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Arguing for Decolonial Repair: Petrostate, Environmental Injustice, and Decompositional Politics in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

Helon Habila's *Oil On Water* (2011) is often considered a crucial literary depiction of the environmental and political violence resulting from the discovery and continual extraction of oil in the Niger Delta. The novel illustrates the journey and experiences of journalists Zaq and Rufus, who venture into the interior villages to investigate the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, the spouse of an oil company engineer. The novel showcases how the landscape of the Niger Delta is marked by toxic emissions resulting from relentless extraction, along with increased structural violence, which has led to militancy, abductions, and disruptive behaviour on the part of certain individuals. In this context, the article re-examines this novel not merely as a striking illustration of petrostate crises but also as a literary piece that underscores the imperative of 'decompositional politics' and the cultivation of epistemic solidarity to transcend the complexities of petrostate violence and comprehend the ingrained forms of epistemic inequalities that have driven the victims of environmental injustice towards insurgent trajectories. The article analyses this work as a reflection of a decolonial perspective that repudiates the top-down model of knowledge formation and underscores the potentiality of 'decolonial repair' by addressing the violence and repression of colonial capitalist histories.

Keywords: Petrostate, epistemology, oil extraction, waste, Niger Delta, decolonial repair

Introduction

The neoliberal capitalist frameworks, inheriting the discontents of colonial capitalism, demonstrate an unprecedented need for energy production and protection, rendering the issues of distribution, access, and sustainability increasingly contentious on various fronts.

The growing requirement for energy has compelled environmental scholars and practitioners to continually reassess the locations, organisations, and authorities that legitimise the ongoing extraction, distribution, and utilisation of oil and mineral resources and deliberate on the protracted consequences in the social and cultural spheres. This process leads to a 'world ecology' (Moore, 2015) system, noting that the perpetual expansion of frontiers and the depreciation of essential resources have been pivotal to the dissemination of ecological and energy regimes. Concurrently, the perpetual desire for petroleum has consistently resulted in violence, relocation, and cooperation between the state and the capital, exacerbating systemic marginalisation in oil-rich regions. Watts (2001) observes that oil exhibits a "peculiar sort of double movement," expanding aggressively beyond being a "natural" resource and assuming multifaceted values (p. 205). The social, ecological, and political consequences of the extraction of oil are extensive and have prompted persistent concerns; nonetheless, the issue also pinpoints the dubious actions of governmental and varied corporate organisations, which, while recognising the carbon menace, paradoxically also perpetuate its escalation, evidencing how, "for all the talk about finite resources and peak oil, scarcity is resoundingly not the problem" (Berners-Lee & Clark, 2013, p. 86). Moreover, there exists a deliberate disregard for the amount to which energy influences contemporary existence. The causes for this myopia to energy are complex, but two aspects are particularly significant. First, oil industries amplify the deliberate obscurity of extraction and infrastructure and function covertly, as many facets of their activities are intended to minimise public oversight: locations for extraction and refining are extensively secured, credible information regarding oil reserves is not accessible, and the socio-cultural and ecological consequences of oil extraction and consumption have been systematically obscured for decades (Hein, 2018; Barrios, 2021).

This contradiction between acknowledging environmental hazards and concurrently promoting capitalist interests highlights the importance of the personal narratives of those affected by and intertwined with the ongoing epistemological, ecological, and political subjugation enforced by petro-industrialization and the politics of the petrostate. The developmentalist petrostate is a fundamentally extractivist social structure and in political terms, it functions in a markedly discriminatory manner, creating advantages for capitalists while relegating grassroots actors and social causes to the periphery of decision-making processes (Kingsbury et al., 2018). This capitalist entanglement perpetuates sacrifice zones in extractive areas and production sites, where developmentalism justifies noticeable techno-social advancements while concurrently masking "vast levels of material inequality" (Lerner, 2010; Walonen, 2012, p. 59). Regrettably, the capitalist petrostate creates difficult-to-change policy paths, highlighting that these trajectories pertain not only to the objectives of particular beneficiaries, organisations, and interconnected geopolitical and economic ties but also to political awareness. For comprehending the entrenched politics of petro-industrialisation and the progress narrative it has been generating, it is crucial to analyse the mechanisms of oppression that operate in various ways to sustain petro-culture and the everyday experientialities of the petro-sites. As Aldemir (2025) argues, this dynamic intersects with social and physical dominance in addition to the environment: "The imperial project's efforts to controlling and sanitizing the colonial environment parallel its attempt to discipline and domesticate women's bodies" (pp. 138-139). This connection displays how environmental management is inextricably linked to larger social hierarchies and power dynamics, where the regulation of bodies and communities reflects the exploitation of land. The widespread influence of capitalist world-ecology is reflected in these interwoven forms of dominance, which calls for a critical perspective that takes social and ecological violence into consideration. As Moore opines that "world literature is also the literature of the

capitalist world-ecology" (2015, p. 19), underlining the necessity for reformed literary perspectives and literary productions from peripheral and exploitative regions. In this context, oil/petroleum extraction-themed fictional narrative, commonly termed 'petrofiction,' becomes highly pertinent, as it culturally reflects the consequences of capitalist modernity and structural abuse by demonstrating the submerged voices, ecological vulnerabilities, and imperialistic structures arising from energy demands. Any discussion of petrofiction may evoke Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2009, p. 208) assertion that the edifice of modern liberties rests upon a constantly expanding basis for energy resource extraction—a compelling metaphor indicating the increasingly precarious and hollow basis of petromodernity.

