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# Writing against extraction: Petroleum resistance in Sony Labou Tansi's *Je, soussigné cardiaque*

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Résumé de l'article

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## WRITING AGAINST EXTRACTION : PETROLEUM RESISTANCE IN SONY LABOU TANSI'S *JE, SOUSSIGNÉ CARDIAQUE*

### Résumé

Cet article analyse la présence du pétrole dans la pièce *Je, soussigné cardiaque* publiée en 1977 par l'écrivain congolais Sony Labou Tansi. Cette pièce décrit l'extraction du pétrole menée par le colon espagnol Perono dans le pays imaginaire du Lebango. Le personnage principal, Mallot, nouvel enseignant fraîchement arrivé en ville avec sa femme enceinte et leur petite fille, se rend rapidement compte que Perono est à la tête d'une tyrannie qui s'appuie sur l'extraction du pétrole et menace l'écosystème lebangolais. Cette lecture se concentre sur le pétrole qui, loin d'être réduit à une simple ressource, offre une résistance proprement non-humaine à la tyrannie de l'extraction.

Mots-clés : Sony Labou Tansi – théâtre – Congo – pétrole – écocritique – extraction – Anthropocène – tyrannie.

### Abstract

*This paper analyses the presence of petroleum in the 1977 play Je, soussigné cardiaque by Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi. The play relates petroleum extraction led by the Spanish colonist Perono in the imaginary country of Lebango. The main character, Mallot, is a new teacher in town. He is accompanied by his pregnant wife and their young daughter. Mallot realizes that Perono rules over this petro-imperial tyranny, where the Lebangoese ecosystem is shaped and voided by resource exploitation. My reading focuses on the presence of petroleum beyond an anthropocentric perspective that sees it only as a resource, as I argue that petroleum offers new possibilities of nonhuman resistance to extraction.*

*Keywords : Sony Labou Tansi – theater – Congo, petroleum – ecocriticism – extraction – Anthropocene – tyranny.*

« Le pétrole manque, non pas parce qu'il manque vraiment, mais parce que Perono y rattache son illusion de pouvoir. [...] Mallot se bat contre des monopoles, toute ma vie, je me battraï pour qu'on ne confonde pas la vérité avec un cachet d'aspirine »<sup>1</sup>.

Petroleum fuels our contemporary world and yet, it remains invisible to the eye. According to Stephanie LeMenager, « petrotopia »<sup>2</sup> reveals how petro-modernity has marked the environment with the omnipresence of petro-generated infrastructures that damage human and nonhuman spheres. As cultural theorist Imre Szeman notes, petroleum is a substance « on which the globe depends to heat its homes, to move bodies and goods around, to build and maintain infrastructure – the substance that, for better and for worse, makes the world go round »<sup>3</sup>. Why this invisibility when our lives depend on petroleum ? In 1992, Amitav Ghosh mentioned the paradoxical lack of literary works on what he calls « the oil encounter » in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, the absence of oil narratives reveals Western countries' fear of dependency as well as the denial of pollution and environmental hazards<sup>4</sup>. North and Sub-Saharan African countries such as Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Gabon, and Congo enclose major reserves of petroleum and lately, Nigerian literary and artistic productions have investigated the conditions of oil production<sup>5</sup>. 4.8 % of world petroleum resources are concentrated in the Guinea Gulf countries<sup>6</sup>, and in the Republic of the Congo, the first « discovered » traces of petroleum date

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<sup>1</sup> SONY LABOU TANSI, « Je, soussigné cardiaque » [entretien], *Le Journal de Chaillot*, n°25, septembre 1985, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> LEMENAGER (Stephanie), « The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil ! », *American Literary History*, vol. 24, n°1, Spring 2012, p. 59-86 ; p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> SZEMAN (Imre), « Introduction to Focus : Petrofictions », *American Book Review*, vol. 33, n°3, March-April 2012, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> GHOSH (Amitav), « Petrofiction : The Oil Encounter and the Novel », *The New Republic*, March 2, 1992, p. 29-33 ; p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> WENZEL (Jennifer), « Petro-Magic-Realism : Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature », in : BARRETT (Ross), WORDEN (Daniel), eds., *Oil Culture*. Minneapolis (MN) : University of Minnesota Press, 2014, XXIII-424 p., ill. ; p. 211-225. Wenzel concentrates on the promises of development offered by oil extraction in post-colonial African countries in the Niger Delta, where work and wealth expectations were shattered and replaced by environmental issues and poverty. By analyzing the links between Nigerian literature and oil exploitation, Wenzel argues that the latter fueled cultural production : petro-magic realism appeared during the Nigerian oil boom that nourished a cultural imaginary. Recently, Nigerian writer Helon Habila published famed petrofiction *Oil on Water* (2010), photographer Akinunde Akinleye captured the disastrous consequences of petrol exploitation. See also artist Victor Ehikhamenor's oil drums installation, or the short film *Karikpo Pipeline* (2015) by film maker Zina Saro-Wiwa.

