

**Light, energy and gendered oil gluttony: Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel's challenges to petrocapiialism**

**Accepted 17 September 2019, Modern Fiction Studies**

**Abstract**

Extraction companies and the political regime that they deal with in Equatorial Guinea rely on genderwashing narratives to justify their actions. That is, they claim to promote gender equality whilst, in reality, undermining women's rights. Ávila Laurel challenges genderwashing narratives by laying plain how exploitation of women is linked to petrocapiialism. He does so through an aesthetic of gendered oil gluttony, which aims to disgust as well as to reveal the circumstances that drive sub-Saharan migrants towards a mythical 'better life' in Europe. Electric light works as a metaphor for this dream of prosperity in Ávila Laurel's novel *The Gurugu Pledge*, and is also used as another tool to illustrate petrocapiialism's gendered exploitations. But Ávila Laurel's challenges to petrocapiialism go beyond the content of his work, I argue. Style and form borrowed from oral tradition reinforce the disruptive power of Ávila Laurel's work, as does its distribution. Equatoguinean literature is – like the country's oil - largely an export industry: it is consumed by North Americans, Brits and Spaniards, not by a local audience. In this way, it undermines extraction companies' legitimacy in the latter's countries of origin, illustrating literature's capacity to challenge extractivism on several simultaneous levels.

Dolores Molubela, an Equatoguinean citizen interviewed by the author during a fieldwork trip to the country in 2015,<sup>1</sup> lost her adult children to disease. She is now responsible for looking after her surviving grandchildren. Her work as a cleaner in a hotel frequented by foreign, white collar oil workers means she *just about* manages to keep food on the table. She is clear: not *enough* food, but almost. Dolores is part of a gendered workforce that serves the oil industry in Equatorial Guinea. Some women, like Dolores, work as cleaners, others in hospitality, and others still as street vendors of food, or sex. Dolores, not quite getting by, is conscious of the inequalities that exist between her family and the men she serves: “They say that there is petrol here. Well, the petrol is just for a few people. They fill their stomachs and get fat, and leave the rest of us to starve” (Allan *Silenced Resistance: Women, Dictatorships, and Genderwashing in Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea* 131). Dolores nods to “the politics of the belly,” a Cameroonian idiom that Jean François Bayart uses to conceptualise the politics of sub-Saharan Africa, which he argues are characterized by patrimonialism, corruption, power and resource hoarding (Bayart). The Equatoguinean cleaner brings our attention to the role of oil in this equation of power. Dolores imagines petrol as bloating the bodies of the few who make money from it. She sees oil through a metaphor of gluttony, and condemns the greedy system that leaves her family and friends hungry. Such metaphors, such ways of seeing oil, have recently become a fast-growing line of enquiry in the humanities. Petrocultural Studies concern themselves with such

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

insights into how 'we' – not individuals like Dolores but entire cultures and global communities - make sense of oil, the cultural representation of oil, and how oil shapes cultural production, expectations and values.

How one can see oil is a key question in Petrocultural Studies. While Graeme Macdonald remarks on oil's cultural invisibility in the Global North (Macdonald "Containing Oil: The Pipeline in Petroculture" 38), he likewise recognizes that "[f]or the many extraction sites on the (semi-)periphery of the world-system – and within cultural production from those areas – oil is or has been overtly visible, even if it is subsequently made "unseen", either by privatization, securitization and military enforcement or by its mediated mystification"(Macdonald ""Monstruous Transformer:" Petrofiction and World Literature" 293). Going to Equatorial Guinea, arguably the site of the world's starkest wealth difference and where – not unrelatedly –oil dominates the economy, how is oil seen by Equatoguineans, and how is it made "unseen"? In this article, I aim to contribute to the burgeoning debate on gendering petroculture through a focus on the work of one of Equatorial Guinea's most prominent and celebrated writers, Juan Tomas Ávila Laurel. I argue that Ávila Laurel makes oil visible – explicitly for a Global Northern audience – through a picture of gendered oil gluttony. By doing so, he challenges the mystification tools employed by oil multinationals and political elites, who attempt to obscure their crimes through Public Relations (PR) exercises showcasing their (hollow) support for 'women's empowerment' and 'gender equality.'

Several researchers have contributed to our understanding of the gendered workings of the oil economy, and of the gendered nature of petroculture more widely. Michael Ross has shown how oil-dominated economies entrench gender inequalities by reducing the number of women in the labor force, and thereby women's political participation . Heather Turcotte, on the other hand, turns her attention to matters of conflict through her conceptualization of "petro-sexual politics." She illustrates the global, colonial workings of petro-violence, which, she argues, is inextricably linked to gendered violence . Likewise, Cara Daggett, through her concept of petro-masculinity, argues that fossil fuels forge and further authoritarian masculinities, and that fossil fuel use is a violent compensation for gender anxiety and climate change trouble (Daggett).. From a Cultural Studies perspective, Cecily Devereux explores how petroculture drives the performance of femininity to the extent that women living in the epoch of petroculture have become imagined as petrocultural commodities (Devereux). Sheena Wilson likewise joins the dots between consumerism, Western 'feminism' and the female body, showing how neoliberal petro-discourses promote specific female identities, a consumerist feminism and "largely superficial" definitions of women's relationship to oil (13). Wilson illuminates her argument by pursuing several lines of discourse analysis, including corporate and state constructions of Canadian oil as ethical and pro-gender equality. Helen Kapstein, whose work makes an important contribution to the growing wealth of scholarship on texts and music that depict oil politics in Nigeria, likewise focuses her attention on such self-justifying narratives of Big Oil, but she

also shows how literature can resist and sabotage such narratives ("Crude Fictions...").<sup>2</sup>

It is at this point in the scholarship – the point where literature’s transformative potential is in the spotlight - that I hope to intervene. Building on Kapstein’s exploration of literature as sabotage, and focusing on the work of Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, I show how literature can challenge the false narratives of state ‘feminism’ of the Equatoguinean regime and its Big Oil partners. I do so by exploring how state ‘feminism’ plays out in Equatorial Guinea, and how Ávila Laurel uses electric light and gluttony as metaphors for petroculturalism’s dazzling dream and ugly (misogynist) reality in turn. I also argue that Ávila Laurel’s borrowing of style and form from oral tradition increases the disruptive power of his writing, giving way to narrative strategies that facilitate the humanization of migrant characters.

