Prior to his execution, Ken Saro-Wiwa was a Nigerian writer, an environmental activist, and a member of the ethnic minority of the Ogoni people. His homeland, Ogoniland, situated in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, had been the targeted for the extraction of crude oil since the 1950s by multi-national oil corporations (MNOCs) such as the Royal Dutch Shell Company (Shell, as we know it). As an environmental activist, Saro-Wiwa naturally took issue with the extreme environmental damage the Ogoniland had incurred as a result of the MNOCs continued presence and exploitation of the land’s rich natural oil reserves. In an effort to simultaneously oppose this exploitation by Shell and of the Nigerian government’s refusal to address the issue, Saro-Wiwa initiated the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), a non-violent campaign intended to secure the environmental and humanitarian rights of the Ogoniland and the Ogoni people, respectively. On May 21, 1994 after several years of intense conflict between the MNOCs and the indigenous population of the Niger Delta, Saro-Wiwa and nine other activists of MOSOP were accused of murdering four Ogoni chiefs, for which they were promptly arrested and indicted. Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried by way of a special military tribunal on charges of “incitement to murder.” He was convicted and hanged by General Sani Abacha’s military government on November 10, 1995. In this paper I will detail the Nigerian government’s willingness to make backroom deals with the MNOCs and the resultant hardships of the Niger Delta region. I will also examine Saro-Wiwa’s
activism, the effect his execution had on the structure of civil society in the Niger Delta, and how civil society there continues to operate today. (SLIDE 2)

While I cannot say for certain that Ken Saro-Wiwa was wrongly convicted of his crimes, it is of popular belief that the charges against Saro-Wiwa were “entirely politically motivated and completely groundless,” (Ed Kashi, “About Wiwa v. Shell”), merely the results of a Nigerian military government steeped in corruption and fueled by the payoffs of the even more ethically corrupt MNOCs. Saro-Wiwa’s death was a travesty of justice, but his death was not in vain. Since his execution in 1995, the Niger Delta region has witnessed a proliferation of civil society in the form of ethnic, pan-ethnic, and communal civil groups, youth militant associations, and environmental and civil rights activists—all fighting for what Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP fought for, and more (Augustine Ikelegbe, “Civil society, oil, and conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria”). (SLIDE 3)

In order to give some perspective on the grievances of these civil societies, it is important to look at the economic and political climate of the Niger Delta region and how it has developed since Shell’s discovery of oil in 1958. In 1966, the Nigerian government accrued revenues from Shell’s oil extraction at a rate of 50%. This basically means that the Niger Delta saw 50% of its oil revenue circulated back into the region’s economy during that time. In the 1990s, derivations to the region had dropped to just 3%. It has since marginally recovered, rising to 13% in 1999, but since 1999 it has not budged. According to Joe Sutcliffe, in his report “Militancy in the Niger Delta: Petro-Capitalism and the Politics of Youth,” this qualifies Nigeria as a petro-state, which is essentially a
state whose oil sales account for the vast majority of its revenue, but whose monetary gains from said oil sales find their way only into the wallets of a small, corrupted elite.

This corruption isn’t a well-kept secret, either. While the political and corporate elite build lavish, garrisoned compounds guarded by staggering numbers of military personnel, the region’s infrastructure remains unimproved, and ethnic minorities unfortunate enough to live in the delta states endure extreme poverty. The 9-13 million barrels of oil spilled since 1958 in the Niger Delta have no doubt been leading instigators of the annihilated local fishing economy, which, as claimed by National Geograhpic, was the region’s primary industry until Shell’s discovery of oil in 1958 (National Geographic, “Curse of the Black Gold,” 2007). To put that amount of oil seeping into rivers into perspective, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that lasted 87 days in 2010 spilled a relatively meager 4.9 million barrels of oil. Recall the outcry of the American public and the haste with which we addressed and worked to resolve the issue, but also the toll it took on our country in spite of our best efforts. I can assure you cleanup efforts for that spill were far more extensive than any cleanup efforts in the Niger Delta. Due to the Niger Delta’s ruined environment and shattered way of life, and not to mention the unrestrained discrimination against local ethnic minorities in the workforce, 70% of the six million people in the Niger River Delta are forced to live off of less than US$1 per day (Amnesty International, “Nigeria: Oil, Poverty, and Violence,” 2007). (SLIDE 4)

Considering the deplorable conditions of the Niger Delta region, for which corrupt government officials and exploitative MNOCs are largely responsible, it should come as no surprise that established civil groups have turned from Ken Saro-Wiwa’s initial Ghandian approach and adopted militancy in its place. Militant organizations like
the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have aims similar to those of its father organization, MOSOP, but as a militant group naturally the means by which those aims are achieved differ greatly. Members of MEND frequently employ guerrilla tactics in order to disrupt the operations of and coerce MNOCs and government officials. Among these tactics: repeatedly bombing pipelines in order to trigger an international increase in the cost of oil, taking Shell employees hostage and ransoming them, and stealing oil and selling it on the black market in order to fund further resistance (Global Guerrilas, “Nigerian Evolution,” 2006).

These tactics have raised a number of concerns on behalf of academics well versed on the topic of Niger Delta crisis, and have raised questions of the potential criminality of militant groups under the “greed, not grievance” hypothesis. This hypothesis essentially claims that certain militant groups are using civil and rights activism only as a cover for their true intentions of achieving personal financial gain (Joe Sutcliffe, 2012). To be frank, perhaps there is a bit of truth to the “greed, not grievance” hypothesis, but I don’t buy into it much myself. However, in order for MEND to establish complete legitimacy in the international community and erase concerns that they or any other militant group does mean to use militancy for their own financial gain, it would be wise for MEND to continue working towards unification of all groups. The larger the militant group, the greater the credibility and influence when it comes to dealing with the government and the MNOCs, peacefully or otherwise.

Civil conflict in the Niger Delta hasn’t received half of the international attention that it rightfully deserves. If I had to describe the problem in five words or less, I would call it, “Internationally-ignored, environmentally-induced genocide.” Unless the
international community takes serious action soon, Nigeria could be facing much bigger problems than it already is. MNOCs should be held accountable for their actions, no matter which country those actions have adversely affected. It’s not America’s job alone to democratize nations, but if no one else is going to do it then we can’t simply continue to ignore the problem. A little media coverage of serious ethical corruption could go a long way, especially in America, one of Shell’s top consumers. We cannot forget the people who have given their lives in order to oppose corruption; we cannot let their deaths be in vain. Those who have died and continue to die aren’t statistics—they are people fighting and dying for necessary change. (SLIDE 5)

Ken Saro-Wiwa’s life and literature were intimately intertwined with the oil crisis of the Niger Delta and the plight of his people. He was a passionate man, genuine, self-sacrificing, someone who stood behind a humanitarian effort worthy of mass recognition. Before taking Professor Shetty’s African Literature course, though, the very same course that inspired me to delve into the issues of the Niger Delta, I’m ashamed to say that I’d never heard or even read Saro-Wiwa’s name. Prior to this presentation I’d be willing to bet that some of you, or most of you, hadn’t either. And because of that each of us carries with us a certain amount of guilt. Not a personal guilt, necessarily, but guilt of a universal sort; a guilt that arises from the inadvertent neglect of a fundamental, humanitarian understanding of life, what I would describe as a willingness to close our eyes and block our ears when we are faced with a choice between what is right and what is lucrative or convenient. After today, though, no one here can close his or her eyes to the Niger Delta without assuming that personal guilt we may have been free from previously. We are no
longer ignorant of this tragedy of human history, and therefore we are no longer innocent of its perpetuation.