Malagasy Ecopoetics

The Hybrid Poetry of Parny, Rabearivelo and Mahaleo

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Abstract

Malagasy literary production has long displayed a discourse with Madagascar's unique environment, often linking this with an exploration of island identity. This article examines and compares poetic writing in Madagascar across three and a half centuries. It studies the anti-colonial prose poems of eighteenth-century white creole poet Évariste Parny alongside early twentieth-century poems of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, who brings French Symbolism into contact with traditional Malagasy verse, and alongside lyrical poetry by the musicians in the modern folk-pop band Mahaleo, who bring a mixture of traditions to a unique Malagasy style of music. Parny, Rabearivelo, and Mahaleo all build on and break with generic convention of poetic form, and all do so in order to draw attention to the island's specific experience of ecological colonial violence and to their interpretation of eco-regional identity. Their writings help us to make sense of the ecological changes in Madagascar during and after colonisation, and of the human response to these changes.

Discussions around environmental devastation have assumed an increasingly visible place in much scientific, political, social and literary discourse in the last decade. The Indian Ocean features prominently, for it may be

> one of the world's most vulnerable regions to a range of environmental security threats, whether stemming from climate change, extreme weather events or human activities […]. The Indian Ocean island states are on the front line of these challenges, as they're among the most vulnerable to such threats (Brewster 2020).

Yet, awareness of environmental change and its consequences, particularly in the Indian Ocean, is not new. Indeed, postcolonial ecocritical theory notes that, as early as the eighteenth century, the tropical island 'became the central motif of a new discourse about nature which we can safely characterise as environmentalist rather than simply conservationist' (Grove 1995: 223). In Mauritius, for example, '[s]ome of the worst consequences of early colonial deforestation were well documented' (Ibid.: 5–6). Yet, knowledge acquired by eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers from the colonies is all too frequently overlooked, 'in the absence of any attempt to deal with the history of environmental concern on a truly global basis' (Ibid.: 2). It is important for modern scholarship to address this oversight, since,

> As colonial expansion proceeded, the environmental experiences of Europeans and indigenous peoples living at the colonial periphery played a steadily more dominant and dynamic part in the construction of new European evaluations of nature and in the growing awareness of the destructive impact of European economic activity on the peoples and environments of the newly 'discovered' and colonised lands. (Ibid.: 3)

By revisiting the voices of the past, we gain a more comprehensive insight into climate change in this region.

We must be sensitive not only to the precursors of ecologists, such as Pierre Poivre, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Philibert Commerson. The fictional writings and poetry of the period also provide a wealth of material concerning humankind's early understanding of the climate crisis. Modern climate policy discussions have largely focused on 'improving climate predictions' and 'creating new economic policy instruments', rather than 'learning from the myths of indigenous cultures' or 're- thinking the value of consumption' (Hulme 2011: 177–178). However, as Finch-Race argues,

> The role of story-telling needs elevating alongside that of fact-finding. [...] *Stories are the way that humans make sense of change*, and the humanities understand the practices of story-telling very well. A failure to engage fully with the story of the climate crisis is a problem requiring expertise in qualitative approaches rooted in the arts, humanities, and social sciences as a counterpart to quantitative methods that are the foundations of the natural and physical sciences (Finch-Race 2021a: 100, my emphasis).

With this in mind, understanding and textual analysis of literature 'might help with perceiving the intricacies of climate change' and its effects on local populations (Finch-Race 2021b: 146).

Whilst there has been increasing focus on the Caribbean and the Atlantic as a site for ecocritical study (Casteel 2004; DeLoughrey 2007; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Benson 2011; Savory 2011; Paravisini-Gebert 2011), there has been less focus on the Indian Ocean. However, as Francoise Lionnet writes:

> The recent turn toward the inclusion of the Indian Ocean world in studies of the eighteenth century in general […], in ocean studies, comparative literary studies,

> and critical theory […] has paved the way for a reconsideration of histories and voices neglected by the widespread focus on the Atlantic world and its role in the triangular trade and the age of imperialism (Lionnet 2018: l).

Malagasy literary production has long displayed a discourse with the island's unique environment, often linking this with an exploration of island identity, the evils of colonialism, and the need to respect the environment to protect future generations and the ecosystem.[1] This is no surprise. Madagascar's unique environment has altered since its first encounter with humankind, with many tribes settling and cultivating the land. One Merina king, Andrianampoinimerina, for example, famously expressed his ambitions thus: 'the sea shall be the limit of my rice-fields' (Brown 1995: 108). However, the ecological devastation brought by the arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean (from the sixteenth century onwards) has caused the greatest suffering to the land and consequences to climate. This period will be the focus of my article.

Although the French Empire did not officially annex Madagascar until 1896, Madagascar had suffered contact with French settlers as early as the mid-seventeenth century. As its neighbours, Mauritius and Réunion, gained a core position in the French Empire's trade route, Madagascar became 'an essential source of rice, beef and slaves for the settlers on Bourbon [= Réunion] and Mauritius' (Brown 1995: 49). Malagasy produce, such as 'rice, beef, leather, graphite and other materials' were also shipped to France during the First World War (Ibid.: 244). Brown (1995: 2) writes: 'the climate is temperate but the original forest has been destroyed nearly everywhere and the general impression is of barren, eroded hills interspersed with terraced rice cultivation in the valleys'. As Said argues, 'imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence' (Said 1994: 77). The act of writing the landscape (and its wounds) opens up the path to 'recovery, identification, and historical mythmaking "enabled by the

land"' (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 3).[2] Yet, this 'land is recoverable at first only through imagination' (Said 1994: 77). Examining the ways in which Malagasy writers engage imaginatively with landscape over the course of the island's (post)colonial history is arguably crucial to our understanding of a) the ways humankind has cultivated a relationship with the Malagasy landscape since the eighteenth century, and b) the effects of landscape violence on flora, fauna and human life. The very act of such writing is an attempt to initiate recovery. The voices of (post)colonial Francophone literature from the past three and a half centuries therefore provide modern scholarship with insight into the development of human interaction with climate change.

Poetry dominates Malagasy (post)colonial literature, largely because of the island's oral culture and the Merina *hain-teny* tradition. The novel was not a popular form of literature on the island during the colonial period, and the strength of poetic tradition has overpowered that of the novel in the years following independence (Hawkins 2007: 78). This is perhaps reflected in the delay in opening up the Malagasy fictional literary scene to a wider international audience. Although the works of Madagascar's famous poets have been available in English translation for decades, no Malagasy novel (written in French or Malagasy) had been translated into English until 2017, when Naivo's *Au-delà des rizières* (2012) became the first. It is poetic writing, therefore, to which this article turns, investigating the ways in which hybridity of verse has allowed Malagasy poets and songwriters to engage with island landscape, and to elucidate the impact of colonial violence upon it.

