Reading at Scale: Wetland Futures and Deep Time in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Introduction:

As always, I begin with research and a story. I invite you to read the following two excerpts, to sit with them, and to find their internal dialogue. This is an exercise in anticipation. This is an invitation into scalar multiplicity, which, as Annemarie Mol writes, "suggests that different *versions* of an entity may clash *here* while *elsewhere* they overlap or are interdependent" (154; emphasis original). Understanding often dawns on me as something like magic: draw a card and remember what it says. This will be important later.

> The transformation of Land into Resource is achieved not only through the arrangement of space but also through the arrangement of time. The temporality of Resource is anticipatory – it makes and even aims to guarantee colonial futures. Crucial to this temporality is the belief that this future can be chosen and that the present can be directed toward it via management practices. As such, Resources eclipse other possible relations with Land both now and in the future. […] The landscape cannot support other relations, or activities, or futures that might interfere with future use. (Liboiron *Pollution*, 64-65)

This dawning sense that our Earth is replete with otherness, that a new planet might suddenly be visited upon us, we suggest, informs the mix of horror and fascination that imbues the broad reception of the Anthropocene thesis (Clark and Szerszynski 28).

And now the story, as promised. It is a story about wetlands, refracting and echoing other wetlands elsewhere. I can confidently say that nightclubs are not for me. I moved to Berlin the same year and month as the infamous virus, which led to the quick shutdown of the city's nightlife. A little over a year later, I was lining up outside a building that I had often admired and photographed for its architecture but always had doubts about entering: Berghain. In an exhibition that ran from July to September 2021, Halle am Berghain re-opened its doors to the public for Jakob Kudsk Steensen's Berl Berl, "an immersive installation that leads us to Berlin's origins as a swamp formed by a glacial valley over 10,000 years old" ("Jakob Kudsk Steensen: Berl-Berl").

The exhibition brought together my most resilient special interests: industrial architecture, Berlin, deep time, ecological histories, archives, photography, and video game technology. Steensen combined photographs of present-day wetlands of Brandenburg and specimens from the archives of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin to create an audio-visual story of the city-before-it-became-this-city, with the wetland as the protagonist. The production process involved running a large repository of images and sounds through the Unreal Engine, a software used to create landscapes for video games.

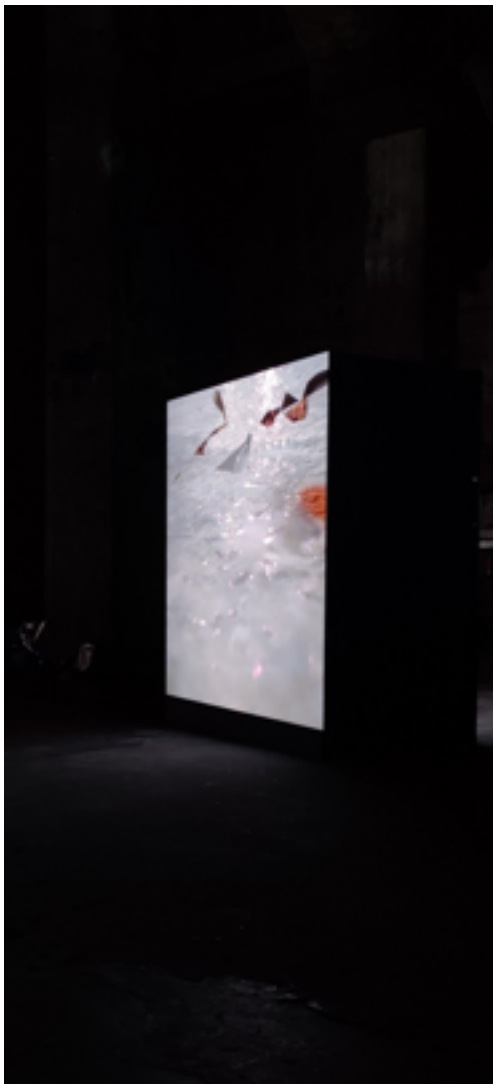

Fig. 1: Jakob Kudsk Steensen, *Berl-Berl*, Halle am Berghain, 2021. © Baldeep Kaur