Instead of exclusively critiquing fossil fuel extraction in various fictional narratives, it is essential to adopt a more systematic, multifaceted, and intellectual perspective on the critical issue of petromodernity. Thus, thinking in line with Amitav Ghosh (1992), I argue that despite the widely recognised impact of oil on contemporary existence, the under-representation of petrofiction in the global literature is intriguing, which in turn delineates the complexities of the literary and political representations. Ghosh describes the inadequacy of petrofiction as 'literary barrenness,' which highlights the intricate philosophical crises defining the cultural constraints that render "the history of oil [as] a matter of embarrassment bordering on the unspeakable, the pornographic" (1992, p. 29). The justification for examining Nigerian novelist Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011) is echoed in Robert Johnson's perspectives on the re-evaluation of fictional narratives. As Johnson opines:

> Fiction, when reread in light of climate change, breathes differently for us. It opens us up to new possibilities for relating to the past, for reframing the present, and for projecting into an unnamed future. It offers bits of material, natural resources, here and there, new beginnings, new starting points, for constructing a postcarbon self beyond bitumen, beyond petroleum, beyond gas, a self that is ultimately more sustainable and compassionate. But to get there we will first have to retextualize the world. (qtd in Barrios, 2021, p. 363)

Thus, I contextualise *Oil on Water* within the framework of identifying the environmental violence that has inflicted a devastating impact on the Niger Delta, triggering numerous forms of both visible and invisible violence, which "escalated during two main historical periods: in the late 1960s and since the late 1990s" (Le Billion, 2010, p. 71). Despite the extensive scholarship by Edebor (2017), Egya (2017), Feldner (2018), Pirzadeh (2019), and Olaoluwa (2020), to name a few, on this text addressing themes such as oil extraction, violence, toxicity, neocolonialism, capitalist practices in extractive industries, militancy, and resistance, it is essential to analyse the text beyond apparent interpretations and to emphasise the intellectual significance of petrofiction as crucial literary representations of extraction and energy politics, which produce diverse and lasting consequences. The aim is to point out how this text serves as a cultural document that inspires contemplation on 'decompositional politics' and the essentiality of acknowledging the affected voices to challenge the perpetuation of 'petro-knowledge'—that represents the colonial capitalist epistemology of economic progress. Petro-knowledge in the context of the novel refers to the epistemic expressions and concerns that emerge from and encircle the processes of oil—its production, exportation, and consequences. To support this argument, the article draws on the assertions of Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (2017) regarding the importance of energy-aware cultural endeavours as providing means to transcend "energopower" and confront the prevalence of petro-knowledge - by encouraging readers to identify how "conditions of life today are increasingly and unstably intertwined with particular infrastructures, magnitudes,

and habits of using electricity and fuel" (p. 325). A comprehensive understanding of the systemic development of petro knowledge may provide a viable foundation for establishing 'decompositional politics,' which reflects the wilful and active participation needed to dismantle petroculture (Boyer, 2023, p. 75), a culture that has been instrumental in fostering "an energy-intensive notion of capitalist modernity" (Macdonald, 2017, p. 292) and its associated geopolitical and cultural aesthetics. In line with Boyer's argument, the article illustrates the correlation of the petrostate that transcends the oil producer and consumer, typically denigrating existing ecosystems and disturbing the equilibrium between humanity and nature. The article subsequently identifies how the environmental violence stemming from extraction culminates in epistemic exclusion, which further entrenches forms of structural violence and relationships of waste. Furthermore, the article argues that Habila's novel provokes deeper enquiries that transcend the portrayals of environmental violence exacerbated by decades of extraction and encourages an attitude of epistemic solidarity by deconstructing petro knowledge and the hierarchies created by petroculture. In so doing, the novel advocates for a decolonial repair framework by discovering and acknowledging the experiences of those impacted by the economic and environmental ramifications of extraction.

Oil on Water (2011) portrays the harsh realities of extractive capitalism and resource crises in the Niger Delta, marred by poverty, suffering, and the emergence of insurgency. A socially conscious and politically committed writer, Habila depicts the atrocities of petro-industrialization by utilising a narrative structure in which Isabel Floode, a British citizen and wife of an oil engineer, is abducted, prompting a comprehensive inquiry. Occurring over slightly more than two weeks in August 2009, the narrative unfolds as an expedition featuring two journalists, Zaq and Rufus, in pursuit of an abducted white woman. Initially, Rufus, an aspiring journalist, seeks to establish his reputation by shadowing his mentor, Zaq, a seasoned journalist nearing retirement. However, as they navigate the complexities of the Niger Delta's environmental and social landscape, the personal ambitions of Rufus are overshadowed as he encounters the complexities of both human and non-human elements within the oil sectors of the Niger Delta. Rufus witnesses the contaminated rivers, petroleum explodes, aggression, uncertainty, militancy and corruption that define the state of affairs in Niger Delta, a harrowing but revealing experience that uncover how the petrostate has played a pivotal role in instigating a sequence of victimisation, wherein the "hapless people and the land on which they have lived and thrived for centuries" (Okonta & Douglas, 2001, pp. 63–64) face severe crises in validating their existence and epistemology. The narrative frame intriguingly adheres to a structure that illustrates Rufus's evolution from a self-absorbed journalist to a more enlightened and accountable individual who recognises the importance of understanding others' stories, perspectives, and versions of knowledge that seldom penetrate the broader world. Thus, a narrative that begins as a kidnapping tale evolves into a more profound one through which Rufus understands that "the story is not always the final goal [but] the meaning of the story" (Habila, 2011, p. 5). A journey that started with Rufus's motive of gaining a strong foothold in the field of journalism turned out to be his heart-wrenching comprehension of the "depoliticized techno-economist utopias" that define the excesses of the colonial anthropogenic culture, rendering "some lives and ecosystems" as "disposable and sacrificial" (Sultana, 2023, pp. 59-60). Subsequently, Zaq and Rufus are shown as not only reporting the kidnapping but also investigating the crimes committed by the authorities, armed forces, terrorists, and oil companies in the Niger Delta. They concurrently acknowledge the broader, obscure realities regarding how extraction in the Niger Delta has transformed the region into a complex petrostate, plagued by severe ecological degradation, threats to social systems, and chaotic conditions marked by