There are many forms of hybridity: biological, racial, cultural, linguistic, literary, and others. As Vanessa Guignery (2011: 2) notes, 'the word "hybridity" has its origins in biology and botany […]. In the twentieth century, the term hybridity extended beyond the biological and racial framework to embrace linguistic and cultural areas'. Subsequently, 'at the instigation of Homi Bhabha […], postcolonial theory adopted the idea of hybridity to designate the

transcultural forms that resulted from linguistic, political or ethnic intermixing, and to challenge the existing hierarchies, polarities, binarisms and symmetries' (Ibid.: 3) This article discusses literary hybridity and the ways in which breaking with established poetic form and tradition (including mixing literary styles, mixing Malgasy-French influences, and mixing traditional myths with science) can be used to highlight ecoregional island identities (themselves sometimes hybrid), subvert (neo)colonial hierarchies, and present a dialogue between anti-colonial discourse and environmental awareness. Since hybridity is a recognised phenomenon of Malagasy literature (Hawkins 2007: xiii), the island's poetry is fertile ground for such analysis.

In what follows, I examine anti-colonial prose poems by eighteenth-century white creole poet Évariste Parny; early twentieth-century poems by Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, whose *hainteny*-French poetic mix brings French Symbolism into contact with traditional Malagasy verse; and lyrical poetry by the musicians in the modern folk-pop band Mahaleo, who bring a mixture of traditions and references to a unique Malagasy style of music. Parny, Rabearivelo, and Mahaleo build on and break with generic conventions of poetic form to draw attention to the island's experience of ecological colonial violence and to their own interpretation of eco-regional identity, ultimately contributing to a body of Malagasy ecopoetry. Their creative works help us to make sense of the ecological changes in Madagascar during and after colonisation, and of the human response to these changes. Ecopoetry is poetry with a strong ecological emphasis or message. It is the 'incorporation of an ecological or environmental perspective into the study of poetics' (Rigby 2016: 79). Specifically, I analyse the functions and unique constructions of poetic texts (style, aesthetics, literary devices, themes and forms) to ascertain further how an understanding of the arts and humanities can assist us to assess human interaction with climate and discussions on climate change. Through my investigation into Malagasy poetic works across three and a half centuries, I show that, while it has taken

critical theory until the 2000s to open direct dialogue between postcolonialism and ecocriticism (Campbell and Niblett 2016: 6), anti-colonial discourse and environmental awareness have appeared alongside each other, in entwining metaphors and dialogues, in primary literary sources from the eighteenth century through to the twenty-first.

In its broader discussion of ecoregional identity, this article engages with recent work, such as that of Daniel Finch-Race and Valentina Gosetti, to provide accounts of 'Francophone contexts from a decentred perspective couched in environmental awareness' (Finch-Race and Gosetti 2019: 154).[3] Finch-Race and Gosetti discuss the importance of 'identifying what is distinctive about a multispecies community in a certain location' (Ibid.: 156) and to engage 'in lines of enquiry that situate the unique qualities of regional experiences within a framework of global concerns' (Ibid.: 157). This article discusses Malagasy poets and performers whose work is little-known and investigates their imaginings of and engagement with environmental issues. In doing so, it brings the literature of this specific region of the Global South to the tables of ecocritical debate. Because of the lack of (eco)critical postcolonial focus on the literature of this region, this paper will demonstrate how Malagasy poets engage with multiple features of the natural world, outlining the wide range of ecological strands to which they refer. It covers tropical storms, the ravaging of shorelines, felling of trees, transplantation of plant life, and the extraction of fossil fuels.

Parny's 'Chansons madécasses'

Évariste Parny was born in Réunion in 1753. While still young, he was sent to France to study. Together with other poets born in the colonies, namely Antoine Bertin (in Réunion) and Nicolas-German Léonard (in Guadeloupe), he formed 'one of the rare poetic movements of the prose-rich eighteenth century, a movement that helped to renew the genre and opened the way

for both Romanticism and Symbolism' (Lionnet 2021: 331). Parny's poems proved extremely popular in France and beyond (Ibid.).

The *Chansons madécasses* (1787) are considered to be the first prose poems published in French. Lionnet argues that 'the "careful prose" into which he couched these songs in French makes them a landmark in the development of French prose poetry' (2018: 111n). In choosing to write prose poetry, Parny broke with more than one tradition. Not only are his poems different from the established verse poetry of previous centuries, they are in fact conspicuous in the field of eighteenth-century literature generally, since 'la poésie du dix-huitième siècle s'épuise et se meurt dans les mondanités fugitives ou le rationalisme didactique' ['eighteenth-century poetry disappears and dies amid the fleeting worldliness or didactic rationalism'] (Boucher 2009: 7). In his *Discours sur la tragédie* ['Discourse on Tragedy'] (1730), Antoine Houdar de La Motte launched an attack on poetry on account of its figurative and embellished language and form, and 'surtout contre la rime' ['above all against rhyme'] (Ibid.: 53). La Motte wished to see verse transformed into prose, and to 'dépouiller [son] ode de tous les ornements poétiques, et en réduire exactement le sens dans un langage sérieux et littéral' ['strip [his] ode of all poetic adornments, and simplify the exact meaning of it in a thorough and literal language'] (Ibid.: 78). La Motte's theories belong 'to a pre-history of the prose poem' and to 'the struggle to modernize and elevate prose by advocating a new freedom against old rules' (Moore 2009: 70).

La Motte 'challeng[ed] future prose authors to develop old genres into new beginnings' (Ibid.: 76), and Parny rose to this challenge. As Moore indicates, his '*Chansons madécasses* attempted to transcribe a new mode of expression […] his construction of a primitive "parole" invented a modern voice that questioned traditional poetics' (Ibid.: 213). Moore continues:

> The oral performance delivered by authors who declaimed their verses or read their prose in the semi-public space of the salon had become so scripted as to be more written than spoken, more objective than subjective. It is a new kind of orality, therefore, toward which Parny, Chateaubriand, and Mercier were dreaming, tied to faraway lands and 'primitive' cultures. Their new rhythms are a *provocation* aimed at re-energizing the Enlightenment (2009: 211–12).[4]

These writers turned to the orality of indigenous cultures in the lands that the French had begun to settle, with Parny finding his inspiration in the oral cultures of the Indian Ocean region of his birth. As Gwenaëlle Boucher (2009: 7) has remarked: 'il semble que la "créolité" redonne souffle et vie à une literature néoclassique obsolète' ['it seems as though "creolity" breathes new life into an obsolete neoclassical literature']. It was not just a new mode of expression which Créole cultures provided for French poetry; they also furnished 'une couleur locale' ['a local colour'] which allowed poets like Parny, Bertin and Léonard to draw on contemporary fascination with exotic spaces and to develop 'le sentiment de la nature et de la passion' ['the feeling for nature and passion'] in literature set in these spaces, in the same vein as Chateaubriand and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in fictional writing (Ibid.: 7). Parny's *Chansons Madécasses* present themselves as translations of genuine Malagasy songs. Although this story is likely apocryphal, it is possible that much of his subject matter came from enslaved people in Réunion with experience of Madagascar.

Key features of eighteenth-century French prose poetry are 'repetition, symmetry, refrains and typographical markers (indentation and quotation marks)' which 'compensated for the absence of rhymes' (Moore 2009: 212).[5] A further notable feature is the presence of continuous narrative, which in Parny's case reproduces the oral narratives of indigenous peoples. As Seth argues, 'la fiction d'altérité justifie l'abandon de la rime' ['the fiction of

otherness justifies the abandoning of rhyme'] (2000: 8). Drawing on these key features, Parny uses the novel, hybrid combination of prose poem and indigenous orality to help convey two major themes.