Fig. 2: Jakob Kudsk Steensen, *Berl-Berl*, Halle am Berghain, 2021. © Baldeep Kaur

The only sources of light on the two floors were the large screens on which the artist's work played on loop. The upright displays seemed like giant mirrors, reflecting a watery version of my surroundings that was otherwise invisible. At first, the transformations of the wetland and the navigations through it seemed random, but after I spent enough time with them, seasons began to emerge. Towards the end of one such winter, the screen in front of me displayed the view through the frosted-over surface of a pool, seen from its bottom. As the ice began to thaw, a single human handprint appeared – as if someone had placed their palm against the ice on the other side. I snapped to attention and fumbled for my phone, but by the time I had the camera open, the frame had moved on. I took a picture of what had followed and told myself that if I stick around until it is winter again, I will see the phantom hand again. After several cycles, I had to accept that that frame was either not going to appear again or was a product of my imagination in the first place. I stood up and walked around some more, hoping to catch the handprint on a different screen. Eventually I gave up and biked home, newly aware of the damage that had been paved over to build the city and wondering what would come after.

Fig. 3: Jakob Kudsk Steensen, *Berl-Berl*, Halle am Berghain, 2021. © Baldeep Kaur

I was reminded of this experience a few months later when I was reading about Michel Serres' traveling models in Annemarie Mol's *Eating in Theory*.[1] In laying out a selective history of empirical philosophy, Mol recalls Serres' caution against "hardening concepts" (20) and his proposal of "alternative models to think with: muddy places where water and land mix, clouds first forming and then dissipating into rain, curving paths that twist and turn, fires that consume what they encounter" (20). Considering this, how interesting that an exhibition had taken place in a part of Berlin with a particular wall-oriented history, in a re-purposed power plant no less, where one saw a Berlin continuous with its Brandenburg-ian surroundings—a muddy place where water and land mix—a speculative narrative in which time and space generously lend themselves to chrono-confusion and viscosity. Within the enormity of those scales, the fading human handprint could well be my own wishful thinking, a mind reaching for the familiar as it hits the limits of its own imagination. As someone who is not from this place and is more familiar with Berlin's present-day canals than its historical roots, I am unable to offer a satisfactory analysis of *Berl Berl*. I do not know enough to say where the installation lands politically, but I can feel how it gave me an unexpected alternative model with which to think about time and ecology. It was a realization that gave me pause, and although there is a lot going on in my mind that has grown from it, I do not yet have the words.

The one clear question that I can distil from this churning is the one that prompted the writing of this piece: where does it take me if I think the linear Anthropocene from places that are difficult to pin down in the before-and-after scheme of things, where time and geographies are weird? Instead of offering poor definitions for what I mean by this phrase, I want to lean into it with an analysis of Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water*: sitting with post-colonial sites where ongoing ecologies and colonial technologies have formed non-linear amalgams, and with the curious case of wetlands and their recalcitrant role in the history of colonial industry. So let me move from the Berlin wetlands towards the Niger Delta's wetlands—known to me only via literary writing—and their entangled ecologies of water, carbon, and oil.

Resources, Single Commodities, and a Story of the Niger Delta

In a quote we already have encountered at the top of this piece, from *Pollution is Colonialism*, Max Liboiron writes that the "temporality of Resource is anticipatory – it makes and even aims to guarantee colonial futures" (65). They further identify the problematic central

belief that drives this temporal understanding: "that this future can be chosen and that the present can be directed toward it via management practices, […]. The landscape cannot support other relations, activities, or futures that might interfere with future use" (65). While Liboiron develops these insights in relation to the settler colony of Canada, they also trace particularly well onto non-settler colonial contexts, such as Habila's Nigeria, where infrastructures of extraction create and maintain colonial futures. This is a cue to think of colonial effects as they continue to radiate through social, political, and personal relations, whether we want them to or not. As I contextualize extractivism in the Niger Delta, I argue that resource regimes not only limit what a place can sustain, but they also deflect focus from amalgams that ecological processes form with colonial infrastructure. These imbrications are more than a symptom or side-effect of modernity; in fact, they form the bones of what is to come. Analytical models centered around single-resource regimes reduce complex terrains to narratives of damage and death that recognize only anthropocentric agencies. What I am still struggling with is how to part ways with these analytical models without downplaying the racialized violence that characterizes life amidst extractivism.

