

PETROVIOLENCE AND POSTCOLONIAL HEALTH CONDITIONS IN HABILA'S OIL ON WATER

2023 Brock University English
Graduate Student Colloquium

April 25, 2023, 11:30 am -1:30 pm. Dr. Charles A. Sankey
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Second Reader: Dr. Adam Dickinson

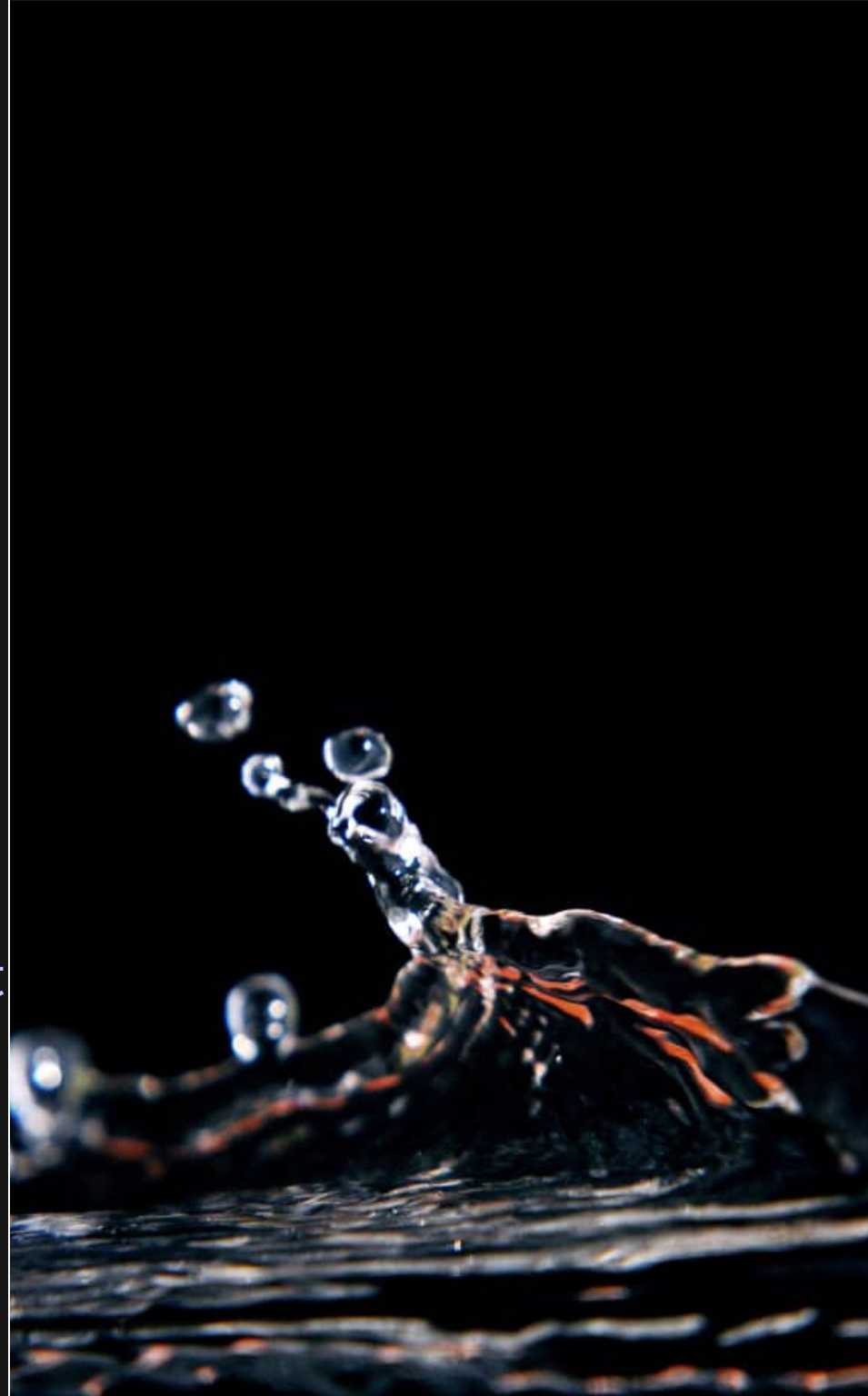


A basic lesson from Indigenous reproductive justice is that “violence on the land is violence on our bodies” ~ Michelle Murphy