First, he highlights antipathy for the colonial project, and, in this respect, the form of his work is groundbreaking. As Lionnet (2018: xxxiii) writes, '[h]e opens the way for twentieth and twenty-first century trends: writers who question the ideology of form and its concurrent colonial and neo-colonial social norms or rules follow in his footsteps'. Second, strongly linked to the anti-colonial message, is an evocation of landscape and environmental awareness. Often, references to nature appear rather generic, and do not convey specificities of island flora, fauna or culture: 'Les fruits ne mûrissent plus pour lui' ['the fruits no longer ripen for him'] (Parny 2018 [1787]: 114); 'Il est doux de se coucher, durant la chaleur, sous un arbre touffu […]. Le vent du soir se lève; la lune commence à briller au travers des arbres de la montagne' ['it is sweet to lie down, during the heat, under a bushy tree […]. The evening breeze picks up; the moon begins to shine through the mountain's trees'] (ibid.: 121); or they feature in similes and metaphors: 'il s'élève comme un jeune palmier sur la montagne. Vents orageux, respectez le jeune palmier de la montagne' ['he grows like a young palm tree on the mountain. Stormy winds, respect the mountain's young palm tree'] (ibid.: 114).

Where more specific references to island landscape and ecology occur, they do so in conjunction with the form and features permitted by Parny's prose poetry. For example, as Moore has stated, '[t]he exotic character of the *Chansons madécasses* does not reside in rare descriptions, but in speech acts: local color is nested in dialogues and monologues' (2009: 218). In these speech acts, Parny's references to nature give way to specific warnings, which reveal both environmental awareness and an understanding of colonialism's violation of nature. Chanson V is filled with imperative verbs which illuminate the anti-colonial nature of the poet's views. The poem begins with the instructions to the indigenous population: 'Méfiez-

vous des blancs, habitants du rivage' ['Beware of the whites, inhabitants of the shore'] (Parny 2018 [1787]: 117), a refrain which is then reprised once partially ('Méfiez-vous des blancs') two-thirds of the way through the narrative, and once fully, at the poem's close, bringing the reader full circle. The other imperatives in the poem are directed towards the white settlers themselves, asked to respect the land: 'Soyez justes, soyez bons, et devenez nos frères' ['Be fair, be good, and become our brothers'] (ibid.: 117). A direct line of communication radiates from the speaker in two opposing directions. A narrative relating the actions of previous generations of settlers is then established, detailing the promises of white Europeans to cultivate the land fairly, their subsequent treachery, the vengeance which expelled them, and the survival of the indigenous people. The narrative draws on inclusive language (repeating 'nous' ['we'] and 'ils' ['they'], 'nos' ['our'] and 'leurs' ['their'] in constant opposition) and on violent language to underscore the difference between the respectful Malagasy peoples and European brutality: 'Le carnage fut long et terrible' ['The carnage was long and terrible']; 'la foudre qu'ils vomissaient […] qui écrasait des armées entières' ['the lightning they vomited forth […] which crushed entire armies'] (ibid.: 117). Despite promises, the settlers dug entrenchments, built forts, fired cannons, thus disturbing the environment and changing the land's layout. Fort building relied heavily on felling trees to clear space and for use as building materials. Yet, the only 're-planting' undertaken is unnatural: 'Nous avons vu de nouveaux tyrans […] *planter* leur pavillon sur le rivage' ['We have seen new tyrants […] *plant* their flags on the shore'] (ibid.: 117).[6] Parny draws on poetic metaphor to highlight the traitors' anti-ecological actions.

According to Lionnet, Parny's 'soul searching leads to an evocation of the island's sublime landscapes, but they only accentuate his distress in the presence of human suffering and an indifferent nature whose violence equals that of humankind' (2018: xlvii). However, nature is far from 'indifferent': 'le ciel a combattu pour nous; il a fait tomber sur eux les pluies,

les tempêtes et les vents empoisonnées' ['Heaven fought for us; it caused rain, storms and poisonous winds to fall on them'] (Parny 2018 [1787]: 117). The islanders' identity is closely linked with the nature they attempt to protect; nature enters the fray alongside them to expel the intruders. Nature's vengeance takes the form of storms and hurricanes. It was well known among scientists and explorers in the mid-late eighteenth century that mankind was inflicting damage upon the environment. In the late eighteenth century, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1804 [1784], 77) wrote that 'l'homme […] dérange les plans de la nature; il détourne le cours des fontaines, il excave le flanc des collines, il incendie les forêts, il massacre tout ce qui respire' ['mankind […] disturbs the plans of nature; he diverts the course of springs, he excavates the sides of hills, he burns forests, he massacres everything that breathes']. It was also well known, amongst writers such as Buffon, Poivre and Bernardin that disturbing trees on the shoreline causes increased hurricane damage. Poivre wrote: 'the rains which in this island [Mauritius] are the sole amendment and the best that the earth can receive […] follow the forests exactly, but cease and do not fall on cleared lands; also these lands have no shelter against the violence of the winds which often destroy all crops' (quoted in Grove 1995: 186). The narrative progression of Parny's poem echoes this knowledge. Invaders destroy and seize control; nature's elements respond in precisely the same way. Sharae Deckard analyses 'how Caribbean writers use storm-events to construct liminal narrative spaces which overturn social hierarchies and behaviours' (2017: 25). Parny turns to these natural phenomena in the same manner, defeating the invaders and overturning the hierarchy of white settler over indigenous peoples. Analysis of more recent Indian Ocean literature, such as Lindsey Collen's *Mutiny* reveals similar metaphors; Charne Lavery has argued that Collen's storm 'throws apparent certainties […] into disarray' and that the rainstorm becomes 'a metaphor for the sense of agency and revolt' (2013: 225–26). Sarah Nuttall also discusses the imagery of cyclones in Indian Ocean literature 'empower[ing] characters to act and to free themselves from social bondage' (2019:

31). Analysis of Parny's poetry suggests that the use of these images to make such arguments dates at least to the eighteenth century, when the devastating effects on climate of disturbing island flora and littorals became apparent.

Concretising this argument, Parny's narrative transitions from the *passé simple* [past historic] ('Les blancs promirent' ['the whites promised']; 'Leurs prêtres voulurent' ['their priests wanted']) to the *passé composé* [perfect] ('le ciel a combattu' ['the sky fought']; 'il a fait tomber' ['it caused to fall']), and concludes in the present ('nous vivons libres' ['we are living free']) (Parny 2018 [1787]: 117). The tenses place the white treachery firmly in the past and the survival of the indigenous peoples in the present, with the actions of nature's vengeful elements as an intermediary in both time and space. Throughout Chanson V, prosaic dialogue, syntax and grammar complement poetic refrain, metaphor and choice of language, in the desire to create a piece of literature which breaks with tradition in order to respond to the crisis of conscience 'de l'Européen face à l'exploitation de l'indigène' ['of the European faced with the exploitation of the native'] (Seth 2000: 7) and his/her landscape. The poet subverts established poetic form in his effort to subvert colonial hierarchies and anti-environmental attitudes.