The current carbon-intensive world order rests on financial regimes that extract disproportional value and power from single commodity economies. Singular ecologies are somehow made legible and narratable using the narrow vocabulary of profits, stocks, resources, reserves, and commodities. I am wondering here about the problem of beginning the story of carbon not in the thick of development and resource extraction but at the *speculative* phase where commodity regimes are still in formation—that is, when the status of an object as a "commodity" has not yet solidified and there is no cause to diverge from the current developmental plan. This speculative phase often lies and relies on the tail end of a previously operative resource regime. In this phase, resource speculation has as much to do with the search for a new commodity as it does with creating emergent fictions of colonial endurance in an ecosystem disturbed and depleted by the work of sustaining a (now inefficient) dominant narrative.

I was alerted to this during a research visit to a facility in Celle, Germany, that manufactures oil drills.[2] A researcher from the group that I was with asked the employee who led our tour about his opinion on natural gas. He told us that the industry is turning its favor to natural gas now that oil drilling is "wasteful." He explained that to meet the demand for oil, they had to drill increasingly deeper to access crude oil. This increased the costs of drilling operations and made profit margins smaller. The company that owned the drill manufacturing facility was amenable to a switch to natural gas extraction as a cleaner, more efficient operation that kept them in

business. This also allowed them to incorrectly frame natural gas as a good transition fuel, which hides the high methane emissions and ecosystem disruptions that result from drilling.

What alarmed me about this response is how it aligns ecological interests with capitalist interests and stays consistent with corporate entitlement to land and the lives of those who belong to it. This switch from the messy, leaky fluid dynamics of oil to buoyant natural gas is framed as amenable to efficient engineering as well as the *renewability* of capital gain. As Marco Armiero noted, the story of carbon intensiveness includes both zones of wasting and zones of development. He argues that to conceive the world as a Wasteocene is to identify "the wasting relationships, those really planetary in their scope, which produce wasted people and places" (2) as a precondition of modernity where "social dumps and immunized communities" (45) become mutually inclusive. Keeping this in mind, what sort of emergent colonial developments are concealed in stories of ecological devastation?

In the logic of extraction, a resource can be converted into a commodity if its production (and consumption) can be scaled up to an extent where it becomes globally relevant. Whether during the geographical surveys in nineteenth-century colonies or in the present-day speculation for lithium and natural gas, the success of extraction depends on the actual availability of the resource as well as the discursive possibility of manufacturing demand for it. Therefore, speculation does not always result in extraction; territories under exploration can either be discarded as dead ends or lead nowhere for decades before something meaningful for surplus capital emerges. For instance, several companies took turns holding oil exploration rights in the Niger Delta for over fifty years, until Shell British Petroleum began extracting crude oil at the Oloibiri Oilfield in 1956 (cf. Steyn). As is particularly stark in this example, it can be difficult to pinpoint single perpetrators of the resulting ecological damage as various stakeholders infiltrate territories in waves of acquired license and failed prospection.

Exploration always leaves its traces – by altering ecologies, introducing new technologies of work and leisure, as well as by creating social regimes that are initially organized in response to exploratory activity and then go on to develop a life of their own. Paying close attention to a site of resource speculation can reveal chains of association between successive commodities; consider, for instance, the case of palm oil and crude oil, where the profits and precedence of the former resource regime enabled speculation for the latter. This perspective in turn encourages questions about why colonial systems transition from one commodity to the next instead of endlessly deriving value from and insuring a future for colonialism against only one resource.

