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## Pervasive extractivism: Petroculture and sedimented histories in Sandrine Bessora's *Petroleum*

**Résumé**

Cet article a deux objectifs. Premièrement, il considère comment le roman de Sandrine Bessora, *Petroleum* (2004), utilise l'intertexte du mythe de Médée, s'inscrivant ainsi dans une tradition littéraire spécifique, pour explorer la manière dont l'histoire est écrite. Deuxièmement, il examine comment, en incorporant le mythe de Médée avec le personnage des traditions ouest-africaines de Mami Wata, le roman fictionnalise l'histoire de la colonisation comme étant connectée à celle de l'extraction, rendant ainsi visible l'insertion diffuse du pétrole aux pratiques néo-coloniales au Gabon. De cette manière, l'article montre comment l'extractivisme et le cadre théorique de la « pétroculture » permettent de réviser et de réécrire l'histoire gabonaise dans ses dimensions énergétique et coloniale. En mettant en question le déroulement traditionnel du mythe de Médée, le roman de Bessora suggère de regarder l'histoire de la colonisation et de l'extraction de ressources naturelles au Gabon à travers des perspectives pétroculturelles non-européennes.

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## INTRODUCTION

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1 This paper seeks to address the following questions: can aspects of Gabonese history be told through the pervasive presence of extractive practices in the country—and extractivism's deeply entangled relation to French colonialism in the country—and can cultural productions tell this history, specifically in Sandrine Bessora's novel *Petroleum* (2004)? In order to address these questions, this paper will argue that the novel can be read as a re-telling of Gabonese history; specifically that of extractivism and colonialism in the country. This can be identified through several narrative elements which excavate this sedimented history of extractivism. First, by identifying a genealogy connecting extractive practices in the country from slavery and its marketplace to timber logging and offshore petroleum extraction—the focus of the novel investigated in this chapter—to manganese mining as a future for the country's extractive industry. The argument here is that the extractivism at the core of this part of Gabonese history is deeply connected to colonial and imperial practices, which have simultaneously erased the country's past. Second, by voicing these silenced histories, I argue that Bessora's novel brings to light the extractive connections just mentioned, catalysed in offshore oil extraction. It does this through the way the novel is written: the narration is constantly intermeshed with historical and factual elements, bringing attention to history and events relating to oil research and extraction in the country. This practice merges fiction and history writing, thus inciting the reader to ask: what is a historical narrative, and how does it differ from a fictional one? It also highlights extractive connections using the intertext of the Medea and the Mami Wata figures, which engage with a broader history of colonial epistemological and intellectual violence, and it connects this history to the Atlantic trade in the case of the Mami Wata figure. This practice permits us to identify oil extraction within a longer history of colonial exploitation in the country. Furthermore, the construction of Medea and Mami Wata as figures of resistance in the novel also permits

highlighting a gendered feature of the violence of oil extraction, and of extractivism more broadly, that undoes kinship across communities and between human and extra-human life.

2 These questions will be addressed by considering how the extractive practices above are connected and embedded in the country's colonial history and identifying how these are part of "petrocultural methods". Specifically, I will think through the extractive side of petroculture's theoretical frames. The paper will then tackle questions about the writing of history in general, but particularly in a colonial context. Finally, it will bring these methodological and theoretical underpinnings into an investigation of Bessora's novel. This will identify how intertextuality and historiography come to play a crucial role in making this novel a "petrohistory". In order to do so, it will engage with the differences between history, myth and fiction and how history is un-written and re-written, and the role myths play in these dynamics. It will also consider the role of feminised and gendered depictions of "nature" in registering extractive violence in terms of conceptual articulation as well as physical and material traces that remain so deeply embedded in our history, that they become sedimented in our consciousness. This will connect the focus onto the use of the Medea and Mami Wata figures and the intertextual role of these figures before the paper's conclusion.

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## ENERGY BETWEEN THE LINES: EXTRACTIVISM AND PETROCULTURE

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3 This paper does not aim to provide an overview or literary review of "petroculture", which is a conceptualisation and methodological approach identifying the pervasiveness of crude oil and refined petroleum and petroleum-derivative products, such as plastic, in our daily lives and cultures.<sup>1</sup> Associated with the term petrofiction,

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<sup>1</sup> Sonia Shah, *Crude: The Story of Oil* (New York, Toronto and London: Seven Stories Press, 2004); Imre Szeman, "How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures", *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études Canadiennes*, vol. 47, n° 3, 2013, 145–168; Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the*

a category that identifies narratives that focus on oil in its different forms, petroculture is a context within which innumerable cultural productions can be framed.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one could arguably claim that *all* cultural productions are petroculture: though they might not focus *specifically* on the extraction, refining, production, distribution, consumption or economy of petroleum, any work featuring modes of transportation fuelled by petrol, plastic products or other petroleum derivative products are essentially woven into the fabric of what is understood as petroculture. Petroculture is a way to read forms of energy production and consumption *between the lines* of cultural works, whether these be literary lines or any forms of visual, multimedia, performative and sound-based arts.<sup>3</sup> Thus, petroculture is pervasive not only because our lives have been fuelled by energy consumption more broadly for centuries—our modernity has been built on fossil fuel energy in particular—but also because the theoretical framework established in the Energy Humanities by petrocultural scholars has become itself pervasive across fields in the humanities and social sciences.

- 4 This scholarship is grounded in traditions developed by many scholars focusing on the “priority

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*American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ross Barrett, Daniel Worden, *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, Imre Szeman, *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Imre Szeman, “Conjectures on World Energy Literature: Or, What Is Petroculture?”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, n° 3, 2017; Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Simon Orpana, *Gasoline Dreams: Waking up from Petroculture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021) and Carola Hein, *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Imre Szeman, “Introduction to Focus: Petrofictions”, *American Book Review*, vol. 33, n° 3, 2012, 3; Jennifer Wenzel, “How to Read for Oil”, *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, n° 3, 2014, 156–161; Graeme Macdonald, “Oil and World Literature”, *American Book Review*, vol. 33, n° 3, 2017, 7–31; Amy Riddle, “Petrofiction and Political Economy in the Age of Late Fossil Capital”, *Mediations*, vol. 32, n° 1, 2018, 55–74.

