



# Itineraries of Conflict in Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades*

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**Abstract** This article studies the depiction of indigenous struggles against the grab of minerals, crude oil, and other natural resources by private and government corporations in works such as Arundhati Roy's travel essay "Walking with the Comrades" (2010). Roy's narrative of her journey across the dense forests of Bastar in east-central India re-articulates the significance of this contested environmental space from the perspective of the region's indigenous minorities. Traveling with a troop of indigenous rebels hailing from the Gond, Halba, and Muria communities for more than two weeks, Roy describes their armed struggle to a global English audience. Exploring Roy's role both as an itinerant narrator and a global cultural mediator, the author argues that descriptive accounts of travel through contested zones of extraction can foster a vocabulary of resistance that the author calls an itinerary of conflict. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's conception of the tour as a descriptive approach to space, the author posits the itinerary of conflict as a spatial trope produced in Roy's essay when the writer's embodied travel narrative is inflected by indigenous journeys and spatial practices, such as marches across contested zones and ritual processions to sacred sites. Itineraries of conflict enact a semiotic and political resistance to resource grabs conducted by state agencies and powerful corporations, exemplified by the usurpation of tribal lands rich in iron ore, coal, and other minerals in Chhattisgarh state. Further, itineraries of conflict emphasize the embodied presence of indigenous communities and their activists in areas demarcated for the extraction of minerals, timber, and other resources in the face of continued armed conflict or toxic pollution. More broadly, the author suggests that narratives of conflict over the extraction of natural resources can be studied as the corpus of "resource conflict literature," thus generating a global comparative framework for the study of contemporary indigenous struggles.

**Keywords** environmental justice, extraction, global literature, indigenous studies, natural resource conflict

## Literary Genre in Arundhati Roy's Essays on Bastar

We have run out of new places to conquer, new places to mine, new places to dam. The remaining oil resources are there in places where it is untenable or difficult to get. They are now coming to those most remote places—the Ramu Nickel Mine, the Tar Sands of Alberta . . .

—Winona LaDuke<sup>1</sup>

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In her influential study of imperial travel narratives, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt proposes the notion of the “travelee” to evoke the perspective of “people at the receiving end of empire.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to deconstructing the literary tropes employed by colonial travel writers, Pratt’s landmark book invites us to dwell on the critical potential of travel writing undertaken by people from previously colonized places, a corpus now referred to as postcolonial travel literature. Pratt suggests that postcolonial travel literature can underscore “the position of the people and places travelled to,” thus bringing into view the “neocolonial relationship” between Europe/the US and their remote outposts in the global South.<sup>3</sup> However, the most celebrated works of this genre of travel literature have, so far, produced highly nuanced cultural observations from the perspectives of authors traveling across metropolitan destinations. For instance, among the works that Claire Lindsay describes as a “canon of sorts” within postcolonial travel literature, many depict the postcolonial author as an international traveler, including Caryl Phillips’s *The European Tribe* (1987) and Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul* (2000).<sup>4</sup> While such narratives of travel abroad are important in their own right, I suggest that the perspective of the *travelee*, as construed in Pratt’s work, is more readily available in contemporary texts that depict the displacement of indigenous communities from native lands coveted for their valuable natural resources.<sup>5</sup> It is in this context that I study Arundhati Roy’s essay “Walking with the Comrades” (2010), which recounts the Booker Prize-winning author’s travels through the forests of Bastar in east-central India, as she accompanies several indigenous rebels engaged in armed struggle against a nexus of corporate mining interests and government security forces.<sup>6</sup>

As the epigraph above suggests, in the words of prominent Anishinaabe activist Winona LaDuke, we live in a moment in which indigenous communities around the world are being encroached by multinational corporations looking to extract mineral ores, crude oil, timber, and other natural resource commodities. Despite the collapse of major European empires in the middle of the twentieth century, the economic conditions created by structural adjustment programs in the past three decades have enabled the effective usurpation of indigenous lands and minerals by metropolitan power

1. Epigraph excerpted from Christopher McLeod’s documentary film *Standing on Sacred Ground* (2013).

2. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

3. Here I draw from Pratt’s reading of Alejo Carpentier’s essay “On the American Marvelous Real” (1949). Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 225–29.

4. Lindsay, “Travel Writing and Postcolonial Studies,” 31.

5. For instance, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan argue that postcolonial accounts of travel abroad explore the author’s “conflicted cultural origins.” See Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters*, 23.

6. Roy’s essay “Walking with the Comrades” first appeared in March 2010 in a special issue of *Outlook*, a print and online magazine based in India. The passages cited here are taken from the trade paperback volume Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*.

centers once again.<sup>7</sup> Amid these global circumstances, indigenous journeys in their various typologies—in the course of displacement, reorganization in struggle, or day-to-day activities—are especially relevant to what Edward Said has called “a serious study of imperialism and culture.”<sup>8</sup> Such indigenous journeys taken as a prominent feature of Roy’s essay, and as a recurring element in global literature and media, are the central concern of my study. Whereas indigenous mobility and spatial practices have been largely ignored in the genre of postcolonial literature, they are to be found more reliably in narratives that address conflicts arising from the extraction of natural resources. As such, I read Roy’s essay “Walking with the Comrades” as an example of a genre that I call *resource conflict literature*. I use this term here to refer to a growing body of texts about indigenous struggles against the grab of natural resources by large corporations or state-run development agencies.<sup>9</sup> Within the context of global literature and media in English, Roy’s essays in the collection *Walking with the Comrades* (2011) are part of a growing corpus of works that depict neocolonial conflicts over the extraction of valuable resources like crude oil, mineral ores, land, or timber. A few other examples of texts in this genre include Abdelrahman Munif’s novel *Cities of Salt* (1984), Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010), and Christopher McLeod’s documentary film *Standing on Sacred Ground* (2013). Broadly, we can think of *resource conflict literature* as a genre of literature and media that draws attention to land grabbing, rapid deforestation, toxic waste dumping, and other unethical practices of the globalized oil and mineral sector.

