

# OIL CURSE: NARRATING CONFLICT AND DEVELOPMENT IN SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: *Lenin Oil* (2006) by the Portuguese author Pedro Rosa Mendes and *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* (2011) by the Santomean writer Aíto de Jesus Bonfim are inspired by the ongoing projects of oil extraction in São Tomé and Príncipe. This paper offers an ecocritical reading of the representation of conflict, development and socio-environmental justice in the context of natural resources extraction depicted in both narratives. KEYWORDS: oil extraction; socio-environmental justice; Santomean literature; Pedro Rosa Mendes; Aíto de Jesus Bonfim.

MALDIÇÃO PETROLÍFERA: NARRANDO CONFLITO  
E DESENVOLVIMENTO EM SÃO TOMÉ E PRÍNCIPE

RESUMO: *Lenin Oil* (2006) do autor português Pedro Rosa Mendes e *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* (2011) do escritor são-tomense Aíto de Jesus Bonfim são inspirados pelos vigentes projetos da extração petrolífera em São Tomé e Príncipe. Este artigo apresenta uma leitura ecocrítica da representação de conflito, desenvolvimento e justiça socio-ambiental no contexto da extração de recursos naturais retratada nessas duas narrativas. PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Extração petrolífera; justiça socio-ambiental; literatura são-tomense; Pedro Rosa Mendes; Aíto de Jesus Bonfim.

Extraction of natural resources in Africa is not a simple story to tell. Implicated in competing discourses of (neocolonial) exploitation vs. modernization and development, it tends to be presented by state authorities as a blessing, which can nonetheless be experienced as a curse by the populations inhabiting the affected areas. The notorious case of Niger Delta oil exploration revealed in full light how environmental issues in place are intersectionally connected to the aspects of social justice and

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human rights (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 52). The entangled global, regional and local dynamics, rooted in historical and contemporary power relations, structural dependencies and vulnerabilities, constitute a socio-economic and political framework that poses a threat to sustainable security when it comes to resources extraction. As noted by Iheka, foreign oil companies active in Africa often demonstrate “the colonial disregard and contempt for the environment in the communities where they operate” (2018: 13). On the other hand, the revenue can become a driving force for state vampirism — as it was the case of Nigeria — where “those corrupt bureaucrats who allegedly operated in its interests, preyed upon the people they claimed to serve, funneling vast amounts of money and resources into the hand of a neocolonial elite” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 37).

Writing can become a powerful tool to denounce and resist such exploitation, on the one hand, and a way of imagining alternative ways forward to ensure socio-environmental justice, on the other. As explored by Caminero-Santangelo in his influential monograph *Different Shades of Green*, “African literature can challenge dominant Western assumptions regarding African environments and environmentalism and [...] offer powerful counternarratives” (2014: 4). Importantly, “standard histories of and approaches to environmental writing in Anglo-American literature rely on a definition of nature as pristine and untouched, while in the African context we encounter an idea of nature as interdependent with human culture” (Wu 2016: 11). However, while reading such texts from an ecocritical perspective, there is a risk of reducing them to a form of “protest literature” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 14). While certain narratives have explicit environmental and social justice agenda, as would be the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writing on Niger Delta and the resistance of the Ogoni people, their aesthetic function should not be disregarded.

African literatures written in Portuguese have revealed a growing preoccupation with environmental issues and the ways they are interlinked with social justice. *Os Transparentes* [The Transparent City] by Angolan Ondjaki on the topic of oil extraction and water shortages; *Ponta Gea* by Mozambican João Paulo Borges Coelho on water systems management, and *Confissão da Leoa* [Confession of the Lioness] by Mo-

zambican Mia Couto on wildlife-human relations are just a few examples to cite. However, given the recent scholarly debate on the legacy of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who has become “a potent symbol of resistance against petro-capitalism” after his execution by the Nigerian state in the aftermath of a staged trial in 1995 (Caminero-Santangelo 2014: 134), it seems particularly timely and relevant to now read narratives imagining the impact of the still in-the-making oil exploration in São Tomé and Príncipe.