The Poetry of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo

Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, in the first generation born under the yoke of colonial rule, was arguably the most famous Malagasy poet: Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo. He lived among a people still coming to terms with the new status quo. He witnessed failed forms of resistance and the progressive entrenchment of French colonialism, the continued exploitation of forests and ecosystems, shoreline devastation, and the shipping of Malagasy produce and materials to France. Madagascar's socio-political situation contextualises his writing, which deals simultaneously with both past heritage and present subjugation, with Malagasy tradition and French imposition:

> In Rabearivelo's time […], writing in Madagascar changed course and the transition is fully embodied in the life and writings of Rabearivelo, a man who stood exactly astride two literary traditions – the foreign and the local. (Adejunmobi 1996: 35; c.f. Saint-Guilhem 2013: 35)

The crossroads at which Rabearivelo stands appears in the form and themes of his writing:

> Il exprime une mélancolie qui trouve un véhicule convenable dans la poésie romantique puis symboliste qu'il absorbe et imite : des vers réguliers finement sculptés – mais non sans hétérogénéité ni ingéniosité de rythmes et de rimes — portent l'empreinte de Charles Baudelaire, Albert Samain, Paul Valéry et Pierre Camo, entre autres. […] Rabearivelo fait donc des avancées fulgurantes comme poète francophone, mais malgré 'cette voix qui n'est pas celle de mes morts', il ne délaisse pas pour autant son pays natal (Bowd 2017: 31).
>
> [He expresses a melancholy which finds a suitable vehicle in Romantic and then Symbolist poetry which he absorbs and imitates. His regular, finely sculpted lines, not without heterogeneity or ingenuity of rhythm and rhyme, bear traces of Charles Baudelaire, Albert Samain, Paul Valéry and Pierre Camo, among others. […] Rabearivelo therefore makes dazzling progress as a francophone poet, but despite 'this voice which is not that of my dead ancestors', he does not forsake his native country]

Reverence for deceased ancestors is an important feature of Rabearivelo's work. Proximity to ancestors is, in fact, crucial to Malagasy identity: 'the ways in which ancestors enter into on-

going processes of creating, sustaining and transforming identities (national, ‘ethnic’, regional, and local) in the various regions of Madagascar are diverse, complex, and often highly nuanced’ (Middleton 1999: 20). Specifically relevant for the present discussion is the notion that ‘land for Malagasy is […] the link between the living and the ancestors’ (Vinciguerra 2013: 233). In fact, the word *‘tany* or land has about 11 equivalents in English varying from land to earth, country, soil, field, place or environment, world, native land, estate, ground or life’ (Aliderson 2004). Viniguerra writes that ‘the notion of *tanindrazana* is an element of national unity, also expressed by the start of the national anthem: “*Ty tanindrazanay Malala ô!”, “oh, beloved ancestor’s land”’* (2013: 233; c.f. Fournet-Guérin 2009) and, according to Keller, ‘the importance, in all Malagasy societies, of having a strong link to one’s *tanindrazana*, can be hardly exaggerated’ (2008: 652).

Rabearivelo was greatly influenced by *hain-teny*, a traditional form of Malagasy poetry involving heavy use of metaphor as well as ‘images and comparisons rather than […] direct statement’ (Koshland 1960: 115). *Hain-teny* poetry is often proverbial, is strongly linked to oral tradition, and often includes dialogue (Saint-Guilhem 2013: 68). Rabearivelo is simultaneously influenced by French authors. His heroes are the poets writing in the Symbolist tradition, many of whom (including Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Valéry) he translated into Malagasy (Bowd 2017: 43). Rabearivelo even ‘maintained correspondence with writers such as André Gide and Paul Valéry’ (Mauguière 2000: 573). Like the French poets he admired, Rabearivelo endowed images or objects with suggestive, often melancholic meaning. Rabearivelo’s writing thus becomes a hybrid middle ground of two cultures. Analysing his poetry allows us to enter the place where Malagasy traditions and French poetic techniques meet. The combination of poetic style from two traditions – encompassing metaphors and symbolic imagery, dialogues, proverbs and warnings, and prosopopoeia (through which the communication of the ancestors might be transmitted) – conveys a sense of displacement and

rupture, as well as highlighting the violence of colonialism and the endangering of nature. Yet, this hybrid poetic style is not only employed to challenge hierarchies, but also to reflect the poet's own human hybridity: 'l'union prénatale de l'Orient et de l'Occident et la fécondité des enfants de cette union. […] Le lieu de rencontre entre ces deux opposés est le point de fuite où l'identité du poète se cherche' ['the prenatal union of East and West, and the fertility of the children of this union. […] The meeting place between these two opposites is the vanishing point where the identity of the poet is sought'] (Saint-Guilhem 2013: 89). Moreover, given the significance of land to the Malagasy link to ancestors, it is unsurprising to see that the crossroads at which Rabearivelo's identity becomes clear is to be found coinciding with images of Malagasy landscape and ecology. Rabearivelo's works thus feature a distinct ecoregional identity. If Rabearivelo 'trouve dans la nature ce qui pourrait l'aider à comprendre le mystère de son identité duelle' ['finds in nature that which might help him understand the mystery of his dual identity'] (Ibid.: 53), the poet finds in (his hybrid) poetry the means to express that identity. In the present article, I focus largely on the importance of plant life, trees and deforestation to Rabearivelo's ecosensitivity.

The poem 'Aux Arbres', written in 1928, is taken from a collection entitled *Volumes*, containing 11 poems about trees. It conveys ecoregional identity and crisis through arboreal imagery. Both tree roots and generational roots are to be found in the same soil: 'Arbres sur la colline où reposent nos morts' ['Trees on the hill where our dead lie'] (Rabearivelo 1928). As Bowd has made clear, reverence for and connection to the deceased generations of Madagascar is a frequent feature of Rabearivelo's work (2017: 24, 72, 117, 137). The connection with trees in this poem permits the dead to convey their voice, even their soul, to the new generation: 'votre rumeur me dit l'âme de mes aïeux' ['your murmur relates the soul of my ancestors to me'] (Rabearivelo 1928). The poet, in turn, replies directly to the trees, establishing a human-nature dialogue, emphasised by the use of first- and second-person pronouns: 'tout m'incitera

qu'à vos mystères verts/j'offre des chants ardents, et tristes et funèbres' ['everything will prompt me to offer to your green mysteries/my ardent, sad and funereal songs'] (ibid.). Echoes of Parny's prose poems arise here, through Rabearivelo's creation of poetic dialogue (assisted by pronouns). The trees open a line of communication between living and dead, which is aided by the wind: 'et toi, vent né des zones soleilleuses/qui ranimes leur sein d'ombre humide' ['and you, wind born from the sunny areas/you who revive their shady, damp bosom'] (ibid.). The ambiguity – whether the 'sein' ['bosom'] which is revived is that of the dead or of the trees – is likely intentional, on account of the solid link established between ancestral and arboreal roots. We therefore see the wind breathe life into the speech of the dead.