The question of resource frontiers and the making of commodities has not escaped the attention of the environmental humanities. The scholarship of Jennifer Wenzel and Michael Niblett, in particular, focuses on "the strange, jarring, and 'bewitching' effects of new value regimes as they transform local environments" (Vandertop 531). Noting "the ideological overdetermination of the word 'frontier' and its historic association with imperialist narratives of endless territorial expansion" (55), Michael Niblett, for instance, suggests treating the term "'commodity frontier"' not as a concept but as a narrative category which "mediates between the logistics of frontier-making and their concrete historical instantiation" (43). In other words, rather than building a water-tight conceptual box, Niblett proposes that to invoke a commodity frontier is to invoke a narrative that is informed by two scales: the ideological force of imperial frontierism and the local logistics of a frontier. Further, he observes that the "weird economies" of commodity frontiers can be represented via the stylistic mode of magic realism or even a troubled realism as theorized by Frederic Jameson.[3]

Building upon Löwy's concept of "irrealism," which describes "the absence of realism rather than an opposition to it" (Löwy 195), Niblett suggests that literary modes like magic realism or the Gothic that depict commodity frontiers tend towards "irrealism." Accordingly, "an irrealist literary work might include elements of fantasy, the oneiric, the marvelous, or the surreal; it may well display an admixture of disjunctive registers or tonalities" (62). In conversation with such suggestions, Jennifer Wenzel proposes *petro-magic-realism* as a strategy for reading Nigerian petrofiction,

> A literary mode that combines the transmogrifying creatures and liminal space of the forest in Yoruba narrative tradition with the monstrous-but-mundane violence of oil exploration and extraction, the state violence that supports it, and the environmental degradation that it causes. (Wenzel "Petro-Magic-Realism" 456)

Petro-magic-realism emphasizes the relevance of "petro-magic" in the political ecology of the petrotext.[4] Even as I learn from these literary studies of world-ecology, I find myself wondering what literature can do with situations when these resource regimes have not yet solidified. The mode of most present-day literary writing seems retrospective rather than responsible: it waits for the accumulation of trauma and catastrophic violence to begin the plot instead of intervening early, especially when the hold of power is still uncertain. Patricia Yaeger argues that the marketing of literature as a pleasure (of reading and interpretation) is contingent on the accretion of trauma. Her self-reflexive critique of the humanities views cultural analysis as an intellectual practice caught between oppositional currents: "our

irrepressible longing for pleasure and our traffic in specters: our omnivorous conversations with the implacable dead" (Yaeger 2).

Yaeger's article "Consuming Trauma" is unsettling to read because it accurately points out how cultural analysis often gets too caught up in using language to describe racialized violence, to the point where these descriptions become a source of personal intellectual enjoyment. This is made even more disturbing by the fact that citations turn out into career and capital. Moreover, this entitlement to readily available documentation of violence and destruction is in turn justified by submitting said career and publication success as "evidence" of analytical expertise. As trauma, like capital, circulates and is offered up for consumption, a more vital question falls out of relevance: how do we in the humanities care for stories that do not belong to us and trauma that we do not ourselves come from? If the dominant mode of storymaking needs sufficient accretion of trauma, can our training in literary and cultural analysis still be used to read against the grain of such an eager orientation towards damage?

The tendencies identified by Patricia Yaeger also naturalize the inexorable progression of colonial violence and render both its victims and survivors—human and otherwise—mortal and ineffectual. And yet, as I have learned from black intellectuals like Sylvia Wynter, Kathrine McKittrick, and Paul Gilroy and from the writings of Elizabeth Povinelli, the opposite is often true. The parameters of colonial paradigms fall short of the overwhelming capacity of peoples and their lands to undo binary formations of past and future and life and death. The intergenerational entanglements that we could enjoy with each other and with those natures that made us possible can dwarf the scale of colonial consumption. Keeping this in mind, I want to turn unfaithful to dominant modes of interpretation and analysis that easily assign reality-making, or even magical power, to commodities. If a commodity could indeed be the protagonist of our stories, is it subject to the existentialism and mortality of a Bildungsroman?

Keeping this in mind, I want to turn unfaithful to dominant modes of interpretation and analysis that easily assign reality-making, or even magical power, to commodities. If a commodity could indeed be the protagonist of our stories, is it subject to the existentialism and mortality of a Bildungsroman? Could the trick of invulnerable petromagic survive a telling of its speculative beginnings? Even where a resource regime is in full swing, how does one read the frontier against its anthropocentric grain? An abundance of commodity-oriented literary criticism has been generative in my line of questioning: what happens if the focus shifts from commodity-history to the role that ecology has played in multiple commodity histories?