São Tomé and Príncipe is a small archipelago country in the Gulf of Guinea with a fragile economy, highly dependent on external aid, and high indices of poverty, yet steadily improving its social indicators, as reported by the World Bank (2021). According to the report by the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, the prospects of oil extraction have been explored in the archipelago since colonial times (the Portuguese colonial government signed an agreement with the American company Ball & Collins in 1974, which was resolved after the country’s independence in 1975), but binding agreements and actual investments have only been put in place in the last two decades (ITIE 2019: 15). In 2001, the country signed a bilateral agreement with Nigeria on the joint development zone, which has been recently renegotiated and, in 2020, it also negotiated an agreement with Equatorial Guinea (Neto 2019). The exclusive economic zone was established in 2009, where the government passed on the concession to several foreign companies. The revenues from the signed concessions are being invested in several social programs, with a special focus on education and infrastructure, yet as noted in the aforementioned report, “este processo continua a necessitar de melhoria em termos de gestão, difusão/disseminação e controlo de implementação” [this process still needs improvements in terms of management, dissemination and control of implementation] (ITIE 2019: 27). It is important to note that at the time of writing of this paper, all revenues so far are contractual fees secured in the concession agreements and the actual extraction is planned for the end of 2020 or beginning of 2021 (Neto and Soares 2020).

It was in this scenario of exploratory perforations and agreement’ (re) negotiations that two writers with very different backgrounds decided to pick up the theme of oil extraction in the archipelago. Pedro Rosa

Mendes, a Portuguese reporter and writer, publishes *Lenin Oil* in 2006. This novel, just like his earlier fiction piece, the acclaimed novel *Baía dos Tigres* [Bay of Tigers] (1999), depicting a travel across the African continent from Angola to Mozambique, seems deeply embedded in Rosa Mendes's experience as a reporter covering armed conflicts but also post-independence developments and tensions. In fact, his chronicles covering the Angolan corruption – and the involvement of its former president, José Eduardo dos Santos in particular – led to a heated debate in the Portuguese media, especially in 2012 after the chronicles series “Este Tempo” [These Times] was abruptly discontinued in the radio station Antena 11.<sup>2</sup> In 2011, Aíto de Jesus Bonfim, Santomean lawyer and (play) writer, author of allegorical and politically engaged pieces, such as *Suicídio Cultural* [Cultural Suicide], launched *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* [Golden Tear of Evil]. The year of this publication coincides with the end of the second term of President Fradique de Menezes, who in Bonfim served as a legal consultant in the oil extraction negotiations, among others (Téla Nón 2011). Despite – or precisely because of – being involved in politics as a legal counselor, Bonfim depicts in his prose a critical view on the Santomean, and in general African, decolonization and independence transition processes. In fact, his play *Berlinização ou a Partilha de África* [Berlinization or the Scramble for Africa] (1987) was censored by the MLSTP, which ruled the country at the time within a one-party regime (Leite et al. 2014, p. 292-293). While the other writings of the two authors address the past intertwined with the present in post-colonial contexts, both *Lenin Oil* and *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* present what Inocência Mata designates as a “viagem a um futuro indesejado” [journey to an unwanted future] in her analysis of *Lenin Oil* (Mata 2010: 239). This paper

<sup>2</sup> Case was investigated by the Portuguese Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social [Media Regulatory Authority]. It was concluded that Rosa Mendes's piece emitted on 18th of January 2012 was within the freedom of opinion and expression and the management's actions undermined the credibility of the radio's public service but it was not proven that the chronicle in question was the direct and sole cause for the canceling of the series (ERC 2012).

aims to offer a comparative close reading of such a future-oriented imaginary of environmental and social (in)justice narrated in *Lenin Oil* and *Lágrima Áurea do Mal*, which, as will be argued, present distinct and valuable contributions to a better understanding of environmentalism, development, and resistance in discourses in and on contemporary Africa.

