Militant Metaphors: Precarity and Violence in Niger Delta's Conflict Literature

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Introduction

In Michael Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars* (2009), the narrative journalist's quest for a "truthful depiction" is cast into doubt by the very *performative* nature of the subjects that the text purports to represent. "The men were gluttons for the camera" (12), writes Peel, and moreover:

> At a deeper level, I am also aware of how the Delta has, over the past few years, become what a friend describes as very 'Hollywood.' Many villagers and militants, sensing the growing if still modest international interest in the region, operate with a sense of theatre [...] I am reminded of this as we pull away from the Ikebiri jetty, when Commander Freeman gestures to a house on stilts at the river's edge. 'See where we toilet, see,' he says, urgently. 'See the houses that we are living in. Can you believe we are in an oil producing community?' A moment later, having paused for thought, he turns to us to say that next time we come we should 'bring video coverage'. (187)

Peel's views, though accentuated to invite a stern judgment on part of the reader, are very much in tune with what Enrique Galvin-Alvarez has called "performing sovereignty" (204), or Omar Hamilton's notion of "staged revolution" in *The City Always Wins* (2017), wherein the subalterns – be they rebels, rogues, protesters, revolutionaries – *perform* their sovereign desires and achievements *for* the camera. The fictionality that enters such performance is critical to the understanding of the Niger Delta's plight through literary narratives. The two texts selected for analysis here pose a peculiar challenge to the foregone conclusion in literary theory that all texts are susceptible to fictionality, as both works feature journalists who embark on a truth-seeking voyage of Conradian proportions, no less than a fact-finding mission in the heart of Niger Delta's "darkness." The only difference between the two protagonists, however, is that Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars* features a real-life journalist with a penchant for literary devices, whereas Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) features a fictional journalist with social realist and picaresque proclivities. Despite their generic distinction or classification, by employing what I call here "militant metaphors," both texts – as this article aims to show – reveal that precarity breeds insurgent violence.

Given the ethical bind to facts or verifiability of factual claims in narrative journalism, Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars* is best positioned to uncover the "absent presence" of violence. In other words, the real-life journalist's lack of direct access to the sites of sources of insurgency violence in the Delta "swamps" leads him to trace the trajectories of its militant metaphors *elsewhere*, in the normalization of violence in every other aspect of Nigerian life: the urban gangs of Lagos, the informal economy fed by the laundering of oil money, the menace of oil theft, the infrastructural vacuum occupied by a vigilant, organized mafia, and more importantly, the global hegemonic forces driven by an insatiable appetite for Delta oil. In tune with what Derek Gregory calls the "connective dissonance" (12) of dissimilar narratives in "which moments clip together like magnets" or "imaginative geographies [as] doubled spaces of articulation" (256), Habila's *Oil on Wate*r, on the other hand, unravels what I would call "present absence" of the Niger Delta conflict. While complementing the absent presence captured by a narrative journalist, the imaginary freedoms unleashed by fiction enable the journalist narrator to go beyond what is given and present: the violence inscribed upon, if not etched into the Niger Delta's very cultural landscape and the ecosystem. In doing so, both texts treat, as this article argues, the Delta militantly as a metaphor, as a symptom of the larger yet absent inequalities crystallized into insurgency and set out to trace the other absent metaphors that are laden with militancy: area boys, bookshops, urban gangs, ecology, and landscapes.

The Violent Precariat

The Ogoni uprising led by the local scribe Ken Saro-Wiwa – a household name in Nigeria – and his Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) is often credited as the defining moment in the rise of environmental activism in the Delta region. Following Saro-Wiwa's demise and incensed by Abacha's billions of dollars of loot from oil revenue which had made international headlines, a number of civil, vigilant and semi-armed groups such as the Ijaw Youth Council (1998), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF) waged an uncoordinated war against both the Nigerian state and the foreign oil companies. Today, an umbrella organization called Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) represents a bewildering array of insurgencies, boasting an armed militia of 50,000 soldiers (Murphy 85). At the opposite end of the spectrum are the state, the military and the rival group Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), founded by Ijaw youths led by Ateke Tom. This group rose to prominence after the fall out of

Mujahid Dokubo Asari, the founder of NDPVF, with the Governor of the River States in 2003, who had actively funded the NDPVF since its inception. In 2004-2006, a major conflict of international concerns ensued, which led to hundreds of deaths and a major hike in global oil prices. Apart from these, there are other internal ethnical rivalries in the Niger Delta, between the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo, which became the subject of major novels and documentaries. Since March 2016, however, another group called Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) has joined the fray – due to a significant slowdown in the activities of MEND, owing much to the various amnesty programmes carried out by the state —with crude theft, kidnapping and attack on foreign oil workers as their major activities.

