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3 ***Decolonising Renewable Energy: Aeolian Aesthetics in the poetry of Fatma***  
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5 ***Galia Mohammed Salem and Limam Boisha***  
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7  
8 **Joanna Allan, Northumbria University**  
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10 Scholars have begun to question the commonly-held notion that renewable energy  
11 is always environmentally, economically and socially sustainable. In particular,  
12 energy humanities researchers are tentatively beginning to highlight connections  
13 between renewable energy developments and colonisation of indigenous lands.<sup>1</sup> But  
14 it is not just energy infrastructure, or material regimes of generating energy, that act  
15 as colonial apparatus. Hegemonic understandings of energy, that which is  
16 'harnessed' or 'produced' by human technology and measured in units, are largely  
17 fruit of fossil-fuelled industrial capitalism and colonialism (Lohmann 2015-2016,  
18 Mitchell 2013). To transition away from a colonial energy system is therefore to  
19 rethink how we understand energy. Imre Szeman and his co-investigators have called  
20 for a project of 'indigenizing energy,' which would seek to understand the  
21 philosophies of indigenous energy cultures and their implications for a global energy  
22 transition (2016: 3). I follow that call by focusing on conceptions of wind, wind  
23 energy and, relatedly, of desert ecologies, that emerge from Saharawi poetry. I focus  
24 on two poets – Limam Boisha and Fatma Galia Mohammed Salem – who are  
25 members of the Friendship Generation<sup>2</sup> of Saharawi writers that use Spanish as their  
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51 <sup>1</sup> See especially Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, "Aeolian Politics," *Distinktion:*  
52 *Journal of Social Theory*, 16:1, 2015.  
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55 <sup>2</sup> The Generation was constituted as such in 2005. Joanna Allan, 'The Saharawi "Friendship  
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<https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=19491>, 29 May 2017

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3 language of choice, because of the prominence and accessibility of their work.<sup>3</sup> I  
4  
5 argue that these writers employ what I call – borrowing the first term from Howe  
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7 and Boyer’s conceptualisation of *aeolian politics*, which highlights the manifold  
8  
9 effects, negative as well as positive, of wind power (Howe and Boyer: 31) - a  
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11 Saharawi aeolian aesthetic: a particular wind-infused form of artistic expression  
12  
13 inspired by the traditional ways-of-life of Saharawi nomads, and their relationship  
14  
15 with wind and windblown desertscapes. Aeolian aesthetics, I argue, allow Saharawi  
16  
17 poets to claim their desert heartlands based on love and knowledge, to challenge  
18  
19 dominant Western imaginaries of desert, and to provide a counter to hegemonic  
20  
21 understandings of energy and their colonial implications. Indeed, the artistic texts  
22  
23 explored in the paper undermine the logic of wind energy developers’ colonial  
24  
25 narratives. They do so by drawing on the properties of wind and Aeolian geology  
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27 aesthetically, and by making apparent, explicitly for a foreign audience, how wind  
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29 shapes and enables the Saharawi people’s very way of life.  
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40 In terms of structure, I first explain my reasoning for setting this paper within the  
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42 field of Petroculture. Second, I give some background on the Western Sahara conflict  
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44 and renewable energy developments in occupied Western Sahara. This includes a  
45  
46 brief analysis of the main wind energy developer’s (German conglomerate SIEMENS)  
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53 <sup>3</sup> The work of both poets is regularly drawn on by solidarity activists and artists. For example,  
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55 Mohammed Salem’s work “La ciudad del viento” formed the basis of museum installations by Spanish  
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57 artist Federico Guzman in Madrid and the Basque Country. All poems drawn on in this article are  
58  
59 readily available online.  
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3 narrative depiction of wind and desert.<sup>4</sup> Then, I discuss why an aeolian aesthetic is  
4 possible in a petrocultural world. This allows me to move on to analyse works by  
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6 poets Boisha and Mohammed Salem. Using their work, I explore what aeolian  
7  
8 aesthetics are, and discuss their decolonising potential. I structure this analysis by  
9  
10 focusing on poetic evocations of windblown desertscapes: the Hamada and *gallaba*  
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12 in Boisha's work, then an erg in Mohammed Salem's poem. On the way, I argue that  
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14 aeolian aesthetics are the brushes to Boisha and Mohammed Salem's poetic  
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16 palettes: wind informs poetic form, structure and rhetorical strategies as well as  
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18 content. I also explore the relationship between the wind and the poets' underlying  
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20 anti-colonial politics.  
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30 Because wind energy developments in Western Sahara emerge from, and maintain,  
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32 the capitalist, colonial, oil-dominated world order, in this paper I seek to engage with  
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34 Petrocultural Studies. Petroculture is the global culture of the modern era born of a  
35  
36 colonial, capitalist, fossil-fuelled energy system with all its political, social, economic  
37  
38 and environmental implications. Scholars of petroculture have concerned  
39  
40 themselves with how oil has shaped modern culture and society, largely by reading  
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42 energy into literature and visual culture. There is an aspiration, amongst such  
43  
44 scholars, to contribute to a successful energy transition: only by unraveling and  
45  
46 understanding the logics of oil-fuelled culture and our attachments to them can we  
47  
48 begin to reimagine and reinvent our anticipated lives after oil. Within Petroculture  
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50 as a field, scholarship to date has understandably focused on oil. In this paper, I bring  
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57 <sup>4</sup> SIEMENS is the largest industrial manufacturing company in Europe with branch offices abroad.

