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“In this Country, the Very Air We Breathe Is Politics”: Helon Habila and the Flowing Together of Politics and Poetics



Helon Habila’s literary output has until now been characterised by a great focus on politics and history. Inheriting from a number of great Nigerian writers, he falls into the scope of these literary predecessors who have considered that literature is commitment, but he also tends to move away from this tradition. Politics and poetics flow together in his work to denounce military rule, but also the paradox of a country, extremely wealthy as regards oil, yet incapable of making its population benefit from it fully, thus pointing to the false promises that oil offers.

In *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995), environmental activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa stated that

[l]iterature in a critical situation such as Nigeria’s cannot be divorced from politics. Indeed, literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role. (81)

Saro-Wiwa, who was hanged by the military government of Sani Abacha in 1995, could not be any clearer: he did not believe in the idea of art for art’s sake, but considered literature as a means to emancipate those who are voiceless.¹ Nigerian writers have long been preoccupied with their country’s political development and history.² According to Ali Erritouni, while

first- and second-generation writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta, and Ngũgĩ, [...] are “massively overdetermined by [the colonial event]” [and] have championed nationalist causes, third-generation writers, such as Maik Nwosu, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Habila, are shaped by an increasingly globalized world [...]. (145)

Erritouni explains that the generational criterion used in order to come up with differences between generations of writers is not satisfying. Indeed, a divide based on generations could overshadow the existing bridges between the fathers of Nigerian literature and the “children of the postcolony,” to use Abdourahman Waberi’s words

1. It bears noting that, among many others, Odia Ofeimun is also famous for thinking of the writer as a citizen. In a 1990 interview, Ofeimun states that “[i]t is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies [...]. I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considered right and deserving expression” (Wilkinson 66). Therefore, according to quite a few voices in the Nigerian literary landscape, a writer has the duty to interfere in politics.

2. Helon Habila falls within the scope of the Nigerian literary tradition in his collection of short stories entitled *Prison Stories* published in 2000. One of the short stories, “Love Poems,” received the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001. It constitutes the basis of his first novel *Waiting for an Angel* (2002). While describing the type of fiction that was given birth to under the Sani Abacha regime (1993-1998), Oyèniyi Okùnroyè explains that one of the trends was “inspired” by the hardships during the Abacha years. These hardships “inspired more prison memoirs and diaries in various forms. [They] serve as enduring records of *personal agony under a lawless regime* [...]. Those who survived the *ordeals* always had tales of *torture* and *dehumanizing restriction* to tell” (76, emphasis added). *Waiting for an Angel* describes this “torture,” and the “dehumanizing” measures taken by the authorities.

(1998).³ Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and their contemporaries have often addressed the legacies of military rule, among which abuse of power but also the dearth of economic management.⁴ In 2007, when asked about his inspiration for the writing of his first novel, Helon Habila stated that

in a way, the dictatorship was good for literature because it supplied some of us with our subject matter, and also while it lasted, gave us an education in politics that we couldn't have acquired in school or anywhere else. We saw pro-democracy activists being killed or arrested or exiled – unfortunate for the victims but great stuff for writing. (Qtd. in Okunoyè 65)

The appalling conditions under which people lived during the approximately thirty years of military rule⁵ gave rise to events that became a source of inspiration for Nigerian writers, moulding not only their writing but also the function of Nigerian literature. Poetics and politics thus converge in a country where, to quote Lomba in *Waiting for an Angel*, “the very air we breathe is politics” (108).

Each of Helon Habila's three novels to date is set in a different part of Nigeria, which allows one to grasp the specificities of each region more fully by laying the stress on the multi-ethnicity and the fragmentation that characterise the Nigerian nation.⁶ *Waiting for an Angel* takes place in the urban environment of Lagos while *Measuring Time* (2007) and *The Chibok Girls* (2017) – the latter is a non-fictional work – are set in Northern Nigeria. *Oil on Water* (2011) takes place in the Southern Delta state.⁷ The similarities between these regions seem to be scarce: whether it be religiously, traditionally, or culturally, they display divergent identities. However, politics can be considered a point of confluence in this fragmented country.

Oil on Water deals with political issues through the two liquid motifs mentioned in its title. Nigeria is undoubtedly one of the world's wealthiest countries as regards oil resources and greatly depends on them economically. The novel may be about “a political ecology of oil” (Wenzel, “Petro” 452). Rivers are locales whose significance is worth noting since the motifs of water and oil, almost always related to the topographic phenomenon of confluence, form the crux of the novel.⁸ The novel may be considered a response to the dearth of novel-writing dealing with oil as highlighted as early as

3. Waberi considers that third-generation writers were born after the independence of the former colonies, *i.e.* 1960 for Nigeria. In his 2005 article, Harry Garuba was already pointing to the problem Erritouni highlights in his article.

