From Niger Delta to NATO: Literature as Geopolitical Witness in Nigerian Oil Narratives in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010)

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Abstract
Nigerian oil usually appears in public debate as barrels, revenue and ransom demands. Helon Habila's Oil on Water (2010) asks what those figures leave out. This paper argues that the novel works as geopolitical witness, a literary record of the human cost of the global oil system, made at the point where that system is hardest to see and set against the way distant institutions describe the same oil. Three bodies of thought carry the argument. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence explains why pollution, displacement and delayed death resist reporting. Petrocriticism, drawn from Amitav Ghosh's essay on petrofiction and Stephanie LeMenager's Living Oil, explains how oil shapes feeling, habit and narrative form. Michael Klare's work on resource wars explains why states treat oil supply as a matter of security. The link to NATO is the paper's own claim. The alliance's declarations at Riga in 2006 and Lisbon in 2010 treat the disruption of energy flows as a risk to its members, and they do not address the people who live where the energy is produced. Read against that gap, Habila's journalist narrator, his kidnapped Englishwoman, his army major, his militant Professor and his dispossessed villagers sit at different points on one chain of value. The paper concludes that the novel makes a slow and scattered harm legible without turning it into spectacle, and that it also shows how easily witness becomes one more commodity in the oil economy.

Keywords: *Helon Habila; Niger Delta; slow violence; petrofiction; resource wars; NATO; witness*

1. Introduction

Rufus, the narrator of *Oil on Water*, begins his account by correcting a lie. The fire that wrecked his home town and burned his sister Boma was not a pipeline accident, whatever he told a white man and printed in a published piece; yet it might easily have been one (Habila 11). Nixon explains why such a lie is useful, because violence is usually imagined as a sudden and visible event, and a poisoning spread over years hardly qualifies (2). Rufus's fire is local and dramatic, so it can stand in for the pipeline pollution that has no single date, no single victim and no photograph. This paper argues that Habila's novel is a work of geopolitical witness. The phrase names a literary text that records the cost of the global oil system where that system is hardest to see, and that sets the record against the language distant institutions use for the same oil. The institution chosen here is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Habila never mentions it, and

the paper does not pretend that he does. The connection is the paper's own claim, and it rests on the alliance's published view that a disruption of vital resources can affect the security of its members (NATO, "Riga Summit Declaration" par. 45). That view places harm at the moment the flow stops. The novel shows harm done by the flow while it runs.

Why read a Nigerian novel beside a security alliance of North Atlantic states? Because the novel itself draws the line between them. Its cast includes the wife of a British petroleum engineer, a Nigerian army major, a militant leader who calls himself the Professor and a village chief whose people have been forced to move five times. Each stand at a different point on one chain of value (Habila 39, 116, 145, 167). Rufus travels along that chain by boat, from Port Harcourt into the creeks, and the journey matters more than the plot it serves, since the creeks are where official language gives out. The paper has three aims. It asks how Habila's novel represents the slow harm of oil extraction, how it represents the people who guard and trade oil, and what changes when that representation is read beside the security language of an alliance whose members import oil. The method is close reading of the novel, guided by the four theorists named above and set against the political history of the Delta and two NATO documents. The paper does not claim to cover Habila's other work or the whole body of Delta literature, and it treats the NATO texts as evidence of a way of speaking rather than as a record of what the alliance did in Nigeria. The remaining sections define the terms, review the theory, survey related writing on the Delta and on oil in literature, read the novel closely, and test the limits of the claim in a conclusion.

2. Conceptualization

Witness comes first. In literary study the word means more than seeing. Dori Laub argues that testimony is incomplete until someone listens, so that the witness and the listener make the event together (57-74). Carolyn Forché approaches the same idea from the writer's side, and her anthology treats the poetry of witness as writing marked by the extreme events it carries into public language (29-47). Habila joins both views in one scene. Rufus hears Chief Ibiram's history of his village in a house on stilts, and later carries it out as a reporter, which moves him from listener to speaker (Habila 37-39).

What, then, makes witness geopolitical? Two features do. The text records local harm in an oil-producing place, and it makes that record answer to the way states and alliances speak about oil. The paper therefore uses *geopolitical witness* for a text that sets a village-level account beside an institutional one and lets the gap show. The term is not borrowed from the sources reviewed below. It is built from them, and the reading of Habila is its test.

