

"We are the Delta": Nature and Agency in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Felicity Hand

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

felicity.hand@uab.cat

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ ECOZONA.2021.12.1.3556](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2021.12.1.3556)



Abstract

At first sight there appear to be three human groups in the Niger Delta struggle in Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water*. The soldiers sent by the federal government who keep the oil business running; the armed rebels who fight to protect the environment and for a say in the distribution of petrodollars; and the local villagers who find themselves wedged in-between. This article claims that the fourth actor in the ecodrama is the brutalized landscape. Far from assuming a passive role, nature in *Oil on Water* strikes back through Habila's prose. The devastated land is given a powerful voice in order to demand an urgent need for action to stop any further destruction caused by mindless oil extraction.

Keywords: Niger Delta, oil, ecocriticism, pollution, Helon Habila, nature, agency.

Resumen

A primera vista, en la novela de Helon Habila *Oil on Water* parece haber tan solo tres agentes humanos en la lucha del Delta del Níger: los soldados enviados por el gobierno federal que mantienen el negocio del petróleo en activo; las fuerzas rebeldes armadas que luchan para proteger el medio ambiente y para tener voz en la distribución de petrodólares; y finalmente los habitantes de las aldeas vecinas que se encuentran atrapados en el medio. El presente artículo sostiene que el cuarto actor en este ecodrama es el paisaje, víctima de un trato brutal. Lejos de asumir un papel pasivo, la Naturaleza en *Oil on Water* contraataca a través de la prosa de Habila. A la tierra devastada se le otorga una voz poderosa para exigir medidas urgentes de acción que pongan fin a nuevos daños causados por la extracción salvaje de petróleo.

Palabras clave: Delta del Níger, petróleo, ecocrítica, contaminación, Helon Habila, naturaleza, acción.

Niger Delta fiction

Petrofiction set in the Niger Delta is gradually becoming a genre in itself due to the increasing number of novels and poems that reflect the disastrous environmental effects of oil pollution in south-east Nigeria. To date, many of these novels simply use the gas flares and sabotaged oil pipeline spills as motivation for the plot, such as in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) where the protagonist's mother becomes impoverished, literally overnight, because of an oil spill, which in turn encourages the young girl to seek her fortune in the big city. Likewise, Tony Nwaka's *Lords of the Creek* (2015) evolves around the kidnapping of a princess of the Itsekiri royal family with the corruption generated by the oil wealth constantly in the background. Neither of these two novels gives a voice to the people actually suffering the degradation of the Niger Delta as this is merely the

backdrop of their plots. Agary does highlight the poverty that results from the loss of fertile land, but Nwaka's novel is more concerned with the workings of a political thriller and the elites who enrich themselves with the black gold. The poetry of Nnimmo Bassey laments the initial optimism of the people as regards the new wealth that oil would bring and denounces "the complicity of the military junta and the oil companies in ravaging both the land and its inhabitants" (Egya 63). Bassey indeed questions the damage done to the environment, but nature stubbornly remains 'out there' in his work as his emphasis is very much on human action and reaction. He is a vocal member of *Friends of the Earth Africa* and has queried how "vulnerable communities would fare in a post petroleum economy when they would be left with nothing but a polluted environment" (Bassey 2006).

Helon Habila is one of many Nigerian writers to denounce this appalling situation. Many of these authors have written literary responses to fuel extraction in what has been described as a socialist-realist tradition (Egya 61), but we cannot and must not forget that one of the best known intellectuals to champion the cause of the Niger Delta minorities was the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose trial statement left no doubt about the inseparability of the political from the environmental.

We all stand before history. I am a man of peace, of ideas. Appalled by the denigrating poverty of my people who live on a richly endowed land, distressed by their political marginalization and economic strangulation, angered by the devastation of their land, their ultimate heritage, anxious to preserve their right to life and to a decent living, and determined to usher to this country as a whole a fair and just democratic system which protects everyone and every ethnic group and gives us all a valid claim to human civilization, I have devoted my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated. ("Complete Statement")

For many Nigerian writers, it is clear that the "disruption of the landscape is tied to political corruption" (Slaymaker 131). For poets like Nnimmo Bassey, the origin of the conflict lies in the class differences between the farmers and fishermen, on one hand, and the oil companies who act with the complicity of the military junta (in the days of General Sani Abacha) and the more recent civilian governments of Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, on the other. Bassey (2002; qtd. in Egya 63) writes:

We see their Shells
Behind military shields
Evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs
Drilling our souls

On the other hand, in his collection *The Oil Lamp: Poems* (2005), Ogaga Ifowodo (13; emphasis in original) endows the earth with a voice that cries out for ecojustice:

Take your cooking oil away
We are not pots or cauldrons!
Can't you see here's no kitchen
And you burn your meal to ashes?