desperation, apathy, neglect, and regression, alongside revolutionary potential, implicating dominant governmental structures and epistemic divides and injustices.

The article, in continuation with the existing scholarship, enunciates that Habila's novel, by conveying Rufus's renewed learning of the inscribed inequities in the Niger Delta and in portraying any definite closure, demonstrates how "alternative epistemologies, cosmologies, and resistances emerge from lived experiences" (Sultana, 2025, p.3). Here I direct these perspectives through a decolonial repair framework that can be fostered through "decolonising epistemic violences" and re-evaluating the growth models and relational systems that underpin these frameworks; as Farhana Sultana aptly puts it, "context matters in understanding coloniality, so it isn't just an abstract analysis of the racialisation of difference but of accounting for local, embodied, material, and lived experiences of knowing subjects" (2025, p. 4). Thus, I emphasise how petrofiction can serve as a meaningful alternative avenue for engaging with epistemic solidarity and decolonial approaches by representing the repressed and entangled voices, while also addressing the 'epistemic violence' (Spivak, 1988) and exclusion in the context of the extractive politics of the Niger Delta.

Petrostate and environmental injustice in the Niger Delta

Habila's novel presents a compelling depiction of the petrostate and the concomitant environmental and structural violence, illustrating the enormous ecological deterioration that has, on the one hand, disrupted the traditional ecosystems and, on the other, ravaged the Indigenous methods of survival in the Niger Delta. Petrostate refers to "countries with an economic overreliance on oil exports" and is often rife with conflicts between the groups who benefit from the resource and others who do not benefit from "externalised costs of development" (Neubauer, 2018, p. 247). Since 1970, Nigeria has generated substantial oil revenue from Niger Delta production, recording petroleum outputs of 28,163.0 million cubic meters in 1990 and 47,537.5 million cubic meters in 2000; however, this wealth has not translated into economic or social advantages for the common citizen (Onwuka, 2005, p. 658). The situation becomes evident when the setting of Habila's novel transports the readers to the Irikefe Island, an interior region of the Niger Delta, historically distinguished by its rich and diversified habitats for fauna, fish, and many avian species, but currently enduring the brunt of extractivism that denotes a constellation of self-perpetuating practices, ideologies, and power imbalances that justify and sustain socio-ecologically detrimental systems of life organisation characterised by subordination, depletion, and lack of reciprocity (Chagnon et al., 2022). As Zaq and Rufus initiate their investigation into Isabel Floode's kidnapping and the motives behind her abduction, they simultaneously assume the roles of witnesses and chroniclers of the multifaceted injustices that pervade various regions of the Niger Delta, accelerating systemic inequalities and engendering novel forms of structural violence, as "paradoxes and contradictions of oil are nowhere greater than on the oilfields of the Niger Delta" (Watts, 2007, p. 641). Rufus and Zaq sense a widespread ecological degradation that afflicts all the villages in the region, with each community nearly duplicating the others regarding toxic substances, pollution, and deterioration:

> The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable

> sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. (Habila, 2011, p. 9)

This identification signifies the metamorphosis of the Niger Delta into extractive landscapes that reinforce "new cycles of extraction and predation," perpetuating the "colonial structuring of economic spaces" (Mbembe, 2021, p. 43). The pervasive breakdown of natural ecosystems in the region subjected several Indigenous communities to precarity, vulnerability, and environmental toxicity. Rufus and Zaq confront the extensive environmental destruction that results from drilling, leaking, explosions, and continuous extractive waste. For example, on their journey, they observe the malodorous, oil-saturated soil and "water beneath [them]... [that] had become putrid and sulphurous," which they learn has caused widespread illness and mortality (Habila, 2011, p. 34). The oil fires have devastated the Delta's fauna and livestock and brought about the deaths of numerous birds, as seen by Zaq and Rufus: "Dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (Habila, 2011, p. 9). Upon further observation, they encounter the horrifying sight of "the carcasses of fish, crabs, and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns, villages, and islands each morning, killed by the oil" (Habila, 2011, p. 175). The evidence indicates that within this framework of extractivism in the Niger Delta, both human and non-human entities exist in "sacrifice zones,' based on "a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking" (Klein, 2014, p. 97). Consequently, the region experiences the dynamics of power between the human and nonhuman domains, as well as across numerous communities within capitalist extractivism.

