Representing the neocolonial destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2011)

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the literary representation of the ecological, economic and social destruction of the Niger Delta in Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2011). Although formally independent since 1960, Nigeria is still embedded in unequal neocolonial relationships under the guise of globalization. With its focus on one manifestation of neocolonialism, namely the extraction of oil, the novel can be placed in the context of petroculture, which foregrounds the global significance and impact that fossil fuels have on cultural and social imaginaries of the global North and South. Focusing on narrative perspective and structure, the article analyzes the way *Oil on Water* is constructed to explore the social and environmental consequences of the extraction of oil in the Niger Delta. The novel itself, highlighting as it does the role of the journalist as observer and witness, amounts to an act of literary activism, since it provides testimony concerning the destruction of the region.

Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2011) powerfully and engagingly captures the ecological and social situation in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian writer’s third novel traces the consequences of the “vicious ecological war” that has been waged in the region in the name of the extraction of oil, “a war whose victims are a hapless people and the land on which they have lived and thrived for centuries” (Okonta and Douglas, 2001, 63–64). On the surface, the novel appears to be a thriller revolving around a kidnapping case, but it is actually an elaborate investigation of the ways the oil production has negatively affected the region’s environment and population. This article opens with a discussion of the neocolonial situation in Nigeria and places *Oil on Water* in the context of petroculture. Employing literary analysis and close reading, it then proceeds to analyze the way *Oil on Water* is constructed to explore the social and environmental consequences of the oil extraction in the Niger Delta. In contrast to previous discussions of the novel, such as those of Leerom Medovoi (2014) and Solomon Edebor (2017), the article focuses particularly on the use of narrative perspective and structure to convey the novel’s thematic concerns. *Oil on Water* exhibits a complex narrative structure in which the journalist Rufus, the novel’s protagonist and homodiegetic
narrator, travels through the Delta. He assembles accounts of the participants and victims of the oil conflicts and thus presents a detailed picture of the social situation in the region. In addition, his narrative features pervasive references to the oil-polluted ecosystem and the resultant death of humans, animals and plants. This results in a haunting depiction of the Niger Delta’s environmental destruction, which is heightened through rhetorical devices such as the personification of the landscape as a sick and dying person.

**Neocolonialism and petroculture in Nigeria**

Helon Habila’s work belongs to the tradition of the socially conscious Nigerian novel that bears “witness to Nigerian social experience” (Griswold 2000, 3). His first novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (2004), is a fictional exploration of the atmosphere of oppression in Nigeria under General Abacha’s military dictatorship in the 1990s, while his second novel, *Measuring Time* (2007), is a historiographic metafiction that traces the first decades of the country’s independence, and investigates and counters colonial records of Nigeria’s history. Habila has also published *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016), an account of the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the kidnapping of 267 girls from Chibok Secondary School. As a result, he can certainly be considered a literary chronicler of post-independence Nigeria. As such, he is also concerned with the forms of foreign intervention and neocolonial intrusion into Nigeria’s sovereignty that have effectively turned the country into a postcolony. His writings “reveal the complex ways in which colonial history continues to shadow daily life in West Africa without fully dominating or dictating it” (Newell 2006, 4).

Nigeria is a postcolony in the temporal as well as the economic and political senses of the word. A former colony, it has been formally independent since 1960 but is still in relationships of dependence and subordination to the metropolitan center. Like other West African states, Nigeria remains “in continuing subservience to European and North American governments and corporations” (Newell 2006, 4). Following Achille Mbembe’s (2001) theorizations of the term, “postcolony” has been used to refer to formerly colonized territories that have undergone a process of decolonization, but where “the colonial order (institutions, regimes of accumulation and regulation, forms of governance, patterns of thought and understanding) continues to exert a powerful – even, in some instances, defining – influence beyond the formal transfer of power” (Lazarus 2013, 327). This “continued dominance of the west, in terms of political, economic, military and cultural power” (Young 2001, 5), that has been referred to as neocolonialism, amounts to a hegemony where “the postcolonial state remains in a situation of dependence on its former masters, and […] the former masters continue to act in a colonialist manner towards formerly colonized states” (45).

