

Literary Waters, Petro-Violence and Ecological Ethics in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Seas and oceans have come to be interpreted as sites of trans-corporeality (Alaimo), human-nature entanglement (Carson), and eco-humanitarian emergence (Iovino) within eco-critical studies. Building upon this scholarship, this research project will analyze the postcolonial narrativization of water as a means of advocating socio-ecological justice. In this regard, the research project will engage in a critical explication of Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2010). The novel delineates two African journalists' journey through the Niger Delta as they attempt to locate and rescue the kidnapped wife of a British oil executive. The quest also functions as a documentation of the ecological destruction inflicted upon the Niger Delta due to petro-development. The "slick alliance of state and capital"¹ thus generates an ecological crisis which irrevocably destroys and harms the local ecosystem(s).

Recognizing that this crisis is enabled through a deliberate calibration of nature as standing reserve for neoliberal consumption, this project explicates how Habila's novel showcases the elemental dynamism, spatial expansiveness, and biodiversity of water to highlight its value as a self-contained and independent entity existing outside of anthropogenic systems of valuation (as signified by the land-locked regions of oil extraction). Concurrently, the project argues that the novel's depiction of the 'slow violence' (Nixon) of oil pollution depicts the ways that water bodies which are "sites of human labor and livelihood are threatened by vast enclosures" (Dalla Costa and Chilese). In doing so, this project establishes how literary water bodies transform into cartographic signifiers of eco-social justice that counter the "hegemonic, land-based narrative of oil industry"² and expose the insecurity and violence engendered under the guise of development.

¹ Michael J. Watts, "Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology." *UC Berkeley: Institute of International Studies* (1999): 1-26. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zh116zd#>. Accessed 9 Oct 2017.

² Helen Kapstein, "Crude Fictions: How Nigerian Short Stories Sabotage Big Oil's Master Narrative." *Postcolonial Text* 11, no. 1 (2016): 1-18.