<sup>6</sup> COPINSCHI (Philippe), NOËL (Pierre), « L'Afrique dans la géopolitique mondiale du pétrole », *Afrique Contemporaine*, vol. 4, n°216, 2005, p. 29-42 ; p. 29.

back to 1893 with the explorers in French Equatorial Africa. This paved the way for a century of exploitation by Elf<sup>7</sup> that Marcel Ntsoni (1947-1995), better known by his pen name Sony Labou Tansi, relentlessly criticized. Born in the Belgian Congo, now Democratic Republic of the Congo to a Zairian father and a Congolese mother, but raised in the Republic of the Congo, he embraces the two Congos in his literary production and reflects on tyranny, violence, colonial and post-colonial politics not only in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in the industrialized world<sup>8</sup>. The ecological world offers a prism to reconceptualize these tropes beyond the human frame : Céline Gahungu thus studied the role of the forest in *La Vie et demie* and of the river in *L'Anté-peuple*, since both display safe spaces in the narratives for the characters<sup>9</sup>. Of equal importance are the subterranean world and mineral elements<sup>10</sup>, as staged in the play *Le Ventre*<sup>11</sup> set in the Zama Kingdom, a small African country which becomes wealthy thanks to the extraction of petroleum and mineral resources. Another unpublished manuscript, *La Raison, le pouvoir, le béret*<sup>12</sup>, stages the arrest of the main character against the backdrop of an oil crisis.

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<sup>7</sup> MALONGA (Ferdinand), SMIR (Saul), « Elf-Erap et le Congo : les vicissitudes d'un mariage de raison (1968-1978) », *Histoire, économie et société*, vol. 29, n°2, 2010, p. 109-125 ; p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Achille Mbembe's chapters « Esthétique de la vulgarité » and « Du hors monde », in his *De la postcolonie : essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (Paris : Karthala, coll. Les Afriques, 2000, 293 p. ; p. 139-186 and p. 217-264), or Dominic Thomas' chapter « Sony Labou Tansi : Commitment, Oppositionality and Resistance », in : THOMAS (D.), dir., *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2002, xv-270 p. ; p. 52-89.

<sup>9</sup> GAHUNGU (Céline), « Poétique du paysage dans *L'Anté-peuple* et *La Vie et demie* de Sony Labou Tansi », *Études littéraires africaines*, n°39 (*Littératures africaines et paysage*), 2015, p. 79-89 ; p. 83 ; en ligne : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1033133ar> – c. 24-05-23. In what Gahungu calls a utopian geography (« *géographie utopique* »), borders disappear as the landscape implements a political project which rejuvenates the Kongo.

<sup>10</sup> See the chapter entitled « Les œuvres du Capitalocène » in Alice Desquilbet's dissertation, *La Poétique de la complémentation dans l'écriture de Sony Labou Tansi après 1980, vers une écopoétique* (thèse de doctorat sous la direction de X. Garnier, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2021, 602 p. ; p. 82-149), and her analysis of the play *Le Trou* which delves into the poetics and politics of extraction.

<sup>11</sup> Consulted at the Bibliothèque multimédia francophone at Limoges, Fonds Labou-Tansi, November 2021. In this play, the instauration of a monarchy leads to intensive natural extraction, while the King has a constantly expanding stomach that threatens his health. Sita, his minister of natural resources, embodies the political figure who builds the entire economy of the country on the exploitation of natural resources.

<sup>12</sup> Consulted at the Bibliothèque multimédia francophone at Limoges, Fonds Labou-Tansi, November 2021.

The play *Je, soussigné cardiaque*, published in 1977, imagines a fictional country, Lebango, ruled by the oil industry. Even though this name evokes a real town in the region of Cuvette in the Congo, Sony locates it in the Pygmy country (« *pays pygmée* »<sup>13</sup>) in the original manuscript. If the latter indicates that the play is set in 1962, the 1976 typescript of the play sets the plot in 1969, when the Congo placed petroleum at the core of its national economy. It is in this context that Mallot, a schoolteacher, arrives in town with his daughter, Nelly, and his pregnant wife, Mwanda. Mallot needs oil and meets Salvator Perono, a Spanish colonizer who, along with a local priest, owns all the nation's supply of petroleum. But Mallot refuses to acknowledge Perono's monopoly and declines his oilcan. Despite Mallot's (false) health certificate which should have prevented his transfer to another location, Ebara, the Director of Education in Lebango, transfers Mallot, then has him arrested<sup>14</sup>, sent to jail and sentenced to death.

