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Petrofiction: Oil and Literature in *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila and *419* by Will Ferguson.

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There is a fire in me

burns all night and day

flares at injustice

leaps at oppression

glows warmly in beauty.

Ken Saro-Wiwa

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3

0.1. From oil invisibility to oil visibility: aim and method of the current work 3

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS 7

1.1. Tracing the evolution of Ecocriticism.. 7

1.2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology of literature............................. 10

CHAPTER 2: OIL AND LITERATURE..15

2.1. Energy Humanities.. 15

2.2. Petrofiction... 17

CHAPTER 3: OIL AND NIGERIA..21

3.1. Historical background: the origin of the oil industry in the Niger Delta 21

3.2. Oil's ramifications in the Niger Delta: current status of the problem................. 23

3.3. Grassroots movements: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 26

3.4. Introduction to *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila 30

3.5. The importance of *Oil on Water*'s narrative structure 32

3.6. *Oil on Water*: a novel with a journalistic element 34

3.7. Water turns red: violence and precariousness... 36

3.8. Water turns black: environmental degradation 40

3.9. Irikefe island: resisting the narrative of violence and oil.................................... 44

CHAPTER 4: OIL, CANADA, AND NIGERIA 49

4.1. Alberta oil sands and the illusion of ethical oil.. 49

4.2. Introduction to *419* by Will Ferguson.. 51

4.3. Oil, space and place 54

4.4. "Welcome to the Republic of Shell".. 60

4.5. Nigeria and Climate change.. 66

4.6. Oil and justice 72

CHAPTER 5: FINAL CONSIDERATIONS 78

5.1. The challenges of petroculture 78
5.2. Changing perspectives 81
5.3. The role of literature in changing perspectives 83

BIBLIOGRAPHY...89

INTRODUCTION

0.1. From oil invisibility to oil visibility: aim and method of the current work

When reflecting upon the role occupied by oil in our world, we can see it holds a central position. However, this awareness does not come easily because most of the daily interactions between oil and society are taken for granted or are usually hidden by a system that continues to deny the negative impacts that the extraction and burning of fossil fuels have on the physical world as a whole. These impacts are particularly evident in some oil extraction sites that show how the global oil apparatus continues to rely on a system of injustice, which forms an integral part of neo-colonial discourses and is linked to issues surrounding climate change, human and non-human rights, and corporate responsibilities. With reference to these dynamics, this master's thesis focuses primarily on the Niger Delta and investigates the environmental and social ramifications that the oil business is having on this particular environment. The investigation will be carried out through a literary analysis, which takes into account how this dramatic situation is covered within two novels, namely *Oil on Water* by the Nigerian author Helon Habila and *419* by the Canadian author Will Ferguson.

Chapter one presents a general overview of the theoretical approaches that will be adopted in the analysis of the two novels. Firstly, it introduces the environmental investigations elaborated within Ecocriticism and observes how this approach to literature has been evolving and changing its premises, moving away from the early studies elaborated within the American Academia to more inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches, which are constantly evolving and have converged in the project of the Environmental Humanities. Within this evolution, this master's thesis pays particular attention to the concepts elaborated within Postcolonial Ecocriticism, which focuses on the environmental dimension of postcolonial literary works and investigates how the colonial and neo-colonial projects do not include only the exploitation of native people but also of colonial environments. Given these premises, the thesis introduces also the idea of Cultural Ecology of Literature elaborated by Hubert Zapf, who considers literature as a system that employs language and

imagination to challenge certain cultural discourses and build more inclusive and ecological narratives (2010: 138).

Chapter two investigates the troubled relationship between world society and fossil fuels and looks at the way in which this connection is analysed within the new interdisciplinary research field of Energy Humanities. Consequently, this thesis ponders upon the difficult task of the transition towards greener forms of energy, a transition that presents not only practical difficulties but also clashes with a cultural attitude and practices that stand at the basis of Western modernity and the idea of economic progress. This cultural side of the problem puts emphasis on the importance of the Humanities in imagining a world without oil. Hence, literature assumes a renewed importance, especially the literature that deals with the ramifications of oil, which can be grouped under the genre of Petrofiction. This term was coined by Amitav Ghosh and denotes the interplay between oil and literature, not only in terms of content but also in terms of the economic, social, and cultural systems to which this interaction refers.

Chapter three starts with a historical excursus on pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria and how the discovery of oil impacted the very creation of Nigeria as a nation, which was forged by European nations whose influence is still present and has been transformed into forms of neo-colonial domination and exploitation of natural resources. These forms of exploitations are particularly evident in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian region that carries the signs of the ramifications of the oil business, which translate into environmental pollution derived by oil spillages and gas flares that indirectly cause harm to the inhabitants of the region torn by illnesses and lack of means of support. Consequently, different grassroots movements, the best-known MOSOP movement under the guidance of Ken Saro-Wiwa, tried to oppose to this situation but positive outcomes were a few and the circumstances got even worse with the following violence caused by the fight between the military and militant groups, who frustrated by lack of infrastructures, job opportunities, and pollution of the environment, started to kidnap foreign workers and tap oil from pipelines in order to sell it illegally.

Starting from this overview, the thesis analyses *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila and the way the novel employs a confused narrative structure and a journalistic undertone to mirror the chaotic situation in the Niger Delta. Secondly, the work focuses on the two main aspects that surface in this novel, namely the human aspect of native

communities endangered by this situation, and the environmental aspect of the Niger Delta degradation. In this way, considering the claim of Edebor, who emphasizes "the fact that there is a dearth of serious scholarly research on [Oil on Water]" (2017: 41), this work aims at enriching and expanding the insufficient academic investigations on Habila's novel, while making a significant argumentation that could emphasise the ecological importance of this book by looking at the way in which Habila presents different points of view which challenge the master narrative of oil and the violence it entails.

Then, chapter four introduces another energy sacrifice zone of petrocapitalism, namely the tar sands in the region of Alberta in Canada, which is indirectly linked to the content of *419* by Will Ferguson. This novel presents the devastation of the Niger Delta like Habila but adds a far-reaching plot that uses oil as a link between the Delta, Nigeria at large, and Canada, indirectly referring to the entire world. As a result, this thesis adopts a comparative outlook that scrutinises *419* in order to see the important aspects that Ferguson adds to the picture and the way he refers to the consequences of petromodernity on an international scale, showing how the oil industry is also indirectly linked to 419 advance-fee fraud crimes and to global warming. In addition, the thesis focuses on the way in which the novel shows how, even though oil connects the world as a whole, it is perceived and affects people and environments in very different ways, thus continuing to fuel the system of injustices created by neoliberalism and neo-colonialism.

In conclusion, the last chapter tries to summarise the concepts that have emerged from the literary analysis of the two novels. It demonstrates that contemporary environmental and cultural crises are largely fostered by the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels (oil, in particular) that continue to form an integral part of Petro/neo-colonial discourses, which keep relying on power relations and have repercussions on both the environment, humans and non-human beings. As a result, this work stresses the importance of understanding how oil influences every aspect of our society in both tangible and abstract terms. Building from this awareness, it suggests the need to dismantle the legacies of colonialism and to embrace more ecological and holistic points of view, which could trigger the creation of more inclusive environmental imaginaries. To achieve this aim, literature can help readers to critically challenge the

master narrative of oil, which is supported by corporations and political denialism on climate change that puts profit ahead of the planet's survival. Consequently, the current work considers the examined novels as important evidence, which goes against the invisibility of oil and the violence it entails, thus supporting the case against fossil fuels and the need for a transition towards renewable and less damaging forms of energy, a transition that seems impossible yet necessary.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1.1. Tracing the evolution of Ecocriticism

Any critical study aimed at analysing the "green" aspects of a literary text, will inevitably encounter the term "Ecocriticism". This word, which was probably introduced by William Rueckert in 1978 (Glotfelty, 1996: xx), was borrowed by the scholarly community and used to denote a critical school that emerged in the mid-1980s and was concerned with "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996: xvii-xviii). Since this first attempt to define and lay the foundations for a literary theory that, more than any other critical school, was and is trying to respond to urgent matters, Ecocriticism has been subject to revisionist discussions.

On this point, Zapf observes that even though, at the beginning it "met with considerable resistance" from the academia, Ecocriticism "has gained increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a broad spectrum of new perspectives and that can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and of literary studies" (Zapf, 2010: 136). Indeed, Ecocriticism can be considered as one of the main outcomes of the environmental mindset that has been adopted by different disciplines and has restored the cultural and social significance of the Humanities, which, alongside scientific subjects, can be seen as reliable ways to address contemporary ecological crises.

However, in spite of this achievement, Ecocriticism is constantly evolving and changing its premises, and this is partly due to the fact that "the environmental turn in literary studies has been more issue-driven than method or paradigm-driven" (Buell, 2005: 11); but also as a result of the outset of Ecocriticism, which included different "environmental approach[es] to literature" developed by single academics without a common programme (Glotfelty, 1996: xvii). In addition, Ecocriticism has always maintained a tendency towards cross-fertilization, which has enriched it and kept it self-critical, while presenting some problems under certain aspects.

The first problem concerns the different names that are used to identify this literary theory. "Green Cultural Studies", "Literary Ecology", "Environmental Criticism", along with other terms, are sometimes used interchangeably as substitutes for Ecocriticism. This variety of expressions may constitute an obstacle for the examination of a specific corpus of data, and although twenty-three years ago, Glotfelty was thinking of "how convenient it would be to sit down at a computerized database and have a single term to enter for your subject search" (1996: xx), apparently this suggestion has not been grasped yet. Similarly, this varied vocabulary may generate contradictory ideas between scholars who favour "*Eco-*" over "*Enviro-"* because they compare Ecocriticism to ecology (Glotfelty, 1996: xx); and other intellectuals like Buell, who, by contrast, argues that "Environmental" is a better term as it includes different kinds of environments, and underlines the interdisciplinary trait of this critical school (2005: viii). Moreover, he adds that this word highlights engagement with "issues of environmental equity that challenge early ecocriticism's concentration on the literatures of nature and preservationist environmentalism" (Buell, 2005: viii). Indeed, Ecocriticism has been broadening its line of inquiry, and even though some recent trends can be identified, another problem may surface when trying to outline its development.

With regard to this second issue, Bartosch observes that "Ecocriticism seems to resist a clear theoretical classification, and it has instead been described historically rather than theoretically" (2013: 44). This tendency can be noticed in the subdivision advanced by Glotfelty, who, in her famous collection of ecocritical works edited with Fromm, compared the three main stages of Feminist criticism to what she senses as being the three main stages of Ecocriticism (1996: xxii-xxiv). In a similar way, Buell, while acknowledging that "no definitive map of environmental criticism in literary studies can [...] be drawn", distinguishes between two waves of Ecocriticism, which he also calls "palimpsest" in order to underline the gradual changes (2005: 17). In short, he observes that there has been no severe cut between these two waves, and claims that in this passage, Ecocriticism has been expanding its outlook by moving from looking at the environment exclusively as "natural environment", to analysing other kinds of environments considering "anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns", in dialogue also with scientific discourse (Buell, 2005: 21-23). Moreover, he celebrates the fact that

this new tendency has been taking into account different realities, thus acquiring an international approach that looks also at minority discourses (Buell, 2005: 21-23).

This shift is also observed by Iovino, who suggests that "emphasizing the social and ecological message of 'eccentric' experiences (so called because of their 'non-centrality' [...]), literary and cultural criticism can contribute to dismantling ideological constructs which support the parallel hierarchization of nature and marginalized humans" (2010: 46). In this respect, scholars have started to take into account different perspectives and develop alternative views, such as Vital's call for an "African Ecocriticism" (2008, 90) that responds to the hopes Glotfelty had for the future of Ecocriticism: to "become a multi-ethnic movement" (1996: xxv) given its Western origins. To put it in another way, for the most part, Ecocriticism has turned into a literary theory, which "is not stuck with a single genre or a 'central' cultural tradition but it is open to a multiplicity of voices and of narratives, both seen as pathways through 'viable' cultural 'alternatives'" (Iovino, 2010: 39).

Along with these discussions, Slovic quotes Buell's subdivision and claims that the "wave metaphor" appears unsuitable to describe the evolvement of Ecocriticism, which "has occurred evolutionarily rather than revolutionarily" (2017: 108). Hence, he suggests a larger picture that, starting from "proto-ecocriticism", follows responses to the intensification of the environmental crisis and an acquired interdisciplinary attitude (2017: 108). These changes are linked to the agenda of the "Environmental Humanities" that consider Ecocriticism as one of their branches, and "hold the conviction that the wounds of the natural world are also social wounds and that the planetary ecological crisis is the material and historical consequence of an anthropocentric and dualistic worldview" (Oppermann, & Iovino, 2017: 4). To this respect, the Environmental Humanities bring different disciplines together "in a common effort to develop a comprehensive approach to the multifaceted aspects of environmental crises" (Oppermann, & Iovino, 2017: 1).

In conclusion, even though Ecocriticism presents some problems in terms of terminology, historiography, and unified interpretative methodology, it has always been able to respond and adapt to contemporary concerns, while remaining always open to external contributions. This feature has created a fertile ground for interdisciplinary collaborations, which, within the Environmental Humanities' scheme, underline

Ecocriticism's "commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point" (Buell, 2005: 11). Indeed, regardless of the strategy adopted, Glotfelty was right when she claimed that "consciousness raising is [Ecocriticism's] most important task. For how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them?" (1996: xxiv). For this reason, "in its interpretative as well as pedagogical intent, ecocriticism expresses and implements a constructive ethic of the future" (Iovino, 2010: 41), and underlines the creative potential of literature, which can be seen as an important resource that is able to translate into words the environmental problems affecting the present-day world.

1.2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology of literature

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the theoretical openness of Ecocriticism has been a relatively new critical school known as "Postcolonial Ecocriticism". This literary approach takes into account Postcolonial Studies in combination with Environmental criticism; a connection that is still under discussion and presents some issues. First of all, some of the problems that were previously mentioned for Ecocriticism, can be also observed for Postcolonial Studies, especially in the problematic use of the prefix *Post-*, which does not stress the ongoing impact of neo-colonialism. In addition, given their own intrinsic properties, these two literary theories appear to be in conflict because of the fact that Ecocriticism "has tended as a whole to prioritise extra-human concerns", while Postcolonialism "has been routinely, and at times unthinkingly, anthropocentric" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 17).

However, even though these characteristics may constitute an obstacle, they actually represent the source of the synergy between these two critical schools. Indeed, thanks to the link between an attention to the environment and an investigation into the legacy of colonialism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism may be useful to address and uncover the way in which environmental practices were and are not only "central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of

imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently - depend" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 6). Buell agrees when he writes that "nature has historically been not only directly exploited but also the sign under which women and nonwhites have been grouped in the process of themselves being exploited even while being relished as exotic, spontaneous, and so forth" (Buell, 1995: 21). In other words, owing to a Eurocentric and racist view, European colonisers imposed a regime of dominion based not only on the subjugation of people, but also on the conquest of land and natural resources, which could provide raw materials to be used in their home countries to sustain the development of Western modernity. Thus, Europeans exported this exploitation pattern and their idea of economic development, which revealed to be unsustainable, especially in ecological terms.

Hence, development became indirectly linked to colonial power and Ghosh observes that this association has not changed and he claims that the global environmental crisis is not simply caused by capitalism, but empire and imperialism need to be incriminated as well (2016: 87). Indeed, despite the decolonisation of many countries in the mid-20th century, colonial dynamics of power keep controlling international affairs and even the popular binomial "sustainable development" continues to underline that "it is economic growth, rather than the environment [and the people], that needs to be protected, and that environmental degradation is to be fought against principally because it impedes this growth" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 34).

Consequently, forms of neo-colonialism have been hiding "the hand of the colonizing nation" whose reformed project is "the creation of a state, which is theoretically independent with all the trappings of international sovereignty, but whose economic system and political development is directed from the outside" (Bah, 2016: 4). Therefore, ex-colonial countries find themselves under the pressure of an unsound system, which does not look at the real needs of the population, neither takes care of land conservation.

For this reason, "the ecological gap between coloniser and colonised" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 2) is growing daily, and even though a vigorous environmental consciousness is spreading around the world, it appears difficult to harmonize "the Northern environmentalisms of the rich (always potentially vainglorious and hypocritical) with the Southern environmentalisms of the poor (often genuinely heroic

and authentic)" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 2). Hence, Western environmentalism may run the risk of adopting the same prejudices which fostered past and neo-colonial projects. Bartosch agrees when he writes that:

> environmental concerns can turn into a form of 'ecological imperialism' (Crosby 1993)[1] since Western ideas of conservation and the management of natural resources often tend to clash with local means of dealing with nature. For instance, by identifying non-Western natural sites as worthy of preservation, Western environmentalism perpetuates the notion of postcolonial societies as being 'under-developed' or 'developing'. Thus, it integrates the natural world into the framework of Western control and nourishes the myth of 'developmentalism' (2013: 75).

In reaction to this "myth", Huggan and Tiffin insist that one of the main functions of Postcolonial Ecocriticism "has been to contest – also to provide viable alternatives to – western ideologies of development" (2015: 29). Thus, by looking critically at these ideas, Postcolonial Ecocriticism acquires an additional engagement with social and political matters, which overcome "the apolitical tendencies of earlier form of ecocriticism" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 11). Yet, this engagement generally finds its place within literature, which remains the principal means through which Postcolonial Ecocriticism tries to investigate more sustainable alternatives.

However, literary texts should not be analysed only as productions whose principal aim is that of leading the reader towards the formulation of possible solutions to the ongoing exploitation of ex-colonies. On the contrary, the aesthetic characteristics of texts must be taken into consideration as well. In this respect, Huggan and Tiffin observe that when labelling certain texts as "protest literature" there is the risk of "underestimating [their] aesthetic complexities", although they concede that "literary choices are rarely without their political consequences as postcolonial environmental writers (and indeed all writers) know" (2015: 35). In other words, Postcolonial Ecocriticism firstly looks at literature as written text with all the specific characteristics it entails, and secondly, it pays attention to the value of the text, which can help to

[1] "A theory conceived by Alfred Crosby in his 1986 book *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, which proposes that colonization was not only a form of cultural and political tyranny, it was also a form of environmental terrorism. Indeed, Crosby goes so far as to argue that the ecological dimension was in fact primary."; Retrieved from https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095741676

address postcolonial environmental and social problems, while "[setting] out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 14).

In addition, these features of literature can also be seen through the lenses of Cultural Ecology, which shares key concepts with Postcolonial Ecocriticism. First of all, this approach looks at the "transformative ecological potential of narrative texts within cultural systems and discourses" (Zapf, 2016: 135). This view means that by approaching literature through Cultural Ecology, the relationship between culture and the environment in which cultural discourses are produced, emerges and enables critical awareness, which may bring to a regeneration of the system itself.

Secondly, Cultural Ecology "emphasizes relationality and interconnectedness on all levels and in all areas of study", while at the same time, it acknowledges differences (Zapf, 2016: 138). According to Zapf, this aspect represents the main point of convergence between Postcolonialism and Cultural Ecology, which "assume[s] a *transcultural* potential of texts that, by the very logic of ecological thought, provides the basis for such a cross-cultural interpretation and dialogue, while at the same time always also offering resistance to easy appropriation and generalization" (2017: 74; emphasis in original). To put it in another way, literature appears like a system rich in biodiversity, where different discourses and components should be considered and protected to enrich the generative power of the system itself. In order to trigger this energy, Zapf observes that:

> literature draws its cognitive and creative potential from a threefold dynamic in its relationship to the larger cultural system – as a cultural-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counterdiscourse, and a reintegrative interdiscourse. It is a textual form which breaks up ossified social structures and ideologies, symbolically empowers the marginalized, and reconnects what is culturally separated (2010: 138).