Crude oil dependency is probably the greatest cause of precarity in Nigeria, much to the neglect of civic infrastructure, including education and health. Despite its primacy to the economy and society, oil theft is endemic to Nigeria and is the source of major conflicts among rebel groups competing for oil territory. The state, for its part, casts a blinkered eye on oil piracy even though it costs about $ 2.7 billion annually in revenue for the exchequer (Kallnish Energy n.p.). The Delta states' as well as the oil companies' collusion with the armed groups is a well-documented fact. Little known is the Nigerian state's lackluster attitude towards oil piracy, which is often justified by the lopsided argument that oil theft provides temporary employment, never mind the unsafe and unprotected work conditions as well as the precarious subjects who are exposed to the dangers and violence involved in stealing, transporting and retailing it in the streets.

For the purpose of this essay, I define precarity, via Ben Scully (2016) and Guy Standing (2011), as an experiential and affective subject position that is produced by a lack of access to institutional structures that ensure safety, stability, income opportunities and protection. Precarious subjects are those who fall outside the normative categories of subalterns or proletarians and include detainees of internment camps, sweatshop labourers, and domestic workers. Nonetheless, it would be erroneous to read precarity as a mere victimological position. As Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) observe, via Maurizio Lazzarato, precarity is "'understood at once as a source of 'political subjection, of economic exploitation and of *opportunities to be grasped*'" (52, emphasis added). Given its proto-resistance, precarity invites potentially combative, at times violent responses, as in the case of 2011 anti-austerity protests in Greece, the 2011 London riots, or the more recent Yellow Vest protests in Paris. Suggesting that precarity is not unique to contemporary Europe but traceable to colonialism and slavery, Frank Wilderson III contends that because entire groups and races of people under colonial rule are made to "stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world" (18), the ontic violence of the precarious subject makes him/her inversely

violent. For instance, to quote Tahseen Kazi, "this precarity is expressed in suffering survival as the destabilizing, unruly performance of precarious living, such as the Igbo mutiny and suicide off the Savannah coast in 1803" (1).

Further illuminating this intrinsic relationship between violence and precarity, Patricia Lopez and Kathryn Gillespie liken the figure of the precarious subject to the farmed animals that "live and die in a constant state of precarity, driven by the social and economic conditions of commodification, whereby they are brought into being specifically to be commodified and killed" (8). Such precarious life includes not merely "bare life" but life of the "bare carcass" (Pugliese 169-170) in which the subject is stripped of all civic and political life, having been reduced to a permanent stage of siege or injury (Mbembe, 21).

According to Katy McEwan, it thus comes as no surprise that the tangible aspects of the precarious subjects and their conditions of injury are often "packed inside an over-arching sense of fear of disruptions, potential harms and risk as engendered through 'terror', 'others', war and climate change" (n.p.). This is perhaps the implicit, yet intrinsic ambiguity left behind in Guy Standing's reference of the precariat as the "new dangerous class" (10-21) – a class that is subject to myriad visible and invisible forms of violence, which resort to equally violent forms of resistance. In other words, as the two texts under discussion shall reveal, the violence inflicted by the precarious subjects and communities mirrors the violence inflicted upon them.

A few years before the renowned Nigerian writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa, staged an organized campaign against foreign oil companies in the Delta region, he published his only novel *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), whose protagonist anticipates the looming unrest of the Ogoni people in the Delta region by revisiting their suspended and subjugated positioning between the two warring fronts – the Biafrans and the Nigerians – and the environmental destruction caused by war, economic sanctions and external interventions during the 1960s civil unrest. It thus goes without saying that the two texts analyzed in the essay are part and parcel of a rich legacy of literary responses to Niger Delta's grievances as fictionalized in the first wave of writers such as J.P. Clark's *Wives Revolt* (1991; *All for Oil*, 2000), Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* (1994), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* (1995), poetry collections such as Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil - But it was Blood* (2002), which were chiefly concerned with the socio-cultural and ecological costs of the aggressive oil exploration in the region since the 1970s. This is followed by a second wave of literary responses in the form of novels, poetry, dramas, docufictions, and reportage accounts, focusing predominantly on the causes and

consequences – especially conditions of precarity – of the armed conflict in the region: Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005), Kaine Agry's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba's *The Killing Swamp (2009),* Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* (2011), Sebastian Junger's *Blood Oil* (2007), Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet* (2008), Chimeka Garrick's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010), Andrew Berends's *Delta Boys* (2012), and Ilse van Lamoen's *Daughters of the Niger Delta* (2012).[1]

Absent Presence in Michael Peel's *A Swamp Full of Dollars*

Peel's narrative opens with an action-packed encounter in the militant den of Asari, only to be cut short by the erratic and dangerous behaviour of the group. Ruing the missed opportunity with the militants, Peel wastes no time to source new objects of his inquiry elsewhere: in London, on the American warships patrolling the Delta waters, and in the hubs, suburban and satellite towns of Lagos, as evident in the titles of his chapters, "Fuel the Bike, Fuel the Rider," "Fishing without Fish" or "More Popular than Churchill." This approach enables Peel to situate both his narrative in the complex web of global consumption of Delta oil and the failures of local governance.