In establishing dialogue within his poetry, Rabearivelo is engaging with *hain-teny*, traditionally dialogic poetry. This engagement is further evident given the subject matter: to connect the living and the dead and thus to underline the importance of maintaining links with the ancestors. *Hain-teny* forms one of four Merina 'genres', according to Haring (1985: 299); the remaining three are riddles, oratory and proverbs. 'The four genres', writes Haring, 'are grouped by Merina under the names "sayings of the ancestors" (*fitenin-drazana)*' (ibid.).

Rabearivelo's trees also, however, engage directly with Baudelaire's 'Correspondances' (1857) – 'the poem that perhaps more than any other influenced the Symbolists' mystification of the natural world' (Evans 2017: 120): 'La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers/Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles/L'homme y passe à travers des fôrets de symbols/Qui l'observe avec des regards familiers' ['Nature is a temple where living pillars/Sometimes emit confused words/Man passes through forests of symbols/Which observe him with familiar eyes'] (Baudelaire 1975 [1857]: 11). Rabearivelo's roots are therefore not only Malagasy, but also French. His own identity, simultaneously hybrid and also ecoregional, is therefore conveyed by a Malagasy-French hybrid poetic mix.

Whilst Rabearivelo's ecoregional identity is shored up when French and Malagasy work together, it is threatened when the coloniser harms the colonised land. Meitinger (1991: 76) states: 'dans la série de poèmes intitulée *Arbres* dans *Volumes,* il [= Rabearivelo] compare son sort de poète au cœur déplanté, arraché au terreau originel, à celui d'arbres transplantés d'une région à une autre' ['in the series of poems entitled *Arbres* in *Volumes*, he [= Rabearivelo] compares his fate as a poet whose heart is displaced, torn from originary fertile ground, to that of trees transplanted from one region to another']. The threat becomes particularly clear in the final stanza:

> Car, déjà, vous attend la cognée ou le feu,
> vous qui n'avez jamais connu la grise automne
> et qui ceignez encor d'admirables couronnes
> le front des monts royaux, frères de l'azur bleu! (ibid.)

> [Because, already, the axe or the fire awaits you,
> you who have never known the grey autumn
> and who still encircle with admirable crowns
> the brow of the royal mountains, brothers of the blue sky']

Images of elevation are used to connote the glory of the traditional past, both literally and figuratively. In employing these images of elevation, Rabearivelo engages again with the French symbolists, not least Baudelaire's 'Élévation' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), and Rimbaud's 'Une matinée couverte' (Fragments du Feuillet 12), in *Illuminations* (1886). Again, Rabearivelo conjoins French Symbolism with the metaphor and dialogue of *hain-teny*. *Hain-teny* is a Merina genre, and, as though to underline his intention to connect with it, Rabearivelo

refers to the 'monts royaux' ['royal mountains']: the powerful Merina monarchy had been situated in the Malagasy central highlands. The trees form the crown on the brow of these mountains, and thus can be said to stand in for the human ancestors who once wore a literal crown. Stretching skyward, they raise the image of elevation even higher, thus completing the vertical axis: from arboreal-ancestral roots in the earth, to the seat atop the mountains whence came the pre-colonial monarchy. However, this glory is threatened with destruction. Rabearivelo's trees, crucial links to bygone ages and key features of island identity, are awaiting 'la cognée ou le feu' ['the axe or the fire'] (ibid.). As Rabearivelo knew, Madagascar had suffered deforestation for many years because of colonial settlements.

These are images which Rabearivelo reprises in his anthology *Presque-Songes* (1934). Trees are once again a crucial element of island identity in 'Fièvre des îles', whose first stanza includes the image of 'l'arbre qui soutient ton dos' ['the tree which supports your back'] (Rabearivelo 1934), implying that the strength of the island's peoples stems from their connection to the land, and indeed from their ancestors. Moving from this image of simple support, the poem takes the metaphor further, incorporating the trees into the bodies of the people: 'les branches de ton corps' ['the branches of your body'] and 'ton crâne est un énorme fruit vert qui mûrit' ['your head is an enormous green fruit which is ripening'] (ibid.). We have come full circle from the anthropomorphising of trees to the ecomorphising of the human population, further solidifying an ecoregional identity.

The anthropomorphising of nature continues in 'Cactus' with 'le sang de la terre, la sueur de la pierre/et le sperme du vent' ['the blood of the earth, the sweat of the stone/and the sperm of the wind'] (Rabearivelo 1934). The wind, which previously transmitted the words of the dead with the aid of trees, is now spreading a new generation. However, this is a generation damaged by the forces of colonialism. Whereas the trees in 'Aux Arbres' enabled the dead to speak with the assistance of the wind, the plant in the poem 'Cactus' is a 'multitude de mains

sans doigts/que le vent n'arrive pas à agiter' ['a multitude of fingerless hands/that the wind cannot manage to stir'] (ibid.). The plant life has lost its connection to the ancestors, thus part of its voice and identity. The 'hands' are incomplete and diseased: they are 'fondues' ['melted'] in the opening line of the first stanza, and 'ces lépreuses' ['these lepers'] in stanzas three and five (ibid.). Consulting research into botanical history and the work of Jeffrey Kaufmann, Mary Orr attributes this to a 'history of transfer and naturalized accommodation to Malagasy culture' (2021: 157). In other words, the colonial project interfered with the ecology on the island, introducing the prickly-pear cactus, and subsequently a parasite to control this transplanted species, which destroyed the Malagasy cactus (Kaufmann 2004: 345–61). The message here is both proverbial (following *hain-teny* traditions) and also ecological: colonial destruction of the landscape harms the island's identity and that of its people. The final stanza of 'Cactus' is filled with hope and sadness. Building on the leprosy metaphor, Rabearivelo refers to Christ's compassion towards those suffering from the disease:

Je sais un enfant,
prince encore au royaume de Dieu,
qui voudrait ajouter:
'Et le sort, ayant eu pitié de ces lépreuses,
leur a dit de planter des fleurs
et de garder des sources
loin des hommes cruels' (Rabearivelo 1934)

[I know of a child,
still a prince in the kingdom of God,
who would like to add:

'And fate, having had pity on these lepers,

told them to plant flowers

and guard springs

far from cruel men']

The power of Rabearivelo's argument is to be found in the mix of European and Malagasy tradition and belief. He juxtaposes pre-established Malagasy heritage and folklore (in the form of an ecoregional identity) with Christian imagery. The cactus, representative of a generation damaged (by colonial violence) and displaced (in the sense that their island is rapidly losing its identity), is warned that its flowers and springs would be safer 'loin des hommes cruels'. This line is, as Mary Orr has stated, 'the all-important final poetic moral […] of anti-colonial resilience' (2021: 157); yet, in its position as the ultimate line, it also reminds the reader/listener of Parny's refrain in his own final line of Chanson V: 'Méfiez-vous des blancs' (Parny 2018 [1787]: 117). Hope is to be found away from the actions of the settlers and colonisers. It is also to be found where Christianity meets and assists Malagasy tradition, rather than where European Christians on their *mission civilisatrice* destroy it.