Slow violence is the second term. Nixon defines it as violence that happens gradually and out of sight, with effects delayed and scattered across time and space, so that it is rarely recognised as violence at all (2). The dead fish that Zaq contemplates on the first morning of the journey is a small case (Habila 13). No inquest will name oil as the killer of one fish, and still the river is dying. Petrofiction and petroculture make up the third pair. Ghosh uses petrofiction for novels that take the meeting of oil companies and local societies as their subject, and he complained in 1992 that such novels barely existed (29). LeMenager widens the field from the novel to daily life, and uses *living oil* for the way petroleum shapes bodies, moods and habits (3). Together the terms put two questions to Habila. Does his novel stage the oil encounter, and does it show oil living inside the people who suffer from it?

Oil diplomacy and resource war come last. In this paper oil diplomacy means the work states and companies do to keep supply secure, including treaties, security partnerships and public declarations. Resource war means the argument, tied most closely to Klare, that competition over

vital materials drives armed conflict and military planning (1-2). The NATO declarations belong to the first term. The Nigerian army's campaign in the creeks belongs to the second.

3. Theoretical Review

3.1 Nixon and slow violence

Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011) gives the paper its main concept and its main worry. Nixon's worry is representational. Because slow violence offers no spectacle, he says, writers must find stories, images and symbols that give it a shape the public can see (3). The demand falls on literature, and Habila's fog is one answer to it. The fog that swallows Rufus's memory in the opening pages and the mist that turns the river into a trick of light (Habila 11-12) work as a formal equivalent of the harm Nixon describes, a harm that blurs the edges of its victims and its causes. Nixon also names a social group, the poor who defend their land and water against developers and polluters, and calls their stance the environmentalism of the poor (4). Chief Malabo's refusal to sell his village, as Chief Ibiram tells it, fits that stance closely (Habila 38). Nixon's hope that such resistance can win something meets a hard test in the story, since Malabo dies in custody and his land is sold anyway (Habila 39).

3.2 Ghosh, LeMenager and petrocriticism

Ghosh's essay "Petrofiction" (1992) is short and often cited. It observes that oil, though central to the modern world, had produced almost no novel of consequence, and it treats Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* as the great exception (29-30). Habila's novel enters that silence from a different oil country twenty years later. Its kidnapping plot forces the oil encounter into small rooms and boats, where an Englishwoman and a Nigerian driver must talk (Habila 145, 161-64).

LeMenager's *Living Oil* (2014) moves the question from the novel to the whole of life. Petroleum culture, for her, includes the car, the light, the food and the mood of everyday living (3), and it produces its own grief, which she names petromelancholia (102). Habila's villages show the other face of this culture, since the orange flare that lights their nights is both a comfort and a poison (Habila 113). LeMenager writes mostly from the American Gulf after the 2010 BP spill. Habila writes from a delta where spills are a long-standing feature of life, and the praise printed in the front matter of his edition shows British reviewers reading the book with the BP disaster in mind (Habila 2).

3.3 Klare and resource wars

Klare's *Resource Wars* (2001) argues that, once the Cold War ended, competition for oil and other vital materials replaced ideology as a leading cause of armed conflict, and that states respond with arms, aid and alliances aimed at protecting supply (1-2). This gives the novel its outer frame. The federal patrols that hunt the militants in the creeks (Habila 14) and the foreign hostage whose kind the embassy warns visitors about (Habila 145) are local pieces of the system Klare describes. Klare is strongest on the view from capitals and weakest on the view from the village. The Doctor's data and Chief Ibiram's lost land are not events that move armies. They are what remains when the armies have done their work.

Klare's account has a limit that Nixon repairs. Resource-war analysis counts what is fought over and who fights, and its dead are mostly combatants. Nixon counts the dying who are never counted. The Delta needs both, because the same water carries the militants' boats and the oil that kills its fish. Taken together the two writers describe a double failure. Oil is guarded by force where it is contested and ignored where it poisons.