<sup>3</sup> Here between the line used following Edward Said's theorisation of contrapuntual reading in Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

of the political interpretation of literary texts”, as Fredric Jameson puts it: “It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity”.<sup>4</sup> Jameson's suggestion also means a connection to environmental and energy reality as a socio-political and economic world is deeply entangled with the ecological. Indeed, Patricia Yaeger asks about Jameson's concept: “Does this model of the political unconscious also describe an energy unconscious?”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this entanglement is also necessarily tied to our current climate crisis, as Andreas Malm notes: “perhaps global warming is, [...] a political unconscious that already pervades culture”.<sup>6</sup> It is a climate crisis that is not only ecological, though exacerbated by fossil fuel burning, and which has a longer history in imperial extractive forms of exploitation which have precipitated the consequences of anthropogenic climate change in formerly colonised spaces. It is thus through energy, and seeking to produce and consume energy, that we can identify the incipit of our current climate catastrophe and identify the extractive practices that allowed petroleum-based economies to take hold in our modern and contemporary world. Particularly, given the scope and focus of this article on Western Africa, Gabon, and the Atlantic, I wish to identify this starting point with the development of the Atlantic trade and slavery.<sup>7</sup>

The initial violence and extraction of abducted Black peoples from the African continent to be enslaved in the Americas is perpetuated in other

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<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 17, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Yaeger, “Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources”, *PMLA*, vol. 126, n° 2, 2011, 309.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), 14.

<sup>7</sup> See also Kenneth Omeje (ed.), *Extractive Economies and Conflicts in the Global South: Multi-Regional Perspectives on Rentier Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

contemporary forms of extraction, including that of oil like in the novel explored here. I base this understanding of extractivism following a number of scholars, but notably Macarena Gómez-Barris' definition of extractive capitalism, because, as a practice, it allowed for the development of our economic system. Gómez-Barris explains the term as follows: “[e]xtractive capitalism, then, violently reorganizes territories as well as continually perpetuates dramatic social and economic inequalities that delimit Indigenous sovereignty and national autonomy”.<sup>8</sup> This territorial re-organisation is seen in transformation of land, bodies of water and people through the extraction of natural resources aimed to turn these into commodities—or commodity producing *bodies*—that enriched emerging European nation states and featured in the daily lives of their inhabitants:

As the Liverpool Maritime Museum says in its Transatlantic Slavery Gallery: ‘Much of the social life of Western Europe in the Eighteenth Century depended on the products of slave labour. In homes and coffee-houses, people met over coffee, chocolate, or tea, sweetened with Caribbean sugar. They wore clothes made from American cotton and smoked pipes filled with Virginian tobacco. They used furniture made from mahogany and other tropical woods.’ As Europeans became more and more attached to

these goods, they were sucked into the vortex of slavery and its human-consuming economy.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the Atlantic trade and slavery can be seen as extracting “bodies” from the African continent for enslaved labour, which often implied working on plantations, themselves an extractive and unsustainable type of agriculture given its monocrop model to maximise production and wealth. Additionally, this labour itself is an extraction process by which the strength of *objectified bodies* is drawn.<sup>10</sup> Achille Mbembe notes that

[I]e monde de la traite des Nègres est la même chose que le monde de la chasse, de la capture, de la cueillette, de la vente et de l’achat. Il est le monde de l’extraction brute. Le capitalisme racial est l’équivalent d’une vaste nécropole. Il repose sur le trafic des morts et des ossements humains.<sup>11</sup>

(The Atlantic Trade world is the same as the world of hunting, of capturing, of gathering, of selling and buying. It is the world of raw extraction. Racial capitalism is the equivalent of a vast necropolis. It rests upon the traffic of the dead and of human bones.)

<sup>8</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xviii. See also Eduardo Gudynas, “Extracciones, extractivismos y extrahecciones. Un marco conceptual sobre la apropiación de recursos naturales”, *Observatorio del desarrollo*, n° 18, 2013, 1–18; James Petras, Henry Veltmeyer (eds.), *Extractive Imperialism in the Americas: Capitalism’s New Frontier* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Matthew Henry, “Extractive Fictions and Postextraction Futurisms: Energy and Environmental Injustice in Appalachia”, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 11, n° 2, 2019, 402–426; Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2020); Alok Amatya and Ashley Dawson, “Literature in an Age of Extraction: An Introduction”, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 66, n° 1, 2020, 1–19 and Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, “Afterword: What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Extractivism?”, *Textual Practice*, 2021, 1–19.

<sup>9</sup> Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 81–82.

<sup>10</sup> Here I use the term “bodies” to emphasise the objectification of the enslaved subjects through slavery and colonialism, following WReC who notes: “especially if we bear in mind Wallerstein’s repeated emphasis (1996) that the production of capital entails ‘the commodification of everything’: ‘commodification’ is a never-ending rather than a once-and-for-all process; it ramifies both *extensively* – through the ceaseless development and conquering of new markets – and *intensively* – through the equally ceaseless quantification of quality” in WReC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 18–19. See also Alexander Butchart, *The Anatomy of Power: European Constructions of the African Body* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison Nègre* (Paris: Découverte, 2013), 200–201. All translations are mine unless specified otherwise.

7 This necrotic practice is grounded in a specific process of objectification, or *production*, of Black humanity by white humanity, through the trade of abducted and enslaved people in the aim of extracting this Black humanity as a natural resource to produce wealth. This racialised and racialising process is at the basis of our contemporary fossil fuel production and consumption, in the sense that these would not be possible without physically and ontologically violent racial and colonial practices. Mbembe explains this process as follows:

Le substantif « Nègre » est, ensuite, le nom que l'on donne au produit résultant du procès par lequel les gens d'origine africaine sont transformés en *minerai* vivant dont on extrait du *métal*. Telle est sa double dimension métamorphique et économique. Si sous l'esclavage l'Afrique est le lieu privilégié d'extraction de ce minerai, la plantation dans le Nouveau Monde, par contre, est le lieu de sa fonte, et l'Europe le lieu de sa conversion fiduciaire. Ce passage de *l'homme-minerai* à *l'homme-métal* et de *l'homme-métal* à *l'homme-monnaie* est une dimension structurante du premier capitalisme. L'extraction est d'abord arrachement ou séparation d'êtres humains singuliers des origines où ils tirent leur naissance. Elle est, ensuite, ablation ou extirpation—condition pour que le pressage (sans lequel il n'est point d'extraction aboutie) puisse effectivement avoir lieu. En faisant passer l'esclave par le laminoir et en le pressurant de manière à en extraire le maximum de profit, on ne convertit pas simplement un être humain en objet. On ne le marque pas seulement d'une empreinte indélébile. On produit le Nègre.<sup>12</sup>