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel is a novelist, poet, playwright, essayist and short story writer, as well as a critic of Equatorial Guinea’s ruler of 40 years, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, and of the international community for tolerating this despot. While his works have received critical acclaim abroad, the political and cultural climate in Equatorial Guinea means they are less accessible for his comrades. In February 2012

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<sup>2</sup> Also of relevance is Helen Kapstein’s forthcoming work, in which she illustrates, through the concept of ‘petrofeminism,’ how Nigerian women writers, via the romance genre, make claims *within* the oil economy, for example by painting female characters that obtain lucrative jobs in oil companies. Kapstein, Helen. "Petrofeminism: Love in the Age of Oil." *Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere*, edited by Stacey Balkan, and Nandi, Swaralipi, Forthcoming.

Ávila Laurel began a hunger strike in protest at the dictator's continued rule, which culminated in his house arrest and eventual seeking of refuge in Spain (Reporters without Borders). His writing consistently engages with inequalities, injustices and tyranny suffered by Equatoguineans in their country, including the governing regime's sale of Equatorial Guinea to foreign oil companies (Sampedro Vizcaya). Indeed, focusing on the current generation of Equatoguinean playwrights, who write during the epoch of Equatorial Guinea's oil boom, Elisa Rizo terms their work "petro-theatre" for what she considers to be a "literary movement" to "untangle the ethnic-history of the situation of the Equatoguinean present" (76).<sup>3</sup> In this article I analyse two of Ávila Laurel's short stories, "Seas of Saucepans" ("Mares de ollas") and "A Superhuman Effort" ("Un esfuerzo sobrehumano"), from the 2008 collection *Crude Stories* (*Cuentos crudos*), the 2017 novel *The Gurugu Pledge*, and one poem, "Equatorial," from the pair collectively entitled *Equatorial Guinea* (*Guinea Ecuatorial*).<sup>4</sup> I have selected these examples of Ávila Laurel's substantial body of work due to their accessibility (for a foreign audience with internet access at least) and their preoccupation with oil and/or energy. Before analyzing these works, I give some background to Equatorial Guinea, its oil politics, and Obiang's discourses of hollow state feminism.

Equatorial Guinea is a scattering of relatively tiny islands off the coast of Cameroon, Gabon, and its own continental rectangle of mainland. Several ethnicities, mostly of bantu origin, make up the population of Equatorial Guinea, although it is dominated

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<sup>3</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>4</sup> Translations mine

(80%) by Fangs. Although a small part of the population work in services or industry, around two thirds sustain themselves via subsistence farming of cassava, rice, yams, bananas and palm oil nuts, or through hunting bush meat and fishing. Each ethnicity has its own language, but most of the population can also speak Spanish, which is, as a legacy of the colonial era, an official language and the language of education and government. The country had already endured several centuries of European appropriation by the time it became 'Spanish Guinea' at the 1884 Berlin Conference. For Spain, the colony meant imperial pride, timber, coffee and cocoa. But the UN, badgered by Equatoguinean independence activists, started to push for decolonization in the sixties (Campos Serrano). Equatorial Guinea gained nominal independence in 1968, but the new leader, Francisco Macías Nguema, quickly revealed a tendency for tyranny. A third of the Equatoguinean population had either died or left the country by the time Macías' nephew, current dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema, seized power in 1979. Obiang has ruled by way of petroleum-funded patronage networks and security apparatus since Mobil struck oil in 1995. Hydrocarbons reportedly account for 98 percent of the Equatoguinean economy, and by 2005 the country was selling more oil per capita than Saudi Arabia (Wenar 68). However, the country has two sorry distinctions. One, Equatorial Guinea has the largest gap between its GDP and its place on the UN Human Development Index. Two, it repeatedly features in the NGO Freedom House's annual 'worst of the worst' list of the world's most repressive territories, along with the Moroccan-occupied part of Spain's other ex-African colony, Western Sahara. Obiang sees the country's oil fields as a family, rather than a national, asset. The "world's most important bank" helped to make this obvious in 2005 (Cornwell), when Washington-based

Riggs Bank was found guilty of money laundering (Associated Press). US oil companies paid money into personal accounts –held in Riggs Bank - of the Obiang family. On at least two occasions, a Riggs Bank employee had visited Equatorial Guinea’s Washington embassy to pick up suitcases holding plastic-wrapped bundles of cash of up to \$3 million (Cornwell). Obiang’s son and Vice President of Equatorial Guinea, Teodorín, has faced legal repercussions for corruption and “plunder[ing] his country’s oil wealth to buy luxuries” in Brazil, France and Switzerland over the last two years (BBC News).

