

Waterscapes of Waste and Wealth: Environmental Pollution in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

ABSTRACT Helon Habila's 2011 novel, *Oil on Water*, fictionalizes the socio-political effect of petrol extraction on Nigeria and relies on bodies of water to convey its focus on environmental pollution by constructing through imagery and sentient personification the decay, foulness, and death in the aftermath of oil pollution. Thus, this study draws from Elizabeth DeLoughrey's examination of Atlantic modernity as a receptacle of wasted lives. In the novel, petroleum modernity's violence is embodied in the way the bodies of water are burdened with the weight of oil pollution, which has a telling effect on the ecosystem and the lives of the characters. Therefore, the water bodies can be read as signs of the burdens of industrial modernity's violence enacted on certain bodies and places. The subsisting extractive regime has resulted in a historically violent and destructive inscription on the novel's waterscapes.

KEYWORDS Helon Habila, Niger Delta, environment, water, oil

Introduction

Much has been written on the environmental harm committed by oil multinationals in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. These writings have amplified the discourse of the resource curse and have further exposed the ecological degradation that is reshaping the economy and geopolitics of the Niger Delta. This does not neglect the fact that adequate attention has still not been paid to the oil spills and environmental damage in the region; that is, there is continued invisibility in global awareness about the catastrophe, which is caused by the power dynamics in the world and the spatial and temporal distance of the hazards. Environmental scholars interested in

the Niger Delta have all noted these points. I seek to further the debate by pointing at how, in Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2011), water and waterscapes direct and shape the lives and geographies of the Niger Delta and subaltern subjectivities that are represented as forgotten, suppressed, and avoided. Furthermore, water bodies are viable environmental categories that squash the nature/culture dualism of established Western/Northern thought and specific environmental concerns. However, they carry the weight of oil pollution in more critical ways as they occupy important positions in structuring the novel's narrative frame.

A World Shaped by Water and Waste

Elizabeth DeLoughrey, in her article "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," uses the concept of heavy water to demonstrate "an oceanic stasis that signals the dissolution of wasted lives" (DeLoughrey 2010, 703) in Atlantic modernity. She discusses further "how Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present" (2010, 704). DeLoughrey is concerned chiefly with the traumatic, violent, and military history that the Atlantic embodies and its import to enslavement and neo-imperial history. Accounts of brutal Atlantic modernity of heavy waters are extant on the Atlantic portion of the West African subcontinent, where corporal and environment violence manifest in uncontrolled waste production, the domination of oil multinationals, and military complexes of government apparatuses. Here, the focus is on the Niger Delta, where water bodies can be designated as heavy because they contain the superfluity of petrol production and the wasted lives of ongoing industrial modernity fuelled by petrol energy.

Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* shows this heaviness by presenting land- and waterscapes that are burdened by the imagery of foulness caused by the waste matter of oil on water; this leads to environmental, social, and physical decay and death. Therefore, the water bodies are an apt metonymy for the ecological destruction and ontological instability that follow the extractive oil economy. While this article understands that the topography of the Niger Delta includes lands, creeks, swamps, rivers, and an ocean, it argues that Helon Habila utilizes the oil excess and dead matter on the bodies of water categorically to illustrate the extent of environmental pollution around the Niger Delta. In this way, the bodies of water align with DeLoughrey's use of heavy water to describe the Atlantic Ocean as a receptor of dead weight and modernity's waste, such that the