As a result, literature is "on the one hand, a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, [...] and it is, on the other hand, a medium of continual cultural self-renewal" (Zapf, 2016: 149). This self-regeneration is largely based on an interpretation that looks at literature in a more comprehensive way with the "recognition that different languages (and discourses within a language) permit varieties of understanding" (Vital, 2008: 90).

In that respect, also Iovino observes that "in a world in which everything that once seemed to be endless appears instead to be near to its end, our imagination faces a challenge: namely, that of radically redesigning our future scenarios in more inclusive terms – ethically as well as culturally" (2010: 29-30). For this reason, it is important not to undervalue literature and its restorative and challenging properties, which can interrogate different views and elaborate ecological alternatives to the ongoing neo-colonial exploitation of the environment and people. All these qualities appear essential "in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact" (Glotfelty, 1996: xix; emphasis in original).

CHAPTER 2: OIL AND LITERATURE

2.1. Energy Humanities

In a historical period where the future of the humanities seems increasingly precarious, new and productive collaborations are shaping the agenda of many scholars and are revitalizing the liberal arts. Along with Environmental Humanities, another growing interdisciplinary research field has come to be known as "Energy Humanities". The central idea that stands at the basis of Energy Humanities is the "recognition that there is a deep connection between energy and culture" (Szeman, 2017: 277). Taken in isolation, the word "energy" bears connotations that are not necessarily negative. Indeed, "energy is a fundamental element of human life. It is what makes societies and the individuals in them 'go', and not only in a basic, material sense, but socially and culturally, too" (Szeman, 2017: 277). Nevertheless, when looking at energy within contemporary times, the word assumes a negative nuance that underlines the use and abuse of energy (especially the one generated by fossil fuels) that keeps sustaining modernity and economic progress.

This collective dependence and obsession with energy are translated into an "impasse", namely a "gap between knowledge and action, insight and involvement" (Boyer and Szeman, 2014). With particular reference to oil, which is usually considered to be the main contemporary energy resource, LeMenager calls this predicament "Petromelancholia", meaning a feeling that:

> does not necessarily induce action against fossil-based energy, but it does increase guilt about using these energy sources [and it] often comes with an awareness of how difficult it will be to overcome petroculture, resulting in a paralyzed inability to act in the face of overwhelming obstacles (Petrofictionary).

To put it in another way, the modern lifestyle's massive reliance on fossil fuels poses an obstacle to a radical shift towards a different and more sustainable existence, which appears impossible at least in the long term. In addition, this apparently difficult change is translated not only in practical difficulties but it also clashes with a cultural attitude

that, especially in the West, is not able to envision an alternative energy future. Indeed, Szeman insists that "it is not just energy that constitutes a limit but also our present understanding of its social role and significance" (2011: 324). This complication is due in part to the fact that "the unprecedented explosion of accessible energy [has been left out] of our picture of modernity [and this] has meant that we lack a full understanding of the forces and practices animating its politics and economics, as well as its social and cultural life" (Szeman, 2017: 277). In addition, this transformation appears to be difficult also "because we are implicated in the system that we are committed to changing [and] powerful oil companies and others opposed to change know this difficulty well and exploit it frequently" (Petrocultures Research Group, 2016: 44). As a result, Szeman et al. observe that "transitioning away from fossil fuels will necessitate a more thorough understanding of the social forces they have unleashed, and an understanding, too, of shifts in social practices that will be important for real and sustainable energy transition" (2016: 2).

Hence, this change should be developed by means of a common and interdisciplinary effort, which once again, underlines the importance of Energy Humanities. Boyer and Szeman agree when they write that "today's energy and environmental dilemmas are fundamentally problems of ethics, habits, values, institutions, belief, and power – all traditional areas of expertise of the humanities and humanistic social sciences" (2014). As a consequence, "solving our dilemma requires the humanities' involvement – not as an afterthought to technology and policy, but as a forerunner researching the cultural landscape around us and imagining the future relationship between energy and society that we need to strive toward" (Boyer and Szeman, 2014). Indeed, "we will not make an adequate or democratic transition to a world after oil without first changing how we *think, imagine, see*, and *hear*" (Petrocultures Research Group, 2016: 41; emphasis in original).

For this reason, since art and literature, in particular, use imagination as their raw material, it is important to produce texts and cultural products, which might not only enable us to uncover the hidden aspects of our reliance on fossil fuels, but also to imagine future scenarios and sustainable alternatives. In this regard, Wenzel observes that "the individual work of pioneering scholars in emergent fields like Energy Humanities can also have a collective function of founding a discourse and creating the

matrix within which conversation becomes possible" (Wenzel, 2016: 32). As a consequence, these kinds of interdisciplinary collaborations might start to pave the way towards the achievement of a more sustainable future thanks to the employment of different imaginative abilities and points of view.

2.2. Petrofiction

Under the impulse of Energy Humanities, it is interesting to notice the observations that may emerge "if we frame cultural and intellectual periods and the literatures they encompass not in terms of movements (e.g. modernism), nations (*British* modernism), or centuries (eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth) but in relation to dominant forms of energy" (Szeman, 2011: 323; emphasis in original). With regard to the contemporary era, LeMenager refers to present-day society by naming it "petromodernity", thus invoking "a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum" (2012: 60). In other words, this expression underlines the impact of oil on people's lifestyles and indirectly draws attention to "modernity's troubled love affair with oil" (Wenzel, 2014: 156). Defining this relationship as a "troubled love affair" demonstrates that the oil industry and its worldwide interconnections stand on a series of contradictions.

The first paradox mentioned by Wenzel is linked to the impression that "*oil is everywhere and nowhere*" (2014: 156; emphasis in original). Indeed, even though contemporary social structures across the world largely depend on the oil industry, oil is difficult to detect and it is complicated to explicitly see the way in which it shapes international relations. With reference to this opacity, Ghosh claims that "to the principal protagonists in the Oil Encounter [...], the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic" (1992: 29-30). This attitude can be seen as a consequence of the fact that access to oil has generally been controversial and a source of friction between countries, which have always been trying to ensure their share of supply by all possible means including war. Consequently, the very maintenance of these dynamics relies on the continuous consumption and

extraction of petroleum, which, although it is recognised as one of the main causes of global warming, keeps fuelling contemporary lifestyle and ideas of economic development. In fact, "despite proven and widely acknowledged warnings that at least two-thirds of known carbon reserves must remain in the ground to control global warming" (Macdonald, 2017: 289), Ghosh observes that "global inaction on climate change is by no means the result of confusion or denialism or a lack of planning: to the contrary, the maintenance of the status quo is the plan" (2016: 145).

This claim is indirectly linked to a second contradiction that can be observed with regard to the world's oil reserves, namely that "*there is too little oil in the world, and too much*" (Wenzel, 2014: 157; emphasis in original). In relation to this matter, Macdonald acknowledges that "despite being non-renewable, there is a seemingly perpetual deferment (or masking) of oil's finite status" (2017: 290). In fact, although fossil fuel resources are becoming increasingly limited, there is a significant "overwhelming media and political promotion of oil as a benign force for good, to say nothing of the weight of quotidian comfort of our societies" (Szeman, 2013: 148). Paradoxically, this promotion simultaneously hides the social, environmental and political implications of oil and, as a result, for the most part, "we do not see [oil] as giving shape to the social life that it fuels. It is thus that we imagine that life as we know it can continue along in its absence or disappearance" (Szeman, 2013: 146). For this reason, it is extremely important to make people aware of these dynamics and enable the creation of platforms where to foster critical thinking and a desirable reform of the energy system. Hence, finding information about oil is essential but, quoting Wenzel's stimulating questions: "*how do we read for oil?*" and "*how do different kinds of texts [...] either work against or contribute to oil's invisibility?*" (2014: 157; emphasis in original).

With regard to literature, Yaeger underlines "the need to contemplate literature's relation to the raucous, invisible, energy-producing atoms that generate world economies and motor our reading" (2011: 307). Nevertheless, Szeman observes that when "we look to literature to help us grasp how oil and its by-products generate the expectations and desires of the modern world [...] we find it represented far less than we might expect" (2017: 284). Indeed, the invisibility of oil characterises different literary works. In a book review of Munif's "*Cities of Salt*", in which Ghosh gave birth to the

term “Petrofiction” that was fundamental for the growing field of “Petroculture Studies” (Ghosh, 2014), Ghosh compares the ancient Spice Trade to the oil business and claims that while the two bear commercial, political and cultural similarities, they differ in the kind of literary works they have inspired (1992: 29). However, this difference does not depend on the fact that in the case of oil there is no “food for thought”; on the contrary, this condition may be seen as a consequence of the fact that, again, “a great deal has been invested in ensuring the muteness of the Oil Encounter” (1992: 30).

Similarly, this silence can be also linked to the difference between coal and petroleum in terms of substance and historical events. Since coal is connected to a long history of social protests, which combine miners’ demand for political rights with “stories of class solidarity, courage, and resistance”; oil, by contrast, is made of a different material and “its extraction does not require large numbers of workers, and since it can be piped over great distances, it does not need a vast workforce for its transportation and distribution” (Ghosh, 2016: 73-74). By extension, fewer workers imply less trouble and more control from the nation-state and, as a consequence, Ghosh observes that “British and American political elites began to encourage the use of oil over coal after the First World War” (2016: 130). At the same time, oil remains invisible also in terms of imagination. Ghosh agrees when he writes that “the energy that petrol generates is easy to aestheticize – as in images and narratives of roads and cars – but the substance itself is not” (2016: 74).

Nevertheless, Macdonald insists that when comparing literary works that deal with petroleum, an “aesthetics of oil” can be found and “can be uncovered by comparing the recurring motifs, systemic connections and structures of feeling produced by oil modernity” (2017: 291). By extension, this aesthetic can be found also within texts that do not deal specifically with oil. Indeed, under the label of Petrofiction, it could be gathered not only the “literature that addresses the production, consumption, or consequences of petroleum-based energy [but also] literature that works, mostly within realism, to envision a post-petro future” (Petrofictionary). Similarly, some scholars suggest that Petrofiction should be used to denote all the “literature written during the petrocultural historical period or ‘Age of Oil’ [because they claim that] all contemporary (western) fiction is petrofiction because our lives are embedded in petroculture” (Petrofictionary). Whether or not this suggestion is to be considered valid,

it is true that literature is produced within a cultural and economic system, which is connected to oil.

As a result, the analysis of this interconnection should be done by taking into account the way oil permeates the world as a whole. In fact, Macdonald acknowledges that:

> the world reach of the carbon web requires and endorses a reformulated world-literary outlook that serves as a compass of interpretation for energetic resource fictions. For if oil's ubiquity lends it relationality on a world-scale, across all points of its production cycle, then its cultural extrapolations have somehow to manage that scope, scale and uneven connectivity (2017: 290).

Hence, Macdonald believes that "any reading of energy culture or literature must have a fully 'worlded' horizon, because to 'see' oil is to see it systemically, and to see it systemically requires a relational and consciously energetic world-ecological outlook" (Macdonald, 2017: 292). Indeed, the "wordling of petrofiction" may be useful to "[link] energetic texts and literary forms whose unlikely likenesses correspond with the world-system's carbon flows, exchanges, relations and circulations" (Macdonald, 2017: 291). Therefore, readers need texts, which may help them to unmask the presence of oil and how it connects contemporary global society; thus, promoting critical thinking with the confidence that "although oil may be running out, imagination is not" (LeMenager, 2012: 59).

CHAPTER 3: OIL AND NIGERIA

3.1. Historical background: the origin of the oil industry in the Niger Delta

Europeans have been knowing the richness of the Niger Delta for a long time. Since their first arrival in the 15th century, Europeans started a business with local thriving kingdoms, which provided slaves to be sent to America, and subsequent supply of palm oil to be sent to Europe (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2019). However, if at the beginning, trade was apparently lucrative on both sides, with the following abolition of the slave trade, colonisers started to control and exploit Nigerian natural assets, creating de facto an "informal empire" (Döring, 113). This system was in force before the official establishment of British rule over Nigeria with the allocation of African colonies among European powers at the Berlin conference in 1884. After that meeting, British ambitions of power and the creation of different forms of protectorate, concentrated the control of commerce and resources in the colonisers' hands, thus fostering competition between the different ethnic groups (SDN, 2019). In fact, the artificial creation of Nigeria "united these separate and mutually hostile groups and systems [...] while paying scant attention to issues of disparities in cultural values and preferences" (Agbiboa & Maiangwa, 2012: 113).

Subsequently, these frictions were also intensified by the discovery of one of the present-day most lucrative resources, namely crude oil. After unsuccessful expeditions carried out by the British, the oil business began with "the discovery of oil by Shell D'Arcy, the Anglo-Dutch Oil Company (now Shell Petroleum Development Company) on June 12, 1956, in a 12,008-feet-deep well in Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State" (Ebiede, 2011: 141). Since that day, the equilibrium of one of the biggest Delta regions of the world has been severely compromised, and even though four years later Nigeria gained independence from British rule, further ethnic tensions were established as the major political groups were formed under the dominant ethnic groups, namely Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (Apter, 2005: 262). As a result, ethnic minorities such as "the people of the Niger Delta were not able to participate with the major groups which lead to

significantly reduced economic, political and social opportunity which in turn lead to inequality and resentment" (SDN, 2019).

In addition, this situation got worse because of the subsequent military coup and the atrocious Biafran war, which was also characterised by a controversial "treatment of the Ogoni and other Delta minorities who were corralled into Biafra against their will" (Apter, 2005: 262). Furthermore, the war was not only fought on the national level, but also international dynamics fuelled the conflict from behind the scene, and "although the causes of the war were diverse, it has been noted that the involvement of the British, Dutch, French and Italian oil companies started and protracted the war" (SDN, 2019). As a result, the history of the Niger Delta shows the way in which colonialism and more recent forms of neo-colonialism have been spreading like cancer throughout the Nigerian social structure and oil industry, thus leaving behind unresolved issues and slowly sucking the vital resources from the Delta environment and its inhabitants.

These circumstances still persist, and even though Nigeria obtained a place as a member of the OPEC organization, "most Nigerians [are] excluded from the profits of the oil wealth, [and] most of the wealth has not been invested within the country, contributing to most Nigerians living below the poverty line" (Agbiboa & Maiangwa, 2012: 109). This situation apparently validates the "resource curse" thesis, which was advanced by Auty in 1993 and "refers to the paradox that countries endowed with natural resources such as oil, natural gas, minerals, etc. tend to have lower economic growth and worse development outcomes than countries with fewer natural resources" (Badeeb et al., 2017: 124). Apparently, the factors that block economic growth are, in part of economic nature, and in part of political nature (Badeeb et al., 2017: 125-127). Indeed, Badeeb et al. observe that the money generated by the commerce of natural assets is subject to global markets fluctuations and also to the quality of political institutions, which may be affected by corruption and might favour "the elites or powerful groups [that] generally take a large share of these revenues and distribute it for the benefit of their immediate circles rather than investing it to upgrade infrastructure and sustainable economic development" (2017: 126).

In fact, "whether in theory or empirics, resource abundance *per se* does not cause the 'curse'. Instead, much depends on how these resource revenues are handled" (Badeeb et al., 2017: 132; emphasis in original). This concept is valid not only at

national level, but it also applies to the international landscape whose articulations suggest that “poverty is itself an effect of the inequities created by the carbon economy; it is the result of systems that were set up by brute force to ensure that poor nations remained always at a disadvantage in terms of both wealth and power” (Ghosh, 2016: 110). This is particularly evident in Nigeria where “the neocolonial economy [...] continues to run on the brutal tracks largely installed by pre-colonial and colonial players” (Bassey, 2016: 5) at the expense of Nigerian citizens, especially the communities living in the Niger Delta region.

3.2. Oil’s ramifications in the Niger Delta: current status of the problem

Up to the present day, the extraction of crude oil has brought more problems than benefits for Nigeria, especially for the people living in the delta of the Niger River. First of all, the terrible consequences of this uncontrolled extraction of oil manifest themselves in the physical environment of the Delta “making it one of the most ecologically endangered regions in the world” (Huggan, & Tiffin, 2015: 42). As acknowledged by Ebiede “the major activities of the oil industry that negatively impact the Niger Delta area are gas flaring and oil spillages” (2011: 140).

The former results from the burning of wasted gas, and affects the environment because it tends to provoke acid rains and it is “also a significant contributor to global warming” (Schick, Myles, & Okelum, 2018). Despite this awareness and an amendment regulation, which prohibited this practice in 1984, “the oil companies have continued to plead that total prevention is impossible [claiming that gas flaring] is done only when ‘it's simply not safe to collect and use the gas,’ and that sometimes ‘it's environmentally better to flare it’ than store it” (Allen, 2012: 51). As a result, oil companies keep doing this activity and although the government has announced that gas flaring in Nigeria will end by 2020, this optimism clashes with the challenges Nigerians face in their everyday lives and with the statistics that show how the year “2018 has yielded the highest readings for gas flaring in Nigeria” (Schick, Myles, & Okelum, 2018).

In a similar way, oil spills have contaminated the alluvial soil and river waters causing pollution and loss of flora and fauna. This disaster was also confirmed in 2011 by the United Nations report on Ogoniland which "reinforced fears of the life-threatening impact of oil on farmland, swamps and mangroves, surface water, sediments, fish, and public health [with the finding] that at 41 sites, hydrocarbons had infiltrated groundwater at levels far beyond standards permitted by Nigerian law" (Allen, 2012: 50-51). To put an end to this situation, "on 2nd June 2016, the Federal Government flagged-off the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP) with the mandate to *Remediate the Environment and Restore the Livelihood of the people"*(Umo, 2019; emphasis in original). However, Godwin Uyi Ojo (executive director of Environmental Rights Action - Friends of the Earth Nigeria) observes that not only "the cleanup has been heavily politicised" and the project "lacks the capacity to coordinate a cleanup of this magnitude" but also the involvement of Shell in the project "may have compromised the cleanup process as the company seeks to minimise damages and reduce costs to protect its interests" (2018). Hence, the overall picture is "a verdict of failure on the part of Shell, HYPREP and the Federal Government in that over two years after the flag-off of the exercise, not a drop of oil has actually been cleaned up" (Uyi Ojo, 2018).

At the same time, this inaction on environmental pollution has a significant impact also on the life of the Niger Deltans. Indeed, the other side of the problem concerns the negative consequences that gas flares and oil spills have on humans, which translate into illnesses (e.g. cancer, breathing problems) and a shortage of food for native populations, whose subsistence economy has become dangerous to health and the cause of what Nixon defines as "displacement without moving", which does not indicate "the movement of people from their places of belonging, [but] refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (2011: 19). Commenting on some data, Bassey underlines the fact that "average life expectancy in Nigeria is currently 52 years [whereas] in the Niger Delta it is 41 years [and] only about 30 per cent of the people in the Niger Delta have access to safe drinking water" (Bassey, 2016: 6).

These concerns are made worse by the lack of basic public infrastructures (e.g. hospitals, schools), which "is best explained by the corruption thesis" (Ebiede, 2011: 145). Indeed, this stagnation is usually justified in terms of unsuitability of the riverine terrain, whereas according to Niger Deltans, the "region's underdevelopment is political, not geographical, because Lagos, the former federal capital has an equally difficult terrain and perches mainly atop land reclaimed from the sea but it has modern and well developed infrastructure" (Agbiboa, & Maiangwa, 2012: 116).