Through first-person testimonies, letters to an unidentified superior designated as “Honorável” [Honorable] and to a friend whose name is never disclosed, *Lenin Oil* presents a story of an equally nameless representative of the US state (referred to as “blancú” [white] or “americano” [American] throughout the narrative) who arrives to São Tomé and Príncipe to secure the US control over (and revenues from) the prospective oil deposits. The US involvement is presented by the narrator as strategic and instrumental for both their international and domestic policy, oil being perceived as “nossa geografia vital” [our vital geography] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 63). Such an attitude positions São Tomé within the logic of the narrative as an object of intervention and not a new partner in a joint venture. This becomes quite explicit in one of the letters to “Honorável” where the American urges the officials to change their focus from the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Guinea to adapt to the ongoing changes in the geopolitics of resource extraction “para que elas [as mudanças] mudem no sentido que mais nos convém” [so that the things change in the direction that is most suitable for us] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 63). São Tomé becomes within this strategy not a specific country, but just a country, or even an unknown country:

Países como este. [...] Precisam de tecnologia, de financiamento e de segurança para que o seu petróleo renda. Precisam de um parceiro. Precisam de nós. Como eles, outros na região. A Guiné Equatorial. Alguém sabe onde fica? [Countries like this one. [...] They need technology, founding and security to make its oil profitable. They need a partner. They need us. As they, others in this region. Equatorial Guinea. Does anybody know where it is?] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 66).

In fact, as Inocência Mata notes, São Tomé is never named in the novel although all toponyms as well as historical and cultural references clearly indicate where the plot is situated (2010: 239). In my opinion,

the motif of namelessness that punctuates the narrative is very productive in denouncing the existing power dynamics in the sphere of global international relations. A nameless narrator exploring a nameless country becomes an allegory for the politics of resources extraction built upon a framework of structural dependencies. The unemotional, detached, or even cruel voice of the narrator — for example, when mentioning the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa as unfortunate, yet inevitable (Rosa Mendes 2006: 67) — makes the reader question the interests and responsibilities involved and rethink the frameworks of socio-environmental justice from a transnational, global perspective.

Accordingly, São Tomé in the eyes of the narrator is not an image readers, especially those from São Tomé, can easily digest and engage with, yet apparently complacent with the subject position of the narrator. The images of the island as “uma placenta podre” [a rotten womb] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 134) and its population as “filhos da inércia, do mito e do rancor” [children of inertia, of myth, of bitterness] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 420) textually recreate the process of othering so implicated in the discourses of modernization and development intertwined with extractive policies and agendas in and targeting the Global South. Yet, as argued by Inocência Mata, this imaginary offers a challenge to “tornar significativa a violência psicológica com que é representada a realidade: uma classe política sem ética, uma população sem perspectivas, uma História implacável” [make significant the psychological violence with which the reality is represented: a political class without ethics, a population without perspective, a relentless History] (Mata 2010: 238).

Indeed, during his stay, the American gets acquainted with the local political folklore where corruption and nepotism are taken for granted. As declared by Wahnnon, the archipelago’s president: “A corrupção é uma fera que cresceu cá em casa [...] é a nossa espécie protegida” [The corruption is a beast that grew up here at home [...] it is our protected species] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 106). An imagery of a corrupt state fed by natural resources and disconnected from the people they were meant to serve is depicted in the scenes of the official celebrations of 30 years of independence at the roça Soledade [plantation Solitude]

or private gatherings in the restaurant Belvedere where two former presidents, Cacau and Café (named after the two main cash crops of the archipelago — cocoa and coffee), childhood friends and political arch-enemies, discuss the political developments and plan a coup d'état while playing checkers.<sup>3</sup> However, it is through the character of Lénine, a young entrepreneur who strives to get an opportunity and benefit from the oil extraction prospects, that the local dynamics of power relations, dependency and resistance are explored in a more nuanced way.