Rufus's and Zaq's personal witness of the ecological devastation produced by decades of extraction and waste provides them a keen understanding of oil exploitation in Africa, showcasing the detrimental impacts of "violent capitalocenes" (Ogude & Mushonga, 2022) and the corrupt, exploitative mindset of transnational oil corporations, which, in collusion with tainted governments, promoted "the protection of capital over the protection of nature" (Helbert & O'Brien, 2020, p. 59), in turn, reinforcing the tangible and non-tangible discontents of petro states. During one of their trips, Rufus interacts with a local resident, Chief Ibiram, who shares with him how the decline of their social condition has escalated with the ongoing deterioration of the ecosystems. Recalling the earlier days before the discovery of oil in the region, Chief Ibiram shares:

> Once upon a time, they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children grow up before them, happy. The village was close-knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters, and though they were happily insulated from the rest of the world by their creeks and rivers and forests, they were not totally unaware of the changes going on all around them. (Habila, 2011, p. 42)

Regrettably, upon the discovery of oil in Chief Ibiram's villages, the Indigenous communities encountered a harrowing sequence of persecution. Initially, they were given substantial financial compensation for drilling rights, exceeding their prior expectations: "[a] lot of money, more money than any of them have ever imagined" (p. 38). Chief Ibiram, articulating his apprehension, conveys that his community, having observed the detrimental consequences of oil drilling in adjacent villages, has declined to succumb to momentary financial incentives. The community recognised that allowing the development of oil pipelines or drilling would irrevocably devastate the land and water bodies. Nevertheless, opposing the offers has been ineffectual, as his community has been displaced from their

land and is now seeking a sustainable living, converted into "mere wanderers without a home" (Habila, 2011, p. 41). This is a pivotal moment in the economic and social structure of Nigerian villages, where formerly self-sustaining communities have been transformed into peripheral groups due to the influence of oil capitalism. The expulsion of inhabitants from the Niger Delta exemplifies the brutalities of petrostate structures, wherein the remnants of imperial violence persist, contributing not only to ecological deterioration but also to heightened catastrophes caused by climate change affecting disadvantaged groups worldwide, who are rendered exceedingly susceptible and expendable, with different degrees of visibility (Agarwal & Narain, 2012). What becomes more distressing is that, in the aim of adapting to metropolitan life, Ibiram and his group relocate closer to Port Harcourt, only to encounter increased vulnerabilities, as he mulls his people being "swallowed up [. . .] like people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets" (Habila, 2011, p. 178). Chief Ibiram's narrative of displacement from his village exemplifies the plight endured by numerous Delta communities, who have been ensnared in the "oil wars, caught between the militants and the military, and the only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind" (Habila, 2011, p. 33). Ibiram's account represents the notion of eco-apartheid, defined by the disparate environmental trade between the Global South and Global North, the relentless extraction-based capitalist system, and the imperialist regulations of global trade and governance that reinforce climate coloniality (Roberts & Parks, 2009; Fanning & Hickel, 2023). Ibiram's narrative here highlights how climate coloniality manifests by means of pervasive racism worldwide, persistent exclusion, enslavement via colonial-capitalist exploitation and commodity capitalism, voracious relocation and devastation, interlinked damage to the environment, establishment of sacrifice zones, and unjust vulnerability to climate-induced dangers, among other factors (Klein, 2016; Andreucci & Zografos, 2022).

The self-sustaining livelihoods of the inhabitants of Irikefe Island, as conveyed to Rufus by other people who live there, including Tamuno, the fisherman, and his son Michael, have also been compromised by the extension of oil fields in the region, who have for generations relied on the sea for their livelihood. Expressing his woes, Tamuno shares the dangers of "the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water," and how soon they might have to move to a place where the fishing is still fairly good (Habila, 2011, p. 18). The accounts of the common populace that Rufus hears underscore the government's motivated compliance with the demands of petro-centric developmentalism, confirming the geopolitical and environmental necropolitics practiced by global capitalism and state-sanctioned extractivism, particularly in the Global South (Clark, 2020; DeBoom, 2021; Parsons, 2023). The communities' heartbreaking accounts underscore various forms of neoliberal capitalism's intrusion and governance that insidiously benefit a limited number of sociocultural and capitalist strata while compelling others to suffer the consequences of ecological and economic expropriation (Karmakar & Chetty, 2023). Rufus understands that although comprehending the complex manifestations of violence, racism, dispossession, and impoverishment perpetuated by transnational extraction industries is challenging, it is undeniable that petro-development signifies the grave and catastrophic failure of democratic or socialist governance models, triggering militancy and armed resistance from a deep sense of epistemic suppression. As Elias Courson puts it, "The indigenes of Niger Delta oil producing communities have anchored their resistance on their exclusion from the benefits of the oil industry, the lack of social development, good governance, pollution of their lands and waters, widespread poverty, and high levels of unemployment" (2011, p. 37). In Nigeria, the irony lies in the reality that despite the nation-state organisation maintaining custody of oil exports, the 'ethnic-majority ruling elites' governing the national government have

appropriated a bulk of the benefits, leaving ethnic minorities to endure neglect, environmental damage, and destitution (Obi, 2010, p. 223). Consequently, the environmental violence perpetrated by Nigeria's petrostate, as represented in this novel, indicates an uncertain amalgamation of forces, outlining the inescapable conflict over oil wealth—who possesses and governs it, who holds entitlements to it, and how the wealth is allocated and utilised. These circumstances introduce a multitude of local political entities (ethnic militias, paramilitaries, separatist movements, etc.) into the operations of the oil sector concurrently, which culminates in a relentless production of environmental and human disposability, a pervasive threat of economic and epistemic deprivation, worsening relationships, and social violence.