These poems speak about and to the destruction carried out in the name of modernity. Ifowodo gives a voice to the abused land—what I am calling an ecocrusade—admirably continued by Helon Habila in his 2011 novel *Oil on Water*, the focus of this article.

Alongside novels and poetry, popular music in Nigeria has played a vibrant role in airing social issues and encouraging people to act, according to Ogaga Okuyade, professor at the Niger Delta University (2011). Notwithstanding the obvious widespread influence of this type of cultural production in Nigeria, my argument focuses on a written literary text as Habila goes beyond denouncing the upheaval caused on and by the human actors. *Oil on Water*, published in Britain by Penguin thereby reaching out to a wide English-speaking readership, is a powerful ecothriller that ostensibly relates how a white woman is rescued from her kidnappers, while it actually probes into the drama behind the oil pollution of the Niger Delta. This tragedy affects all the human inhabitants of the area, from the soldiers sent by the federal government to keep the oil business running; the armed rebels fighting to protect the environment and for a say in the distribution of petrodollars; and the local villagers who find themselves wedged in-between. Besides these three human groups, *Oil on Water* presents a fourth actor, as through his prose Habila allows the devastated land to speak for itself. It is the voice of the polluted rivers and the grief of the ill-used land that demands our attention. My argument draws on the theories of Cajetan Iheka when he claims that, “[n]onhumans [...] encompass the other life forms in the environment, including plants, animals, and forests but also the abiotic components of the ecosystem including *soil and water*” (*Naturalizing Africa* 1; my emphasis). He argues that the Niger Delta is “a habitat for interdependent beings” (*Naturalizing Africa* 15) and claims that “the story of the human world is not the only one at stake” (“African Literature” 212). Iheka’s work reinforces my own understanding that in *Oil on Water* one must search for the ‘greater meaning’ of the novel, beyond the plight of a single human actor (*Oil on Water* 5).¹

In Search of the Truth

Habila’s novel is set in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which encompasses the geographical area covered by Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross River State, Delta State, Edo State and Rivers State. This oil-producing area, predominantly rural, covers approximately 13 percent of Nigeria’s landmass, seventy thousand square kilometers, which compares roughly in size to the Republic of Ireland. It is, however, densely populated and accounts for over 31 million people—almost a quarter of the population of Nigeria—constituted by a complex mosaic of ethnic groups, some of which are very small and who thus lack political clout in the country as a whole (Afam Ifedi and Anya 82). The largest wetland in Africa and one of the largest in the world, the Niger Delta is the site of most of Nigeria’s biodiversity. It also generates more than 80 percent of the country’s revenue from the sale of crude oil. “Oil revenues are the main source of public revenue in Nigeria, accounting for about 80 percent to 85 percent of the total receipts” (Watts 199).

The novel, narrated in first person by Rufus, a young, inexperienced reporter, who volunteers to accompany Zak, a veteran of Nigerian journalism, is a complex, zigzagging account of the two men’s quest to find news of the kidnapped wife of a British oil

¹ Unless it is ambiguous, henceforth only the page numbers will be quoted in all references to *Oil on Water*.

executive. The reporters are entrusted with a highly dangerous mission as the creeks of the Niger Delta are patrolled by so-called insurgents—presumed to be the perpetrators of the kidnapping—who have no qualms about eliminating anybody believed to be consorting with their sworn enemy: the Nigerian military. The narrative is composed of flashbacks depending on Rufus's thoughts at the time, with the result that the meandering of the story mimics the intricate waterways of the delta. The journey up and down the oil-polluted waters takes the two journalists deeper into the damaged ecosystem, allowing them to hear conflicting versions of the political situation. The further they penetrate the stench and putrefaction of the waters, the hazier the notion of truth becomes. The novel clearly resonates with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with its journey motif as the two men are confronted with diverse versions of the 'truth' of the conflict as they navigate the rivers and encounter the three human actors in the ecodrama of the region: the soldiers sent by the federal government, the armed rebels or insurgents and the local villagers. The federal government considers itself justified in enlisting soldiers to protect the oil rigs and prevent sabotage on the pipelines. The local militants are fighting to protect the environment, and by extension their livelihoods, but also to demand control of the valuable resource that lies beneath their land. The fishermen and farmers find themselves wedged in-between as both sides accuse them of selling out to the enemy. The fourth actor, about which I will say more below, is the brutalized landscape, which, I contend, plays a much more predominant role in *Oil on Water* than Conrad's Congo River in *Heart of Darkness*. Although his portrayals of the hapless villagers are moving, Habila does not side with any of the parties involved in the conflict; he instead constructs a layer of silent but vociferous denunciation under the squabbling of the human actors as "[t]he only innocent party in the oil war crisis is the environment" ("Negotiating Identity" 225). In this respect Iheka (*Naturalizing Africa* 5) reminds us that we need to acknowledge the permanent bond that exists between humans and other life forms in the environment and to endeavour to think beyond our anthropocentric prejudices.