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59 The principal divisions of the company are energy, industry, healthcare and infrastructure & cities.  
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3 renewable energy into the conversation. While Petroculture scholars have  
4  
5 speculated that 'solar and wind literatures' may emerge in the future, post energy  
6  
7 transition, I wish to show that wind literature, or at least the use of aeolian  
8  
9 aesthetics, already exists in the here and now (Szeman 2017a: 278).<sup>5</sup> In turn then, a  
10  
11 discussion of aeolian aesthetics can yield positive outcomes beyond the Saharawi  
12  
13 case. If knowing how oil has shaped culture is essential for ensuring a true energy  
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15 transition, then surely, too, is knowledge of the cultural impact of energy sources to  
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17 which we wish to transition.  
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### **Western Sahara and energy colonialism**

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30 Western Sahara became a Spanish possession during the infamous 1884 Berlin  
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32 Conference, in which the European powers colonised Africa with a ruler and pencil.  
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34 For Spain, facing an existential crisis since the loss of its empire in Latin America,  
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36 Africa emerged as a horizon of possibility for resuscitating its 'glorious' imperial past  
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38 (San Martín 2005: 250). As well as attempting to extend its 'civilising mission'  
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40 amongst the Saharawis, Spain exploited the Sahara's resources, above all its  
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42 phosphates. In 1975, as Spanish dictator Francisco Franco lay unconscious and dying,  
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44 his government passed its colony, by then rocked by a widely-supported indigenous  
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46 independence movement known as the Polisario, to neighbouring Morocco and  
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48 Mauritania via the illegal Madrid Accords. In exchange, Spain achieved continued  
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54 <sup>5</sup> The emerging sub-genre of solar punk may also be of interest. See Centre for  
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56  
57 Environmental Research in the Human Science (CENHS), Podcast 157 – Solarpunk (feat. Rhys  
58  
59 Williams), <http://culturesofenergy.com/157-solarpunk-feat-rhys-williams/>  
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3 access to the country's fisheries and a 33 per cent share in Western Sahara's rich  
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5 phosphates industry.  
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10 Several thousand Saharawis fled the invading armies. In the southwest corner of the  
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12 Algerian desert, near the Algerian military outpost of Tindouf, they established the  
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14 refugee camps that still house them today. In 1976 Polisario declared these camps  
15  
16 the Saharawi state-in-exile (the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic), which, as Pablo  
17  
18 San Martín powerfully shows, has functioned as a hub for the consolidation of  
19  
20 Saharawi national identity (San Martín 2010). The refugee nation has its own  
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22 schools, hospitals and parliament, and some 200,000 inhabitants. The refugee-  
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24 citizens are separated from those Saharawis left behind by the world's longest active  
25  
26 military wall, which severs Moroccan-occupied Sahara from Polisario-controlled  
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28 'liberated' Western Sahara. The UN considers Polisario the only official  
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30 representative of the Saharawi people. In 1991 the UN brokered a ceasefire between  
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32 the Polisario and Morocco (Polisario and Mauritania had made peace in 1979) on  
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34 the back of a promise for a self-determination referendum on independence for the  
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36 Saharawis. Morocco has continually blocked the referendum, whilst the UN has been  
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38 unable or unwilling to force Morocco to submit to its peace process.<sup>6</sup> Officially,  
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40 Western Sahara is considered a "non-self-governing territory" – UN parlance for  
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42 'colony.' No country in the world officially recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over  
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44 Western Sahara.  
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54 <sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of how this 'blocking' has worked in practice, see Human Rights  
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56 Watch, "Keeping it Secret: The United Nations Operation in the Western Sahara," October  
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58 1995.  
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6 Saharawis see their prospects for independence blocked by resource wealth.  
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8 Morocco sells Saharawi fisheries, sand, phosphates and agricultural produce to  
9  
10 customers all over the world. Since 2002, Morocco's lack of oil, and the possibility of  
11  
12 oil's presence in Western Sahara, has furthered Morocco's resolve to hold onto its  
13  
14 colony (Allan 2016). But, from the perspective of many Saharawi activists and their  
15  
16 allies, the most dangerous development is not oil but renewable energy (Hagen  
17  
18 2018). Since 2009, Morocco has overseen the rapid development of renewable  
19  
20 energy infrastructure in occupied Western Sahara. It takes its colony as a source of  
21  
22 electrical power, thereby strengthening its hold on Western Sahara by way of the  
23  
24 irreversibility of physical infrastructure and energy dependence. The twisted metal  
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26 strands of transmission lines connect one territory to the other, as if in one  
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28 corporeal nervous system. The cables crisscrossing the Morocco/Western Sahara  
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30 border mirror the former's discourse of 'territorial integrity,' which imagines  
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32 Western Sahara as an integral part of the Moroccan nation. Beyond, the Moroccan  
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34 grid links to the EU energy market by way of connections through Western Sahara's  
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36 former colonial power, Spain. Renewable energy, in occupied Western Sahara, is a  
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38 colonial agent.  
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50 By 2020, 26.4 per cent of Morocco's renewable energy is expected to come from its  
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52 colony (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2015). Morocco's main corporate partner  
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54 in this endeavour is SIEMENS. So far, SIEMENS has provided the mills for the 200  
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56 Megawatts (MW) Aftissat farm, whilst SIEMENS itself will be leading the respective  
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58 100MW and 300MW programmes in Boujdour and Tiskrad, all in occupied Western  
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3 Sahara. These add to the existing farms at Foug el Oued (50MW), which powers a  
4  
5 nearby phosphate mine (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2016), and the 5MW  
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7 CIMAR plant, designed to power a Moroccan cement-grinding factory, also in  
8  
9 occupied Western Sahara (Western Sahara Resource Watch 2017, Environmental  
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11 Justice Atlas 2017). SIEMENS builds these wind farms against the express wishes of  
12  
13 the Polisario and Saharawi civil society. In an attempt to give a positive spin to its  
14  
15 questionable role in these developments, SIEMENS relies on colonial discourse. It is  
16  
17 not the purpose of this paper to analyse this discourse in depth, as I do so  
18  
19 elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> However, below I give one example of SIEMENS' discursive colonisation  
20  
21 of Western Sahara's land and wind in order to show readers the colonising  
22  
23 narratives that Saharawi poets undermine. It is worth highlighting here that Boisha  
24  
25 and Mohammed Salem do not compose/write in direct response to SIEMENS.<sup>8</sup> But  
26  
27 their poetry, with or without explicit intention, challenges the colonial discourses of  
28  
29 SIEMENS and other corporate and state actors that use similar colonising narratives.  
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40 A short SIEMENS film promoting the company's role in the *Moroccan Renewable*  
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42 *Energy Programme* (developments in Western Sahara form part of this Programme)  
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45 <sup>7</sup> I am working on a paper discussing SIEMENS' embroilment with settler colonialism. See  
46  
47 also Alicia Fernandez Camporro, "The King's Speech. An Analysis of the Institutional  
48  
49 Discourse around the Development of Renewable Energy Infrastructure in Western Sahara,"  
50  
51 (Forthcoming).  
52  
53