Roy’s essays in *Walking with the Comrades* describe India’s indigenous or *adivasi* people as travelees whose towns and villages have been encroached on by multinational mineral companies and state-backed armed forces.<sup>10</sup> Since 2005, at least 300,000 people from across 644 *adivasi* villages in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state have been severely affected by atrocities committed by Salwa Judum, a government-supported vigilante group acting to vacate mineral-rich lands.<sup>11</sup> By 2007, nearly 50,000

7. Since the 1980s, policies imposing rapid economic liberalization in developing countries were attached to conditionalities in loans made by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Foreign investments in the oil and mining sectors of developing countries, resulting from these policies, have contributed to undermining the democratic processes, per Stiglitz and other scholars. See Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, 72. See also Giles, “Structural Adjustment.”

8. Said asks whether “the literary-cultural establishment as a whole has declared the serious study of imperialism and culture off limits.” See Said, *Orientalism*, 13.

9. My use of the term *resource conflict literature* is an original contribution in calling attention to a body of literature and media that addresses conflicts between minority communities living close to a resource-rich area and external powers acting through state, private, and multinational agencies. The term *resource conflict* appears in many discussions of natural resources management, but my own approach to it is discussed in more detail below.

10. Given its prominence in Roy’s text, I use the term *adivasi* in speaking about the indigenous peoples of India. The term has been used by activists for many decades and is steadily gaining currency in academia. Even though *adivasi* translates literally as “first inhabitant” in Hindi, it does not necessarily imply a history without migration or an identity preexisting the arrival of British colonial scholars. See Kela, “Adivasi and Peasant,” 504.

11. Kashyap, Becker, and Ganguly, *Being Neutral Is Our Biggest Crime*, 8.

people were forcefully relocated into makeshift camps operated by paramilitary groups, and 65,000 more fled to adjoining states.<sup>12</sup> In 2009 government security forces launched a broad-ranging military attack—referred to as Operation Green Hunt by the news media—targeting the “Naxalite” rebels opposed to the expansion of mining in Bastar’s thick forest belt.<sup>13</sup> Operation Green Hunt marked the deployment of several national defense units against purported insurgents in the predominantly tribal region of southern Chhattisgarh, including the Border Security Force, the Armed Border Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, and a unit of the Central Reserve Police Force specially trained in jungle warfare.<sup>14</sup> An estimated 2,177 people were killed in 2009 and 2010 as a result of the conflict, with 672 of these fatalities reported in Chhattisgarh alone.<sup>15</sup> Roy connects the Indian government’s military crackdown in Bastar to the Chhattisgarh state government’s concurrent auctioning of mining concessions to multinational companies to boost the extraction of iron ore, bauxite, and “twenty eight other precious mineral resources, including uranium, limestone, and dolomite.”<sup>16</sup> By presenting adivasi resistance to the takeover of their forests and farmlands in the context of resource grabs by government agencies and private corporations, Roy’s essays portray indigenous activists and Naxalite insurgents as “resource rebels.”<sup>17</sup>

In using the term *resource conflict* in a global context to denote native resistance to prolonged low-intensity violence by a nexus of mineral corporations and security forces, I foreground indigenous efforts to maintain access to nearby natural resources as a means of livelihood. In India’s Bastar region as well as other frontiers of conflict over mineral extraction, native claims to “resources” resonate with adivasi demands to secure their access to *jal, jangal, aur jameen* (water, forest, and land).<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, my emphasis on access to resources as a means of livelihood does not foreclose native rights to revenues from the sale of minerals. Indigenous struggles in resource frontiers around the world routinely claim a share of the proceeds derived from the state’s extraction of minerals or assert the right to decide how and where resource exploitation

12. Kashyap, Becker, and Ganguly, *Being Neutral Is Our Biggest Crime*, 8.

13. The term *Naxalite* here indicates a connection to the present-day leftist insurgency in Chhattisgarh and its adjoining states. *Naxalite* is used interchangeably with *Maoist* in India to refer to members of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), a political party umbrella with active political organizers and armed troops in several parts of the country. For a brief history of leftist organization within the tribal peoples of Chhattisgarh, see Prasad, “Political Economy of Maoist Violence,” 11.

14. Sethi, “Green Hunt.”

15. South Asia Terrorism Portal, “Fatalities in Left-wing Extremism,” [www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data\\_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal05-11.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal05-11.htm) (accessed February 29, 2016).

16. Roy points out the suspicious timing of the paramilitary offensive, occurring only months after the Chhattisgarh government signed iron ore concessions with steel-mining conglomerates Tata and Essar in April 2005. See Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 24, 79.

17. Al Gedicks uses the term *resource rebels* to denote indigenous peoples who oppose the theft of mineral resources by large corporations. See Gedicks, *Resource Rebels*.

18. The slogan, used by adivasi activists all over India, is attributed to the Gond/Koitur leader Komaram Bheem. See Poyam, “Komaram Bheem.”

occurs.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the term *resource conflict* is informed by the Ogoni leader Ken Saro-Wiwa's demand for "resource control," that is, the Ogoni people's movement to determine the extent of crude oil production in their homeland in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> Further, "conflict" over natural resources may manifest in multiple forms, including civil litigation, protest marches, public demonstrations, or armed rebellions against private corporations and state entities. Hence, *resource conflicts* are a complex social-material phenomenon involving local and transnational actors, such as mining corporations, government agencies, native struggle committees, armed rebel groups, nongovernmental organizations, private security outfits, intergovernmental financial organizations, civil societies, news reporters, academics, and so on.<sup>21</sup> Since oil and mining operations increasingly rely on security forces to reshape vast tracts of resource-rich land into insulated mineral enclaves, native resistance to the usurpation of their resources often devolve into situations of "prolonged low-level violence and insecurity."<sup>22</sup>