This essay focuses on the discreet yet omnipresent nonhuman character of the play : petroleum. Indeed, Sony draws the reader's attention to the *concreteness* of petroleum in Lebango. Sony's gesture towards the subterranean environment recalls what Édouard Glissant called the deep (« *les profonds* ») in our concrete experience of them : « *la concrétude de la profondeur, ce qu'il y a, concrètement, en dessous de l'apparence* »<sup>15</sup>. Even if Glissant's vision centers on the depth of the Caribbean volcanic landscape, this concreteness incites us to rethink the world that lies beneath our feet. In calling for a poetics of materiality, Glissant's approach reframes the subterranean world, which escapes our human vision that remains on the Earth's surface. As a matter of fact, Sony questions our anthropogenic gaze that turns a blind eye on petroleum or reduces it to a resource to fulfill our needs. Instead, he invites us to follow the traces of petroleum, making the imperialist extractivist gesture visible and revealing the hollowing of Lebango. Beyond the anthropogenic violence of subterranean exploitation, Sony fleshes out new perceptions of petroleum based on its geological resistance potential. Through erosion and liquidity, petroleum acquires a geological agency that generates new epistemologies and gives birth to resilient trans-species beings that evade the tyrannical rigid system.

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<sup>13</sup> Consulted at the Bibliothèque multimédia francophone at Limoges, Fonds Labou-Tansi, November 2021. This spatial detail recalls the impact of natural exploitation, such as deforestation, on autochthonous populations in the Congo.

<sup>14</sup> This episode recalls Sony's life as a teacher who was forced to move between different teaching appointments in the Congo because of his opposition to the political regime – see : THOMAS (D.), *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 55 ; GAHUNGU (C.), *Sony Labou Tansi : la naissance d'un écrivain*. Paris : CNRS éditions, coll. Planète libre. Essais, 284 p. ; p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> GLISSANT (Édouard), NOUDELMANN (François), *L'Entretien du monde*. Saint-Denis : Presses universitaires de Vincennes, coll. Littérature hors frontière, 2018, 200 p. ; p. 69.

## Extraction

Lebango has the defining traits of a society that voids all forms of life. Phillip John Usher defines geological extraction (from *ex* and *tractum* in Latin, which means to pull something out of something else) as a « rupture », where the land « becomes raw material »<sup>16</sup>. In this transformative process, the extractor alters the status of the extracted material — no longer a parcel of land — as he projects his own desire onto it. Driven by his own fantasies, the extractor imagines beforehand what is beneath the Earth's surface<sup>17</sup>. Perono's extractivist gaze reduces petroleum to gold and Lebangoese bodies to energy. He does not see matter but what he can extract from it ; the petroleum Perono sees can be nothing but future capital. Therefore, extraction translates Perono's supremacy : « *Il ramasse des os, des cailloux, des insectes... tout* »<sup>18</sup>. In fact, Perono exhibits a variety of masks and African objects in his living room, as in a museum, where enclosed objects only have an aesthetic function and lose their cultural and local roles. But here, Perono's carnivorous museum embodies the West's consumption of Lebango.

After the extraction comes the ingestion. The gigantic dining-room in Perono's house reflects his appetite : he eats a considerable amount of food cooked by his domestic servant-child, Karibou, so much so his gluttony becomes a metaphor for his greed for petroleum. Anthropophagy is even hinted at when Perono threatens Karibou : « *tu finiras par affecter un morceau de ton cul de Pygmée au fond de ma nourriture* » (*JSC*, p. 84). Perono's drive recalls that of the Providential Guide in *La Vie et demie*, as the Guide cuts Martial's dead body into pieces, peels off his skin and ingests his raw flesh in his living room<sup>19</sup>. As philosopher Achille Mbembe puts it, Martial's chopped body becomes meat to be eaten by the carnivorous power of post-colonial politics which transforms bodies into anonymous meat<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, in this horrific living room, Perono's infinite extractivist hunger ingests every form of life and turns bodies into edible meat.

Before the extractor(s) lay the extracted survivors. How do the Lebangoese people survive, when extraction generates a political system that relies on systemic hollowing ? While Perono and Ebara's tyrannical power increases, Lebango's economy hollows. Mallot hints at the oxymoronic

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<sup>16</sup> USHER (Philip John), *Exterranean : Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene*. New York : Fordham University Press, 2019, xi-209 p., ill. ; p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> USHER (P.J.), *Exterranean...*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> SONY L.T. – SONY LAB'OU TANSI, *La Parenthèse de sang* suivi de *Je, soussigné cardiaque : théâtre*. Paris : Hatier, 1981, 159 p. ; p. 81. Referred to as *JSC*.