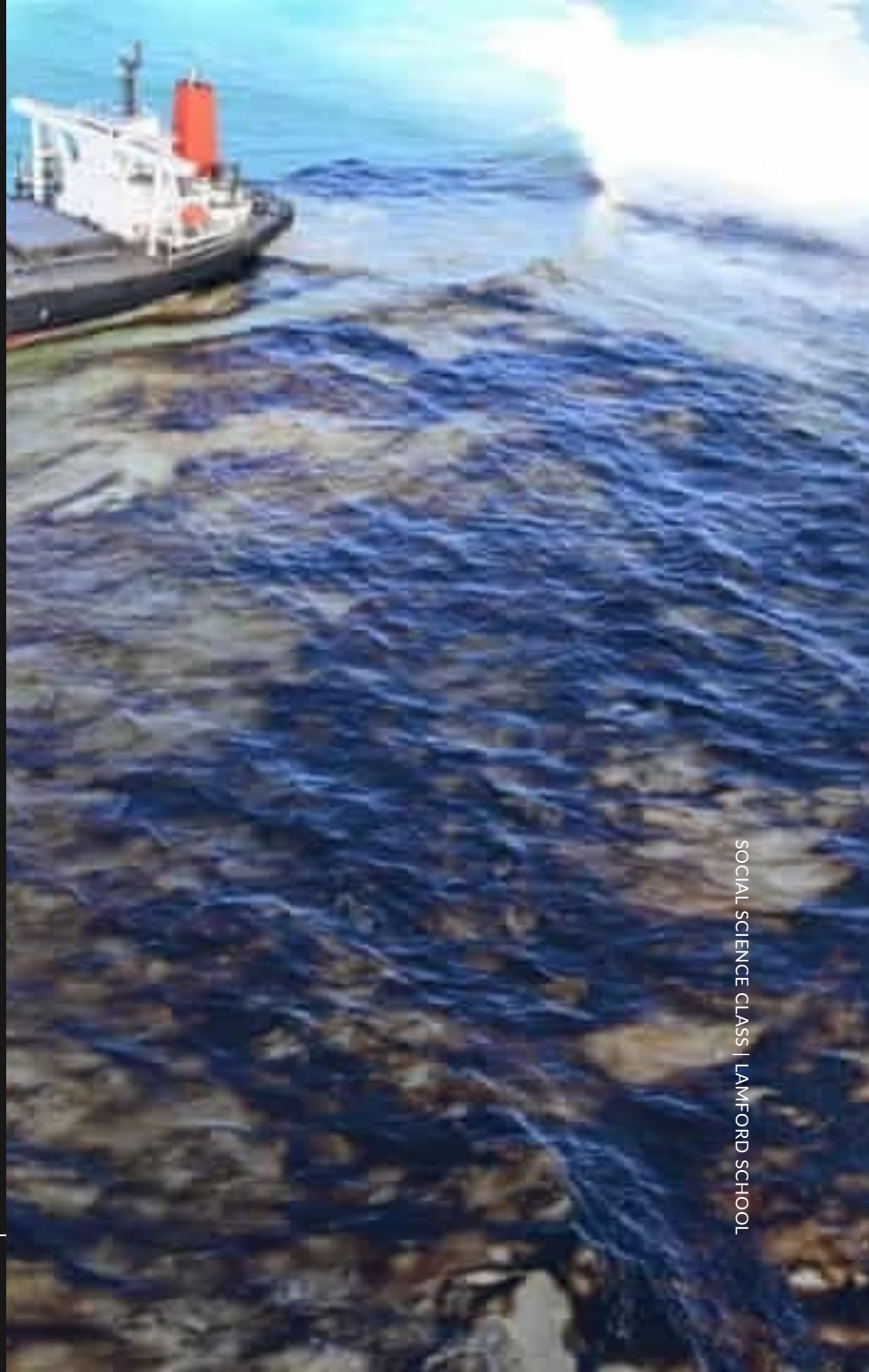
OVERVIEW

Oil on Water by Helon Habila is a fluid narrative. Told in the stream-of-consciousness technique, the text does have its own ebb; it flows from the narrator (who is also a character) through the other characters. The water symbolism that it bears is a narrative and structural element as well as a physical presence that acts with other structures in the text to foreground the questions of petroviolence and decolonial chemical relations.