(The term “Nègre” is, then, the name given to the product resulting from a process through which people of African origin are transformed into living *ore* from which one extracts *metal*. That is its double dimension; both alchemical and economic. If under slavery Africa is the preferred site for this extraction, the New World

plantation, instead, is the site of its casting, and Europe the site of its financial conversion. This passage from the *man-ore* to the *man-metal* and from the *man-metal* to the *man-money* is a structural element of nascent capitalism. Extraction is first the tearing or separation of individual human beings from the origins of their birth. It is then removal or extirpation—a condition needed for ore processing (without which there is no successful extraction). By putting the enslaved through the ore rolling mill and pressuring them in order to extract as much profit as possible, one does not simply convert a human being into an object. One does not only brand a human being with an indelible imprint. One produces the “Nègre”.)

8 Though the term “Nègre” in French may appear more ambiguous than its English cognates and translations – all of which are always racial slurs – this ambiguity does not mean the term is any less racist. Rather it is grounded in a specific tradition of Francophone thought which has attempted to wrest the term from its racist and racialising roots. This practice began in the 1920s with the “Négritude” movement. Aimé Césaire, Léon Gontran Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor coined the concept of “Négritude” for the first time in 1934-35 in a journal they founded called *L'Étudiant noir*. Since then, the concept has evolved and continued to provoke debate. Césaire himself, in a paper delivered at a conference at the University of Miami in 1987, confesses his struggle with it.<sup>13</sup> As it has been greatly discussed, the strength of “Négritude” lies in the radical act of adopting and desacralising racist and racialising terminology which perpetuated and reinforced (material) violence imposed on people of African descent and other indigenous groups by the dynamics of colonialism, slavery and imperialism. However, if we bear in mind Mbembe's description above as lying at the heart of our extractive capitalism, it is clear that our world cannot untangle itself from racism and racial exploitation, given that the structures of

<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, *Critique*, 67–68 (cf. note 12), italics in original.

<sup>13</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme, suivi de discours sur la Négritude* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2004).

our socio-economic system were built on this premise. It is at the core of our energy systems, the way we produce and consume energy, and particularly in sites and practices of extraction. This is identified by Malcom Ferdinand's definition of "Nérocène" in the important work *Une écologie décoloniale* (2019):

Ici le mot « Nègre » ne désigne plus une couleur de peau, un phénotype, ni une origine ethnique ou une géographie particulière. Il désigne tous ceux qui furent et sont dans la cale du monde moderne : les hors-monde. Ceux dont les survivances sociales sont frappées d'une exclusion du monde et qui se voient réduits à leur valeur « énergétique ». Le Nègre est blanc, le Nègre est Rouge, le Nègre est Jaune, le Nègre est Marron, le Nègre est Noir. Le Nègre est jeune, le Nègre est vieux, le Nègre est femme, le Nègre est homme. Le Nègre est pauvre, [...]. Le Nègre est marron-forêt, le Nègre est vert-plante, le Nègre est bleu-océan, le Nègre est rouge-terre, le Nègre est gris-baleine, le Nègre est noir-fossile.<sup>14</sup>

(Here the term "Nègre" does not designate a skin colour anymore, a phenotype, nor an ethnic origin, nor a particular geography. It identifies all of those who were and are in the hold of the modern world: the ones that are out of the world. Those whose social survival is struck by marginalisation and exclusion and that are reduced to their "energetic" value. The "Nègre" is white, the "Nègre" is Red, the "Nègre" Yellow, the "Nègre" is brown, the "Nègre" is black. The "Nègre" is young, the "Nègre" is old, the "Nègre" is woman, the "Nègre" is man. [...] The "Nègre" is wood-brown, the "Nègre" is plant-green, the "Nègre" is ocean-blue, the "Nègre" is soil-red, the "Nègre" is whale-grey, the "Nègre" is fossil-black.)

- 9 Ferdinand engages with the critical intersection between the decolonial and the environmental by identifying the transformation of "bodies" into "energy" through (neo-)imperialism and slavery,

<sup>14</sup> Malcom Ferdinand, *Une écologie décoloniale: Penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 106.

as noted in this quote, which also raises issues in relation to gender, body and different physical abilities. The final lines identify extra-human-based extractive practices deeply tied to the ones that brought about slavery, plantation agricultural, coal and crude oil extraction. Thus, petroculture is a theoretical framework that allows us to connect a *longue durée* of extractive practices which culminate in our fossil-fuelled present, ones which have caused socio-ecological apocalypses from slavery and indigenous genocide to the destruction of human and extra-human kinship, and even to our current climate crisis. In this manner, petroculture is also petrohistory as we can identify these developments, which appear linear, according to our Enlightenment-inherited understanding of history, but that is actually cyclical and deeply sedimented in our world-system. Indeed, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues the "classification of all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical is tied also to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity".<sup>15</sup> If history, then, is what Christina Sharpe calls "a past that is not past",<sup>16</sup> should not the manner in which history is written highlight the continued presence of this supposed "past"?

#### FROM MEMORY TO FICTION: NARRATING AND WRITING HISTORY

In 1978, Hayden White argued that "in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are—verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences".<sup>17</sup> My aim here is not to conflate his-

<sup>15</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 42.

tory and literature. Rather I argue that literature has been, and still is, a repository of history and, more specifically, of colonial histories.<sup>18</sup> Literature may be fictional and may not always provide facts as history strives to do. However, a collection of facts themselves is insufficient to paint a good picture of the past: historical recounting is always biased by the point of view, the school of thought, the language and culture, of the historian. The fact that colonial histories are passed on through literature, and sometimes *as* literature—often implicitly, as literature might not be seen as history—makes them more insidious because their problematic content is not challenged as it would be if they were truly considered historical documents. Therein lies the problem with the supposed harmlessness of fiction, since by pertaining to be fiction rather than fact it “deresponsibilises” itself.