The search for Isabel Floode, the kidnapped white woman, becomes a sideshow for the real ecopolitical struggle into which Rufus and Zak find themselves embroiled. Her terrifying experience is faded out of the major drama being enacted on the delta waterways and, in stark contrast to the continuous upheavals in the lives of the villagers, any remembrance she may have of oil-clogged waters and dead birds and fish will gradually vanish. Rufus reflects that "[a] fortnight hence and she'd look back and this would all be nothing but a memory, an anecdote for the dinner table" (215). The human players in the Niger Delta conflict, the militants on one hand and the bicephalous entity comprised of the federal government with its soldiers and the multinational oil companies on the other, are rarely explored in depth by literary scholars as for many critics the local farmers and fishermen are the real victims of the ecodrama. Okuyage, for example, discusses at length the displacement suffered by the villagers, who are forced to abandon their ancestral homes and roam the creeks in search of a place to lay down new roots. He highlights the psychological damage inflicted on these people by "the liquidation of culture... [coupled with] permanent itinerancy, landlessness... [and] social marginalization" ("Negotiating Identity" 228). Nixon laments the total disregard for the

livelihood of the Ogoni people in the oil capital game, ruthlessly dispossessed of the riches beneath their earth (108). Edebor (2013) highlights the health hazards that follow on inexorably from “the fire that burns day and night” (*Oil on Water* 91) that the villagers demand in order to have their share in the modernity that they believe the oil rigs and the gas flares will bring them. It is true that Habila paints a distressing picture of the plight of the villagers in his novel and gives voice to these dispossessed and damaged people, tragically represented by Boma, Rufus’s sister, whose face is badly disfigured after an oil explosion. Nevertheless, I argue that however poignant Boma’s personal story is, the real protagonists of this novel, the authentic bearers of the truth of the conflict, are the land and the water themselves. Following Cajetan Iheka, “the object of the search becomes enlarged to include the *space* covered in the quest” (“African Literature” 204; my emphasis). As Jennifer Wenzel concludes in her review of the novel, “the land and water seem to speak directly, in their own voice” (“Behind the Headlines” 14). Following Wenzel’s reading, my analysis of the novel explores Habila’s narrative strategy that endows nature and the environment with “agentic capacities” (Coole & Frost 10) which allow their voice to be heard.

The Degeneration of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region has degenerated into a land of poverty, contamination and profound misery despite the immense wealth that lies in its subsoil (Afam Ifedi and Anya 88). The waters of the creeks have become polluted, the flora and fauna have ceased to flourish and the local people themselves have become alienated from the lands where they have worked for generations. The root causes of the Niger Delta conflict can be traced back to the federal government’s failure to develop the region, the reasons for which are far beyond the scope of this article, but they suggest a deliberate desire to subordinate an extremely affluent region and forestall any separatist notions.² Over the past fifty years, “more than seven thousand oil spills have occurred across the Niger Delta oilfields” (Watts “Oil Frontiers” 190), which works out at more than 1.5 million tons of oil. These spills have caused serious damage to the region’s ecology since the pollution threatens rare species of fish, turtles, and birds, not to mention the survival of crops. Likewise, the local people have found their everyday lives disturbed by the increase in violence through the protests and sabotages organized by militant groups and the subsequent intervention of the federal army.