I argue that an overwhelming focus on the commodity frontier performs a "deadening" of the ecosystem that has informed and perhaps co-created the technical edifice of extraction.[5] This mobilizes

the logic of waste colonialism, where "pollution and wasting can also *accomplish* enclosure and dispossession" (Liboiron, "Waste Colonialism;" emphasis in the original). Within this logic, polluted or damaged ecosystems are rendered non-agential at the level of narrative and discourse. The modes of irrealism or petro-magic-realism encourage readings where discarded materials—both in terms of ecosystems and built environments—are somehow inert to history and politics, where falling out of capitalist use somehow equates to falling out of time and narrative. In these situations, agency—what Jennifer Wenzel calls "the capacity to be a protagonist" (Wenzel *Disposition* 19)—is easily granted to the spectacular magical power of commodities like oil or sugar but is withheld from environments that do not meet the colonial standards of pristine wilderness or the pastoral.

Reconciling the protagonist-like quality of commodities with the storymaking work of ecological processes is much more than magic. With my brief yet hopeful reparative reading of *Oil on Water* below, I argue against readings of fiction that center a single commodity. Commodity-centered modes perpetuate damage-oriented thinking that performs a figurative "deadening" of ecologies; within these modes, the focus of literary criticism tends towards damage-oriented analyses with little to no attention to the effects of ecological specificity. Displacing focus onto ecosystems instead of commodities, I offer strategies for reading Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* for its commentary on a wetland's turning away from human life rather than framing the deltaic system as an inert background.[6]

Wetland Futures in *Oil on Water*

"Given the ways that oil hijacks the imagination, how can the story of the Niger Delta be told?"

This question, asked by Jennifer Wenzel in *The Disposition of Nature*, is a question that overwhelms and stills me. So, with this article, I am trying to tailor it to a scale that I can respond to: given the ways that oil hijacks the imagination, how can a story of the Niger Delta be read? In my attempt to do exactly that, I aim to consolidate commodity-centered readings of the text with an ecosystem-centered interpretation of its milieu. Literary modes of reading must search for beacons of speculative futures of alterliving (cf. Murphy),[7] rather than defaulting to apocalyptic readings where colonialism outlives everything and repair is not an option. I demonstrate this with my reading of Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* along two vectors: mobilities and deep time. Habila's story illustrates the tension between an attention-grabbing commodity frontier and the limits that a deltaic ecosystem sets upon this narrative. Instead of a spatial analysis of the Niger Delta,

I opt for an infrastructural analysis of its disturbed ecology, where organic matter mixes with discarded petro-infrastructure.

Oil on Water is narrated by a Nigerian journalist named Rufus, who ventures into the Niger Delta in hopes of gaining an audience with so-called militants who have kidnapped the wife of a British oil engineer. In the novel, Rufus never really seems to arrive where he would like to; instead, he and his colleague Zaq seem to be pinballed between islands in search of the elusive militias. Each new island reveals a distinct narrative arc of petrocapitalism: the inhabitants range from members of a cult who provide refuge to militants to military barracks that 'keep peace' for the oil corporations in the region. The course of this journey is riddled with images of terrible ecological destruction, brute force, and the loss of human life.

Imagination and fact align in the novel's *Niger Delta*, where habitable land for people has shrunk rapidly due to pollution and private ownership by oil corporations. As native communities give up their land in exchange for promises of modernization, how can these tensions between human subjects and their natural surroundings be narrativized? For a literary work, this is a problem of writing both space and time in a story where the space (both on land and in water) that the characters can inhabit shrinks as time passes. In *Oil*, this shrinking of habitable space is represented in the first few pages as a diminishing of mobility, as Rufus notes that "the river grew narrower each time we set out again" (9). This unpredictability of routes forecloses the possibility of a linear or teleologic narrative: the story simply cannot offer a guaranteed future that it can advance towards, nor can it provide its characters with stable spatial footholds since their presence on the land they inhabit is either increasingly life-threatening or illegal.