Typical of its generic conventions, Peel's reportage vacillates between the authorial "I" and "camera eye" narration, laden with common journalistic protocols of interviewing, balanced sourcing, and on-site reporting while employing storytelling techniques of troping – diegesis, focalizers, free indirect speech, allegory, among others – which enable the journalist to "represent social reality through the filters of personal experience and moral judgment" (Harbers and Broersma 643). For instance, it is Peel's repeated distrust in the altruism of the insurgency – the insurgent's cause or at least the way insurgency activity is conducted - which turns him away from the Delta creeks and to seek answers in Nigerian mainstream society. To his credit, however, Peel does cite on-site evidence to justify this incredulity of the insurgents' claims: when he questions Asari, how is it that only 17 of his fighters had been killed whereas his force had assassinated thousands of enemies, Asari responds: "'We don't know' [...] 'We are on the right course, so we are protected'" (10).

It is almost as if Peel's narrator embarks on a quest for the elusive "truth" of militancy among the "sheer variety of untruths" (10), by tracing this so-called "right-course" of those who mimic, moralize and reap the benefits of an informal oil-theft economy fuelled by the militancy outside of the Delta region. He finds the absent presence of militancy in the most unlikely places: in a book shop run by the youth on Lagos Island. Led by a protean fellow named Adekunle Talabi, the

bookshop is a shell organization featuring a curious blend of "area boys," vigilante groups, civic activists and urban gangs – a conglomerate of "young male scavengers" whose "roots lie as much in the limited riches brought by oil as in grinding deprivation" (68). The area boys have a two-fold function: to provide "security" to the liquidation of oil money, and to take a cut from it. In the *absence* of infrastructures for a formal economy, they become the watchdogs of what they do have in their *presence* – the informal sector: the area boys are part of a grab-it-now free-for-all that helps explain Nigeria's paradox of poverty" who are fully aware of the fact that "they have to give the real economy space to flourish if they are to take their share" (ibid.). In the context of such infrastructural neglect, the void filled in by the citizens is tantamount to civic insurgency or what Sarah Nuttall calls, via Hanna Baumann, the "resistance as repair" in the context of planned violence in Palestine, which "involve[s] ways of restoring or reusing infrastructures to resist being cut off and to assert access to the city; and of the turning of the planned into the resources of the unplanned" (332). Such civic insurgency, as Peel rightly observes, often resembles organized crime, much like the romance of the picaresque anti-hero who emerges from "neoliberal shanty towns" and takes a violent path in a just fight to change his fate, often opting for "the undignified and subversive – at times roguish – individualist options left within these disenabling global relations" (Elze 44).

Unlike the flamboyant, gun-hungry Delta insurgents, the violence of Tabali's gang is rather implicit and silent. Talabi himself represents a militant metaphor, resembling a potent blend of a warlord, mercenary, and a self-appointed city counsellor: "He combines the roles, among others, of tycoon, police force and immigration officer. His commercial interests include DVD retail, a barber's salon, a building contractor, and a security company. Most crucially, he is the "'chief of all boys.' 'I am the chairman,' he says. 'I am the manager'" (67). As Peel testifies to the area boy's performative sovereignty, their major source of income "is spurious 'taxes' that they apply to the trucks passing through their domains, bearing consumer goods bought with the proceeds of crude" (73). This resistance of/as repair, to use Nuttall's words again, is a sharp antidote to the self-admitted infrastructural neglect signalled by the Nigerian leading news headlines: "'Lawlessness, armed robbery, gridlock, overpopulation, stench: welcome to Lagos.'" Despite their tenuous and "incredible" (10) operations of events, Peel's narrator is more willing to listen to the justification of their existence than that of Asari's men:

> The Lagos gang fight in the no-man's-land between the breakdown of traditional power structures and the rise of global capitalism. The group has no elders, Talabi says, and no wider sense of patriotic loyalty. They see themselves – or so, at least, they tell me – as a symptom of lawlessness rather than a cause of it. 'I am providing

> security for my area, not for my country,' Talabi says. 'For my area, for my people – in order not to let us fall into bad temptation.' (68)

If Talabi's men could be seen as civic insurgents responding to the precarious conditions in their presence, but more importantly, as filling the void the infrastructural neglect precipitated by the gross mishandling and misdistribution of the absent oil wealth, then the okada (bike taxis) drivers of Lagos are the exemplars, if not the emplotters, of the resistance of repair in a broken city. Peel finds another absent presence figure, like Talabi, in Olufemi Orimogunje – an okada entrepreneur – who has no qualms about disclosing the riches of his enterprise: "'A tailor who doesn't have any cloth to sew with will become okada rider. A mechanic who doesn't have any tools will become okada rider. Unemployed graduates will become okada riders'" (91). A trained biochemist himself, Orimogunje impresses upon the journalist that okada driving is a sanctuary of the qualified unemployed professionals, "illiterate youths and natural-born chancers" (ibid.). As Peel further gleans from Orimogunje, the absence of okada drivers in the streets of Lagos would amount to law-and-order problems:

> [...] apart from the logistical problems it would cause, it would mean 'sleepless nights for everyone' because sacked riders would turn to robbery. 'The crime rate would increase,' he says, 'because okada riders save many souls in employment.' 'It's a system you enter by force – force of the economy,' he says. 'That's what always brings our solidarity – people united by frustration. It's like particles attracted by a magnet.' (93)

Besides the precarious income – from which several pockets along the string of bureaucratic hierarchy have to be fattened with bribes – it is also a dangerous profession not least because of accidents and deaths due to the reckless driving and the fury of the precariat "united by frustration" (ibid.). Violence remains an integral part of this pyrrhic but indispensable unity. Peel's frequent use of narrative devices provides a rare insight into this violence, especially when he takes the cue from a union leader of the okadas about their civic resistance of repair and probes him in such a manner that the violent nature of their operations unravels itself:

> If people don't pay their union fees, their okadas are taken from them. If they still don't pay, the riders are taken to the nearest police station to face the 'wrath of law' [...] I asked what happens to members who don't pay up. Agumba's sidekick, Innocent Adio, answers, trying to be helpful – and earning his name. 'They will force him and beat him and humiliate him,' he says. The chairman anxiously corrects him, 'Not beat him. They will seize his machine. (95)

As Amartya Sen writes, "[p]overty can certainly make a person outraged and desperate, and a sense of injustice, related particularly to

gross inequality, can be a good ground for rebellion – even bloody rebellion" (8). Although okada drivers do not stage an armed rebellion *per se*, their canniness to break rules to survive, and reconstruct the civic infrastructure in such a way that it transforms them into militant metaphors revving through the Lagosian streets. As the journalist himself concedes, despite the fact that okada drivers' "horn-blowing and gadfly dodging across lanes" may be annoying, "you will silently cheer your okada driver as he rides roughshod over traffic laws to get you to your appointment in time" (92). As Hanna Baumann agues, such canniness in the context of Palestine has the effect of civic insurgency (152):

> Crossing the boundaries that might be reinforced, claiming public space through presence and opposing state violence by exposing oneself to it are ways of mobilising vulnerability as a means of resistance. To take up space and claim it through one's body is a way of insisting on a 'right to the city' through daily practice.

The okada rider's place in the oil-rich country is all but precarious: plenty of oil to fuel the bike, not enough to fuel the rider. Although the okada riders may not be directly linked to the management of the oil money, their very existence owes to the violence generated by the infrastructural neglect – of transport, unemployment, lack of safety, and traffic gridlocks – which they take upon themselves, turning the resources of the unplanned violence into planned civic insurrection.

Peel's quest to trace the trails of Delta oil gradually moves from inward to outward: from the Creeks to the urban centers of Lagos, and to the tainted world of global oil conglomerates. As part of the post-9/11 War on Terror-campaign, the patrolling of the warship *Dallas* – perhaps the most imposing of the militant metaphors – to protect the offshore drilling facilities of the multinationals and curb the oil theft militancy in the region has the opposing effect: it provokes the militants to prove their strength and protect their territory. Peel, for instance, recounts an attack by the militants on a Shell Bonga oilfield 75 miles off the coast just before his arrival in São Tomé which sent a "tremor of fear" through the regional oil industry whose output was reduced by 10% as a result, and reminding them of "the kind of conflicts in which the *Dallas* and other visiting US ships might become involved" (143).

Dallas's absent presence in the Delta conflict is not an isolated enterprise but one "too closely connected to the executive and to national security forces that have a popular reputation for brutality and impunity" (161), having killed scores of "armed-robbery suspects" (ibid.) around oil facilities. Shell itself is the major catalyst of the conflict, with its perpetual absent presence in the security operations, and more crucially, the displacement of the Delta subjects from their own lands. Peel unravels this fulcrum of

precarity and violence with the use of fictional devices in conjunction with a series of backstage stories that brings forth the absent/ present forces of the conflict. For instance, in a face-to-face encounter with the Shell managing director – Basil Omiyi – Peel narrates:

> Omiyi denies Shell has responsibility for the greatest crime widely laid at its door: the execution of the 'Saro-Wiwa nine'. As he talks, he raises his finger in the air as if scolding a child who simply won't get the right idea. The Ogoni struggle was not about Shell but about autonomy, he says, pointing to a bill of rights signed in 1990 by Ogoni leaders including Ken Saro-Wiwa. (161)

While emphasizing the pedantic and knee-jerk reaction of Omiyi and his physiognomy, which is befitting of a person in denial, Peel backs up his narrative ploy with evidence: "but Omiyi does not mention the anger it expresses over the results of Shell's decades of oil production. The bill of rights describes the area as an 'ecological disaster,' and one where people have no water, no electricity and no jobs. 'The Ogoni people have received NOTHING,' it says" (ibid.). Armed with this evidence, Peel goes on to drive the conversation with Omiyi to concede that the oil industry *does* provide logistics and support for the military because if the military were to be pulled out of the Delta, there would be ethnic wars and bloodshed as, for instance, "'I would say the Ijaws have armed themselves to the teeth today. They would have the upper hand'" (164). Peel immediately punctures this claim for the military support by exposing the sheer platitudes in Omiyi's narrative: "'If we ever know any time today that the government wants to use this for an offensive type of thing, we will not do it. That's the truth. And we keep this message all the time'" (ibid.).