- 11 Fiction—especially the narratives constituting the so-called “literary canon”, which can be more aptly described as a “colonial literary archive”—must be seen as a repository of the past, of colonial and oppressive histories and relationships which need to be challenged. Moreover, traditions of resistance against repressive regimes—sometimes also expressed through cultural productions—need to be recognised as such and placed in dialogue with the former to challenge them. Indeed, as Trouillot notes: “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”<sup>19</sup> This also raises issues of memory and memorialisation as practices through which erasure of certain developments in history can be

recalled to the present. This is central, given how many argue that we currently live in a “post-colonial” world. Priya Satia identifies how memorialisation for colonialism and imperialism are so necessary, and though Satia’s work consider the British context, it can be globally extrapolated to any other colonial and imperial power that seeks to erase its past and present oppression:

Memorialization can help make the atrocities of empire common knowledge, for the sake of avoiding future repetitions and to ensure that Britons are aware of what their country owes the world, as such awareness can critically shape relationships among its citizens and between Britain and the world. We live in a postcolonial world in which the division between haves and have-nots extends divisions created in the era of European colonialism. Without a clear-eyed understanding of that colonial past, people around the world will continue to turn to myths of liberal empire and racial and cultural prejudices to understand their inequality. *We remain prisoners of those myths because the history of empire has not ended.*<sup>20</sup>

This history has not ended, not only materially, 12 as mentioned above, but also epistemologically because the histories, and stories, we tell today erase and transform the episodes which gave birth to our contemporary world. And this is why historicism and history have been complicit with colonialism and imperialism, and why we continue to see traces of this complicity.<sup>21</sup> As Satia notes: “Historians are storytellers, custodians of the past, repositories of collective memory, poetic interpreters of what it is to be human. Whether explaining our present or understanding the past on its own terms, their work critically shapes how the past infuses our

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Nadine Gordimer who argued that “[i]f you want to read the facts of the retreat from Moscow in 1815, you may read a history book; if you want to know what war was like and how people of certain time and background dealt with it as their personal situation, you must read *War and Peace*” in Nadine Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writing* (Johannesburg: Spro-Cas/Ravan, 1973), 7. Though my argument here further challenges historical writing itself and the boundaries set between literature and “History”.

<sup>19</sup> Trouillot, xxiii (cf. note 16).

<sup>20</sup> Priya Satia, *Time’s Monster: History, Conscience and Britain’s Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 282, my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> According to Satia “[w]e know about historicism’s complicity in the rise of modern imperialism, how it defined progress through the rhetorical exclusion of ‘others’ from that narrative, so that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty told us two decades ago, ‘historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century’”, 3.

present”.<sup>22</sup> Sandrine Bessora’s novel, as we will see in the next section, allows us to unlearn these colonially complicit narratives of history by both revising an aspect of Gabonese history, one connected to extractivism, and by identifying post-fossil-fuel living practices, thus proposing ways of seeing how we can shape our future differently. This is crucial when thinking about writing history in the context of Gabon, as much of what is available focuses on the colonial period. This is noted by Gabonese historian Gildas Nyame Mendendy Boussambe who, in *Histoire du Gabon. De ses origines à 1964 (History of Gabon. From its Origins to 1964)*—only recently published in 2019—creates an important space for Gabonese pre-colonial history. In the preface, Nyame Mendendy Boussambe notes the urgency of more historiographical material on the country because, in its absence, the main source otherwise remains work by another important Gabonese historian, Frédéric Meyo-Bibang who, in the 1990s, produced a manuscript that continues to be on the primary school syllabi in the country. Nyame Mendendy Boussambe informs the reader of a personal as well as a professional need to undertake this critical work in order to answer key questions the author has been exploring for years. In the description of this work, the author notes:

Le livre, intitulé *Histoire du Gabon. De ses origines à 1964*, part d’un constat simple : il n’existe quasiment pas d’écrits ou de manuels d’histoire sur le Gabon accessibles à chaque Gabonais ou à des personnes désireuses d’apprendre véritablement l’histoire de ce pays situé dans le bassin du Congo.<sup>23</sup>

(The book, entitled *History of Gabon. From its origins to 1964*, develops from a simple observation: there is nearly no writing or manual on the history of Gabon available to each Gabonese or to anyone wishing to genuinely learn the history of this country situated in the Congo basin.)

This is vital, not only because of the cultural importance of writing one’s history and untangling it from those written during and reflective of colonial times, but also because, as Jeremy Rich argues, “Gabon is perhaps the most perfect example of neocolonialism on the entire [African] continent”.<sup>24</sup> While Rich’s work is now dated, having been written in 2007, the lack of historiographical material on and emanating from the country shows the extent to which this neo-colonialism is pervasive. I therefore propose that we consider Sandrine Bessora’s novel as providing an alternative, revised and memorialising history of Gabon. Given the length and scope of the novel, this is not an entire history of the country and its development, but rather a micro-history that takes petroleum and extractivism as focal points to untangle and explore the country’s energetic and colonial past and present.

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#### BETWEEN MYTH & HISTORY: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF *PETROLEUM*

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Sandrine Bessora studied economy and finance and eventually undertook a PhD in Paris in Anthropology entitled “Mémoires pétrolières au Gabon”/ “Oil memories in Gabon”. Thus, many of the historical descriptions in the novel, interspersed with the fictional narration, provide the reader with a background on the petro-history of Gabon. This focus on the historical, socio-ecological, political and economic impact of oil extractivism is crucial in its dialogue with mythical intertexts, specifically that of the Ancient Greek Medea myth and the Ekang or Fang beliefs in land and water deity and particularly that of Mami Wata. So, here I want to consider how the use of these myths engage with and assist a re-writing of petro-colonialism in Gabon in Bessora’s novel. First I will provide a brief summary of the plot: *Petroleum* follows a French white geologist called Médée who works on a ship, the “Ocean Liberator”, extracting oil off the coast of Gabon. She is in love and in a relationship with the crew’s cook, a Gabonese Black man named Jason. The novel explores the life

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,1.