Given a lack of orientation or the skill to navigate, the characters in Oil seem to perpetually be in a state of *drifting*. Literally, Rufus and Zaq drift in the oil-tainted waters of the Delta in various boats or on various islands. The story's other agents—religious cult members, creeks that end abruptly, displaced villagers looking for a new home, or military personnel employed by oil companies—overtake all of their attempts to control their movements. These movements and topographical constraints in the narrative are essentially *wetland* conditions.[8] The shrinking passage of the protagonists tells a story where the wetland maps unevenly onto oil's devastation and re-routing of the Niger Delta. Colonial projects can constitute a reorganized map where existing relationships are broken or modified and new ones in the service of capitalism come to be. However, when exposed to the alterations and fluvial conditions of deltaic ecologies, these projects lose their footing more quickly. Read this way, the narrative emerges as a series of vantage points that either provide information on events that have already happened in the novel or end up connecting to events

that happen in succeeding chapters. Often, one finds themselves reading a scene without any supporting sub-plots, and the causal backstory only arrives several chapters later, in a deferred form. However, these literal and affective drifts are not just iterations of personal memory or interactions between human characters. These drifts are *mediated* by the environment they take place in: the polluted channels and islands of the Niger Delta that are inundated with both active and abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia.

I want to take care not to flatten the Niger Delta's fluvial processes into anonymous "nature" and rely on Melody Jue's media studies framework for milieu-specific analysis. This calls "attention to the differences between perceptual environments" and "acknowledges that specific thought forms emerge in relation to different environments" (Jue 3). However, Jue cautions against reifying a milieu "as a stable object" (3) and highlights that an environment—the ocean, wetlands, or desert—means different things for different actors, especially in combination with media technologies. In *Oil on Water*, notions of stability, home, and safety mean different things for the Delta's inhabitants and for the journalist, Rufus, who is a newly arrived visitor. Petro-magic-realism's focus on the "mundane" violence of oil excavation and state violence does not account for the cultural techniques by which inhabitants of the Delta derive pleasure from oil media. "Longing for infrastructure" (Wenzel *Disposition* 82) is an important motivational technique that propels the narrative of *Oil* and reveals the tussle between desired civic infrastructure and the extractive industry that is delivered in its place. Overcoming a supposed "antagonism between textuality and technology […], itself a legacy of the Enlightenment and the first Industrial Revolution," is fundamental to the task of uncovering "the cultural agency of technology" (Purdon 2) in a literary text.

One way of doing this in literary analysis is to attend to the agency of nature as infrastructure rather than a character sketch of supposedly sovereign human subjects in a text. As seen in the following excerpt, with the appearance of increasingly confusing amalgams of pollution, discarded objects, and fluvial processes, given definitions of social organization begin to fail:

> It turned out this wasn't a village at all. It looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meagre landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes criss-crossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field. (Habila 34)

The irony of the phrase "oil-fecund earth" is significant in this instance. The word "fecund" carries connotations of fertility and profuse growth. While the soil in the region is indeed completely saturated with oil, it is unable to re-generate more oil (at least not for the next few millennia), nor can the soil grow any fauna on it. This is

the breakdown of "the idea that forests, wetlands, reefs, and other landscapes, if appropriately organized, deliver services (water[9] storage, purification, and conveyance; flood alleviation; improved air quality; climate regulation; and so on) that facilitate economic activity and development" (Carse 540). In *Oil*, the assumed collaboration of natural processes with social and capitalist structures no longer appears natural, inevitable, or even possible. Such instances destabilize existing major bodies of knowledge (like the anthropocene, the divide between nature and culture, or even "petrocultures") and nudge the reader towards speculative (post-hydrocarbon) futures that are already seeded with (residual) oil media and do not secure the needs and comforts of (only a few) humans.

In another instance, Rufus peers into a well hoping for water, and instead is nauseated by "something organic, perhaps human, (that) lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil" (Habila 9). I read this as a chilling gesture towards the contents of the well and future fossil fuels in the making, which are contingent on selectively destroying the conditions that sustain life for those considered disposable in the hierarchy of racial capitalism. In this sense, colonial futurity not only extracts oil but also conscripts metabolic processes by violently converting disenfranchised peoples into future reserves. However, oil cannot replace water or the desire for it, and the nausea of finding oil where there should be water is indicative of the counter-intuitiveness of colonialism's desire to endure into the future by effecting ever-narrowing conditions of liveliness. Much like the obsolescence of Rufus' boat amidst the disappearing deltaic routes in the novel, in guiding planetary formations towards building inevitable colonial futures, the ability of colonial machines to navigate the planet itself rapidly shrinks. The opposite of colonial futurity is not an alternative futurity that does not have colonial effects. Colonialism and its future are a set of relations that perpetuate exhaustion, scarcity, and extraction to the point where abundance and randomness dwindle into impossibility. Colonialism and its future are based on tactics of isolation and apartheid that seek to compartmentalize damage and well-being, underdevelopment and development. Colonialism and its future are projects that contract the imagination to the point where the relations between people and things can only be configured in an equation where one exists only at the expense of another.