By the time we reach Rabearivelo's *Traduit de la nuit* (1935), the loss of the island's ecoregional identity has become further ingrained and is emphasised in evident paradoxes. The 'arbres sans racines' ['trees without roots'] and 'oiseaux muets' ['mute birds'] (Rabearivelo 2007 [1935]: 19) of poem four soon deteriorate, in poem six, into the 'oiseau sans couleur et sans nom' ['birds without colour or name'], and the 'arbre sans tronc' ['tree with no trunk'] (ibid.: 23): following its initial loss of roots and voice, island life appears now to have lost its ontological status altogether. The colonial project has felled the trees and harmed the wildlife, damaging the ecoregional identity of those on the island. This is intensified in poem thirteen: the 'oiseaux devenus étrangers' ['birds who have become strangers'], are described as 'ne

reconnaissant plus leur nid' ['no longer recognising their nest'] (ibid.: 41). As with 'Cactus', in poem six the wind cannot revive what has been lost: 'Il [= L'oiseau] se pose sur un arbre sans tronc/tout en feuilles/que nul vent ne fait frémir' ['He [= the bird] perches on a tree with no trunk/covered in leaves/that no wind can stir'] (ibid.: 23). The source of the responsibility: 'ce sont *des coqs* qui en sortiront:/*les coqs* de tous les villages/qui auront *vaincu* et *dispersé*/ceux qui chantent dans les rêves/et qui se nourrissent d'astres' ['it is *cockerels* who will come out from there:/*the cockerels* from all the villages/who will have conquered and scattered/those who sing in dreams/and who feed on the stars'] (ibid.: 23). The symbol of the cockerel as representative of France dates from the Middle Ages, owing to the play on words in Latin between *Gallus* (an inhabitant of Gaul) and *gallus* (rooster). The history of the use of the rooster as an unofficial national emblem (from the Middle Ages to the present) on engravings, coins, flags, the works of political cartoonists, and even the gates of the Elysée, is given its own online article by the *Ministère de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères*.[7] The islander, like the nocturnal dreamer (poet), is defeated by the cockerel. Yet, as in 'Cactus', there is hope and freedom to be found when the 'oiseau sans nom' ['bird without a name'] eventually 'reprendra son vol' ['takes flight again'] (ibid.: 23). If hope can no longer be found at the foot of the vertical axis, extending down into the ground, perhaps it is to be found at its summit, extending into the heavens, 'loin des hommes cruels', in the 'royaume de Dieu' mentioned in 'Cactus'. (Indeed, as if looking for hope 'loin des hommes cruels', Rabearivelo tragically did take his own life two years after the publication of *Traduit de la nuit*, through cyanide poisoning.)

Rabearivelo's hybrid poetry reminds us that ecological destruction and deforestation cause the uprooting and the displacement of peoples, traditions and wildlife, and shake the foundations of the island's very identity. We can read a progression of ecosensitivity throughout his anthologies. His poems become increasingly peppered with illusory or

paradoxical images, in his attempt to portray reality and its sense of loss, tragedy, damage and despair. He brings together the imagery, despondency and melancholy of the French Symbolists with the proverbs, dialogues and metaphors of *hain-teny.* In so doing, he transmits what has happened to his generation's identity and his land.

The Poetic Music of Mahaleo

Studies of Malagasy music, including the island's famous musical sons, Mahaleo, are rare. However, those who have studied the field and interviewed the island's musicians agree that a unique style stems from its contact between a variety of cultures, sounds, instruments, and ideas, and, as a result, this 'turns music from Madagascar into an exceptionally rich area for research into questions of identity' (Fuhr 2014: 2). The British music journalist Ian Anderson argued that Malagasy music sounded 'like everywhere and nowhere else at the same time' (Anderson 1994: 363–70). Malagasy music and lyrics, like Malagasy poetry, is a combination of the island's influences and cultures, a unique and powerful creation that celebrates and benefits from hybridity and diversity. Indeed, the island's music and its poetry have much in common. Peter Hawkins argues for considering the Indian Ocean islands' musical history alongside their literary histories: 'in several cases there has been a clear interaction between the literary field proper and that of local popular musical forms' (Hawkins 2007: xiii). For this reason, the final case study in this article's quest to uncover the ecosensitivity of Malagasy poetics is the lyrics of one of the island's most famous and popular bands: Mahaleo.

Despite beginning to prosper as an independent state post-1960, many of the problems which colonialism had entrenched within the country continued. By the 1970s, unpopularity and neo-colonialism brought about the end of the Tsiranana government: 'some would say *the* major factor in the decline in the popularity and authority of Tsiranana was the growing perception that little had been changed by independence and that behind the façade of a

Malagasy government the French were still running the country' (Brown 1995: 307). France 'had a major say in economic decisions', controlled the import-export trade, occupied the naval base, and had a constant military aircraft presence (ibid.: 307). By 1972, a wave of protests, known as the Rotaka, was under way, instigated by students and farmers. Mahaleo were born out of this rebellion against the neo-colonial regime and played a key role in its fall. Their music became representative of youth protest in the same way as American and European folk and protest singers were representative of the 1968 protests in the northern hemisphere. Most members of the band are qualified in other professions alongside their music career: three practised medicine; three studied sociology; a couple have been involved with local radio stations; and the band has seen its share of involvement in local politics and campaigns for the rights of the rural population. Indeed, they bring their non-musical knowledge to their musical skills, thus creating a scientific-musical and political-musical mix. Although Mahaleo write and sing in Malagasy, they frequently interview in French and made their 2005 film *Mahaleo* largely in French. Their songs have also been translated into French: 'le fruit d'un travail collectif, en movement, initié dans le CD *Tadidiko*, poursuivi avec le film *Mahaleo* et la captation *Mahaleo, Live à l'Olympia*' ['the fruit of a collective work, in movement, initiated with the CD Tadidiko, continued with the film *Mahaleo* and the recording *Mahaleo, Live at the Olympia*'] (ibid.: 279).

Mahaleo draw on the heterogenous combination of influences in Malagasy music to create their own sound, *Tsensigat*: a form of folk music influenced by Malagasy literary traditions such as *hain-teny,* Western folk music and protest songs, which also draws inspiration from traditional Malagasy sounds and instruments (Clerfeuille 2007). Like the poetry of Parny and Rabearivelo, they bring together several influences and ideas. Thus, they create a musical dialogue filled with anti-(neo-)colonial sentiment, revive rural culture by revealing a deep-rooted ecosensitivity and addressing ecoregional identity, and speak for those

in poor rural areas, whose voices are drowned out by government. The hybridity of their music (in terms of form, instruments, language, disciplinary influence, and cultural tradition) lends weight to their messages.

