined by ecological devastation, systemic pollution, and pervasive corruption, crime and violence. And yet the wounds of extraction, poverty and war could not subsume the underlying beauty and tenacity of the landscape and the people.



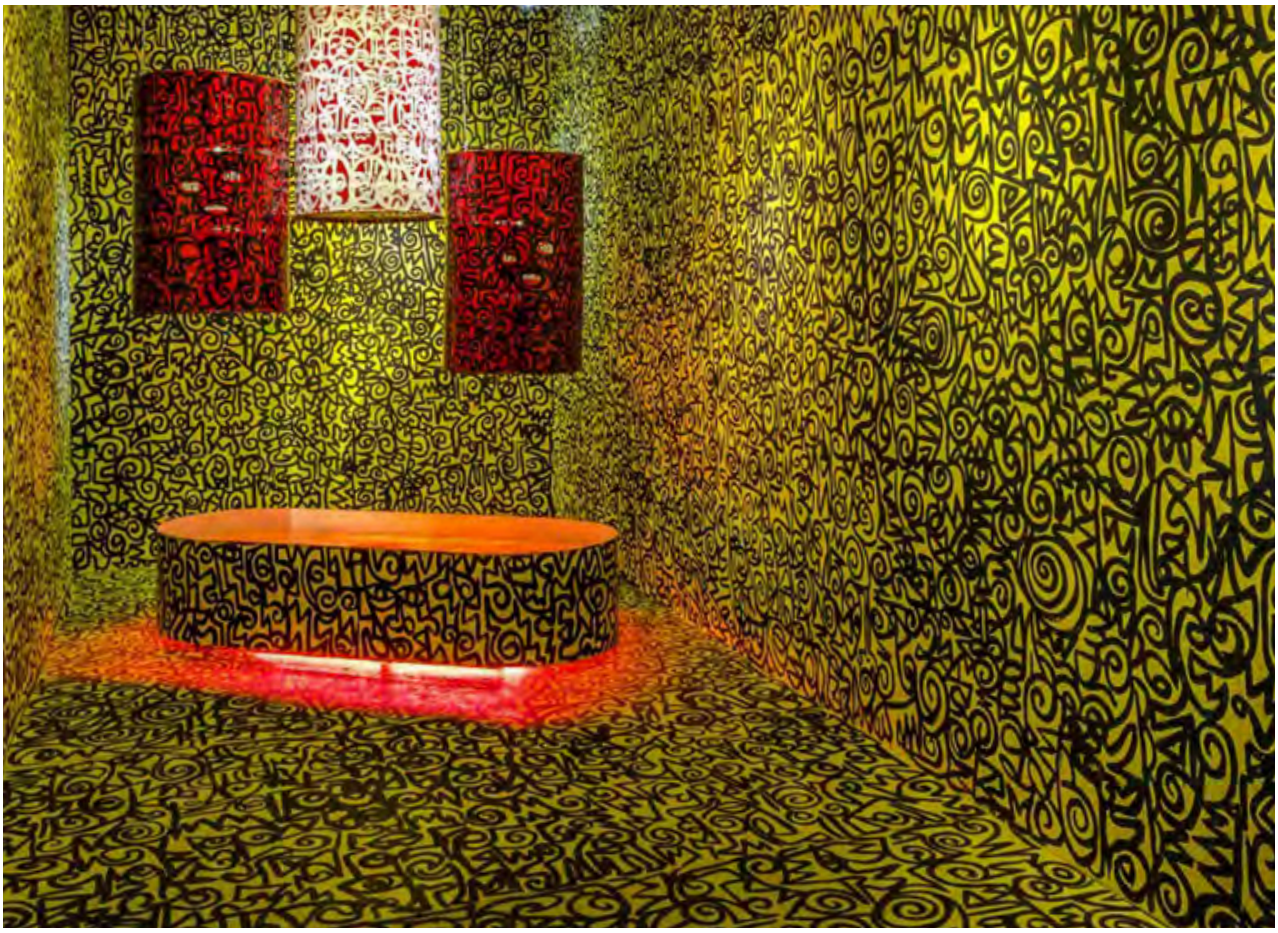
Niger Delta, 1980s.