The opposite of colonial futurity, then, is to engage in an abundance of future visions—the more multifarious, the better. This project is not about discovering a new frontier or new vision but to develop a keen sense for what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling"—existing currents of potentiality or affect that can give way to paradigms that currently exceed the imagination. Literature—its writing and reading—can be one way of modeling or testing that

which cannot be fully realized and felt. In this role, modes of writing and interpretation can be diversified beyond their basic function of documentation that takes place after the fact. When Rufus peers into the well, his revulsion prepares the reader for what could eventually become refusal and a turning away from the dominant paradigm of fossil capitalism. Within this scene of past and future fossilizations, the linearity of colonial futures breaks down in a visual manner, and several time scales become compossible—what Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay defines as a condition where "two things are together possible" ("Manifestos of Futurisms" 21). In his thesis on cofutures, Chattopadhyay notes that "while many temporalities are possible, not all these temporalities are together possible" and explains that to reject linear time is to give in to the "complexity of coevalness where different times are not discrete but always collocated: the pasts are not dead, the presents are not made, and futures have always been here" ("Five Speculative Acts"). Even if one were to blend temporalities into a cosmopolitan vision, this runs the risk of totalitarian thinking. Chattopadhyay's *speculative* move is to find futures of compossibility: "Something that makes other works possible, but is itself not the origin, genesis, or destiny of the work. This something is part political formation, part social infrastructure, and part technical capacity, whose existence is also with the existence of others" ("Five Speculative Acts").

As my analyses have shown, both colonial projects and wetland conditions seem to perform planetary functions (resilience, holding fossils, and holding fossil fuels). Knowing that colonial projects are determined to produce colonization-friendly futures, how do these interact with planetary time or deep time, which includes the natural demise of all (colonial) projects? Further, how do we reconcile them within our literary readings that respond to climates both within and outside the text? Without equating the scales of the two, how can we handle the very real, slow violence that racialized bodies experience and the thickening toxicity of the ecologies they inhabit with care? Or without using one to cancel out the other? The challenge is finding the place where the grip of a system at capacity begins to slip and ecological processes exceed its imaginative grasp. The grip of crude oil lies not in the existence of crude oil but in its use as leverage and abstract value. In *Oil*, the scene of the well is a reminder that oil will outlive its colonial usage, and this sense of overwhelming temporality could be nourished into the belief that if enough things can be made possible together, colonial violence can be outlived.

This rejects the narrative of the anthropocene, in which human subjects shape the world, and gestures towards futures that the humans of Western enlightenment cannot keep up with. In *Oil*, the Niger Delta carries a history of ecological manipulation that precedes petro-modernity (as an important geopolitical location in the colonial palm

oil industry), that enfolds technologies of oil extraction, and that unfolds in excess of the anxious temporalities of colonial commodity frontiers. Thwarting colonial efforts to fix routes to guaranteed futures, oil-disrupted wetland ecologies turn away from unfamiliar wetland futures. While there is also fertile ground for oil-mediated cultural techniques, the demise of any pleasure derived from them is swift. To be attentive to this is not to romanticize the violence of racist capital or ascribe anthropologic resistance to ecological processes. This is only a small-scale intervention at the level of one reader, in one reading, to turn away from signposts that direct attention only towards damaging colonial futures and call them inevitable.