<sup>23</sup> Gildas Nyame Mendendy Boussambe, *Histoire du Gabon. De ses origines à 1964* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2019), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremy Rich, *A Workman Is Worthy of His Meat: Food and Colonialism in the Gabon Estuary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), ix.



onboard the ship and where offshore extraction takes place until suddenly the ship explodes and a few of the characters die or disappear, including Jason. An investigation begins and Médée is one of the main suspects, having been temporarily back on land when the explosion occurred, as is Jason, given his ties to eco-activist groups and his disappearance—rather than death, since his corpse, or any part of it, has not been recovered, unlike other characters' remains. As the investigation unfolds, Médée refuses to believe Jason is dead and looks for him in the urban setting of Libreville, where the novel is now moored. Eventually, Médée is imprisoned because her love story with Jason comes to light and strengthens police suspicions on her involvement. Jason's aunt Louise, who is also his eco-activist and spiritual mentor, visits Médée in prison and gives her a drink which will supposedly help her sleep in her cell. The police find Médée's lifeless body and decide to simply pin the explosion on her and get rid of the body, repatriating an empty coffin to France. However, Louise and Jason find Médée, who was actually put in a death-like sleep rather than having been killed, allowing Médée and Jason to live happily ever after in the woods at the periphery of the city and away from petroleum companies.

- 15 The protagonists' names "Médée" and "Jason" permit the first identification of the novel's intertextual relation with mythology. Like any Graeco-Roman myth, Medea's story differs according to the source one reads, though the Ancient Greek playwright Euripides is often seen as cementing this character as the epitome of "otherness" as he made her a witch, a woman, a barbarian, and an infanticide in the eponymous play *Medea* (431 BC). In previous versions of the myth, Medea was not seen as responsible for her children's death, while in Euripides' version, Medea murders her children as a form of revenge against her husband Jason who has abandoned them to marry Corinth's King's daughter, Creusa. Bessora's novel is not the first to excavate and utilise this intertext, indeed, this novel can be seen as forming part of a tradition of writing which addresses the Medea myth, which Marie Carrière has described as a "Medea Renaissance" in her work *Médée*

*Protéiforme* (2012), and these are often feminist and post-colonial re-writings.<sup>25</sup> In this article, I focus mostly on the Euripidean intertext rather than other sources, such as Seneca or Golden Fleece narratives starting from Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica*. This is due to the article's focus and scope, but also because of the racial and heroic inversion between Medea and Jason's characters in Bessora's novel, which re-centres Medea in the narrative—though connections between the Golden Fleece and petroleum as "black gold" could easily be drawn, which the novel itself mentions once: "Le pétrole est la toison d'or et Elf est son gardien"<sup>26</sup> ("Petroleum is the Golden Fleece and Elf its keeper"). Additionally, I see Bessora's novel as rewriting the Medea myth by excavating submerged histories of colonisation and (neo-)imperialism, especially because of the identification of Médée's character with Mami-Wata and the setting of the novel. Indeed, past violent practices of enslavement and uneven relations persist in Bessora's novel, in which oil is extracted from the seabed within the Gabonese Exclusive Economic Zone to benefit France, other European countries owning the fictional oil company, and a small elite of Gabonese people. Thus, there is a lack of resource redistribution which reproduces colonial and imperial practices wherein European countries—or spaces that were to become some of the current countries in the European continent—extracted wealth from their former colonies. Additionally, according to Alexandra Perisic, the ship used to transport abducted peoples from the African continent to the Americas has, in the novel, been replaced by the oil ship: "The ship still operates as a metaphor of the world: it contains all the race, class, national, and gender divisions while at the same time being positioned outside of a national territory. It is, additionally, a metaphor of the world as a workplace".<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Marie Carrière, *Médée Protéiforme* (Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2012), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Bessora, *Pétroleum* (Paris: Denoël, 2004), 245.

<sup>27</sup> Alexandra Perisic, "Life after Oil: The Politics of Labor in Bessora's *Pétroleum*", *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 5, n° 3, 2018, 410. Additionally, it could be argued that *Pétroleum* in the francophone literary corpus follows in the footsteps of

16 This identification between the Atlantic trade and the petro-extractivism—in addition to continued imagery throughout the novel of a feminised land (both on- and offshore) against which different violent acts are perpetuated—also engages with an erased history of colonial rape. Many histories and narratives of enslavement remind their readers of the many physical abuses lived by abducted peoples, and the rape of women is continually present, whether on the ship or the plantation. Throughout Bessora's novel, the initial rape, which often took place onboard the ship transporting abducted and enslaved people, is superimposed onto the action of extracting oil. Repeatedly, drilling for oil is compared to a violent sexual encounter, violating the earth compared to a woman. This is often supplemented by a consideration of Gabonese workers' conditions: "D'abord, les muscles indigènes ont téléguidé un énorme tube creux du plancher de forage à la croûte continentale. Il y a eu pénétration. Elle était vierge"<sup>28</sup> ("First the indigenous muscles guided an enormous hollow tube from the drilling floor to the continental crust. There was penetration. She was a virgin"). The reduction of indigenous labourer characters to their physical strength ("les muscles indigènes") hints at the parallel between the transatlantic ship and the oil ship, and the objectification of Black Humanity identified by Mbembe and Ferdinand mentioned above. Moreover, in the novel, when oil is extracted by the "*Ocean Liberator*" ship and its international team of workers and engineers, it is continually compared to childbirth, strengthening the idea of feminisation of the land: "le petit arrive. Il est tout près... Hourra. [...] Pas d'éruption en vue. Naissance sans violence. Naissance sans douleur. Quelques larmes d'émotion pour accueillir le dernier-né d'Elf-Gabon"<sup>29</sup> ("The little one is coming. He's so close...

Yay. [...] No eruptions within sight. A birth without violence. A birth without pain. A few emotional tears are shed to welcome Elf-Gabon's newborn").