Among the numerous ways neocolonialism manifests itself in Nigeria, several forms of foreign intervention are especially conspicuous. One is the interference in Nigeria’s affairs through the instruments of financial debt. As a result of the country’s economic distress in the 1970s and 1980s, caused by low oil prices and a decline in agricultural production, Nigeria had become reliant on loans. Financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization took advantage of the situation and forced Nigeria to implement neo-liberal economic policies. Like other countries of the global South in the following decades, Nigeria was subjected to so-called Structural Adjustment Programs, including the promotion of austerity measures, large-scale privatization and the
opening-up of the national markets to international trade (Lazarus 2011, 8–9). Rather than improving the economic situation, these programs contributed to Nigeria's destabilization and resulted in "the 'lost decades' of structural adjustment programs" (Zeleza 2009, 35–36), and a "de facto recolonization" (Nugent 2004, 327) by non-governmental organizations which were quick to replace the hamstrung governmental structures.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also assumed control via the related politics of humanitarian and developmental aid, a form of neocolonial intrusion that has "been placed beyond critique in a space of moral certainty" (Sharp 2013, 239). Asserting the necessity of developmental and humanitarian aid is problematic, as it contributes to the discursive construction of African countries as underdeveloped and in need of receiving gifts from the advanced global North, and thus perpetuates the colonialist images of Africa as a "dark continent" and a place defined by "lack" (238–240). Through the "nominally supportive mechanisms of budget assistance and developmental aid", the receiving states are reduced to merely "performing the roles of sovereignty and statehood" (241; original emphasis).

Furthermore, much of the money flowing into Africa is actually dedicated to military and security interventions under the guise of terror prevention. Joanne Sharp (2013) argues that the colonial present in Africa is characterized by the dual pursuit of security and of developmental aid. Thus, "the 'white man's burden' of development aid and the militarism of the 'war on terror'" (236), are "two apparently separate mechanisms that on closer inspection turn out to be entangled" (238). Connected to these security concerns are Europe's current efforts to prevent large-scale immigration from Africa by shifting the frontiers far into the African continent, securing the borders between the countries and building detention centers to keep migrants from reaching the Mediterranean in the first place. This is a reminder that development and security politics have primarily been imperial instruments to contain problems within Africa. Hence, aid and support in the name of "development is first and foremost about the security of the west" (244).

A third complex of neocolonial intrusions in Africa concerns the extraction of valuable natural resources, such as coltan and cobalt in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, diamonds in Sierra Leone and gold in South Africa. Nigeria has in this regard been affected considerably by the extraction of oil, which by the mid-1970s had become Nigeria's dominant export after substantial crude oil and gas reserves were discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956. Following the country's independence, a combination of subservience and corruption prevented Nigeria from building an independent national economy. Its elites became "commission agents of the big commercial houses and mining companies that the departing British still controlled, while also moving to capture political power in order to use it as an instrument to secure more economic benefits for themselves" (Okonta and Douglas 2001, 28). This situation attracted powerful transnational companies such as Royal Dutch Shell, which have been active in Nigeria for many decades now. While presenting a benevolent image, Shell has "quietly and unobtrusively worked its way to the epicentre of power over the years" (58), taking advantage of the "symbiotic relationship" with local politicians and soldiers in the mutual interest for control over the region and its oil. The increasingly unchecked drilling for oil has contributed to the exploitation and impoverishment of the Niger Delta and has caused significant environmental destruction. It has been accompanied by protest and agitation, which the governments have sought to suppress. The most prominent victim in the 1990s was writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa who was executed for his involvement in campaigns against the degradation of his native land. Since then, the Niger
Delta has turned into an uncontrollable area destabilized by armed gangs performing acts of sabotage, kidnapping and oil theft (Falola and Oyeniyi 2015, 99).