British colonialism in Nigeria was made possible by a centuries-long trade in "dark cargo:" first, black bodies; then palm oil, coal, and finally, crude oil and vast volumes of natural gas. Port Harcourt stands out precisely because it was a model West African coastal colonial city, a city built directly for extraction and yet designed as a garden city. That contradiction drove the city's transformation into a massive, largely unplanned metropolis defined by extremes of wealth and poverty, a self-built city always on the edge of destruction. The Port Harcourt of today is the product specifically of rapid, oil-fueled growth during the 1970s and 1980s, which included the resettlement and growth of many waterfront areas. Yet this development offered little improvement in the lives of the rapidly growing population. By the 2000s, in line with increasingly disastrous oil spills and pollution across the Niger Delta, even more people moved south, many as a first step to emigration. This situation was encouraged as the government began engaging in "slum clearance" operations that made tens of thousands of people homeless. The city was becoming undone, deliberately, and residents had little time to understand how to resist or transform the situation.



Michael Uwemedimo, Port Harcourt, 2020

That destructuring was fresh in our minds when, returning to Lagos from Port Harcourt, we made a visit to Victor Ehikhamenor's studio in the city's Ikoyi neighbourhood. The connection between his work and the struggles of the residents of the creeks was impossible to ignore, and unsurprising given he'd known the city from his time as a journalist. Its power, however, stemmed first and foremost from its intensity and fluidity. After viewing some of his works-in-progress, Victor suggested we visit a new installation, "Daydream Esoterica," at the Rele Gallery, about a kilometre from his studio. It was not just an "immersive experience" – as so many exhibitions claim to be - but kinetic, alive with colour, emotion, and playful critique. Not long after that, we came across his "Wealth of Nations" installation, which portrayed the bloody price extractivism demanded of ordinary Nigerians amidst the unprecedented wealth it produced. We realised that bringing Victor to Sydney could open up new aesthetic and political horizons across oceans and continents.



Victor Ehikhamenor*, Wealth of Nations,* 2016.

Victor Ehikhamenor's art offers a psychologically and politically immersive tableau of the forces – people, including their relationship to their heritage, their languages and community's history – that define both the landscapes of contemporary Nigeria and the movement of people between Nigeria and Australia, two countries which, although historically, geographically and socio-culturally diverse, share a common experience of British colonialism and the transformation of colonial order into post-independence extractivism. The exhibition is equally an engagement with the fragmented experience of migration, and with moments and places where resistance transmutes, however fraught, into remaking home.

Avoiding a distillation of well-trodden narratives that depict migration as either a problem or a panacea, and the oft-romanticised swing between hope and nostalgia, the exhibition evokes the range of strategies deployed to make home anew where one's presence is often unrecognised, contested and even denied. It pushes the boundaries of the sociological imagination of migration as determined by an impersonal and generalizable mix of push-and-pull factors – be they socio-economic, geopolitical, environmental or even personal – to reclaim migration primarily as a radical act of dissidence, and hence part of a larger strategy of resistance to the long-term effects of colonialism and extractive capitalism even well into the post-colony.



Victor Ehikhamenor, *So Far, So Near,* Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

II. COUNTER-NARRATIVES FROM THE WATERFRONTS: THE DUAL GLASS CASES

While violence, poverty, and marginalisation formed the dominant public archive of Port Harcourt, our fieldwork uncovered an entirely different frequency of urban life. We collaborated closely with the waterfront communities and local activists, running collaborative workshops – where Mark focused on music production and the underground genealogies of youth music cultures, and Lucia led sessions on feminist oral history – to learn from their radical resilience and localised aesthetic strategies.

Our decade-long research project, Towards Collaborative Ontologies, taught us that social justice is a method, not just a mission statement. It demanded that the memory of these marginalised communities be fiercely preserved against official historical erasure. In the exhibition, this collaborative research is physicalized into two glass cases placed at the threshold of the Penelope Gallery. These cases act as a scholarly counter-archive, a tangible constellation of literature, music, and media that grounds and informs Victor Ehikhamenor's larger installations.



Lucia Sorbera leading oral history workshops, 2019.



Mark LeVine leading a music workshop in Port Harcourt, 2019.

The anchor of ***Undoing The City, Making Home*** is composed of three of Ehikhamenor's works. The first one is titled ***Numinous Night*** (2025). In this, Ehikhamenor uses hundreds of black rosaries as a field, with yellow rosaries tracing undulating lines across them.