Moreover, the name of the oil ship "*Ocean Liberator*" echoes the neo-imperial rhetoric of "liberating" natural resources through extractive practices, emphasised in the first line of the novel in which the company's "prophecy" is the mission the ship's workers need to fulfil: "Après un long périple, l'Or noir rencontrera la faille. Son voyage s'achèvera par trois mille mètres de fond. Le Libérateur le délivrera des entrailles de la terre" ("After a long and difficult journey, black gold will meet the rift. Its journey will end three thousand meters deep. The Liberator will deliver it from the earth's entrails").<sup>30</sup> And in the description of Médée extracting petrol from the ground: "Médée a libéré Bitume de la Terre qui le gardait prisonnier" (Médée has freed Bitumen from the Earth that kept him imprisoned),<sup>31</sup> and in the general statement that "La Terre fut la prison de Bitume" ("The Earth was Bitumen's prison").<sup>32</sup>

Hence, the initial "rape" is continued in the present for many former colonies through neo-liberal and neo-imperial resource exploitation.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the idea of extraction leaving a physical trace is present through description of a scarred seabed: "... mer limpide. Transparente, elle ne cache rien de sa nudité et montre ses blessures : le fond sableux des eaux laisse parfois apparaître de larges cicatrices sombres, dépressions subites, gouffres noirs creusés par des machines suceuses de sable"<sup>34</sup> ("... clear sea. Transparent, she hides nothing of her nudity and shows her wounds: the sandy floor under the water shows at times dark large scars, sudden depressions, black chasms dug by sand-sucking machines").

Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* (1992). The novel, set in Martinique, also explores the continued impact of colonial extractivism on the island from unsustainable monocrop sugar plantation to oil extraction.

<sup>28</sup> Bessora, 11 (cf. note 27). Additional instances of this comparison, including childbirth imagery, can be found at 7, 20, 23, 24, 27, 29, 35, 50, 55, 68, 70-71, 73, 75, 85, and 280.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>33</sup> It would be worth to note here the etymological origin of the word "rape" from Latin is the verb *rapere* meaning to snatch off, carry off/away and thus has connections to ideas of theft.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

19 The feminisation of the land has been a practice investigated by many scholars, from Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) to the many chapters of the *Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature* (2022) edited by Douglas A. Vakosh. It is a rhetoric with a deeply colonial origin; "explored" and "conquered" lands in the Early Modern period were often depicted as women, a tradition that Renaissance practices recovered from Classical times.<sup>35</sup> Notably, Europe and Asia are named after female characters from Greek mythology, emphasising the importance of Classical sources in the articulation and conception of new continents. Early Modern Europeans were encountering in their supposed "exploration" of the world. Other images from classical sources, especially those of monstrous "others", play similar roles, as does the figure of Medea. Thus, the perpetuation of this feminisation not only is grounded in a violent colonial history of exploitation and disenfranchisement, but also in petrocultural texts, as Cara Daggett notes: "the aesthetics of fossil fuels—most particularly oil—are ripe for recoding as expressions of sexualised power and orgasmic satisfaction. The parallels between rape and extractivism have been well documented".<sup>36</sup> Thus, in Bessora's novel the continual and ironic depiction of the rape of the land for oil extraction can be read as a commentary and means of registering the socio-ecological violence of petro-extractivism, one written within a history of colonial extraction in the country, beginning from the Atlantic trade, as noted via the Mbembe quote above, to the lumber extraction which preceded oil extraction

in Gabon. Additionally, Daggett informs us that "[a]nalyzing petro-masculinity alerts us to those perilous moments when challenges to fossil-fuelled systems, and more broadly to fossil-soaked lifestyles, become interpreted as challenges to white patriarchal rule".<sup>37</sup>

This is crucial in the use of the Medea and the Mami Wata figures, in rewriting a specific history of Gabon, as both challenge white heteropatriarchal rule. Mami Wata is a fluid and multifaceted divinity, going by several names, and which can be found throughout what Antonio Benítez Rojo calls "la cultura afroatlántica" (developed from John Thornton's coinage of the word).<sup>38</sup> A merging of the European mermaid with African and Amerindian beliefs, "Mami Wata"—"(pidgin English for "Mother Water" or Mistress Water," sometimes rendered as "Mammy Water")" or even Man/Manman dlo in French creole—"epitomizes and embodies hybridity. She is a transcendent, transformative, transcultural, transnational, transgendered, and trans-Atlantic being. She straddles both land and water, culture and nature (being half-human, half-fish)".<sup>39</sup> Despite its hybridity, it is important to note that the use of this figure does not aim to merely celebrate creolisation, which might risk erasing the violence and brutality of colonisation and imperialism behind it.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "In 1507, Martin Waldseemüller in his *Cosmographiae Introductio* proposed the name "America" for Columbus's newly discovered land on the explicit grounds that "I do not see why anyone should object to its being called after Americus the discoverer, a man of natural wisdom, Land of Americus or America, since both Europe and Asia have derived their names from women" in Lisa Hopkins, "Marlowe's Asia and the Feminization of Conquest", in Debra Johanyak and Walter S. H. Lim (eds.), *The English Renaissance, Orientalism, and the Idea of Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 115.

<sup>36</sup> Cara Daggett, "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 47, n° 1, 2018, 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio Benítez Rojo, *Archivo de los pueblos del mar* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2010), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Henry John Drewal, Charles Gore, Michelle Kisliuk, "Siren Serenades: Music for Mami Wata and Other Water Spirits in Africa", in Linda Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (eds.), *Music of the Sirens* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 294 and 295. In Hispanic and Lusophone cultures of the Americas she may also be called Yemayá and Iemanjá/Yemanjá.

<sup>40</sup> See more in Henry John Drewal, "Beauteous Beast: The Water Deity Mami Wata in Africa", in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 77–101; Persephone Braham, "Song of the Sirenas: Mermaids in Latin America and the Caribbean", in Philip Hayward (ed.) *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 149–170; and in Giulia Champion, "Decolonising Deep-Sea Gothic: Perspectives from the Americas", *Gothic Studies*, vol. 24, n° 3, 2022, 275–294.