With *Oil on Water* Habila joins the group of Nigerian writers “whose creative energy is focused on environmental and ecological issues” (Slaymaker 2007, 686; see also Edebor 2017, 43), particularly regarding the exploitation of resources in the Niger Delta. Their criticism has often found expression in the form of poems, most notably in collections such as Niyi Osundare’s *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), Tanure Ojaide’s *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998) and Ogaga Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp* (2005), as well as the poems and essays collected in *Ogoni’s Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria* (1998), edited by Abdul-Rasheed Na’Allah. Nigerian writers have also employed other formats, such as the essays collected in Wole Soyinka’s *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996), poet Nnimmo Bassey’s essay “We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood” (2016) and Femi Osofisan’s play *Many Colors Make the Thunder-King* ([1997] 2003). Likewise, several fictional explorations of the issue exist, including Ken Saro-Wiwa’s short story collection *Forest of Flowers* (1986), and novels such as Isidore Okpewho’s *Tides* (1993), Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and Vincent Egbuson’s *Love My Planet* (2008). While Habila’s novel is therefore by no means the only literary examination of the ecological, sociopolitical and economic devastation of the Niger Delta, it is arguably the best known and internationally most visible example of this subgenre of Nigerian literature, as well as outstanding in its narrative and argumentative complexity and literary quality.

Moreover, by highlighting the destructive power of oil extraction in the Niger Delta, *Oil on Water* can be seen as a paradigmatic example of the concept of petroculture, something it shares with several other novels from different geographic locations, including Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* ([1984] 1987), Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* (1991), Charles Red Corn’s *A Pipe for February* (2002) and Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* (2010) (Wenzel 2014, 158). Petroculture is located at the intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism and links such geographically dispersed places as Nigeria, Alberta, Siberia and Ecuador in the attempt to write the importance and ubiquity of fossil fuels into the cultural and social imaginaries of the global North and South. Habila’s novel certainly “foregrounds the impact of energy on literary form at the periphery” (Szeman 2017, 281), but in the logic of petroculture’s advocates it can only represent one of the more obvious instances of a work of petrofiction. Not limited to those cultural texts that emphasize the violence and destruction caused by oil and petroleum, petroculture takes into account all the ways culture is affected and influenced by oil, seeking “to connect and compare resource texts from all points, or links, in oil’s value chain, from (semi-)periphery to core, (refined) pipeline liquid to global stock liquidity” (Macdonald 2017, 300). *Oil on Water* may provide only partial insights into an “aesthetics of oil” that can be “uncovered by comparing the recurring motifs, systemic connections and structures of feeling produced by oil modernity” (291), but its focus on one particular site of extraction effectively reveals the dark underside of the oil business.

**The narrative structure of *Oil on Water***

The plot of *Oil on Water* appears to be rather simple and straightforward. Taking place over a period of little more than two weeks in August 2009, it details the trips of two Nigerian reporters, Rufus and Zaq, through the Niger Delta. Their assignment is to investigate the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, a British woman and the wife of a petrol engineer working for
an oil company in Nigeria. Rufus is a young journalist eager to make his mark, and follows his mentor, Zaq, an older journalist at the end of his career, into the natural and social maze of the Niger Delta. More than once Rufus feels unable to orient himself in the network of narrow channels he and his company try to navigate, even though he knows “the general geography of this area” (Habila 2011, 68). However, he also knows “how confusing and indistinguishable from one another the interconnected rivers and creeks could be” (68). In a passage from the opening pages of the novel, which is repeated halfway through the text, the atmosphere the characters find themselves in is succinctly captured. Upon “entering an especially narrow channel in the river, our light wooden canoe would be so enveloped in the dense grey stuff that we couldn’t see each other as we glided silently over the water” (163). In addition, the apparent impenetrability of the Delta is emphasized in references to the “swamps and the mist” (34) or the “opaque, misty water” (33).