Violence, Waste and Societal Systems

The extreme manifestations of environmental deprivation, as represented in Habila's novel, involve profound epistemological repression, which ultimately culminates in various forms of intercommunity 'violence and the deterioration of the social fabric. A majority of the local inhabitants are not only compelled to feel that they possess no rights to water, land, or resources from nature, but more drastically, the escalating poverty that comes from lack of sustenance and unemployment diminishes their sense of epistemic agency. As a result, numerous factions emerge in the region, resorting to sabotage of oil production and using threats and abductions of foreigners to maintain their dominance and affirm their existential, environmental, and epistemic rights. The insurgency is a response against repressive governmental institutions, utilising funds from global oil corporations to perpetrate egregious violence against the vulnerable populations of oil-rich regions. This opposition further represents the convergence of two significant factors. The emergence of youth politics, characterised by a younger generation whose socio-economic and political opportunities were hindered, has begun to contest traditional forms of authority mainly and the corrupt practices inherent in the petro-state (Watts, 2007, p. 652; Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007). The factions in the novel consist of the Black Belts of Justice, the Free Delta Army, and the AK-47 Freedom Fighters (pp. 34-35), composed of adolescents, lawbreakers, and dropouts from school, including Ani Wilson, commonly referred to as Professor, a militant leader who, disillusioned by environmental degradation while employed at an oil company, transformed into a militant to advocate for change. When Rufus seeks to figure out the motives behind the militants' abduction of Isabel, he uncovers not merely a tale of vengeance, but rather narratives characterised by profound dissatisfaction, grievance, experiences of epistemic exclusion, and an overarching sense of being 'wasted' or othered. This sense denotes how the dehumanisation of communities in the Niger Delta is perceived as expendable—devastated, diminished, wasted, and disregarded, thereby epitomising the broader narratives of climate apartheid and encapsulating the struggles of communities susceptible to the locally specific socioeconomic and environmental injustices of modern neoliberal globalisation. Individuals of this nature, as articulated by Bauman, are deemed "human waste," representing disposable populations of "wasted humans" (Bauman, 2004) who are insignificant or obstructive to what David Harvey (2003) refers to as "accumulation by dispossession," the continuous dispossession of essential resources and the alienation of people from the machinery of production, a notion that Marx identified as fundamental to capitalism (Wenzel, 2018). This understanding of waste parallels Hubert Sauper's assertion

that "wherever prime raw material is discovered, the locals die in misery," their sons become combatants or militants, and their daughters are relegated to servitude and prostitution (Courson, 2011, p. 20; emphasis added), frequently reflecting similar patterns in the human experiences within the Niger Delta.

The two most intriguing individuals Rufus meets are the Major, a military leader, and the Professor, a defiant figure who challenges the capitalist objectives of corporations and governmental alliances by kidnapping, extortion, and, when necessary, assassination of opponents. Rufus discovers, to his astonishment, that each possesses opposing perspectives regarding one another and the current circumstances. The Major depicts militants such as the Professor and his adherents as mere gangsters and predators, attributing the predicament in the Niger Delta to their actions, contending that they are the true malefactors accountable for the prevailing circumstances. Further, the militants consistently disguised the whereabouts of their camps, as their survival depended on it, and "they always returned to the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries, which they constantly threatened to blow up, thereby ensuring for themselves a steady livelihood" (Habila, 2011, p. 7). While imprisoned by the militants, Rufus seizes the opportunity to interrogate the Professor, gaining insight into the other perspective. The Professor contends that the insurgents "are not the barbarians that government propagandists claim we are" and asserts that they advocate for the population and possess no aim of terrorising them (Habila, 2011, p. 209). Contrary to the Major's perspective, the Professor confirms that the activities of the rebel are not the catalyst for the interruptions in the Niger Delta but rather a consequence of them. This militancy is the outcome of decades of oil extraction, and the revenue has yielded no benefits for the inhabitants of the Niger Delta, resulting solely in ecological devastation, social impoverishment, and political exclusion (Onah, 2001). Their 'resistance policies' (Ebienfa, 2011) embody the interests of individuals marginalised by capitalist social relations and the dominant influence of the federal government-corporate partnership in the oil sector, aiming to counteract their exploitative objectives. Professor firmly believes that the combination of political marginalisation, brutality, unemployment, severe hardship, and social exclusion in the Niger Delta constitutes valid complaints for the formation of armed groups. The Professor posits that these rebellious acts can engender 'social transformation' (Castles, 2010), representing a fundamental reorganisation of society that transcends the regular course of (s)low social development. During events like civil wars, armed conflicts serve as the trigger for a profound transition.