#### Public relations and ‘feminism’ in the Equatoguinean oil regime

US companies are Obiang’s first partners (that is, they are dominant producers of Equatorial Guinea’s crude oil) when it comes to oil extraction, although British, French and Spanish companies have also been major players. Obiang’s Equatorial Guinea is a classic client state. As the US embassy put it in a leaked communication in 2009, “We (via U.S. oil companies) pay all the bills—and the EG leadership knows it”(Smith (US Embassy to Equatorial Guinea)). By 2009, the US was allegedly importing a larger share of oil and gas from the Gulf of Guinea than it was from the Middle East (Smith (US Embassy to Equatorial Guinea)). In 2018, the US imported \$454 million worth of mineral fuels from the country (Office of the United States Trade Representative). The US government has also bank-rolled security infrastructure surrounding Equatorial Guinea’s/the Obiang family’s oil fields (Allan *Silenced Resistance: Women, Dictatorships, and Genderwashing in Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea*). US technical assistance would, in the words of the US

Embassy in the Equatoguinean capital Malabo, be “effective in giving EG the future we want it to have” (Smith (US Embassy to Equatorial Guinea)). That was an Obiang-led future that would avoid, the embassy said in a leaked cable, “revolution that brings sudden, uncertain change and unpredictability [and] potentially dire consequences for our interests, most notably our energy security” (Smith (US Embassy to Equatorial Guinea)).

Anthropologist Hannah Appel’s ethnography of white oil executives’ and their wives’ lives in Equatorial Guinea backs up what the aforementioned leaks reveal. Appel has explored how enclaves for white North American oil managers act, on an infrastructural level, to “deny the web of sociopolitical relations required for hydrocarbon extraction and production, allowing the commodity (and the companies producing it) to appear as if separate from those relations”(442). That is, Appel shows how American oil companies attempt to deny responsibility for the current state-of-affairs in Equatorial Guinea, in which the majority of the Equatoguinean population live in poverty, without access to electricity and running water, despite the country’s elevated GDP.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, Appel convinces the reader of the guilt of said oil companies through an analysis of their illegal practices and leading role in Obiang’s ostentatious but socially useless prestige projects, such as building high rise buildings that are impressive to the eye but without plumbing or

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the private enclaves that appear in tandem with Western investments in natural resource exploitation throughout Africa, creating transnational networks that are nevertheless disconnected from the national societies in which the enclaves are located, see Ferguson, James. "Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 107, no. 3, 2005, pp. 377-382.

electricity. In other words, Appel picks apart American oil companies' attempts at denial and lays plain their entanglement with Obiang regime abuses of the Equatoguinean population (Appel).

Just as it has done in other oil-rich regimes, such as Babangida or Abacha-ruled Nigeria (Mama), or the Shah's Iran (Sullivan) Equatorial Guinea oil fuels state 'feminism'. Obiang and his Western corporate and government petro-allies work together to formulate a discourse of false state feminism. The Obiang regime brands itself as a champion of gender equality to match the current international trend for supporting, at least in theory, women's empowerment in the "developing world."<sup>6</sup> Such branding serves Obiang's Western partners because it helps them to put a positive spin on their morally reprehensible activities. This branding exercise and its political objectives are well encompassed by the term *genderwashing*. Genderwashing is to claim to promote gender equality whilst simultaneously undermining it (Allan *Silenced Resistance: Women, Dictatorships, and Genderwashing in Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea*; Mason). Obiang, who, in his government's words, "recognized women's rights for the first time in the history of [Equatoguinean] people"(Government of Equatorial Guinea 3) has paid a US-based reputation management company to push the story of his fruitful efforts for gender equality. The US state and US oil companies have helped by sponsoring well-

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to recognize, as Balghis Badri and Aili Mari Tripp do, that African women have played a large role in pressuring international organizations to put women's rights at the forefront of development agendas. Badri, Balghis, and Tripp, Aili Mari. "African Influences on Global Women's Rights: An Overview." *Women's Activism in Africa*, edited by Balghis Badri, and Tripp, Aili Mari, Zed Books, 2017, pp. 1-32.

publicised 'gender equality' work in the country. In practice though, state and foreign embassy-funded measures to tackle sexism in Equatorial Guinea are dramatically inadequate, and mostly consist of high profile receptions and marches attended by the wives of politicians to 'celebrate' their achievements, and beauty pageants. Meanwhile, feminists subtly criticize government for blocking efforts to implement laws and policies designed to promote gender equality, such as a draft law to regulate aspects of customary marriage (covering issues such as the dowry, consent and inheritance) and for refusal to fund measures to support vulnerable women, such as healthcare services for rural women, and support services for sex workers at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (Allan *Silenced Resistance...* 137-141). Likewise, the role of overseas aid to Equatorial Guinea in general terms has received a damning judgment: the only systematic, independent evaluation readily available online at the time of writing finds that aid has been used principally for the personal and political advantage of the ruling regime, while having no positive impact on the lives of the poorest Equatoguineans (Larrú).