The Niger Delta is depicted as a claustrophobic maze, a depiction that is also reflected on the discourse level of Oil on Water, whose narrative structure is complex and disorienting. The two weeks of story-time are not covered chronologically. Instead, readers are confronted with a non-linear narrative that jumps back and forwards in time. Also contributing to a disorienting reading experience is the fact that the characters repeatedly find themselves in situations they have been in before, albeit under different circumstances. A location they keep returning to is the island of Irikefe, but the non-linear sequence does not always make clear at what exact point in time and under which circumstances they arrive at or leave the island. At the end of chapter 13, for example, they are on Irikefe as the guests of the local priests who minister a shrine there. Rufus and Zaq have just dug up the supposed grave of the kidnapped Mrs Floode, but found it empty. The priests, angry about the disruption of the burial ground, refuse to allow them to leave until the completion of the reburial. The beginning of chapter 15 is set a few days later. They are on Irikefe again, this time under completely different circumstances. They are in the custody of the military, having been picked up on suspicion of being rebels (as was narrated in chapters 4, 5, 8 and 9) and brought to Irikefe, which, in the meantime, has been severely bombed and largely destroyed. The similarity of the two situations is remarked upon by Rufus who states that it “felt almost surreal to be back on the island, trapped again, but this time not by harmless priests and worshippers, but by the Major and his soldiers” (Habila 2011, 164). Not only do the two episodes resemble each other, but they are intercut in such a way that it is difficult to determine whether the characters are on Irikefe with the military after the destruction of the island, or whether they are there with the priests a few days earlier. Playing with the chronology in this way, Habila complicates a plot that in itself is not too complex, and creates for readers an impression of disorientation, which mirrors that of the characters. However, the confusion in the reading process is generally not a problem, as it is not the point of the novel to present a straightforward outcome. More important than the actual trajectory of Rufus’s journey is the journey itself, a notion confirmed by several allusions and references to the activity of writing.

This metareferential level links Oil on Water to Habila’s two previous novels, Waiting for an Angel (2004) and Measuring Time (2007), books that similarly foreground questions of writing as a political act. Waiting for an Angel, which depicts Nigeria under the military dictatorships of Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha in the 1990s, is in many respects a text about the possibilities of literature and journalism, and about the potential and dangers of writing under an authoritarian or even totalitarian system. Chris Dunton
(2008) points out that *Waiting for an Angel* is especially concerned with the efficacy of political writing, as “the notion of writing as activism drives the narrative” (74). *Measuring Time*, a Bildungsroman in which the protagonist’s process of growing-up parallels the first decades of postcolonial Nigeria, chronicles the young nation’s history. As the protagonist becomes a historian, aspiring to write the history of his village and people, the novel revolves around issues of historiography, the countering of colonial representations, and the rewriting of the country’s history from a Nigerian perspective.

In *Oil on Water*, the two main characters are journalists, a profession not presented in an exclusively positive light. In the beginning Rufus and Zaq travel with a group of reporters who are portrayed as superficial, sensationalist and fame-seeking, but their own journalistic ethos is also questionable. They are in pursuit of a scoop; Zaq points out that

luck is on our side: here we are, pursuing what is almost a perfect story. A British woman kidnapped by local militants who are fighting to protect their environment from greedy multinational oil companies. Perfect. A good story for any paper. (Habila 2011, 135)