Victor Ehikhamenor*, Numinous Night*, Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

In his words, "The rosary is an object of prayer and repetition, but I am also interested in its capacity to become a kind of visual language and, in this case, a landscape within a landscape, as in Niger Delta within Nigeria. Repeated across the surface, individual objects lose their singularity and begin to form a larger structure. The black rosaries create a field that can suggest a city at night — dense, difficult to read, seemingly ordered but full of movement. The yellow lines interrupt this field. They wander rather than follow a predetermined grid. The landscape here therefore references the Niger Delta and the oil, aka black gold, that flows through it as well. They become routes, rivers, borders, connections, interruptions. Here, I think about the ways people create their own pathways through systems that were not designed for them."

For Ehikhamenor, cities reflect imagined and enforced ideas of order and the boundaries that constrain them, both territorially and politically. This experience of order is inevitably met, engaged and resisted by the people who move through these spaces daily, with very different motivations, imaginations and agendas. When forced, "They carry their homes with them," which provides the seed for rebuilding and remaking place. Here the function of the rosaries in *Numinous Night* becomes clear as they represent the "multitude" of migrants, of "individual lives gathered into a collective structure, each carrying its own history".



Victor Ehikhamenor*, Numinous Night,* curated by Associate Professor Lucia Sorbera and Professor Mark Levine, Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.



Victor Ehikhamenor, *So Far, So Near,* Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

The work, ***So far, So Near***, comprises an ongoing series of small drawings that Ehikhamenor has made in cities around the world since 2015, particularly in places where bodies of water mark points of arrival and departure such as Port Harcourt and Sydney: "Water is important here because it refuses the stability of the city. A city can draw a boundary on a map, but water has always allowed people to cross boundaries. It carries migrants, traders, refugees, workers, colonisers, exiles and tourists. It can be a route to another life, but it can also be the distance between a person and everything they have known" (Ehikhamenor, 2026). Crucially, they also represent and critique what he terms the "bureaucratic archive" that enables and – more often – constrains migration and belonging.

The third work, ***Fragment of Memories on the move***, collected around the city of Sydney, is made of different used materials like excavated doors, stained-glass windows, wood, pre-used furniture and found objects that hold human and spatial memories. The size and aesthetic of these repurposed material objects represent the often small and fragmented nature of memories on the move. Indelibly incomplete, the archive, and thus this work, represents traces of what remains after displacement has propelled people from their homes, lives and histories.



Victor Ehikhamenor, *Fragment of Memories on the move,* Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

Roots fray as new routes are charted – and as often, improvised. The complex ways individuals and communities search for new places to call home, how they are interrogated and ultimately accepted, all resonate through the dimensionality of these materials, the improvised yet purposeful trajectory of objects, reflecting livelihoods destroyed, dreams deferred yet also futures reimagined. The entirety of the installation is an evocation of the distance between dreams, realities and possible future.

Accompanying and woven into Victor's tripartite installation is a soundscape collage, recorded and arranged by our local collaborator Chicoco Media and the Collaborative Media Advocacy Platform under the direction of Ana Bonaldo, with additional sounds recorded by Niger Delta-based rapper MC Kay and arrangements and mixing by Mark. The 16-and-a-half-minute composition was created by Bonaldo with sounds from the Niger Delta – an eco-acoustic rendering of the region bringing together both underwater and above-ground soundscapes, to the streets and creeks of Port Harcourt. Together, they provide the soundways and auratic power to draw visitors into the spirit and vision of the exhibition. While Port Harcourt today is defined by the unrelenting sonic barrage of a city that literally never sleeps, this soundscape focuses on the quiet moments, when one can hear nature speaking up through the din of overcrowded city life and decimated nature.



MC Kay, Niger Delta.

Finally, the fourth component of this exhibition returns to its origins, comprising two display tables featuring archival documents, books, journals, films, albums and photos belonging to the academic curators and that reflect the various sources consulted in developing the thematic structure. These document the daily struggles and occasional triumphs of residents of the creeks in the crevices of extractivism across several generations. Narrating their journeys and making clear the importance of documenting their experiences as a mechanism of self-generated agency illuminates the grand canvas of Ehikhamenor's installation. The faces, sounds and stories of daily life, which we encountered and learned so much from thanks to the guidance and collaboration of CMAP and its Chicoco initiatives, undiminished by the always present challenges of ceaseless urban place-making, environmental degradation and poverty, concretise the more visceral vibrancy of the installation's multi-faceted work.









Top Right, Left, Bottom left: The Shed, community centre, recording studios, radio station. Chicoco Sound performing, residents relaxing, members dancing, 2026.