21 This paper's emphasis on the Mami Wata figure intends to show how she subverts socially constructed boundaries which are vestiges of colonial practices and epistemes. This is shown in the novel through the character of Louise, Jason's aunt, and her role as a priest to the deity, as well as in Jason's choice to work against Elf-Gabon for the deity. Louise represents these spirits and through her they tell the story of the first extraction of Gabon: timber logging. Indeed, in a flashback section of the novel this history is told by identifying the arrival of the first geologists in 1928 and how this shows a transition from timber to crude oil extraction.<sup>41</sup> The novel connects these colonial scientists to Médée via their profession, but unlike Médée, these geologists do not unlearn the western episteme in which their science is grounded. Though they use a guide, Zéphryn, to take them through the woodlands, they do not abide by the traditional practices the guide identifies as the correct way to engage with extra-human nature; practices grounded in custodianship: "Il sait bien qu'il dérange les esprits de la forêt et les génies des eaux. Il sait bien qu'il faudrait demander l'autorisation aux arbres et aux poissons. Leur dire s'il vous plaît. Merci. Bonjour. Au revoir"<sup>42</sup> ("He knows full well that he was disturbing the spirits of the forest and the water genies. He knows full well that he should have asked for authorisation to the trees and the fish. Tell them 'please'. 'Thank you'. 'Good morning'. 'Goodbye'"). Thus, the guide becomes afraid of the woods as he fails to properly ask for permission to extra-human nature for trespassing: "Alors il craint les représailles de la forêt. Néanmoins, il guide les explorateurs. Parce que le pétrole, ça paie bien. Ça paie mieux que le bois. Ça tue, mais ça paie"<sup>43</sup> ("He is then scared of the forest's revenge. Nonetheless, he guides the explorers. Because petroleum pays well. It pays better than timber. It kills but it pays"). Zéphryn's identification of the geologists as explorers highlights the colonial genealogy present in the different extractive practices of Gabon from colonisation

to lumber and to crude oil extraction. His concluding words on the reality of petroleum as something that kills denotes not only the violence that accompanies petro-economies, but also the necrotic realities of colonialism as noted in the Mbembe quote above. This is opposed to the spirits Zéphryn mentions, identifying their roles as stewards of the land and waters.

22 Similarly, the Medea figure challenges similar assumptions because of its intertextual presence and the mapping of the intertext on the novel's characters, as mentioned above; Médée is a French geologist and Jason a Gabonese cook working on the oil ship. This inverts the racial and power dynamic of the Euripidean intertext: Medea the dark-skinned barbarian becomes Médée in *Petroleum*, a French geologist from Normandy, and Jason the Hellenic white man becomes the Gabonese cook on the oil ship.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Médée herself temporarily dies when Louise poisons her into a death-like sleep to free her from prison, incarcerated after having been wrongly accused of causing the explosion on the oil ship. For Médée to be free and with Jason, she must be officially dead, just as the Medea myth presented by Euripides must be deconstructed.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the character of Médée herself is compared to Mami Wata by Jason: "- Je ne connais qu'un homme-poisson et c'est une sirène. Elle s'appelle Mamiwata. Son ventre est froid. [Le] regard [de Jason] se durcit et il ajoute d'un ton sec: - Elle te ressemble"<sup>46</sup> ("- I only know one merman and it's a mermaid. Her name is Mamiwata. Her belly is cold. [Jason's] gaze hardens, and he adds: - She is like you"). Médée's cold stomach here is likewise a cold womb: crude oil is her and Elf-Gabon's child extracted from the surrogate womb of the earth. The infanticide is displaced onto the Elf-Gabon company, since oil is the child in the novel to which, as noted above, Médée helps give birth. This refers back to the role of midwife often attributed to the character of Medea in many texts. Thus Médée may be connected to

<sup>41</sup> Bessora, 60 (cf. note 27).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> See *Ibid.*, 14–17.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 319–320.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

motherhood or the possibility of childbirth, but not be enclosed in that role. By undoing the cultural connection between the Medea myth and motherhood, but also Mami Wata and motherhood, the novel proposes to reconsider femininity not only as a potential for motherhood, but as an individual identity on its own. While Mami Wata will always be a mothering figure attached to bodies of water, it is also a mermaid-like character that travels and moves freely in water and on land, unmoored.

- 23 For this reason, Bessora's novel brings full-circle this subversion of the (re)productive system through its focus on the Elf-Gabon company as the target of the murder. It also subverts the mythic intertext in which the character of Medea facilitates Jason's heroic quest by making her the main agent of the quest in the novel.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, as Alexandra Perisic has argued, the use of the detective novel form specifically permits the novelist to unearth and bring to light these uneven and exploitative dynamics of petro-imperialism:

In *Petroleum*, the target of the crime is no longer a person, but an entity: the Elf-Gabon company. Etienne, the sole human victim of the crime, is also one of the primary suspects. I concur with Close's assessment that detective fiction arises as an appropriate form to address the rise in violence in the age of neoliberalism, the new political emphasis on terrorism, and an increasing insistence on the importance of national and personal security. I would add that in conjunction to reflecting the rising social inequalities in the world metropolises, detective fiction stages the dialectic between the known and the unknown that is reflective of the contemporary modes of power and marginalization.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> "Par contre, dans *Petroleum*, c'est la femme, le héros de la quête. Autrement dit, c'est Médée, et non l'Argonaute aux multiples périples, qui détient la « puissance d'agir » dans ce texte. [...] À noter, tout le long du roman, il figure comme l'objet passif du désir féminin et des rêves de Médée" in Carrière, 153 (cf. note 26).

<sup>48</sup> Perisic, 419 (cf. note 28).

24 Along these same lines, I argue that the novel undertakes a type of detective work in excavating submerged, un- and mis-told histories, especially through "clearing" Medea's name. Thus, Bessora's novel interweaves the Medea and Mami Wata intertexts and, in one parallel motion, exonerates the Medea figure while aligning the Mami Wata figure to a similar "canonical" level. Indeed, as the extensive scholarship on the Medea myth and figure shows, it has become a crucial and central figure in European intellectual and aesthetic work, including that written in Francophone languages. However, due to its emergence in Graeco-Roman sources, this myth has been given precedence, culturally speaking, over non-western narratives. This is due *first*, to the fact that colonial practices developed further during the Renaissance, a time which re-birthed "Classical sources" and put them above all other forms of knowledge. This was a central time for what was to become "Europe" as David Graeber and David Wengrow argue that in

the Middle Ages, most people in other parts of the world who actually knew anything about northern Europe at all considered it an obscure and uninviting backwater full of religious fanatics who, aside from occasional attacks on their neighbours ("the Crusades"), were largely irrelevant to global trade and world politics. [...] All this changed, of course, in the late fifteenth century, when Portuguese fleets began rounding Africa and bursting into the Indian Ocean – and especially with the Spanish conquest of the Americas.<sup>49</sup>

25 And *second*, also because the history of these developments has been told and repeated, as I discussed above, in a problematically unilateral way—especially in western historiography—and one that has erased other voices, as Graeber and Wengrow have also noted about the history they discuss in the quote above:

<sup>49</sup> David Graeber, David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), 29.