### Indigenous Journeys within Itineraries of Conflict

Roy's essay "Walking with the Comrades" features her travels on foot through a stretch of the Dandakaranya forest in east-central India, a region encompassing Chhattisgarh and adjacent states that has been at the heart of a leftist insurgency against the nation-state through most of the twenty-first century.<sup>23</sup> The spatial narrative of Roy's journey alongside Naxalite adivasi cadres in Bastar liberates a host of semiotic possibilities, undermining the culturally dominant processes of geographical sense-making prescribed by the nation-state. Invited by Naxalite adivasi rebels to their base in the middle of the Dandakaranya forest, Roy joins one of their troops in a single-file foot march for two weeks, detailing some of the day-to-day aspects of the cadres' struggle. The modality of walking-in-the-forest in Roy's account engenders an embodied narrative that reveals the contested areas of Chhattisgarh's Bastar region from the perspective of indigenous minorities. By describing the comrades' experiences of marching through the forest in an episodic manner, Roy's narrative itinerary fosters their own spatial sense-

19. My use of the term *resource frontier* is a slight modification of the term *commodity frontier*, used by Felix Padel and Samarendra Das to refer to mineral-rich areas of Odisha as frontiers of global capitalism. See Padel and Das, *Out of This Earth*, 14–15.

20. Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day*, 69, 149.

21. Here I build on Michael Watts's concept of the "oil complex," which considers ideological pressures acting in multiple ways on crude oil resources in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. See Watts, "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate?" 643.

22. James Ferguson underscores the proliferation of "intensively exploited mineral enclaves" in resource-rich areas of the third world, such as the Malongo complex in Cabinda region of Western Africa. See Ferguson, "Seeing like an Oil Company," 379.

23. I use the term *east-central India* to refer to the geographical space of resource conflict in the central forest belt of India, broadly including Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. Caleb Johnston uses this term in his study of denotified tribes (DNT) activism in West Bengal. See Johnston, "Political Art of Patience."

making, while drawing on the essay form's capacity to "think in fragments [while also] moving through the fissures of fragmented thinking."<sup>24</sup> Roy's modernist travel essay is continually inflected by the indigenous rebels' activities as they march through a section of the Dandakaranya forest, producing a spatial literary device that I call an *itinerary of conflict*. In the context of the mining conflict in Bastar, Roy's writing produces the act of "walking in the jungle" as shorthand for a wide array of experiences embodied by adivasi cadres. What I call an "itinerary of conflict" is inherent in the physical movements of the itinerant figure across an indigenous homeland or a resource frontier. A pertinent concern in Roy's essay, which I get to a little bit later in this article, is the clearly expressed distinction between her position as a nonindigenous outsider writing in English and an insurgent adivasi subjectivity largely articulated thus far through songs, poems, plays, and slogans in the regional languages of east-central India.

The travel narrative of Roy-as-narrator is itself shaped by multiple indigenous trajectories, including the author's description of cultural troupes walking across the forest to attend the centenary celebrations of the Bhumkal, the famous adivasi rebellion against British colonial rule in 1910. Roy's presence as a traveler/narrator in the jungle also serves a crucial mediating function for narrating the accounts of women cadres who joined the Naxalite insurgency after their native villages were raided by the Salwa Judum. Roy's self-aware prose initially resembles a travel essay, as she reflects on her trip from her home in New Delhi to Bastar. Roy as the itinerant narrator takes the bus from New Delhi to Dantewada, a town in Chhattisgarh. At the bus stand in Dantewada, she recalls a candid conversation with the town's police chief during an earlier visit, thus reflecting her social privilege as a recognized author. After traveling alone to the Danteshwari temple, a local landmark, Roy meets two young scouts and follows them to the edge of the forest. Later, Roy-as-narrator joins a rebel troop in their march deep into the woods, as they eventually meet with another group of comrades. As the essay progresses, Roy's prose takes on the qualities of literary journalism and the political pamphlet, with her narrative register varying between description, storytelling, and polemic. From a perspective akin to that of an immersed journalist, Roy describes the cadres of her troop as they pause briefly in the middle of the forest to mingle with members of another passing troop, before continuing their foot march to the venue of the Bhumkal centenary within the Dandakaranya forest. Thus, Roy's writing negotiates with the form of the travel essay in order to accommodate the viewpoint of her fellow travelers and their day-to-day activities in response to the unfolding conflict in Bastar.

By describing her Naxalite interlocuters' path-making practices within the forest, Roy foments an embodied vocabulary of resistance that I study here as the *itinerary of conflict*. In one instance of Roy's description, she recounts walking in the forest in the dark to avoid being spotted by armed military and police forces. Her self-reflexive style of drawing attention to her own embodied presence in the forest is relevant here, in

24. Adorno, Hullot-Kentor, and Will, "Essay as Form," 164.

light of her positionality as a nonindigenous narrator. She writes, “We’re walking in pitch darkness and dead silence. I’m the only one using a torch, pointing down so that all I can see in its circle of light are Comrade Kamla’s bare heels in her scuffed, black chappals. . . . It turns out to be a long walk.”<sup>25</sup> Referring to the group collectively as “we,” Roy tries to accommodate the troop’s point of view into her own narrative of the journey. At the same time, Roy notes being physically challenged in the course of the “long walk,” thus drawing attention to her bodily presence as well as her status as an outsider among the Naxalite comrades. Hardly keeping pace with Comrade Kamla, even with the aid of a flashlight, Roy indicates her inability to fully describe the troop’s spatial point of view. Roy’s act of shining the flashlight on Comrade Kamla’s scuffed “bare heels” in this passage also furnishes a metaphor for the arbitrary viewpoint of the author, through which the labor of Kamla’s struggle is depicted for a diverse global audience.