OVERVIEW

Habila's novel presents the land and sea in conversation with oil, and shows the attendant consequences of that conversation for the riverside people of the Niger Delta. My study, therefore, aligns with Opperman's belief that "the sea's meanings always remain in the interstice between the discursive and the real" (446).



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent do the hypothetical matters in *Oil on Water* reflect or reveal the textuality of oil in the postcolonial world?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Is there any paradigm shift - progressively or retrogressively - in the activities surrounding oil exploration in the Niger-Delta by the end of the novel?

LITERATURE REVIEW



1. Pizardeh discusses the confluence of the activities of extractivist companies and the lifeworlds in the Delta as depicted in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Her paper observes that there is a conflictual relationship between neoliberal Extraction and Aquatic life in the narrative and points out many episodes from the narrative to substantiate its arguments. According to Pirzadeh, neoliberal ideology operates by treating nature as a commodity. This commodification of nature leads to an attitude of hostility towards the land and water wherein they become dumping grounds for human wastes and suffer ultimately the result of oil spillage and gas flares.

2. Olaoluwa points out the cyclic sense in which humans affect the natural environment which in turn affects humans. Against anthropocentrism, the paper presents the sufferings of humans against the backdrop of a diminishing and sickening natural environment. It investigates particularly the place of Habila's text as petrofiction. The paper reads Lagos and Portharcourt as actual characters in a dramatic situation involving the human and non-human worlds.



Literature Review Contd.

Egya presents Habila's text as an exercise in literary Militancy, a militancy driven on the wings of "the tripartite system of ruination (the multinational oil corporations, the federal soldiers and the local militias. The paper studies the relationship between the human activities that release toxins into the air, land and water and the effect of this pollution in human and non-human lives. Egya collapses the aesthetic and the ideological. The treatment of the environment is with a "genuine alarm" (98) about the dangers of living with a continually depleting ecosystem.



Fiorini, Mara

Fiorini studies the two aspects of ecology and the human environment in the text. The argument that the paper makes is that suffering subsists on two levels in the novel. But the two levels are investigated as independent units. My research sees that these two exist in a cause-and-effect relationship, such that one is the cause or the effect of the other. Fiorini as such adopts a postcolonial frame while keeping in mind the ecological tragedy at play. The researcher identifies the colonizer as the exploiter of land and labour for his own selfish reason, usually, economic advancement. Fiorini also links the environmental tragedy to the human tragedy in the novel



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



1.

My reading of the novel as a Blue Humanities project is premised on the water imagery that runs the entire gamut of the text. I also argue that Water is a mobile character in this text. It is equally a means of transportation that drives the characters to the desired scenes of action, and represents a means of survival for the postcolonial subjects in the text. I find, therefore, that the pollution of the water is a suicidal act, that it is this singular act that sweeps through the text, and leads to the other death situations, directly and indirectly. Exploring oil and water pollution constitute the springboard from which the conflicts in Habila's text arise.