4. To give but only a few examples, a military coup d'état terminates the politicians' corruption in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1967), a novel where the military is perceived rather positively, as a symbol of change to end corruption. However, later, in *Antibills of the Savannah* (1988), Achebe criticizes the military for interfering in civil administration. In his play *Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* (1995), Wole Soyinka similarly exposes the hopes that the transition toward the military might have represented for the population; yet, this hope was ruined because the very soldiers that were believed to be saviors became oppressors, all this of course, mirroring the situation in Nigeria back then.

5. The military ruled Nigeria from 1966 to 1979 and from 1983 to 1999. The Babangida and Abacha years, from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, regulated both public life and private life and turned out to be totalitarian regimes.

6. In his latest work, *The Chibok Girls* (2017), Habila attests to this lack of homogeneity in the country when he writes, for instance, that the northern “region, often seen by outsiders, erroneously, as part of a homogeneous ‘north’ – meaning any part of the country above the River Niger-River Benue line and commonly viewed as all Muslim and all Hausa Fulani – still has its many fault lines. And because these divisions predate the birth of the nation, most people here – and this is true to a large extent in other parts of the country – are always *Muslim or Christian first, ethnic affiliation second, and Nigerian third*” (68, emphasis added).

7. The three novels will from now on be respectively referred to as *Waiting*, *Measuring*, and *Oil*.

8. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines “confluence” as “a flowing together or union of rivers *etc.*/The place where two or more rivers *etc.* unite/A combined flow or flood” (Brown 476-7).

1992 by Amitav Ghosh in his essay “Petrofiction,”⁹ but also, more recently, by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and the “After Oil” school embodied by the Petrocultures Research Group.¹⁰ Thematically this time, Habila explores and engages in a field that has until now hardly been tackled in the Nigerian novel.¹¹ He elaborates a reflection on what Fernando Coronil (1997) has called “petro-magic” whereby petroleum cannot but be a lie when it promises people to strike it rich with no work involved.

I would like to argue that one of the specificities of Habila’s writing lies in his literal use of toponymy, in order to chart a poetics and politics of confluence. His works convey a political message through the motifs of oil and water, both related to the phenomenon of confluence. This particular interest in toponymy and in the notion of confluence parallels the generic hybridity at the heart of his oeuvre: facts – historical and/or political – and fiction converge. The generic confluence at issue – a hybrid genre called *faction* – craftily merges real historical events and fictional situations. Finally, this emphasis on history and politics raises the question of the role of the contemporary Nigerian writer. As was seen before, this question has often been debated in Nigeria with various responses. As a representative of the third generation of Nigerian writers, is Helon Habila saying that Nigerian writers should, as Ofeimun and Saro-Wiwa argued, be eminently political, in order to depict and/or denounce pervasive corruption, dire poverty, and the disastrous environmental situation of the country?

Poetics and Politics of Confluence and the Confluence of Poetics and Politics

Habila’s three novels and his latest non-fictional work stage political atmospheres which constitute the undercurrents of life in Nigerian society. The regular use of the motifs of oil and water, and the phenomenon of confluence begs for investigation. After a short summary of the works under study, in which I analyse how central political instability is in the plots, I will concentrate on toponymy as well as its inter-connectedness with the two liquid motifs that serve as prisms through which the political stance of these works is observed.

Politics is central in *Waiting*, in which the protagonist, Lomba, a journalist, is locked up in jail after what was initially intended to be a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration. From then on, he is considered a political prisoner. The novel is set in the 1990s, mostly under General Sani Abacha’s dictatorial regime. The first chapter eponymously entitled “Lomba”¹² stages the protagonist in his cell, awaiting trial, most likely in vain. In this novel Habila puts forth the pervasive corruption which gangrenes postcolonial Nigeria, and which affects not only all the layers of society, but also, in a symptomatic way, the

9. Although Ghosh was mainly alluding to Indian literature, his reflection can be considered true in the Nigerian context. Indeed, some short stories and plays, as well as numerous poems tackle the issue of oil and its consequences on the population: the question of the suitability of a shorter form, such as the short story or the poem, in order to narrate the impact of oil on the population, is interesting but will not be broached here for want of space.

10. See Margaret Atwood’s “It’s Not Climate Change – It’s Everything Change,” written online in 2015. Available at <<https://medium.com/matter/it-s-not-climate-change-it-s-everything-change-8fd9aa671804>>. The Petrocultures Research Group, based in Canada, wrote a short book entitled *After Oil* (2016), to which I will be referring later.

11. Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) is another novel dealing with the consequences of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta, but it focuses more on the feminine experience of it.