Moreover, besides health concerns and structural deficiency, this mismanaged and insalubrious environment damages also local businesses. The most affected sectors are fishing and agriculture, and even though "oil replaced agriculture as the mainstay of the Nigerian economy by the early 1970s" (Bassey, 2016: 5), this economic boom did not lead to the creation of new jobs, but, on the contrary, Agbiboa and Maiangwa observe that "oil politics has resulted in a disproportional focus of efforts to gain employment and be associated with the oil industry. This has resulted in a mono-focus that fails to realise the potential for other economic activities based on local assets" (2012: 120). In addition, for the most part, non-renewable resources "do not need to be produced, but only extracted; [hence] because the generation of natural resource wealth is not a result of production, it can occur relatively independently of other economic processes and does little to create employment" (Badeeb et al., 2017: 124). Consequently, precariousness, lack of job opportunities and poverty have provoked an escalation of violence that demonstrates the frustration of citizens, who feel abandoned by the government and claim their share of revenues.

Hence, in order to express their resentment, some inhabitants of the region have organized themselves into different militant groups that are responsible for acts of sabotage against pipelines and kidnappings of foreign workers. These actions go to finance an illegal market, which not only causes financial losses for Nigeria, but it is also dangerous for the people who may die through inadequate refining, which can cause fires and release of polluting liquids in the ground (SDN, 2013: 4). As a result, the oil industry washes its hands of the matter by "[pointing] to sabotage and illegal activity as the primary cause of the region's environmental woes" (Allen, 2012: 52). In addition, corporations "can escape or ignore their responsibility to the environment and to the people/communities with the protection of the military" that seems to care more about

the defence of oil companies rather than the security of the region's inhabitants as some approved abuses of power have demonstrated (Bassey, 2016: 8, 15,16).

In order to resolve this situation, "in 2009, approximately 26,000 militants agreed to a ceasefire and a government-led Amnesty Process. To this day, the Amnesty Process is ongoing, however, the peace is fragile as the deep roots of the injustice have not been fully addressed" (SDN, 2019). On this matter, Bassey observes how "the lands and creeks of the Niger Delta are still highly militarised, giving the impression that either the peace is not deep seated or that the tradition of oil companies' working behind a military shield has simply come to stay" (2016: 15). Furthermore, even though "the Amnesty has created the space for civil society to develop and organizations to come into the Niger Delta to encourage the reconciliation of these injustices leading to a more peaceful, politically stable and economically diverse Niger Delta" (SDN, 2019), Agbiboa and Maiangwa acknowledge that the Amnesty and other measures "fail to seriously address the underlying issues of government corruption, political sponsorship of violence and environmental degradation that continues to fuel resistance" (Agbiboa & Maiangwa, 2012: 120). Hence, the situation appears complicated and until the government will not pay appropriate attention to the real needs of Niger Deltans and the environment they inhabit, probably these solutions will never work.

3.3. Grassroots movements: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni

With reference to the history of Nigeria, both Nigerian politics and economy have always been under the formal or informal influence of Western powers and corporations, which have been exploiting and benefiting from one the most lucrative Nigerian industries, namely oil. As already said, this exploitation has resulted in a polarisation of Nigerian society and serious environmental problems, which become particularly evident in the Niger Delta where the situation seems hopeless and the violence and pollution appear almost irreversible.

Despite these tragic circumstances, Bassey observes that "Nigeria's experience also contains seeds of hope, as the environmental aggression of the combined forces of commerce and politics, has not gone unchallenged due to strong resistance by impacted

oil-field communities and their allies" (2016: 3). One of the most remarkable examples of this resistance was the movement called MOSOP (the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People). Their leader was the literary author, screenwriter, entrepreneur, and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who became the symbol of ethnic minority struggle against oil companies and Nigerian government, and whose fight "became emblematic of both local and global struggles against the depredations of international capitalism and for the right to a clean earth" (Huggan, & Tiffin, 2015: 37).

Even though "the Ogoni people were not the first in the Niger Delta to articulate a comprehensive response to oil-related problems" (Allen, 2012: 47), Ken Saro-Wiwa and his ethnic group remain the best-known case not only on a national level, as Saro-Wiwa was a famous public figure, but also on the international stage as their struggle made itself heard in the global press but it sadly proved to be "a failure of international diplomacy" (Larson, 1997: 210). In fact, the public opinion did not stop the intention of General Sani Abacha and on 10th November 1995, Saro-Wiwa and other eight activists were executed after an unfair trial in which flimsy accusation of murder was presented. The act was condemned by the United Nations that took several measures to punish Nigeria, but unfortunately, no actions were taken against the oil companies, which were undoubtedly involved in this inhuman act (Apter, 2005: 258).

Within this context, Saro-Wiwa's assassination must be seen through two different perspectives:

> from the outside, [his] death was a heroic tragedy of one man against a Leviathan, a hybrid beast of corporate profiteering and military domination violating human rights and destroying nature. Within Nigeria, however, [his] struggle was tied to ethnic politics, championing the cause of the Ogoni minority against the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo power blocs that stole from the state and gave only to their own (Apter, 2005: 259).

In short, his battle was carried out on two fronts. On the one side, Saro-Wiwa fought against the neo-colonial oil industry, Shell, in particular, that was continuing to extract oil in Ogoniland (Rivers State in the Niger Delta) careless of the damage to humans and the environment it was producing. On the other side, he was against the system he referred to as "Black colonialism" (1995: 191) that was performed by Nigerian major ethnic groups against minorities. As these groups were controlling the political sphere,

the income generated by oil was gradually concentrated in the hands of the central government and if "the revenue sharing formula in the early 1970s was 50 percent to the region that generated the revenue", soon after "from 1979 to 1999 the share that went to producing regions fell to 0 percent with a full 100 percent going to the central government (Federation)" (Bassey, 2016: 5). This unfair distribution resulted in a lack of infrastructural development and job opportunities for Niger Deltans.

Given this situation, MOSOP redacted and presented the "Ogoni Bill of Rights" to the central government: a programme "in which they demanded environmental protection, economic benefits, political representation and treatment with respect and dignity within the Nigerian state" (Bassey, 2016: 10). As for this request, Saro-Wiwa strongly believed in the concept of "Erectism" and to this regard he wrote:

> what I want to see, and what I will always argue for is ERECTISM — ethnic autonomy, resource, and environmental control. If this comes to pass, then Ogoni will be free and it is to them that I wish to dedicate the rest of my life. And I hope that that can be an example to other ethnic groups. The translation of my dreams into reality[2] (Corley, Fallon, & Cox, 2014: 101).

In other words, he wanted his ethnic community to have the power to decide on regional issues and gain a voice within the Nigerian political sphere. In order to do so, MOSOP organised different peaceful demonstrations, the most heartfelt in January 1993 when "the Ogoni people declared Shell persona non grata in their territory [and] by that declaration, Shell was [symbolically] expelled from Ogoniland" (Bassey, 2016: 11).

At the same time, these protests also included a cultural dimension as "the Ogoni people, under the banner of MOSOP, mobilised using cultural tools such as songs, drama, and dance to assert themselves and demand an end to environmental crimes in their territory" (Bassey, 2016: 18). In that regard, Ken Saro-Wiwa "continued to believe that written testimony, backed by activism, could make a difference. Like many African authors before him, he recognized that in a society with frail democratic forces and a thin intellectual elite, interventionist writing required versatility and cunning" (Nixon, 1996: 3). As acknowledged by Caminero-Santangelo "in his activist writing, Saro-Wiwa effectively challenged what he called 'shellspeak,' a form of (neo)colonial

[2] Ken Saro-Wiwa to Sr. Majella, 24 October 1994, in *Silence Would Be Treason: Last writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*, edited by Corley, I., Fallon, H., & Cox, L. Daraja Press, 2014.

development discourse [that] claimed both to bring economic progress to the Delta and to follow the strictest environmental guidelines in its operations" (2015: 230). As a result, thanks to his publications, "Saro-Wiwa positioned himself as a witness to the injustices that make visible the ways the company's rhetoric of care and development is a lie" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 230). Hence, it is important to look at Ken Saro-Wiwa not only as an activist but also as an author, who "understood far better than his adversaries that you can't crucify ideas, that there are some things that cannot be resolved by a show of force" (Nixon, 1996: 10).

Despite these good intentions, soon after the informal expulsion of Shell from Ogoniland, the military government, with the approval of oil companies, which wanted to secure their extraction machinery, started to suppress the protests through intimidations and violence (Nigeria: My husband was executed, 2017). From that moment on and with the following murder of Saro-Wiwa and the other eight Ogoni, the violence has been escalating and, as already said, it has also been fuelled by other militant groups, which have changed their strategy "moving away from the non-violent approach endorsed by Saro-Wiwa [taking] arms and [forming] rebel groups fighting against the international oil companies and Government through gang violence, pipeline destruction, and oil bunkering, kidnappings and piracy spurring a wave of criminality through the Delta" (SDN, 2019). As acknowledged by Bassey, this situation signals "the failure of the state and oil companies to pay attention to the demands of the people but rather to depend on brute force [that] inexorably led to a violent confrontation with the oppressed and the voiceless" (2016: 14).

In addition, the oil companies, Shell included, have continued undaunted to extract oil in the Niger Delta and "[in the] late 1990s [...] Shell's focus shift[ed] to offshore exploration, where it enjoy[ed] better margins and fewer threats of attack by militants" (Bousso, & Hepinstall, 2018). Meanwhile, on the mainland, the contamination has continued due to illegal oil tapping but also to the poor maintenance of the pipelines, and even though "companies have a responsibility to respond to spills regardless of their cause" there are usually delays that worsen the situation (Niger Delta Negligence). One of the most notorious episodes happened in 2008 when "two large spills, a result of operational faults, hit the community of Bodo in Ogoniland in the Niger Delta [and] tens of thousands of barrels of oil [were] spilt" (Bousso, & Hepinstall,

2018). After this episode, Shell was taken to a foreign court for the first time and forced to pay "55 million pounds [...] to Bodo villagers and to clean up their lands and waterways" (Bousso, & Hepinstall, 2018).

Fortunately, the battle for justice continues and some widows of the nine Ogoni killed in 1995 have filed a suit against Shell, claiming that "Shell was complicit in the unlawful arrest, detention, and execution of their husbands in 1995" (Tucci, 2019). The latest developments in this trial have been positive as in May 2019, the District Court of The Hague "ordered that the plaintiffs' lawyers hear witnesses and provide further evidence as to whether Shell bribed people to testify against the Ogoni Nine" (Nigeria/Netherlands: Kiobel, 2019). Hence, even though the Global Witness report titled "How many more?" (2015) shows that "activists around the world are being killed in record numbers trying to defend their land and protect the environment in the face of increased competition over natural resources" (2015: 4), some positive progress in the struggle for social and environmental justice can be found. However, justice will never be done until oil companies admit their faults and change their configurations.

3.4. Introduction to *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila

Helon Habila is one of the most acclaimed contemporary Nigerian authors. He started his career as a journalist but then he focused on poetry and fictional narrative, which gave him international recognition. His work has also been appreciated by other writers, most importantly by Chinua Achebe, who personally invited Habila to the United States. The U.S. has become the place where Habila now lives and works and although he has been living overseas for many years, the topics of his writings primarily deal with Nigeria along with contemporary issues. His poems and novels have won many prizes, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Among his most remarkable compositions, *Oil on Water* (Habila, 2010) emerges as a noteworthy text, which was shortlisted for several international competitions. Even though it is considered a novel, when trying to describe *Oil on Water* labels are difficult to apply. While having the characteristics of a road novel, it bears also similarities with the detective novel "but it

is actually an elaborate investigation of the ways the oil production has negatively affected the [Niger Delta's] environment and population" (Feldner, 2018: 515).

Talking about the creative process behind the draft of *Oil on Water*, Habila reports that he was commissioned the script for a movie but then the script turned into a narrative text at the moment he realised he "had to write a novel on it, [he] had to tell the story of the ordinary person in the Delta who bears the brunt of the injustices of the oil extraction industry" (Habila, 2015). This intention clearly emerges from a general overview of the synopsis of the novel, which covers the two weeks journey of Rufus, a Nigerian reporter, who decides to embark on a journey into the swamps of the Niger Delta to find information about Isabel Floode, a kidnapped English woman, who is the wife of an oil businessman. Initially moved by ambition and the fact that Zaq, the journalist he best admires, is going to take part in the assignment, Rufus will eventually witness the devastation and pollution of the land caused by oil extraction and gas flaring. Moreover, by being captured two times, first by the military and then by the militants fighting for the control over natural resources, Rufus will experience first-hand the sufferings of the Delta communities, who are torn by violence and illnesses caused by oil contamination of soil, water, and air.

Hence, as for the way in which *Oil on Water* explores the endangered social and environmental dynamics of the Niger Delta, Habila can be considered as a member of the group of African authors, who have recently started to pay attention to ecological issues concerning the African continent, showing in this way that "they are not oblivious of the ecological implications of man's exploitative tendencies on earth's resources, proving in the process that the issue of environment and its preservation are not an exclusive preserve of the Whites or those in the sciences" (Edebor, 2017: 43). As a result, their literary production can be taken as a resource to denounce the destruction of land and to restore the right to land for native populations, especially because literature can contribute to the environmental discourse as it differs from scientific reports, which apparently tend to:

> miss important aspects of the situation of developing countries and regions, because they neglect such factors as personal experience, emotions, cultural memory, and the impact of the modernization process on the values, identities, and concrete lives of people, and especially of

> those whose voices are silenced in the official reports and blueprints for developmental programmes (Zapf, 2017: 63).

Consequently, in the particular case of the Niger Delta, Egya believes that literature can be seen as a form of "literary militancy" in the way writers "deploy the instrumentation of literature, […] 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" (2017: 94). This agenda perfectly applies to *Oil on Water*, which is one of the best examples of how a fictional narrative may support the need for an environmental and social safeguard of the Niger Delta.

3.5. The importance of *Oil on Water*'s narrative structure

The first notable aspect of *Oil on Water* is the original way in which Habila presents events and characters. In fact, when trying to trace the synopsis of the novel, it becomes clear that "the two weeks of story-time are not covered chronologically. Instead, readers are confronted with a non-linear narrative that jumps back and forwards in time" (Feldner, 2018: 519). This framework can be observed from the very beginning of the novel, which starts around the middle of Rufus' journey, combining it with many flashbacks and vague memories that are linked to his life and childhood.

On the one hand, these digressions and the nonlinear rearrangement of incidents might be seen as a technique employed by Habila in order to mirror the chaotic status of the Niger Delta. Feldner agrees when he writes that "the Niger Delta is depicted as a claustrophobic maze, a depiction that is also reflected on the discourse level of *Oil on Water*, whose narrative structure is complex and disorienting" (2018: 519). This disorientation is further underlined by "the fact that the characters repeatedly find themselves in situations they have been in before, albeit under different circumstances" (Feldner, 2018: 519). For example, Rufus and Zaq are trapped different times by different groups of people but these situations of confinement bear similarities that display the way in which "Habila complicates a plot that in itself is not too complex,

and creates for readers an impression of disorientation, which mirrors that of the characters" (Feldner, 2018: 519).

On the other hand, this particular design may also suggest the selective way in which Rufus' memory recollects episodes of the past. Memories about his childhood, his career, and the first meeting with Zaq are disjointed and interwoven within the events of the journey, thus contributing to the discontinuity of the storyline. In this way, Habila highlights important aspects that are linked to the personality of the characters, who are introduced by means of Rufus' thoughts. In addition, Habila probably presents the way in which Rufus is trying to overcome the trauma linked to the oil explosion that devastated his family. In fact, even though Rufus was not present when the accident happened and his father survived the explosion, which was caused by his involvement in illegal oil refining, Rufus' memory collects bits and pieces of this tragic story that will eventually become his first journalistic success, and that will keep returning as a traumatic image, which is best embodied by the scar on his sister's face.

Consequently, the narrative makes a parallel between the anecdotes linked to the life of Rufus and the life of Niger Deltans by employing oil as a leitmotif that works as a threat for each character without distinction. In this regard, Feldner observes that:

> as Rufus's disorientation in the narrow and opaque canals of the Delta finds its equivalent in the readers' confusion in the maze-like construction of the narrative, the main attention is drawn to the Niger Delta and the ways its social fabric is torn apart by conflicts while its landscape drowns in oil (2018: 525).

In other words, the arrangement of the storyline is thought-provoking and aims at shedding light on the bigger picture of endangered communities and the environment that slowly emerges from behind the journey and from the reflections of the protagonist. Hence, in the light of cultural ecology of literature, this book might, therefore, be regarded as "an ecological cultural force", which operates "not only in a thematic sense as in explicitly environmental forms of writing, but in a more fundamental sense in the forms and functions of aesthetic communication" (Zapf, 2016: 142). As a result, the formal qualities of this novel are an essential contribution to the reader experience and the understanding of the problematic situation in the Niger Delta.

3.6. *Oil on Water*: a novel with a journalistic element

The way in which Habila employs a journalist as the homodiegetic narrator of the novel is to be taken into special consideration. Besides being directly linked to the author's work experience, Habila explains that the topic of journalism connects also to the period in which the novel was conceived, namely when militant groups began to attract attention within the international media as they started to kidnap foreign workers in the Niger Delta region (Habila & Adunbi, 2018). On that occasion, Habila felt the necessity to contribute to the debate because he was aware of the gaps that were unfulfilled by the media and therefore he decided to "go behind the headlines" and present a novel, which could offer a different understanding of the complicated nature of the problem while giving voice to characters that could truly embody the plight of the Niger Deltans (Habila & Adunbi, 2018).

Given these premises, *Oil on Water* illustrates two kinds of journalism, namely the press that employs a sensationalist approach and the one that tries to be more objective. These two approaches correspond to the changes in Rufus' attitude throughout the novel and "emphasize the need for journalists to refuse to reproduce hegemonic [...] discourses and to serve as witnesses who record what such discourses suppress" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 229). Thus, even though at the beginning Rufus' motivations do not totally differ from the other reporters, who scramble to get the scoop on the kidnapped British woman, subsequently "the abduction ceases to be Rufus's main motivation when he recognizes that he has come across a much bigger story, namely the destruction of the Niger Delta" (Feldner, 2018: 520). In this regard, Feldner claims that "even though it is to some degree problematized as a vehicle for the search for recognition and fame, in *Oil on Water* the act of journalistic writing is ultimately also represented as an important form of activism, witnessing and chronicling" (Feldner, 2018: 520).

As for "witnessing and chronicling", when talking to villagers and seeing the devastation through his eyes, Rufus manages to provide an honest reconstruction of the circumstances by giving space to different interviews. In this way, people become

individualised and the reader is presented with different points of view and versions that "result in a multifaceted and intricate picture of the situation in the Delta, as seen from the perspective of a variety of characters" (Feldner, 2018: 521). Indeed, even though Rufus is the 1st person narrator, the book is filled with dialogues, which introduce different characters and perspectives. Consequently, "in order to serve as 'a witness,' the reporter must confront the complexities of a place that has been shaped by interlocking forms of toxicity and relinquish the role of authoritative truth teller" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 233) by giving space to these different opinions; thus acquiring an essential role in his super partes position, which serves as a link between the different parts involved.

Similarly, with reference to "activism", Rufus expresses practically what he learns from his mentor Zaq, as he will eventually understand that it is not the story but "the meaning of the story" which matters (Habila, 2011: 5). This principle becomes clear in the way Rufus answers to the empty rhetoric of Mr. Floode during their first meeting at Floode's house where the international TV is broadcasting information on Isabel while talking about poverty, oil, and corruption in Nigeria. These words are then rephrased by Mr. Floode, who "believes that [Nigerians] are themselves responsible for the poverty and chaos in the country, having wasted its potential through corruption, violence and vandalism" (Feldner, 2018: 522). Caminero-Santangelo observes that "this representation echoes Shell's and Chevron's narrative depicting illegal oil bunkering as the main source of danger from oil spills and suggesting that the oil industry offers an opportunity for development undermined by a lack of restraint among 'the people'" (2015: 231). Listening to these approximate judgments, Rufus embodies the voice of the oppressed people of the Delta and gives his side of the story, which acquires more truthfulness as it emerges from real and personal experience:

> 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 the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry, and tired (Habila, 2011: 103,104).