Moreover, despite the fact that the region is the main source of Nigeria’s external revenue, very few of these petrodollars are actually paid back to the Niger Delta states or invested in infrastructures. In other words, the population of the oil-producing areas hardly benefits from the oil wealth generated on their land. “Fossil-fuel culture can be, in

² The Niger Delta was a major battleground in the Biafra War of 1967-70, see for example Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra: A Civil War Diary* (1973) and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1985), both of which record the conflict from a clearly Niger Deltan, as opposed to a Biafran, perspective. See Richard M. Shain, 1993.

short, described as an 'age of exuberance'—an age that is also, given the dwindling finitude of the resources it increasingly makes social life dependent on, haunted by catastrophe" (Buell 71). Buell's notion of exuberance exemplifies the irony of the situation embodied in the resentment harboured by the Niger Deltans who come to depend more precisely on what has impoverished them in the first place. As Matthew T. Huber explains: "oil is also incredibly *ordinary* because it is embedded in everyday patterns of life" (ix; emphasis in original), so it takes a determined leader, like Habila's Chief Malabo, to keep his people away from the lure of the "quenchless flare" (92):

Just look at the other villages that had taken the oil money: already the cars had broken down, and the cheap television and DVD players were all gone, and where was the rest of the money? Thrown away in Port Harcourt bar rooms, or on second wives and funeral parties, and now they were worse off than before. (39)

Needless to say, a persistent cloud of discontent hovers over the people who, viewing the flagrant underdevelopment of their region despite the fortunes made by the oil companies, have turned to violent protests.

The Niger Delta frontier reveals one explosive trajectory, characterized by massive conflicts, an insurgency, and a pattern of violent accumulation in a disorderly world of corrupt chiefs, powerful politicians, violent state security forces, and robust and often shady alliances between state and capital. ("Oil Frontiers" 196)

Watts, in fact, compares the coastal waters of the delta with the pirate-infested Indian Ocean around the Horn of Africa.

What Wenzel has called "the phantasmagoric effects of petro-violence" ("Petro-Magic-Realism" 221) reveals why the villagers have not sat back and watched how their land has been ruined for fishing or farming or just basic survival. The major problem facing these people is that they have to fight two different enemies at the same time. On one hand, the corrupt Nigerian governments have remained afloat thanks to the enormous wealth earned from the oil revenues and, on the other, the multinational oil companies have little interest in intervening in what they consider to be an internal Nigerian matter. In fact, as Habila makes clear in his novel, soldiers have often been deployed to deal with the insurgents to protect Nigeria's national wealth. The alarming levels of pollution have forced the local population to act as the Nigerian government has constantly failed to deal with their problems.

In the early days of the conflict, popular action was carried out by village or clan groups (Afam Ifedi and Anya 76) but, as a consequence of the total lack of response from Abuja, groups of armed combatants have been formed. This, in turn, has diminished traditional deference toward local chiefs who seem to be paying lip-service to the federal government or who are simply too cautious.

In *Oil on Water*, Rufus patiently explains to James Floode, the husband of the kidnapped woman, that the acts of sabotage enacted by the local people are in retaliation for what they see as a complete disregard for their welfare:

There are countless villages going up in smoke daily. [...] I don't blame them for wanting to vandalize the pipelines that have brought them 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. (107-8)

It would however be naïve to presume that the peoples of the Niger Delta lived in perfect harmony until oil was discovered in 1956, or until the federal government brought in its machinery of oppression. Before crude oil ruled the Nigerian economy at the expense of the Niger Deltans, the area had supplied other highly profitable resources to the world, such as slaves, until palm oil took over from slavery as the dominant trade in the region (Afam Ifedi and Anya 77). Likewise, the heterogeneity of the Delta zone with its myriad ethnicities reveals the lack of a haven of pre-oil peace. Reactions to the conflict vary considerably depending on the ethnic group. The Ogoni have protested vociferously—one need only recall the tragic execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his companions in 1995—while on the other hand the Ibeno people seem to be resigned to mere survival. As Okoko states:

Unlike some neighbouring communities, the people of Ibeno are generally peace-loving and law-abiding, and oil leakages are not usually attributed to sabotage by aggrieved citizens. Indeed, there is a relatively cordial relationship between the [Ibeno] community and oil companies in spite of oil spillages and gas flaring, with the community more concerned to secure investment in basic local amenities such as clean water, electricity, roads, schools and hospitals, rather than to protest about environmental damage. (376)

Regional development has been scarce, however, and despite the billions of dollars' worth of oil that has been extracted from the area, the majority of people are worse off in all aspects than before the oil companies arrived. Ogoniland is a notable example of this paradoxical situation. According to a report published in 2011:

Even though oil operations have ceased in Ogoniland, oil spills continue to occur in alarming regularity. Since life expectancy in Nigeria is less than 50 years it is a fair assumption most people in Ogoniland have lived with chronic oil pollution throughout their lives. [...] Ogoniland has a tragic history of pollution but systematic scientific information has been absent about the ensuing contamination. ("Niger Delta oil spills")

In fact, Ogoni communities feel just as marginalised and in need of work and development as they were before the executions of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other chiefs in November 1995. The executions, which allowed no appeal, followed a peaceful uprising by 300,000 Ogonis against Shell's widespread pollution in Ogoniland. They focused worldwide attention on the small 1,000 square kilometre region where the Nigerian oil industry first developed in the 1950s, and which was hit hardest by oil spills. Saro-Wiwa's execution brought the region's woes into the global limelight but over twenty years later, the future of the Niger Delta lands has barely improved. Furthermore, oil company records and investigations of spills in the delta are heavily disputed and politically sensitive, with the result that it is extremely complicated to single out any one actor as ultimately responsible for the numerous oil spills. In this respect Huber (xi) refers to the destruction of livelihoods in the Niger Delta as one of "the more pernicious forms of injustice along the petroleum commodity chain."

Habila uses the kidnapping of Isabel Floode as a narrative tactic to place the two reporters, Rufus and Zak on the scene to enable them to narrate the realities of the Niger

Delta conflict. Moreover, as reporters their duty is to “decide how to assemble meaning from an overburden of victims and crimes” (LeMenager 127). Rufus and Zak, the veteran reporter whom the younger man earnestly wishes to emulate, are inadvertently caught up in a kind of petro-chess game played by militant kidnappers and oil companies. The latter require proof that their employees, or their spouses, are still alive before paying out exorbitant amounts of ransom money, hence Rufus on his return to Port Harcourt is summoned to James Floode’s home to assure him that his wife will be rescued. Despite his involuntary submergence in the miasma of the environmental chaos, Rufus struggles to stay neutral and keeps proclaiming the need for journalistic objectivity. This, in turn, parallels the plight of the local communities who, obliged to bear the brunt of the oil wars, caught, as they are, between the rebels and the federal troops, can only survive by staying out of the way of both.

The Land Cries Out

Coole and Frost state that “materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9). Habila’s vivid descriptions of the pestilential landscape and air and the poisoned rivers render the effects of crude oil on human bodies horrifyingly manifest and, I argue, endows the violated landscape with the only means it has to fight back: through a slimy, unsightly fetidness. Oil oozes from the earth and appears to take its revenge for its misuse by human hands. It leaves the waters “oil-polluted”, the land “oil-scorched” (175) and even the oil poured onto the suspected rebels by the Major “found every exposed surface” (57) which corrodes the skin of the unfortunate prisoners as if it were searching for a culprit for all the woes of the Niger Delta. Thus I claim that Habila conceives nature as more than passive or inert and agrees with Iheka’s view that “humans possess and share agency with the landscape” (*Naturalizing Africa* 4). The villagers are clearly located within a natural environment that is in constant flux. The narrative strategy Habila uses goes beyond prosopopeia as the text suggests that the border between sentient and nonsentient entities is flimsy or at best questionable. In this way, the fourth actor of the novel obliges us “to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency” (Coole & Frost 9).

The novel opens with Rufus’s narration of the events of the ninth day of their quest and the reader is confronted almost immediately with the eerie, dystopian landscape that will accompany the journalists throughout their journey:

A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia was strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of wide cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. ... Behind one of the houses we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers. ... Soon we were in a dense mangrove swamp; the water underneath us had turned foul and sulphurous; Hanging roots ... grew out of the water like proboscis gasping for air. (8-9)

As an example of the vocal plea of the abused land, the grass defies the challenge of the abandoned oil machinery and forces its way through the gaps of the concrete platform. Likewise, the maggots continue the cycle of life and death and the mangrove swamp struggles to survive the violation of its depths. Any previously conceived idea of nature being separate from humanity and immutable is belied by the landscape in *Oil on Water* which cries out through “the ever-present pipelines, criss-crossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old shriveled hand, and sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall” (175).