<sup>19</sup> SONY L.T., *La Vie et demie : roman*. Paris : Éd. du Seuil, coll. Points, n°659, 1998, 191 p. ; p. 11-19.

<sup>20</sup> MBEMBE (A.), *De la postcolonie...*, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

relation between void and production proper to extraction : « *Nous sommes les plus grands producteurs mondiaux de vide* » (*JSC*, p. 125.)<sup>21</sup>. Extraction is not just about void. Instead, it generates void : it never stops digging. In this respect, Sony's play is an illustration of the double movement emerging from what Michael Watts calls « petrovioence » : on the one hand, there are the national promises of development and « progress » and on the other hand, there are the terrible conditions of production that contradict these expectations<sup>22</sup>. The only thing growing in Lebangó is a gaping void. Given his political commitment<sup>23</sup>, Sony was aware of the dangers of pro-development discourses in post-colonial Africa. Accordingly, there is a thin line between colonial ideology and contemporary discourses on development. In maintaining active the dichotomy between Europe and Africa, such rhetoric keeps a Western stranglehold on land and does not eradicate colonialism, but only displaces it. As Sony puts it, development is a vicious circle that condemns countries to provide raw materials to so-called developed countries that consume these resources. When Perono tells Karibou, his servant, that she has made him rich (« *tu m'as vraiment enrichi* », *JSC*, p. 84), he is not just talking about Karibou's unique mustard recipe : Perono literally owes Karibou, a local child, his wealth. Alongside this illusionary sense of independence, de-colonization brought about a false balance in the world order, while under-development perpetuated a hierarchy between the global South and the global North, now reproduced by petroleum exploitation. For Sony, the ideology and practice of development induce under-development, synonymous with economic stagnation and decline. Worse, under-development becomes a resource in a system that ties the African continent to an inherited order of the world : « *le sous-développement se transforme en une matière première hautement stratégique et hau-*

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<sup>21</sup> This quote twists political speeches on development and shows that behind the promises of a new El Dorado, oil actually creates but a world of dreams and the illusion of wealth and profusion. Mallot shatters this image, a mirage hiding a void.

<sup>22</sup> WATTS (Michael), « Petro-Violence : Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology », in : *Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics*. Berkeley : Institute of International Studies, Working Papers 99-1, September 1999, p. 1-30 ; p. 9 : <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zh116zd> – c. 12-06-2021.

<sup>23</sup> See Sony's letters to François Mitterrand in 1988 and to Jacques Chirac in 1993 in : SONY L.T., *Encre, sueur, salive et sang : textes critiques*. Édition établie et présentée par Greta Rodriguez-Antoniotti. Avant-propos de Kossi Efoui. Paris : Éd. du Seuil, 2015, 195 p. Sony embraced a political career in 1992, when he became a member of parliament. In a letter to president Lissouba published in 1993 by the newspaper *Le Combat*, Sony criticized the politics of development : « *Je vous ai suggéré que le développement était ce truc-machin assez vicieux qui sert à prolonger, comme il y a cent ans, la mission civilisatrice, les prérogatives de l'Europe sur un continent qui n'avait son salut que dans la puissance qu'il déploierait à refuser le développement made in Europe, pour se consacrer à ses propres voies d'organisation sociale et économique, suivant la diverse richesse de ses cultures nationales liquidées à Berlin* » (p. 61).

tement rentable »<sup>24</sup>. In other words, extraction produces underdevelopment that itself fuels post-colonial politics.

The Lebangolese tyrannical regime further relies on a political and economic void that empties the local population, as emptiness self-generates and annihilates any form of life in Lebango. For geo-philosopher Kathryn Yusoff, politics of extraction, even more in the (neo)colonial sphere, indeed betray a material anti-blackness :

a billion Black Anthropocenes names the all too many *voidings* of experience that span multiple scales, manifestations, and ongoing extractive economies, in terms of the materiality and grammars that inculcate anti-blackness through a material, geophysics of race<sup>25</sup>.

Extraction is not neutral and impacts those who living on the land that is being drilled<sup>26</sup>. Mallot is a man in pieces, as he tells Hortense : « *[V]ous m'avez rendu un gros morceau de moi* » (*JSC*, p. 131). At the beginning of the play, Mallot sees himself in a broken mirror (*JSC*, p. 77) and his fragmented reflection displays his collapsing self drilled by extraction. This symbolically suggests that the image he has of himself is a face (the ethical marker of mankind in Levinas' philosophy) in fragments. In other words, extraction shatters the ethical and supposedly universal dimension of the face. As a matter of fact, Mallot repeatedly invokes a sense of being emptied out : « *On me vide de mes nerfs, de ma tête et de mes os* » (*JSC*, p. 77). Like a skinned animal, his flesh has been removed and only his body-husk remains. When he sees the doctor, Mallot's depiction of his own flesh recalls drilling : « *Prenez vos engins. Creusez, bêchez, fouillez* » (*JSC*, p. 109).