history of modernity “is registered by the heavy metal waste in its waters [...] and the rise of modernity [w]as reflected in its maritime waste” (707–8). Though DeLoughrey’s work concentrates on the traumatic memory of enslavement and the “violent corporal history of the Atlantic” (703), her idea can be extrapolated to the issue of environmental degradation and waters in the Niger Delta as the aqua-physical environment of the Niger Delta is, in many ways, heavy with ecological waste production of oil exploration and industrialization. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this production of waste is an inevitable outcome of modernization and “an inseparable accompaniment of modernity” (Bauman 2004, 5). In this way, one may understand the production of petrol waste and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta as consequences of industrial modernity’s dependence on energy and fossil fuel and the continuous extractive economy which was engendered by (post)colonial exploitation. Oil thus contradictorily marks modern development as a significant source of energy for contemporary subsistence in the way that Stephanie LeMenager has described as “a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms” (2014, 6), and on the other hand, oil results in high carbon emissions and environmental pollution in many places. As a result, oil contributes to the socio-cultural and materialist production of place as habitable or inhabitable and alters Indigenous people’s cultural and economic practices through the chemical and toxic transformation of the environment. In the case of the Indigenes of the Niger Delta, the “economies of violence”¹ that oil extraction, transformation, distribution, and financialization manufacture are detrimental to land and water.

This article focuses on the marine environment and argues that there seems to be a binary opposition that constructs land as lived space and water as threatening, vast, and uninhabitable in studies of the biophysical circumstances of life. Antonis Balasopoulos (2006) and Daniel Brayton (2012) have, for example, discussed how the Hellenic, Greek, and Judeo-Christian cultures constructed the sea and ocean as unstable, dangerous, vast, and chaotic. This false contradiction has been disputed by scholars like Paul Gilroy (1993) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2010), who demonstrate that the Atlantic constitutes the epistemologies, cultures, and histories of many people. In his well-cited work *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant (1997) has shown how, beyond the rhetoric of an untameable empty nature, the Atlantic Ocean contains the traumatic memories of enslavement, shared knowledge, and erasure. All these contribute to understanding the

1 Michael Watts (2004, 55) uses this term to point at the series of conflicts, violence and ungovernability that oil exploration produces.

ocean and other water bodies not as “empty” space but as space shaped by experiences, epistemologies, history, and politics. Similarly, Stefan Helmreich has pointed at the inadequacies of conceptualizing seas as “nature” in binary opposition to the category “culture.” He instead argues that “water as culture, meanwhile, can materialize as a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel, poison, and disaster” (Helmreich 2011, 132). This deconstruction of dichotomies between water bodies as nature, as opposed to land as culture, will animate my arguments. Therefore, the conception of water here hinges on the grounds that waterscapes are multiplex, natural, and cultural phenomena, well imbued with symbolisms and embodied with the tangible materiality of nature. Thus, through its geographical, historical, social, cultural, and religious interaction with the bodies of water, the Niger Delta merges the categories of culture and nature and provides a pretext to understanding the social, cultural, and environmental impact of oil pollution in the area, as represented in *Oil on Water*.

The emphasis on land- and waterscapes serves two purposes in the novel. Firstly, by reading the contiguity of waterscapes and landscapes, the novel defies the premise of water as vast and uncountable nature that is opposed to culture. Instead, the novel’s spatial setting is represented in such a way that the imagined emptiness of water bodies is cut into tiny lived spaces through which characters have a sense of place. Hence, narrative events and actions occur on land and water, and both spaces have social and historical importance for the novel’s plot. In this way, the novel participates in the deconstruction of earlier narrative writings like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which saw the ocean and seas as timeless and outside history and merely a passage for adventure. On the contrary, in *Oil on Water*, the seas and water bodies bear marks of both human and natural history as petrol waste ecologically, toxically, and spatially alters the biosphere of the represented Niger Delta. Secondly, *Oil on Water* continues in the tradition of environmental writing in the Niger Delta that uses the trope of polluted oily water to depict the extent of environmental degradation. The environmental narratives of Kaine Agary (2006) and May Ifeoma Nwoye (2015) and the poems and writings of Nnimmo Bassey (2002) have used this trope of polluted rivers and ocean in their writings, often to show the grotesque extent of oil extraction pollution. Furthermore, Oyeniya Okunoye (2008) and Sule Emmanuel Egya (2016) have analysed, in social, historical, political, and ecological ways, how two rivers in the Niger Delta, the rivers Nun and Omoja, have symbolic and spiritual importance for the representations of the environment in the works of writers like Gabriel Okara and Tanure Ojaide. In Habila’s writing, what is also evident is how land- and waterscapes are mapped

out and appropriated by individuals and multinationals to demonstrate the disproportionality in oil wealth benefits.