54 <sup>8</sup> Both poets considered here are, though, aware of SIEMENS' activities in Western Sahara  
55  
56 and strongly condemn the company. Personal interview with Limam Boisha, Madrid, 6 July  
57  
58 2018. Telephone interview with Fatma Galia Mohammed Salem, 18 September 2018.  
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2  
3 showcases the colonial narratives on which Siemens routinely relies. The video is  
4  
5 embedded in an online article dedicated to a particular wind farm, “Africa’s largest  
6  
7 onshore wind farm”.<sup>9</sup> The article highlights the farm’s contribution to carbon offsets  
8  
9 and the hi-tech prowess of SIEMENS: “wind turbines have been specifically adapted  
10  
11 to withstand the corrosive conditions of both the salty ocean winds, desert  
12  
13 sandstorms and the year round hot weather,” reads the article. Here, SIEMENS  
14  
15 builds on pre-existing discourses, hegemonic in Western public imagination, of the  
16  
17 desert as scorching, inhospitable and hostile. This serves to underline the company’s  
18  
19 technological acumen in overcoming this ‘extreme’ context (Hunold 2011). The  
20  
21 article ends with the lines: ‘Capturing the power of desert winds – and turning it into  
22  
23 clean energy millions rely on. That’s Ingenuity for life.’ The wind is imagined as a wild  
24  
25 beast (barbaric native) that SIEMENS can harness for capitalism. Indeed, the  
26  
27 company’s self-perceived brilliance in managing such a feat is announced with the  
28  
29 towering capital of “Ingenuity.”  
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40 This idea of ‘nature’ (specifically wind) as domitable is repeated in the corporate  
41  
42 video. The film opens with a low-angle shot of a sandy dune, dust blowing over it,  
43  
44 and a blindingly bright sun on the horizon, which is made still more intense by the  
45  
46 contrast with the otherwise dark lighting. We hear a howling wind, emphasising the  
47  
48 desolation suggested by the visuals. SIEMENS draws here on the nineteenth century  
49  
50 European colonial doctrine of *terra nullius*, in which ‘non-civilised’ peoples were  
51  
52 seen as incapable of ruling, or making effective use of, the ‘wild’ and ‘hostile’ lands  
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57 <sup>9</sup> Available at [https://www.siemens.com/ma/en/home/company/topic-areas/ingenuity-for-](https://www.siemens.com/ma/en/home/company/topic-areas/ingenuity-for-life/tarfaya-wind-farm.html)  
58  
59 [life/tarfaya-wind-farm.html](https://www.siemens.com/ma/en/home/company/topic-areas/ingenuity-for-life/tarfaya-wind-farm.html)  
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1  
2  
3 that they inhabited (Gilbert 2014, 95, Huh 2015, 715). This desolate scene set, the  
4  
5 moment of colonial encounter arrives. The heroic missionary bravely confronts  
6  
7 hostility: the mood changes as text appears on screen, signalling SIEMENS entrance  
8  
9 in this damned desert. 'SIEMENS presents... Drawing the wind.' Simultaneously the  
10  
11 light brightens, the howling sound is replaced with uplifting music, and the camera  
12  
13 cuts to a pan of beige desert and rock, finally resting on a row of mills, blades  
14  
15 circling. Next, another low angle shot, this time taken from the bottom of a mill,  
16  
17 gives the latter a gigantesque, majestic look. Adopting the hoary colonial discourses  
18  
19 of white-man-as-saviour, SIEMENS literally and metaphorically brings the light.  
20  
21 Meanwhile, a voiceover claims 'to draw the wind, you must tame it...' The wind is  
22  
23 imagined as a natural asset that can only be harnessed (dominated and  
24  
25 domesticated) by SIEMENS. Here SIEMENS makes use of, and reinforces, the violent  
26  
27 Cartesian nature/society dualism, which, as a system of thought, was central in  
28  
29 structuring the colonial world order and what Jason W. Moore terms the modern  
30  
31 'world ecology' or 'capitalist web-of-life' (Moore 2016). SIEMENS is enmeshed in said  
32  
33 'world ecology' of power, capital and nature, in which capitalism is a way to organise  
34  
35 nature (Moore 2015). Significantly, SIEMENS' notion of energy follows the  
36  
37 internationally hegemonic one. This is the energy of petroculture. In petroculture's  
38  
39 energy system, a natural asset (read: wild, indigenous population) is harnessed  
40  
41 (read: colonised) in order to further material plenty and consumerist lifestyles for  
42  
43 limited sectors of the global population. Whether the source is coal or oil, sun or  
44  
45 wind, this notion of energy does not change.  
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### **Children of the wind: Aeolian aesthetics in Saharawi poetry**