#### Oil gluttony, gender and lights of hope

In the remainder of the paper, I explore Ávila Laurel's use of gluttony as a metaphor for petrocapiatalism, where petrocapiatalism is a globalized economy dependent on oil and gas, and the current geopolitical status of quo, in which access to oil is paramount (Rogers). Whilst most dictionary definitions of the word understand it as excessive eating or drinking, gluttony, in its broadest meaning, is "the overindulgence or overconsumption of anything—not just food—to the point of

waste” (Dossey 3). Bayart, as I mentioned earlier, has drawn our attention to the workings of politics in many sub-Saharan African countries through the idea of “the politics of the belly,” where eating stands in for governing, and eating involves exploiting, hoarding, attacking or feeding one’s kin and allies first (Bayart). For example, Bayart describes former Equatoguinean dictator Macías Nguema, who killed or forced into exile a third of the country’s population through his draconian policies, as having “a prophetic appetite”(268) But Bayart finds that, in many cases, such politics, for better or worse, work. What the idea of gluttony adds to this conversation is a value judgement on these politics from an Equatoguinean perspective, and the judgement condemns. In Christian doctrine (and we should perhaps bear in mind, in the context of this paper, that the majority of Equatoguineans are Catholics) gluttony is a sin when it involves depriving the needy of food (Okholm). Ávila Laurel paints a picture of Bayart’s politics of the belly, but it is a hypercritical one. The aesthetic quality of Ávila Laurel’s picture of oil gluttony is also important: the politics of the belly disgust. Greed and exploitation are grotesque. Below, I focus on Ávila Laurel’s depiction of the relationship between oil gluttony and transactional sex in Equatorial Guinea. Then, I look at how the global injustices of petrocapiatalism play out, often in gendered ways, beyond the borders of his country. Finally, I explore the politics of energy access in Equatorial Guinea as well as Ávila Laurel’s attention to audience and, linked to this, the subversive power of his work’s distribution.

“I’ve got good news for British women, I’m single!” So Ávila Laurel opened his address at the 2018 Edinburgh Book Festival, making light of the gendered and racist

line of questioning to which UK authorities subjected him in the UK visa application.<sup>7</sup> “No...” (he presumably told the UK Border Agency), “...my reason for travel is not to marry a British woman, but to discuss my latest novel.” Ironically enough, *The Gurugu Pledge* includes an exchange in which the Malians mock the Gambians for their relationships with “old English ladies” (*The Gurugu Pledge* 81) but the gender-race-age-class-power nexus through which sex tourism operates in Ávila Laurel’s native Equatorial Guinea is different to that of Ghana. In Equatorial Guinea, it is Equatoguinean girls and young women who engage in (or are engaged in) sexual transactions with older, richer white men, and sometimes local men too, if the latter are high enough up in the ranks of the petro-regime to have money to spare (Allan *Silenced Resistance...* 131-151). Ávila Laurel draws attention to the implication of oil in these gendered, raced and classed sexual relations in his poem “Equatorial,” which is the second of a pair of poems respectively names *Guinea* and *Equatorial*, and which, as their titles suggest, together explore the (lack of) national identity of the country:

[...]

And they say that it’s kerosene,  
 that burns the wallet  
 and opens the hymens of shameless girls.  
 In the afternoon, they all go to mass  
 and confess their lies  
 at gunpoint.

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<sup>7</sup> I noted the quotations used here during the event.

free Africa

long live Equatorial Guinea!

*offshore, eaten raw*

[...]

Y dicen que es el kerosín,

que quema la cartilla

y abre los virgos de chicas sin vergüenza.

Por la tarde, todos van a misa

y confiesan sus mentiras

a mano armada.

África libre,

!viva Guinea Ecuatorial,

off shore de crudos consumidos. ("Ecuatorial")

Equatorial Guinea itself is described (in the final two lines, but also implicitly in the title of the pair of poems) as an “*offshore, eaten raw,*” suggesting the nation is raw meat for oil predators, as well as the concept of oil gluttony. The entire nation – and indeed the pair of poems raises doubt as to whether or not ‘Guinea’ ‘Equatorial’ is a nation in the traditional sense of the word - is reduced to the (over?) consumption of oil. If ‘petronations’ are postcolonial nations that came into being parallel to oil developments, and for which oil and gas dependency is part of their national identity (Rutland), Ávila Laurel gives an overarching image of Equatorial Guinea less as a petronation than a petrocolony. The neocolonial undertones of the oil/sex nexus are

underlined by the Anglicism of the final line,<sup>8</sup> whilst “free Africa” suggests the irony of a ‘postcolonial’ country bankrolled, that is dependent economically, on the West. Like “eaten raw,” the kerosene-burnt savings book, together with the nod to catholic mass and confession, suggest the gluttonous sins of petrocapiatalism.

The neocolonial dynamic of oil-soaked sexual politics, as well as the chaotic excesses of oil gluttony, are also addressed in Ávila Laurel’s short story *Seas of Saucepans* (*Mares de ollas*), part of the wider 2006 collection named *Crude Stories* (*Relatos crudos*), freely available – like the aforementioned poems - online.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on *Crude Stories*, Dorothy Odartey-Wellington finds that the challenges faced by the Malabo-dwelling residents, whether they be power blackouts, lack of running water or exploitation by foreign multinationals, are a microcosm of the national situation and country-wide discontent with the ruling government (84-85). *Seas of Saucepans* focuses on the latter of the three challenges highlighted by Odartey-Wellington. It is a dark political satire of a dictator’s whim and its effect on the population. Through it, Ávila Laurel ridicules the Obiang regime and exposes the gendered outcomes of its oil gluttony. By way of its farcical orders, the regime forces the population to humiliate itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Ávila Laurel is aware of the colonialism’s linguistic legacy. When describing how the Gurugers live according to language group, and struggle together to find something to eat each day, he clarifies, “Eat or *manger*, according to whichever history the whites chose for you” Ávila Laurel, Juan Tomás. *The Gurugu Pledge*. translated by Jethro Soutar, *And Other Stories*, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> See ---. "Mares De Ollas." 22 April 2019.