Against the innocuous metaphors of the unsubstantiated claims such as *offensive type of thing* or *that's the truth* or *keep this message all the time*, Peel goes on to source stories and narratives with militant metaphors that unravel the workings of the oil industry, especially Shell, in a sharply contrasting manner to Omiyi's claim that its role is that of a neutral enterprise. In the process, Peel turns to the other side, the local elite and the villagers at the receiving end of the spectrum, to find out that the oil industry is at the heart of the Niger Delta's "conflict system" as the chief benefactor of the conflict, not its manager. Peel's narrator presents, for instance, the case of the Odioma community which was torn apart after Shell had purchased lands from a village, and another village came forward claiming to be the owner. The conflict ended in the military razing the entire village of the new claimants. Peel immediately connects this journalistic evidence to the narrative diegesis to debunk Omiyi's ethically questionable response: "'What happened on the ground we don't know,' [...] 'I can't speak for the military'" (165).

Despite the occasional throwaway comment about Nigerian anarchy, Peel's uncovering of absent presences that underpin the Niger Delta conflict are made possible by the generic conventions unique to narrative journalism: factual claims that represent reality and narrative ploys that represent "emotional and psychological truths" that can't be captured by facts or evidence alone (Martell 16). If the narrative journalist sees himself as the "potential messenger for people's frustration and at the same time a symbol of the very privileges they say they resent" (Peel 187), then the task of the fictional journalist, as it were, is to "make people see what they cannot see" (Habila "Why I Write" n.p.) precisely because of the factual and topical overdetermination of what *can* be seen, or what is presented to be seen.

Present Absences in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Habila's novel is set against such overdetermination of factual knowledge of the conflict – often made possible by the thrill- and sublime-seeking film makers from the West. In fact, Habila himself was approached by a film company who wanted to make a feature about kidnappings in the Niger Delta, which had "forced" him to write the novel. But as if refusing to abdicate his aesthetic and imaginative rights, the "force" in Habila's novel, as it were, turns on its head: he takes the cinematic kidnapping plot and goes beyond its every imaginable limit. In effect, he takes the kidnapping culture as a mere symptom, an entry point into a world of present absences, namely the grave socioeconomic precarity of the subjects whose violence is not only inscribed into their daily grind of their living, but more importantly, into the very nature and landscape – be it water, oil, and fish – with which they cohabit. As Habila states in an interview, he prefers his fiction to tackle "topical" issues but "then you go beyond and in-depth, to look at the characters and the sociopolitical and literary implications of these topical subject matters", and in the process "make people see what they cannot see because of the topicality" (Habila "Why I write" n.p.). In tune with his interest on topical issues, Habila did produce a non-fictional text (*The Chibok Girls*, 2017) on Boko Haram violence. Yet, Habila's allusion to what he considers to be the inability of the reader to see beyond the glare of the screen or the taper of textuality is what Daniel O'Gorman (2015) reads as the presence of absence in the context of Iraqi war literature. For O'Gorman the conspicuous absence of the victims in the narrative proper leaves the traces of their "presence," in tune with Derek Gregory's notion of "connective dissonance in which connections are elaborated in some registers even as they are disavowed in others" (256).

Habila's fictional journalist is best positioned to decipher the absence(s) of the silenced or subjugated voices. He does so by tapering off each layer of hierarchy, in a descending order beginning with the global, down towards the local, the ecological, the aquatic, the subterranean – through metaphors and materials that are at the author's disposal. This imaginary thirst to capture beyond what is given, present or familiar, is shaped by Habila's desire to defamiliarize the familiar, or in the author's own words to "stand outside Nigeria and see myself" and "to see things from a vantage point" (Habila "Why I write" n.p.) of an investigative fictional journalist who is neither bound by facts nor the verifiability of real-life events.

Recalling the Conradian echoes of Peel's journey, accompanied by the veteran journalist Zaq, the young reporter Rufus in Habila's novel sets out on a hunt for a kidnapped British woman, the wife of a British oil engineer at a multinational refinery, into the troubled waters of the Delta creeks. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that their voyage is less about the missing woman than the two men "bearing witness to" – to borrow Wendy Griswold's (2000) term – the paradox of the precarious and the plenty in the Delta region. From the global crisis of oil engineering and the international media frenzy and fascination associated with the kidnapping phenomenon in the Delta, Zaq and Rufus gradually move inward: to the local subjects, fish, water, ecology, and the militarization of their entire biosphere.