Of course, this isn't usually the way historians of ideas tell this story. [...] As a result, even in cases where Enlightenment thinkers openly insisted they were getting their ideas from foreign sources [...], there was a tendency for contemporary historians to insist they weren't really serious; or else that when they said they were embracing Chinese, or Persian, or indigenous American ideas these weren't really Chinese, Persian or indigenous American ideas at all but ones they themselves had made up and merely attributed to exotic Others.<sup>50</sup>

26 Thus, this constant erasure and mis-/re-attribution of ideas and ways of thinking have constantly marginalised non-white and non-European peoples. This epistemological violence of colonial practices is repeated every time a narrative omits the importance of multi-cultural sources in its creation; Euripides' text created the Medea figure in a certain way, which was repeated across time, but Bessora's novel—as other resistance stories—has undone and decolonised it through its connection with Mami Wata. This means that the novel brings back to the forefront non-European and non-Graeco-Roman narratives and figures hence pushing the unlearning further; Medea is only one part of this history.

## CONCLUSION

27 In Bessora's novel, we glimpse an ever-expanding socio-historical horizon, identifying how a world-systemic history connects colonial pasts with extractive presents. This genealogy is identified in Bessora's novel through a neologism correlating petrol extraction to colonisation and imperialism. This is done in the quote below through the narrator's listing of historical French figures who participated in the colonisation and exploitation of Gabon, via their roles as geologists, colonial administrators and politicians: "Serval, le gouverneur Chavannes, le géologue Roger Butin, le géologue Victor Hourcq, pionniers admirables de la colonisation puis de la

pétrolisation"<sup>51</sup> ("Serval, governor Chavannes, geologist Roger Butin, geologist Victor Hourcq, admirable pioneers of colonisation, and then, of petrolisation"). The creation of this noun rhyming with colonisation in this sentence further identifies the entanglements between colonial practices and petroleum extraction and trade.

The novel also shows the power wrapped in 28 the acts of resistance and non-conformity of the Medea and Mami Wata figures, as Sylvère Mbondobari argues concerning Medea:

Dans *Pétroleum*, la quête de l'Or noir donne lieu à différents types de violence: violence contre la nature, violence contre les populations autochtones, violence politique, violence coloniale et violence postcoloniale. Mais contrairement, au mythe originel qui met l'accent sur la violence de la figure féminine, Bessora fait de Médée une femme autonome et subversive, qui refuse la soumission à la hiérarchie d'Elf-Gabon et aux règles politiques et sociales dictées par la logique coloniale.<sup>52</sup>

(In *Pétroleum*, the quest for black gold produces different types of violence: violence against nature, violence against indigenous population, political violence, colonial violence and postcolonial violence. However, contrary to the original myth, which emphasises the violence of the feminine figure, Bessora portrays Médée as an autonomous and subversive woman, who refuses to submit to Elf-Gabon's hierarchy and to political and social rules dictated by the colonial logic.)

This can also be seen metatextually in Médée's 29 temporary dead state after she is poisoned by Louise in order to be freed from prison. This literal renaissance of the Medea figure through the character of Médée undoes its colonial and

<sup>51</sup> Bessora, 90 (cf. note 27).

<sup>52</sup> Sylvère Mbondobari, "Prose postcoloniale et enjeux mémoriels: Discours, mythes, et mémoire coloniale dans 53 cm et *Pétroleum* de Sandrine Bessora", in Anthony Mangeon (ed.), *Postures postcoloniales: Domaines africains et antillais* (Paris and Montpellier: Éditions Karthala, 2012), 119.

classical intertextual inheritance and further connects the figure to that of Mami Wata, given that Louise is a priestess to the deity in the novel.

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Additionally, the binary between life and death is destabilised through a revision of indigenous epistemologies which provide a counter-context in which ancestors and loved ones who have passed away remain close to the characters in the novel. This is also noted by Étienne-Marie Lassie:

En plus de postuler l'existence des génies, entités surnaturelles maléfiques ou bienfaitantes suivant les circonstances et maîtresses absolues de l'élément naturel qu'elles habitent, ce qui tient lieu de culture locale dans *Petroleum* conçoit aussi la mort comme un passage de l'état d'être de chair à celui d'esprit. Ces esprits élisent domicile dans la nature et « vivent » en communion avec les vivants de la communauté dont ils influencent l'existence positivement ou négativement.<sup>53</sup>

(In addition to postulate for the existence of genies, malicious or good supernatural entities, depending on the context and as absolute master of the natural element they inhabit, in

*Petroleum*, local culture is also seen to conceive of death as a passage between the physical living state and that of living spirit. These spirits choose to live in nature and 'live' in harmony with the living community whose existence they influence positively or negatively.)

Moreover, the focus on oil in the novel is crucial for deconstructing life and death as a dichotomy, because petrol is seen in the novel as bringing back to life dead matter (considering that it is made out of fossilised life): “Né de la vie morte, le pétrole, c'est vous: un déchet organique. Oui, madame, le pétrole est ce qu'il reste des êtres vivants après pourrissement. C'est qu'il restera de vous après votre décomposition”<sup>54</sup> (“Born of dead life, petrol is you: an organic refuse. Yes, Madam, petrol is what remains of living beings after they rot. It is what will remain of you after you decompose”).<sup>55</sup> Petrol takes on this zombified presence that connects humans and our “developed civilisation” to apocalyptic petrofutures, where loss appears to be the only result of our society's inability to divest from fossil fuels. A loss that also shows how petroleum extraction and production conceptually appear as a legacy, emphasised by the repeated images of birth the novel contains.

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<sup>53</sup> Étienne-Marie Lassie, “La nature ré-enchantée de Bessora: La pétro-critique par les mythes dans *Petroleum*”, in Étienne-Marie Lassie (ed.), *Aspects écologiques de l'imaginaire Africain* (Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2013) 181.

<sup>54</sup> Bessora, 174 (cf. note 27).

<sup>55</sup> This quote echoes Italo Calvino's short story “The Petrol Pump”, a classic of petroculture and one of the first text to fictionalise our embodied connection to petroleum and fossilisation, see Italo Calvino, “La pompa di benzina”, in Italo Calvino, *Prima che tu dica “Pronto”* (Milano: Mondadori, 1993), 194–201.

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