Therefore, by focusing on the rivers, creeks, sea, and islands, the novel demonstrates how the political economy of oil values financialization over the environment by fictionalizing multinational oil pollution as destructive of flora, fauna, and the ways of being of the characters. The Indigenous people represented in the novel have to contend and live with the consequences of a despoiled environmental space. The novel relies heavily on watery topographies to convey its aspect of environmental pollution by constructing, through imagery and sentient personification, the tragic experiences and conditions of being invisible, which are mostly fictionalized through foulness, grime, and subjugation of both people and “nature.” The text’s reliance on waterscapes is, in fact, remarkable when one considers the cultural, religious, and economic importance of water to the people of the Niger Delta since the “Delta’s myriad rivers and creeks not only define a geographic region; they also form a cultural confluence” (Anderson and Peek 2002, 13) through which fishermen, farmers, and traders carry out their economic activities. This “water ethos” carries an aesthetic, religious, and artistic significance, as shrines, masks, and myths are usually invested with a thematic of water and water spirits. This points at the imbrication of water bodies in the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta, which in many ways is reflected in the way bodies of water imaginatively mark the economic, social, and geographical world of their artefacts, albeit in complex heterogeneous ways. Importantly, by reading the transformational force of fossil energy on water bodies, this study does two things. Firstly, it recentres environmental concern from a land-centric discussion to an encompassing biophysical consideration that takes into account bodies of water. Secondly, this study reads Habila’s focus on water as a strategic ploy to address the environmental disruption of oil exploration and its human and socio-cultural cost.

Analysing *Oil on Water*: Waterscapes and Environmental Pollution

Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* narrates the adventure of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, in search of a kidnapped British lady, Isabel Floode, who is also the wife of a multinational oil employee. Presented through a homodiegetic narrator, the text moves through the rivers, creeks, and islands of the Niger Delta, and shows the existential conditions of inhabitants of the island and villages like Chief Ibiram. Chief Malabo, Boma

and Gloria, whose lifeworlds have been altered by the polluted environment. The novel is at pains to show the many actors, like state operatives, militant groups, and journalists like Zaq and Rufus, who shape the perception, materiality, and discourse of the environmental catastrophe. Consequently, *Oil on Water* portrays the environmental injustice and the “resource curse” of petrol in the Niger Delta and creates a fictional account of the ebbs and flows of petroleum prosperity, the extreme poverty, the suffering from the deteriorating environment, and deaths due to toxins, the highhandedness of militants, and government-sanctioned violence. Objects like the pipeline are metonymies for the extractive and appropriative quality of multinational oil companies. The novel then participates in a depiction of petro-culture where the petro-economy results in economic inequality, environmental devastation, and deaths. By petro-culture, I imply that the novel, thematically and formally, takes into account the distinct ways that fossil fuel shapes the social and economic lifeworlds of a text; such texts consider and demonstrate “all points or links in oil’s value chain from (semi-)periphery to core (refined) pipeline liquid to global stock liquidity” (Macdonald 2017, 300). In *Oil on Water*, petrol destructively alters the fictional landscape and creates an immiserated class of Indigenous people whose livelihood is threatened by the polluted environment and existential violence of national militaristic powers and an equally violent guerrilla militia. However, the devastation highlights the socio-economic dynamics of the environmental threat in antagonistic terms in such a way that the producers of pollution and the victims of oil pollution reside in different locations. Byron Caminero-Santangelo has read this in terms of privilege and power for the likes of James Floode. What is important for this study is how the islands and villages are acted upon and shaped to produce “a geography of injustice shaped by oil” (Caminero-Santangelo 2016, 366). Consequently, the division of geographies into hospitable and habitable is an anthropocentric domination and mapping of nature that is shaped by the structures of powers and the oil economy.