Habila's landscape is neither inanimate nor inert. The villages may be abandoned by their former human inhabitants, but “a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return” (9), and in fact “[t]he houses seemed to belong more to the trees and forest behind them than they did to a domestic human settlement” (11). The land fights on to survive, the mangrove roots gasp for air amid the foul and sulphurous water: “a rank smell wafted from its [the well's] hot depths Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil” (9). Nature's response to such blatant exploitation is for the water to emit a “foul smell” and a constant “itch on our grime-smearred faces” (10). The shape-shifting river, grim and desolate, together with the penetrating smell of corruption, permeate the novel forcing the crimes committed against nature to take their place centre stage.

The water took on a million different forms as we glided on it. Sometimes it was a snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous. Sometimes it was an old jute rope, frayed and wobbly and breaking into jagged, feathery ends, the fresh water abruptly replaced by a thick marshy tract of mangrove standing over still, brackish water that lapped at the adventitious roots. ... Sometimes it was an arrow, straight and unerring, taking us on its tip for miles and miles, the foul smell of the swamps replaced by the musky, energizing river smell. (33-34)

The agency of nature is nowhere more powerful than in Habila's insistence on the smell of oil that seeps through the delta vegetation: “The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench ... the same indefinable sadness in the air” (9).

While the land and the water have suffered at the hands of human hubris, which has ridden roughshod over the interests of the rest of the natural world, Habila also testifies to the mindless cruelty suffered by the ill-fated villagers, caught between the two warring factions. In the following scene, the fuzzy boundary between sentient and non-sentient matter—the villages and the landscape—is poignantly drawn. Both entities suffer the suffocating effects of oil spills because it is, as Coole and Frost claim, “a question of degree more than of kind” (21). One of the most disturbing episodes in the novel is the punishment meted out by the Major to the group of local people he accuses of consorting with the rebels. The villagers are regularly drenched with petrol poured from a watering can at the major's order. Even the ten-year-old boy, Michael, the son of the boatman who ferries Rufus and Zak around, does not escape from the “brutal anointing ... the reek of petrol hanging in the air, pungent, acrid” (55). The Major took his revenge on a rich boy

who had raped his daughter, crippling him for life, for which he was court-martialed and posted to the Niger Delta as a punishment. His bitterness for the crime committed against his daughter and his own relegation turns into relentless anger against the helpless villagers who literally have oil culture rammed down their throats. As the doctor at the Major's camp tells Rufus, "It's the oil and the fighting. It affects everyone in a strange way. ... this place is a dead place, a place for dying" (90). The scene ironically recalls the villagers' desire for oil, the "orange fire" (91) that they were convinced "was a sign, the fulfilment of some covenant with God" (92) because "Oil [has become] synonymous with development, modernity, and 'the good life,' a notion that operates on multiple levels: economic, cultural, geopolitical, and – crucially [...] infrastructural" (Macdonald 39). Dr. Dagogo-Mark's words of warning to the communities about the health hazards that the continuous gas flaring³ would cause go unheeded: "those whom the disease doesn't kill, the violence does.... I tell you there's more need for gravediggers than for a doctor" (93).

Likewise, Rufus's sister, Boma, is an embodiment of the horrors of the oil spills. She becomes a victim of an explosion, indirectly caused by their father. Like many impoverished people of the area, Rufus's father had sunk into a state of self-hatred and earned a rudimentary living buying or stealing petrol from burst oil pipes. The petrol thus procured was stored in drums in a barn and sold on the black market. Lack of proper safety precautions leads to a fire and Boma is permanently disfigured, both physically and psychologically until the end of the novel when she finds calm and self-esteem on Irikefe Island, an oasis of peace and harmony within the turbulent oil-infested waters of the delta. The two journalists find refuge on this island, a haven of tranquility, seemingly untouched by the oil warfare being waged in the vicinity. Habila creates this idyllic retreat in the midst of the murky waters of the Niger Delta creeks where Rufus and Zak are taken after being attacked by a group of militants and deprived of their boat. The worshippers, as they call themselves, live on Irikefe in harmony with their natural surroundings and immune to the political and economic battles being fought around them. It is a place where "time seemed suspended and inconsequential" (85). Gloria, the nurse on the island, tells Rufus about the history and rationale of Irikefe:

The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. That was when priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the sea. The land needed to be cleaned of blood, and pollution ... we have managed to keep this island free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence. (130)

However, despite the beauty and peace of Irikefe, it is not totally safe from the oil pollution: "These islands used to be a big habitat for bats; now only a few dozen remain here and there... Gas flares. They kill them. Not only the bats, other flying creatures as well" (129).