The very structure of the novel – its anachronistic movement, alternating timelines, and the chapters constantly switching the narrative perspective between Rufus' own pernicious past and the picaresque present – allows for a rather convoluted yet connectively dissonant portrayal of violence at both ends of the spectrum; the precarious and the privileged, the military and the militants, the violators and the violated. The recurrent references to the urban riches serve as a trope of presence, through which the pursuit of the absent precarity in the Delta creeks becomes a relentless, at times, restless affair for the duo of the protagonists. This chasm between the urban and rural creeks is allegorically represented in the superimposition of oil *on* water, or in the recurring metaphor of the burnt side of Boma's face – Rufus' sister who barely survives an accident resulting from her father's pirated oil enterprise. If oil here represents the *presence* of urban dreams and desires, then water is its *absent* other – the precarious, precious and contaminated substance of the creeks. The charred remains of oil on Boma's face, as it were, serve as a militant metaphor for the two incompatible substances which cannot *coexist* but cohabit – under the condition that oil is always superimposed upon water – like the etching of oil scar into Boma's being.

In contrast to the professional hazards faced by Peel's journalistic narrator who offers a proxy narration of the Delta conflict in the civic, urban and global power circuits, Habila's fictive journalist –

uninhibited by his creator's cultural proximity to the Delta conflict as well as the imaginary liberties entrusted to his genre – grapples with the convergence of precarity and violence from a social realist perspective. As Habila himself admits, "it's in the news all the time," and to gain a neutral perspective, he had done research for a commissioned movie script that fell through. Habila had decided to use that research material and turn it into a novel because he had felt "fiercely" about the Delta people's strife and the "subject matter" (Habila qtd. in Zerzan, n.p.). Social realism is generally understood as a form of realism to be *distinguished* from the mainstream – the avantgarde, fabulist or modernist traditions with a morally bound, value-laden quest of a central protagonist – or at times crudely defined as "contemporary life from a left-wing point of view" (Smith and Smith 233) with a penchant for the struggles of the marginalized and subaltern groups, like Habila's self-avowed commitment for social justice that inspired the novel in the first place. Sure enough, in a heated exchange with James Floode, Rufus goes on to reason the oil theft, the criminal elements as well as the insurgent activity as just violence:

> But I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefit out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning farmlands [...] These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth [...] And you think the people are corrupt? They are just hungry, and tired. (Habila *Oil* 103-104)

The fictional journalist takes the hackneyed, and oft-cited justification of "hunger" as militant metaphor – a cause or justification for militancy – and traces its present absences among the precarious subjects of the Delta community. Ironically, this toxic blend of poisoned ecosystem, hunger, dead fish and dead insurgents, grows into a full-blown disease across the Delta which could only be treated by oil. As the Doctor, whom Rufus meets in the Creeks, recounts:

> I soon discovered that the village chief's discontent was not over their health; they were remarkably healthy people, actually. One day an elder looked me in the face and said, I am not ill. I am just poor. Can you give me a medicine for that? We want that fire that burns day and night. He told me that, plainly, pugnaciously. (152-153)

In a bizarre clash of fates, the villager does get his bitter medicine – the orange fire that burns all day and night – only to find out that it burnt way too bright for him to swallow. A year later, livestock and fish began to die, but the villagers didn't care. People began to die due to exposure to toxins, and as the Doctor recounts: "Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear, just like that" (153). In an almost

identical case of an oil curse, a group of villagers lose their entire ancestral lands to some aggressive oilmen from the city. Instead of accepting the money offered as compensation, they curse the greedy men and abandon the village (45). These two vignettes provide a compelling testimony to the structural chasm between precarious and plenty, nature and culture, reminding us of the caveat that "it is not simply shortage, but the abundance and processes of environmental rehabilitation or amelioration that are most often associated with violence" (Peluso and Watts 5-6).

Zooming in from the global to the urban, and to the creeks and its oil, *Oil on Water* eventually turns the lens to the terrestrial and the aquatic sphere. The metaphor of fish – which has been a major source of sustenance for the Delta inhabitants – one that moves inside the water, up*on* which the Delta oil floats, serves as a narrative bridge between the precarious lives of the Delta subjects and Rufus' childhood formations in the rural Delta. For instance, in a series of alternating narrative blocks – between Zaq's formative days as a journalist, Rufus' life in the countryside and then in the city – that make up the opening of two chapters, Habila abruptly switches the narrative perspective from Zaq's and Rufus' misadventures in the Creeks to a nameless place from Rufus' past in which his sister is swept into a river in an attempt to save a bucket of crabs that Rufus overturns and scatters at the river bed. This event from Rufus' past is immediately transitioned into a similar event in a nameless Delta village in which a local old man and a young boy go for fishing or catching crabs (Habila *Oil* 19), although the old man later pleads Zaq and Rufus to take the young one with them to Port Harcourt, fearing that he might join the militants, because there is "No fish for river. Nothing" (40). Accordingly, the "floating carcasses of fish and crabs" (193) – which reveal their present absence, and their connective dissonance throughout the novel (28-29) – become objects of anger, as well as guiding metaphorical cues to the responsive violence of the ordinary Nigerians, including one Chief Ibrahim of a nameless Delta village (193), the inhabitants of the Junction and the Irikefe Islanders, among others.