Furthermore, geographical features like the creeks, rivers, and sea are depicted as toxic spaces and waste depository. In this way, they carry the burden of oil pollution and relate the precarious conditions left in the wake of uncontrolled and irresponsible oil extraction. Through the waters, the narrator mostly conveys the imagery of pollution that evokes the sense of putrid smell and hideous sight. In contrast to the serene and sublime qualities usually adopted to describe oceans and mangroves as spaces of natural beauty, like in John Steinbeck’s *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) and Carl Safina’s *Song for the Blue Ocean* (1999), this region is not depicted as a pastoral space of natural beauty but as a degraded space that struggles

with its former glory of being home to a diverse ecosystem. The ocean, rivers, creeks, and islands of the Niger Delta are described as diseased, evident in Rufus's belief that it is "somewhere in these godforsaken waters, that's where he [Zaq] must have picked it [his fever] up. There are plenty of bugs flourishing here" (Habila 2011, 90). The novel is at pains to link the ominous waterscape to the oil and belligerence on the island. The doctor confirms this position by connecting death and decay to the "faraway orange sky" (90). Furthermore, by constructing a temporal frame that shows a before-and-after causal chain, the doctor acknowledges the deadly power of oil infrastructure. This historical knowledge is likewise validated by the scientific authority of the doctor, who, through his samplings in the laboratory, is able to measure the steady elevation of toxicity in the water (92).

However, this dis-ease is not restricted to a particular region or the villages where the doctor carries out his sampling. Instead, the overreaching fluidity and viscosity of oil permeate the water bodies that are contiguous with the area of pollution. To narrate the extent of the pollution, the novel reiterates the islands' turbulent historical trajectory as a site of multinational oil extraction by recognizing the traces of its once beautiful, idyllic diversity depicted by the seeming environmental sanity when "these islands used to be a big habitat for bats" (129) and when "the sea was just outside our door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives" (26). Contemporary extractive activities within and around water bodies are therefore constructed as progressively destructive enterprises that are calamitous to the social formation of the Indigenes, sense of place and the biosphere.

The link between pollution and multinational extractive recklessness is further demonstrated through signs of disruption in the ecosystem by the novel's formal aspects and by its employment of imagery of visual and olfactory dis-ease caused by eco-imperialism. The novel utilizes a formal structure that evinces entanglements and disruptions, which is evident in the use of a nonlinear story whereby the novel begins at the end, and the end is not an end but a further descent; this is crucial in articulating the interruptions and retrievals of memory which allows going back to verify a pre-extractive time. In this way, the story thematizes and formally represents the social and militarized conditions of places subjected to brutal national and oil multinational regimes. The figuration of populated water further enhances the story aspect as a propellant for militant action. The militants are spurred to action by the visibility of oil on their water. The concreteness of the pollution bears significance in how it disrupts the people's livelihood and how it leads to ill health. Hence, the militants justify their belligerency on account of the material reality of gas flaring

and oil on water; as the leader of a militant group, Professor, tells Rufus, “we are for the people. Everything we do is for the people [...]. Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water” (209–10).