4. Review of Related Literature

A short political history gives the novel its setting. Oil was first found in commercial quantity at Oloibiri in 1956, and since then the Delta has supplied most of Nigeria's export earnings while its own people have seen little of the revenue. In 1995 the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged with eight other Ogoni activists after a military trial, following his campaign against Shell's operations in Ogoniland. From about 2006 the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, known as MEND, attacked pipelines and kidnapped foreign oil workers, and in 2009 the federal government of Umaru Yar'Adua offered the fighters an amnesty. Habila's story belongs to that moment, and Zaq's grave is marked August 2009 (Habila 171). It is a time when the state moved between force and bargaining, and when a foreign hostage was the most valuable person in the creeks. The politics of the Delta come first. Michael Watts argues that oil there produces a particular kind of violence, which he calls petro-violence, in which the value of the commodity draws state, company and community into a contest over who controls the places where it comes out ("Petro-Violence" 189-212). In a later essay he shows how oil companies and the Nigerian state together govern the oil territories as zones where ordinary rights are weak ("Resource Curse?" 50-80). Habila's Major lives in such a zone, and he says that shooting captives saves time and public money (Habila 116). The fit between Watts's concept and the Major's speech is close. Economists tell a related story. Michael Ross surveyed the evidence on the resource curse and found that states dependent on oil and minerals tend to suffer weak institutions and a higher risk of conflict (297-322). Chinua Achebe had named the Nigerian form of the problem earlier and more bluntly, as a failure of leadership (*Trouble* 1). Habila's Professor is a former party thug whose patron turned environmentalist and entered the senate (Habila 116), and he is that failure seen from below. Ross gives the pattern, Achebe gives the verdict, and the novel gives the career. The human rights literature fills in the ground. Human Rights Watch's *The Price of Oil* (1999) documented how security forces and oil companies worked side by side in producing communities, and Amnesty International's 2009 report on pollution and poverty in the Delta documented contamination and poor clean-up a year before Habila's novel appeared. These reports answer the Doctor's despair in the novel. The documents exist, they were published and they were filed. Criticism of oil in literature supplies the formal question. Jennifer Wenzel's "Petro-Magic-Realism" reads Nigerian fiction in which oil's social effects arrive through the fantastic, because plain realism struggles to hold them (449-64). Graeme Macdonald argues that oil-fuelled modernity leaves traces in literary form even where oil is never named ("Oil" 7). Habila differs from the writers Wenzel studies, since his surface is realist and his oil is visible in documentary detail. The fog is his one gesture towards the unreal, and it points at a gap in knowledge more than at a spirit world. Postcolonial ecocriticism links all of this to empire. Huggan and Tiffin hold that environmental damage in the postcolonial world cannot be separated from colonial and neo-colonial exploitation (1-2), and DeLoughrey and Handley argue that postcolonial writing joins ecological memory to historical memory (3-39). Chief Ibiram's tale does both. It begins in a lost paradise and a snake in the garden, and it ends in wandering (Habila 37-39). The river journey also invites comparison with Conrad, and the *Times* praise printed in the edition makes it (Habila 2). Achebe's objection that Conrad turned Africa into a backdrop for a European's inner crisis ("Image" 782) is answered here, because Habila gives the Delta's people long speeches of their own in their own idiom.

Most of this work reads Habila's Delta from the ground up, beside other literature or other politics. This paper takes the further step from the creek to the alliance, and the next section makes it.

5. Textual Analysis and Discussion

5.1 A narrator in the fog

Rufus's first confession is about method. He admits that memory lets go of his hand halfway along its path and that he must invent the faces, places and even feelings that the fog hides (Habila 11). The admission makes him an unreliable witness by his own account, and it gives the novel a doubtful footing that matches Nixon's sense of a harm without clear edges (2). The doubt is also a kind of honesty. A journalist who knows he fills gaps is better placed to show where the official record has gaps too. Zaq supplies the theory. On the boat he tells Rufus that the story is not the goal and that the aim is the meaning of the story, which only a lucky few find (Habila 12). Set beside Ghosh's complaint that the oil encounter had found few novelists (29), the remark reads as a programme for one. Yet Zaq philosophises over a dead fish on oil-polluted water (Habila 13), and the novel allows no sharper contrast than the one between his large phrases and the small corpse. The meaning of the story, the reader begins to see, lies in the fish.