Regardless of these complex narrative cues that serve as what Gregory calls the "doubled spaces of articulations" in which events in one place and time can be understood through their connective trajectories elsewhere – such as the connective dissonance of the techniques used in the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and the Chinese Uighur rehabilitation camps – the existing readings of *Oil on Water* tend to advance a rather hackneyed perspective on the novel as political pamphlet for ecological justice or a manifesto for averting apocalypse (Edebor; Simon *et al*.), for instance. Throughout these readings, the denial of agency manifests itself in the superimposition of victimhood upon the Delta subjects. The only exception to this is,

perhaps, Sule Egya's reading of militant agency is perhaps the only exception to this, which hails *Oil on Water* as a template for "literary militancy" (94). Such militancy in the novel operates as a responsive field of force: "provoked by what one may see as the tripartite system of ruination, having three agents of destruction, namely the multinational oil corporations, the federal soldiers, and the local militias who call themselves militants" (Egya 94). Distinguishing it from "literary activism," Egya further notes:

> Literary militancy, as I conceive it, is the desire of writers, Nigerian writers, especially of the South-South or Niger Delta region extraction, to deploy the instrumentation of literature, of literary and cultural imagination, in not only projecting the colossal environmental degradation and human suffering going on in the region, but also instituting a confrontational discourse in defense, and toward the liberation, of the anguished local peoples and environment of the region. I prefer the use of the word "militancy" over "activism" (in spite of the negative connotation some might see in "militancy") because it better captures the sense of potential force and aggression in what I see as the metaphorical belligerence deployed by the writers. (94-95)

Taking my cue from this notion of literary "belligerence" as a trope of narrative discomfort and even disturbance – metaphorical or otherwise – I wish to draw attention to the picaresque and rogue elements in *Oil on Water*. The social realist depiction of these rogue and picaresque figures, with an "emphasis on dirt and grime and recreating authentic working and living conditions" (Habila *Oil* 227) become the signature theme of its plot, setting and characters, that haunt the novel as the metaphors of present absence:

> The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village center like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. The atmosphere grew heavily with suspended stench of dead matter […] Something organic, perhaps, human lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands. (8-10)

Not only the traces of the dead and the decomposed, but also the vivid metaphors of decay or deadly diseases evoke an organic imagery of violence sunk into the very soil of the Delta. Here, the metaphors of violence and militancy are superimposed upon nature, as though nature itself has turned rogue, staging its own kind of insurgency against those who inhabit it. This is not a violence that is inherent to the Delta ecology, as Habila's metaphorical militancy reveals, but a *response* to the violence inflicted upon the environment.

If the term picaresque is typically associated with the attributes of delinquency, abjection, crookedness, conceit, roguery (Sieber 2017), and even an innate sense of menace thrust upon by the unconventional hero who hails from a troubled social class that is exposed to violence, then, as Angus Ross argues, the picaresque hero himself becomes the source of violence (171). Arguably, the very plotting of the novel is infused with rogue elements with the sorry lives of all the major protagonists occupying the bulk of the narrative: Rufus' itinerant childhood in the countryside, Boma's failed marriage, and Zaq's marriage to whisky. Like Zaq's uncanny fascination for risk, the fringe lives of the prostitutes (one of whom he marries) and drugs, Rufus is drawn to, and even volunteers for the job knowing the dangers very well: "I see it as a great opportunity to show what I can do, sir" is his response when his editor candidly asks "aren't you afraid of danger? You could get killed" (Habila *Oil* 56). As if that is not enough, Rufus literally steps into the dead man's shoes: Rufus gets the opportunity to cover the kidnapping by the sheer chance that his predecessor gets killed by the militants on a similar assignment. Even after he willingly accepts the job, Rufus strongly entertains the thought of running away with the finder's fee offered by Mr. Floode – the husband of the kidnapped British woman (107). While these rogue elements remain integral to the characters themselves and adhere to the generic features of social realism in which the descriptions of "low life" (113), and a desire for "climbing the social ladder" (15) are pressed into the service of "anti-idealizing" of issues of "hunger and social justice" (Samson 36), other aspects of Habila's narrative, such as the vocations, occupations or preoccupations of the characters, too, are rendered in the most picaresque terms. A journalist, whom Rufus meets along the way, remarks: "I bet you went to journalism school, didn't you? […] Well, nothing like journalism school for us. You begin as a cub reporter, and if you survive, you become the king of the jungle, or at least something high up on the food chain" (Habila *Oil* 118).