Final Openings

I conclude with the hope that this analysis can expand the function of storytelling and reveal how literary writing (and reading) can record things even as they slip away from us because of infrastructural transitions or climate change. To return to Wenzel once more, in her introduction to *The Disposition of Nature*, she reckons with the task of *reading for the planet*. In asking "whether the literary can be part of an environmentalist praxis" (2), she is careful to note that "there is probably more evidence that literary imagining has been complicit in environmental crises than that it offers robust solutions" (16). She emphasizes that even if a text is not ostensibly about nature, "literary imagining informs what we talk about when we talk about nature, it also shapes what we don't talk about, and the forms those silences take" (16). If we are reading for the planet, how does the individual or situated imagination even reach for that vast a scale? As I have tried to show, one way of finding out is to move the scope of inquiry beyond asking whether literature is a viable response or a counterstrategy to the climate crises. At the same time, I am taking a practical view of scholarship that makes claims to overarching labels such as decoloniality or ecocriticism. I want to be truthful—both to myself and to my reader—about the span and limits of this work and the ways in which it is written both for and against the colonizing-academic complex. In line with the anticolonial drive to reject colonial knowledge projects, my reflections above have refused settler models of sustainability as a template for the "saving" of colonized lands and peoples from climate change.

Instead, the contribution of this piece is to open new forms of reading praxis that create possibilities for collaboration; to offer alternatives to "hardening concepts" (to recall Mol on Serres) and to think, instead, with "muddy places where water and land mix, clouds first forming and then dissipating into rain, curving paths that twist and turn, fires that consume what they encounter" (Mol 20). Having moved from my initial considerations of Berlin and Brandenburg wetlands

and towards the wetlands of the Niger Delta, I have tried to acknowledge the limitations of my subject position and the dangers of claiming universal knowledge. In envisioning and writing an unresolved series of questions and reading experiments, I am learning from the centuries of life-making work by Indigenous artists, theorists, and survivors (in the sense that surviving too is an intellectual tradition of life and liberation) who started the conversation of which I am only a student. It is also important to note that literary writing is simply the genre of the now; it is no larger or smaller than those modes of storymaking that have preceded it, coexisted with it, and will come to be.

Notes

1. Mol's book seeks new wordings and models for philosophy in response to ecological precarity since the existing modes are imbued by humanist thinking, which separates and reifies "the human" from nature. In a way, I am trying to do something similar for literary theory: learn about what existing and emergent modes of reading and writing do from within the climate crisis.

2. This excursion was a part of the *True Oil* symposium organized in 2018 by the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung.

3.Importantly, Niblett notes that magic realism was formalized through Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fiction set against resource extraction in Latin America.

4. Wenzel defines this as "the excesses of affluence, corruption, lingering colonial consciousness, and military rule" (Wenzel 2006, 454). She expands on this in an interview: "petro-magic is in no way a Nigerian thing, but instead an insight about oil itself and its effect on the ways that communities are imagined, as well as the ways that the costs and benefits of resource extraction are distributed. […] Petro-magic has fundamentally to do with oil's seemingly universal promise of wealth without work" (Potter, 385).

5. Michael Niblett describes a commodity frontier as "a complex of relations organizing human and extra-human natures in service to value accumulation" (55), each historical iteration of which is governed by its own unique logic.

6. This is a reference to Elizabeth Povinelli's critique of neoliberal binaries of Life and Nonlife in *Geontologies.*

7. Michelle Murphy defines alterlife as "words, protocols and methods that might honor the inseparability of bodies and land, and at the same time grapple with the expansive chemical relations of settler colonialism that entangle life forms in each other's accumulations, conditions, possibilities and miseries" (497).

8. Franz Krause argues that researchers cannot assume terrestrial or oceanic frames when writing and researching wetlands. Krause notes at least four dimensions of such "amphibious anthropology": (i) "hydro-sociality" or the organization of social relations "through the water that flows – or does not flow – between them," (ii) "wetness," (iii) "volatility," and (iv) "rhythms" (404).

9. Elsewhere, Patricia Yaeger writes of the exhibition of Steven Biko's murder:

> Between the heroic picture and its obscene plastic double, this exhibit attempts to instantiate two different versions of mourning. First, it offers a body that is easy to introject, to sublimate into a system of great, representative men. But beneath this sublime portraiture we meet something more tenuous and closer to home: a body that seems harder to swallow. (Yaeger 2)

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