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6 Graeme Macdonald argues that '[p]etroleum culture is enacted wherever there is a  
7  
8 detectable reliance (conscious or otherwise) on fossil energy...' (2017, 291). Since all  
9  
10 modern cultural production emerges from an age of global petroculture, argues  
11  
12 Macdonald, one can read oil into all world literature (2012). If this is the case, could  
13  
14 Saharawis be an exception? I do not mean that Saharawis live outside of  
15  
16 petroculture. Even those staying in the remote camps of Algeria are connected to  
17  
18 the rest of the world by mobile phones, can hitch a lift in a Polisario Land Rover,  
19  
20 drink water from plastic bottles. Their exiled lives are furnished with  
21  
22 petrocommodities, even if the material wealth and consumerism of petroculture is  
23  
24 impossible for them. Besides, Saharawis' very exile and occupation is sustained by  
25  
26 petrocultural energy systems. Nevertheless, lives before petroculture descended on  
27  
28 Western Sahara are still in living memory: at least until the sixties, Spanish  
29  
30 colonialists avoided interference with the 'hostile' Saharawi tribes, and largely stuck  
31  
32 to the lucrative opportunities of Western Sahara's coastline. Furthermore, the  
33  
34 Saharawi state-in-exile today attempts to conserve 'traditional' culture by fostering  
35  
36 the breeding of camels in the camps, and clearing mines in 'liberated' Western  
37  
38 Sahara to allow for nomadic camel pastoralism there. Several middle-aged and older  
39  
40 Saharawis knew nothing but the desert nomad's life until the Moroccan invasion. It  
41  
42 is the memory of this life, and this life that is still practised on the margins of  
43  
44 petroculture in the 'liberated' territories, that shapes the Saharawi poetry analysed  
45  
46 in this paper. With this life in mind, Spanish colonialists, observing how the nomads  
47  
48 tracked clouds in their pursuit of water, famously nicknamed the Saharawis 'the  
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50 children of the clouds.' As I discuss below, the wind, the sounds it transmits, the  
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3 water it carries as cargo, the trails it leaves in the sand, and the geological  
4  
5 formations it creates, have been central to the possibility of Saharawis' nomadic life  
6  
7 for millennia. Saharawi culture is windblown, and yet their territory is fast becoming  
8  
9 a capitalist, imperial wind energy factory. Just as petrocultural societies are  
10  
11 dominated by oil aesthetics, and the cultural production of Caribbean societies,  
12  
13 which are built around imperial sugar plantations, is marked by saccharine stylistic  
14  
15 tendencies (Niblett 2015), Saharawi cultural production is characterised by an  
16  
17 aeolian aesthetic.  
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25 Wind is elusive to the eye. We can see the wind only in the movements of the things  
26  
27 it carries, or in the visible traces of the material it has sculpted, destroyed, created or  
28  
29 left behind. Visual aeolian aesthetics therefore rely on images of the windblown. In  
30  
31 Boisha and Mohammed Salem's poetry, such imagery is drawn from aeolian  
32  
33 geomorphology, that is, desertscapes created by the wind. Saharawi culture is  
34  
35 constituted by these desertscapes, both those that are perceived as 'Saharawi,' and  
36  
37 – since all identities are delineated by what is other to them - those that are not.  
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45 Boisha evokes the windblown Algerian Hamada to comment on the Saharawis'  
46  
47 victimization. 'Existiría la Hamada si no nos hubieran intentado enterrar en ella? /  
48  
49 ¿Existiría si no nos hubieran dicho que existía?'<sup>10</sup> asks Boisha in his poem *Di que no*  
50  
51 *me lo has contado*. His question highlights that places are not neutral entities, but  
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53

54 <sup>10</sup>The poem was first published in Boisha's second sole-authored collection of poetry *Ritos*  
55

56 *de jaima*, Madrid: Editorial Bubisher, 2012. Available online:  
57

58 [https://elpais.com/elpais/2012/10/22/africa\\_no\\_es\\_un\\_pais/1350907260\\_135090.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2012/10/22/africa_no_es_un_pais/1350907260_135090.html)  
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3 socially, politically and culturally constructed ones, and simultaneously reveals how  
4 the Algerian Hamada, as a place, is imagined in Saharawi society: an infertile, bleak  
5 and insufferably hot plain. But to say that places are socially constructed does not  
6 mean that they are materially inexistent.<sup>11</sup> Hamada is a term for a particular type of  
7 desert landscape, characterized by rocky plains where almost all sand has been  
8 removed by an aeolian process known as deflation. Geologically, the Algerian  
9 Hamada would not exist without a huge and sustained wind power. The intense,  
10 turbulent – that is, characterized by chaotic changes in pressure and speed - action  
11 of the wind carries the sand away. Just a stony plateau of gravel and bare rock is  
12 left. Vegetal life is almost completely absent, and thus nomadic camel pastoralism,  
13 the basis of Saharawis' entire cultural identity, is not possible. For the Saharawi  
14 imagined nation, the Hamada is – materially as well as aesthetically – apocalyptic.  
15 The first line of *Di que no me lo has contado* nods to the international politics that  
16 have shaped this negative imagination of the Hamada. Saharawis have been  
17 'enterra[do]' there, that is to say trapped, their nationalist aspirations thwarted, and  
18 denied dignified lives as individuals, by an undetermined third person (this could be  
19 the Moroccan state alone or in partnership with SIEMENS and other corporates,  
20 Spain and/or the wider international community). The ecological and visual hostility  
21 that the Hamada represents for Saharawis is reflected in the tone of Boisha's poem.  
22 The imperative 'Di' of its title, and the seemingly relentless, vertically stacked

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<sup>11</sup> As Yi-Fu Tuan argues, human senses of place are not only imagined and the result of  
symbolic projection, but also formed by long sensory associations with the environment. Yi-  
Fu Tuan, 'Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective,' In: Gale S., Olsson G. (eds) *Philosophy  
in Geography. Theory and Decision Library*, Vol. 20, Springer, Dordrecht, 387-427.