This statement, which is quite problematic considering that their “good story” involves a victim whose fate is unknown at this point, shows that Rufus and Zaq are mainly looking for professional success and personal gratification. Rufus also reveals that he believes he “should receive more recognition for the effort and enthusiasm” (160) he puts into his job and imagines himself returning from the trip a hero: “I saw my story on the front pages; and, finally, I saw myself being restored to my rightful place as a reporter” (78). Although Rufus’s motives are not entirely selfless, he nevertheless takes his job seriously. When attending a scene where a group of supposed militants is being doused in petrol by soldiers, for example, he forces himself to watch: “I couldn’t turn my face away for long. I was a journalist: my job was to observe, and to write about it later. To be a witness for posterity” (55). Furthermore, the abduction ceases to be Rufus’s main motivation when he recognizes that he has come across a much bigger story, namely the destruction of the Niger Delta. Having learned from Zaq that “the story is not always the final goal [but that] the meaning of the story” (5) can often be more important, Rufus’s attention gradually turns away from the kidnapped woman. Instead he starts to record what he sees on his trips through the Delta: “I wrote down all that I had witnessed since we left Irikefe yesterday: the abandoned villages, the hopeless landscape, the gas flares that always burned in the distance” (24). Rufus believes that this is “how history is made, and it’s our job to witness it” (60). His stance, that a journalist should observe political developments and critically attend to them, is reminiscent of a similar conviction in *Waiting for an Angel*, where a character claims that it is the media’s task “to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it” (Habila 2004, 198). Even though it is to some degree problematized as a vehicle for the search for recognition and fame, in *Oil on Water* the act of journalistic writing is ultimately also represented as an important form of activism, witnessing and chronicling.

As journalists, Rufus and Zaq are in a good position to record the situation in the Niger Delta. Occupying a neutral position, they are comparatively safe – if not completely out of harm’s way, as they know that two weeks earlier two journalists were killed on a similar assignment – and have access to, and opportunity to talk with, all the groups affected by the conflicts in the region. Rufus accordingly speaks with ordinary people who have been displaced by the drilling for oil; he interviews members of both the military and the militants, as well as the petrol engineer James Floode. Towards the end of the novel he even manages to fill in the last details of the kidnapping when he has a conversation with Isabel Floode.
This collection of accounts results in a multifaceted and intricate picture of the situation in the Delta, as seen from the perspective of a variety of characters.

The narrative therefore captures the effects and the victims of the oil extraction, but due to Rufus’s limited perspective, which allows him to record only the situation on the ground, the root causes are beyond his scope. He cannot take into account the actions, methods and strategies of the oil companies, or adopt a more distanced point of view of Nigeria’s entanglements in international neocolonial relationships. As a result, the novel does not offer an analysis of the processes and structures of neocolonialism but is testament to its effects and consequences.

The destruction of the Niger Delta

In *Oil on Water*, the Niger Delta is depicted as a war zone, where the military is in conflict with militants who sabotage oil production and kidnap foreigners for ransom. Readers encounter this situation both through Rufus’s perspective and his interviews with the various participants in, and victims of, the conflict in which they get a chance to present their point of view. Two important characters in this respect are the Major, a military leader, and the Professor, one of the rebel leaders. The Major portrays militants like the Professor and his followers as little more than thugs and bullies and blames them for the situation in the Niger Delta, arguing that “they call themselves freedom fighters, but they are rebels, terrorists, kidnappers” (Habila 2011, 96). When Rufus is a prisoner of the militants and gets a chance to interview the Professor, he hears the opposing view. The Professor argues that the rebels “are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?” (209).

In contrast to the Major’s opinion, the Professor’s position is that the actions of the rebels are not the cause of the disruptions in the Niger Delta but a product of them. In this regard, the novel’s narrative confirms the Professor’s standpoint, as it portrays the militants as a direct consequence of the destructive oil production. Recruited from the impoverished inhabitants of the Delta, their actions are both their only viable source of income and an outlet for their frustration and anger. Discussing its natural resources, Okonta and Douglas note that the Niger Delta

is one of the world’s richest areas. Apart from its substantial oil and gas deposits, there are extensive forests, abundant wildlife, and fertile agricultural land where rice, sugar-cane, plantain, beans, palm oil, yams, cassava, and timber are cultivated. The Delta is also famous for its fish resources. It has more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa. (2001, 63)