Lénine, whose start-up company “Lenin Oil” gave the title for the novel, is presented as a critical thinker and revolutionary. His involvement in the local politics, namely the conspiracy orchestrated at the restaurant Belvedere, is fueled by his urge for change. “*Temos de mudar isto, Amicú. Ou salvamos ou varremos. Assim, não vale a pena*” [We have to change this, friend. Either we win or we lose. Like this, it is not worth it] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 116), as he announces to the American before taking him to the restaurant. Lénine’s motivation becomes very clear from the moment he introduces himself to the narrator — he wants to be seen (Rosa Mendes 2006: 30-31). The power relations in place are metaphorically presented by him in terms of (in)visibility. Invisibility, just like namelessness, can be a privilege for those in power, or a curse for those who are in a dependent position. It is not a condition intrinsically good or bad, but a means of exercising (and abusing) power where only some can navigate between becoming (in)visible while others are subjected to invisibility. The death of Lénine at the end of the narrative, killed by the President’s security forces on suspicion of an attempt of coup d’état, is never disclosed to the public opinion (“O Presidente recusou-se a tecer qualquer comentário sobre uma alegada e falhada intentona” [The President refused to comment on the alleged and failed attempt], Rosa Mendes 2006: 157) and the President refers to him simply as “cabecilha” [head] in a conversation with the American (Rosa

<sup>3</sup> The political elite presented in the novel is clearly inspired by real characters involved in the Santomean political scene in the post-independence period. See Mata (2010) for details.



Mendes 2006: 149). Lénine is thus rendered invisible and nameless, a metonymy for the São Tomé presented in the novel as instrumentally used by both foreign and local elites. It is particularly interesting in the context of the legacy of Ken Sarro-Wiwa whose name and ideas permeated despite his execution by the Nigerian state. In this context, *Lenin Oil* could be read as an epistemological inquiry into (in)visibility of social justice in extractivist economies without clear-cut answers nor ready-made points of action. Rather, it seems to develop

a narrative on ways of narrating (and silencing) experiences, perspectives, and voices involved in and impacted by resource extraction.

However, this dystopic imaginary of São Tomé, which seems apparently impossible to change, needs to be also read in the context of the overarching motif of death and (re)birth presented in the novel. The first and the last chapters function as a metaphysical beginning and ending, opening and closure for the protagonist, for the island, and for the history of socio-environmental justice. The book starts with an illustration of the American, lying on the ground, with his eyes closed, his head in the direction of the surrounding water and the torso as if emerging from the green, flourishing soil. “Estou pronto para nascer” [I am ready to be born] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 8) — is the opening statement embedded in the illustrations by Alain Corbel, painted in predominating tones of blue and green.

The visual narrative does not simply serve as an illustration to the text, but importantly situates the textual narrative, focused on the human actors, within the natural environment. The forest and the sea are then much more than a stage for the presented plot, but rather its integral part. Birth, just like death, seem to be inscribed here both in the cycle of nature and history. The narrator’s delirious monologue, induced by a malaria attack, presents a kaleidoscopic and nightmarish overview of São Tomé’s history of exploitation: the sugar cycle, coffee cycle, cocoa cycle, slavery, indentured labour. The only freedom seems to come with death, in which humans and the natural environment become united:



Conheço as florestas de séculos. Nelas tive liberdade e força. Escolhi bem a madeira da árvore que vai esmagar-me. Vejo-a um instante, já vem ela deitando em mim. Não bulo, não tujo. Abro os braços. O tronco, perfeito e hirtto, encaixa-se no meu peito. Caímos os dois sobre os fetos e os búzios, unidos. Um crucifixo. [I know the forests of centuries. There I had freedom and strength. I chose well the wood of the tree that will crush me. I see it for a moment and it is already falling over me. I don't turn, I don't tweak. I open my arms. The trunk, perfect and straight, fits in my chest. We both fall over the ferns and the snails, together. A crucifix.] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 14-15).

The opening scenes, full of references to the local history and culture, are narrated apparently by one voice that brings forth, though, different voices and live experiences. This multivocality is explained only in the last chapter when it is revealed that the sick American returns to the roça where the celebrations of the independence took place and where he encounters a dying man, an old Cape Verdean that arrived to São Tomé as an indentured laborer, who tells his life story in a delirious trans. It is a story of constant, never-ending flight that never really let the character leave and change his fate: “a minha fuga foi uma obediência: eu já fugia e começava antes de ser dia. Apenas não saía do sítio” [my flight was an obedience: I was already running away and I started before the dawn. But I was never leaving the place] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 148). Both dying men, despite their different live experiences and subject positions, become united in this moment of physical death and spiritual rebirth: “Ouço o moribundo e a voz dele fala dentro de mim” [I listen to the dying man and his voice speaks inside me] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 153). This voice brings the narrator the consciousness of how the present is embedded in the past and what impact this has on social justice: “a única justiça que teremos é a de [...] conviver com o que está vivo e com o que pode reviver em nós, aceitando que todo o tempo que nos precedeu é nosso contemporâneo” [the only justice that we will have is to coexist with what is alive and what can revive in us, accepting that the time that preceded us is contemporary to us] (Rosa Mendes 2006: 153). The novel does not offer any promise of change nor a call for flight and resistance. However, in the final mystical scene