Often times the prevalent notion of waste directs actions and relationships in a different yet justified way. Recruited from the destitute inhabitants of the Delta, these acts by opposing forces, which are already treated as disposable, serve as their only means of livelihood, a channel for expressing their dissatisfaction and wrath, and a way to reduce the ongoing perception of them as 'waste.' Speaking on the politics of 'Wasteocene' and the capitalist systems of producing wasting relationships, Marco Armiero (2021) observes, "The disposable body becomes a political body and its struggle to survive an insurrection or, more mimetically, a sabotage of the social relationships which enforce the bodily boundaries of the Wasteocene" (2021, p. 12). The notion of waste and relationships predicated on the idea of being wasted is ingrained in the expansionist and accumulative principles of capitalism, as Armiero asserts that waste embodies a societal connection that perpetuates power disparities, rendering it substantially a political phenomenon. Thus, 'Wasteocene' authorises a detrimental narrative, attributing blame to the victims and normalising the socio-ecological dynamics that generate marginalised individuals and environments. In addition, the catastrophes stemming from the Wasteocene and wasting relationships are not addressed by

substantive structural reforms but rather through superficial solutions that ultimately perpetuate the existing paradigms.

Within the framework of this novel, waste, which often signifies the experience of being disenfranchised, is linked to intensified manifestations of environmental, epistemological, and structural violence among the deprived and victimised population of the Niger Delta. The contentious politics and continuing violence that Rufus encounters in the region expose the structures of predation, injustice, and waste, engendering an overwhelming feeling of betrayal and disposability among the people who live there. While it is factual that the structure of 'predation' has advantaged a segment of the military-political elite, thus aiding various insurgents and indirectly affecting segments of economically disadvantaged youth (Le Billion, 2010), Habila's novel, through Rufus's interactions with the Professor, emphasises the necessity of interpreting the underlying factors that have given rise to the extensive and conflictual landscape of violence and endorsed well-organised insurgents opposing the state, ethnic militant organisations, and vigilante associations akin to the mafia. For instance, the members of the Professor's group engage in abduction and murder for monetary gain. Salomon, the cook of James Floode, along with his neighbour Bassey and the cop Jamabo, are members of a criminal group that clandestinely orchestrates the disappearance of Isabel Floode as retribution against her husband, James Floode, for impregnating Salomon's lover, Koko. Salomon describes the kidnapping as a "technical way" of recouping the distress these individuals inflict upon them (Habila, 2011, p. 220). Salomon argues that the extortion money is not related to Floode's finances but rather originates from his country: "Wasn't he in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in the process? Surely I was entitled to some reparation, some rent money from him" (Habila, 2011, p. 111).

In a similar manner, when Rufus confronts the Professor, the latter rationalises his violence, asserting that resorting to violence is the sole means to compel corporations, governmental elites, and the outside world to pay attention to the existence of Nigerian communities and legitimate ownership of their land, which has been subjected to relentless exploitation. The Professor, therefore, asserts to Rufus,

> Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at the night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence everyday. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me where? Tell them, we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth, remember that. (Habila, 2011, p. 210)

These reasons and arguments emphasise that waste refers more to orders, frameworks, and relationships than to specific substances. The critical factors include the broader "social, economic, political, cultural, and material systems that shape waste and wasting" (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022, p. 2). Furthermore, the Professor's animosity and compulsive demeanour exemplify his method of announcing his testimony and epistemic rights against the "globalised assemblage" (Siakwah, 2018) of capitalism, which has systematically obstructed the Nigerian people's capacity for effective decision-making and inexorably left them feeling neglected and violated. The Professor's aggressive stance, while showcasing the detrimental effects of wasted or wasting relationships, also pinpoints that "the relations between extraction as a concrete, physical practice, on the one hand, and extractivism as the cultural and ideological rationale that either motivates extraction or is the consequence of it, on the other, are necessarily complex and difficult to untangle" (Szeman & Wenzel, 2021, p. 508). The anger of the discontented youth and unemployed educated individuals in the

Niger Delta stems from their exclusion from meaningful decision-making roles concerning land, economy, and environment. This situation exemplifies 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007), wherein individuals are denied the ability to express or develop their knowledge, ultimately resulting in contributory injustice that hinders excluded individuals from engaging in collective cognitive and learning pursuits due to systemic obstacles created by the process of 'epistemological rejection' (Dotson, 2012) in the Niger Delta.

The intertwining of extraction and prolonged epistemic marginalisation is challenging to fully comprehend, and Rufus uncovers that efforts to convey the toxicities have consistently gone unheeded. Through Rufus's gradual unravelling, the narrative emerges as an illustrative testimony of 'petroviolence,' an expansive term that seeks to encompass the diverse physical, structural inequality, environmental, and social expressions of violence frequently occurring in oil-rich nations (Watts, 2001). Rufus learns from Dr. Dagogo-Mark that oil was discovered two years after he first arrived in the community. The doctor recounted that originally, the populace was oblivious to the egregious repercussions of oil extraction, despite witnessing the insatiable flames. Subsequently, livestock perished, and vegetation started to decay on the stems. As fatalities commenced, the Doctor obtained samples of water used for drinking and blood for analysis in his laboratory, revealing an increase in toxin levels. Numerous individuals became ill, and many succumbed to the same sickness. The Doctor mulls the place as a lifeless environment, stating, "Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear, just like that. I feel angry at the oil company [...] I go from community to community and I try to create awareness of the dangers lurking in the wells and in the air above. They all share the same story, the same diseases" (Habila, 2011, p. 93). This form of environmental injustice aligns with Pulido's (1996) assertion that impoverished and marginalised populations frequently endure contamination and resource degradation due to their vulnerability and lack of alternative options.