Yet, as far as its population is concerned, it is also “one of the poorest and most underdeveloped parts of the country” (19). Farming and fishing, the main livelihood for many in the Delta, have been made impossible due to the pollution caused by the oil production. In *Oil on Water*, Rufus notes that their “rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (Habila 2011, 39). Most other jobs are provided by the oil companies, but are hard to come by. One character in the novel is “actually a university graduate who, like a lot of young men in the Delta, had been forced to take a job far below his qualifications while he waited for that elusive job with an oil company” (183). Kidnapping and oil theft, therefore, are some of the few activities that earn the Delta inhabitants some money.
In addition, there is a sense that the militants represent the continuation of the anti-oil agitations of the 1990s. Faced with brutal oppression by the military government under General Abacha, most visible in the hanging of writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists, the anti-oil activists resorted to violence. In the novel, the myths surrounding the Professor allude to this narrative of resistance. He is believed to have worked “for an oil company, and one day he grew disgusted with the environmental abuse and he became a militant to fight for change” (Habila 2011, 96). He would therefore have been part of the armed groups that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, sprang up across the Delta, sabotaging pipelines, stealing the oil and kidnapping oil workers (Falola and Oyeniyi 2015, 99).

The violence in the region is a result of the struggles over the control of Nigeria's oil resources, a fact that is not mentioned in a BBC report that Rufus watches:

Some oil companies had already stopped sending expatriate workers to the region, and were even thinking of shutting down their operations because the cost was becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing a tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in response. (Habila 2011, 106)

The report tells about the effects of the kidnapping on the international oil market and is thus one of the few instances in which the perspective of Rufus's narration is extended beyond his immediate experiences in the Delta. His interview with James Floode is another opportunity for a statement exposing the position of the oil companies. Floode is predictably unsympathetic concerning the situation of the Nigerians. He believes that they are themselves responsible for the poverty and chaos in the country, having wasted its potential through corruption, violence and vandalism. Rufus angrily responds to these charges by emphasizing the perspective of those who actually live in the Delta, and by outlining their reasons for resistance:

I don’t blame them for wanting to vandalize the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. [ … ] And you think the people are corrupt? No. they are just hungry, and tired. (Habila 2011, 107–108)

In this passage, Rufus wholeheartedly condemns the destruction of the Niger Delta, the ensuing suffering of its inhabitants and the callous attitude of the oil companies and politicians towards them.

Even though Rufus rarely voices his own opinion this explicitly, it is clear that he tends to side with the people in the region, especially with the displaced villagers living in poverty. This is not surprising, considering that the oil production has directly affected Rufus's life. His father was without a job and tried to earn some money peddling stolen petrol. One day, his supply blew up, not only badly burning the face of Rufus's sister, but also destroying their home and causing the disintegration of his family. Beyond this family tragedy, Rufus might have ended up a militant or a soldier, had he not gone to journalism school believing that journalism was one of the few employment opportunities open to him. Many young men like him joined the militants, having been disillusioned and angered by the government, the lack of prospects and the general situation in the country:

I had seen that kind of anger before in many of my friends, people I went to school with; some of them were now in the forests with the fighters, some of them had made millions from ransom money, but a lot of them were dead. (Habila 2011, 100)
Rufus is familiar enough with these men’s stories to know that he easily could have been one of them. Although Rufus might feel a connection with the militants, his narrative does not shy away from the moral complexities of their fight against the military and the oil companies. Indeed, the military and the militants resemble each other to a striking degree, and the novel indicates that it does not make a big difference to the Delta inhabitants whether they are terrorized by the militants or the soldiers. As Leerom Medovoi (2014) points out, the Professor can even be compared to the oil companies, using the same greenwashing rhetoric to justify the acts of violence his group has committed. Depicting him like “an ecocritical ‘professor’ who espouses the environmental ‘truth’ without acknowledging his language’s complicity with the existing political ecology of petroviolence” (22), the novel shows “that the remediative discourse of environmental advocacy can become not only a form of hypocrisy but also, at its worst, a screen for killing” (22). The blurring of clear moral lines regarding the militants and the military further contributes to the atmosphere of confusion and disorientation that pervades the novel.