where the American and the worker exchange their skins, their identities seem to suggest there is some future ahead. A haunted future.

While *Lenin Oil* is set on the island of São Tomé, the allegorical narrative of *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* depicts a fictional African country “Telanóm”, torn by a civil war ensuing the discovery of extractive resources. The land becomes a stage for the conflict among “Filhos da Terra” [Children of the Land] — “progressistas, nacionalistas e populares” [progressives, nationalists and populists] — and “Donos da Terra” [Owners of the Land] characterized as “liberais, conservadores e reformistas” [liberals, conservatives and reformists]. Their collective identities are defined along two intersecting axes: political affiliations and relation to land. The groups’ names are highly symbolic in this regard. “Children of the Land” creates an imaginary of a symbiotic co-existence between the people and the land, highlighted also by the choice of the color green, symbolizing nature, as their emblem. On the other side of the spectrum, “Owners of the Land” are represented by the color brown, which can be associated with soil. Interestingly, this color symbolism does not automatically imply a disdain for nature, since fertile soil is a prerequisite for flourishing ecosystems, but rather it represents a specific view on the relation between the humans and the land, a kind of relation where the land is conceived of as an asset to be used. However, it is very telling that this binary division between the two groups is not framed in terms of “good” and “evil”, but rather presents a much more nuanced image of different perspectives and interests involved. Already at the wake of the conflict the two groups arrogate themselves to be the “good” ones as satirically narrated in the passage below:

Foi a bipolarização e a fractura do país/ Em dois blocos em contenda, se arrogando:/ «Nós os verdes, os bons», e eles contrapondo/ «Nós os castanhos, os melhores», em desdém./ Indo cada grupo buscar ao hino as suas denominações,/ As cores partidárias à bandeira nacional/ E os seus símbolos à distorção do símbolo nacional/ Em estereótipos em progressão à medida da evolução/ Das diferenças em antipatias aos antagonismos,/ Até à guerra aberta também mesmo a nível de símbolos. [It was the bipolarization and the country’s divide/In two warring parties, bragging:/ «We the greens,

the good ones», and them replying/ «We the brown, the best ones», and scornful./ Each group took its designation from the anthem,/ The party colors from the national flag/ And their symbols from the distortion of the national symbol/ In stereotypes evolving/ As differences change into aversion and conflict,/ Until the open war at the level of symbols themselves] (Bonfim 2011: 13).

While the discovery of oil deposits is celebrated as “[t]al uma segunda independência benzida pelos religiosos” [a kind of a second independence, blessed by the religious people] (Bonfim 2011: 23), along the narrative it proves to be a curse and not a blessing. Compared to the Biblical plagues by the consulted astrologist — astrology being a new “fashion” in the country (Bonfim 2011: 15) — the “Natural Resources Curse” brings death, violence, illness, land degradation, and structural social inequality. In fact, the prophecy of the astrologist builds up an apocalyptic imaginary which intertwines aspects of environmental and social justice, transposing the Biblical symbols of destruction into the realm of contemporary (armed) conflicts: “Para as sarnas, os efeitos das armas biológicas,/ A pulverização com desfolhantes/ Das florestas frondosas e savanas planas;/ Para as saraivas e granizo destruindo colheitas,/ O abandono do cultivo pela importação barata” [For scabies, the effects of biological weapons,/ Spraying of leafy forests and plain savannas/ with defoliants;/ For hail destroying the crop,/ The abandonment of agriculture for cheap import] (Bonfim 2011: 20). In fact, the curse is told to provoke damage in three well-defined areas: “Na gestão de recursos, *res publica* e geografia” [In the resource management, *res publica* and geography] (Bonfim 2011: 19), presenting the land, the environment as inseparable from the political agendas in place.