Habila’s narrative in this way articulates the violence, deadness, and dis-ease caused by oil exploration on land and in the water. The bodies of water in the fictive Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* bear witness to a dead space emptied by a consumerist modernization that is dependent on oil and fossil fuels. As an embodiment of foulness, death, and pollution, water bodies are inscribed with a heaviness that carries the weight of the death of humans, flora, and fauna. This image of polluted water bodies cuts across the novel, and the reader from the very first pages of the novel is already aware of the ecological grotesquery as the journalists “followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots” (9). Consequently, the narrator shows that the deadness of the water is a consequence of environmental catastrophe produced by irresponsible oil exploration. To this end, water is burdened with the weight of oil, as depicted in the title, *Oil on Water*. The helplessness and vulnerability of all forms of life to the environmental burden of oil are then described in a representative mode that evokes deadness. The asphyxiating and hostile force of oil on water assumes an agency of destruction in its comparison to the hangman later in the novel: “the weight of the oil tight like a hangman’s noose round the neck of whatever form lay underneath” (215). The figure of the hangman and their noose is here haunting and ambivalent. Constituted in this figure is the state’s repressive power to negotiate with oil multinationals and seek foreign investments that may be beneficial to an elite few. Therefore, the denigration of the environment demonstrated by a polluted waterscape provides gruesome and gory details of multinational oil activity and militaristic invasions in the Niger Delta. This can well be understood in the sense of Rob Nixon’s explication of the resource curse, whereby

a mineral strike, though less immediately spectacular than a missile strike, is often more devastating in the long term, bringing in its wake environmental wreckage, territorial dispossession, political repression and massacres by state forces doing double duty as security forces for unanswerable petroleum transnationals or mineral cartels. (Nixon 2011, 70)

The extent of the resource curse appears to be uniform around the islands and villages as the novel adopts a comparative descriptive model to show

that “the next village was almost a replica of the last” (9). The novel’s aesthetic choices also demonstrate the similarities and uniformity of environmental degradation that cut through multiple islands and villages by juxtaposing villages and islands in the same chapter in such a way that it is at times difficult for the reader to tell the difference between one island and another. This maze of spatial interpolations serves as a mechanism to articulate the (dis)similarities of victimhood, degradation, and loss.

Nevertheless, *Oil on Water* is careful not to attribute a broad human agency and responsibility to these destructions. The novel carefully presents certain characters and agents as culpable in producing the ruins while also creating actants who, on the other hand, are mostly victims but are more considerate of the consequences of their interaction with the environment. Furthermore, the forceful appropriation of land and the mapping of space into useful and non-useful places are, in a sense, a means of social and spatial segregation enabled by the water bodies. Port Harcourt, the seat of the oil multinational’s operations, is mapped out and populated by a demographic group that is sustained by oil wealth. This is important in reading Helon Habila’s novel, as the leading characters, Rufus and Zaq, are depicted as venturing from Port Harcourt into a form of Conradian “heart of darkness” distinguished by its maze of mangroves and high fever. The novel contrasts two coastal places’ prosperity and geography to represent the asymmetric prosperity that oil wealth embodies. Thus, Port Harcourt serves as a foil to the impoverished villages and islands where oil exploration and the attendant oil spill are the order of the day. This contrastive spatial configuration is further heightened by the presentation of Bar Beach in the commercial city of Lagos.

Bar Beach, swelling with new oil wealth and hedonism, stands as a symbol of capitalistic abundance and military irresponsibility from the oil boom’s degradation of the environment. At Bar Beach, there are “makeshift bar rooms and restaurants lined up along the beach” (121). When juxtaposed with the villages that Rufus narrates, Lagos stands in superfluous contrast to the Niger Delta islands and villages, which are deprived of government development, with “abandoned villages, the hopeless landscape and the gas flare that always burned in the distance” (Habila 2011, 24). The harmful dimension of oil extraction is then constricted to a particular space, a form of environmental red-zoning, one might say.

It may be argued that on a national level the novel presents a spatial narrative frame that depicts the plundering of the Niger Delta for another region’s infrastructural “development” and prosperity. The people are thus doubly alienated from the resource wealth of their land. On the one hand, an extractive economy exists that transports the region’s wealth away to

distant countries through multinational oil companies. On the other hand, through its power to determine oil prospecting, tax, and “legitimacy” for all lands within its sovereign territory, the nation-state of Nigeria selectively directs oil wealth to specific regions and elites. In this way, the state’s institutional apparatus focuses on some regions, producing some form of capitalistic consumerist and flourishing economy.