What emerges from Roy’s essay is the crucial role of an itinerant *travelee* in underscoring the embodied presence and the sociopolitical aspirations of indigenous communities in the contested frontiers of resource extraction in various parts of the world. The figure of the itinerant *travelee* recurs in contemporary texts as characters and intermediaries who traverse unique paths, often tracing the routes of a sacred pilgrimage, a protest march, or a ritual procession. As I argue, itineraries of conflict provide us a conceptual key for the study of *resource conflict literature*, recurring as a spatial trope that informs the narrative with the *travelee*’s dynamic relationship to the contested land. While Roy’s essay clearly demarcates the distinction between the subjectivity of the narrator and that of the indigenous *travelees*, such a distinction may not be available in other works of *resource conflict literature*. For instance, the itinerary of conflict in Munif’s novel *Cities of Salt* (1984) occurs as the bedouin clan leader Miteb al-Hathal’s wanderings across the oil-boom towns, after he is displaced from his oasis hometown of Wadi al-Uyoun. Similarly, in Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010), a journalist from the city of Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta region visits rural indigenous communities of the delta that have been ravaged by rampant oil extraction. Thus, the narratives of *resource conflict* may appear in any number of diverse typologies across media forms like feature film, photo series, prose memoirs, or investigative news reports.

### The Author as a Global Cultural Mediator

An outstanding subtext of Roy’s essays is that she does not hail from adivasi tribes—such as Gond, Halba, Dorla, or Muria—that have been agitating against the government’s push to expand the extraction of mineral resources from their homelands. Referring to Roy’s earlier essay on adivasi struggles, “The Greater Common Good” (1999), a few established scholars of postcolonial studies label the author’s voice as culturally

25. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 95.

inauthentic.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, scholars like Rob Nixon characterize Roy's work in the same essay as an act of mediation between a global audience and India's minority communities.<sup>27</sup> I explore this debate regarding authorial mediation briefly, since it is broadly relevant to resource conflict literature. In "Walking with the Comrades," Roy's self-reflexive gestures toward her celebrity and urban lifestyle in New Delhi emphasize that her portrayal of the Naxalite insurgency does not stand in for the entire "bandwidth of resistance movements" against corporate mining in India.<sup>28</sup> Even in Roy's account of traveling through the forest, her social status as a celebrated author remains in view, often in relation to interlocutors like Comrade Maase, whom she describes as a reader of her work.<sup>29</sup>

Roy's interlocutors also "speak" through the circumstances of her travel essay. For instance, her Naxalite hosts schedule her visit to their base in the Dandakaranya forest to coincide with the centenary celebrations of Bhumkal.<sup>30</sup> At the start of Roy's essay "Walking with the Comrades," she recounts "waiting for months" to hear back about the timing of her visit with the Naxalites, finally receiving her invitation as a "terse type-written note slipped under my door."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Roy indicates that her account of the Bhumkal centenary's festivities owes significantly to the organization of her journey by her Naxalite interlocutors. The author's journey takes on an additional level of significance when we consider that her itinerary through the jungle follows adivasi cadres traveling to Bastar to participate in the Bhumkal centenary.<sup>32</sup> The Naxalite valorization of the Bhumkal rebellion of the Koya people is consistent with their celebration of adivasi revolts against British colonialism, including the Santhal rebellion of 1855 and the Munda uprising of 1889.<sup>33</sup>

26. Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 53, 72. See also Huggan, "Greening Postcolonialism"; and Guha, "Arun Shourie of the Left"; and Omvedt, "Open Letter to Arundhati Roy."

27. Roy addresses the diversity of demands and modes of operation in adivasi movements, referring to "a bandwidth of resistance movements fighting an assault on adivasi homelands." See Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 209.

28. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 156, 171.

29. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 62.

30. Here, the indigenous organizers' collaboration with agents of global media is a transnational exchange in itself. As Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih argue, "minority cultures are part of our transnational moment, not a reified or segregated pocket of cultures and mores waiting to be selectively incorporated into what qualifies as global or transnational." Lionnet and Shih, "Introduction," 7.

31. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 37.

32. Bhumkal evokes Bastar's history as a princely state from 1323 to 1947. After India's independence, the region of Bastar remained an undivided administrative district in Madhya Pradesh state until 1998, when it was divided into smaller districts named Bastar and Dantewada. These two districts are part of present-day Chhattisgarh, a state formed in 2000. For a history of Bastar and Bhumkal, see Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, 79.

33. It's worth noting that Roy and several other writers reject the idea of a discrete separation between adivasi people and leftist rebels, citing that the Naxalite insurgency in the east-central region has been peopled predominantly by its tribal populace. See Navlakha, "Days and Nights in the Heartland."



In *Walking with the Comrades*, Roy's self-referential prose style and description of her own experiences in the resource frontier are particularly relevant because her authorial persona has become a topic of academic debate in the last two decades. Citing Roy's nonindigenous origin and her authorial celebrity, influential scholars like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have argued that Roy's privileged status as a "cosmopolitan elite" makes her an unfit "representative" of tribal movements in India.<sup>34</sup> Huggan and Tiffin argue that Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good" appears to hijack the voice behind Narmada Bachao Andolan, the adivasi struggle against the damming of the Narmada River. The criticism of Roy's writing by Huggan and Tiffin resonates with the larger unease in Western academia regarding the overrepresentation of the elite third world voices, a concern that frequently manifests through a Marxist analysis of the author's biography. In addition to the scholars' concern with Roy's biography, it is their overreliance on the notion of representation that presents a pertinent issue of methodology. Reading Roy as a representative of Indian people, Huggan and Tiffin conflate a perceived paucity of adivasi voices in global discourse with a shortcoming in Roy's writing style.