Using this exhortation, “like Saro-Wiwa, Habila mocks the oil companies’ (neo)colonial development discourse” (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 231) and, as a result, Rufus sounds like an activist whose intent is to deliver a message, which, in this case, seems to work both on the level of the plot, in the way it challenges the oil companies’ attitude, and on the level of the readers’ experience in the way the reasons behind the militants and the villagers’ behaviour reaches the readers’ understanding.

Nevertheless, although Rufus achieves this awareness, his “activism” does not translate into a tangible change. Indeed, more than once within the novel, the role of journalism in making a difference is questioned. While witnessing the atrocities, Rufus usually feels “impotent, helpless, like a man running in his sleep with his leg crossed” (Habila, 2011: 63); and even when he turns to Zaq for solutions, he too, admits: “I wish it were that easy to intervene and change the course of things. It isn’t. We’ll observe, and then we’ll write about it when we can” (Habila, 2011: 65). Thus, in order to accept this impediment, Rufus concentrates on the authentic aspects of journalism and gets strength from the realization that he must be “a witness for posterity” (Habila, 2011: 60), an observer waiting for “a transcendental moment, a great story only the true journalist can do justice to” (Habila, 2011: 79). Consequently, his role is not depreciated and the book underlines the fact that “journalists can [actually] contribute to the process of detoxifying the Delta through a witnessing that challenges the world-making discourses of the powerful” (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 233).

3.7. Water turns red: violence and precariousness

The human costs of oil extraction in the Niger Delta emerge clearly from the first page of *Oil on Water*. Starting in medias res with a dream-like description of the oil accident that still haunts the memory of the protagonist, the reader is immediately confronted with the brutality of oil’s ramifications, which find in Boma’s disfigured face a powerful image that pervades all the narrative and proves the trail of injuries left behind by oil. Yet, besides injuries and health issues caused by illegal bunkering, gas flares,

and oil spills, the most tangible evidence of the negative impact that the oil business has on the region's inhabitants is violence. In this regard, the novel presents a delta, which appears like "a war zone, where the military is in conflict with militants who sabotage oil production and kidnap foreigners for ransom" (Feldner, 2018: 521). In this warlike situation where "there's more need for gravediggers than for a doctor" (Habila, 2011: 154), thanks to the different characters met by Rufus throughout his journey, the text gives voice to both conflicting parts. In fact, by being captured two times, Rufus has the chance to talk to the leaders of the two antagonistic factions, namely the Major and the Professor, and consequently report their points of view.

On the one hand, the Major (the commander of the military) sides with the government and the oil companies believing that "people like the Professor are responsible for [the violence:] they call themselves freedom fighters, but they are rebels, terrorists, kidnappers" (Habila, 2011: 156). These words sound hypocritical as they are inconsistent with the Major's violent behaviour, especially when he affirms that "most times it's easier to shoot them than to capture them" (Habila, 2011: 156) or when he tortures alleged militants, among them innocent people like Tamuno and his son Michael (Zaq and Rufus' river guides) (Habila, 2011: 59,60). In this way, he becomes responsible for the same violence he fiercely condemns. Consequently, under the pretext of discovering the criminals, Feldner emphasises that "the Major discredits the military with his ruthlessness and brutality" because even though the army should be seen as "a positive force" in the way it represents the federal government that should take care of its citizens, "[the soldiers] do not, however, act in the interests of their fellow Nigerians but in those of neocolonial transnational companies and corrupt elites who exploit and destroy the livelihood of the region" (2018: 523). As a result, the novel presents a government that appears to be absent until the moment it needs to exercise military control and abuses of power over a region, which is considered important only in terms of natural assets and not of human lives, who are seen as an obstacle to the profit machine.

On the other hand, the Professor, who stands for the militants, claims to be the force fighting against the federal and international exploitation of the region. Under this view, "the Professor's position is that the actions of the rebels are not the cause of the disruptions in the Niger Delta but a product of them" (Feldner, 2018: 521). Indeed, the

chaotic situation of the Delta blurs the distinction between victims and criminals and considering the limited opportunities given to the Delta population, "kidnapping and oil theft [...] are some of the few activities that earn the Delta inhabitants some money" (Feldner, 2018: 521). This is best exemplified by Tamuno, who repeatedly asks Zaq and Rufus to sponsor his son to Port Harcourt as the possibilities to live a decent life in the Delta are few, and besides the scarcity of food and pollution, he is afraid the boy may join the militants (Habila, 2011: 40). By extension, Tamuno's preoccupations recall Rufus' father's worries because being himself involved in the oil illegal market, he did not want this life for Rufus and he urged him to find work elsewhere (Habila, 2011: 69). On this matter, Feldner suggests that Rufus "might have ended up a militant or a soldier, had he not gone to journalism school [as] many young men like him joined the militants, having been disillusioned and angered by the government, the lack of prospects and the general situation in the country" (2018: 522).

Consequently, the narrative apparently justifies the actions of the rebels by presenting the reasons behind their behaviours and considering the Professor not as "a madman who shot people for fun" but as "a man with an agenda, [who would treat with respect] anything that could help him in that pursuit" (Habila, 2011: 229). In this respect, Medovoi suggests that the reader "might read the novel for an espousal of environmental heroism, analyzing it, in other words, from the ideological viewpoint of the Professor himself, who claims to symbolize and defend a deep unity between the long-suffering land and people" (2014: 22). However, the critic also observes that this interpretation might be seen as problematic in the way "it doesn't take seriously the novel's textual uncertainties, beginning with the Professor's implication in the escalating violence" (2014: 22).

In fact, with reference to the violent episodes reported by Rufus, it can be noted how "the military and the militants resemble each other to a striking degree, and the novel indicates that it does not make a big difference to the Delta inhabitants whether they are terrorized by the militants or the soldiers" (Feldner, 2018: 523). Hence, Habila stresses the fact that the people living in the Delta are the actual victims of this unsound situation because being "caught between the militants and the military" (Habila, 2011: 37) and being weakened by shortage of food and pollution of the environment, they find

themselves tormented by fear and forced on a constant move in search for a safer and healthier place where to live.

In addition, their precarious lives are indirectly linked to the implications of neo-colonialism and the perpetuation of racist ideologies. "Does that make her more important than if she were, say, Nepalese, or Guyanese, or Greek?" (Habila, 2011: 35) answers Zaq when reminded that Isabel must be saved and protected as she is a British citizen. Zaq's bitter-ironic answer shows how "Isabel's abduction and the attention it draws to itself is, the novel stresses, inconsequential compared to the large-scale abuse and degradation resulting from commercial oil exploration in the region" (Egya, 2017: 98- 99). This differentiation of treatment is also underlined by a militant, who trying to open Rufus and Zaq's eyes to the hidden dynamics that fuel the ongoing militarization of the Niger Delta and its exploitation, affirms: "who is she in the context of the war that's going on out there, the hopes and ambitions being created and destroyed? Can't you see the larger picture?" (Habila, 2011: 163). Consequently, Egya suggests that "seeing 'the larger picture' sets the tone of the novel as a militant action toward, first, showing the devastating spiritual and physical destruction of the local communities; and, second, raising a consciousness against the perpetrators of such destruction" (2017: 98- 99).

However, even though the novel succeeds in giving a realistic depiction of the social and environmental devastation of the Delta perpetuated by the military and the militants, it does not link it to "narratives about how violent conditions have been historically produced and, more specifically, about how (neo)colonial relationships have worked over time to create the situation in the Niger Delta" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 229). In this regard, Feldner observes that:

> due to Rufus's limited perspective, which allows him to record only the situation on the ground, the root causes are beyond his scope. He cannot take into account the actions, methods, and strategies of the oil companies, or adopt a more distanced point of view of Nigeria's entanglements in international neocolonial relationships. As a result, the novel does not offer an analysis of the processes and structures of neocolonialism but is a testament to its effects and consequences (2018: 521).

Hence, the lack of historical and neo-colonial references may be taken as a literary choice, which could be linked to the features of oil, which despite being "overtly visible" in the "extraction sites on the (semi-)periphery of the world-system", it may be "subsequently made "unseen", either by privatization, securitization, and military enforcement or by its mediated mystification" (Macdonald, 2017: 293). Consequently, the novel, by means of Rufus' testimony, simply but masterfully reports the actual effects, which the oil extraction business has on the social fabric of the Niger Delta, where the geopolitical, neoliberal and postcolonial dynamics that are at the basis of the fossil fuel economy are hidden from public knowledge and from the people living in the region, who while being torn by violence and pollution, find themselves incapable of changing their situation as the means are controlled by forces that go beyond their reach.

3.8. Water turns black: environmental degradation

In the introduction to *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell gives "a rough checklist of some of the ingredients that might be said to comprise an environmentally oriented work" (1995: 7). Even though this list might be seen as approximate and outdated as it was conceived in the early stages of the environmental critical school; some of its points are still valid and may be used as an analytical framework that can provide interesting observations for an ecocritical analysis of *Oil on Water*.

The first bullet point of Buell's list reads: *"the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history"* (Buell, 1995: 7; emphasis in original). This implication can be observed in Habila's novel in the way the author stresses the connection between humans and the physical world by means of many figures of speech. For instance, oil spreads over "the patch of grass growing by the water", and thus the grass' blades appear "covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands" (Habila, 2011: 10). This comparison shows how the environment endures the same sufferings as the people of the Delta, and besides "the personification of the

landscape as a sick and dying person" (Feldner, 2018: 516), Feldner also suggests that the dramatic medical condition of Zaq, who starts the journey in a poor state of health and will eventually die at the end of it, "might be extended to refer to the Niger Delta at large" (2018: 525).

This correlation is also underlined by means of the numerous descriptions of the status of water, which are provided by Rufus and highlight the importance of this element not only for the communities living in the area but also for the Delta's ecosystem. Being it an essential element for life, water becomes a poisoned liquid that carries the signs of human and environmental loss. A horror movie-like scenario, where "strange objects" emerge from water and beside "a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly-up with black birds perching on it", Rufus catches sight of "a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away from [him], its fingers opening and closing, beckoning" (Habila, 2011: 37-38). In this regard, Egya observes that "afflictions to the environment translate as damage and injury to the humans inhabiting the environment [in which] the violence [ties] together the environment and humans in victimhood" (2017: 101).

Yet, the reasons for these sufferings are to be attributed only to the human element and the oil industry that have been altering the ecological equilibrium of the Niger Delta. This altered ecosystem is, therefore, the product of human concepts of modernity and progress that require the exploitation of different resources and urge "the less 'advanced' southern countries to close the gap on their wealthier northern counterparts, and in so doing to subscribe to a capitalist growth model that is both demonstrably unequal and carries a potentially devastating environmental cost" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 30).

This economic pressure can be seen in *Oil on Water* when the doctor working for the military tells Rufus that in his early days in the Delta he "discovered that the village's [...] discontent was not over their health" but rather over their poverty, which provoked a desire for "that fire that burns day and night" (Habila, 2011: 151-152), namely the gas flares, which advertised a sparkling picture of modernity and were hiding the devastating consequences on both human health and the environment. This trick is best exemplified by Chief Ibiram's tale on how their "paradise" became a nightmare. His story is reported by drawing a comparison with the Biblical story of the ancestral sin and how their village will be eventually destroyed by the oil companies

promising money and employment opportunities, which turned out to be ephemeral but kept tempting people like a "snake in the garden [that] wouldn't rest, [and] kept on hissing, and the apple only grew larger and more alluring each day" (Habila, 2011: 43).

With reference to this temptation, Löschnigg claims that the double aesthetics of the sublime (terror and delight) can be applied to these situations, which show "the doubling of attitudes which characterizes modern societies, which try to reconcile their consumerist behaviour and fascination with technological progress with a growing knowledge of the often devastating effects on the environment as well as on social structures" (2017: 544). In this context, Löschnigg adds that novels like *Oil on Water* show how "the double aesthetics of the sublime loses balance as notions of terror overrule notions of fascination and delight [and thus it reminds] the reader of the ambivalence of society's attitudes towards the glamour of progress" (2017: 558). In short, Habila underlines the negative aspects behind human ideas of progress and modernity longing, which reveal to be ecologically unsustainable.

In addition to these considerations, the fourth and last point of Buell's list may be also applied to *Oil on Water* as it refers to the fact that *"some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text"* (Buell, 1995: 8; emphasis in original). By means of the descriptions given by Rufus, the reader is presented with an environment that has been subject to changes and with the way in which people and nature have been adapting or overwhelmed by these changes.

With reference to adaptation, Habila focuses on the substance of oil and its repercussions on the natural landscape by "[treating it] not simply as a toxin that has poisoned its surroundings [...], but as itself a new and persistent feature of the environment" (Medovoi, 2014: 23-22). Hence, by becoming an intrinsic aspect of the land, Medovoi suggests that *Oil on Water* "does not so much ask us to contemplate the ruining of the Niger Delta's natural environment per se as it encourages our reflection on the new conditions of life in a sickening environment that the extraction of petroleum has created" (2014: 23). Indeed, oil, in its liquid and gaseous form, is everywhere in the novel and everything is affected by this substance, which, despite being something that naturally belongs to the earth, is extracted by humans and thus it becomes potentially dangerous. In this way, what is natural becomes artificial and even

the day-night cycle results altered by the unnatural light created by the gas flares, which work constantly "like distant malfunctioning stars" (Habila, 2011: 65).

These alterations inevitably affect also the man-made environment and therefore buildings coexist with the elements of the oil extraction industry. As a result, the distorted environment loses its uniqueness and in the eyes of Rufus, one of the villages he visits looks like "a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meager landscape [...] covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field" (Habila, 2011: 38). Moreover, also some of the villages' social structures and people's lifestyles need to adapt to these impending changes. This scenario is best narrated by the doctor, who tells Rufus the story of a village where the gas flares had been warmly welcomed by the inhabitants to the point that they became the social and trade centre of the village and were even called "The Fire of Pentecost" as they were seen as a divine blessing that could bring prosperity and artificial light (Habila, 2011: 152-153).

However, soon after, all these changes usually become overwhelming and quite soon some villages begin to disappear under the sign of illness and unemployment (Habila, 2011: 152-153). In fact, as soon as all the promises of progress reveal their true nature, living conditions become unbearable and villagers are forced to migrate towards the bigger industrial cities, demonstrating in this way that "oil production in Nigeria [...] also serves as a negative factor for urbanization" (Feldner, 2018: 524), thus having significant repercussions on the landscape. At the same time, animals are also forced to move and besides the evident loss of fauna, which becomes clear in front of Rufus' eyes as the environment carries "the suspended stench of dead matter [...] dead birds draped over tree branches, [...] dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (Habila, 2011: 9-10), the greatest loss is represented by the species that cannot be seen. Indeed, some are close to extinction and this tragedy is underlined by Gloria (a nurse working in the Delta), who tells Rufus that the "islands used to be a big habitat for bats [but] now [because of gas flares] only a few dozen remain here and there" (Habila, 2011: 127).

In short, the way in which *Oil on Water* presents a sort of apocalyptic scenario, where both humans, animals, and vegetation equally bear the scars of environmental devastation, appears as an interesting ecological analysis. Consequently, the interconnections stressed by Habila work against the indiscriminate oil extraction,

whose practice shows how "human relations with the planet at large and with local ecosystems on national and regional scales have so far been grounded in unsustainable practices that rely on systems of domination and 'hyperseparation'" (Oppermann & Iovino, 2017: 4-5), which found and still find fertile ground in the ideologies of modernity and perpetual growth. As a result, *Oil on Water* gives attention to the way in which these concepts need to be brought under scrutiny and rethought in more inclusive and ecological terms.

3.9. Irikefe island: resisting the narrative of violence and oil

In an essay on petrofiction, Macdonald acknowledges that "in most oil-encounter fictions [...] the pre-oil world doesn't quite disappear [...] enabling reconsideration of 'post-oil' sensibility in 'pre-oil' shapes and forms" (2017: 300). In the context of postcolonial ecocriticism, this co-presence might constitute an opportunity to "[scrutinise] literary texts as places where different environmental imaginaries are articulated" (Bartosch, 2013: 72).

These observations may be also applied to *Oil on Water* as the main characters find refuge on Irikefe island, which is a place that resists the modernity of the nearby Port Harcourt. On the island, a community and a group of religious worshippers protect a shrine, which was created in a post-conflict time when "the land needed to be cleansed of blood, and pollution" (Habila, 2011: 128). As a result, the place holds a particular spiritual connection with its inhabitants, who "have managed to keep this island free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence" (Habila, 2011: 129). Even though this attitude does not make this community totally immune from the violence escalating in the Delta region, still, their mindset helps them to be resilient in order to "bring a healing, to restore and conserve" (Habila, 2011: 137). These three pillars seem to arise from an ecological view, which embraces both human and physical elements as they are both considered in need of care,

and this is also why Boma decides to join the community in which her newfound happiness seems even to erase the scar on her face (Habila, 2011: 170).

Consequently, as suggested by Zapf, this philosophy can be taken as an example of how "indigenous knowledge of culture-nature interdependence often represents a source of imaginative counterdiscourses in postcolonial texts that help to frame western scientific paradigms in a broader and more holistic form" (2017: 74). Nevertheless, Riddle finds some critical issues regarding the native community-led alternative presented in *Oil on Water* and claims that:

> this cyclical view of ecological processes is what distinguishes the novel from typical environmental apocalyptic novels, in that it refuses the didactic ploy, aiming to change the consciousness of the reader with the shock of the doom to come. But this means that instead, the novel is depicting a situation in which the end of the cycle has already come, as it has come to the Niger Delta, and that there is nothing left to do but heal and survive (2018: 63).

This interpretation, which suggests a hopeless resolution based on the bitter acknowledgment of social and environmental damage that appears irreversible, combines with the commentary of Edebor, who claims that Habila "fails to suggest pragmatic solutions to the staggering challenges confronting the oil-polluted and violence-ridden nation of Niger Delta" (2017: 1). In reply to these observations, it may be argued that Habila as a fiction writer does not have to provide easy solutions to these extremely intricate problems. Conversely, his job is to invite the readers to ask themselves questions about possible solutions: it is the very act of reading that "raises the awareness for gaps of meaning" (Bartosch, 2013: 149). Indeed, for the most part, "Habila's novel is literature in pursuit of social and ecological justice *as* it provides testimony of the environmental and social damage caused by the oil extraction in the Niger Delta" (Feldner, 525; emphasis added) and presents the community living on Irikefe island as an example of the way in which some native people try to elaborate sustainable alternatives to the oil-driven modernity.

In a similar way, Edebor criticises also the fact that "Habila's position regarding the actions of the militants (as contained in the novel) appears evasive as there is no strong condemnation as such" (2017: 48). Considering this claim as a failed political stand on the part of Habila, it may be argued that the political character of *Oil on Water*

is to be found in the democratic way in which the different points of view of the factions involved in the Niger Delta conflicts are presented. In fact, by giving voice to a great variety of characters, the novel is fiction that:

> [goes] beyond the headlines and look[s] at characters, and [tries] to understand what might have led some people to become who they became, [...] tries to make the reader imagine himself in the place of these people—to try to dramatize it and to create empathy. That's what fiction does best [...] it [makes] things more complex and shows you that there aren't easy answers (Habila, 2017).