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3 rhetorical questions, suggest the angry tirade of a wronged person against a culprit.  
4  
5  
6 The powerful, destructive potential of a scowling and scouring wind capable of  
7  
8 creating a geological Hamada is reflected in the violence of the final line, with its  
9  
10 arresting images of 'carne,' 'muerte' and 'sangre nuestra.' The latter possessive  
11  
12 pronoun indicates Saharawi victimhood.  
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18 Yet in this poetic picture of the wind-created, or wind-destroyed, Hamada, Boisha  
19  
20 manages to introduce a simultaneous but strikingly different symbolic role for wind.  
21  
22 '¿Existiría el Sáhara sin la envidia de la memoria del viento, sin las señales del fuego,  
23  
24 la libertad de los pastos, la sombra de las acacias?' Here blows the wind of the *bādīa*.  
25  
26 *Bādīa* is the Hassania (Saharawi language) term for the beloved desert heartlands of  
27  
28 Western Sahara. With its juxtaposition next to the 'señales del fuego,' wind here  
29  
30 symbolises, on the one hand, resistance. On the other, wind is freedom. This is  
31  
32 evident metaphorically through Boisha's evocation of Western Sahara's *bādīa*  
33  
34 landscape, and crudely through the reference to the way-of-life of the nomadic  
35  
36 'pastos:' they knew no walls, roamed freely. Saharawis today talk of the *bādīa*'s  
37  
38 flowering and green havens after rains, and lovingly recall its *āḥīām* (traditional  
39  
40 Saharawi tents), its camels, its acacias and breezes. As ethnobotanist and  
41  
42 anthropologist Gabriele Volpato explains, in Saharawi society, 'feelings of good  
43  
44 health, pride, dignity and freedom are associated with a 'return to the *badiya*'  
45  
46 (2014a). The *bādīa* is all that the Hamada is not. But it, too, exists as a product of  
47  
48 wind power. While the aeolian process of deflation has created the rocky plains of  
49  
50 the Hamada, abrasion, the process through which wind-driven and windborne sand  
51  
52 particles erode the earth's surface, has sculpted the rock formations that  
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3 characterise the *bādīa* landscape. These rocky wind creations, called *gallaba*, or *galb*  
4  
5 in the singular, make the very way-of-life of Saharawis possible. In his poem named  
6  
7 after these formations, Boisha explains the sociocultural significance of *gallaba*.  
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12  
13 The poem, in which Western Sahara is personified as a longed-for and desired  
14  
15 woman, relies on the double meaning of *galb*. One meaning for *galb* is heart. It is  
16  
17 also the Hassania word for a particular type of desert landmark. According to  
18  
19 traditional Hassania epic poetry, which had (and has) a pedagogical use for  
20  
21 transmitting ethnobotanical and geographic knowledge between the generations,<sup>12</sup>  
22  
23 there are 365 *gallaba* in Western Sahara, each with its own name.<sup>13</sup> British and  
24  
25 Spanish readers might have various words, shaped by European historical cultural  
26  
27 understandings and ecological knowledge, to classify the physical manifestations  
28  
29 that are *gallaba*, for example mountains, caves or rock formations. But for  
30  
31 Saharawis, *gallaba* are the markers - physically resembling hearts - forged by the  
32  
33 desert wind to enable their nomadic culture. Saharawi nomadic life is driven by the  
34  
35 need to know where to find water and the best forage for their milk-providing, life-  
36  
37 sustaining camels (Volpato 2014a). As Volpato has highlighted, Saharawis have  
38  
39 developed strategies of temporal and spatial mobility to ensure their ability to locate  
40  
41 the best pasture areas at any given time (2014b: 206). The wind-forged *gallaba* have  
42  
43 made these mobility strategies possible. They are vital for the nomads' navigation  
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55 <sup>12</sup> On 'traditional' Saharawi poetry, see Bahia Mahmud Awah, "Literatura oral y transmisión  
56  
57 en el Sáhara," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 13 (2010).

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59 <sup>13</sup> Limam Boisha, Personal Interview, Madrid, 6 July 2018.  
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3 through the desert, as well as providing shelter from the sun and wind when these  
4  
5 energies are at their most powerful.  
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10 Boisha's use of aeolian geomorphology as a source of structural inspiration and  
11 imagery serves to claim Western Sahara for Saharawis due to their knowledge and  
12 membership of the desert ecology. In authoring *Galb*, Boisha takes the place of the  
13 wind in sculpting out stanzas that, like *gallaba*, guide us through Western Sahara.  
14  
15 Mirroring the physical diversity of *gallaba*, each stanza has its own formal  
16 particularities: some are four lines long, some five; there is no regular rhyme  
17 scheme. But each stanza is similar in line length and content. All begin with a  
18 toponym, which is likened to an enticing part of a lover's body, and each ends with a  
19 lyrical flourish that employs imagery of lightness, flight or water, suggesting freedom  
20 and fertility. Each stanza, each *galb*, allows us to navigate through the poem, as if  
21 the entity of the poem was itself a metaphor for nomadic Saharawis' Western  
22 Sahara. The poem's formal features - short lines, the structuring of the poem into  
23 stanzas, and the abundant use of commas and full stops - paces the poem and  
24 ensures it progresses without unnecessary haste, as if to give the reader/listener  
25 time to fully pay attention to the desert surroundings. Thus, we are encouraged to  
26 mimic, or at least reflect on, a nomad's close relationship with all the desert  
27 elements. Boisha is nodding at Saharawis' intimate and complex knowledge of the  
28 botany, ecology and meteorology of the *bādīa*, and of well locations, distances and  
29 trajectories for crossing the desert (Volpato 2014a, b). Knowledge of place gives  
30 Saharawis the right to the *bādīa*, Boisha's poem suggests.  