Huggan and Tiffin seem surprisingly at ease while comparing the irreducible roles played by two individual postcolonial authors. The scholars contrast Roy's authorship with that of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian author who wrote extensively about the Ogoni people's campaign to protect their Niger Delta homeland from oil leaks and resource grabs. Huggan and Tiffin argue that Saro-Wiwa offers a better example of representative writing since he writes on behalf of the Ogoni people as an Ogoni himself. However, placing Saro-Wiwa as a model author of indigenous literature is not as benign as it initially appears. First, it ignores the fact that the discourse of indigeneity has been in flux over the years, with communities in many parts of the world still agitating for recognition. In contrast to Saro-Wiwa's indigenous heritage being taken as incontrovertible fact, the Nigerian author was writing at a time when critics were still questioning whether the idea of indigeneity could be applied to any people in Africa. Saro-Wiwa's own writing in English about the Ogoni's history of marginalization played a crucial role in establishing the legibility of indigenous identities in the Niger Delta, as Susan Comfort and others have noted.<sup>35</sup> Second, we need not assume that representation is the only form of cultural mediation that occurs in global or postcolonial discourse. Roy's strategic contributions in bringing global attention and legibility to adivasi struggles does not necessarily constitute an act of representation. If Nixon underlines Roy's cultural work as a "translator" of the diverse aspects of Narmada Bachao Andolan for the lay audience, we can also conceptualize other modes of postcolonial authorship

34. Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 53, 72. See also Huggan, "Greening Postcolonialism."

35. Comfort, "Struggle in Ogoniland," 237–39. See also Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 110–11; and Watts, "Sinister Political Life," 126–27.

and mediation.<sup>36</sup> Further, there is no inherent benefit in sidelining the considerable gains made by nonindigenous activists like Medha Patkar and Mahasweta Devi for adivasi rights in India over the years.<sup>37</sup> Their respective roles as cultural mediators and political activists are, at the very least, worthy of deeper academic investigation.

### The Itinerary of Conflict as a Semiotic Function

“Walking with the Comrades” draws attention to the semiotic function of an itinerary of conflict that allows a resource frontier to be described again and redefined from an indigenous minority’s perspective. Itineraries of conflict depict the lived exchanges of indigenous peoples that enact a semiotic reappropriation of the resource frontier, often in opposition to the definition offered by mining corporations or government agencies. Taking Michel de Certeau’s conception of walking as an embodied interaction with space, I posit that itineraries of conflict can take on the semiotic functions of subverting dominant sociocultural ideas associated with a place and positing the minority community’s responses to them.<sup>38</sup> De Certeau conceives “the tour” as a descriptive approach to space that can transgress the fixed sociocultural boundaries conveyed by an official map. Underlying this idea is de Certeau’s view of description itself as a “culturally creative act,” one that can authorize new relationships to a place. For de Certeau, the transgressive function of a “tour” is illustrated by ritual processions led by *festiales*—priests of ancient Rome—across frontier territories before the start of a war.<sup>39</sup> De Certeau doesn’t dwell on the fact that *festiales* were often followed by military troops on such ritual tours. His argument focuses on the creation of semiotic possibilities through the *festiales*’ physical movement in space, rather than on the takeover of frontier lands by force. In a like manner, Roy’s account of the adivasi cadres’ itinerary through the forest underscores the semiotic rearticulation of their relationship to nearby natural resources.

Following de Certeau’s notion of the embodied tour’s capacity to subvert the state’s arbitrary view of space, we can view itineraries of conflict in contrast to government-issued maps of resource frontiers. Roy’s itinerary in the essay pushes back against the nation-state’s geological accounting of east-central India’s minerals, in survey reports like the *The East Coast Bauxite Deposits of India* (1979).<sup>40</sup> The geographical construction of predominantly tribal areas of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand by postindependence India as “a peripheral space for natural resource extraction” has remained

36. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 156, 171.

37. Medha Patkar is recognized as the spearhead of Narmada Bachao Andolan since its start in the early 1980s. See Ghosh, “We Shall Drown,” 76. Mahasweta Devi’s long-standing contributions toward rights activism for denotified adivasi tribes (DNTs) is discussed by Johnston. See Johnston, “Political Art of Patience,” 1268.

38. De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 120–23.

39. De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 120.

40. This prominent survey was used by the state of Orissa (now Odisha) to lease mines to multinational companies. See Padel and Das, *Out of This Earth*, 59–60.

consistent with British colonial attitudes toward the region as a backwoods source of coal and timber.<sup>41</sup> As several scholars point out, the formation of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand as smaller administrative states, by separating these mineral-rich regions from larger states, was precipitated immediately after neoliberal reforms devolving mine-licensing powers from federal to state government in 2000.<sup>42</sup> Although such drastic reduction of government oversight may have boosted the influx of Foreign Direct Investment into India's east-central states, the resulting model of extractive industrialization does little to improve the living standards of the region's masses, as Sunila Kale points out.<sup>43</sup>

The act of walking in the resource frontier of Bastar can proliferate into “a swarming activity of procedures,” against the impulse of state authorities to surveil and control.<sup>44</sup> As discussed above, the activity of walking through the forest in Roy's essay recalls an embodied process of meaning-making through the fragmentary vantage points of Comrade Kamla and other rebel cadres. The dexterity of Kamla and her troop members at marching through the forest in the night, Roy suggests, reveals their familiarity with the terrain as well as their affective connections to native land. By tracing such “operations of walking” through the forest, Roy recounts an experience of space trained on what de Certeau calls “the act itself of passing by.”<sup>45</sup> If de Certeau draws from the semiotic significance of the festiales to comment on the urban spatial practices of “walking in the city,” my own analysis of Roy's essay focuses on spatial practices occurring in the dense forests of east-central India. But even within the forested terrain of Bastar, the Naxalites' activities are surveilled by high-tech aerial imagery captured through helicopters, drones, and satellites.<sup>46</sup> The nation-state's uneven presence in the predominantly tribal areas of Chhattisgarh—strong in terms of security forces and sparse in terms of social institutions—is aptly historicized by Michael Spacek, who studies the social construction of “insurgent spaces” in east-central India.<sup>47</sup> With regard to the adivasi cadres' own armed mobilization as a mode of occupying contested spaces, Priyamvada Gopal notes aptly that Roy explores the Naxalites' practice of “revolutionary violence” as a means of self-invention in the face of unmitigated suppression by the state. Gopal makes this point by reading Roy's “Walking with the Comrades” alongside Frantz Fanon's essay “On Violence.”<sup>48</sup>

41. Spacek, “Revolutionary Maoism,” 615.

42. Along with Michael Spacek, Jason Miklian and Stuart Corbridge also discuss this issue. See Spacek, “Revolutionary Maoism,” 619; and Miklian, “Political Ecology of War,” 568; and Corbridge “Continuing Struggle,” 56, 69.