According to this function of fiction, Nixon claims that "in a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (2011: 15). To that end, Habila presents circumstances and motivations that usually remain hidden behind the image of the Niger Delta as a place for criminals and terrorists, and shows how the government, the military, and international oil corporations are also responsible for the violence spreading in the region. Thus, by challenging "the prominent Western narratives of violence [and employing] a form of postcolonial witnessing that makes visible often occluded kinds and causes of violence and that disrupts the structures of perception enabling invisibility" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2015: 226), *Oil on Water* raises questions about accountability and ethics and suspends judgments leaving them to the readers, who can elaborate their version of the story.

Moreover, with a special focus on Irikefe island, the novel presents another face of the indigenous fight, namely the pacifist side, which does not rely on the violence and sabotage usually employed by the militias, but, on the contrary, draws its strength and resilience on a special connection with the surrounding environment and the cyclical rhythms of life and death. In this regard, Caminero-Santangelo observes that "any hope in *Oil on Water* is associated not with armed resistance but with cultural narratives and practices which might enable healing and ground ways of life that challenge the fairy tale of oil" (2015: 232).

In connection with this "fairy tale", *Oil on Water* becomes one of the best examples of how petrofiction can work towards the uncovering of oil in the way it presents one of the "sacrifice zones" of the global industry of petroleum that are usually

concealed from the public opinion. The term sacrifice zones "was initially applied during the Cold War [...] to describe such territories [...] which were forever alienated in the wake of nuclear testing and production" (Nel, 2015: 247). Subsequently, it has been used "to understand the systemic and spatial nature of policies, and their relationship to environmental justice, regarding the 'contamination' of communities and landscapes which are sacrificed in the name of capitalist accumulation" (Nel, 2015: 248).

When applied to petromodernity, Hernández calls these places "Energy sacrifice zones" and observes that these zones "have been characterized as an unfortunate byproduct of high demand for energy coupled with the lack of comprehensive energy policy designed to protect areas that generate the energy sources modern society takes for granted" (2015: 3). In addition, it is interesting to notice that usually poorer social classes are the ones who carry the burden of this sacrifice as they usually live in these areas (Hernández, 2015: 5). Consequently, the Niger Delta needs to be seen as a sacrifice zone of the global energy machine, which is willing to sacrifice certain environments and groups of people in the name of progress, not realising that in so doing it affects the world ecosystem in its entirety.

In this regard, in spite of the fact that *Oil on Water* does not directly present the connections between petromodernity and neo-colonialism as the main sources of the Delta destruction, Habila displays the Niger Delta as one of the many energy sacrifice zones of the global oil extraction industry and by doing so, it indirectly criticises this apparatus and its neo-colonial ramifications as he narrates, and thus denounces, human and environmental rights abuses on the part of the oil companies, which tend to hide these practices. As a result, *Oil on Water* must be considered as an important literary work that attempts to bring to light the abuses and destruction often suppressed by the narrative of oil, which thrives from extraction sites that usually remain hidden to most of the people around the world and become deadly visible and material only to the people who are close to these places. In addition, by presenting Irikefe island as a resilient example, the novel works also as a positive counter-discourse, which goes against the oil narrative and the violence it entails. In this way, Habila indirectly questions the attitudes that contribute to oil invisibility and its violence and creates a powerful narrative that highlights the destruction of the environment and social structure of the Niger Delta region, which is in extreme danger and whose ability of

restoration and protection would not only benefit its endurance but also the survival of the world as a whole.

CHAPTER 4: OIL, CANADA, AND NIGERIA

4.1. Alberta oil sands and the illusion of ethical oil

As the world population increases along with the need to sustain future development and energy stability, nation-states are testing new technologies targeted to the discovery of new reserves, which could guarantee a continuous supply of fossil fuels and provide stability against the depletion of natural assets. Within these alternatives, the oil sand reserves in the Canadian province of Alberta represent a tempting possibility to both Canada and its neighbour the United States. In fact, as for the latter, given the possibility of political and diplomatic instability that may apply to the Persian Gulf; "Canada offers the most complete list of criteria - not just its reserves and proximity but also its security of availability and supply, as well as a multitude of practical, economic, cultural, and political accommodations" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 253). This possibility represents an advantageous prospect also for Canada since "with the reclassification in 2002 of the oil sands as part of the country's "proven reserves," Canada's oil stock jumped from 5 billion to 180 billion barrels, making it the second highest in the world after Saudi Arabia" (Szeman, 2013: 156).

Notwithstanding, due to the fact that "the oil sands don't actually have any oil per se [but bitumen]" (Leahy, 2019), the extraction of oil from tar sands "cannot be produced by the techniques that have conventionally been used in the oil industry" (Macfadyen & Watkins, 2014: 141). For this reason, even though the oil industry has always been one of the biggest incomes for the Canadian economy, the "commercial production of oil sands oil did not commence until 1967" (Macfadyen, & Watkins, 2014: 145). Indeed, this extractive method that needs chemical processes to extract oil, presents some technical challenges, which have delayed its development but have not prevented it. The industry is in constant development and makes the "tailings ponds in Alberta's oil sands region [one] of the biggest human-made structures on Earth", so big that they are "large enough to be seen from space" (Leahy, 2019).

This comment gives the idea of the massive impact that the business is having on the landscape. On this subject, Leahy observes that "especially north of Fort

McMurray, where the boreal forest has been razed and bitumen is mined from the ground in immense open pits, the blot on the landscape is incomparable" (2019). In addition, besides deforestation, the colossal refineries create what Pasqualetti calls "landscape of power" (2009: 257) that comes in addition to "changes of a more permanent nature [...] including those from home building, road construction, provision of consumer and industrial services, pipeline placement, and generation and distribution of electricity necessary to service the growing needs of every aspects of the projects" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 258).

Consequently, the migration of people towards these industrial centres will "lead inevitably to changes not just in natural balances but in cultural ones as well" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 257). For these reasons, some indigenous groups have created organisations to keep their traditions and communities alive (Leahy, 2019). An example is the "Indigenous Climate Action" organization whose purpose is to fight against the impact of fossil fuels extraction and underline "how Indigenous knowledge, rights, and systems are critically important in developing successful climate change strategies, policies and mitigation, and adaptation plans" (Indigenous Climate Action, 2017). On the other hand, Leahy observes that "many indigenous communities in the region are deeply impoverished. So, in spite of the history of mistrust, some [...] communities have become partners in oil sands projects, in return for jobs, grocery stores, housing, and public facilities" (Leahy, 2019).

As a result, oil sands exploitation is not entirely condemned by civil society and Szeman emphasises that in 2012 "two thirds of Canadians reported that they believed that the country could increase its oil and gas production without generating any further damage to the environment" (2013: 160). Such beliefs are the product of greenwash rhetoric, which sees oil companies "advertising their efforts to reclaim oil sands land and to act as responsible stewards of the environment" (Szeman, 2013: 157). This narrative is also supported by the federal government and other public figures like Ezra Levant, who applies an ethical approach to oil sands development in comparison to other oil-producing nations and claims that "oilsands are [not] good because they keep the wheels of capitalism spinning, but because they produce a morally superior product to all other oil sources when economic justice, minority rights, freedom from oppression and, yes, even environmentalism are taken into account" (Goddard, 2010). By contrast,

actual damages inflicted upon the Canadian environment demonstrate the inaccuracy of these ideas and the fact that no ethics can be applied to fossil fuel extraction.

First of all, extraction of oil from oil sands contributes substantially to the greenhouse effect because "producing one barrel of oil from oil sands generates three times more greenhouse gases than does one barrel of conventional oil" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 261). Secondly, this technique presents issues of waste disposal and water contamination to the extent that the equilibrium of the Athabasca River in Northern Canada is seriously compromised and thus, in order to protect the fauna, "robotic bird[s] of prey" have been installed to prevent "migratory birds from landing in tailings ponds, where they are poisoned in large numbers" (Leahy, 2019). This solution epitomizes the way in which the groups favouring the development of oil sands extraction tend to invest and focus on the improvement of technologies, which could mitigate the environmental impacts, therefore turning a blind eye on the only plausible solution, namely to stop the extraction. Indeed, due to economic interests that lay behind Alberta's tar sands, it seems clear that "the fantasy of greening something black has proven to be the more attractive vision not only because it holds out the possibility of amelioration as opposed to transformation, but because no real alternative has otherwise been proffered" (Szeman, 2013: 160).

4.2. Introduction to *419* by Will Ferguson

Will Ferguson is a successful Canadian author best known for humorous and travel books. One of his latest works, the Giller Prize-winning novel *419* (Ferguson, 2014) presents some elements of travel writing and some humoristic details but it is actually a thriller that starts and ends with bitter undertones. The title of the novel refers to the entry of the Nigerian Criminal Code that covers advance-fee fraud crimes, which generally come in the form of letters or e-mail scams asking for a small amount of money beforehand with the promise of getting an important monetary compensation at the end of the transaction (Ferguson, 2013a). Being it a scam that could be traced back to Shakespearean times, Ferguson admits that at the beginning he wanted to write a

funny story about this kind of e-mails, but then when he started in-depth research on real case studies, he realised how dark the topic was (Ferguson, 2012).

This aspect is introduced in the novel where a 419-scam sets things in motion and carries deadly consequences. The first victim is the Canadian Henry Curtis, a retired school teacher, who, after having trusted a 419 con man to help an endangered unreal Nigerian woman, loses all of his savings and thus commits suicide with the hope that his family could get the money back from his life insurance. His daughter, Laura Curtis, who works as an editor and leads a depressing life, wants to take revenge on the responsible person and for this reason, she starts investigating through the internet, checking the e-mail scams her father received. This research brings her directly to Lagos in Nigeria, where she turns herself into the trickster and cheats on Winston, the swindler who fooled Henry. However, Laura does not know that her actions will put Winston in danger as his life and "enterprise" are actually controlled by Ironsi-Egobia, who is one of the criminal bosses managing the 419 business. In addition, Laura will be indirectly responsible for the death of Nnamdi, a boy from the Niger Delta, whose life has always been influenced by the oil business, which will eventually bring him to Lagos in the hope of finding financial support for him and Amina, a pregnant woman from Northern Nigeria who was saved by Nnamdi during her desperate pilgrimage to the South in search for a better future.

In short, Ferguson presents a plot that intertwines the lives of four main characters, namely Laura, Winston, Nnamdi and Amina, who correspond to four different places, respectively Canada, Lagos, the Niger Delta, and the Sahel (Northern Nigeria). Notwithstanding, the four different parts in which the novel is divided (Snow, Sand, Fuel, Fire) do not correspond to the different characters and, as a result, their stories are not reported in chronological sequence. On the contrary, the third person narrator jumps from one character to the other, from a country to the other, while adding memories and characters' thoughts by means of free indirect speech, and including also many flashbacks on Nnamdi's childhood, which works as a backstory that introduces the oil explorations in the Niger Delta and the consequent destruction of environment and communities.

This apparently chaotic narrative structure could be linked to Ferguson's film studies at York University (Ferguson, 2013b) as the storyline seems to be arranged like

a sequence of different scenes and shots as some chapters are very short (e.g. three sentences long). On the other hand, this confused storyline perfectly fits with the crime fiction genre as the arrangement creates confusion and, thus the reader keeps collecting details and clues following Laura in her amateur investigation on the reasons behind Henry's death. Hence, only at the end, the reader can finally make sense of the picture the book has built, which does not have to do simply with a murder case, but displays the hidden correlations that link together contemporary societies, which "grow interconnected and dissolve into each other, leading the reader to reconsider received notions of sovereignty, justice, and ethics" (Fraile-Marcos, 2017: 136).

In short, at first *419* seems to connect people and stories that are apparently different and have nothing to share, but in the end, they reveal to be deeply interrelated also because of neo-colonial configurations, cyberspace, and oil. In this regard, in 2012, the Giller Prize jury's comment on *419* celebrated the fact that the novel "points in the direction of something entirely new: the Global Novel" ("Will Ferguson Wins", 2012):

> It is a novel emotionally and physically at home in the poverty of Lagos and in the day-to-day of North America. It tells us the ways in which we are now bound together and reminds us of the things that will always keep us apart. It brings us the news of the world far beyond the sad, hungry faces we see on CNN and CBC and far beyond the spreadsheets of our pension plans. Ferguson is a true travel writer, his eye attuned to the last horrible detail. He is also a master at dialogue and suspense. It is tempting to put *419* in some easy genre category, but that would only serve to deny its accomplishment and its genius ("Will Ferguson Wins", 2012).

By extension, *419* stands as a perfect example of how literature connects with the concept of Cultural Ecology that, as already underlined, "is distinct from such universalizing ecocentric theories in that it thinks together the two axiomatic premises of an ecological epistemology, connectivity *and* diversity, relationality *and* difference" (Zapf, 2016: 138; emphasis in original). In other words, this "Global" novel works on a double track: the moment it shows how connected our world is, it also proves the intrinsic but also artificial differences that continue to shape our modernity.

4.3. Oil, space and place

The connotations applied to the concepts of space and place have been changing during different historical periods. With a specific focus on the passage from modern to a postmodern society, Tally observes that the target of inquiry has been shifting from time to space (2013: 11-12). This "spatial turn", which happened after the end of World War II, signals a substantial change in people's attitude towards the future and an increased sense of precariousness that indirectly promoted an increment in population mobility, which was further fomented by technological revolutions, postcolonial dynamics, and globalization (Tally, 2013: 11-17).

As for environmental literary criticism, Buell notices that it has been largely linked to space and "[has arisen] within and against the history of human modification of planetary space [tracing] the erosive effect of the pace of transformation upon the stability of locale and the assumption of belonging to it" (Buell, 2005: 62). Consequently, literary ecocriticism cannot "theorize scrupulously about a place without confronting its fragility [...] at a time when fewer and fewer of the world's population live out their lives in locations that are not shaped to a great extent by translocal – ultimately global - forces" (Buell, 2005: 62-63).

Taking into account the global feature of *419,* it can be noticed how the novel elaborates on these concepts and shows how space and place have been undergoing various transformations also because of oil and the way the oil business operates globally. Indeed, considering the two countries addressed in the novel, namely Canada and Nigeria, it is interesting to notice how Ferguson creates a sort of geographical map, which does not only refer to the novel's setting, but also to the present-day world economy, and societies. Thus, considering the fact that concepts of space and place have an essential role both in the process of composition and in the reception of a literary work, when analysing the "map" produced by Ferguson, the reader understands some of the ways in which "oil has drastically affected the basic social and spatial conditions of people throughout the world, as well as their modes of relating to one another" (Walonen, 2012: 57).

In other words, Ferguson casts an eye on the way in which oil shapes geopolitics and power relations, and by putting in contact Nigeria and Canada, he investigates the

spatial consequences that oil has on their environments and landscapes. Consequently, Ferguson, like Habila, examines the Niger Delta but he does not simply focus on the environmental devastation of that part of Nigeria; on the contrary, he enlarges the viewpoint and looks at other parts of the country. Moreover, by adding Canada to the picture and showing the correlation between the two countries he refers to petromodernity as a whole and underlines colonial and neo-colonial implications.

As for the Canadian setting, which even though unnamed, bears resemblance to Calgary in the province of Alberta, Laura assists to the transformations of the urban space caused by the oil industry directly from her flat:

> Laura's windows were aligned not with the mountains but toward downtown; they looked onto that sandstone-and-steel city below with its Etch-a-Sketch skyline, a city that was constantly erasing and rewriting itself. A cold city, exhaling steam. A city of CEOs and venture capital, of oil company offices hidden behind curtains of glass. She could chart the price of a barrel of oil from her bedroom window by the turning of construction cranes along the skyline. When the price fell below some magical point, the cranes would slow down. And then stop. When the price rose again, the cranes would start up, spinning anew. Faster and faster. The Heart of the New West. That's what they called the city (Ferguson, 2014: 28).

This description is representative of the equation between Canadian economic development and the business of petroleum. Nevertheless, Ferguson adds a small but important detail, which proves that not all that glitters is gold. Indeed, the reader discovers that the apartment where Laura lives is located above a shopping mall and that Laura suffers from depression. Although she lives in a modern city and "the mall [has] everything she need[s]" (Ferguson, 2014: 26) she feels a void and she has difficulties in establishing social bonds, except with her recently deceased father with whom she had a good relationship.

As a result, the connection between Laura and a non-place stands as an important example of the way in which globalisation has destabilised traditional spatial orders and "reinforce[s] the idea that modernization has rendered place-attachment nugatory and obsolete" (Buell, 2005: 64). Taking into consideration the distinction between "space" and "place" advanced by Buell, who claims that "place" is more specific than "space" as it is usually invested with a special meaning that exhibits a personal and emotional bond (2005: 63), Laura's feelings and the way she objects to the

sale of their family home after the 419 scam (Ferguson, 2014: 197) demonstrates "the continuing desire *for* place despite appearances to the contrary" (Buell, 2005: 71; emphasis in original), a desire that the rapid changes and precariousness of modern society seem unable to fulfil.

In addition, the shopping mall is representative of consumerism and the ecological losses, which unfold after rapid and usually unsustainable urbanization. In this regard, Laura remembers an afternoon spent at the mall with her dad when he discovered that the building of the shopping centre had been designed by incorporating replicas of natural elements, which were used as decorations (Ferguson, 2014: 56). This detail may be interpreted as a reference to the way in which, modern societies seem to be unable to elaborate ecological, sustainable, and fair models of coexistence, and thus they are forced to create artificial copies of all the things (human and non-human) that get lost in the process of modernization.

By extension, the ability to separate the reality from its copy might become difficult and generate a sort of hyperreal world that with reference to Baudrillard's definition of "hyperreality" (1988: 120) can be linked to contemporary petroculture where "hyperreality accounts for the disparity between the real world of limited natural resources and the 'hyperreal' world of capitalism that encourages endless consumption [and thus] it provides a possible explanation for western society's reluctance [...] to imagine alternatives – in terms of either energy sources or lifestyle" (Petrofictionary).

Similarly, along with Canada, Ferguson underlines these "losses" also in the urban agglomerations of Nigeria. During her journey, Amina reaches a city called Kaduna in the North-centre of the country. Here the narrator informs the reader that "the city was named for its river, and the river was named for its crocodiles. But the Kadunas that once floated like logs in the muddy water were long gone, lost like the lions of the Sahel" (Ferguson, 2014: 140). This remark underlines the way in which urbanisation and human activities have supposedly altered the balance and caused harm to the wildlife of that place where it is not the river that guides Amina into the city centre, but the pipelines that can be seen in the distance: "the squat cylinders and intestinal tubings of the city's oil refineries, a complex so sprawling she almost mistook it for a city in its own right" (Ferguson, 2014: 140).

In addition, within this cityscape, Amina notices an incongruity in the way the oil factories interact with the urban fabric. Indeed, she sees that “any fuel these refineries provided seemed to have bypassed local vendors [and] long lines of angry vehicles were queued outside petrol stations [while] the fuel shortage had brought out would-be profiteers, young men selling plastic milk jugs and litre bottles filled with black market gasoline” (Ferguson, 2014: 140). This situation contrasts with the cityscape presented by Laura as the oil wealth in Kaduna does not correspond to infrastructural growth and facilities development, which could be seen from Laura’s window. Conversely, it fuels illegal activities and a spatial disequilibrium that jumbles together “shantytowns wreathed in smoke, and oil company compounds gated luxury jails” (Ferguson, 2014: 216). This image underlines an economic development, which has not been gradual and has not taken into consideration local dynamics, thus corresponding to an equal distribution of resources and wealth that is collected in the hands of few.

This imbalance and the lack of job opportunities and social welfare apply to the entire Nigeria, where the flow of oil draws a national web, yet it establishes strong contrasts especially between urban cities and the Niger Delta where the source of black gold lies. In this way, like in *Oil on Water*, in *419* the Niger Delta emerges as the place, which has changed the most because of the oil business and the way oil has been destroying not only the environment but also people and non-human creatures inhabiting the region. Hence, even though the pipe that goes from Kaduna to Nnamdi’s village located “at the other end of [it]” (Ferguson, 2014: 233) seems to establish a connection, it actually fosters an even greater divergence between these two places, which can be taken as the embodiment of “the spatial disequilibrium between locations of production and locations of consumption” (Pasqualetti, 2009: 255).