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3 But Boisha also claims Western Sahara for his people on the basis of love. He does so  
4  
5 by using aeolian aesthetics to evoke regions with special cultural meaning in the  
6  
7 Saharawi communal imaginary. As we work vertically down the poem, each  
8  
9 stanza/*galb* leads us gradually southwards, as if following the Saharawi nomads –  
10  
11 guided by the *gallaba* - on a migration to Tiris. Tiris is considered the most beautiful  
12  
13 region of Western Sahara's *bādīa*. It is located near the Mauritanian border. The final  
14  
15 stanza, or southern-most *galb*, is dedicated to Tiris. This final stanza begins: 'Como  
16  
17 Tiris es el ombligo del/Sahara,'. Leaving 'Sahara' to stand alone gives the  
18  
19 separateness, the exile from this wonderful place, an added weight and aura. The  
20  
21 very mention of Tiris, the most cherished part of the Western Sahara *bādīa*  
22  
23 heartlands, will produce an emotional response in a Saharawi audience. It is fitting,  
24  
25 then, that Boisha ends with an image of a steadfast heart: 'Galb es un  
26  
27 corazón/corazón de piedra.' The repetition of 'corazón,' separated by a line break  
28  
29 and comma, makes sure that the poem sits down and lingers on the imagery of a  
30  
31 heart/*galb*. One is left, at the close of the poem, with all the poignant emotion of  
32  
33 longing for, and missing, someone or somewhere. Yet the final line is also  
34  
35 ambiguous. The simile suggests both the permanence and intransience of Saharawis'  
36  
37 love for their homeland, and the cold lack of empathy of international corporates  
38  
39 that gaze on the Saharawi refugees indifferently while plundering their country.  
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51  
52 Of course, Boisha's employment of the ready-made heart metaphor also serves a  
53  
54 nation-building function: the poem performs a patriotic 'love of homeland.' The  
55  
56 single 'esculpida' of the penultimate stanza is perhaps the romantic peak of this  
57  
58 loving sentiment. It takes time to carve a lover's name in stone. And such  
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3 petroglyphs can endure for thousands of years. This stanza evokes the poetic voice's  
4  
5  
6 desire to declare his eternal love by giving a physical and permanent shape to an  
7  
8 intangible emotion. Elsewhere, the *gallaba* give way to alluring imagery of a  
9  
10 woman's chest, belly and eyelashes, whilst the night is alive with beings ' - frontando  
11  
12 su piel - .' The use of a pair of em dashes around this phrase disrupts the stanza and  
13  
14 thereby draws special attention to the parenthetical content. The playful eroticism  
15  
16 entices the reader, undoing the supposed 'blandness' of colonial-imagined deserts,  
17  
18 although the ambiguity of the phrase – we do not know if the beings are rubbing  
19  
20 their own, or a partner's, skin – possibly suggests masturbation, once again nodding  
21  
22 to the loneliness of exile.  
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30 Boisha's personification of Western Sahara as a woman reinforces several of the  
31  
32 poet's aforementioned claims to the territory, as well as his challenges to the  
33  
34 discursive colonisation of desert and wind. A cursory look at the literature on gender  
35  
36 and nationalism shows the process of gendering the Western Saharan nation is  
37  
38 nothing new (Yuval-Davis 1997). However, the context of this poem, set against  
39  
40 colonial *terra nullius* narratives that depict Western Sahara as an oversized, useless  
41  
42 sandpit, gives a new meaning to a love poem where one's country is the sweetheart.  
43  
44  
45 The very idea of *terra nullius* is gendered: it implies a virgin territory waiting to be  
46  
47 taken or impregnated, or rather developed and civilised, by colonial powers  
48  
49 (McClintock 1995). But this woman, this desert, is no virgin: the Saharawi poetic  
50  
51 voice is already her lover. He knows and adores every part of her body, every corner  
52  
53 of the Sahara, intimately. Miyek, for example, is compared to 'un lunar/en el vientre  
54  
55 de la tierra.' To know every mole on the body of a lover is surely the superlative of  
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3 intimate love. Furthermore, as is evident in the initial 'Un viajero me pregunta,' the  
4 Saharawi poetic voice is explaining his relationship with his loved one, with Western  
5 Sahara, to an external interlocutor, perhaps even a would-be coloniser. He must  
6 therefore break down the negative stereotypes of desert that exist in the Western  
7 imaginary. Boisha does so by marking the various windblown land(marks) of Western  
8 Sahara - Miyek, Ziza, Tiris - and making them active and dynamic. The stone of the  
9 desert is transient. Craters emerge. The dunes touch. The physical, inanimate  
10 characteristics of the desert become self-moving, active subjects. By personifying the  
11 desert, Boisha firstly makes the Western reader see the life and characters of the  
12 *bādīa*, which are normally invisible for such audiences. As discussed, this is due to  
13 the Western imaginary's understanding of 'desert' – on which SIEMENS' justifying  
14 discourses rely - as a desolate, uninhabited and bleak place (or non-place), or  
15 'something left to waste' to translate the Latin *desertum*. Secondly, by giving agency  
16 to the desert's non-living elements, Boisha simply and effectively hints at wider  
17 Saharawi epistemologies and cosmologies, which necessarily (in order for the  
18 continuation of Saharawi nomadism) respect other animals, organisms, elements  
19 and minerals. He thereby highlights how the desert ecology works: humans, other  
20 beings and elements of the desert atmosphere, such as wind and sand, live in a  
21 mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship. The implicit alternative is the  
22 maintenance of the human-nature binary, the linked devaluation of nature, and  
23 today's resultant planetary crisis. Furthermore, using the windblown *gallaba* as the  
24 gravitational centre of the poem serves to ridicule the corporate understanding of  
25 desert wind as that which is useless and burdensome until it is harnessed by  
26 manmade technology.