The story opens with the dictator's latest decree: the celebration of Christmas is forbidden due to economic crisis. All goods bought for Christmas must be returned to the point of purchase. And as the date is the 23 December, the population have already bought their new shoes and clothes, their Christmas dinner ingredients, had their hair and nails done. Most have already started to cook festive stews, and thus they are forced to return to the shops, saucepans in hand, and attempt to claim refunds for their putrid, rotting ingredients. Thus, the country becomes overrun with the excess commodities that the ruling regime considers an over-indulgence (and, in the case of the saucepans' contents, gluttony) on the part of its impoverished population. The government has a special solution for the thousands of young women that have had their hair braided for the Christmas parties. White employees from a North American oil company arrive in central Malabo in a lorry transporting tubes. Descending from the lorry, the white men carry with them a curious apparatus that resembles an electric saw – a braidcutter. They demonstrate its function on one of the girls that regime heavies have rounded up. She sobs with shame and humiliation as the oil executive, smiling in his suit and tie for a photograph (and thereby suggesting the scene is a PR opportunity to showcase the company's altruistic donation of the braidcutting contraption to the Equatoguinean public), shaves her head. Ávila Laurel lays plain the gendered nature of the extractive violence, and the incredible hypocrisy of corporations that claim to be promoting women's empowerment through their activities in Equatorial Guinea.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the condition of women in Equatoguinean society and in the diaspora, see Melibea Obono Ntutumu, Trifonia. "Acerca De La Mujer Guineana. Un Largo Camino Por Recorrer." <http://www.asodegue.org/marzo0809.htm>. Accessed 23 May 2016, ---. "Guinea

Furthermore, through depicting the ludicrous waste of the entire population's festive feasts, Ávila Laurel suggests the profound duplicity of the ruling Obiang family that grows rich on the back of the world's unabated oil consumption whilst Equatoguineans go hungry. The selfish implications of Christian understandings of gluttony are implied here. Indeed, the poverty of the 'average' Equatoguinean is laid plain by a young woman unsuccessfully attempting to return –as per the demands of the dictator's decree - her new shoes to the market stall where she had purchased them. A reimbursement is difficult since, penniless, she had bought the shoes in exchange for sex.

As the mass public headshaving continues, politicians emerge from the nearby house of parliament balconies to watch the spectacle. They recognise girls with whom they

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Ecuatorial: Misoginia En Los Partidos Políticos." *Tiempos Canallas*, 8 March 2013.  
<http://www.tiemposcanallas.com/8-de-marzo-guinea-ecuatorial-misoginia-en-los-partidos-politicos-de-melibea-obono-ntutumu/> <http://www.tiemposcanallas.com/8-de-marzo-guinea-ecuatorial-misoginia-en-los-partidos-politicos-de-melibea-obono-ntutumu/>, ---. "¿La Mujer Fang Tiene Precio?" 30 April 2012 2012, pp. 1-20. general editor, ASODEGUE, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/92067686/La-Mujer-Fang-Tiene-Precio><http://www.scribd.com/doc/92067686/La-Mujer-Fang-Tiene-Precio>, ---. "Sin Dinero No Se Puede Estudiar Parte 1." ASODEGUE <http://www.scribd.com/doc/94653145/Sin-Dinero-No-Se-Puede-Estudiar>, ---. "Sin Dinero No Se Puede Estudiar: El Caso De Las Mujeres Part 2 ." 24 May 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/94769683/Sin-Dinero-No-Se-Puede-Estudiar-El-Caso-de-Las-Mujeres>, Nchama, Ana. ""Me Prostituyo Con Discreción"." edited by Trifonia Melibea Obono Ntutumu, ASODEGUE, 8 March 2012 2012. <http://www.asodegue.org/marzo0812.htm><http://www.asodegue.org/marzo0812.htm>, Nsue Angüe, María. *Ekomo*. Sial Ediciones, 2009, Obono Ntutumu, Trifonia Melibea. *La Hija De Una Soltera Fang*. 2012. 10 March 2017, Sipi Mayo, Remei. *Inmigración Y Género: El Caso De Guinea Ecuatorial*. Tercera Prensa-Hirugarren Prentsa S.L., 2004.

have had “certain relations,” girls who have not yet reached the age to “do the baccalaureate,” and are so disgusted by the bloody, oily, horror of the sight below that they vomit over the rails. The braidcutter, due to its coating with “grease from the oil company’s warehouse,”<sup>11</sup> makes an unsettling sound that gets louder and louder the more women are shaved, and, since some women have nits, the braidcutter soon drips with nit blood. The scene brings together Equatorial Guinea’s ruling regime, North American oil elites and young Equatoguinean girls, the former two humiliating the latter. Ávila Laurel exposes the genderwashing of petroculture with grotesque imagery of oil, blood, vomit and nits, not to mention the putrid contents of the sea of saucepans that give the story its name. The Equatoguinean regime, in partnership with neocolonial oil elites, exploit underage girls as well as natural resources.

Ávila Laurel’s 2017 *The Gurugu Pledge* also focuses on colonial legacies and the sexual exploitation of African women, and makes use of electricity and oil aesthetically and as metaphors to communicate the role of oil gluttony in fuelling African migration to Europe. The story begins abruptly. The reader lands in the book beside gathered firewood and a sparse, shared meal of fish scraps to view an evening in the life of any Gurugu mountain resident. We are in a cave, on a cold, cold night, listening to a story. This is the survival story, or stories, of the Africans waiting to cross from Morocco to a Spanish enclave, and thus to leave behind the violence of the borderlands and move on to the mythical better life of Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> All translations from mine and from Castilian. Ávila Laurel, Juan Tomás. "Mares De Ollas." 22 April 2019.