12. I see a distant echo with Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), in which the word “number” at the head of the chapters, is actually written and pronounced “Lomber” in Saro-Wiwa’s “rotten English.” It is one of the many subtle correspondences between the late author and Habila that are perceptible in the latter’s oeuvre.

layers of the text. Despite the highly-monitored prison environment, Lomba still finds a “pencil and paper and he start[s] a diary” (3), which enables the reader to have access to his most inner thoughts.¹³ Habila clearly debunks a political system – Abacha’s military rule – which, at the time of *Waiting’s* publication, had come to an end only four years earlier: indeed, Abacha died in 1998 and with his death came the end of military rule and the return to democracy the following year. The 1990s were an intense decade characterized by a tremendous political and social turmoil, marked by arrests, murders, *etc.*

Measuring is partly set in the 1980s-early1990s, in the north of Nigeria. This region is the setting of many tensions. Mamo, the protagonist, is appointed as the would-be-biographer of the local ruler, and works very much as a journalist would in order to find information about his research. Political corruption is a central element in the novel; so is water, a vital resource and a tipping point in the winning of local elections and, as an outcome, an eminently political element. Water is ubiquitous in *Oil*, where rivers are the sites of extremely violent confrontations between government forces and rebels triggered by the monstrous and deadly presence of oil. Liquidity saturates the novel which deals with the abduction of a British woman, Isabel Floode, the wife of a British oil engineer.¹⁴ Zaq, “no doubt one of the best [journalists Nigeria] ever produced” (5) and young Rufus – the protagonist, also a journalist – launch an enquiry so as to find the abducted woman, hoping to issue “almost a perfect story [...] [a] good story for any paper” (135). The kidnapping is a way for Habila to delve into the thorny power struggles between the different factions at play – the representatives of Shell for example, but also the inhabitants of the region, not to mention people who “steal” oil – in the geo-political context of the Delta region, where abductions and murders are rampant.

Habila falls into the scope of his literary predecessors when he shows that politics is so significant in his works. His references to settings, oil and water, are nearly always connected to a (geo-)political agenda. The following quotation, from Kela in *Waiting*, synecdochically refers to Lagos, the place of corruption *par excellence*:

[Poverty] street consisted of a single tarred road that *ran through* its centre – Egunje Road – and a *tributary* of narrow, dirt roads that led off Egunje Road to the dark interior of the street [...]. Behind the Women Centre was Olokun Road, the shabbiest and poorest of all the quarters on Poverty Street. Olokun Road terminated in the less squalid, but more notorious University Road. The latter was the *flux point* for all vices on the street: there were hotels for sex and alcohol, and there were doorways and *alley-mouths* for marijuana and cocaine. (120-1, emphasis added)

In this passage, confluence is political and this is conveyed not only through the lexical field (in italics) which saturates the excerpt, but also through two stylistic devices, the synecdoche and the hypallage, thanks to which Habila elaborates a rhetoric of confluence. Amidst figures of speech related to the metonymy, the synecdoche is a figure in which “a part of something is used to signify the whole” (Abrams 66). It requires that two concepts be near, contiguous *i.e.*, sharing a boundary or a point: the initial interest in toponymic confluence present in Habila’s novels parallels a stylistic convergence which surreptitiously conveys political messages.

13. Lomba starts a “detention diary” as Ken Saro-Wiwa did in *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995) or as Wole Soyinka did in *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972).

14. The name Floode clearly gives clues as to what is going on in the Niger Delta region. Metonymically, the Floodes represent Western expats coming to Nigeria because they are interested in the money they could make out of oil extraction.

The focal point, Morgan Street – ironically renamed “Poverty Street” – seems to be born out of the “alley-mouths,” crippled with “dark[ness],” “squal[or],” and “vices”: this rather dystopian description synecdochically points to the derelict state of Nigeria as a whole. Even “University Road” – allegedly Nigeria’s brightest future? – has become a notorious place because of sex and drug trafficking: it attests to the corrupt quality of the neighbourhood in an obvious, visible way. Moreover, with the Yoruba word “Egunje,” meaning “bribe,” corruption is displayed as more insidious, giving its name to official places. The use of more specific toponymic vocabulary with the words “tributary,” “flux point,” and “alley-mouths,” is noteworthy as it is more commonly found in descriptions of rivers and more precisely when it comes to describing the phenomenon of confluence. This liquid quality is given more prominence thanks to the use of the word “Olokun” which in Edo language¹⁵ refers to the River Goddess. Therefore, the idea of confluence is addressed and used here in order to expose and denounce the impact of the various inter-connected political and social problems mentioned – prostitution, drug-trafficking, poverty – on Nigerian society.