5.2 The Chief's village

The abandoned villages come first. In one, a concrete drilling platform stands at the centre like an altar, a signboard still gives the well number and the year 1999, grass pushes through cracks in the concrete, chickens lie dead in a pen and mosquito larvae thrive in the water pots (Habila 15). A little further on, birds hang from the branches with oil-black wings (Habila 15). This is Nixon's attritional violence rendered as still life, since nothing happens in these scenes except the aftermath. LeMenager's living oil appears in reverse, as an oil-world from which the living has gone (3). Chief Ibiram's account explains how such places come to exist. His people once lived by fishing, hunting and farming, and they watched the gas flares in neighbouring villages and the cars and televisions of neighbours who had allowed them (Habila 37). The oil companies offered to send local children to Europe and America to train as engineers, so that they could come back as oil executives in Port Harcourt (Habila 37). The detail matters for the NATO argument, since Europe and America appear in the story as the source of the promised future long before any foreigner enters the plot. The offer is oil diplomacy at village scale. When Chief Malabo refuses to sell, the answer is not a better price. Soldiers arrest him on charges of backing the militants and threatening foreign oil workers, he dies in custody, and the companies produce a contract he is said to have signed in prison (Habila 39). Klare's claim that states answer fear for supply with force (1-2) finds its smallest example here, where a security charge becomes the lever of a land transfer. Chief Ibiram's people refuse the money, calling it a curse on the buyers, and become wanderers who have moved five times (Habila 39). Nixon's environmentalism of the poor (4) usually implies that resistance wins something. Here it wins only the right to leave. The ending returns to the same people as a fragile flotilla of ordinary men, women and babies about to launch into uncertain waters (Habila 173), and the image is deliberately small beside the weight of the oil system.

5.3 The Doctor's filing cabinet

The Doctor's story is the novel's clearest case of failed witness. He first worked in a village that wanted the fire that burns day and night, and an elder told him, "I am not ill. I am just poor" (Habila 113). When oil was found, the flare became the village square. It lit the night market, the council meetings and the Sunday services of Brother Jonah, who called it the Fire of Pentecost (Habila 113). LeMenager's living oil could hardly be clearer, since the flare is light, commerce and religion at once, and the villagers' joy is real (3). Yet the Doctor measured the water and

found the toxins at nearly twice the safe level within a year (Habila 113), and the joy turned into a slow dying. What the Doctor does next matters more than what he finds. He sends his results to the government, which files them, then to NGOs and international bodies, which publish them in journals and urge action, and nothing happens (Habila 114). Nixon's writer-activists work on the assumption that making slow violence visible is the first step towards stopping it (3). The Doctor tests that assumption and finds it incomplete. The evidence reaches the international level and stops there. He ends as an itinerant doctor who warns one community after another and says the area needs gravediggers more than doctors (Habila 114). Brother Jonah's fate completes the picture, for the church folds when he takes a clerk's job with the oil company (Habila 114).

5.4 The hostage economy

Isabel Floode enters the novel as a news item and a price. Her husband is a petroleum engineer whose skills have taken the couple through Hong Kong, Indonesia, Canada, the Netherlands and now Nigeria, and she came to Port Harcourt to save her marriage after the embassy had shown her clippings about abducted foreigners (Habila 145). The list of postings is a map of the oil world, and it sets the engineer's mobility against Chief Ibiram's forced wandering (Habila 39). Both men move because of oil. Only one of them chooses where to go.

The Professor treats the hostage as an instrument of pricing. Publicity raises the sum, he explains, and a company that refuses to pay will be seen in a bad light (Habila 164). Max Tekena's fatal assignment, recalled early in the novel, shows the pattern in its usual form, in which kidnappers invite reporters, deliver speeches on the environment, and the oil companies pay (Habila 45). The albino held by mistake is the sharpest joke. His captors took him for a white man, the company showed no interest, and he ate well and slept all day (Habila 156). The company's indifference shows what the ransom buys, which is a certain kind of body, and Ghosh's oil encounter takes a racial shape that no one in the scene names (29).

The local kidnapper's reason in the same terms from the other side. Bassey tells Salomon that the ransom comes from oil that was theirs in the first place, so they would only be taking back what was theirs (Habila 161). The ransom economy is a crude version of the claim made on behalf of the Delta, and Watts's petro-violence names its logic ("Petro-Violence" 189-212). Rufus's closing thought about Isabel completes the asymmetry. In a fortnight, he imagines, her ordeal will be an anecdote for the dinner table (Habila 172). Boma's burns, which he hopes will one day fade, will never become anything of the kind (Habila 11, 173).

5.5 The Major, the Professor and the guarding of the flow

The militants' camps, Rufus notes, are never far from the oil installations they threaten to blow up, and the threat gives them a steady livelihood (Habila 14). The observation turns the insurgency into a parasite on the infrastructure it attacks, which is Watts's point that petro-violence feeds on the value of what it fights over ("Petro-Violence" 189-212). The Major mirrors it from the state side. He tells Rufus that force is the only language the rebels understand (Habila 116). His prisoners, drenched in petrol and scratching at scalded skin, carry the oil on their bodies (Habila 119), so that the commodity becomes an instrument of torture as well as a source of pay. The Professor is a stranger figure. The Major's file calls him Ani Wilson, a former party thug who killed an earlier leader and took his title (Habila 116). Yet the Professor speaks the language of witness. He loves the media and arranges viewings for reporters (Habila 164), and when he frees Rufus, he tells him to write only the truth and to tell of the flares, the oil on the water and the soldiers who push the violence higher each day (Habila 168). He also announces