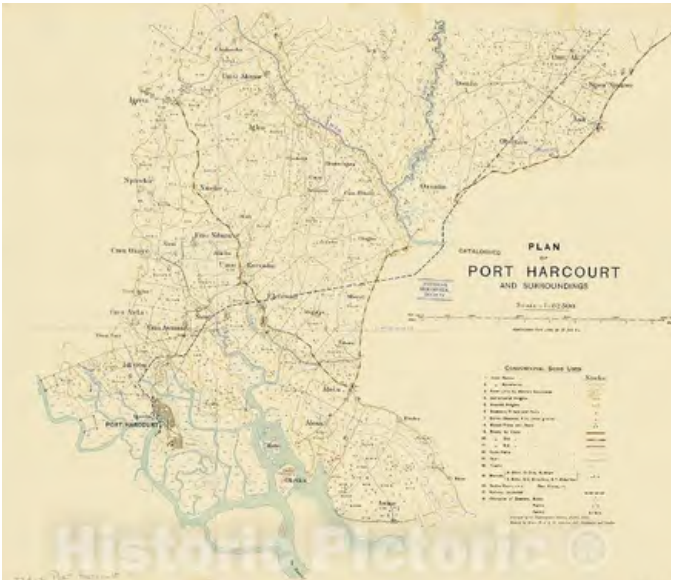
Bottom Right: Case One, *Undoing the City, Making Home,* curated by Associate Professor Lucia Sorbera and Professor Mark LeVine, Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

CASE 1: OIL, VIOLENCE, AND THE HISTORICAL RECORD

The first glass case traces how oil, and the violence that followed it, entered public memory and contributed to shaping it through plays, songs, photojournalism, and films made in Nigeria and abroad. Read together, these physical fragments ask who has been able to tell the story of the Niger Delta, and how. This material reality serves as the direct conceptual foundation for Numinous Night.

Here, the end of local sovereign control of the Delta is visually commemorated by an 1897 photograph of King Ibanichuka of Okrika, who was exiled and imprisoned by the British. A 1915 colonial survey map of Port Harcourt (included below) charts how the British government envisioned the future of the "garden city" as an export hub. The lineage of extraction is here documented by a 1956 corporate photograph of drilling at Oloibiri, marking the commercial dawn of this extractive economy.







Top left: *King Ibanichuka of Okrika*, 1903.

Top right: *Port Harcourt map*, 1915.

Bottom left: *Drilling at Oloibiri*, 1956.

The resulting postcolonial trauma and resistance are captured across decades of creative dissent:

The Literary Dawn:
Wole Soyinka's 1969 *Three Play*s (including The Swamp Dwellers, written in 1958), which captures a Niger Delta village already fractured by floods and the lure of the city on the eve of oil extraction.



The Sonic Protest:
The original 1977 Kalakuta vinyl of Fela Kuti's *Sorrow, Tears and Blood*, which stands as a powerful sonic denunciation of the military rule and corruption of the country's oil boom.



The Activist Voice:
Ken Saro-Wiwa's satirical masterpiece *Prisoners of Jebs* (1988), brings the voice of the executed Ogoni activist directly into our research dialogue.

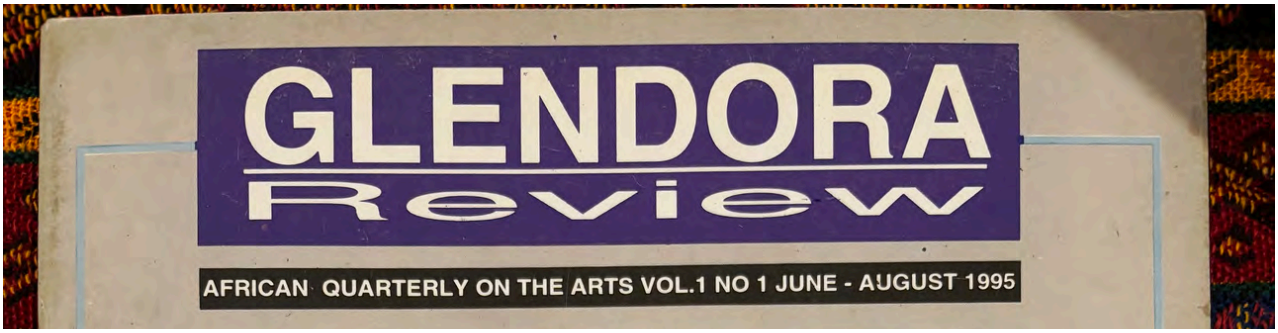
The Cinematic Archive:
Transnational and local cinema, including the Nollywood feature *Liquid Black Gold*, showcases how the environmental destruction of the Delta moved from a local tragedy to a global cinematic theme.