‘Survival’ here means ensuring the infinite continuation of the energy cycle, which trudges around and around and around the novel, like a hamster on a wheel. The Gurugers make and spend this energy. They are the migrants from all over Africa who hide from Moroccan police –known to raze the ramshackle camps of sub-Saharan (Gibson-McDonald) - in the forests of Mount Gurugu. The mountain gazes over the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Melilla. The Gurugers take turns hustling for food, which gives them the energy to play football. They play football in order to keep warm. And as they struggle to keep warm of an evening, they tell stories – their own back-stories, the stories of “what their lives had been before coming to the residence” (*The Gurugu Pledge* 10) – in order to... well, the narrator doesn’t give us a reason at first. But we do know one reason why Ávila Laurel wishes to tell these stories. In his words, the novel is at least in part about “humanizing the lives of people that no one talks about.”<sup>12</sup>

The ‘Pledge’ of the title refers to the Gurugers’ mutual promise to enact justice for the women sexually exploited by the mountain’s two shadiest residents Omar Salanga and Aliko Dangote. The Gurugers’ do so by, in the midst of an attempt to cross the border fence, impaling the two guilty parties upon the fence, thereby contesting Europe’s border regime at the same time as they punish those who have exploited the vulnerable women amongst them. That is to say, Ávila Laurel puts the Gurugers’ agency and moral compass at the forefront. However, we could not describe the pursuit of the ‘pledge’ as a plot. Ávila Laurel consciously wrote a novel without a central plot because – he says – “there is no plot in the lives of the people

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<sup>12</sup> Notes from Edinburgh Book Festival event, 21 August 2018.

whose story [he] tells. If [he] gave the book a plot, [he] would be silencing those people yet again.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, the structure of the novel reflects the oral traditions of the Gurugers’ home communities. We are emerged in a communal storytelling and, fittingly, Ávila Laurel makes abundant use of an oral story-teller’s traditional repertoire. Repetition, parallelism, the direct address, digression, imagery, hyperbole, allusion, and symbolism characterize the novel. <sup>14</sup> Digression, in particular, is a primordial disruptive tool for Ávila Laurel. The teller-of-tales (the novel’s main narrator) is frequently interrupted with interjections in the form of requests for clarifications, rumors linked to the characters he talks of, and other comments and opinions from his audience of fellow Gurugers. Consider, for example, the following interruption of Alex Babingda, whose story was, in turn, a digression from the main narrative:

‘Why don’t we actually just let Alex tell his story?’

‘Yes, do go on, Alex,’ said the man who’d spoken of a wedding. ‘But feel free to use any of my suggestions. You could say you were the nephew of the old woman the tatata girl turned into, for example.’

‘Go on, brother Alex Babingida, tell us your story,’ the man in hysterics said with a splutter.

‘Thank you, I will, although with all these interruptions, I’ve almost forgotten it....’ (*The Gurugu Pledge* 31)

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> For more on the typical tools of storytellers in African oral traditions see Ogede, Ode. "Oral Tradition and Modern Storytelling: Revisiting Chinua Achebe's Short Stories." *The International Fiction Review*, vol. 28, no. 1 and 2, 2001.

Such interjections lend a sense of immediacy to the novel, yet also allow ample opportunity for comedy. Observing the banter between the Gurugers, their sometimes light, sometimes disparaging, sometimes gallows humour, humanizes them and prevents the reader from viewing the migrants as objects of pity or horror (indeed, as mentioned above, we are forced to note their agency and collective sense of justice). This directly undermines the narratives of European mainstream media and populist politicians with regards to “illegal” immigrants, which paint the latter as pitiable, or hateful, pariahs stalking “Europe’s” borders and threatening to invade (Andersson 2-3).

The digressions are also frequently lengthened. They thereby give way to sub-stories narrated by various Gurugers sat around the fire. Each sub-story offers a moral lesson, as is often the case in storytelling traditions (Ogede). And each lesson and sub-story reveals why the Gurugers have come to be on Mount Gurugu. As Robin Celikates points out, irregularized migration is often interpreted in Europe in terms of self-interest (migrants seek to exploit welfare systems) or occasionally of humanitarian motivations (fleeing persecution and violence when legal routes have shut down) . Such migrants are regularly stigmatized in mainstream media, including by depicting African migrants in dehumanizing ways, and as threats to Europeans (Schapendonk). News outlets talk of “waves of immigrants” and of “illegal immigrants,” as if people themselves could be illegal. In this context, the ‘back stories’ of his characters, delivered structurally as sub-stories or interjections to the ‘main’ story told by the central narrator, play a key epistemic role in revealing for a

Western reader (and I argue later that Ávila Laurel's envisaged audience is a Western one, not an Equatoguinean one) the complex motivations, which always intersect with petroculturalism's global injustices, that lie behind sub-Saharan migrants' decisions to head towards Europe. Coming to know individual characters, their histories, motivations and aspirations, serves to humanize communities that are normally homogenized into threatening African invaders. Perhaps most importantly, the sub-stories show the various historic and ongoing roles of the West in producing these injustices: the Western reader is implicated.