Political criticism is rendered even more prominent thanks to two details present in the description above, which describes the daily reality of the inhabitants. The common denominator between the “tarred road” and the “*plastic* containers” (emphasis added) is oil, which is metonymically designated by the two adjectives, tar and plastic being made of this substance. According to Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, “petroculture” “is shaped by oil in physical and material ways, from the automobiles and highways we use to plastics that permeate our food supply and built environments” (9). Kela indicates that on warm days like the one he describes, people “[g]asp[ed] for breath, they would stare through glazed eyes at the long tarred road that dissected the street in two [...]. [T]he tar would start melting, making tearing noises beneath car tyres, holding grimly on to shoe holes” (119). The use of the hypallage (“the tar [...] holding grimly”) gives indirect indications about the feelings of the inhabitants, and the state of the country. Linguistically, the relation between “tar [...] holding” and “grimly” is a divergent one creating a disjunction, which could metaphorically be interpreted as political. It could be inferred that the situation described by Kela is discouraging, depressing, dismal even. According to Hélène Collins, both convergence and divergence form the essence of the hypallage. This double contradictory movement – between divergence and convergence – that this figure of speech seems to operate takes another path: it follows a pattern of “bivergence” (see Collins).¹⁶ This could help better understand the political situation of Nigeria as described by Habila: it is a country that neither converges nor diverges, but is stuck in-between, in a “bivergent” movement, incapable of moving forward. The reasons for this are multiple: mismanagement of oil revenues in the context of *Oil*, or military rule in *Waiting*. They prevent the country from developing smoothly and make the most of its assets. The society depicted is a stagnating

15. Edo language is mainly spoken in the midwestern state of Edo, bordered in the south by the Delta state. Habila’s use of various native languages in the novel’s toponyms points to the possibility of making divergences between ethnic groups appear less prevalent in fiction.

16. These reflections have been inspired by Hélène Collins’s article entitled “La relative transparence de l’hypallage: l’hypallage est-elle un trope?” Collins comes up with the term “bivergence” to express the simultaneous movement of convergence and divergence that is, according to her, at issue when dealing with the figure of the hypallage. It can also mimic Habila’s situation as regards his literary predecessors, between convergence – *i.e.*, writing like – and divergence – *i.e.*, getting away from.

one.¹⁷ Not only is the heat responsible for the oppressive and deadly atmosphere but so are the police forces, brought to the fore through a simile, and the use of hypallages. The heat is personified with verbs expressing violence, a violence that isotopically applies to the police and their drastic measures: “tear,” “strangle,” “wring out.” The stagnating impression is expressed by Lomba in a metafictional passage that can be read as part of Habila’s literary manifesto, where life in this environment, and in Nigeria as a whole, does seem to be harsh:

I use my street, Morgan Street, as a paradigmatic locale, the fuel scarcity as the main theme. The long lines of cars waiting for fuel at petrol stations and obstructing traffic I use as a thread to weave together the various aspect of the article; in front of the petrol pumps I place the ubiquitous gun- and whip-toting soldiers, collecting money from drivers to expedite their progress towards the pumps. (113)¹⁸

The tense, oppressive atmosphere prevailing in *Waiting* is the consequence of the paradoxical situation of Nigeria in the 1990s. David Cockley argues that “*Waiting* [...] subtly positions oil as the undercurrent of every aspect of life in contemporary Nigeria” (147). Although the country is one of the wealthiest as regards oil resources – which are eminently political not only on a national but also on a global scale¹⁹ – very few people benefit from them. When Lomba is offered a job as a journalist,²⁰ the editor suggests that should Lomba write something, he’d better stop trying to write fiction and concentrate on a bottomless source of inspiration: Nigerian politics.²¹ In order to hammer his point, the editor indicates a situation which again synecdochically represents the paradoxical plight of the country where there are “long queue[s] of cars waiting for fuel. Some of them have been there for days. [...] And we are major producers of oil. [...] [P]eople remain stuck in the same vicious groove. [...] The general disillusionment, the lethargy” (108-9).²² The use of the adjective “vicious” to refer to the groove – a possible meaning is “noxious” or “morbid” – prefigures what Habila tackles in *Oil* where the black gold is a major political issue.

While talking to James Floode, Rufus delivers a heartrending (geo-)political speech in which he alludes to his native village, “Junction.”²³ According to Rufus, “Junction” has been devastated by the pollution in the region, and he alludes to the vandalism 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” (108). The region has

17. Okūnoyè writes: “Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola and Alfred Rewane were murdered in very bizarre circumstances by those believed to be agents of the state, while the killing of Moshood Abiola and Ken Saro-Wiwa, in no less questionable circumstances, remain reminders of the damage that the military and their supporters did to *stagnate* Nigeria” (83, emphasis added).

18. It bears noting that the ubiquitous presence of soldiers is equally striking in *The Chibok Girls*. Habila writes that “[c]heckpoints weren’t only for regulating traffic – they also controlled the flow of the narrative surrounding the kidnapping” (22).

19. Ghosh writes: “But the experiences associated with oil are lived out within a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international” (79).