With the swift militarization of the conflict, the “Filhos da Terra” are displaced and survive in hiding in improvised camps, always on the move in inhospitable, degraded surroundings: “De comer em comer qualquer espiga bolorenta/ De beber em beber qualquer verde charco estagnado” [From eating to eating any moldy corn cob/ From drinking to drinking any stagnant green puddle] (Bonfim 2011: 48). Interestingly, there is no clear-cut division between the past and the present within a pastoral vs. anti-pastoral binary dynamic. On the contrary, several passages of the narra-

tive highlight the continuity between the past, the present, and the future, yet dramatically altered by the discovery of oil and subsequent extraction activities by the Empire's mining company. The "curse" is explicitly declared to affect the upcoming generations (e.g. "Vocês estão condenados sem remédio/ Pelo tempo além de vinte, até mesmo quarenta anos" [You are sentenced without remedy/ For more than twenty, or even forty years] (Bonfim 2011: 19). Moreover, it is contextualized within the global-local historical power dynamics as depicted in the chapter "Mercenarismo" [Mercenary History], a micro-narrative presented as a lecture on the history of the mercenary. The passage evokes several well-known historical and mythological armed conflicts that form the European cultural canon, including the Greek myth of Theseus, the deeds of Macedonian Alexander the Great and the Persian Cyrus the Younger, the devastating Thirty Years' War, and the fall of Nazi Germany, among other.

This historical overview seems to present Africa (and in general non-Western populations) as an object of foreign intervention rather than a subject with agency, but the lecture ends with a clear call to "Filhos da Terra" to act. However, it is very telling that this call does not imply an armed conflict, which is presented as a tragedy and trauma and not a heroic epic throughout the novel, but rather to "executar o golpe sentencioso/ Sobre estes réus condenados da História/ Com baionetas dos instrumentos legais convencionais" [execute the silent coup/ Over these defendants condemned by History/ With the bayonets of conventional legal instruments] (Bonfim 2011: 47). Nevertheless, such "conventional legal instruments", as the author is very much aware of, are not an immediate and efficient solution as satirically depicted in the "Internacionalização" [Internacionalization] chapter:

Passou-se das denúncias, contestações, a acusações/ Das organizações regionais às Nações Unidas [...]/ Seguiu-se o Conselho de Segurança da União Africana/ Em sessões aturadas e sonolentas de vários meses/ Com resoluções tímidas e depois sancionatórias [...]/ Finalmente, em virtude da não-observância/ E a incapacidade de tribunais domésticos,/ Deduzidas foram acusações provisórias/ Pelo Tribunal Penal Pan-Africano [It went from complaints to pleas and indictments/ From regional organizations to

the United Nations [...] / Followed by the Security Council of the African Union / In sleepy sessions endured for several months / With shy resolutions and later sanctios [...] / Finally, due to non-compliance / And the inability of domestic courts of law, / Provisional charges were filed / By the Pan-African Penal Court of Law] (Bonfim 2011: 57).

Just as there is no golden past to return to, there seems to be no bright future ahead for the “Filhos da Terra”. Remaining hope after a lost fight is presented as a delirious dream of sleep-deprived, intoxicated men under the influence of rum and cannabis (Bonfim 2011: 78-79). However, in my opinion, the motif of motherhood developed in the book complicates such a unidirectional reading. The love affair between Carla and Tozé, in the midst of fight and flight, results in her pregnancy. Despite all the hardships and a friend’s warnings — “nesta marcha sem fim / Não haverá lugar ao herdeiro a amamentar, / Não há nada para legar como herança” [in this never-ending march / There is no place for an heir to be breastfed, / There is nothing to leave as inheritance] (Bonfim 2011: 50) — Carla’s pregnant body transmits “confiança e certeza nas dúvidas dissipadas” [confidence and certainty in dispelled doubts] (Bonfim 2011: 50). The separation between the mother and child, who is given away to a nuns’ orphanage to be vaccinated, and a subsequent reunion in a refugee camp in the buffer zone are of the most emotional scenes in the narrative. The figure of a mother as a symbol of biological life, a life that implies both flourishing and death, creation and destruction, a never-ending process of becoming is literally and visually represented by a poem hidden in a pocket of Bono, a messenger who delivered the baby girl to the orphanage:

Mother, Child, unity, Identity

Seen under a physical, pale, insensitive light in the study  
Of the fertile seed and of the tree born from that seed.