The interjection of Nigerian Alex is one example of such a sub-story. His tale features the daily trip that he used to make – back home - to a nearby grocery shop to pick up his daily staples of kerosene and food (32). The shopkeeper was foreign, fat, gluttonous, greedy, smelly and grotesque, and literally – Alex thinks – ate other people's money. This foreigner had, so Alex heard, been high up in Idi Amin's regime in Uganda, and had perpetrated numerous atrocities there. Now, he was making a fortune from organizing illegal safari hunting trips for whites. “[A] tremendous glutton,” (8) he would also eat the safari animals and exploit fellow Africans to clean the hides, which he would then sell. The literal and metaphorical oil on the shopkeeper's palms is described in detail over several pages.<sup>15</sup> We see “the dirty pig” “handling everyone else's money, licking his fingers and then eating” as Alex buys a plastic bottle of kerosene (38). And in tandem we are told how the shopkeeper managed to “greas[e] the palms of those in power” in whichever country he found

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<sup>15</sup> Metaphorically greasing the palms of those in power, p.38, actual grease and dirt on his hands, pp. 32-35.

himself (38). Much like Dolores Molubela, the cleaner with whom I opened this paper, Ávila Laurel represents the colonial legacy of oil, authoritarianism and neocolonial exploitation with crude images of gluttony. The juxtaposition of this tale of an (oil) gluttonous, corrupt shopkeeper with that of the morally superior Gurugers who struggle, every day, to find enough food to stay alive (i.e. the 'needy' victims of the Christian sin of gluttony) makes Ávila Laurel's point cruder still.

Energy, including but going beyond the chemical energy that is produced when oil is burned, is a key theme in the novel. Ávila Laurel uses energy converted into electric light as a screen onto which the Gurugers project their desires. But what electricity means socially and politically for Gurugers changes as the story progresses. As mentioned earlier, Gurugers are trapped in an infinite energy cycle, in which they must exercise to keep warm, and seek food in order to have the energy to exercise. Ávila Laurel reflects this relentless cycle in vocabulary, semantics and form: ideas and words are repeated throughout the novel, and secondary characters make successive appearances. Electric-powered lights initially represent the end of the struggle to maintain this energy cycle of basic survival. The sight of electric lights mean warmth without having to expend one's energy as well as power, prosperity, comfort, but – we learn as the story progresses - also the ability to oppress.<sup>16</sup> Says the narrator from the summit of the mountain at night, "you could see the lights in the villages below, and although those villages were not in Europe, they had lights, meaning prosperous lives clustered together" (83). But the torch-light of Omar

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<sup>16</sup> One is reminded of *The Great Gatsby*, in which distant electric light represents Gatsby's dreams and desires, but simultaneously their unattainability.

Salanga's phone (a charged phone is a complete anomaly and an unthinkable luxury on the mountain, where there is no source of electricity), used to guide men to the women he sexually exploits in the cave, stands in for an uglier role for electrical energy. Electric light begins as a metaphor for the prosperity that the Gurugers seek, but later comes to stand for the interlinked power abuses, corruption and poverty that forces them to seek such dreams far from home in the first place. In other words, Ávila Laurel uses electric light to reveal the dazzling dream and ugly reality of petrocapi-talism, and, once again, he takes care to underline the gendered vulnerabilities brought about by this global system.

Equatoguineans are amongst those who pursue a destiny outside of Africa. Benita Sampedro Vizcaya notes that "Guinea does not stay on the sidelines of the displacement provoked by the traffic of political and economic refugees, that escape from the third world at a fast pace fascinated by the capitalist and urban dream of western prosperity"(310-311).<sup>17</sup> Ávila Laurel brings the Africa-wide injustices exposed in *The Gurugu Pledge* back home to Equatorial Guinea in his short story "A Superhuman Effort" ("Un esfuerzo sobrehumano"). Another of the *Crude Stories*, the tale mocks the state of electrical infrastructure in Equatorial Guinea. It is a brief paragraph of a story, flash fiction. Making full use of the brevity of this genre, the power of the story lies in what is nodded to, but not explicitly stated. On 2 January, the employees of Equatorial Guinea's only electrical company arrive home exhausted, demanding multiple portions of food and energy drinks from their wives, because "from the afternoon of the 31<sup>st</sup> until midday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> there were no

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<sup>17</sup> Translation mine from Castilian.

blackouts in sector 3 of urban district number 6" ("Un Esfuerzo Sobrehumano").<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, all other sectors and districts of the Equatoguinean capital city see the New Year in by candle light. Ávila Laurel leads the reader to make several assumptions about Equatorial Guinea: sector 3 of district 6 is the most affluent of suburbs where the country's ruling circle reside, the country's electrical infrastructure is so desperately poor that a team of electricians must work without rest to ensure that energy is provided to one sector of a district for just 48 hours, and that corruption ensures that only the ruling elites have access to electrical energy. The story ridicules the Equatoguinean government, exposing the unfair incongruence of a country that has estimated reserves of 1.1 billion oil barrels, but that cannot or will not supply the majority of the population with functioning electrical infrastructure (The Oil & Gas Year). Again, an underlying message of oil gluttony is suggested, both by the disparity in the ability to (over)consume energy, and by the electricians' lack of food or drink for two days.

Form's interaction with circulation is also significant when it comes to the disruptive power of Ávila Laurel's work. Kapstein's observations on this matter with regards to Nigerian literature ring true, at least partially, for Ávila Laurel's *Crude Stories*. Kapstein argues that the new Nigerian short stories are a form of sabotage because, in terms of their content, they undo Big Oil's narrative of saboteurs-as-criminals by "reframe[ing] the actions of impoverished Nigerian citizens as tactical maneuvers by people wielding the only weapons they have – using the tools of exploitation against their exploiters" ("Crude Fictions: How New Nigerian Short Stories Sabotage Big Oil's

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<sup>18</sup> Translation mine from Castilian.