Many Malagasy musicians ‘bring up the topic of the island’s environment in their music and songs’ (Fuhr 2014: 6). They are aware of the island’s ecological heritage, and the exploitation of island resources: ‘they praise the natural wealth, but very often they also point at the dangers of human beings destroying the environment they live in and often live off’ (ibid.: 6). Indeed, Dama Malhaleo, together with Malagasy singer Ricky Randimbiarison has ‘created a project called “Voajanahary” (“natural”), which features both artists in musical performances and also aims to create environmental awareness in Madagascar’ (ibid.: 6), further evidence of their scientific/political-musical mix. Fanny Pigeaud’s 2011 study is one of the very few detailed analyses of Mahaleo’s work. In conversation with Pigeaud, the band reveals their ecosensitivity:

> DAMA – La terre, la campagne, le terroir reviennent souvent dans mes textes. Cet intérêt pour le monde rural me vient de mes parents: il nous ont toujours fait cultiver la terre. […] Nous avons toujours eu contact avec la terre. […]
>
> CHARLE – La majorité de mes enseignants à l’université étaient du MFM et s’intéressaient donc au monde rural. Ils cherchaient toujours à le mettre en valeur. […]
>
> RAOUL – Ça fait plusieurs années que j’ai acheté un terrain pour faire de l’agriculture […]. J’ai défriché une partie du terrain sans brûler la forêt afin de ne pas gêner la régénération des sols. Les gens en général brûlent tout ici […]. Lorsqu’ils ont vu mon système, ils ont commencé à l’adopter eux aussi, laissant l’herbe comme humus’ (Pigeaud 2011: 145–47).

> [DAMA: The land, the countryside, the soil come up often in my texts. This interest in the rural world comes from my parents: they always made us cultivate the land. (…) We have always been in contact with the land.
> CHARLE: The majority of my university teachers were from MFM (Mpitolona ho an'ny Fandrosoan'i Madagasikara [Movement for the Progress of Madagascar]) and were therefore interested in the rural world. They always tried to showcase it. […]
> RAOUL: I bought land for farming several years ago (…). I cleared part of the land without burning the forest in order not to interfere with soil regeneration. Most people burn everything here (…). When they saw my system, they started to adopt it too, leaving the grass as humus.]

These arguments also emerge in their song lyrics. 'Madirovalo' (1979) explores a Malagasy ecoregional identity reminiscent of that seen in previous literature of the region, and reveals the importance of such an identity. The song's hybridity is to be found in its subject matter: it is a meeting place for ancient mythology/traditions and modern scientific research. It tells of students conducting scientific fieldwork in the town of Madirovalo who discover not the results of experiments, but the sacred places and (hi)stories of Madagscar: 'C'est le lieu sacré d'Anelobe, la source limpide/Qui se jette dans le marais, le lieu sacré' ['This is the sacred place of Anelobe, the clear spring/Which flows into the swamp, the sacred place'] (Mahaleo 2011 [1979]a: 362). This verse is made up of only these two lines, which begin and end with a refrain of 'le lieu sacré', emphasising the land's spiritual connection. The song continues with reference to legend:

> Il y a un animal qu'on n'a pas le droit de regarder

Et si on le voit, on ne doit pas en parler

Un monstre, peut-être un serpent

Qui vit dans un marais plein de bambous

Un jour, un étranger installé de longue date

Coupeur de bambous

N’a pu se retenir de raconter à d’autres

Qu’un animal vivait à cet endroit

Et il est arrivé malheur à sa femme et ses enfants

(ibid.: 362)

[There is an animal which we are not allowed to look at

And if we see it, we must not speak of it

A monster, perhaps a snake

Which lives in the bamboo-filled swamp

One day, a long-established stranger

A bamboo cutter

Couldn’t stop himself from telling others

That an animal lived there

And his wife and children came to grief]

The didactic message in this myth reinforces not only the connection between landscape and deeply embedded folklore, but also the need to revere the land. The ‘étranger’ of this verse is an outsider, a woodcutter, sent to cut down the bamboo in the marsh. He disrespects both the land itself and the tradition attached to it. As in Parny’s poetry, nature seeks its revenge on those who fail to respect it. This ‘moral tale’ is strongly suggestive of *hain-teny* poetic tradition.

It combines these echoes of ancestral poetry with highly modern political arguments, reflective of a contemporary Malagasy socio-economic reality, and thus reveals its hybridity, as the fourth verse makes clear:

> Il y a deux types de pouvoir dans la commune de Madirovalo
> Il y a deux types de pouvoir auxquels est soumis le peuple
> Il y a le pouvoir étatique, détenu par le maire
> Et le deuxième, c'est le pouvoir traditionnel
> Détenu par Iadamalandy
> (ibid.: 362)

> [There are two types of power in the municipality of Madirovalo
> There are two types of power to which the people are subjected
> There is state power, held by the mayor
> And the second type is traditional power
> Held by Iadamalandy]

Ending the verse with the name of Iadamalandy, a prince said to have been reincarnated in the body of a serpent, is a crucial message for mediation between human and non-human life. Meanwhile, the anaphora in the first two lines posits contemporary politics as the antithesis of Malagasy tradition and respect for its land and people (and thus brings a modern-traditional, political-mythological hybridity to the song). In conversation with Pigeaud, Dama (the song's writer) argues that 'Le pouvoir traditionnel structure la société, est en relation avec beaucoup de valeurs liées aux ancêtres, à la communauté' ['Society is structured by traditional power, which is related to many values linked to the ancestors, to the community'] (ibid.: 59). His

words and images echo those of Rabearivelo forty years previously: it is the land, the ancestors and the community which are crucial to the identity and stability of Madagascar and its people. Reinforcing this, the song ends:

> C'est le pouvoir sacré d'Anelobe, qu'il faut invoquer
> Que l'esprit de ces ancêtres continue de nous protéger !
> (ibid.: 364)

> [It is the sacred power of Anelobe, which must be invoked;
> May the spirit of these ancestors continue to protect us]

Traditions and sacred links with the land must be conserved if the people are to be protected and to thrive.

Mahaleo present the impact of human interference and exploitation, and emphasise a bleak picture of a land which has become disassociated from the country's ancestors. Also written in 1979 by Dama was the song 'Maravoay', in which he argues:

> Sur la terre de nos Ancêtres
> Je me sens trop à l'étroit
> Elle est devenue aride
> La terre de nos Ancêtres
> Elle ne peut plus nous nourrir
> (Mahaleo 2011 [1979]b: 366)

[On the land of our Ancestors
I feel too cramped
It has become arid
The land of our Ancestors
It can no longer nourish us]

Mahaleo's lyrics again echo the words and images of Rabearivelo. Although Madagascar's political landscape has changed, the impact of a neo-colonial government on landscape and people is surprisingly similar to that of the colonial regime.