Seen within a global context, Pasqualetti observes that this discrepancy “strongly influences economic and political decisions worldwide” (Pasqualetti, 2009: 255), especially in a world where economic growth is measured in continuous increment in the use of energy. In this way, fossil fuel consumption has a strong geopolitical influence and according to this point, Macdonald observes that oil operates like a frontier “always looking to expand and deepen, but also to prevent any possible shrinkage” (2017: 291). As a result, this movement sustains the myth of oil as a

perpetual resource and therefore “like a tidal system, the oil frontier can fade and return, re-establishing itself in different territories or economic moments, or resurfacing in new forms and striations within an established site of oil extraction or production [...] while benefiting from ongoing petrocultural hegemony at a global level” (Macdonald, 2017: 291-292).

This worldwide geography of oil becomes evident in a passage of *419* in which the narrator explains the global consequences of pipeline sabotages and foreign workers’ kidnappings from the part of the militias in the Niger Delta region. As production decreases because of vandalism, “the price of oil spike[s] on the world market. On the other side of the globe, tar sands operations [rumble] back to life, [begin] chewing up the oil-rich soil again. From Laura’s window, she could see the cranes turning faster and faster” (Ferguson, 2014: 190). This insightful passage exemplifies the connection between two places that despite being distant and different, are completely soaked in the same system that keeps relying on colonial legacies and neoliberal policies, which continue to exploit human beings and natural resources with the sole purpose of maintaining an unfair civilisation progress.

However, the way Ferguson shows the reader this important link and the fact that the drag and drop of weights to balance the oil scale may amount to investments in some parts of the world and harm in other parts appears to be partly weakened by the fact that the novel “elides the local effects of Alberta’s industry entirely” (Ball, 2018: 182). On this point, Ball observes that “Ferguson does not explore [Alberta’s] thematic or geographic territory” and, as a result, “Alberta oil remains distant and invisible, and the gleaming city that prospers from oil is not tarnished by attention to the source of its wealth”, namely the tar sands, which are known as “as a source of ‘dirty oil’ associated with what many environmentalists have shown to be untenable damage and risk” (2018: 194). Consequently:

> in minimizing the presence and entirely avoiding the local impacts of Alberta oil, the novel’s representation of oil economies and ecologies [...] throws off balance the very transcontinental equivalencies and correspondences it seems, on the surface, eager to establish [...] limiting its ability to explore themes of environmental justice comparatively across disparate local ecologies put at risk by oil (Ball, 2018: 183).

In other words, by removing oil sands environmental and social ramifications especially in the Athabasca River and for North Canadian native communities, Ferguson seems to have lost an opportunity to enrich the ecocritical impact of *419*.

Nonetheless, it is important to underline the fact that despite being similar, the spatial and environmental impact of oil affects and is perceived in the two places (Niger Delta and Alberta region) in very different ways. What to Nnamdi becomes a tangible and visible destruction of his home and community, to Laura stays behind the curtain of a system that allows her to "enjoy" the products of that impact, which even though affecting also the environment that is close to her, remains invisible as she is not involved first hand. Again, in this unequal treatment, colonial legacies resurface and are further underlined by a conversation between Nnamdi and a "Shell man", who affirms: "In Europe, and in America, where I'm from, they have though laws about environmental stuff' […] We could never do there what we do here" (Ferguson, 2014: 186).

As a result, due to the continuous separation between North and South, the global oil apparatus relies on a system of law that "creates the conditions of its own suspension, which allows for abuses toward those who are only included in the juridical system by virtue of their exclusion" (Joyce, 2015). Moreover, it establishes an unceasing demand for "energy sacrifice zones", which, as already said, are "places that, to their extractors, somehow don't count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress" (Klein, 2014: 169). Hence, in relation to the illusion of "ethical oil", if on the one hand, Canadian oil production appears on the surface to be more "environmentally controlled", on the other hand, in the Niger Delta, oil companies are "protected" by a system, which looks at their interests rather than at their environmental and human abuses they commit, and this situation happens because of the fact that:

> the creation of a space of exception allowing for unfettered exploitation is crucial to neoliberal gain; as shown in the drilling of the Niger River Delta by Western oil companies, neoliberalism and sovereign power coalesce in the space of the oil field, which, because of its geographical distance from the sovereign power (in this case, the West), lies outside of the law's protection (Joyce, 2015).

The establishment of this kind of distance, which can be translated not only into geographical terms but also into social and economic disparity, creates a situation that prevents people from seeing the global dimension of the oil narrative. With reference to this point, Ball argues against Levant's concept of ethical oil and observes how:

> in *419*, Alberta production increases *because of* environmental and human rights horrors in Nigeria, not in lieu of them. If an escalating war of attrition between Delta oil companies and militants creates more environmental harm for less oil produced, and this reduced production causes the "chewing up" of more oil reserves in Alberta, then not only will Nigeria's carbon footprint increase, but the world's will. Nigeria's zero-sum game thus becomes a global one with global economic and environmental consequences (Ball, 2018: 200; emphasis in original).

In other words, fossil fuels extraction is not simply linked to the environment that bears the burden of this practice. On the contrary, it is indirectly connected to the world as a whole since, for example, it increases global warming. As a result, "entrenched economic structures of relative wealth and advantage dissolve in the face of ecological threats that affect human bodies similarly [and therefore] privilege and empowerment based on class or nationality are no protection against such threats" (Ball, 2018: 195). In this regard, *419* manages to establish interesting and insightful connections between people and places which, within an ecocritical analysis of the novel, create a link "between the singularity of the narratives and the universality of their normative content that enables us to speak of local natures and global responsibilities" (Iovino, 2010: 43).

4.4. "Welcome to the Republic of Shell"

Despite the fact that Ferguson does not explore the environmental and social problems of Alberta tar sands, he pays great attention to the situation in the Niger Delta. Like Habila, Ferguson presents the environmental and human ramifications of the oil extraction industry in this Southern region of Nigeria. Nevertheless, the two authors address these problems in different ways. On the one hand, in *Oil on Water,* Rufus (the 1st person narrator and protagonist) directly enters this "apocalyptic" scenario, which

carries the late stages of this human and environmental devastation and he slowly presents the reasons behind the violence of the militants and the military thanks to the different characters he meets during his journey. On the other hand, Ferguson's 3rd person narrator starts from the pre-oil world, and then moves to the period of colonialism and presents in chronological order the different stages of the changes caused by petroleum extraction. To cover these different passages, the narrator of *419* follows the life of Nnamdi (an Ijaw boy from the Niger Delta) from his childhood to his brutal death and shows how the oil business has been influencing his life choices and the fate of his community.

The very first page of the novel is a flashback on an important figure of Nnamdi's childhood, namely his father and the activity of fishing that Nnamdi used to perform with him at the time when "fishing nets [...] were splashing with life" (Ferguson, 2014: 1). In the description of this episode and other events, which Nnamdi experiences as a young boy, the narrator underlines the equilibrium between the people of Nnamdi's community and the environment they inhabit, which translates into a shared recognition that the surrounding environment is alive: "the mangrove forests were breathing" (Ferguson, 2014: 5), and for this reason, it must be treated with respect: "kill the fish quickly. It is kinder that way" (Ferguson, 2014: 5).

Nevertheless, soon after, the reader is presented with the description of a place that carries the sign of colonisation, namely a British graveyard and a cannon, which "stood out as a local landmark" (Ferguson, 2014: 156). These incongruous elements appear like something out of place and stand as the symbol of the British domination that imposed its rule and language, which "had taken root in the muddy waters of the Delta as surely as the mangroves had" (Ferguson, 2014: 158). In this place, Nnamdi has his first encounter with an oyibo[3]: "the forest beyond the graves…moved […] and then – with a crash and a curse, wide leaves were flung apart and a figure emerged, [like ghosts] the oyibos had finally come out from the shadows [and] were drawing closer, one gas flare at a time" (Ferguson, 2014: 159-161). With this narrative sequence, Ferguson provides an interesting image that shows how the British colonisation had always been there lurking around. In addition, by making a parallel between the oyibos of the past and these new colonisers, the narrator stresses also the reason behind their

[3] "Nigerian word for a caucasian. It is not deregatory. It is just a word used to identify a white person"; retrieved from https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=oyibo

arrival, namely oil, which in different shapes (palm oil first or petroleum after) stands as the quintessence of the colonisation of Nigeria:

> the boy knew about oil. His mother cooked with oil: the red palm oil so much of their food was simmered in. The English had bombarded the Brass Islanders for that very oil, is what his teacher had said. It was Ijaw palm oil that the English had used to grease their machineries and run their cannon factories, to make their soap and their candles, even to feed their slaves. But that was long ago, and it was a different sort of oil the *oyibo* was after now, the kind the boy's father wiped off his hands after working on the generator, the kind that seeped from riverbeds, the kind that was turned into the petrol that fuelled the motorboats, the kind that flared in the night. With so many *oyibo* mosquitoes needling into the flesh of the Delta, it was a wonder the entire place hadn't come down with malarial fever (Ferguson, 2014: 161-162).

This ironic closure foreshadows the following harm to people and the environment that at the beginning is kept hidden from Niger Deltans. During Nnamdi's first encounter with the oyibo Shell man, who praises his smile and tells him that hopefully, he will get rich thanks to the oil exploration (Ferguson, 2014: 162), the young boy idealises this meeting and sometimes he even wonders "if he and the other children had dreamed that encounter [as] it seemed more myth than memory" (Ferguson, 2014: 163). However, the negative ramifications of oil explorations and extraction are not far away and "the real asserted itself soon enough the following spring in a crash of timber and a toppling of trees […] the forests had again begun to move – but more violently this time" (Ferguson, 2014: 163). In this way, the narrator underlines the fast pace of the advancing threat of oil extraction operations in the Niger Delta. In this regard, Macdonald observes that this feature is frequent in petrofictional texts in which:

> Portentous plotlines are common, with the striking of oil and the coming of the oil company men often represented in narratives driven by proleptic inevitability or by a sudden acceleration in events. In such traceable forms, the oil text anticipates the utterly changed world that petromodernity provides. Petrofiction is also usually a narrative of uneasy and uneven encounter (Macdonald, 2012: 31).

"*First they came with handshakes and gifts, and then they returned with bulldozers and paper*" (Ferguson, 2014: 164; emphasis in original). This comment underlines the changes in the attitude and methods of oil companies and shows how colonialism and

neo-colonialism work by means of deceit and coercive methods that were and are still partly based on "the concept of *terra nullis* – the land as 'empty' or pure space – [that] was historically used as a pretext for conquest and denial of aboriginal land rights" (Buell, 2005: 147; emphasis in original). In this way, the environmental devastation can be seen as the aftermath of a robbery, which not only exploit natural resources but also "bulldozes" all the people who oppose to it as they are not even considered as being part of that environment or they are seen as a minority whose rights must be sacrificed in the name of progress.

In addition, *419* stresses the fact that this colonisation and expropriation of land comes with the colonisation of the mind and the sabotage of traditions. Indeed to fossil fuels extractivism corresponds a cultural extractivism, which is underlined by the different missionaries, who took "pride to be posted in the 'far wilds' of the outer Delta, in amongst the 'remote' and 'fearful' tidal Ijaw" (Ferguson, 2014: 168) and whose sermons seem to recall the ones in Achebe's *Things fall apart* (2001: 130-133). Moreover, the changes brought by oil extraction appear to be so deep that even native language is modified and "new words [enter] the village vocabulary: *pipeline, flow station, manifold*" (Ferguson, 2014: 177; emphasis in original). Subsequently, these neologisms turn into more radical changes and even Nnamdi's father, who is a storyteller, "[starts] to incorporate the gas flares and seismic surveys into his nightly narratives" (Ferguson, 2014: 176).

Soon after this initial stage, the narrator follows Nnamdi to the subsequent effects, namely the period in which the aftermath of oil spillages and gas flares make themselves felt on the environment and villagers' well-being. As for the flora and fauna, Ferguson, like Habila, provides the description of a dying ecosystem. "Hundreds of croaker fish had arrived belly-up from the oil creeks farther inland, sheathed in crude and already rotting" (Ferguson, 2014: 155): an example of the many pictures given by the novel that presents them as the proof of ecocide, which removes the livelihood from fishermen. Fishermen and villagers, who know the fragility of the environment in which they live, and how to handle it, but who have to assist to its death as they remain unheard without a voice:

> the oil companies were building a Road to Nowhere [...] Nnamdi's father had pointed out how the roadbed blocked the water from seeping across. 'Do you see how it's backing up on this side, and

> draining on that? The road is acting like a dam. This side will flood, that side will wash away. Not good for fish and forest.' And so it proved. The wine palms died on one side of the road, and the fish drowned in the loam-rich waters on the other (Ferguson, 2014: 176).

The same fate applies to people, who find themselves in a completely altered situation "where light and darkness, day and night, were reversed" (Ferguson, 2014: 280). These conditions compromise also the villagers' health and diseases start to spread especially because of gas flares, which "had tainted the clouds, bringing down rains that itched and burned and left the plantain and palm leaves spotted with blisters. Children had begun coughing up blood, and village meetings became shouting matches" (Ferguson, 2014: 177). Indeed, after the oil men took away Deltans' means of support and they left them with devastation and illnesses, the logic consequence is anger and frustration, which is translated into manifestos such as the "Ijaw Declaration of Independence" (Ferguson, 2014: 204-206) that looks like a tribute to the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* (MOSOP, 1992).

Consequently, in order to remedy this situation and silence angry villagers, the narrator underlines the fact that the oil companies started to build infrastructures, which revealed to be "a school (without teachers) and a health clinic (without doctors) and [...] a pharmacy (without medicine)" (Ferguson, 2014: 178). This hypocrisy is also highlighted by the fact that "the cooking oil continued to arrive in ever larger tins" (Ferguson, 2014: 176) but the food (fish and plants) to be cooked in that oil was contaminated and no more eatable. "We will train you, we will feed you, we will pay you" (Ferguson, 2014: 180) this is the slogan oil companies sold to the villagers, who even though being aware of the falsity behind that statement, clung to it as their last resort. Indeed, the circumstances will "force" also Nnamdi to apply for a "Shell job" on an oil platform on Bonny Island, which becomes another symbol of colonialism as it "used to be a slave port" and then it was converted in a refinery site (Ferguson, 2014: 262). On the island, the Shell men instruct and use Nnamdi as long as he is needed before dumping him on a shore at the moment the production falls (Ferguson, 2014: 190), thus proving once again that the changes brought by oil companies do not turn into improvements in villagers' living conditions.

After this episode, the narrative starts to recall *Oil on Water* as the focus moves to the escalating violence, which takes hold in the Delta and "[begins] with small acts of sabotage" (Ferguson, 2014: 179) from the part of the militants, who obstruct oil

production. A signal of a despair that could no longer be kept hidden and it consequently exploded causing also frictions between different ethnic groups that "were now accused of profiteering, of secretly siding with the Shell Men"; thus fostering an atmosphere of hostility in which "new factions formed as old ethnic feuds bubbled to the surface" (Ferguson, 2014: 178, 206). Consequently, episodes of violence start spreading in the region and "soon the soldiers outnumbered the workers" (Ferguson, 2014: 179) causing even more bloodshed in the clash between the militants and the military. Here again, the circumstances force Nnamdi to reinvent himself and use his skills of "Shell man" to become a "Mosquito" and start selling tapped oil on the black market.

As a result, through the character of Nnamdi and the way he must adapt to the different situations in order to survive and provide a livelihood for his family and later for Amina and her baby, the narrator highlights some of the reasons behind the disorders in the Delta region. In this way, like Habila, Ferguson goes beyond the mainstream narrative of violence and discredits the superficial view of the Niger Delta, which is ironically presented to Laura by the detective in charge of the investigation into Henry's death, who "produce[s] a Google Maps version of West Africa" and states:

> The Delta is a huge area, home to one of the richest petroleum fields in the world. It's also one of the most dangerous places on earth. The militants and local warlords in the Delta have declared war on the oil companies. You might have heard about it in the news. […] the militants have been kidnapping and killing foreign workers with an unsettling ease as well […] in fact, oil, kidnappings, and 419 fraud are Nigeria's three biggest growth industries, and they often overlap" (Ferguson, 2014: 112).

This general overview exemplifies the typical superficial and stereotyped approach to Africa and the dynamics of the Niger Delta, which does not take into consideration the real causes and reasons behind the behaviour of the militants and does not state the complicity of oil companies and Western powers, which have their share of blame.

In addition, by connecting 419 frauds to the oil industry in Nigeria, the book plays on the clichés that see Canada as the civilised Western country versus the uncivilised and chaotic Nigeria. Elaborating on this view that can be seen as the product of colonial legacies, Fraile-Marcos observes that the scam set up by Winston, the con

man who makes Henry believe that an important Nigerian girl is in danger and therefore needs his financial support in order to escape to Canada, is built "on and appeal to the Canadian ethos, which constructs Canada as a safe and compassionate sovereign state, historically involved in the mission of enforcing the law and doing justice, creating a sense of moral superiority" (Fraile-Marcos, 2017: 138). On the other hand, it displays Nigeria as a place "undone by state corruption [...] a failed state, entangled in violent confrontations among state militia, warlords, militants who decry the government's actual lack of power and authority to enforce the law" (Fraile-Marcos, 2017: 139).

Consequently, by going back to Nigerian colonial history and presenting the way it turned into neo-colonial forms of exploitation, the novel confounds these clichés and reverses initial attribution of blame while suggesting that social problems and crime in present-day Nigeria are to be partly linked to the colonial legacy, which is also underlined by the Nigerian official investigating on Laura's reasons behind her travel to Lagos, who affirms: "when it comes to obtaining wealth through false pretenses, the white man is still the expert. I'm afraid the black man is an amateur when it comes to 419ing others. One might say my entire country was obtained under false pretenses" (Ferguson, 2014: 304). In other words, *419* shows how the exploitation of oil resources from the part of Western powers has been affecting and changing not only the environment and people of the Niger Delta but it has been responsible for the creation of Nigeria as a nation, and for the social and economic polarisation of Nigerian society as a whole.

4.5. Nigeria and Climate change

With reference to the previously mentioned global feature of *419,* the novel can be also read as a work that presents between the lines the global ramifications of climate change. With a special focus on Nigeria, the country's recent environmental history and future stand as important examples of how climate change and global warming could disrupt the stability of a nation and consequently of the world at large. The character

that embodies this probable scenario is Amina. In her desperate journey from the Sahel to Kaduna, where she will eventually meet Nnamdi and follow him to the deep south of Nigeria, the reader understands that despite being pregnant, she decided to embark on this desperate walk because she is threatened by something, which is not openly explained to the reader. Nevertheless, some clues concerning the reasons behind her journey are presented through her thoughts and the things she sees along her path.

First of all, there are facts linked to unusual weather conditions: “Storms without rain. Winds without water” (Ferguson. 2014: 32). This anomaly becomes evident along the way: “she passed swaths of failed crops, sticklike in the soil, saw them as the omens they were. A soil grown too sandy for millet, and sparse grasses barely enough to support base grazing” (Ferguson. 2014: 77). This description is representative of a disrupted equilibrium, which threatens the sustainability of people and animals that depend on the land and does not allow the execution of basic methods of agriculture such as the practice of burning the grass in order to enhance the fertility of the soil, an activity that was familiar to Amina, who remembers that it “might produce green shoots for grazing when the rains came – *if* the rains came, and not so hard as to wash the ash away entirely into the flood plains and saline gullies” (Ferguson, 2014: 77; emphasis in original).