The Historiographical Roots:
The pioneering work of Professor Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, whose books O*ral Tradition and Oral History in Africa* and the *Diaspora and The Izon of the Niger Delta* (in case 2) championed oral tradition as valid historical evidence, successfully challenging Eurocentric colonial historiography.



Ass. Prof. Lucia Sorbera and Professor Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, 2019



Glendora Review, 1995

The Lagos Vanguard: An issue of the influential *Glendora Review*, founded in Lagos in 1995 by Olakunle and Toyin Tejuoso under the brutal Abacha military dictatorship and its crackdown on the press. The journal played the crucial function of connecting artists at home and in exile. Crucially, the 1996 issue opens with "Just Before the Blackout," a text reconstructing the final hours of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the eight other MOSOP environmental activists executed on November 10, 1995, capturing his legendary last words: "Lord take my soul, but the struggle continues."



Glendora Review, 1996

THE LAGOS NEXUS: SANCTUARIES OF MEMORY AND CARE

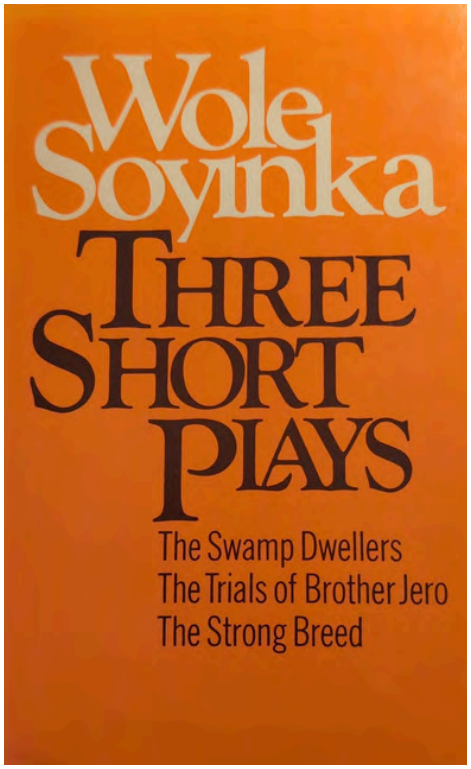
The lineage of these archival objects traces a direct path to our experience in Lagos, a buzzing metropolis of contemporary art spaces and music clubs. At the legendary New Afrika Shrine, the sonic notes of Fela Kuti still pulsed, kept alive by his sons, while the garden is watched over by a statue of "Prof" – Wole Soyinka himself, standing as a permanent emblem of creative and political defiance.



New Afrika Shine, Lagos.



Jazzhole on Awolowo Road, Ikoyi.



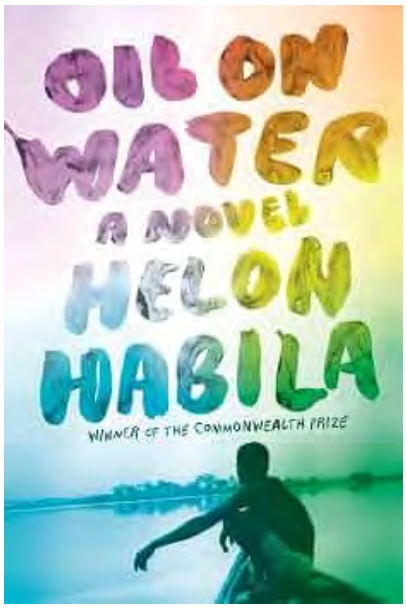
Wole Soyinka, *Three Short Plays,* 1969.

Yet, our transit through the capital required another essential sanctuary of memory: The Jazzhole on Awolowo Road in Ikoyi. Founded by Kunle Tejuoso in 1991, The Jazzhole represents a living archive where time slows down amid wooden shelves packed with literature, rare vinyl records, highlife, and jazz. This space carries a matrilineal genealogy and legacy: it is an offshoot of Glendora Books, the trailblazing independent bookstore chain established by Gbemisola Tejuoso in 1975, which birthed the very Glendora Review preserved in our second exhibition case. For us, it was much more than a research stop; it was a home. We spent hours lost in long, illuminating conversations with Kunle and his wife, Tundun Tejuoso, whose warmth transformed the chaotic rhythm of the megacity into a shared intellectual shelter. Sitting at small wooden tables, fueled by their fabulous egg sandwiches and signature organic carrot cake, we mapped out connections between past and present.