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6 In her poem *La ciudad del viento* Fatma Galia Mohammed Salem likewise  
7  
8 emphasizes, for a presumed Western audience (I make this presumption due to the  
9  
10 poet's large serving of metaphors and similes from the European fairytale genre, for  
11  
12 example 'El desierto me hace sentir/como una princesa,' or 'El sol/mi hada  
13  
14 madrina'), the interconnectivity and mutual reliance that exists between beings and  
15  
16 things of the desert.<sup>14</sup> She, like Boisha, puts a question mark beside the  
17  
18 anthropocentric ontology of petrocultural modernity. Mohammed Salem does this  
19  
20 by making the desert not a passive, intransient thing but rather a living subject that  
21  
22 actively looks out for and elevates the emotional wellbeing of the poetic voice.  
23  
24 Throughout the poem, the poetic voice is the object of transitive verbs for which  
25  
26 desert elements serve as the subject: the stars watch over her, the moon spoils her,  
27  
28 the sun guides and protects her, the desert makes her feel like a princess. The wind,  
29  
30 on the other hand, is not the subject of a transitive verb but is rather her partner. It  
31  
32 speaks with her, joining its voice with hers, in solidarity. Wind is her comrade-in-  
33  
34 arms. By making wind her (activist) equal, Mohammed Salem points to its role in the  
35  
36 aforementioned desert ecology suggested at by Boisha. The picture she paints of a  
37  
38 harmonious relationship between Saharawis, wind and all the other desert elements  
39  
40 serves to underline SIEMENS' contrasting alienation from the delicate desert  
41  
42 ecology. She hints at a very different understanding and vocabulary of wind by  
43  
44 opposing the idea that wind should be 'dominated' or 'tamed' at all. Drawing, as we  
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54 <sup>14</sup> Poem first published in Fatma Galia Mohammed Salem, *Nada es eterno*, Bilbao: Lankopi,  
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56 2010. Available online at [http://literaturasaharai.blogspot.com/2010/04/poemas-  
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2  
3 have seen, on the hegemonic colonial and capitalist understanding of energy, and  
4  
5 indeed on *terra nullius* doctrine, SIEMENS depicts desert wind as underutilized: wind  
6  
7 is the howling voice of the barbaric until corporate renewable developers tame it for  
8  
9 electricity. Mohammed Salem undermines the colonial depiction of ‘unharnessed’  
10  
11 wind by making apparent the latter’s creative, productive role and power in the  
12  
13 desert ecology, and thus in the lives and culture of Saharawi nomads. Wind, shows  
14  
15 the poet, is an integral part of Saharawis’ Western Sahara. If, as the UN suggests, the  
16  
17 fate of Western Sahara should be decided by Saharawis,<sup>15</sup> and, as several court cases  
18  
19 and a UN Legal Opinion suggest, the phosphates, fish, agricultural produce and oil of  
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21 Western Sahara can only be sold with the Saharawis’ consent (Corell 2002, Western  
22  
23 Sahara Resource Watch 2018a, b), then Mohammed Salem’s foregrounding of the  
24  
25 wind as her partner and equal suggest the same is true for renewable energy.  
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35 Aeolian aesthetics are at work beyond just imagery and metaphor in Mohammed  
36  
37 Salem’s poem. She mimics the repetitive, cyclical whirlpools of wind in the structure  
38  
39 and rhetorical strategies of the poem. Repetition is arguably the heftiest device in  
40  
41 Mohammed Salem’s poetic toolbox. She uses it to create stability, continuity and a  
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43 sense of control in knowing what is to come, thereby rupturing the disorientated,  
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48 <sup>15</sup> Literally hundreds of UN Security Council resolutions demand a free and fair self-  
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50 determination referendum for the Saharawi people, and UN General Assembly resolutions  
51  
52 denounce the “continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco.” See for example  
53  
54 United Nations General Assembly, 1980, *Resolution 35/19: The Question of Western Sahara*  
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56 (*11 November 1980*), [[http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_res\\_35\\_19.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_35_19.pdf)], A/RES/35/19.  
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3 helpless, unpredictable and chaotic trauma of war, occupation and exile. The  
4  
5 repetition of the longed-for 'ciudad del viento' and 'desierto,' from which Saharawi  
6  
7 refugees are exiled, invokes those places, making them poetically present. And the  
8  
9 repetition of entire, and various, phrases – as if they were circulating in the wind -  
10  
11 gives a chant-like quality to the aural poem, increasing its spiritual energy and power  
12  
13 to affect the listener. One should bear in mind the Saharawi oral cultural legacy here.  
14  
15 As nomads, Saharawis relied on (oral) poets as transmitters of culturally-specific  
16  
17 knowledge (history, topography, medicine and so on) between the generations, as  
18  
19 anthropologist and fellow Saharawi poet Bahia Awah explores in some detail (2010).  
20  
21 We can reasonably assume that Mohammed Salem's work was meant to be heard as  
22  
23 well as read, hence the importance of paying attention to the aurality of aeolian  
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25 aesthetics.  
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35 The aural power of the poem is further heightened by Mohammed Salem's use of  
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37 devices such as alliteration and assonance (the stanza on the moon is a fitting  
38  
39 example: 'la luna, mi espejo mágico,/ que me escucha,/ me mira y me mima'). I  
40  
41 would argue that these are not just for (aeolian) aesthetic effect but also for  
42  
43 reflecting the particular way that kinetic and sound energy work in the desert. There  
44  
45 are relatively less obstacles to absorb the vibrations that produce sound waves in  
46  
47 Western Sahara, thus sound travels much further, and is more perceptible, than  
48  
49 elsewhere on earth.<sup>16</sup> Some days in the *bādīa*, depending on the wind's direction  
50  
51 and strength, one might be able to hear, for example, the rustle of marching ants on  
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59 <sup>16</sup> Federico Guzmán, Personal Interview, Skype, 23 July 2018.  
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3 tree bark, or the pitter-patter and hum of 'singing' sand, blown and falling back on  
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5  
6 itself. Indeed, I would argue that Mohammed Salem's meticulous attention to the  
7  
8 aural quality of her work serves to remind us firstly, of Saharawis' aforementioned  
9  
10 intimate knowledge of desert ecology, and secondly, of the essential role of wind for  
11  
12 Saharawis' survival. For nomads, the windborne sounds are an aural guide - sentinels  
13  
14 - to the life of the desertscape, and can warn of nearing dangers from several miles  
15  
16 away.<sup>17</sup> Nods to wind's enabling role in Saharawi nomadism challenges SIEMENS'  
17  
18 claim to 'Ingenuity' in harnessing an otherwise 'useless,' 'barbaric' wind of a desert  
19  
20 rendered *nullius*.  
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28 As mentioned above, we cannot see the wind, but only what is windblown and  
29  
30 windborne. Aeolian aesthetics therefore appeal not just to vision, but to all the  
31  
32 senses through which we know the wind. We have discussed the rich aural texture of  
33  
34 Mohammed Salem's work. Other than hearing its sighs, trickles, whistles and roars,  
35  
36 the key way we know the wind is through its touch (Ingold 2007). In Mohammed  
37  
38 Salem's case, her preferred tool for appealing to the tactile is synaesthesia. In her  
39  
40 stanza dedicated to sand, for example, she conjures the feel of its luxurious touch, as  
41  
42 well as its rich sight: 'Ando descalza sobre una alfombra de arena,/suave como la  
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44 seda/y dorada como el oro'. She thereby communicates, to a foreign audience that is  
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54 <sup>17</sup> This is also the case for the indigenous people of the Namib desert. See BBC World  
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56 Service, *The Sounds of the Namib Desert*, podcast audio, The Compass2018,  
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58 <https://player.fm/series/the-compass-1301444/the-sounds-of-the-namib-desert>  
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3 presumably ignorant of the desert's delights,<sup>18</sup> the beauty and wonder of Western  
4 Sahara. Much like Boisha's own evocation of touch then, Mohammed Salem seeks to  
5 challenge colonial mind-sets that imagine the desert as bland and barren.  
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11  
12 Again in the fashion of Boisha, Mohammed Salem conjures a particular windblown  
13 desertscape in order to persuade her audience of Saharawis' vast knowledge of, and  
14 place in, the desert ecology. With its golden and silky carpets of sand and sea-like  
15 veils, Mohammed Salem's *La ciudad del viento* evokes an erg. An erg, or sand sea, is  
16 a large area of aeolian, that is windblown, sand. The dunes of an erg are active,  
17 moving, migratory. Ripples on their surface reveal the wind's direction and speed.  
18 The profile of dunes, whether they are curved into croissants, shaped like stars, or  
19 linear in form, tell us of the surrounding wind regime: its strength, pattern, direction.  
20 Aeolian dunes are constituted by the wind, but they are also a mirror to it. They are  
21 weathervanes.<sup>19</sup> As discussed above, nomads' ability to read the direction of the  
22 wind makes it possible for them to use sound and scent as lookouts: they can tell  
23 what is coming, from where.  
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45 <sup>18</sup> Mohammed Salem nods to this ignorance through the repeated lines "veo lo que nadie  
46 ve,/siento lo que nadie siente" as if to recognise that her Western audience is unable to  
47 appreciate the desert attributes that she sees and feels so clearly.  
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52 <sup>19</sup> For more on reading weather patterns in dunes and ripples, see Lori Fenton, 'Sand Waves  
53 in the Desert. Or Pet Peeves and Deciphering Climate Change in the Solar System,'  
54 Planetary Society, 21 February 2014, [http://www.planetary.org/blogs/guest-](http://www.planetary.org/blogs/guest-blogs/2014/0219-sand-waves-in-the-desert.html)  
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3 The only erg or sand sea in Western Sahara sits in the country's heel, within the  
4 wider beloved Tiris region. The erg, known by the name of its elevated *galb* Azefal,  
5 runs from north east Mauritania, through south west Western Sahara, and back into  
6 Mauritania again. Here is Mohammed Salem's oxymoronic city of wind. She gives the  
7 famed Saharawi erg the label of 'city' to show her lack of want for colonial-imposed  
8 urbanism, modernism and so-called development. The rural city of wind offers all  
9 she could need. Likewise, the poetic voice uses all the senses to show us the desert is  
10 as valuable as 'seda,' 'oro' or 'diamantes' to Saharawis. Her palace is her animal-skin  
11 tent, and the desert, not SIEMENS' contribution to so-called economic development,  
12 provides all the riches she desires. As the author told me in an interview, ""We don't  
13 need big companies. All nomads need are oases, water, vegetation and the natural  
14 wind."20