³ For further information about the consequences of gas flaring see www.aaas.org/page/eyes-nigeria-gas-flaring

Irikefe stands out as “a place of healing” (216) amid the turbulent waters of the Niger Delta. It is where Boma finally finds the peace and psychological balance that she has lost in her accident: “I can feel myself relaxing in a way I haven’t in a long time. My spirit feels settled” (215). Even after finding itself in the midst of the ambush between the militants searching for alleged informers and the soldiers on routine patrol, who together reduce the island to “mostly ashes and rubble” (152), the island of Irikefe clearly exemplifies what Susie O’Brien refers to when she describes resilience thus: “a hallmark of resilience thinking is the claim that it represents a new path, a clear advance over the previous model of sustainability as an approach to resource management” (284). The violent history of south-east Nigeria, which moved from the slave trade to the palm oil trade to crude oil extraction from the 1950s onwards, remains inscribed on the landscape as DeLoughrey and Handley claim that “the land and even the ocean become all the more crucial as recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography” (8). The priests and worshippers build up the community again, once the soldiers withdraw, and Irikefe thus bounces back to life showing the rest of the Delta creeks that there is always hope and the possibility of rebirth even though past iniquities cannot be forgotten. In this way Habila concludes the novel on a relatively optimistic note that life must and will go on despite earlier failures. However, in as far as a novel can reflect the real world it fictionalizes, Patrick Naagbantou, a conflict analyst with the British Council who founded the Center for Environment, Human Rights and Development in Port Harcourt, takes a far more pessimistic view since he does not feel anything has changed in terms of the Niger Delta environment. He points out that: “The benefits of oil revenue are still elusive. Delta communities still have no electricity, no basic services. And the oil spills keep happening” (“Anger”).

Conclusion: We are the Delta

-Does your group have a name?

-No! We used to have a name, but no more. That is for children and idiots. We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand. (149)

This very powerful statement made by the men imprisoned by the Major summarises the theme of *Oil on Water*. The victim of the barbarity inflicted on the Niger Delta is the very earth from which the crude oil is extracted. The human participants in the environmental disaster share part, if not all, of the blame for disturbing the ecosystem of the region through greed, envy, lack of foresight and just plain stupidity. Even the villagers, who have paid the highest price, environmentally, socially, and economically, in the years since oil was first discovered, have fallen prey to the lure of petromodernity and thus cannot escape from their share of responsibility, however limited. The land and the waterways are placed on the sacrificial altar in honour of the deity Oil. However, nature in *Oil on Water* is agentic, that is, far from being a passive participant, it strikes back through Habila’s powerful prose. The river assumes a subject position even though the people themselves seem to have abandoned the struggle. Habila gives voice to the devastated

land in order to demand an urgent need for action to stop any further destruction caused by mindless oil extraction. In *Oil on Water*, narratives of resistance are downplayed as the reader's attention is drawn to the everyday experiences of environmental degradation which, I claim, places the land itself centre stage. The Nigerian government continues to rely on the military to silence the dissenting voices of the local people but can do nothing to silence the anguish of the desecrated waterways. Despite worldwide awareness, the promise of a massive clean-up launched by the current Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari in June 2016, ("Buhari to kick off") and a UN report that urged government and oil company action, many communities still lack lighting and basic services, and fishing and farming is impossible in the many polluted areas ("Anger"). Decades will have to pass before all the swamps, creeks, fishing grounds and mangroves are restored after so many oil spills and gas flaring. Thus, the land and the water must still cry out for justice for many years to come. One wonders if they will have the patience to wait.

Submission received 30 January 2020

Revised version accepted 4 February 2021

Works Cited

- AAAS American Association for the Advancement of Science. "Eyes on Nigeria: Gas Flaring." nd. www.aaas.org/page/eyes-nigeria-gas-flaring
- Afam Ifedi, J.P. and J. Ndumbe Anyu. "'Blood Oil' Ethnicity and Conflict in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria." *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, Winter, 2011, pp. 74-92.
- Agary, Kaine. *Yellow-Yellow*. Dtalkshop, 2006.
- "Anger over enduring 'environmental horror' in oil-rich, polluted Niger Delta." *The Guardian*. 9th November 2015. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/nov/09/anger-environmental-in-oil-rich-polluted-niger-delta-ogoniland-ken-saro-wiwa?CMP=tw t a-environment b-gdneco?CMP=tw t a-environment b-gdneco
- Barrett, Ross and Daniel Worden, editors. *Oil Cultures*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Bassey, Nnimmo. "Trade and human rights in the Niger Delta." *Pambazuka News. Voices for Freedom and Justice*. 1st June 2006. www.pambazuka.org/governance/trade-and-human-rights-niger-delta
- Buell, Frederick. "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance." *Oil Culture*, edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 69-88.
- Coole, Diana and Samantha Frost. "Introducing the New Materialisms." *New Materialism. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 1-43.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth and George B. Handley. "Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth." *Postcolonial Ecologies. Literatures of the Environment*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 3-39.