43. Kale, “Democracy and the State,” 249.

44. De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 96.

45. De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

46. Agarwal, *Third Dimension*.

47. Spacek, “Revolutionary Maoism,” 621.

48. Gopal, “Concerning Maoism,” 123.

Another semiotic intervention is undertaken by Roy's essay in its use of modernist and self-reflexive prose to impart a degree of global legibility to the struggle of Naxalite adivasi rebels, in the face of Indian national security propaganda that characterizes them as "senselessly violent, bloodthirsty insurgents."<sup>49</sup> Roy's modernist prose—internationally acclaimed in her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997)—weaves her interviews with individual Naxalite cadres alongside extracts from Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry and the United Nation's Geneva Conventions.<sup>50</sup> In characterizing Roy's writing as modernist, I seek to highlight the way in which her essay calls attention to itself as a constructed aesthetic object, exposing its own arbitrary point of view. This self-reflexive style serves to expose the limits of the author's subjective views in her discussion of Bastar's adivasi rebellion for a mass audience. Roy's self-reflexive prose can be seen as the equivalent of the visual technique that Garnet C. Butchart calls "redoubling" in the context of documentary cinema, referring to shots that are constructed to purposefully reveal the video camera or other equipment of filmmaking.<sup>51</sup> Wrought in an eminently literary fashion, Roy's creative nonfiction writing in "Walking with the Comrades" can be seen as an instance of "planetary modernism" following Susan Stanford Friedman's exposition of this aesthetic.<sup>52</sup> While recent scholarship by Susie O'Brien places Roy's essay as a work of "critical realism," O'Brien also refers to the playful, awkward, or repetitive phrases in the author's writing, a quality some readers find self-indulgent. These displays of "extreme vanity," which have a jarring quality ill-suited to immersive reading, are part of what I dwell on here as the prose's self-reflexive style.<sup>53</sup>

The semiotic aspects of Roy's essay also encompass the affective and spiritual dimensions of adivasi belonging to their homeland, with the itinerary of conflict signifying the space of the Dandakaranya forest from the point of view of Dorla, Muria, or Halba rebels. Cultural performances at the centenary celebrations of Bhumkal—described by Roy in great detail—honor the legacy of the tribal leader Gundadhur, the hero of the Bhumkal rebellion of 1910. Evoking Bastar as the ancestral homeland of east-central India's tribal peoples, performers also connect the historical rebellion with the present-day struggles of adivasi communities. In addition to adivasi men adorned in traditional garb posing as the legendary Gundadhur, colorful mascots dancing with the crowd establish a continuity between "evil white colonizers," played by men wearing colorful paper hats, and the contemporary "bad mining man," portrayed by men with helmets and dark glasses.<sup>54</sup> In a play titled "Story of the Blood Hunt," performers on stage enact the struggle of displaced tribal villagers trying to reunite with loved ones after their home is razed by the Salwa Judum militia.<sup>55</sup>

49. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 59, 22.

50. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 137, 144.

51. Butchart, "Camera as Sign," 682.

52. Friedman, "Planetary," 476.

53. O'Brien, "Edgework of the Clerk," 190, 202–03.

54. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 115–16.

55. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 115.

Roy's account of the Bhumkal festivities explores ideas of belonging on the basis of affective bonds or spiritual value, irrespective of actual possibilities for returning to native homelands. In this sense, itineraries of conflict serve to reclaim a "strata of consciousness" bound up with a landscape conceived as a palimpsest, to borrow a turn of phrase from Meron Benvenisti.<sup>56</sup> By projecting the celebration grounds in the middle of the Dandakaranya as the site of the historic Bhumkal rebellion, adivasi performances foster affective connections to homeland that may be repressed in the conditions of displacement.<sup>57</sup> Roy discusses the centenary celebrations by Naxalite cadres and ordinary adivasi peoples as an assertion of their right to live happily, without fear of repression and displacement. In the author's description of group dances at the centenary, she emphasizes the affective dimensions of the performances. She also stresses that the cultural performances are not simply driven by Naxalite party rhetoric, but are also shaped by traditional adivasi practices of song and dance. The author reinforces this point by describing performers wearing tribal headgear, playing traditional drums, and drinking mahua liquor. She writes:

The sound of drums becomes deafening. Gradually, the crowd begins to sway. And then it begins to dance. They dance in little lines of six or seven, men and women separate, with their arms around each other's waists. Thousands of people. This is what they've come for. For this. Happiness is taken very seriously here, in the Dandakaranya forest. People will walk for miles, for days together to feast and sing, to put feathers in their turbans and flowers in their hair, to put their arms around each other and drink mahua and dance through the night.<sup>58</sup>

In the scene above, the author shifts focus from individual dancers to the "crowd," highlighting the celebrants' collective aspirations toward a contested homeland. Using impressionistic phrases like "sea of people" to describe the performers, she ironizes her own role as an observer, while also stressing the sheer scale of the ongoing struggle. The notion of "being happy" as evinced by dancing and feasting in Roy's account emphasizes dimensions of the adivasi travelers' well-being that are often eclipsed in narratives of conflict.