Consequently, oil shapes the production of space and inequalities, as the water bodies act as boundaries and are adopted as exclusionary matters related to the construction of social life. Because of this, places like Port Harcourt and Lagos (61), two other coastal cities, are depicted as prosperous and sites of opportunity even though the wealth and rentier economy are built on the oil resources of the impoverished oil-producing islands and villages. Despite the oil wealth, characters are soon disappointed at the vague opportunities in these places, as Rufus, for example, realizes, when he arrives in Port Harcourt for the first time, that the oil wealth is only available to a select few.

Despite these exclusionary spatial politics, the novel retains the ownership of space for the Indigenous dwellers by depicting a localized sense and knowledge of a place, especially in the knowledge of the water networks. It is, in fact, only the locals who know and understand the labyrinth of waterways and villages. For example, none of the first journalists recruited to look for Ms. Floode have heard of Irikefe (Habila 2011, 78). Therefore, despite the presumably superior navigational technology of the multinational oil companies, it is the characters Rufus and Zaq who are contracted to penetrate the dense network of rivers and islands in search of Isabel. These characters also have to rely on information from the islanders and villagers they encounter. The bodies of water these characters navigate construct barricades around what forms of knowledge and information they can obtain. Narratively, James Floode, the multinational oil expatriate whose wife Zaq and Rufus are recruited to find, becomes a synecdoche for multinational oil extractors. By shutting out James Floode from the island and depriving him of knowledge of his wife’s whereabouts, the narrative subverts the hegemony of expatriate expert knowledge of place that is derived from geolocational gadgets and multinational proprietorship.

Representing Environmental Pollution in *Oil on Water*

In *Oil on Water*, water bodies shape narrative linearity as the traversing of waterscapes delineates major chapters and sub-chapters of the novel; furthermore, as already discussed above, the novel’s environment is one

in which land- and waterscapes interpenetrate. Importantly, through water bodies, the text mostly conveys the effect of oil pollution; this is done through the imagery of suppression and weight: the environment is asphyxiated under the burden of pollution and waste. The title of the novel itself points at this imagery through its use of the preposition “on,” which shows a hierarchized relation between oil and water, and pollution on water. As a signifier of oppression, oil represents the financial and military strength of the government’s oppressive apparatuses in league with oil multinationals and further depicts the tedious burden and excess of petro-modernity on the environment. Lives and the environment are thus depicted in their wasted states resulting from oil pollution, mainly as the novel portrays the physical decay and death that pollution heralds quite early in the novel when the journalists encounter “strange objects [...]: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly with black birds perching on it” (Habiba 2011, 34). Death and waste are tropes that the novel sustains to articulate the negative impact of irresponsible oil exploration in the Niger Delta.

Therefore, the novel demonstrates the transformative action of oil on water by depicting the transmutation of one of the waters into an embodiment of offensive matter, with Rufus narrating, “the water underneath us had turned foul and sulphurous” (9). In using the past perfect tense of the verb of change, the narrator traces a historical dimension to the pollution of water in describing a completed process of “change.” The reader is left to imagine the condition before the metamorphosis of the water into brackish, oily, and dirty, which is only traceable through memory and recollections by Rufus and the other characters. Effectively, in his encounter with Chief Ibiram, one of the village chiefs, Rufus learns about how the village was a paradise where the dwellers “lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy” (38). This memory of the past, narrated through the elderly chief, when juxtaposed with the present situation of the village that Rufus and Zaq encounter, shows a destructive environmental metamorphosis that contrasts the earlier tranquil state of nature against the “new” condition of living that has left the villagers in unliveable conditions. Similarly, the island nurse, Gloria, points out to Rufus that “these islands used to be a big habitat for bats; only a few dozen remain [...]. Gas flares. They kill them” (129). Oil, therefore, leaves in its trail terrible devastation on both water and land. However, it appears that from the early days of oil exploration to the present that was being narrated, there is a sense of recurrent violent circles; this is evident in the sense of similarity in regard to how time is rendered in a repetitive gesture. This repetition evinces a temporality of