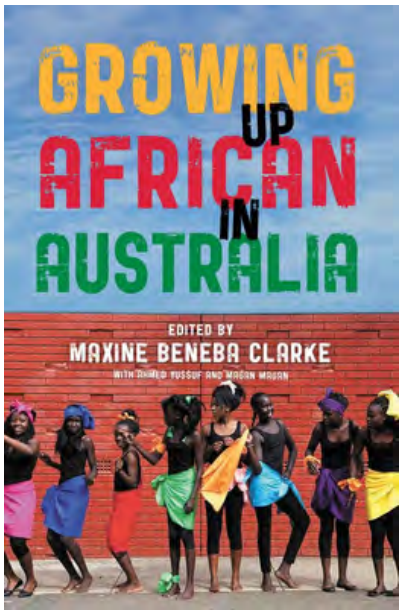
CASE 2: WRITING, ARCHIVING, AND REMAKING HOME

Where official archives fall short, writers, historians, and artists have recorded the history of the Niger Delta, often under censorship or from exile. The second glass case addresses what remains after displacement and how communities build a counter-archive of postcolonial Nigerian history to challenge colonial extractivism. This case provides the direct intellectual framework for Ehikhamenor's global drawings and his sculptural deployment of vintage doors. It celebrates the foundational tools of self-documentation and institutional critique:

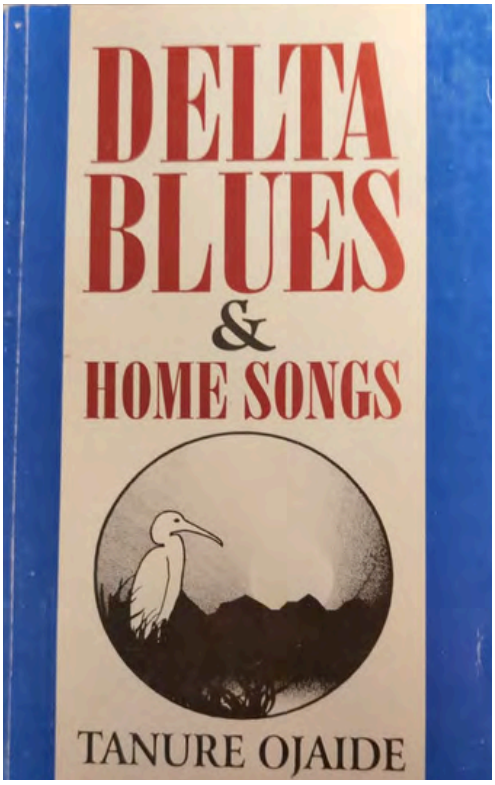
The Literary-Journalistic Record:
Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water*, documenting the increasingly devastated landscape following the 2009 Shell spill, juxtaposed with CMAP's 2009 photographs of armoured vehicles in the creeks (below), documenting the government's violent destruction of informal waterfront neighbourhoods.



The Transnational Diaspora:
An art catalogue from the Morírì Gallery of Contemporary Arts in Port Harcourt, documenting how emerging local artists use contemporary art for environmental action. This is placed in direct dialogue with the 2019 anthology Growing Up African in Australia (edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke), capturing the contemporary Nigerian presence in the Australian cultural fabric.



Reclaiming the Narrative: Chinua Achebe's landmark essay *Home and Exile* (2000), which argues that colonised people must reclaim their own narratives to correct the global "balance of stories." This responsibility of the writer in exile is mirrored in Noo Saro-Wiwa's travelogue *Looking for Transwonderland*, tracing her emotional return to Port Harcourt and the lived memory of her father's sacrifice, and Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, a collection of poetry of protest against the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta.



Visualising the Everyday: Intimate photographs from the waterfront, such as Michael Uwemedimo's "Reading in the Dark" (2020)—featuring the prose of Martha Ereba deciphering sentences under the flickering, fragile light of a Chinese LED lamp and a candle stub. This image documents how local communities refuse to be flattened into victims, instead developing new creative skills to defend and rebuild their environment.



Michael Uwemedimo, *Reading in the Dark,* 2020.



Victor Ehikhamenor, *Fragment of Memories on the move,* Chau Chak Wing Museum, 2026.

Together, the three spaces reflect dynamics that transcend Port Harcourt, the Niger Delta, or any one location, offering a story which, while situated in specific time and place, narrates a universal experience that speaks to the contemporary human condition.

Lucia Sorbera, Mark LeVine and Alia Ardon Sydney, 10 October 2026