This hollowing reaches an ontological dimension, since it never comes to an end, as shown by this oxymoronic structure : « *être du néant* » (*JSC*, p. 135). The phrase figures the in-betweenness of Mallot's (non)being. Even if he is already void, he keeps being hollowed out by the cruel machinery of extraction. It is not by chance that once he is condemned, he refuses to be shot, for it would be an unbearable ultimate drilling by the extractors. He epitomizes the « hollowed object », in tyrannical post-colonial societies, where objectified beings are voided and *are not* by themselves, for they embody a negative essence<sup>27</sup>. Given this constant hollowing out, Mallot cannot be. Afro-pessimist scholar Calvin Warren's

<sup>24</sup> SONY L.T., *Encre, sueur, salive et sang...*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> YUSOFF (Kathryn), *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* [2018]. Minneapolis (MN) : University of Minnesota Press, 2018, coll. Forerunners : ideas first, 2022, XIV-115 p., ill. ; p. XIV.

<sup>26</sup> Alice Desquilbet notably mentions the power of condensation of holes (« *trous* ») in Sony's work, which represent both the historical hole of Central Africa, the stolen and lost past due to colonization as well as the extractivist hole in the land. The hole, she writes, is both spatial and temporal – DESQUILBET (A.), *La Poétique de la complémentation dans l'écriture de Sony Labou Tansi...*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> MBEMBE (A.), *De la postcolonie...*, *op. cit.*, p. 311.



analysis of the « ontological abyss »<sup>28</sup> sheds light on his condition. For Warren, black people « assume the function of nothing in a metaphysical world »<sup>29</sup> that tries to eradicate them. Reinvesting Frantz Fanon's difference between being and existing for the colonized subject, Warren asserts that black people exist but lack being<sup>30</sup>. Ontological discourses use Blackness as an instrument, dominate and annihilate black people to keep the order of the world as it is<sup>31</sup>. A mere shadow, Mallot perpetuates this order and is not given his own ontological substance ; he is trapped in emptiness as a condition. To be nothing is his only possible future, for it is thanks to his nothingness that Perono exists.

In this extractivist ecosystem, wombs cannot procreate either. Mallot repeats his wish to give birth to himself : « *Il faut pourtant que j'arrive à me mettre au monde* » (*JSC*, p. 73). But nothing grows within Mallot, except Perono's invading presence. According to Julin Everett, gender ambiguity in the play suggests that pregnancy is not a question of gender. The absence of the feminine and the hypersexualized dialogue between Perono and Mallot stresses that if the feminine embodies the dominated subject, birth-giving, on the contrary, empowers Mallot and allows him to secure another existence<sup>32</sup>. Still, motherhood is perverted by tyrannical power when Mallot describes himself as a growing fetus to Ebara, the Director for Education : « *Je gonfle. Je bouge. Je monte. J'arrive. Je viens. Et vous m'attendez. Comme une mère* » (*JSC*, p. 135). Ebara, the tyrant, endorses the role of the mother in a matrix-like position. The one who gives life to Mallot is also the one who wants him dead : this self-destructive scheme fails at birth-giving in a country ruled by extraction. Gestation is impossible because extraction penetrates wombs : Perono's drilling presence within Mallot hints at gynecological violence, when he is called a gynecologist instead of generous by the child who brings Mallot to Perono's house (*JSC*, p. 80). With this pun or slip, Perono's so-called generosity ironically indicates the opposite : he is an extractivist, who takes without giving back. Perono penetrates wombs, and the references to rape and loss of virginity throughout the play echo this vaginal intrusion. Perono is the one who ripped Mallot's virginity off, the neolo-

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<sup>28</sup> WARREN (Calvin L.), *Ontological Terror : Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2018, XI-220 p. ; p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> WARREN (C.), *Ontological Terror...*, *op. cit*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Warren writes that black people « inhabit the world in concealment and non-movement » (p. 13). Hence the need for Warren to write « black being » under erasure, as being does not apply to blackness.