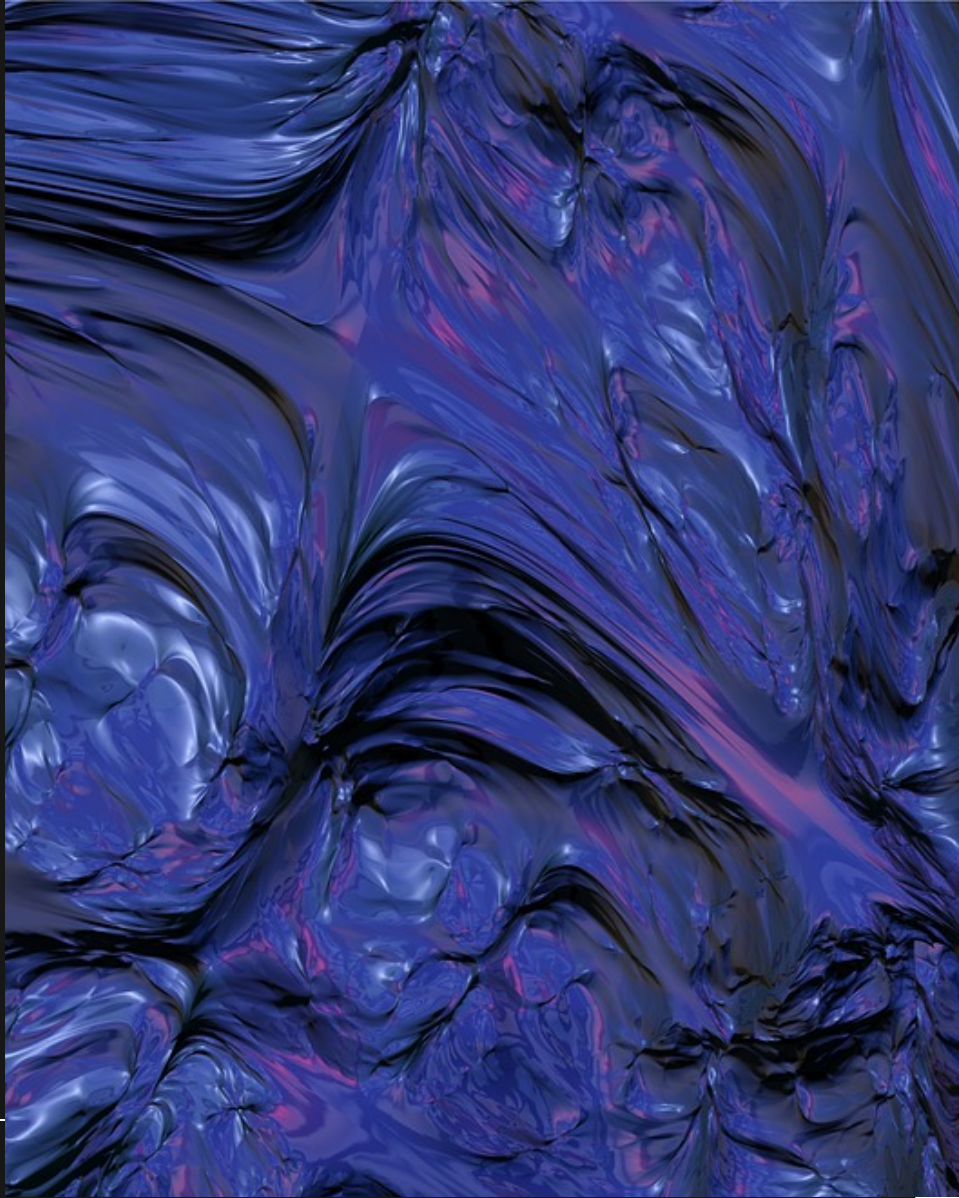
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



2.

I argue that the imagery of water (liquid) is an umbilical cord that connects all the creative acts in the novel. The text presents a statement about the human condition. But, as my reading shows, this condition is particularly postcolonial. The activities that lead to the pollution of the fresh waters of the Niger-Delta are inalienably interlaced with the white man's operations. Even the physical war and militancy is a result of the kidnap of the white man's wife, a British lady, Isabella Floode. The name Floode in itself embodies the imagery of overflowing water, further indications of the intricate web of relations that I find between postcolonialism and environmental crisis in the text.

METHODOLOGY



3.

In following characters like Zaq, Rufus and Boma, and their relationship with the natural environment as they journey through the narrative, my research proves the suitability of the selected theories. I employ ecocriticism and postcolonialism to justify my critique of the land, and the titular oil and water as postcolonial characters, all of whom suffer the tragic necessity occasioned by the petroviolece of the oil companies, and argue that the oil companies in the text typify the presence of the colonial state in Nigeria. Most of these companies are owned by the British, Nigeria's erstwhile colonial masters, and they represent the ghosts of colonialism.

METHODOLOGY

3.

My research is concerned with the relationship between the discursive and the real, the relationship between text, community, and discourse. So, factual historical and political accounts such as the gruesome murder of the environmental rights activist, Ken Saro Wiwa are also factored in. I do not claim that the real and the literary are one thing, but that they are discursively inseparable, language being that which sets up all kinds of discourses.



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