20. The editor of *The Dial* had been impressed by the young man after reading an essay entitled “The Military in Nigerian Politics” (106) that he had written for his university assessments. This attests to the interest in politics the young student was showing then and proves once again Habila’s emphasis on the Nigerian political situation of the 1990s.

21. Habila himself seems to take this advice at face value in his latest work, a non-fiction essay about the 276 Chibok schoolgirls who were abducted by the Boko Haram terrorist group in 2014, triggering a wave of international support with the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. His short essay enables the reader to understand both what happened in Chibok and the subsequent reactions from the Jonathan and Buhari administrations.

22. One cannot but think of the post-independence disillusionment and the literary output of the 1960s.

23. Used as a toponym “Junction” is another word that evokes the idea of confluence.

become explosive because of oil. The land is supposed to provide the villagers with the basic means of survival but crude makes it barren. As an outcome, the villagers are forced to flee. The victims of this ecological catastrophe find a spokesman in Henshaw, an environmental activist: “We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand” (149). Henshaw proudly identifies with his territory as the hammering anaphora in “we” indicates.²⁴ The novel is anchored in the daily reality and politics of the Niger Delta and focuses a great deal on the landscape. The other liquid motif, water, is put forth in a variety of colours and shapes – “clear and mobile,” “brackish and still” (4), “oil-polluted” (5), “restless” (152), “dangerous” (172). Together with oil, it forms the crux of the novel: it is shape-shifting – and as such, unstable, like Nigeria as a whole. In this novel, water is poisonous while it usually symbolizes life.

Toponymy is exploited by Habila in order to express political criticisms targeting the dictatorial regimes of Babangida and Abacha, but also corruption, and the ecological and social impacts of oil on the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. More surprisingly, water is also depicted as life-threatening. In *Oil*, the two liquids meet, but their combined presence is paradoxical since the two resources are not miscible. This chemical (im) miscibility metaphorically affects Habila’s writing, particularly his literary choices, as oil can also be related to ink. He aims to elaborate a generic hybridity, inspired by his own experience as a writer at the junction between two literary modes.

Writing *Faction*: Toward a Generic Hybridity

Habila has declared that his journalistic experience has contributed to shaping his method, style and understanding of day-to-day realities as a novelist. He has also distanced himself from politics, stating that resorting to journalists as protagonists is “a conscious and committed way to put a distance between the artist and political commentary” (my translation).²⁵ He does not mean, however, that in his work no political commentary is made at all. Indeed, according to Lai Oso,

[t]he Nigerian press has from its infancy been a participant in the country’s political processes. From its beginnings, the press has not been a mere chronicler of political events and politicians. Quite often, the press has either wittingly or unwittingly been a major actor in all events. (Qtd. in Okunoyè 69).

In *Oil*, it is Rufus, a fictitious character, who denounces the situation in the Niger Delta, not Habila the citizen/writer. History and politics are central in Habila’s works: it is an aspect the writer is fully aware of as proved by the “Afterword” he included at the end of *Waiting*, and in which he accounts for generic decisions he made while writing his novel. This “Afterword” is meant to emphasize the fictional character of his work and could also apply to his second and third novels. It indicates that *Waiting* is a

story [written] like most *works of historical fiction* are achieved: by making *recognizable historical facts and incidents the fibres with which the larger fictional fabric is woven*. Ken Saro-Wiwa, June 12, Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola, the riots, the student demonstrations, and of course the arrests.

[...] *My concern was for the story*, that above everything else. (228, emphasis added)

24. This episode cannot but remind the reader of Ken Saro-Wiwa whom Habila must have had in mind when he created this fictitious character.

25. “C’est une manière consciente et assumée de distancier l’artiste du commentaire politique.” <<http://the-dissident.eu/4960/helon-habila-ecrivain-lart-etre-reflet-realites-politiques/>>. Consulted 16 March 2016.

The reason for the presence of the afterword is twofold: it circumvents possible criticisms as to a lack of originality because Habila anchors his novel in Nigerian history and politics. Moreover, by laying the stress on the fictional side of his production, Habila may attempt to sidestep problems with the authorities since, surprisingly, as Jennifer Wenzel writes, “[i]n addition to the Caine Prize, Habila won a Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Waiting* [...] in 2003, a feat that he repeated in 2011 with *Oil* [...] – without even getting arrested” (13). To the writer, recent Nigerian history is strewn with historical landmarks he names and which he thinks deserve a place in his fiction. Among those landmarks are references to well-known activists, politicians, and writers, who at some point entered Nigerian history. The period Habila mentions in his *Afterword*, the 1990s, were years of dictatorship embodied by two men, General Ibrahim Babangida, who ruled Nigeria from 1985 to 1993, the year he had to give up power because of the people’s pressure since he had annulled the June 12th democratic elections. As to General Sani Abacha’s regime (1993–1998), it was infamous for wide-spread human rights abuse, among which the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, triggering international anger and causing the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth. Saro-Wiwa himself put forth the plight of the Ogoni people who were – and still are – considered the main victims of oil extraction and exploitation. The late writer clearly had an ecological and judicial agenda in mind and was in favour of financial compensations for the material losses of the Ogoni: this is addressed in *Oil*.