The young men in the Delta have few opportunities, except to join either the rebels or the soldiers – the latter to some extent represented as much as the victims of the circumstances as the former. Even the Major is motivated by a tragedy in his family, his daughter having been raped by her university colleagues. Fighting in the name of order and stability, the military should be a positive force. They do not, however, act in the interests of their fellow Nigerians but in those of neocolonial transnational companies and corrupt elites who exploit and destroy the livelihood of the region. In addition, the Major discredits the military with his ruthlessness and brutality. According to him, the only language the militants understand is violence and there “are no human rights for people like them. You jail them and in a year they’ll be out on the streets. The best thing is to line them up and shoot them” (Habila 2011, 97).

The Major’s attitude towards the militants is problematic but not completely unjustified. In several instances Rufus experiences the rebels to be as brutal and merciless as the soldiers. If it was violent oppression and the lack of opportunities that caused them to assume their fight, violence and destruction are the only methods at their disposal to resist the devastation of their country and their lives. As a result, the rebels have become a violent force in their own right. The lines of conflict run not just between the military and the militants but are more complex, including hostilities among the various rebel groups. The Professor distinguishes his own unit from other rebel groups, whom he calls “criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemy” (Habila 2011, 209). He claims to be fighting for his land, urging Rufus to make public the situation in the Niger Delta:

Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me where? Tell them, we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth, remember that. (210)

While Rufus’s narration ultimately leaves open the question of whether the Professor’s group should be considered freedom fighters or terrorists, his sympathies undoubtedly lie with the displaced Delta inhabitants, whose perspective is privileged in the novel. Rufus and Zaq spend some time with the community of Chief Ibiram. His uprooted village serves as a typical example for the way many of the Delta communities have suffered from the “oil
wars, caught between the militants and the military, and the only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind” (Habila 2011, 33). Chief Ibiram’s village was one of the places where oil was found, and for the drilling rights they were offered “a lot of money, more money than any of them had ever imagined” (38). However, observing the negative consequences of the oil drilling in neighboring villages, Chief Ibiram understood that the consequence of these short-term riches would be the permanent destruction of their basis of existence, and so he resisted the offers. His community was pushed off its land nevertheless, and since then it has been on the move, “mere wanderers without a home” (Habila 2011, 41). Chief Ibiram tells their story as literally a lapse from paradise, an account which enhances the tragedy of their displacement: “Once upon a time they lived in paradise, he said, in a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy” (38). In the hope of being able to make a living in an urban area, they are edging closer to the city of Port Harcourt, where the community “would be swallowed up, its people dispersed, like people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets” (178). Oil production in Nigeria therefore also serves as a negative factor for urbanization. Rufus and Zaq come across several abandoned and derelict villages, all resembling each other. They testify to this rural exodus:

The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. (9)

Descriptions like this, of places where the oil wells have made life impossible, not only manage to convey a sense of sadness and loss through their literary language. They also make palpable and comprehensible the troubling fact that the Niger Delta has become one of the world’s most threatened human ecosystems.

Rufus therefore learns about the social consequences of the oil extraction in his conversations with the various characters. At the same time, on his trips through the Delta he witnesses first-hand much of the damage to the natural environment. The narrative constantly provides indicators of the state of an ecosystem polluted by oil and destroyed by the unceasing gas flares. For example, Rufus notices the thick smoke the gas flares produce: “I went and sat on the hill to stare at the water and the faraway gas flares that emerged suddenly from pillar-like pipes, holding up their roof of odious black smoke” (Habila 2011, 139).