Consequently, the suffering landscape is linked to Amina’s painful memories, which show the reader the possible reason that forced her to leave:

> a season of drought followed by heavy rains, which brought forth hordes of tsetse flies. Her family was forced to move the herd farther and farther afield to drier grasslands, trying desperately to avoid the flies and the sleeping sickness they might bring, travelling far beyond the grasslands, beyond the farthest outposts of her clan (Ferguson. 2014: 87).

This passage gives the opportunity to understand that Amina is escaping from a “nature” that is not recognizable anymore and that has forced her family to leave since their survival and subsistence economy was compromised. As a result, Amina could be seen as the typical representation of climate refugee; a category that is currently “not covered by the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which is designed to protect [only] those fleeing persecution, war or violence” (why climate migrants do not have refugee status, 2018).

Secondly, this extract underlines the other side effect of climate change, namely potential cultural and ethnic frictions. In the particular case of Nigeria, a country whose name and geographical borders were artificially created by British colonial rule that joined the protectorate of Northern Nigeria with the protectorate of Southern Nigeria in 1914 (Federal Government Of Nigeria, 2019), different ethnic groups, which were divergent under many aspects (culture, religion, language) found themselves merged within a political entity, which did not take care of this diversity. This colonial history is also underlined by Amina's uncle and the narrator's commentary on the question "What was Nigeria?":

> It was a net, loosely thrown, a name on a map, one created by the British to paper over the gaping cracks in the joinery. A conjurer's trick, where the many became one, a sleight of hand, like the tired magic of old men making coins disappear. "There is no Nigeria." This was the lesson [Amina's] uncle had wished to impart. "There is Fulani and Hausa, Igbo and Tiv, Efik and Kanuri, Gwari and Yoruba. But Nigeria? That is only the pail we carry these in" (Ferguson, 2014: 82).

Consequently, despite staying in the same country, after few kilometres, Amina "outwalk[s] her own dialect, [finding herself] deep among strangers" (Ferguson, 2014: 77) from whom she cannot even hide as "who she was – and where she came from- was etched into her skin, was present in the delicate geometry of scars cut into her face, scars that both accentuated her beauty and identified her kinship line" (Ferguson, 2014: 80). This situation creates the conditions for potential confrontations and misunderstandings, which show that "Nigeria also provides an important case study in how climate pressures lead to major migrations and to open conflicts" (Bassey, 2016: 17). Unfortunately, these prospects are now reality as "eleven states in northern Nigeria are experiencing serious impacts of desertification [which have] resulted in pronounced southward migration of pastoralists [and] this has resulted in increasing deadly conflicts between the pastoralists and farmers in the middle-belt region of the country" (Bassey, 2016: 17).

As a result, these circumstances foment also religious clashes, which are underlined by Amina, who, in her passage from the "*muezzin* call to prayer" (Ferguson, 2014: 97) to the Christian South, is also running away from Sharia laws. Likewise, recent episodes of violence linked to the jihadist terrorist organization known as Boko

Haram show how climate change is indirectly linked to the proliferation of religious fundamentalism, which takes advantage of people's desperation and presents itself as the only possible alternative to a failing state, which is not able to protect its citizens (Cianciullo, 2018). In this regard, Bassey observes that "climate change is a clear security issue in some ways [also because] nations have to secure the lives of their citizens as the challenge of smaller habitable spaces, food-production failures, and increased temperatures become more pronounced" (Bassey, 2016: 16).

However, these security issues hide terrifying outcomes because "the immediate call is for more urgent action to tackle climate change, but the obvious subtext is that the military better get ready and be given the resources to deal with a messier and more conflict-ridden world" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 3). Consequently, "violent environmental conflicts will most likely lead to greater militarisation of territories and resource sites with scant respect for currently accepted norms, including a respect for protected territories" (Bassey, 2016: 16). This future scenario indirectly stresses the link between climate change and fossil fuels extraction, which becomes evident within the same Nigeria where "the gas flares of the oil fields in the south [...] contribute to desertification in [the North] by reason of the millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases the gas flares pump into the atmosphere continuously" (Bassey, 2016: 18).

This connection can be also found in the novel in which oil creates a thread that connects two migrant characters, namely Nnamdi from the South, whose life has been completely shaped by petroleum, and Amina from the North, who embodies the link between global warming and oil extraction, which is indirectly represented by "her dearest possession during her travels: […] a jerry can, which she fills with water, when she has the chance, and […] drinks even when it tastes of the gasoline the can used to contain" (Fraile-Marcos, 2017: 147). Thus, as for the correlation between the carbon economy and global warming Buxton and Hayes observe that:

> despite the obvious role our energy system has played in causing climate change, most government and corporate energy planners have used energy security to justify ongoing fossil-fuel exploitation, to legitimise military intervention in defence of supply, to repress environmental activists and to prioritise energy for corporations rather than people (2016: 15).

In this regard, the Ogoni in the Niger Delta, Sarayaku community in the Amazon, Aboriginal tribes of North America and all the other groups fighting against the destruction of their land from the part of the oil companies, are representative of the same situation of land exploitation and human/non-human abuses, which demonstrate how "climate change challenges the fundamentals of our right to life as well as that of other species" (Bassey, 2016: 16). In other words, governments are giving priority to the securitization of fossil fuels extraction, which could guarantee their power on the international stage, which is linked to a continuous supply of energy at the expenses of human and non-human lives that are not even considered if not when they represent an obstacle to continuous overexploitation.

Moreover, considering the ongoing reduction of fossil fuels reserves governments will embark on "more transnational military adventures as well as [into] intensified search for more inefficient and dirtier energy resources" (Bassey, 2016: 16). Hence, climate change denial on the part of politicians and other public institution can be seen as a strategy to take advantage of this situation, which produces dynamics such as the ones in the Barents Sea, which "has gained interest because global warming has been lengthening the ice-free periods in the area [and] Sweden, Norway, Russia, France, and Italy all maintain a strong presence [there as] the region may hold several billion barrels of reserves" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 252).

This rhetoric of greenwash is also promoted by oil companies. On this subject, Monbiot claims that Shell's investments in reforestation should be seen as "blatant greenwash" because by taking these measures, the company "intends to offset some of the greenhouse gases produced by its oil and gas extraction" in order to "[sustain] its social licence to extract the gas and oil that will destroy our lives" (Monbiot, 2019). At the same time, "other companies are lining up to profit from the impacts of climate change" and this speculation "reflect[s] an economic model in which corporations and elites are best placed to prosper from climate change while the vast majority of the planet will have no such protection" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 10). Alston agrees when he claims that the world "risk[s] a 'climate apartheid' scenario where the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger and conflict while the rest of the world is left to suffer" (Alston, 2019).

This disparity can be also seen in *419* when, for instance, Nnamdi experiences for the first time the "chill of air conditioning" in an oil platform on Bonny Island (Ferguson, 2014: 184) while outside the platform, gas flaring is responsible for the formation of heatwaves that endanger the health of people and compromise the environment in the Niger Delta (Abdulkareem et al., 2012: 3). In addition, when Joe (the truck driver who travelled with Nnamdi across Nigeria to sell black market oil), Nnamdi, and Amina reach Port Harcourt, they risk their life because of street riots, while foreign workers are kept safe behind the facade of luxury hotels and "oil companies ha[ve] their own gated compounds, with high fences and armed guards" (Ferguson, 2014: 251).

This narrative "points to the profound injustice at the heart of the climate crisis: that those who played the least role in causing the crisis will feel its impact hardest" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 6). Consequently, most of the "responsible" countries will, therefore, use their economic stability to cope with the crisis and their military force to secure their supply of resources, like what happened with the creation in 2007 of "[an American] new combatant command, AFRICOM, […] with an area of responsibility dedicated solely to the African continent (excluding Egypt) to protect oil fields, supply lines, and shipping lanes, especially those from the Gulf of Guinea" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 253). Hence, it is important to see how colonialism continues to control power relations among countries and people and translates into forms of neo-colonialism perpetuated by powerful countries, which despite the fact that they do not own the sources of their power, they own the control of that resources and therefore they put their power above social and climate justice.

With reference to this situation, Bassey believes that a possible way out resides in the citizens and their ability to organise and to oppose to this system, but it is important that the local dimension of the struggles meets "global solidarity actions" because "in a globalised world facing a planetary emergency such as climate change, global action by citizens organised in social formations is the way forward. Individual actions are good, but it is collective action that will bring the necessary change" (2016: 19). In this regard, *419* proposes an example of solidarity given by the positive interaction between Amina and Nnamdi, who, despite sharing nothing but nationality, help each other as they both need to escape from the threats that are undermining their

survival. In addition, Ghosh adds another important element to the possible solutions when he writes that:

> the ongoing changes in the climate, and the perturbations that they will cause *within* nations, cannot be held at bay by reinforcing man-made boundaries. We are in an era when the body of the nation can no longer be conceived of as consisting only of a territorialized human population: its very sinews are now revealed to be intertwined with forces that cannot be confined by boundaries (2016: 144; emphasis in original).

In other words, it is the intrinsic nature of the climate crisis that requires a renewed solidarity, which must embrace all humankind and non-human things and try to dismantle fossilized structures, which are responsible for the ongoing climate, human, and environmental injustices. As a result, the solution to the crisis requires an immediate change based on the recognition that nation-states' architecture and imperialism carry many negative aspects and, thus, they need to be reformulated by means of structural changes that need to be developed by revising the concept of sovereignty and its relation to the global context.

4.6. Oil and justice

As the literary analysis of *419* has underlined, the global industry of petroleum is a structure that connects the world as a whole, yet it is based on a series of injustices and different treatment of people and places, which will be further intensified by the ramifications of climate change that again is indirectly fostered by the oil industry itself. As a result, while reading *419*, readers are encouraged to ponder on various concepts that are linked to ethics, justice, and international and personal responsibilities and ask themselves questions like: "what is the relationship between law and lawlessness? Whom does the law exclude from protection? And perhaps most importantly, given the novel's global reach, how might the law function to sanction or justify abuses toward a distant Other?" (Joyce, 2015).

In this context, the word "other" refers to a system of separation that goes back to colonialism and finds itself anew in the forms of neo-colonialism and the ongoing global imperialism. Indeed, in the split between nature and culture and the following convergence of the conquered people to the former, the colonisers have been able to take advantage of this detachment and suspend the conditions of law and human/non-human rights. This situation was made possible thanks to a system of violence, which is now connected to sovereign power and to global neoliberal capitalism. According to this point, Mbembe claims that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (2003: 11) and along these lines, he elaborates on Foucault's concept of *biopolitics*[4] and Agamben's commentary on the figure of the *Homo sacer*[5], and introduces the idea of "necropolitics" and "necropower":

> to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead* (2003: 40; emphasis in original).

This condition is resumed by Fraile-Marcos, who applies it to the Niger Delta where the "government, the international petrochemical corporations, the warlords, and the oil smugglers work in tandem to extract the maximum benefit from the exploitation of the Delta's natural resources, provoking the suspension of the state of law that should protect the Delta people and their ecologies; [thus turning the Delta] into a *de facto* state of exception, and its inhabitants into bare life" (2017: 144; emphasis in original).

With a focus on the timescale of the violence that produces these kind of human and environmental genocides, Nixon advances the concept of "slow violence", namely violence "that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as

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[4]"For Foucault, life cannot be understood in terms of biological forces or determinants that exist outside of political processes. Instead, life must be understood as both an object and effect of political strategies and technologies."; Retrived from https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756223/obo-9780199756223-0170.xml

[5] "*Homo sacer*: he who is excluded from the law's protection and toward whom the state of exception sanctions the sovereign power's worst abuses" (Joyce, 2015).

violence at all [...] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive" (2011: 2). These characteristics are the product of a system that plays on the invisibility of these abuses and deliberately keeps them hidden in order to create the conditions for the perpetual exploitation of people and resources. With reference to this point, Springer believes that nowadays "violence and neoliberalism have become entwined" (2012: 138). He claims that within the global scenario "the hegemony of neoliberalism positions it as an abuser, which actively facilitates the abandonment of 'Others' who fall outside of 'neoliberal normativity', a conceptual category that cuts across multiple categories of discrimination including class, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, age and ability" (2012: 137). This tendency of "othering" certain categories of people, along with certain places, is also underlined by the violent episodes that occur within *419* where violence is not only confined to the Niger Delta but is perpetrated also in Canadian and Nigerian urban centres.

As for Canada, the sergeant working on Curtis' case, reports the anecdote of the death of an homeless man called Ambrose Littlechild whose "abjection and [...] brutal murder [he is burned alive by a group of boys] bespeak the exclusions of global economic neo-liberalism" (Fraile-Marcos, 2017: 146) as "despite living within one of the centres of Western oil production, Ambrose is [...] excluded by the neoliberal pursuit of economic growth [and] victimized on account of his failure to conform to neoliberal normativity" (Joyce, 2015). In addition, Fraile-Marcos claims that Littlechild is "a very common Indigenous name in Canada, [hence] Ferguson deliberately hints at Canada's colonial violence against Indigenous peoples [and] foreshadows Nnamdi's [death], and [in this way] Canada and Nigeria collapse into each other in terms of the injustice done to Indigenous peoples" (2017: 146).

Consequently, both Nnamdi, who is killed by Ironsi-Egobia because he saves Laura's life even though he was asked to kill her, and Littlechild, who is killed because of his condition of outcast, become mere objects forgotten and disposable, rejected by a system in which they do not fit, and to which they cannot adapt and therefore they are washed away. This condition is best exemplified by the image of Nnamdi's body "charred and stumped [bobbing] to the surface of Lagos Lagoon [...] where it would ruin the view from several fine homes on Victorian Island, [floating] there for almost a week before it finally disappeared [while] but the curtains on Victoria Island stayed

closed until then" (Ferguson, 2014: 379). This indifference underlines the way in which the violence and social and economic disparity is purposely kept hidden in order to maintain the injustices upon which neoliberalism thrives and it is highlighted again when the truck driver Joe remarks that "when slums appear in Abuja, the government bulldozes them down to keep things pretty" (Ferguson, 2014: 239).

In this way, the "fairy tale" of modernity and economic development, which appears sparkling on the surface, reveals to carry the burden of profound injustices that rely on the "ongoing abandonment of the 'Other' [that] encourages us to misrecognise how the violence of neoliberalism actually implicates us all, even the privileged beneficiaries" (Springer, 2012: 141). Consequently, by linking neoliberal policies to the business of oil it appears evident that also the latter is built upon a false narrative that could be addressed as "Petrotopia", namely:

> the utopian future projected by petroculture, which claims oil extraction will create exorbitant communal wealth and lead to a better life for all. The petrotopia myth is used to justify the initial stages of an oil industry's development, and usually is revealed to be false soon after, as the wealth oil generates remains in the hands of the wealthy (Petrofictionary).

As already said, this situation creates a disparity not only in economic terms but also in the way certain categories of people are more exposed to pollutants than others. Indeed, neoliberalism's ability of "internalizing profits and externalizing risks" (Nixon, 2011: 35) can be linked to Beck's concept of "Risk Society" in which "the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*" (1992: 19; emphasis in original) as a consequence of the fact that modernity "has reached an irreversible stage of insecurity in which it can no longer protect itself from the unexpected and unwanted side effects of its own technologies" (Ball, 2018: 180). However, as in the case of wealth, risk distribution is unbalanced and "some people are more affected than others by the distribution and growth of risks [hence] *social risk positions* spring up" (Beck, 1992: 23; emphasis in original).

"How much natural gas would Shell and Chevron flare in the Niger delta, creating blazing, toxic fires, if the people who lived there were honorary Americans or Dutch?" (Lemenager & Foote, 2012: 574). The answer appears bitterly clear and it is also underlined within *419*. In his analysis of the novel, Ball observes that "Amina and

Nnamdi[‘s] tragic encounters with Laura, like Winston’s, throw into relief the complex and sometimes surprising ways nationality, mobility, race, class, and gender affect the relative kinds and degrees of risk characters can take on and of justice they can expect” (2018: 182). Indeed, even though all the characters are willing to or forced to take different risks (Amina starts to travel South to escape from famine and Sharia laws, Winston sends spam in order to “earn a living” (Ferguson, 2014: 63), Laura goes to Nigeria to get revenge, and Nnamdi sells illegal oil on the black market), they all receive different treatment for their choices. Thus, when “comparing Ferguson’s protagonists’ relative abilities to cross cultural, national, economic, and racial divides, it becomes clear that the Canadian protagonist (Laura) possesses a greater level of choice, autonomy, freedom, privilege, and mobility than the three Nigerian ones (Winston, Nnamdi, Amina)” (Ball, 2018: 189).

Consequently, at the end of the novel, Laura appears to embody the figure of the coloniser, who takes advantage of his privileges and wants to get revenge misunderstanding the dynamics that lay behind the surface of 419 scam crimes, thus causing more harm of what she initially planned even when she tries to compensate for Nnamdi’s death by giving money to Amina. In this regard, Ball insists that:

> Laura’s actions and their repercussions in Lagos are more aggressive than defensive, and by seeking payback in the form of money, she also seeks it in the realm of liberty and autonomy: reducing Winston’s in retaliation for his encroachment of Henry’s, without knowing the complicated ways in which Winston’s liberty and autonomy are already compromised. Moreover, in her ignorance of context, Laura also does not see how she is accountable for the liberty and autonomy of others, besides Winston, whose safety her self-serving actions will threaten – and in Nnamdi’s case, violently eliminate. The novel also raises the related question of who has choice and how much. Not surprisingly, Canadian characters have more than Nigerian ones (2018: 188).

Indeed, within the unequal and unjust global society created by neoliberalism and its connection to violence and risk, the novel, like *Oil on Water*, resists easy attributions of blame and presents the reasons behind some of the characters’ choices, thus suspending the judgment and leaving it to the reader. How should the readers judge Winston’s scam when they understand that Ironsi-Egobia is one of the chiefs of the 419 cartels subjugating many of the boys who do this activity? How should the readers judge Amina when she steals food because otherwise, she will die of starvation? Or with

Nnamdi who has nothing left than becoming a "mosquito" tapping illegal oil?. Here the answers might be not so immediate and again they underline how these characters find themselves in a unfair system, which offers them limited possibilities and expose them to many risks, especially in the case of Nnamdi, who dies "because of both Laura's dispute with Winston and the environmental crisis that drove [him] to the city in the first place" (Ball, 2018: 201).

In this regard, Ball celebrates the fact that with the character of Nnamdi, Ferguson powerfully coalesces his individual and ecological risk narrative" and thus Nnamdi's death "encapsulates the unseen (or ignored) collateral damage to people and ecosystems that risk-takers – whether individuals, corporations, or governments – may be unable or unwilling to prevent, predict, or even comprehend in a globalized risk society" (2018: 201-202). Indeed, "risk and reward [...] are distributed flowing lines of privilege and wealth that are all too recognizable from colonial history and from North/South divisions in the globalized economy" (Ball, 2018: 182).

However, despite the fact that the epilogue of *419* supports all these views that show how certain people and places appear to be more affected than others, Beck interestingly claims that "risks of modernization sooner or later also strike those who produce or profit from them. They contain a *boomerang* effect, which breaks up the pattern of class and national society" (1992: 23; emphasis in original). Applying this argumentation to the novel and its global peculiarity, it appears clear that "while Nigeria bears the brunt of the book's localized ecological critique, oil taints and implicates Nigerian people and places in such widespread ways that its expansive reach enables this novel of transnational connectedness and deceptive equivalencies to speak (in an attenuated way) to the global dimension of oil-based risks" (Ball, 2018: 195). Consequently, it is necessary to overcome erroneous ideas of separation and othering, which categorise people and distance them from the physical world, in order to understand that the world as a whole is exposed to the consequences of human actions, and in particular, to the ramifications of the fossil fuels industry. Underlying connections is therefore essential in order to start building a system of justice and equality that cannot wait any longer.