As in Roy's essays, itineraries of conflict in other works of *resource conflict literature* enable indigenous *travelers* to explicate the cultural, ecological, or spiritual values of a place from their own vantage point. In other words, itineraries of conflict discursively reclaim lands that have been demarcated by corporate or government authorities as sites fit for strip-mining, oil drilling, or dam construction. For instance, Christopher

56. Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscapes*, 1.

57. Here I build on Rob Nixon's formulation of the displacement of indigenous peoples by resource development projects as "an official landscape forcibly imposed on a vernacular one." My own study underlines indigenous acts of imagination that resist displacement and reclaim contested landscapes. See Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 17.

58. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 114.

McLeod's documentary film *Standing on Sacred Ground* features the journey of the indigenous Altai shaman Maria Amanchina from her home to the site of a proposed natural gas pipeline in the Ukok Plateau of southwestern Siberia. Amanchina's foot journey reiterates the plateau's significance as the burial mound (*kurgan*) of the Ukok Princess, a native deity. Within such spatial itineraries, indigenous activists and community members can reiterate ideas of belonging and native identity in response to the day-to-day conditions of an unfolding situation of conflict. Responding to various degrees of precariousness to displacement or armed violence, embodied itineraries rearticulate indigenous identities and rights-to-land in a context-specific manner.

### **Embodied Presence in Itineraries of Conflict**

In Roy's essays, the act of "walking in the jungle" becomes an experiential shorthand for a wide array of embodied experiences (both past and future) that respond to the Indian state's repressive security measures throughout the east-central region. By focusing on the willingness of thousands of people to travel by foot through the Dandakaranya forest for days to attend the Bhumkal centenary, Roy's description offers a measure of the sociopolitical resilience and the affective motivations uniting the diverse tribal peoples of Bastar. Comrade Raju explains to Roy that several nonmilitant party members as well as tribal villagers "walk for days together to come together for the celebration."<sup>59</sup> Such pedestrian itineraries become a recurring referent in Roy's essay, offering not just fragmentary experiences of place and time, but also an ideological value that may not be translatable from the comrades' movements into other cultural forms.

The itinerary of conflict in Roy's essay is also phenomenological in the sense that it describes east-central India as a site of the embodied struggles of indigenous women. The Naxalite cadres who walk across Chhattisgarh and adjoining states through the Dandakaranya jungle share personal histories of their struggle in conversation with Roy. In their interviews with Roy, Comrades Laxmi and Padma share their narratives of surviving vigilante attacks and inhumane police torture. Laxmi recounts that her native village of Jojo was burned down by Salwa Judum, prompting her to join the military wing of the Maoist Party. Subsequently, she "walked through the jungle for three and a half months in 2008" to take part in the raid of a police armory in Nayagarh, Odisha.<sup>60</sup> In addition, what emerges from the cadres' journeys through the forested terrain—crisscrossing through state boundaries—is a physiographic impression of the Dandakaranya stretching over five different states. In another instance, Padma recounts that police torture and incarceration in the immediate aftermath of her appendix surgery led to the permanent injury of her legs and internal organs. Describing Padma's account, Roy writes, "When they cracked her knees, the police explained helpfully that it

59. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 95.

60. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 106.

was to make sure ‘she would never *walk in the jungle* again’” (emphasis added).<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Padma organizes a committee of relatives and friends to retrieve the bodies of those killed by the police under false pretenses.

Roy’s interviews with the women cadres address sexual violence against indigenous women in the course of the government’s armed mobilization against the Naxalite insurgency. Scholars like Nandini Sundar have noted the exacerbation of such violence by Operation Green Hunt, with the gang rape of thirteen women reported in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh as recently as January 2016.<sup>62</sup> Itineraries of conflict from other resource frontiers of the world also engage with the issue of bodily violence against indigenous women. For instance, Kaine Agary’s novel *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) begins by conflating the toxification of the Niger River by oil leaks with sexual victimization of the Niger Delta region’s indigenous women. The novel’s teenage protagonist Zilayefa experiences the river’s toxicity as an intimate species of bodily violence, when her attempt to bathe in it feels like “a hundred razor blades slashing my private parts.”<sup>63</sup> Zilayefa’s itinerary of migration from her Ijaw village to the nearby city of Port Harcourt continues to dwell on the theme of sexual marginalization, with the protagonist forced to earn her keep as a mistress to a military officer.<sup>64</sup>

Itineraries of conflict function in a phenomenological sense when the embodied presence of indigenous *travelees* serves to establish the continuity of site-specific spiritual practices or right-of-use over nearby resources. In some cases, the physical proximity of an indigenous *travelee* to a contested site emphasizes the affective dimensions of belonging or loss. In Sanjay Kak’s documentary film *Words on Water* (2002), which documents the movement against the damming of the Narmada River in central India, a protest march by adivasi activists occurs along the river banks from which their homes are soon to be displaced by the rising waters. In another scene from Kak’s film, an interview with adivasi activist Luhariya Sankariya gathers affective force from its location directly against the background of the Narmada Valley’s “lush verdant green landscape that is soon to disappear.”<sup>65</sup>

Itineraries of conflict narrate lived experiences of a resource frontier such that their ideological consequences become legible. By underscoring the presence of indigenous people in contested spaces, itineraries of conflict can engender social and material pressures that may be small in scale, but ideological in their effect. As such, itineraries of conflict may be seen as a coalescent minority ideology that resonates with the lived experiences of minority peoples in a resource frontier. Here, I’m interested in the social and political impact of embodied itineraries in the works of authors like Roy, Kak, or

61. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 158. This reference is to Roy’s third essay in the print volume, titled “Trickledown Revolution.”