Even more strikingly, the novel captures the sheer pervasiveness of the oil pollution. It contains numerous references to the ways oil has infused the environment, including “the evilmelling, oil-fecund earth” (Habila 2011, 34), “the oil-scorched earth” (175), or the “bubbly film of oil on the wood” of the boat Rufus travels on (73). Remarks such as “the water under us had turned foul and sulphurous” (9) allude to the fatal consequences of the oil pollution which causes sickness and death. Rufus learns that the destruction of the Delta’s wildlife, dead livestock, withered plants and sick humans is a result of the gas flares and the rising level of toxins in the water. Accordingly, during his time on the boat, Rufus notices “dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots” (9); he sees “a dead fish on the oil-polluted water” (5). Other strange objects float by, such as “a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly up with black birds perching on it” (33), and there are “carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these
tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil” (175). Considering this display of death, his observation that “the weight of the oil [is] tight like a hangman’s noose round the neck of whatever life form lay underneath” (215) is certainly fitting.

This last quotation indicates that one effect of the imagery in *Oil on Water* is the personification of the landscape. Just as a hangman’s noose lies around the neck of a person about to be hanged, the oil is about to suffocate the Niger Delta. Several images connect the oil-polluted landscape to a sick, dying or dead person, such as the grass “suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker’s hand” (Habila 2011, 9), “the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped” (175) and the pipelines “criss-crossing the landscape […] like diseased veins on the back of an old shrivelled hand” (175). Similarly, the condition of the older journalist Zaq, an alcoholic plagued by a form of dengue fever, reflects the state of the Delta’s ecosystem. When the Doctor tells Rufus that “Your friend, I am sorry to say, is dying” (89), this statement might be extended to refer to the Niger Delta at large.

In *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria*, Wendy Griswold (2000) describes Nigerian novelists as “bearing witness to Nigerian social experience” (3) and counts them “among the most persistent chroniclers of the contemporary political, economic, and moral problems” (11). It is this tradition of the Nigerian novelist that Helon Habila continues with his texts, as he interrogates “myriads of problems plaguing Nigeria, particularly with respect to the issues of bad leadership, corruption, poverty, reckless nature of the military regime, poor infrastructures, and many more” (Edebor 2017, 45). Habila’s preoccupation with political, economic and social issues in Nigeria is especially visible in *Oil on Water*, where he shows the direct consequences of neocolonialism. By making his protagonist a journalist who travels through the Niger Delta, he is able to present a comprehensive picture of the situation there as experienced by its inhabitants. The abduction case that serves as the ostensible hook that draws Rufus into the Delta, and readers into the narrative, is revealed to be little more than a red herring. Instead, as Rufus’s disorientation in the narrow and opaque canals of the Delta finds its equivalent in the readers’ confusion in the maze-like construction of the narrative, the main attention is drawn to the Niger Delta and the ways its social fabric is torn apart by conflicts while its landscape drowns in oil.

It has been argued that the novel offers no solutions nor suggests political alternatives, and that Habila “fails to provide us with some proactive measures or solutions to the numerous challenges confronting this poverty-ridden and violence-prone nation” (Edebor 2017, 48). However, it is questionable whether the novel actually aims to provide viable answers for Nigeria’s troubled state. Rather, Habila uses his fiction to debate the political efficacy of writing, providing “reflections on the uncertainties of how writing could ever help to remediate the Niger Delta” (Medovoi 2014, 23). As discussed above, for Rufus the task of a writer entails being, first and foremost, an observer. Accordingly, the novel adopts “a testimonial approach to the conditions of petro-violence in the Nigerian Delta” (21), recording the environmental degradation and social dissolution that are a consequence of the activities of the oil companies. *Oil on Water* vividly displays the destruction of the social structures and ecosystem of the Niger Delta through the neocolonial actors who show no concern for humans and nature. Confirming Griswold’s assertion that many Nigerian novelists share a “commitment to social improvement through literature” (2000, 39), Habila’s novel is literature in pursuit of social and ecological justice as it provides testimony of the environmental and social damage caused by the oil extraction in the Niger Delta.
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