Habila anchors his novels in history and politics and this constitutes a form of *faction* as defined by David Lodge (202-3). *Faction* – a portmanteau, hybrid word composed of “fact” and “fiction” and at the point of convergence between the two – enables Habila to instil generic hybridity in the very “fictional fabric” of his work.²⁶ His writing is certainly not the equivalent of Truman Capote’s, but Habila aims to convey the raw reality of life in Nigeria without hiding anything. The choice of *faction* is part of his literary agenda in order to convey political messages. The boundary between fact and fiction in his novels proves to be all but clear-cut. Rather, it is fluctuating, blurry. *Faction* is a way for him to narrate the failed *Bildung* of the nation relying on clear and identifiable historical references.²⁷ Yet the *Bildungsroman* – the three novels can be read as such – goes in line with *faction* since “[it is] a genre where the boundaries between fact and fiction are often unclear and not necessarily very significant” (Austen 2). Both Lomba and Mamo’s specific situations can be applied allegorically to the nation itself: people, like Lomba, lack freedom (of speech) and the country, like Mamo, suffers from anaemia, a sickness that wears the country out.²⁸ In *After Oil*, Szeman writes that “energy plays a critical role in determining the shape, form, and character of our daily existence” and “[a]s authors Margaret Atwood and Neil Gaiman have recently argued, now that we have the facts about oil and climate change, we need fictions to act on them” (9, 42). The writer is therefore also a militant.

26. This resonates with Wole Soyinka’s *Foreword* in his autobiographical *Ibadan: The Penkeleles Years, a Memoir 1946-1965* where he writes that “*Ibadan* does not pretend to be anything but faction, that much abused genre which attempts to fictionalise facts and events, the proportion of fact to fiction being totally at the discretion of the author” (ix).

27. Historical references are not as precisely marked in *Measuring* and *Oil* as they are in *Waiting*. *Oil*, for example, elaborates a rhetoric of indirectness reflecting the impression of disorientation affecting the characters in the novel.

28. The plants in an excerpt from *Waiting* also suffer from anaemia: “on the anaemic plants that drooped in old plastic containers” (119). In Nigeria, life as a whole seems to be affected with this (blood) disease. A parallel between oil and blood can also be made. Andrew Apter argues that oil can be compared to blood running in the national body (*The Pan-African* 249-55).

Habila's novels are examples of *faction* since they are presented as works of fiction but find their inspiration in real facts. The generic confluence – with a more or less fluid flow – combines the factual and the fictional. However, is Habila contemplating the role of the contemporary Nigerian writer as political? Does this emphasis on history and politics make the novelist a political spokesperson? It has long been what was expected from the Nigerian novelist, but where does Habila stand on this question?

Helon Habila and the Figure/Function of the Writer

Habila's choice of the socialist realist vein could limit the interpretation of his oeuvre as solely political. Lomba, his literary avatar, does admit that he is “not very political” (*Waiting* 108). Habila, however, acknowledges having a political agenda when he states that he aims at “captur[ing] the mood of the 1990s” in words, but he also weaves an aesthetic approach into his fiction which reaches a point of confluence between politics and poetics, both eventually flowing together.

As we have seen, it has often been argued that the African writer is a political spokesperson. Habila seems to take a slightly different path. Indeed, for instance, the reader does not have access to the article Rufus aims at writing about the situation in the Niger Delta and the abduction of Isabel Floode. The story terminates before the reader even has the opportunity to read it. In a similar way, we only have access to some excerpts from Mamo's biographies and, once more, we do not know whether these biographies will eventually be published. The writer clearly has a political agenda, but it is aborted before publication. Yet, Rufus and Mamo want to write for people to be aware of what is going on in Nigeria.

Regarding the didactic role of the writer, Habila clearly follows on from Achebe in “The Novelist as Teacher.” Quite early in *Measuring*, Mamo teaches history, and the exchange he has with his students is noteworthy: “*What is history?* Immediately hands went up. ‘It's the story of the past.’ / ‘Not entirely true, it is also about the future,’ he replied” (95-6). The writing/teaching of History also has much to do with the future because it enables one to learn from the past. History is also about the consequences of past events upon the future of people, and the construction of the country. When challenged by a student to give his own definition of what history is, Mamo brushes the question away by saying he expects more intelligent answers from his students. Yet, this is telling of the fact that he himself has no clear definition of what history is. The reflection which could have been extremely fruitful is aborted. One of the few things Mamo is certain about is that he aims at writing a revisionist version of the history of Keti in order to right the wrongs he read about in the book Reverend Drinkwater devoted to “History of the Peoples of Keti.” Here, the writer is clearly a righter, in the vein of Achebe or Saro-Wiwa. Indeed, s/he cannot but be a witness of his age, a recorder of events. When he submits a review of the missionary's book, the answer he receives from a London Magazine epitomizes the Western vision of African writers and intellectuals in general:

[W]e regret that the subject does not suit our particular demand at the moment. However, if you have other pieces that address such issues as the AIDS scourge, or genital circumcision, or other typical African experiences in a challenging and progressive way, we'd like to take a look at them. (179)

This is what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has called “The Danger of a Single Story” whenever the West expects African writers to focus on the negative aspects of Africa. The journalists in Habila’s novels – avatars for writers – are expected to keep records of what is going on. Mamo considers that

as far as he was concerned a true history is one that looks at the individuals, ordinary people who toil and dream and suffer, who bear the brunt of whatever vicissitude time inflicts on the nation. He said if a historian could capture these ordinary lives, including their recollections of their own family’s past, then he might come close to writing a true “biographical history” of a nation; for when we refer to a nation, are we not really referring to the people that inhabit that nation, and so isn’t the story of a nation then really the story of the people who make up that nation? (180)

He concentrates on individual stories and the role of the writer is to “writ[e] about our history” (175) according to his girlfriend, Zara. As an outcome, he decides to write “a true history of the Ketu people” (186, emphasis added) and the use of the indefinite article is very powerful: other histories could be written through this bottom-up approach. According to Habila, multiplicity is a strength, and the writer is the very embodiment of this multiplicity of voices, the medium through whom they can be heard. He embodies a point of confluence that is aware of the divergences from which it was born, a confluence which does not erase the peculiarities of each voice. In the same way, Rufus wants to hear and narrate the stories of individuals in the Niger Delta, in order to “write back” to the “Big Oil” narrative. Individual voices are sublimated and Habila conjures up a web of literary voices in order to highlight the fact that social, geographical, historical, *etc.* divergences of (literary) sources can actually be used together in order to criticize specific aspects in society. He aims at writing back to “Shellspeak” as Saro-Wiwa said.

The didacticism of Mamo the teacher, who relies on facts, is qualified with a magical trend present in the novel, particularly in the chapter where the two brothers plan to kill their neighbour’s dog. They intend to discover a new way of seeing the world by rubbing the rheum of the dead dog in their own eyes since dogs “can see spirits and ghosts” (27). Mamo wants to explore “distant places, underwater people and spirits, all these beings Auntie Marina talks of in her stories” (27). This experience brings the two brothers the expected results in the form of nightmares, but they are affected with a temporary blindness since they develop an eye infection that seems to weaken the already fragile Mamo even more. Although this is a particularly unstable classification, we could say that this passage falls within the framework of magical realism, which has a “subversive, anti-hegemonic, or decolonizing thrust” according to Wenzel (“Petro” 457). Mamo – and by extension Habila – seems to be “a crossroads person [...] a child of intersection” as expressed by Ben Okri. Mamo’s political agenda – writing a “true history” of Ketu – aborts before it is completed. Therefore, despite a very political stance, Habila’s novels diverge toward a poetic agenda, with flights of magical realism, but also with poetic passages.

Poetry can be considered a rite of passage for Habila and his avatar, Lomba. Early in his career, Habila wrote poems – among which “After the Obsession” and “Birds of the Graveyard” (2000) – which caught the critics’ attention. Poetry is at times intrinsically woven into his prose. This genre has been used as a political tool by Nigerian writers. We have already mentioned Odia Ofeimun, whose aim has been to use poetry as a po-

litical weapon, especially when he wrote *The Poet Lied* in 1980. Poetry is used to target new leaders who amount to the same as before, as exemplified in Ofeimun’s poem “The New Broom.” *Waiting* refers to the succession of leaders and the impression that they amount to the same thing through the image of the palimpsest:

Everybody started using the shorter name Women Centre, when the full name changed twice in the two years of existence, from Mariam Babangida Women Centre to Mariam Abacha Women Centre. The first name was still faintly visible, in white ink, beneath the hastily painted new name in blue. (120-1)

Habila’s prose is at times eminently poetic, particularly when dealing with the motif of water, which appears in Lomba’s poems written in jail and which are stereotypically connected to “love.” This interest in love poems is most prominent in Lomba’s transformation of Sappho’s poem, “Ode to a Loved One.” What is most relevant in his “bowdlerization” of Sappho’s poem is that the poet’s persona is “no longer master of [his] voice / And [his] tongue lies useless” (21). In another poem in which he describes his living conditions, Lomba writes:

Lord, I’ve had days black as pitch / And nights crimson as blood // But they have passed over me, like water. / Let this one pass over me, lightly, / Like a smooth rock rolling down the hill, / Down my back, my skin, like soothing water. (6)