Master Narrative" 2). Yet Kapstein goes further in arguing that the stories themselves, in terms of their form and circulation, are weapons of sabotage. That is, the stories' short form, and online platform, mean they can be easily disseminated and consumed amongst Nigerians ("Crude Fictions..."). With regards to *Crude Stories* at least, the brevity of Ávila Laurel's tales, and their free accessibility online mirror Kapstein's Nigerian example. However, the crucial difference with the Nigerian context is that Ávila Laurel's principle audience cannot be dominated by his compatriots. There is but one bookshop in Equatorial Guinea, and digital publications by writers seen as a threat to the regime (Ávila Laurel is most certainly a member of this group) are not readily accessible within Equatorial Guinea.

Equatoguinean writers know they write for a foreign audience. This knowledge has implications for how their work can disrupt the narratives of – and indeed resist – Big Oil. When it comes to the dynamics of nonviolent action for overcoming an oppressive force, international indignation can, as Gene Sharp argues, be translated into concrete actions such as economic and diplomatic sanctions (113). However, Sharp also points out that international public opinion alone will have little effect if the opponent is not sensitive to it (113). In the case of Equatorial Guinea, and as mentioned above, genderwashing Public Relations campaigns reveal the importance of public opinion 'back home' for US corporations. To target English and Spanish-speaking audiences then, seems a worthwhile resistance strategy to complement

Ávila Laurel's wider political activism.<sup>19</sup> If Ávila Laurel's intention is to take on Big Oil, and its Equatoguinean government partners, by nonviolent means, then his ability to sway public opinion in the countries in which the corporations active in Equatorial Guinea – mainly US and Spain, and to a lesser extent UK and France – is key.

### Final Remarks

Ávila Laurel's work challenges extractivism by exposing the false feminism and hypocrisy of corporates and the Equatoguinean ruling regime. He helps us see oil, as well as structural inequalities in which it is enmeshed and which it causes, through a picture of gendered oil gluttony. Ávila Laurel's depictions of those who sell oil – whether they be the Equatoguinean ruling elite or the ex-henchman of Idi Amin turned shopkeeper who flogs kerosene and animal hides – reek of overindulgence in (exploitative) sex with underage girls, food and/or corruption. Said shopkeeper guzzles food and other people's money simultaneously, pawing the bottles of kerosene he sells with grotesque, sticky fingers. When white oil executives lead the public humiliation of Equatoguinean girl-children by shaving their heads, they stage this act amidst a scene of extravagant, government-ordered *waste*, with pots and pots of rotting meals, cabinet members spewing out their food, and oil from the braidcutter mingling with vomit and nit blood. The oil system disgusts as it exploits. The concept of energy, on the other hand, is explored in a more nuanced fashion.

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<sup>19</sup> This is also the case for writers from Spain's other former African colony, Western Sahara. See Allan, Joanna. "The Saharawi "Friendship Generation"." *The Literary Encyclopedia*, edited by Helen Rachel Cousins, vol. 8.1.2, 2017.

The Gurugers basic, daily struggle to obtain enough energy to survive accentuates the gluttony of petrocapiatism. At the same time, electrical light stands in for petrocapiatism, both the dazzling dream it presents, and the exploitative and violent reality it constitutes.

But, like Nigerian writers, the disruptive power of Avila Laurel's work is not just in its content. Much of his poetry and short stories are available freely online in their original Spanish, whilst two of his novels are available in English, indeed the latest of these has been published *only* in English. These books are not on sale at all in Equatorial Guinea. His audience is a Western one, principally a US, UK and Spanish. In the same way that the extracted oil does not primarily benefit the Equatoguinean people, but is rather consumed by peoples elsewhere, Ávila Laurel produces works intended for, and consumed by foreign rather than domestic audiences. His work disrupts genderwashing narratives by laying plain how exploitation of, and violence against, women is linked to petrocapiatism. By exporting his writing, Ávila Laurel undermines extraction companies' legitimacy in the latters' countries of origin, a tactic typical of nonviolent strategy. How effective is his strategy? This is harder to measure. But his literary achievements (that is, his appearance on the shortlists of international literary prizes, and his invitations to speak at renowned literary festivals around the world) tell of his ability to raise awareness of petrodespotism in Equatorial Guinea amongst an audience that may otherwise know very little about the country. Expanding his literary audience has also enabled him to create an international platform ready to report on his political activism and offer solidarity when needed. As Professor Pavarti Nair, writing in British national newspaper *The*

*Guardian* on the occasion of Ávila Laurel's 2011 hunger strike explained, "a writer's hunger strike can change Equatorial Guinea". Since Ávila Laurel is "much-loved, read and admired for his brilliance," he has a certain ability to help the anti-regime cause in overcoming what Nair highlights as its principal problem: its lack of "visibility and recognition" (Nair). His close relationship with the Washington-based NGO EG Justice, which fights for respect for human rights in Equatorial Guinea by lobbying US government above all in the area of transparency around oil transactions and exploitation, helps to further amplify the impact of his work.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the greatest indicator of Ávila Laurel's power, though, is the reaction he provokes in the regime itself. While a government spokesperson shrugs off the writer as being "barely known" and as having "no followers" and "no relevance," (Osa Osa Ecoro)" the regime's insistence on ensuring that the Equatoguinean population cannot read his works, its arrest of the writer, and its actions in eventually forcing him to seek exile in Spain, all indicate the depth of fear that Ávila Laurel, his works and his international platform invoke in the decadent regime.

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>20</sup> EG Justice publicizes Avila Laurel's work, and lobbies the US government when Avila Laurel is under threat. For more on the organization's work on oil transparency, see

<https://www.egjustice.org/advocacy>

I would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for the Early Career Fellowship that made this research possible. I am grateful to my colleagues at the Centre for International Development, Northumbria University, for their support. I would also like to thank Alok Amatya, Ashley Dawson, John Duvall, Robert Marzec, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments.

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