Extensive, global, total and inductive biology:

Seed and tree in the four corners of the blue Atlantic

This enormous evolutionary, differential and empirical

Mãe Filho  
Unidade  
Identidade  
Vítima  
A luz:  
fútil  
pálida  
insensível  
no estado da  
do semente fértil  
e da árvore nascida  
semente:  
desta  
extensiva  
biologia  
global total  
semente e  
nos quatro  
do dilecto  
separada  
do arbóreo  
enorme  
diferencial  
evolutiva,  
e  
barreiras murallas chinesas  
Montes Everest: árvore sem  
células da semente já moras;  
Nado-filho  
securus  
já  
substituídas.  
Descendendo em  
respondo Sim  
arregio das  
corações em  
há unidade há  
identidade  
de cada sem  
radical artificial entre  
Semente Arvore Mãe  
Filho. Mãe da Filice  
realismo com segurança  
há unidade identidade  
na concubitanção  
Mãe-Filho no segundo  
genetico da criação  
em notas musicais do  
do cordão umbilical  
e do umbigo.  
Canto amor  
contra os  
manuseio  
santos dos  
deuses  
do Bio-  
logia  
lógica  
lógica  
sem romantismo,  
de Mãe a todas as  
Mãe.

Distance separated by the will.  
 Like barriers, Chinese Walls, Mounts Everest:  
 Tree without cells of the seed already dead  
 Stillbirth in already changed uterine cells.

Disagreeing in antithesis, I reply yes, facing the shivering  
 of spirits and hearts in refusal, there is unity,  
 There is identity in each being without radical and artificial autonomy  
 Between the seed and the tree, mother and child.  
 Beyond Physics I reiterate with confidence: there is unity and identity  
 in the consubstantiation mother and child in the first second of creation  
 in the musical notes of the umbilical cord and the bellybutton.  
 I sing love against the holy textbooks of gods  
 of insane Biology without romanticism.  
 To Mothers, to all Mothers  
 (Bonfim 2011: 83-84).

The calligram representing a silhouette of a pregnant woman points out to the reproductive function associated with the idea of femininity. By weaving in the metaphor of the tree, the poem inscribes the image of motherhood, and by extension of humankind, in the realm of nature, in line with Wu's observation that in African literature there tends to be no strict division between the human and the environment (Wu 2016: 11). However, this symbiotic connection is far from idealized, nostalgic or romanticized imagery of Western pastoral texts. It is an imagery of "insane Biology without romanticism" with all its "insensitive" processes of birth(giving) and death. However, the second stanza develops the idea of "unity and identity" born out of unconditional love. Motherhood becomes here a symbol for a nature that is harmonious within its own internal logic, aggregative and disruptive at the same time. This articulated, multidimensional, and open for reinterpretation vision of human/nature relations seems to explore "not a stable, complacent form of harmony in the human relationship with nature — our species' relationship with its home planet in its macro and its micro ecologies — but [...] a dynamic, self-adjusting accommodation to 'discordant harmonies'", which Gifford identifies as a key characteristic of post-pastoral literature (2013: 28).