Mahaleo consistently present an image of a government prospering from the exploitation of elements which harm the environment, and who, even in doing so, cannot be relied upon to meet the people's needs. The song 'Bemolanga' is named after the oil field in the Morondava Basin of Madagascar. It discusses the petrol promised to the population by the government, and the failure to deliver that promise, in a song which perhaps initially appears anti-ecological, where the people request access to a fossil fuel. However, we learn that the true anger in song lies in the inability to trust the government to keep its promises (Pigeaud 2011: 93), and the fact that the 'black gold' has been used to enrich those in power, whilst the general population continue to suffer. This is the key issue, as in so many of Mahaleo's songs, and is confirmed in the presentation of 'Bemolanga' in the 2005 film *Mahaleo* (Paes and Rajaonarivelo 2005).[8] The viewer is initially presented with shots of the audience when 'Bemolanga' is sung by the band on set. The shots focus on the numbers as well as the social, economic and demographic diversity of the people present, knowing that their voices are being conveyed through the band's words. As the song continues in the background, with the French translation in subtitles, the camera cuts to a view of the land, which divides the screen cleanly

in two. The top half of the shot comprises natural landscape: the scrub and the dry, red land of the last line of the fourth verse 'sur nos terres desséchées' ['on our parched land'] (Mahaleo 2011 [1985]: 302), whilst the bottom half of the screen depicts a man-made, black tarmacked road. Walking through this scene, away from the camera, is an ordinary worker, carrying his spade. His slow walking is juxtaposed with the arrival of a much faster car, reliant on the petrol which is not made freely available to the general population. As he disappears below the horizon, the song enters its third verse:

Ce qu'on a semé
Depuis des années
Pour nos descendants et leurs enfants
N'a toujours pas porté le fruit
(ibid.: 302)

[What we sowed
For years
For our descendants and their children
Has still not borne fruit]

Unlike the country's traditions and ancestors, with their roots firmly in the ground, the governments of Madagascar have failed to plant anything which will bear fruit for the generations of the future. 'Bemolanga', written six years after 'Madirovalo', thus reprises some of the earlier song's images. The sound of the two songs is notably different, though. Mahaleo are known to combine contemporary and traditional instruments, which create 'a range of acoustic styles that blend the sounds of Western instruments – guitar, bass, harmonica, grand piano, keyboard, drum kit – with those of the kabosy, the flute sodina, and many home-grown

drums and shakers' (Kiwan and Meinhof 2011: 53). Mahaleo frequently play Bemolanga with Western guitars and drum kits (as in the *Mahaleo* film): global instruments to elucidate a global problem. Yet, 'Madirovalo' has been played with the accompaniment of a variety of instruments, some traditional,[9] and some more mainstream.[10] This can be seen to highlight the song's situated ecosensitivity.

Throughout their poetic lyrics, Mahaleo retain the Malagasy people's crucial connection to the land and their ancestors, which we have seen throughout earlier Malagasy poetry. Their writing opens up a means to be heard for those who have been ignored by corrupt and neo-colonial governments. It does so by reminding the listener of what is truly important in Madagascar: its landscape and ecology, its myths and traditions. The hybridity of sound allows the music to appeal to all generations, demographics, and socio-economic backgrounds in Madagascar, whilst simultaneously placing Malagasy music firmly alongside popular Western protest musicians such as Bob Dylan, and permits the musicians to bring the voice of the voiceless (often illiterate) to the table of senior government figures. Furthermore, across their songs which deal with environmental issues, Mahaleo's instruments mix so-called 'global' and 'local' instruments and influences, which initially seems to mirror their ability to make eco-political and anti-(neo)colonial arguments on both a global and a local level. However, we might more accurately argue that their hybridity collapses the binary of 'local' and 'global' entirely, revealing them to be nothing more than societal constructs, a simple (neo)colonial fiction for those in power who seek to perpetuate a stratified image of postcolonial societies. Again, Mahaleo's musical hybridity lends weight to their political messages.[11]

Conclusion

Hawkins argues that the Indian Ocean islands possess such a *métissage culturel* [cultural melting pot] of French, African and Asian ideas and heritages, 'giv[ing] rise to a distinctive regional culture that has taken on an identity separate from that of its constituent parts' (Hawkins 2007: 38). Homi Bhabha uses the term 'hybridity' for such a mixture of cultures and races arising from the colonial context, arguing that:

> The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other,* properly alienates our political expectations (Bhabha 2012 [1994]: 37).

The power of the middle space, where cultures meet and nourish each other, is clear from a study of Malagasy poetic production throughout the centuries. A mixing of voices, forms, language and expectations runs through Malagasy poetry and poetic music over the course of the last three and a half centuries, from the innovative prose poems of white creole writer Parny, to the early twentieth-century poems of Rabéarivelo (whose *hain-teny*-French poetic mix brings French Symbolism into contact with traditional Malagasy verse), and the lyrical poetry of the musicians in the modern folk-pop band Mahaleo, who use hybridity to create a unique style of music, and whose words represent a mixture of ancient tradition and modern political issues. Indeed, the hybridity of poetic form and influences permits Malagasy poets across three and a half centuries to engage powerfully and emotionally with landscape and ecology, and to evoke the importance of their ecoregional identity. It also permits them to elucidate the impact of colonial violence and subjugation upon that landscape and ecology, and to establish dialogue

between anti-colonial discourse and environmental awareness. In a manner which reminds the reader of Bhabha's description of hybridity, the poets challenge genre to challenge established hierarchy. Furthermore, finding the 'middle space' explored by Malagasy poetic and musical hybridity (which brings together coloniser and colonised, global and local, ancient and modern, human and non-human, poetry and prose) allows us not only to 'situate the unique qualities of regional experiences within a framework of global concerns' (Finch-Race and Gosetti, 2019: 157), as Finch-Race and Gosetti have argued we must. It shows that, in bringing the literature of the Global South to the table of eco-political debate, we are better able to use those regional experiences to break down the distance which continues to be maintained between Global North states and those in the Global South suffering the more immediate impacts of environmental destruction.

We have also seen several progressions from the pre-colonial era, through the colonial era, into a neo-colonial one. Firstly, there has been a transition in the use of language: Parny writes exclusively in French, despite claiming to be voicing the oral cultures of the Malagasy peoples; Rabearivelo writes in both French and Malagasy, providing his readers with bilingual texts; Mahaleo sing exclusively in Malagasy, though their lyrics have been translated for French-speaking audiences. The poets who deplore the destruction of the land and traditions of Madagascar are thus steadily reclaiming its 'voice'. There has also been a transition in mood: Parny leaves his reader with a warning; Rabearivelo's poetry becomes increasingly despairing in narrating the loss of Malagasy traditions and imbibing the melancholy sentiment of the Symbolist poets; Mahaleo move towards political protest. In all cases, there is an element of hope in images of recovery connected to the land and imaginative presentation of the land, which Said posited as crucial in the process of recovery: for Parny, recovery is nature's vengeful elements coming to the assistance of the oppressed peoples; for Rabearivelo, recovery

is moving along the vertical landscape axis into the ethereal; for Mahaleo, recovery is reviving rural cultures, myths and traditions.

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[1] This article employs the adjective *Malagasy* and not *Madagascan,* following the advice of Voarintsoa et al. (2019: 9), whose research has identified that the term *Madagascan* is Western-imposed, and 'does not reflect the people, the culture, and other objects from Madagascar'.
[2] DeLoughrey and Handley quote from Said 1994: 78.
[3] Ecoregions are 'relatively large units of land containing a distinct assemblage of natural communities and species' (Olson et al. 2001: 933).
[4] Original emphasis.
[5] These are the principal elements of the prose poems of Saint-Lambert, whose 'Les Deux Amis: conte iroquois' influenced Parny's poetry (Moore 2009: 212).
[6] My emphasis.
[7] https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/symbols-of-the-republic/article/the-gallic-rooster
[8] See: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x18ma60>
[9] See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m9y2VdxdF4>
[10] See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9rznSFLA5g>
[11] With thanks to Joe Ford, whose comments on this section helped to shape this final point.

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