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37 Mohammed Salem's rejection of economic development and urbanisation – made  
38 clear in her celebration of a simple, nomadic desert life free of material wealth - can  
39 be read as a wider refutation, or poetic silencing, of petroculture. To draw on  
40 Dorothy Odartey-Wellington's work on the near absence of the Moroccan military  
41 wall from Saharawi poetry, a *purposeful lack* can be read as resistance. Odartey-  
42 Wellington argues that the Saharawi 'writers' imaginations make for' the Saharawi  
43 heartlands, and indeed its beaches, 'without any reference to the wall between the  
44 poetic voice and the ocean' (2017: 5). Odartey Wellington suggests this is because  
45 the writers 'are engaged in a poetic negation, or undoing, of the power of the wall'

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3 (2017: 5). The poets thereby subtly remind us that the walls of occupied Western  
4 Sahara, both the military ones and the fences surrounding the King's and SIEMENS'  
5 vast wind farms, are not, after all, the 'benevolent enclosures' that the *terra nullius*  
6 narrative promised. Likewise, the purposeful lack of petrocommodities and the  
7 'neoliberal freedoms' of petroculture in Boisha and Mohammed Salem's work, as  
8 well as their reliance on aeolian, rather than oil, aesthetics, constitute a (temporary)  
9 barrier to the pernicious reach of petroculture.  
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## 25 **Conclusion**

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30 The incorporation of aeolian aesthetics into Saharawi poetry, shows a way to  
31 challenge the colonial wind energy developments in occupied Western Sahara on an  
32 artistic level. Boisha and Mohammed Salem create melancholic pieces that long for a  
33 return to a pre-petrocultural, nomadic way-of-life. Saharawi culture is entangled  
34 with the wind, and the 'homeland' that Saharawis love is materially shaped by it.  
35 Emerging from this culture are what I call *aeolian aesthetics*: poetry and visual art  
36 informed by wind in their structures, motifs, imagery and rhetorical devices. Aeolian  
37 aesthetics are characterised by a decided appeal to the senses through which we  
38 know the wind: sound and touch, and visions of the windblown. On a political level,  
39 they undermine hegemonic understandings of energy, which make 'nature' (in this  
40 case, wind) something to be 'harnessed' and 'dominated,' in order to power  
41 capitalism and colonialism. The poets do so, first, by showing wind's role as a  
42 creative force, both in the artistic sense and also in a geological sense: The three  
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3 desertscares invoked in the poetic texts explored here - the resented plains of the  
4 Algerian Hamada, the cartographic possibilities of the *bādīa's gallaba*, and the dunes  
5  
6 of the erg surrounding *galb* Azefal – are products of ongoing aeolian processes.  
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10 Second, the poets show the wind's productive power by nodding to how it has  
11  
12 historically shaped, and continues to enable, the Saharawi's nomadic existence.  
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15 Thirdly, they claim the desert's winds as an integral part of Western Sahara, and  
16  
17 therefore as a subject of Saharawi sovereignty, for purposes of wind's exploitation as  
18  
19 energy. Aeolian aesthetics then, in the particular case of Western Sahara, are  
20  
21 employed in an anti-colonial movement at the poetic level. Yet the ability,  
22  
23 demonstrated by Boisha and Mohammed Salem, of aeolian aesthetics to undermine  
24  
25 the logics of petroculture itself indicates their wider possibilities for those living in  
26  
27 petroculture and wishing to resist it. In response to the current environmental crisis,  
28  
29 Szeman and Boyer argue that the task of the energy humanities is to 'grasp the full  
30  
31 intricacies of our imbrication with energy systems (with fossil fuels in particular), and  
32  
33 second, map out other ways of being, behaving and belonging in relation to both old  
34  
35 and new forms of energy' (2017b: 3). Aeolian aesthetics allow us to envisage a social  
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37 existence - forged around a renewable energy source - that refuses the colonial,  
38  
39 capitalist clothes handed down from petroculture. They subvert petroculture by  
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41 challenging our cultural entanglement with oil, inviting us to aspire to a very  
42  
43 different energy system, and assisting us in imagining how being, behaving and  
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45 belonging to decolonial wind culture might feel.  
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60

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7  
8 Boisha and Fatma Galia Mohammed Salem for their insights and beautiful work.  
9  
10

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