horror, where destruction is cast as recurring and non-remediated. In fact, the memory of the beginning of the pollution is unrecoverable as the narrator Rufus demonstrates, “I am walking down a familiar path, with incidents neatly labelled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand and a fog rises and covers the faces and places and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost” (1). When one considers the age difference between Chief Ibiram and Rufus, it becomes evident that oil pollution and exploration shape the memories of Rufus and the younger characters like Boma, such that the only past that Rufus can retrieve is one conditioned by gas flares and oil on water. The fogginess of the past resulting from gas flares illustrates a disruption of the social, cultural, economic, and political pasts.

In addition, the juxtaposition of the past and the present establishes a critical discourse on the claims of the collective anthropogenic destruction of the environment. The extent of the human as a collective geological force is underlined through the novel’s attention to the scale and extent of the destruction wrought by different actors. The multinational executive and the violent national agents are depicted, on the one hand, as significant destroyers of the environment. On the other hand, the islands’ inhabitants take from the ocean for daily sustenance; a symbiotic relationship of mutual respect exists between the ocean, environment, and the individuals. A textual example is the worshippers of the waters who are one with the waters, during their ceremonies “swaying rhythmically, imitating the movement of the waves.—They believe in the healing powers of the sea” (127). Nevertheless, the novel does not paint a romanticized relationship. The villagers of the island had once despoiled the island by bloodletting through intra-community violence. Nevertheless, they tried to move beyond the violence by building a close communion with the sea as “each day the worshippers go in procession to the sea, to bathe in it, to cry in it and to promise never to abominate it ever again” (130).

On the contrary, while the locals aim to keep the sanctity of the water, the outsider force of multinational greed and avarice pollutes the land and water through oil mining, oil spillage, and gas flaring. One may then add that the abomination that the inhabitants aim to evade is reintroduced through the destructive power of land and water damage. The scale of such pollution is also a temporal and spatial issue as the future is threatened and at risk on account of oil pollution; spatially, gas flaring cannot be restricted to space as the distant gas flare is transported and seen in Irikafe. Time here is also problematized on account of oil pollution since the apocalypse is no longer in the future but has already occurred; this is most evident in the eschatological diction of sulphur and death on the

waters of one of the dense mangrove swamps where underneath Rufus and Zaq's hired boat the water had turned "foul and sulphurous; insects rose from the surface in swarms to settle in a mobile cloud [...] The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter [... they] saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (9). Here the apocalyptic quality of this scene derives from the materiality of environmental catastrophe and its gothic aftermath as the two men travel on water. The imagery evokes deadness and irrevocable devastation through its familiar association with similar apocalyptic tropes and metaphors in the Bible. These images work in two dimensions. Firstly, by focusing on the mortal bodies, they communicate the annihilating powers of irresponsible oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Secondly, the deployment of "foul and sulphurous" imagery hints at the hellish conditions that activities like gas flaring and oil spillage engender. In this case, drawing on its parallels to the biblical hell that burns with sulphur and brimstone, the result of petro-extraction can only lead to eternal torment and Hadean existential conditions.