62. Sundar, *Burning Forest*, 185.

63. Agary, *Yellow-Yellow*, 39.

64. Agary, *Yellow-Yellow*, 39.

65. Ghosh, “We Shall Drown,” 62.

McLeod. *Resource conflict literatures* can lend coherence to ongoing struggles against resources grabs, “exerting palpable pressures and setting effective limits on experience and action.”<sup>66</sup> To clarify, my argument relates to the sociopolitical value inherent in descriptive accounts of indigenous struggles, rather than the ideology of allied political parties, civil societies, or nongovernmental organizations. Further, this view of struggle narratives does not imply that indigenous responses to a resource conflict are collectively coherent or ideologically the same. Far from it, adivasi youth in east-central India have fought from opposite sides, both for the Naxalite insurgency and the government’s paramilitary forces. The armed police force of Chhattisgarh has recruited adivasi youth into anti-insurgency combat positions in a targeted manner, by summarily creating special units for them, such as the Special Police Officers and the Auxiliary Armed Police Force.<sup>67</sup> Roy also discusses the integral role of the Bastar politician Mahendra Karma, an adivasi by birth, in establishing the anti-Naxalite vigilante group Salwa Judum. Karma worked with Hindu nationalist parties in favor of expanding corporate mining in Chhattisgarh after converting to Hinduism as a “twice born.”<sup>68</sup>

### Conclusion

The issues of global and social equity brought to the fore by Saro-Wiwa’s pioneering work in articulating indigenous issues during the 1990s have fostered a global framework of environmental justice, which tends to scrutinize the disproportionate impact of environmental disasters on social minorities. However, the discourse of environmental justice has emerged certain scripts for “minorities at harm” and “green spaces at risk” that limit the scope of its concern and inquiry. Such media scripts prize the stories of small vulnerable tribes engaged in nonviolent environmental activism. For instance, environmental justice narratives can help to amplify the stories of the Bodo and the Ogoni, which have been involved in civil litigation against Shell oil since the 2000s.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, the armed struggle of the Ijaw rebels in the same region of eastern Nigeria has not been adequately addressed through similar narratives, even when their livelihoods from fishing and agriculture have been disproportionately eroded by toxic oil pollution. Their stories of armed rebellion exceed the script of “nonviolent idyllic tribe at risk,” much like the struggle of Naxalite adivasi cadres in east-central India.

66. For Raymond Williams, “Although [structures of feeling] are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.” Itineraries of conflict may offer “a kind of feeling and thinking” that are from their inception “taken as social experience.” However, they are not an “embryonic” phase of articulation that, according to Williams, later crystallize into widely understood cultural forms. See Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” 23–24.

67. The Auxiliary Armed Police Force unit was established in 2011 for the targeted recruitment of adivasi youth into anti-insurgency combat, “barely three weeks after” the Special Police Officers unit was declared unconstitutional by India’s Supreme Court for the same activity. See Sharma, “Chhattisgarh SPOs Likely to Return.”

68. Roy, *Walking with the Comrades*, 69.

69. See Vidal, “Shell Announces £55m Payout.” See also Mouawad, “Shell to Pay \$15.5 Million to Settle.”



Centering narratives of violent struggle allows us to study urgent issues regarding the equitable use of natural resources that continue to be deflected by nation-states and large corporations under the guise of national security or infrastructure development. Further, a more holistic view of environmental justice movements can be obtained by discarding a rigid distinction between armed and nonviolent resistance. Even when indigenous struggles protest peacefully, they are at risk of being arbitrarily criminalized by police and state authorities. For instance, the Dongria Kondh tribe's resistance against the expansion of bauxite mining in their native Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha has become increasingly embattled by police abuse and incarceration during the 2010s.<sup>70</sup> Activists of this small hilly tribe have reported being detained and harassed, while summarily being labeled as Naxalite insurgents or conspirators.<sup>71</sup> Since the early 2000s, the Dongria Kondh tribe's stand against the aluminum multinational Vedanta Resources has received media coverage from London-based allies such as Survival, a nongovernmental organization, and FoilVedanta, an environmentalist pressure group. The tribe's activism has been broadly legible thus far, due to their succinct identity claims as the only indigenous inhabitants of the Niyamgiri Hills and the congruence of their struggle with the environmentalist ethos of protecting pristine woodlands from deforestation and toxic-waste dumping.<sup>72</sup> Other adivasi struggles in east-central India may not fit as comfortably within environmental justice narratives, leaving them susceptible to the state's repressive tactics. For instance, tribal communities peacefully resisting displacement from the mineral-rich hills of Raoghat and Narayanpur in Chhattisgarh have received substantially less media attention.<sup>73</sup> The framework of resource conflict literature enables us to study more complex articulations of indigenous identity claims and environmental attitudes, while incorporating diverse narratives of struggle into the study of postcolonial and world literatures. Conceived as a global comparative framework for studying indigenous identities articulated in the context of resource conflicts, *resource conflict literature* shores up critical avenues for the study of resistance to extraction through intersections with the fields of indigenous studies and the environmental humanities.

70. In March 2017, around two hundred Dongria Kondh people staged a protest outside the district police office in Rayagada, Odisha, to demand an end to indiscriminate arrests and the release of activist Bari Pidikaka. Activist Ladda Sikaka is reported to have said, "Police is targeting innocent Dongria Kondhs branding them as Maoist supporters." See South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Odisha Timeline 2017," [www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/timelines/2017/orissa.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/timelines/2017/orissa.htm) (accessed February 1, 2018).

71. Dongria Kondh activist Bari Pidikaka died in police custody in June 2017 after being held since October 2015. Among those released after detention, several Dongria Kondh people have reported being tortured and humiliated. See Survival, "India: Tribal Leader Dies in Police Custody," [www.survivalinternational.org/news/11724](http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/11724) (accessed February 1, 2018).

72. For a brief account of the Dongria Kondh's resistance movement, see George, "Claiming Niyamgiri."

73. The proposed expansion of iron-ore mining in the forested Raoghat Hills by Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) contravenes environmental laws and legal protections afforded to tribal villages. See Kohli, "Steeling into Raoghat's Future."

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