that a major oil depot will burn within a day and that the war aims to make the companies pull out (Habila 167). The speech joins slow violence and spectacle in one breath. His evidence is ecological and his method is arson. Nixon's warning that spectacle crowds out slow harm in public attention (3) is therefore no charge against reporters alone, since the Professor exploits it himself. The deaths in the novel show what this economy costs those who carry its stories. The Professor says that Salomon, Isabel's driver, jumped from a cliff while trying to escape, and Rufus does not believe him (Habila 166). Zaq, who once hungered for a scoop, dies after a long decline before Rufus returns, and the plain cross over his grave names him only as a journalist and gives the month of his death (Habila 169-71). Salomon and Zaq are the two Nigerians who held an ordinary claim on the story, one as the hired driver of the foreign wife and one as the veteran reporter, and neither lives to tell it. Laub's point that testimony needs a listener (57-74) gains a darker corollary here. The people who might have told and heard the account are removed one by one, and only the narrator is left to carry it.

5.6 From the Delta to NATO

The NATO argument can now be stated in full. In the Riga Summit Declaration of 2006, the Allies wrote that their security interests can be affected by the disruption of the flow of vital resources, and they backed international work to assess risks to energy infrastructure (NATO, "Riga Summit Declaration" par. 45). The Strategic Concept adopted at Lisbon in November 2010, the year Habila's novel appeared, adds that some members will grow more dependent on foreign energy suppliers and on foreign networks of supply (NATO, "Active Engagement" par. 15). Neither text names Nigeria. Their grammar, however, fits Habila's Delta exactly, since supply is a flow, the threat is its interruption and the risk lies in routes and installations.

The novel answers in the same grammar and then breaks it. Every interruption is present, in the militants' threats to the installations (Habila 14), the Professor's promised burning of a depot (Habila 167) and the hostage-taking that the embassy warns visitors about (Habila 145), and the state answers each with soldiers. What the declarations cannot register is the harm of the flow in normal running, which is the Doctor's toxins, the oil-black birds and the villages emptied by contract (Habila 15, 39, 113). The security word, disruption, locates the injury at the moment of stoppage. Habila locates it in continuity. Rufus's closing vision makes the point. He imagines a sabotaged refinery in flames, and then the weight of spilled oil pressing on the life beneath the water like a noose (Habila 172). The sabotage that the NATO texts would call disruption is, in Habila's picture, one more instalment of slow violence. Two cautions keep the claim honest. The novel shows no NATO action, and the paper claims a resemblance of language and structure rather than a chain of command. Nigeria is not a member, and Allied forces do not patrol its creeks in the story. Nor is security discourse closed to the novel's concerns by nature. The same paragraph of the Lisbon text lists environmental and resource constraints among the pressures that will shape the future security environment, though it frames them as pressures on Allied planning rather than as injuries to the people who live with them (NATO, "Active Engagement" par. 15). That framing is exactly what Habila's witness refuses.

6. Conclusion

Habila's novel performs geopolitical witness in a specific sense. It records slow harm at creek level, and by placing a British hostage, a Nigerian major and a militant chief beside that record it shows that the vocabulary of supply security and the vocabulary of ecological injury describe the same river without meeting. Read in this light, the NATO texts are less an adversary than a

symptom of the split. The claim should also complicate its own opening. If witness can be a weapon, as the Professor shows, it can also be a commodity. His staged viewings, the lock of Isabel's hair sent as proof (Habila 167) and Rufus's first published piece, with its false cause of the fire (Habila 11), all belong to an economy in which suffering earns attention only when it is staged. Habila does not exempt his own genre. His narrator's lie is a warning that testimony bends to fit what editors and readers can bear. The last pages point to a form of care that no witness mediates. Boma decides to stay with the worshippers on Irikefe, and she tells Rufus that her spirit feels settled there (Habila 172). Zaq lies in a plain grave on the same island, among more than a dozen new ones (Habila 171). Rufus, who has the story, watches the morning procession to the sea from a hill and waves in memory to Chief Ibiram's people (Habila 172-73). The healing the novel allows happens off the record. The reader who wants the harm made visible has been given it. What the novel will not promise is that anyone with power will look.

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