Scholars like Leerom Medovoi (2014), Sule Egya (2016), and Maximillian Feldner (2018) have majorly discussed *Oil on Water* in light of its representation of petro-violence and oil pollution. While this has in many ways shown the aesthetic and thematic elements that the novel employs to depict the dire environmental conditions of the Niger Delta, it is essential to note the futuristic outlook of the novel as it envisions a world of oncoming threat from water. Hence the novel pays attention to the anticipated climatic disaster of rising water levels, which will further pose significant environmental risk to and will cause crisis for the Niger Delta. Thus, when Rufus watches a science-fiction movie (presumably Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*) "about a submerged world [where] the polar ice cap has melted and land has sunk under water" (Habila 2011, 101), the planet-wide post-apocalyptic future of the movie draws attention to the futurity of environmental risk. However, Rufus's reaction to the film raises the question of whether a mode of environmental narrative like apocalyptic fiction can sufficiently stimulate interest and action as regards the oncoming climate change disaster. Although Rufus feels empathetic towards the plight of the characters, he is, in fact, unmoved to action because of its distance in time. The lack of urgency towards such threats and the apocalyptic mode that the film utilizes to convey its message raises the question of the affective effect of such futuristic representations when environmental threats are ongoing in many parts of the Global South. In contrast, the environmental risk that *Oil on Water* represents is one already in motion; the materialized

risk threats are further produced by agents whose actions—oil exploration—are directly linked to pollution. It is in this way that Habila's novel may produce an urgent and achievable effect in ending the environmental risk of oil pollution. This is compounded by the fact that the producers of the hazards are not its victims; hence the novel raises ethical and political questions that differentiates it from planetary anthropogenic visions like the one in *Waterworld*.


Conclusion

The extent of environmental damage in the Niger Delta is conveyed mostly through water bodies that evoke foulness, decay, and rot. Toxic components in the waters and the dwindling water organisms represent the environmental degeneration closely linked to oil exploration. As demonstrated above, Helon Habila's 2011 novel *Oil on Water* imaginatively addresses the petro-culture and multinational/government despotism as evident in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The novel depicts the sustained entwinement of ways of life in the post-oil-polluted space at the interface of the global financial system and contemporary postcolonial oppressive regimes as a crucial way of understanding the ecological mess in the Niger Delta. Oil is demonstrated as suppressive on water; it similarly alters the history and ways of life of the novel's Indigenous people. Indeed, by formally juxtaposing the past with the present, the narrative voice evokes a pathos for a past that was environmentally sane by using retroversion to put this death in comparative terms. At different points in the novel, the narrative voice describes a before-oil-exploration period and a period after exploration, with apocalyptic sceneries representing the extent of oil damage.

However, in its representation of such geographical marks like mangrove swamps, seas, and islands that still appear pristine, *Oil on Water* disrupts the romanticist depiction of ocean and wilderness as it presents an environmental context that is both "natural" in its depiction of forests, creeks, islands, and ocean albeit these 'natural' features have been altered by the anthropogenic force of oil pollution. In this way, Habila straddles the binary between inside and outside, within and without, as the panoramic description of the ocean and the environment produces a "nature" that is sublime yet possessing an underbelly that is despoiled and deadly. Perhaps in reference to the fluidity of water bodies, the narrative structure follows this fluidity and interpenetration of land with water in the Niger Delta by annihilating the boundaries between events that happen on water and land with not much textual evidence of change or interruptions. Events in the

chapters interpenetrate one another, creating a maze of interwoven experiences and victimhood. A new category of explanation for the Niger Delta situation is a dystopian wilderness, when one considers the mangrove, creeks, swamps, rivers, and seas seemingly untouched by modern influences but even more so by the fluidity of oil and its ability to permeate and pollute space. The novel disrupts an easy categorization of wilderness as untouched by modernization technologies and urbanity. While the swamps and mangroves maintain trees on the banks (68), hence an implied sense of greenness, the penetrative power of petrol permeates the fictionalized bodies of water, land, and the bodies of the characters as if to insinuate a dystopian wilderness. Hence, contrary to the Thoreauvian “nature,” usually depicted as hospitable, rejuvenating, and welcoming, the penetrative fluidity of oil-stained water and the destruction of livelihood makes the mangrove swamps and islands undesirable and deadly. The green forest, the blue Atlantic Ocean, and islands are disrobed of the self-serving idealizations and symbolisms by multinational corruption and despoliation.

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