<sup>31</sup> WARREN (C.), *Ontological Terror...*, *op. cit*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> EVERETT (Julin), « Must La Victime Be Feminine ? Postcolonial Violence, Gender Ambiguity, and Homoerotic Desire in Sony Labou Tansi's *Je, soussigné cardiaque* », *Research in African Literatures*, (Indiana University Press), vol. 44, n°1, 2013, p. 1-18.

gism « *dévierger* » (*JSC*, p. 91, 95, 100, 116) anchoring extraction at the core of the intimate body.

Indeed, the female body suffers from several forms of extractions. Hortense, the minister's secretary in the play, is thus constantly hollowed out by men. She mentions Ebara's sexual assaults, attempts to seduce Mallot, and asks him to own her in a sexual way, but also, an ontological one (« *posséder* », *JSC*, p. 130). The fact that Mallot calls her Ebara's prostitute (*JSC*, p. 138) also hints at the way her body, a sexual tool, is the property of men. Besides, Hortense notes her co-constitutive gap : « *quand je fais la somme de ma viande-toujours – même résultat : manquant. Déficit* » (*JSC*, p. 129). Nothing adds up, and her own body, referred to using an economic jargon, suffers from the self-generating void that affects Lebang. The substantial gap emerging between herself, the speaking subject, and her « meat », epitomizes how Hortense distances herself from her own body. Drained by her ontological void, she fails to grasp her wholeness as a subject : « *Je n'arrive pas à remonter ma chair jusqu'à moi. Refaire surface jusqu'à moi* » (*JSC*, p. 129). Reduced to a uterus and a mouth, Hortense becomes nothing more than these two sexualized body orifices – she turns into a human hole. Enduring her own condition, Hortense is made of « flesh », something Hortense Spillers famously situates as captive, contrary to the body, which embraces the position of the liberated subject. The body controls, the flesh obeys and if the captor has a body, slaves do not have one : they are an agglomerated, non-gendered, anonymous mass of flesh. Flesh is a receptacle for violence ; it is mutilated, broken skin that bleeds and oozes. The « seared, divided, ripped apartness »<sup>33</sup> of flesh atomizes an already objectified body. The play uncovers a laboratory of ontological extraction, where flesh bears tortures and experiments, and where the extractivist hand penetrates and digs through the layers of land, beings, and wombs.

## Geological ontology

Because humans fail, Sony veers away from the extractivist gesture to reclaim petroleum for what it is, before being a resource that fuels our world. In the play, the subterranean is not doomed to be exploited, as geological agency resists the tyranny of extraction and reconfigures resilient beings.

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<sup>33</sup> SPILLERS (Hortense), « Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe : An American Grammar Book », *Diacritics*, (Johns Hopkins University Press), vol. 17, n°2, Summer 1987, p. 64-81 ; p. 67.

## Dust

In a context of extraction, violent drilling creates a world of dust and dirt, where land and beings crumble and dissolve. Dust becomes the symbol of a devastated land, so much so that Mallot compares himself to insignificant dust : « *je suis leur chose. Leur objet. Ils me marchent dedans sans tenir compte de rien. Un peu de poussière au fond du système* » (JSC, p. 123). The remnant and invisible dust figures Mallot's worthlessness in Lebango. He is the one to whom nobody pays attention, and the one who is put to pieces by the extractivist system. But dust also permeates the first pages of the play, when Mallot and his family arrive in the village where everyone, including himself, and everything, is covered with red dust : « *que tout devienne... (il prend un quartier de terre et l'effrite) poussière* » (JSC, p. 77). In this cosmogonic moment when Mallot embraces a God-like function in his dusty universe, he wishes for a dust world, where dust escapes the rigid tyrannical system of Lebango and its hierarchy. His hand, crumbling the soil, establishes an inter-corporeal connection with dust. This contrasts with Perono's extractivist hand that never stops digging into the land of Lebango. Here, Mallot is making an opposite gesture ; he raises and grasps the crumbled land to reclaim its agency. In this context, being dust (« *être poussière* ») is neither annihilation nor destruction, given that dust recasts human possibilities. Reclaiming dust grants Mallot a new status in Lebango. As Stephanie Newell argues about dirt, which is, similarly to dust, too often reduced to negative connotations, we need to read dirt in « multicultural contexts and disconnect it from a binary relation with cleanliness »<sup>34</sup> and to question the colonial inheritance of dirt as synonymous with filth. Dust appears as an active agent which crumbles and scatters, moves and is moved by external forces. Above all, dust is not a mere remnant of insignificant pieces, but brings together fine particles of matter and tiny bits of organic and inorganic fragments. Because it challenges contours, it refuses the dichotomy between the human and the nonhuman, and penetrates and dissolves the characters' epidermal boundaries. We are intricate with dust, it moves with, on, and – when inhaled – in our bodies. We cannot conceive dirt or dust as clearly outside our bodily frontiers, as scholar Heather I. Sullivan claims, « we are enmeshed within dirt in its many forms »<sup>35</sup>. Even more with an exploited soil, drilling blurs the distinction between land and beings, and causes granular materials to invade lungs and to mingle with human cells to co-constitute these bodies. Lebangoese people exist with, in and through dust. As Lydie Moudileno argues, Sony's works explore science-fiction patterns, such as hybridity, to enable a « historical and