CHAPTER 5: FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

5.1. The challenges of petroculture

The two novels analysed in this master's thesis have drawn attention to different aspects of contemporary global petroculture, namely to "the ways in which post-industrial society today is an oil society through and through [as] it is shaped by oil in physical and material ways [that] have also shaped our values, practices, habits, beliefs, and feelings" (Petrocultures Research Group, 2016: 9). Over the course of time, these features have been revealing their flaws as they are contributing to global warming and to the negative societal changes, which are widening the ever-greater polarisation of people in terms of wealth and power.

As a result, the world is presently facing two different crises: "an ecological crisis brought about by the use of resource-destructive technological processes and a cultural crisis emerging from an erosion of the social structures that make cultural diversity and plurality possible" (Huggan, & Tiffin, 2015: 54-55). In other words, the global carbon apparatus has been causing damage to the physical world because of its massive reliance on fossil fuels extractivism and burning, which contribute to the release of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. At the same time, it has been also responsible for a sort of cultural extractivism, which moved by western ideologies of modernity and progress, has "hit indigenous societies hardest – societies subject both to the continuing expropriation and exploitation of their resources and to social/political exclusion by the centralised machinery of the state" (Huggan, & Tiffin, 2015: 54-55). In this regard, the analysed novels have displayed the fact that within petroculture, states must be considered on both local and global terms as they are structures deeply entrenched in a globalised and interconnected world, which continues to rely on colonial and neo-colonial practices. On this point, Ghosh observes that "we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities [and] differentials of power between and within nations are probably greater today than they have ever been [and they are] closely related to carbon emissions" (Ghosh, 2016: 146).

Consequently, the ideas elaborated within Postcolonial Ecocriticism have been useful to stress "the need to bring postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance" (Huggan, & Tiffin, 2015: 2). In spite of this aim, the global capitalist system, which continues to rely on the injustices of colonialism and exploitation of land and people, seems very difficult to dismantle and its "environmental costs continue to rise as the search for new oil reaches farther and farther into virgin rain forests, trackless deserts, permanently frozen wilderness [and] will continue as long as oil remains tightly tied to economic prosperity, military power, national prestige, and global security" (Pasqualetti, 2009: 256).

This hopeless situation clashes with the steps that are necessary to face a climate and social crisis of this magnitude. Indeed, the solution would require an urgent stop with neoliberal policies and with the extraction and burning fossil fuels, but the world as a whole is so deeply soaked in the economic and social systems created by petromodernity, that they are taken for granted and prevent any radical and rapid change, especially because the idea of petro-progress "impedes research on alternative forms of energy, technologies and ways of life, [and believes that] society should always move 'ahead' and never backwards" (Petrofictionary).

This view is to be found also within the political sphere that is characterised by an increasingly prevalent denial of climate change, which is not only linked to the fact that power is connected to energy, and therefore to fossil fuels, but also to the fact that extra-political forces are increasingly in control of governments. In this regard, Ghosh observes that "countries [...] are now in many senses 'post-political spaces' that are managed by apparatuses of various kinds" (2016: 131). In the same way, "the dangerous impacts of inaction play out in the context of growing corporate power and diminishing popular accountability" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 7), which is linked to the fact that the majority of the population has only a consumerist relation to oil and does not control the means of production (Ghosh, 2016: 130). Consequently, environmental activists are seen as an obstacle to petro-progress and "have been defined along with terrorist suspects and armed militias as 'domestic extremists', or 'eco-terrorists', with enormous resources now devoted to identifying, tracking and spying on them" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 12).

This tense atmosphere is also linked to the fact that oil is a finite resource and this aspect is causing concern among governments that are progressively shielding "behind the barrel of a gun [in order to prepare for] a Malthusian vision of scarcity that predicts shortages in the future due to population growth combined with climate constraints" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 7;14). These future circumstances have been paradoxically analysed by Shell that in its "Shell Energy Scenarios to 2050"[6] published in 2008 predicts two situations, namely "Scramble" and "Blueprint":

> Scramble envisages a future where the growing demand for energy, fuelled by India and China's rapid growth, leads to increasing competition, rivalry and tensions between states, and ensuing conflicts and social and environmental crises. Blueprint imagines that public concern about the environment and the rise of renewable energy leads to significant reduction of carbon emissions [...] in other words, a world fuelled largely by renewable sources, rather than fossil fuels. Unusually, Shell [...] declared this time that it was in favour of Blueprint. This was heralded at the time as a sign that oil companies could be part of the solution to climate change rather than the principal cause. However, a closer look at the Blueprint's small print showed that Shell did not envisage that this scenario would involve curtailing their own fossil fuel production [...] in other words, Shell believed that a renewable world would come into being without requiring any fundamental change in Shell's operations; instead, the problem of carbon dioxide would be magically resolved with the help of a few technofixes and the use of carbon credits to get others to reduce their emissions [...] Shell's so-called Blueprint was in fact a plan for continuing business-as-usual – even if it leads to a world considered dangerous by many climate scientists (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 1-2).

This resolution is part of a greenwash rhetoric that stands at the basis of the unjust neoliberal system in which "powerful transnational corporations exploit under cover of a free market ideology the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others" (Nixon, 2011: 46). These different managements are part of the discriminatory apparatus of petromodernity, which employs power against the powerless and continues to rely on colonial structures that explain the reason "why an apparently biocentric discourse of concern for the Earth in one setting [e.g. Alberta tar sands] might paradoxically help to poison the environment in another [e.g. the Niger

[6] http://www.proyectomilenio.org/documents/10156/43639/Shell+Energy+Scenarios+2050+-Signals+%26+Singposts-.pdf?version=1.0

Delta], or why an apparently anthropocentric discourse [‘people just need oil’] might inflict tremendous harm on [indigenous] people” (Medovoi, 2014: 20). As a result, within this unfair organisation of the world and the precarious circumstances that await the future of the planet, it is imperative that human societies, especially the Western world, come to terms with the errors of the past and understand how they persist and threaten life on Earth.

5.2. Changing perspectives

In order to transform this global oil apparatus into a fairer ecological system, the first measure which needs to be taken is to enhance knowledge of the substance “that has produced the societies we inhabit and has made us the subjects we are” (Szeman, 2013: 148). In this regard, Szeman insists that “understanding how we know oil, and how we might or should know it, should make us alert to the very real challenges of naming, thinking, and changing the global society and social imaginaries that we have constituted around black gold” (2013: 163). In other words, it is necessary to analyse the different aspects of contemporary society, which are influenced by oil both as a tangible substance and as a system of ideas, because “only by knowing oil we can start to understand fully what and who we might become without it” (Szeman, 2013: 146), and thus trigger the necessary cultural, economic, and political changes.

To achieve this aim, there is the need to redefine some cultural paradigms with the purpose of building more inclusive environmental imaginaries, which would take into account a renewed concept of respect and justice for the planet as a whole. To that end, it is important, on the one hand, to dismantle colonial legacies and on the other hand to embrace a holistic approach in order to face contemporary crises. In this regard, some scholars have been reconsidering the concept of Humanism within a historical framework, which has underlined its role in the colonial project of conquest and dominion over the land and native populations (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 229). As the prominent philosopher Braidotti puts it, the category of man has generally been seen exclusively as “European, male, white, [and] intellectual ideal” (2017: 339). Hence, to

challenge this view, Braidotti introduces the idea of the "Posthuman, [whose ethics] proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others, including the nonhuman or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism" (2017: 343-344). Subsequently, other thinkers have modified this terminology and have embraced the idea of pan-humanism, which suggests that "what is probably most needed is not the capacity to think beyond the human, but the courage to imagine new ways in which human and non-human societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: 236).

Regardless of these different terms, both the approaches suggest the necessity to move the focus of our attention and embrace the multiple realities that have been historically excluded from "the norm" and exploited because of this exclusion. Thus, in order to face contemporary environmental and social crises, Iovino suggests a urgent passage from an "ego-logical" to an "eco-logical" ethic, namely a passage from an "ethic founded on the primacy of the human ego" to an ethic "open to the multiplicity" (2010: 20), which "would shift our mindset towards a disanthropocentric discursive change, which in turn will create and implement more sustainable economic practices, social behaviours, and moral paradigms" (Oppermann, & Iovino, 2017: 5).

This holistic perspective fits within the interdisciplinary approach endorsed by the projects of the Environmental Humanities and the more recent Energy Humanities, which try to elaborate ecological discussion within different kinds of knowledge, and thus, stand as positive examples of how a "transdisciplinary approach affects the very structure of thought and enacts a rhizomatic embrace of conceptual diversity in scholarship [that] amounts to higher degrees of disciplinary hybridization and relies on intense de-familiarization of our habits of thought" (Braidotti, 2017: 342). Consequently, this inter-dialogue may be helpful to ensure that "cultural differences are taken into account in building bioregional models of sustainability and resilience, and that new ways of thinking about the human [and] beyond the human are developed [by recognising] the imbrication of social and ecological factors" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015: viii). In this regard, a glimmer of hope can be found in the project for the Green New Deal drafted by U.S. democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Edward J. Markey. This political plan embraces a holistic attitude, which does not only take into account a transition towards greener forms of energy, but it also promotes investments in the

public sphere and regulation of polluting corporations, with the idea that "change can't just be a technological feat, [but] it must also tackle poverty, income inequality and racial discrimination" (Friedman, 2019).

Despite the originality and importance of this view, the project is being obstructed by a large number of politicians, who, as already said, are usually influenced by big corporations, and thus they continue "to throw up false solutions, while social injustices pile up" (Bassey, 2016: 19). Nevertheless, Bassey insists that even though "the tight marriage of political structures with polluting corporations and the continued entrenchment of neoliberal economic policy make the needed transition more difficult to bring about, [this inertia] offers no excuse for inaction" (2016: 19). Indeed, even though, as previously mentioned, the power of the population has been severely reduced and even peaceful protests are seen in bad terms, Bassey emphasises that "the way forward is not the way of retreat. The times are critical for popular mobilisations on all available fronts, linking between formations across the world, joining up social forces and active engagement in community and national political processes that push for real solutions to climate change" (Bassey, 2016: 19). As a result, grassroots activism, especially the recent mobilisation of the youths, must continue to play an important part but it needs to run parallel to the detoxification of minds and erroneous cultural practices, which can be positively transformed by means of holistic and more inclusive approaches to knowledge.

5.3. The role of literature in changing perspectives

In one of his publications, Zapf observes that, over the course of history, "literature and culture have always been responding to a state of crisis [...] not only in times of wars, revolutions, or epidemics, but in more 'normal' times as well – crises that have been imaginatively represented in narrative and story-telling" (2019: 2). This ability of literature and cultural products to sense and interpret contemporary issues can be also applied to the environmental and social crises brought about by petromodernity on the grounds that "issues of vision, value, culture, and imagination are keys to today's

environmental crises at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (Buell, 2005: 5). Nevertheless, despite this potential, the role of narrative literature is generally underestimated, especially nowadays, in a world that gives priority to economic and pragmatic arguments and sees literature as "no practical response to most pressing practical challenges we face" (Armitage, et. al., 2013: 4).

At the same time, literature has to deal with another crisis that Ghosh refers to as the crisis of imagination (Ghosh, 2016: 9). This crisis becomes problematic when trying to address future scenarios linked to climate change, which "poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales" (Heise, 2008: 205). Indeed, both space and time stand as limitations when looking at the way in which climate change affects and will be affecting the world as a whole. Ghosh agrees when he writes that the form of the novel seems to be unsuitable to represent climate change as it establishes a series of boundaries in space and time and thus, he envisions the creation of new hybrid forms which will change people's reading habits (2016: 63; 84).

In the context of petroculture, which needs to be seen as one of the main drivers behind climate change, this crisis of imagination translates into the apparent impossibility of elaborating alternative green energy resources and changing people's lifestyles. Despite this difficulty, "the disassociation that pushes oil to the background in the global north has enabled postcolonial writers [...] to grapple with the social power of oil, not least due to the imaginative openings that the periphery [e.g. Niger Delta] provides, or its capacity to transform oil-rich spaces into alien ones" (Szeman, 2017: 283). In this regard, this master's thesis has drawn attention to two examples of petrofiction, which, especially in the case of *419*, have been able to connect the climate crisis to the global narrative of oil and to both current and possible future risk scenarios.

In this regard, Szeman claims that "when novelists [...] decide to focus on oil – its environmental impact, the nature of the society that it fuels, the folly of depending on a finite energy source – it is because they wish to inform and to unsettle quotidian beliefs and behaviours, thereby activating a response in their readers" (2013: 155). Nevertheless, with reference again to the different crises of culture and imagination,

which are partly responsible for the impasse when talking about the future of the planet, it is complicated "for aesthetics to generate the kind and level of understanding required to produce desired social or political outcomes [also because] the unique position of oil at the heart of contemporary society troubles the always-uneasy relationship between aesthetics and politics" (Szeman, 2013: 155). To put it in another way, the reading of *Oil on Water* and *419* will not persuade readers to quit oil cold turkey, but maybe it will help them to start questioning the world as they perceive it, especially when they get access to certain aspects of peripheral narratives.

Consequently, to the question "can books save the world?", Bartosch accurately answers that it is not their duty, because "reading and studying literature opens avenues of thinking and, thus, of seeing the world differently; [hence, books do] not save the world but [they help] us envision it with more alert eyes" (Bartosch, 2013: 281; 285). Therefore, "we might read texts in order to learn something about the way we comprehend the world; and this is quite different from making predictions about which books might affect people in some way or other" (Bartosch, 2013: 282-283). In other words, literature does not give readers a list of practical solutions to face today's challenges because it uses a different code from hard science. Hence, literature's "textual energy" emerges "from the translation of creative processes of life into the aesthetic processes of texts" (Zapf, 2019: 11). To put it in another way, literature presents readers with glimpses of real or imaginary experiences that can make them ponder and empathise with the characters and stories presented.

Along with these positive aspects, this master's thesis has also underlined the importance of the critical approaches that need to be employed when close reading texts. Environmental criticism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and a critical analysis of the literary genre of Petrofiction have helped to examine "the relationship between literary representations of environments, the populations that might inhabit those environments, and the readership that engages these representations" (Medovoi, 2014: 20). As a result, through the lenses of these critical schools, this thesis has analysed the way in which Habila and Ferguson have challenged the master narrative of petroculture on multiple levels.

First of all, by focusing on one of the many sacrifice zones of the global energy apparatus, namely the Niger Delta, (besides an indirect reference to the Alberta tar

sands in *419*) the analysed two novels go against the invisibility of oil, which could be described as an "invisible ubiquity", namely "the design of modern life – from infrastructure to everyday speech – such that the use of oil as an energy source and an environment-destroying product eludes detection despite its omnipresence" (Petrofictionary). In this regard, Szeman believes that "making oil part of our knowing – making it a key component of our investigations on whatever topic – changes how and what we know" (Szeman, 2013: 146). Indeed, "if we insist on understanding modernity as an *oil* modernity and capitalism as an *oil* capitalism, this cannot help but force us to reconsider how we understand both" (Szeman, 2013: 147; emphasis in original). Consequently, *Oil on Water* and *419* provide an important contribution to the unmasking of the way in which oil companies operate without concern for environmental and human rights and, thus, they help readers to reconsider given assumptions on the contemporary world, and help them to see injustices and neo-colonial dynamics, which are at the basis of petromodernity.

In addition, the novels show the link between oil and violence, which is perpetuated on both human beings and environments. This kind of violence "has roots in the conflicts embedded within the global fossil fuel economy [and] has consistently followed extraction of oil, ranging from repression of residents in extraction zones to the giant geopolitical conflicts" (Buxton, & Hayes, 2016: 8). Similarly, the novels have also underlined the fact that the violence derived from carbon economy and neoliberalism can be also detected in the urban centres of contemporary society, where the disparities between richest and poorest people are increasing, thus creating an expanding group of disposable people with the consequent sense of frustration, which has been fostering individualism and has been misused by populism. This situation of growing conflicts, which are going to aggravate in light of possible climate disorders, is regarded by Ghosh as "incendiary circumstances", which are "no longer exceptional anywhere in the world" (Ghosh, 2007: X). As a result, within this troubling scenario "language and narrative [...] are integral to conceptualizing both the legacies of rupture and the possibilities of imaginative recuperation and transformation" (DeLoughrey, Didur, & Carrigan, 2015: 5), but, as underlined by Ghosh, "is it possible to write about situations of violence without allowing your work to become complicit with the subject?" (2007: X).

The answer becomes affirmative when looking at the way in which the two novels, analysed in this master's thesis, create a sort of polyphony, which challenges the petro-narrative of violence. One the one hand, *Oil on Water* collects the different voices of the main protagonists in the Niger Delta conflicts, whereas, on the other hand, *419* presents characters that embrace different points of view and are connected to the global oil system in various ways, as they come from different cultures and places. In this regard, Zapf claims that "the encounter between different characters, cultures, and narrators implies a confrontation between different kinds of knowledge [and] produce[s] gaps, uncertainties, and indeterminacies in the texts, which may be seen to resist rather than support unidirectional ecological agency and political engagement" (2019: 5-6).

Furthermore, this diversity of discourse tends to have a pedagogical power as "cognitive critics have begun to discover that [literature fosters imagination and solidarity, and] this sort of imagining stimulates the brains built-in theory of mind, a primary index of social skill that gets exercised through encounters with characters thinking about what one another might be thinking in the novel" (Lemenager, and Foote, 2012: 575). Consequently, seen within an ecological discourse, this polyphony connects to the concept of literature as Cultural Ecology, and thus, to the importance of looking at cultural differences in more inclusive terms in order to protect biodiversity of discourse, which, within literature, acquires a generative potential and creates an important precedent that supports the necessity to stop fossil fuels extraction and the violence it entails.

Hence, the more diversity in cultural, artistic, and literary discourses, the more sustainable our society will be, especially because, as Zapf suggests:

> the internal landscapes produced by modern culture and consciousness are as important for human beings as their external environments are. Human beings are by their very nature not only instinctual but also cultural beings. Literature and other forms of cultural imagination and cultural creativity are necessary in this view to continually restore the richness, diversity, and complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind, the imagination, the emotions, and interpersonal communication which make up the cultural ecosystems of modern humans, but are threatened by impoverishment by an increasingly overeconomized, standardized, and depersonalized contemporary world (2010: 138).

In this regard, it appears extremely important to take advantage of the way in which "the Arts and Humanities teach us how to describe experience, how to evaluate it, and how to imagine its liberating transformation" (Armitage et al., 2013: 1).

In conclusion, this thesis has tried to demonstrate how a postcolonial ecocritical approach to petrofiction is important in view of the need for an urgent change in cultural, social, and economic systems. Indeed, through these lenses, this literary genre offers examples that help readers to understand the way in which western modernity and global petroculture have always been taking advantage of the separation between the concepts of culture and nature whereby "the natural environment as empirical reality has been made to subserve human interests, and one of these interests has been to make it serve as a symbolic reinforcement of the subservience of disempowered groups" (Buell, 1995: 21). Consequently, it is important to consider literature as a valuable tool "that operates both inside and outside the discourses of the larger culture, opening up an imaginative space in which dominant developments, beliefs, truth-claims, and models of human life are being critically reflected and symbolically transgressed in counter-discourses to the prevailing economic-technological forms of modernization and globalization" (Zapf, 2016: 141-142). As a result, once readers critically engage with these representations, they should make the best out of their reading experience and let the texts challenge their preconceptions about the world. This is what good literature does best: it helps readers to dismantle fossilizations and to build more inclusive, open and respectful imaginaries.

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