To the Doctor's profound disappointment, the oil firm proposed monetary compensation and employment in exchange for exclusive access to his findings, while the government expressed gratitude but relegated the results to a filing cabinet, failing to implement any substantive measures to enhance the welfare of the populace. The Doctor shares the difficulties encountered by ordinary impoverished Nigerians in industrial zones, mourning their precarious existence in dire poverty despite the abundant oil resources and the perpetuation of this suffering through corruption. The Doctor's displeasure at being silenced in expressing concern about environmental degradation in a skewed way reflects the perpetration of 'slow environmental justice' which is typically instigated by corporations seeking to obstruct and postpone judicial determinations regarding environmental issues. In the Niger Delta, such conduct is executed through protracted legal proceedings and implementing various techniques, such as submitting numerous appeals, financing extensive technical reports, and seeking to sway courts and governmental entities, therefore depleting the victims' time and financial resources. In addition, judges can significantly influence the pace of legal proceedings by decelerating, halting, or expediting them. Protracted justice frequently entails the relocation of legal procedures among regional, national, and international governments, resulting in delays in the conclusion of arbitration matters (Conde et. al., 2023). Delayed justice, based on epistemic injustice, serves to perpetuate slow violence, intensifying emotions of vulnerability and sometimes "de-radicalising" grassroots movements led by local individuals or groups (Manrique Lopez & Orihuela, 2024). Consequently, the Doctor's broader worries indicate a slow environmental justice characterised by restricted and selective involvement of local populations in participation

plans, insufficient evaluation of company-community agreements, and overall ineffective environmental legislation.

The alarming realities pertaining to deleterious ecology, widening economic gaps, and degenerative social relationships grounded in a widespread mechanism of epistemic deprivation can, however, be perceived and felt by Rufus, since the extraction of oil and the disintegration of the economic equations it generated have likewise impeded Rufus's life. His father was unemployed and attempted to generate income by selling pirated petrol. One day, his supply exploded, severely burning Boma, Rufus's sister, while also obliterating their home and precipitating the fragmentation of his family. Despite enduring a family tragedy, Rufus pursues a profession in journalism while becoming cognisant of the detrimental survival constraints imposed on the Nigerian populace, as he admits, "I had seen that kind of anger before in many of my friends, people I went to school with; some of them were now in the forests with the fighters" (Habila, 2011, p. 100). Boma's damaged appearance exemplifies the pervasive waste produced by extraction and, in a heightened way, the consequences of the economic and social discrepancies inflicted by extractivism and capitalist ideals. As Rufus interacts with a diverse array of persons, he increasingly identifies that the landscape of Irifeke Island is marred by violence that, initially environmental, gradually evolved to involve epistemological, social, and political dimensions. The egregious manifestations of environmental injustice, brutality, and confrontation referenced repeatedly by Rufus, the Professor, the Doctor, and other characters underscore the potential impact of 'slow observation' (Davies 2018; Karmakar 2024), which can foster epistemic agency, elevate awareness, and offer a means to address the profound effects of toxic exposure, ultimately aiding in the pursuit of environmental justice and underscoring the necessity for decolonial repair frameworks.

Decompositional politics and decolonial repair

The prevailing wasteocene generated by extractive capitalism has established a variety of interactions marked by tension, disposability, and hostility in the Niger Delta. Building on Le Billion (2008), I suggest that the links between being left out of knowledge, personal mistreatment, and worsening relationships show the "resource curse" effects, where resources influence how organisations work and economic results; "resource conflicts" are about the problems caused by exploiting materials and how they affect the environment and society, as well as how profits are shared; and "conflict resources" are those that lead to economic disputes. In this context, Habila's novel implies the urgent and persevering attempts of disadvantaged communities to articulate their voices or safeguard their cultural views. This aspect of the novel, in my interpretation, relates to Dominic Boyer's concept of 'decompositional politics'—specifically, the strategy and intentional engagement in opposition to fossil fuel consumption and the transcendence of petroculture and petro-induced behaviours. Boyer argues that the adoption of a decompositional politics can lead to renewal and reconciliation, initially through participation in or channelisation of "direct democratic movements" that aim to permanently end the use of fossil fuels. Move from passive to active participation in the ending of petroculture, and second, by "breaking petrohabits" and "restoring the relations of trust and care among humans, and between humans and nonhumans" (2023, p. 75).

In this novel, amidst unrelenting degradation, unemployment, social disintegration, and violence, Rufus learns about the efforts of the local and Indigenous community to maintain healing rituals that foster a communal engagement and recuperation from the overarching forms of ecological, social, and militant violence. One of the prime examples in this regard is the common people's endeavour to sustain and safeguard their ancestral veneration for the water and land while seeking to heal the victimised and the abused. The earnest attempts of the common people to illuminate the Indigenous reverence for nature, the sea, and its inhabitants underpin their cosmology and way of life. The Island people seek to restore the epistemic value of their Indigenous thinking by commemorating the environment and embracing ancient cosmology. Rufus learns from the nurse, Gloria, about the assembly of several priests who collaborated to construct the shrine as a means of purifying the water contaminated by severe poisons. Gloria conveys that the shrine has been erected with much optimism and hope: "When the blood of the dead ran into the rivers, and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of warriors floated for miles on the river" (Habila, 2011, p. 129). Besides this, the people have also built a sculpture garden, carving wooden figures and mud statues, with the belief that "these figures represent the ancestors," whom the masses believed were "watching" from over and protecting them (Habila, 2011, p. 130). The activities aimed at establishing the epistemological significance of cultural rituals related to purification and veneration may not result in immediate or drastic changes to the repressive effects of petro-extraction, yet they undoubtedly signify the formation of a decolonial political consciousness, which is "necessary for decolonisation and abolition of systems of harm" and is founded on "overcoming alienation, and acknowledging differences and commonalities to build shared goals" (Sultana, 2023, p. 64).