For Rufus and Zaq, such sense of naturalized roguery that underpins their vocation is made prominent through ecological metaphors. The very opening of the novel is ominously explosive as the narrator recounts the accident at a "barn with the oil drums," in which people are either dead, have their faces charred, or, more importantly, are saved from a certain impending danger. Inversely, the physical environments are replete with the traces of the humans, human refuse and above all else, *refused* humans: "consumerist goods," a "lone arms floating away" with "its middle finger extended derisively, before disappearing into the dark mist" (38), "dead birds draped over tree branches," "dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (10), "dead bats that could not survive the gas flares" (127).

In essence, the recurring instances of roguery and their prefiguration as the present absence of nature and culture in the novel,

lend insights into Nancy Peuso and Michael Watts' (2001) critique of "violent environments," which falsely recast precarious and disposed subjects into nature as savage and violent objects. In the latter, Habila's narrator – analogous to Mieke Bal's (21-25) more expansive definition of focalizer, which is a prerogative of the narrator as opposed to the characters' – exposes the fraught relationship between violence, nature and precarity by means of what Rob Nixon describes as the "environmental picaresque" in which the "the toxic repercussions" innate to neoliberal practices "will return to haunt it" (452). Citing Indra Sinha's *Animal People* (2007) as the prime example, Nixon writes: "His picaresque Animal a potent compression of disturbing, porous ambiguity, a figure whose leakiness confounds the borders between the human and the nonhuman as well as the borders between the national and the foreign" (ibid.).

Besides confounding borders between animal and nonhuman representations, I might add, a further salient feature of the environmental picaresque is its ability to anthropomorphize or even subjectivize the otherwise object nature, thereby infusing a sense of active agency into the physical environment – a dominant current of *Oil on Water.* To that end, the frequent comparisons of oil pollution with spots on the human liver or nicotine-stained hands invoke the "militant" imagery of the Delta region as a toxic organic soup of oil and dead human flesh. As the fictional journalist reflects:

> The ever-present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old, shriveled hand, and sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall. Maybe fate wanted to show her first-hand the carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce. (Habila *Oil* 192-193)

The above words, attributed to the kidnapped woman Isabel Floode, the wife of the British oil executive, on account of the narrator, bear testimony to the agency of the violated nature, whose violence is made visible through militant metaphors.

Boma's surprise visit to Rufus on Irikefe island provides the ultimate metaphorical cue to the commensurability of precarity and violence, but also the incommensurability of the two facets of Nigeria – oil and water, Lagos and Port Harcourt, precarious and plenty. "She looked pretty," remarks Rufus, "I was looking at the good side of her face, and suddenly I was back many years the last time I'd seen her like this, without the scar" (170). It is entirely possible to read the scar as an allegory of the burnt side of Nigeria – the Delta Creeks, Irikefe island where Rufus stands upon and sees the good side of Boma's face

– whose combusted fumes drift waywardly, casting a smoke screen over its "pretty" side. The fact that Boma refuses to return to Port Harcourt and decides to stay on Irikefe island as part of a group of worshippers who are forced into submission by the insurgents gestures towards the narrator's own submission to the violent agency of the precarious denizens of the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

As the two journalistic narrators – albeit one fictional, and one non-fictional – have shown, facts and truths never fully avail themselves, or become visible to the observer's naked eye. As Peel's authorial narrator concedes: "I am a potential messenger for people's frustration [...] For them, the priority is to tell their story to a world that they optimistically hope is listening" (187). And almost immediately Peel undermines to this laissez-faire notion of journalism by drawing attention to the challenges posed by the performance of stories, like the "camera-glutton" (ibid.) insurgents he frequently encounters. Thus, Peel's attempt at, or rather journalistic imperative for, factual verification leads him to shift his gears as well as the focus of his subjects – the absent presence – of his inquiry from the Delta creeks to the militant metaphors of the urban gangs, civic insurgency, and the global actors at work.

Complementing Peel's absent presence, Habila's fictional journalist performs an equally enabling role in teasing out the traces of absence – the precarious lives and the violated nature that breed conflict – in what is present or given. As he states in an interview: "I wanted to carry the reader into this landscape. [...] The big people – the oil companies and the government – they are in the background. You have a sense that they are there, always pulling the strings. But I wanted to draw attention to the environment and the people who are living on that land and who are really suffering" (Habila qtd. in Zerzan, n.p.). Despite the inverted nature of the literary techniques and effects of absence and presence in the two texts discussed here, in their shared concern to decipher the militant metaphors of the Niger Delta fraught with precarity and violence, their use of aesthetic-literary devices has significant conceptual implications for recapturing the facts whose presence may have been erased or have not given due credit, or truths that may no longer be there to be discovered.

Notes

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