Such a dynamic vision of the human as an interdependent part of the surrounding ecosystem is also visible, or rather audible as I will argue, in the introspection moments by different characters and the narrator. While the collective, lived experience of the independence and the ensuing armed conflict tends to be narrated using the contrasting imagery of land as a fertile or, on the contrary, barren soil, with the grain spikes as an overarching symbol, the acts of individual self-reflection are marked by references to wildlife and natural landscapes. Nevertheless, it is never an image of pristine nature that is depicted in such scenes. Daniel, whose testimony retold by the narrator of the book constitutes the main plot, narrates how he leaves the lecture on the mercenary history to “respirar em pleno ar” [breathe the fresh air] (Bonfim 2011: 36). He describes the meeting place as a cellar that “devia ser uma gruta/ Ou uma mina desactivada e húmida nas entranhas da terra” [must have been a cave/ Or a humid, deactivated mine in the Earth’s flesh] (Bonfim 2011: 37). A distinction between the nature and the human-made landscape is thus impossible to make. Daniel tries to focus on his own breathing, in and out, to erase the yelling of wounded companions from his consciousness and only after this moment of in-depth mindfulness he starts hearing dripping water. Also the “Conclusão” [Conclusion] chapter seems to bring forth the idea that self-consciousness can be achieved when the mind is tuned to hearing the surrounding nature. The narrator closes his “crónicas sobre os efeitos da exploração/ De um recurso de ricas receitas num país incauto/ Na mitigação preventiva do seu impacto nefasto” [chronicles on the effects of the exploration/ of a high revenue resource in an unwary country/ In an attempt of preventing its wicked impact] (Bonfim 2011: 100) with a description of the sounds of a new day raising: “Mais uma aurora se abria ao som de cantos vários/ De galos, rolas madrugadoras e pássaros/ E os morcegos regressavam às grutas escuras” [Another dawn opened to the sound of different chanting/ Of cocks, early morning turtledoves and birds/ And the bats returned to dark caves.] (Bonfim 2011: 100).

The embedding of such introspective, (self-)reflective scenes in the sounds of nature could be read as a literary manifestation of the concept of environmental mindfulness, which has received a growing interest in

the field of sustainability cognitive research in the last two decades (Thiermann and Sheate 2020). Mindfulness can be defined broadly as “intentional awareness of experiences and behavioural functions” and it is argued that “mindfulness is related to pro-environmental behaviors through the process of enhancing experiences with nature” (Barbaro and Pickett 2016: 137). It is important to note that in the existing scholarship environmental mindfulness tends to be framed as a unidirectional relation between a (mindful) human and the environment, with the underlying agenda of supporting “social transformation to a more sustainable society” (Thiermann & Sheate 2020). The literary (unwanted) future created in *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* explicitly points towards a need for such a transformation to ensure both environmental and social justice. Importantly, these two axes are symbiotically interwoven in Bonfim’s narrative. Mindfulness practiced by the narrators of the book is not presented as an intentional awareness of the outside world, but rather a contemplation of one’s self which allows one to open up for the surrounding nature and it is this environmental embedding that creates a framework for resistance. Resistance that can be enacted through violence or legal instruments, or as Bonfim seems to suggest, through love and storytelling.

*Lenin Oil* and *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* build upon the ongoing debates on the impact of oil extraction in São Tomé and Príncipe to explore in the realm of fiction the intersection of environmental and social justice in postcolonial contexts. Despite clearly different subject positions and perspectives adopted — a Santomean allegorical narrative depicting a continent’s struggle to thrive amid the conflicting interests in the extractivist agendas and a Portuguese novel engaging with the contemporary politics in São Tomé and Príncipe in the context of its colonial history —, both books remind us of the plurality of voices, from the past and from the present, that need to be heard to ensure that there will be a “wanted” future ahead. Importantly, both the disturbing, violent imaginary of the armed conflict presented by Aíto de Jesus Bonfim and the imaginary of relentless exploitation of the people and the archipelago by the colonial as well as post-colonial elites depicted by Pedro Rosa Mendes highlight the need to situate the discussion on extractivist policies in Africa within a



framework of global political economy that is attentive to “the ways Africa has been shaped in particular ways as a result of uneven relationships and processes operating at a global scale” (Caminero-Santangelo 2011: 9). The intertwined local and global tensions, interests and agendas represented in these two actor-oriented narratives point out towards the relevance of storytelling as a way of resisting socio-environmental injustice as well as of rethinking ingrained binaries of past vs. present; local vs. global; human-made vs. natural landscape. This way, *Lenin Oil* and *Lágrima Áurea do Mal* invite readers to engage in a moment of mindfulness that encompasses issues of human rights as well as environmental sustainability.

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