The liquid quality is conveyed with the alliteration in /l/ which saturates the poem. It is unstable as the varying number of feet in each line indicates. The harmonious iambic pattern is nearly absent. Unlike the water that has hitherto been referred to, water is here reassuring, alleviating, a property that is regularly attributed to the liquid motif but which contrasts strikingly with the conditions in which Lomba evolves, rendered through the erratic poetic rhythm. The reference to blood – which parallels water here – allows the reader to see that water is highly ambivalent. These poems are not really “love poems” anymore since Lomba is manipulating the format, but also the words to ask for help from the superintendent’s girlfriend. Lomba the poet is lying and has political goals which aim at showing that poetry has the power to inspire action. This resonates with *Oil*, where water is most of the time ominous and poisonous as exemplified in the following passage in which Naman, a worshipper, tells the story of the shrine he leads. There, people have decided to live on an island, away from the pollution of the Niger Delta, in a traditional, “pre-oil” utopian manner:

The shrine was started a long time ago after a terrible war – no one remembers what caused the war – when the blood of the dead ran in the rivers, and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of warriors floated for miles on water, until they were snagged on mangrove branches on the banks, or got stuck in the muddy swamps, half in and half out of water. The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. That was when priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the sea. The land needed to be cleansed of blood and pollution. (129-30)

The accumulation of punctuation signs (dashes, commas) and the repeated use of the conjunction “and” indicate a reluctant flow of the sentence which metaphorically parallels the quasi impossible flow of the rivers: corpses of both human beings and animals choke the rivers. The dashes themselves insert the rivers physically on the page. This description reminds the reader of the River Styx which formed a boundary between Earth and the Underworld. These passages are eminently poetic and the poetic motif

par excellence, water, is typically used and injected with political aspects. Poetics and politics thus flow together: the Nigerian writer has to navigate troubled waters and, as the Petrocultures Research Group asks us to do in *After Oil*, imagine a world that has transitioned away from the black gold. In this context, Habila can be said to have written a “climate change novel,” also known as “cli-fi.”²⁹ However, he seems to bring a unique voice in the sense that his “narrative [...] [is] focused on the environmental and social impact of particular extractive industries [and] Habila introduces some visions of spiritual cleansing and healing for human bodies, if not for the land, in his novel” (Irr 16).

Contrasting with the poetic stance adopted by Lomba, the writer is metonymically reduced to his “asshole for shitting and farting, and a penis that in the morning grows turgid in vain. This leftover self” (24). This scatology is clearly a symbol of political disillusionment in postcolonial Nigeria where the writer is aware of his own uselessness and powerlessness. When Mikhail Bakhtin refers to the grotesque realism in Rabelais’s writings in *Rabelais and his World* (1941), he calls attention to the “downward movement” of carnivalesque humour and the emphasis it places upon “the level of the material bodily stratum” (370), triggering a cathartic laughter whose aim is to produce social criticism and satire to eventually bring along regeneration. However here, the scatological motifs point to the hardships the prisoner and the writer had to go through, and they do not produce the expected laughter. The political seems to prevail; yet, this points to a form of commodification of suffering in order to gain literary profit,³⁰ something Habila paradoxically criticised in an article published in *The Guardian* when reviewing NoViolet Bulawayo’s debut novel *We Need New Names* (2013).

In *Waiting* “Habila [...] recognizes that life without the prospect of a better future is meaningless” (Erritouni 154), and this is the reason why he envisions utopian worlds to try and find solutions to political and social ills. For indeed, as Imre Szeman writes, “[t]elling stories from the past is not just an exercise in uncovering lost causes, traumas, and oppression. It can also point to alternative ways of thinking and being that may have been forgotten or suppressed in the mad rush to cover the world with oil” (43). According to Fredric Jameson, who refers to Ernst Bloch’s utopias, utopian impulses are future-oriented (2) and it is now up to “[t]he arts and humanities [as] uniquely equipped to help us engage in a full, successful energy transition” (Szeman 41), inventing utopian alternatives to the dystopian stories told by Helon Habila.

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29. Caren Irr writes that “cli-fi” is “[c]haracterized most frequently by efforts to imagine the impacts of drastic climatological change on human life and perceptions [...]. The styles and voices used in cli-fi range widely, but these works often pay marked attention to the perspectives of scientists, especially where these deviate from popular ideas about the environment. [...] Together, these motifs cohere in an apocalyptic sensibility” (2).

30. In *Waiting*’s last chapter, where some Nigerian writers among whom Toni Kan, but also Maik Nwosu and even Helon Habila himself are given a platform, Lomba has a conversation with a female painter who says: “You really must try and get arrested – that’s the quickest way to make it as a poet. You’ll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award” (215).

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