<sup>34</sup> NEWELL (Stephanie), *Histories of Dirt : Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2020, XIX-249 p., ill. ; p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> SULLIVAN (Heather I.), « Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism », *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, vol. 19, n°3, Summer 2012, p. 515-531 ; p. 515.

epistemological rupture »<sup>36</sup> and establish new narratives avoiding the clichés in the representations of the African continent. For Sony, science is neither neutral nor universal, precisely because it comes from man, and this same science failed in the past because it refused the status of human beings to a part of the population<sup>37</sup>. For him, rethinking sciences aims at getting rid of their reductive scopes and encyclopedic classifications reminiscent of the colonial model. Sony therefore scatters our well-known human features to empower beings with geological agency, far from scientific taxonomies. The play offers a breach to reframe the human in an ecological world in crisis and a transitional space to think of new epistemologies in times of extraction. De-centering the human goes together with dust agency that crumbles human and nonhuman borders and constitutes a site of trans-corporeal exchanges.

### **Petro-plasticity**

Dust crumbles bodies, while petroleum conceptualizes liquid beings who escape frameworks of definition. If, as Perono remarks, one cannot give birth to petroleum (« *on ne peut pas enfanter du pétrole* », *JSC*, p. 89), because human oil consumption is faster than its production, he does not mention the generative power of petroleum. In fact, the confrontation between Perono and Mallot in Perono's villa presents a trans-species birth. When Mallot spills oil on the floor, it gives birth to the new man he wants to become. This scene is the only one where oil is directly present on stage, as it flows out of its can, while Mallot expresses his wish to create a new man<sup>38</sup>. With oil's liquidity, Mallot gives birth to a being out of human ontology : « *l'homme n'a jamais eu lieu, je l'invente* » (*JSC*, p. 75). Céline Gahungu mentioned the bodily dimension and the organic quality (« *organicité* ») that both permeate Sony's writing process : « *la création est associée au jaillissement* »<sup>39</sup>. In this scene, the surge (« *jaillissement* ») is geological and embraces Mallot's body. This new man, bound to petroleum, escapes epistemological definitions. In spilling out of the can, oil is free – just like Mallot : « *je suis impossible à mettre en conserve* » (*JSC*, p. 92). Mallot identifies with oil and refuses imprisonment. Petroleum springing forth gives birth to Mallot, nourishes him with its strength and its ontological possibilities, as would a black amniotic liquid. In this highly symbolic geological birth, petroleum is poured out of

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<sup>36</sup> MOUDILENO (Lydie), « Magic Realism : “Arme Miraculeuse” for the African Novel ? », *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 37, n°1, Spring 2006, p. 28-41 ; p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> SONY L.T., *Encre, sueur, salive et sang...*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> This passage is highly reminiscent of Sony's own desire to create his own self thanks to the writing process. See C. Gahungu's analysis of Sony's pseudonyms in : GAHUNGU (C.), *Sony Labou Tansi : la naissance d'un écrivain*, *op. cit.*, p. 32-38.

<sup>39</sup> GAHUNGU (C.), *Sony Labou Tansi : la naissance d'un écrivain*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

the can and brings this hybrid version of Mallot into the world. That is why Mallot repeats that he is untakeable (« *imprenable* », *JSC*, p. 92), since his liquidity eludes the extractivist grasp of Perono. In the same way that petroleum runs between Perono's hands, Mallot escapes his lethal grip and the burden of extractivist tyranny.

Just after Perono agrees to give Mallot oil, Mallot replies that he overthrows him (« *je vous renverse* », *JSC*, p. 92), as he throws oil on the floor. This is a political gesture, considering that in French, the verb « *renverser* » has two meanings : to spill, but also to overthrow a political figure. From this verb springs Mallot's double resistance : he literally liquefies and spills Perono, and with him, the colonial system. At this specific moment, from a rigid tyrant, Perono becomes nothing more than a puddle of oil. This moment discloses Mallot's refusal of petro-imperialism<sup>40</sup>. As the play goes on, characters become fluid and lose their structuring shape. Step by step, human liquefaction annihilates the inflexible and hierarchized extractivist world. The altercation between Perono and Mallot reveals aqueous bodies : « *[J]e bouge dans toutes les tiges de votre chair. Je l'éclabousse. Vous entendez ? Plouf ! Plouf ! Plouf ! J'écarte vos chromosomes* » (*JSC*, p. 95). Perono is no longer a rigid, threatening human, but becomes a figure that is malleable and penetrable by Mallot. The latter is no longer the drilled, penetrated character, as petroleum displays this malleable cosmos to him. Facing Mallot, Ebara experiences the same liquefaction when his bodily shape dissolves : « *[J]e vous éparpille, je vous disperse* » (*JSC*, p. 136), « *je vous dissous* » (*JSC*, p. 94). Verbs like « *dissoudre* », « *éparpiller* », « *disperser* », « *renverser* », and « *éclabousser* » splatter the lines of the play to shatter oppressive characters.