- Edebor, Solomon Adedokun. "Rape of a Nation: An Eco-critical Reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*." *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol.6, no. 9, 2017, pp. 41-49. DOI: doi.org/10.18533/journal.v6i9.983
- Egya, Sule E. "Eco-human engagement in recent Nigerian poetry in English." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2013, pp. 60-70. DOI: doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.677404
- Habila, Helon. *Oil on Water*. Penguin, 2011.
- Huber, Matthew T. *Lifeblood. Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Ifowodo, Ogaga. *The Oil Lamp: Poems*. Africa World Press, 2006.
- Iheka, Cajetan. "African Literature, Audience, and the Search for the (Non)human." *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*, edited by Moradewun Adejunmobi and Carli Coetzee, Routledge, 2019, pp. 203-214.
- . *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil. Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Macdonald, Graeme. "Containing Oil: The Pipeline to Petroculture." *Petrocultures. Oil, Politics, Culture*, edited by Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, pp. 36-77.
- Naagbantou, Patrick. "Shell has admitted liability but has a long way to go to make amends." *The Guardian*. 4th August 2011. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/04/shell-nigeria-oil-spills
- "Niger Delta oil spills clean-up will take 30 years, says UN", www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/aug/04/niger-delta-oil-spill-clean-up-un 4th August 2011.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Nwaka, Tony. *Lords of the Creek*. AuthorHouse, 2015.
- O'Brien, Susie. "Resilience." *Fueling Culture. 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, edited by Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger, Fordham University Press, 2017, pp. 281-284.
- Okoko, Eno. "Women and Environmental Change in the Niger Delta, Nigeria: Evidence from Ibeno." *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1999, pp. 373-378. DOI: doi.org/10.1080/09663699924944
- Okuyade, Ogaga. "Rethinking Militancy and Environmental Justice: The Politics of Oil and Violence in Nigerian Popular Music." *Africa Today*, vol. 58, no. 1, Fall, 2011, pp. 78-101.
- . "Negotiating Identity in a Vanishing Geography: Home, Environment and Displacement in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*." *Natures of Africa. Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms*, edited by F. Fiona Moolla, Wits University Press, 2016, pp. 212-234.

- Onyema, Chris C. "Alter-Native Press: Implicating Subaltern Discourse in Ogaga Ifowodo's Ecological Poetry." *An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies (LALIGENS)*, vol. 4, no. 2, Serial no. 10, May, 2015, pp. 135-151. DOI: doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v4i2.10
- Saro-Wiwa, Ken. "Complete Statement by Ken Saro-Wiwa To Ogoni Civil Disturbances Tribunal." 21st September 1995. ratical.org/corporations/KSWstmt.html
- Shaban, Abdur Rahman Alfa. "Buhari to kick off \$1bn cleanup of oil ravaged Niger Delta region", *Africanews.com*, 2016. <http://www.africanews.com/2016/06/02/buhari-to-kick-off-1bn-cleanup-of-oil-ravaged-niger-delta-region/>
- Shain, Richard M. "War of Words. Two Niger Delta texts on the 'Biafran' war." 1993. hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4761530.0006.010
- Slaymaker, William. "Natural Connections: Ecocriticism in the Black Atlantic." *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol.1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 129-139.
- Watts, Michael, Ike Okonta, and Dimieari Von Kemedi. "Niger Delta: Economies of Violence." Working Papers. 2004. geog.berkeley.edu/ProjectsResources/ND%20Website/NigerDelta/pubs.html
- Watts, Michael. "Oil Frontiers. The Niger Delta and the Gulf of Mexico." *Oil Culture*, edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 189-210.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. "Behind the Headlines." *American Book Review*, vol 33, no. 3, 2012, pp. 13-14.
- . "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited. Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta." *Oil Culture*, edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, pp. 211-225.