The relatively small yet enduring efforts to illuminate the cultural rituals and values that strengthen Indigenous communities point out their attempts to validate their way of thinking and existence in Nigeria, a country plagued by petro-violence and extractivist ideologies. Another illustrative example is Chief Malabo, who vehemently opposes the capitalist agendas of the petroleum corporations. Chief Malabo, as a defender of centuries-old Indigenous values and protector of the village, disagreed with the proposal from the politicians and company owners to purchase the entire village. Chief Malabo resolutely declares, "This was their ancestral land, this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried," standing firm against materialistic temptations and striving to uphold the intrinsic value of land and nature beyond economic classification (Habila, 2011, p. 38). Malabo's refusal to sell the land is not only an opposition to the petro-centric commodification that legitimises a specific group as the principal agents of progress while relegating land or nature to a subordinate status relative to human necessities, but it also corroborates the 'epistemic frame of modernity' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 214) that has been foundational in reinforcing the capitalist visions of anthropocentric progress. The novel's finale does not provide a definitive resolution; yet, it undeniably culminates in Rufus's developed and nuanced comprehension of the inherent truths of extraction and the accompanying bloodshed. Rufus has a sense of hope and optimism in his relationship with the deprived, battered, and abused. As Rufus reflects on each interaction and the stories he heard, he considers how the shrine has served as a site of 'healing'—a refuge where his sister Boma can attain forgiveness, allowing "her scars would recede into the back of her mind" (Habila, 2011, p. 216). Rufus recalls "Tamuno and Michael and Ibiram [. . .] and all the nameless ones" who have been "braving the darkness in order to get to light" (Habila, 2011, p. 216), and absorbs the pressing need to alleviate the detrimental effects of epistemic

injustice and exclusion, while encouraging a culture of epistemological solidarity that takes marginalised people's concerns, testimonies, and experiences.

Habila's story notably lacks a definitive finish or optimistic ending, suggesting an avoidance of any singular or universal narrative. Through Rufus's quest and eventually his absorption of diverse narratives from the perpetrators as well as the victims of petrostate, Habila's novel, in my reading, opens up a position for dialogues and repair that can only occur through the recognition of the episteme of the 'othered,' enabling the potential for decolonial repair. Here the text illustrates the integration of decentralised political analysis with militancy and coalition formation to enhance leverage in negotiations. It emphasises the importance of recognising civil disobedience and its impact on public sympathy as essential elements in asserting the fundamental right to take action, which is a key part of a revitalisation initiative, while also acknowledging the state as a crucial ally of capital in these conflicts (Stevens & Nesbitt, 2023). Thus, decolonial repair, as I argue, involves shifting from traditional frameworks of rationalism and political indifference to a critical, politically conscious position that acknowledges the past while seeking to transcend mere uncritical memory. Decolonial repair aims for inclusive restructuring and recuperation, proposing an alternative to Western modernity's norm of the 'hubris of the zero point' (Castro-Gómez, 2021). Hence, in contrast to conventional methods, decolonial repair often utilises innovative and imaginative tools provided by storytelling, which facilitate a more engaging and egalitarian means of articulating the exploratory and liberating potential of the excluded (Harvey, 2022). Significantly, Habila's novel allocates textual space to the memories, experiences, aspirations, and grief of the Nigerian populace, who have been silenced for years by petroknowledge, thereby embracing decompositional politics and identifying the underlying "forces that within the Wasteocene are fighting to sabotage the wasting relationships and experimenting with new socio-ecological relationships" (Armiero, 2021, p. 5). The narrative, while portraying the incessant unleashing of extractive violence, also calls for a deeper reconsideration of alternative imaginaries and excluded knowledge, thereby situating the narrative within the larger discourse of 'decolonial hope' (Karmakar, 2025). The hope and repair here can work in tandem to rebuild an economic system in the Niger Delta that is not focused exclusively on capitalist extractive ideologies but on the well-being of everyone and a kind of sustainable development and a society where people can no longer be seen as disposable and waste.

Conclusion

The advancement of extractivist markets and neoliberal regimes has led dominant forms of technocratic knowledge to exclude, undermine, delegitimise, and disapprove of the substantiality of critical thinking and lived experiences. Despite these pressures often being rationalised by authoritarian colonial models that seek to depoliticise and undermine critical discourse, it is undeniable that storytelling and literary works have repeatedly presented alternative ideologies and fostered critical thinking. As Armiero (2021) contends that storytelling can be utilised to reveal the obscured brutality, acceptance of discrimination, and the obliteration of alternative narratives, thus challenging the foundations of capitalist or Wasteocene narratives. Literary viewpoints and storytelling in confronting injustices and elucidating the lived experiences of oppressed individuals can enable us to understand the

multifaceted implications of extractive capitalism, as stories and fiction can "dismantle the othering project, create communities, and have the potential to undermine the Wasteocene regime" (p. 47). Accordingly, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* effectively navigates the complex realities of petrostate and petroculture, guiding readers through Rufus to critically participate in decomposing petroknowledge and petrohabits and engage with mechanisms of decolonial repair through epistemic justice and solidarity.

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