Spilling embodies resistance and recalls how liquid petroleum escapes a rigid extractivist system. When petroleum smears Perono's rug, it leaves an inerasable mark on his property. Petroleum is black ; it stains and is indelible, just like the Chinese ink that infiltrates Sony's well-known novel *La Vie et demie*. The tyrannic Providential Guide is stained by Martial's inky black body liquid, while women throw up an inky substance that smears the Guide<sup>41</sup>. The two occurrences of the indelible ink inscribe Martial's resistance on the body of the tyrant. The Chinese ink in *La Vie et demie* hints at another face of geological resistance, since ink originates from carbon dissolved with a liquid binder, such as water or glue. On earth, carbon derives from a transformative process over billions of years and is to be found in different natural components, such as rocks, diamonds,

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<sup>40</sup> WATTS (Michael), « Petro-Violence : Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity », in : PELUSO (Nancy Lee), WATTS (Michael), eds., *Violent Environments*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2001, 453 p. ; p. 189-212 ; p. 205. Watts explains that « oil is unavoidably an engagement », a « Faustian bargain » that trades independence against oil revenues.

<sup>41</sup> SONY L.T., *La Vie et demie*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

graphite, coal, or petroleum. It is not by chance, then, that both petroleum and ink splatter Sony's texts, for both have a geological origin and conceptualize black resistance as indelible. Sony invests these two subterranean agents out of their anthropogenic use to suggest the characters' surviving potential.

As petroleum splashes the lines of the play, it is no longer invisible subterranean matter. Glissant's vision of the deep (« *les profonds* ») goes beyond geological layers : what was deep below now springs and soaks Lebango and its inhabitants. In fact, petroleum's liquid resistance penetrates Mallot's body. When he speaks to Hortense, he mentions an internal flood : « *J'afflue de partout. J'émerge de tous côtés. [...] Déluge, oh, déluge de moi sur moi* » (*JSC*, p. 131). His bodily liquefaction portrays his overflowing out of his human boundaries to fully embrace oil liquidity. The Biblical deluge hints at God's will to annihilate all human beings, except Noah and his family, who survive the diluvian flood on his Arch and give birth to another mankind. In this scene, the deluge reconfigures Mallot out of his body and floods the extractivist system to conceive a new version of man. Mallot's corporeal liquefaction reappears with saliva, a body liquid that keeps flowing into and out of the lines of the play<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, saliva is Mallot's only remaining weapon when facing figures of authority ; like other liquids, it has a power of dissolution. Mallot's bursts of saliva<sup>43</sup> (*JSC*, p. 102) epitomize its violent potential : « *ma salive vous dissout* » (*JSC*, p. 136). In this outburst when facing Ebara, Mallot reinvests petroleum's spilling power. Petroleum floods, impregnates, and empowers his body with its liquidity. Mallot starts spitting after the confrontation with Perono (in fact, the first occurrence of saliva in the first scene takes place at the end of the play, since the entire play is a flashback), which is also when oil pours out of its can. When Mallot spits at the tyrants (*JSC*, p. 75, 102, 104, 105, 136, 137), saliva re-enacts this initial springing of oil with Perono and imitates the flowing petroleum that stains and resists the oppressor. As oil infiltrates bodies in resistance, saliva is indelible ; it stains, and becomes Mallot's tool of protest. This geological resistance in Sony's prose unearths oil agency through erosion or liquefaction, and both challenge politics of extraction. Petroleum is no longer a resource that fuels human needs. Instead, oil meets and mingles with the human to generate resilient beings who smudge, soak, and flood our extractivist world.

Ninon VESSIER<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See C. Gahungu's description of corporeal vital forces such as blood or sperm that echo the creative process for Sony – GAHUNGU (C.), *Sony Labou Tansi : la naissance d'un écrivain*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Mallot metaphorically transforms saliva into bullets : « [Ç]a vaut toutes les mitraillettes du monde » (*JSC*, p. 102).

<sup>44</sup> Emory University.