

## **Blood in the Water: Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Bayou Magic* as Petrofiction**

Jewell Parker Rhodes's fantasy novel *Bayou Magic* (2015) alludes to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. BP blamed the catastrophe on human error, but the disaster made visible a more troubling cause: the naturalization of oil dependency. Building on the tradition of petrofiction, *Bayou Magic* exposes the ruinous effects of petroculture and capitalist modernity. The oil spill lays waste to Gulf Coast ecosystems; it threatens a small bayou community that has, in many ways, insulated itself from modernity. In the novel, characters who embrace or participate in oil-based capitalism are corrupted and even destroyed by it. Maddy's sisters reject familial and supernatural connections in favor of material trappings. Bear's father, an oil rig worker, has transformed from a loving father to a taciturn and sometimes violent man. He is killed when the oil rig explodes.

Through an interpretation of Mami Wata, a water deity venerated in many African regions and the African diaspora, *Bayou Magic* links the atrocities of twenty-first century capitalism to the atrocity that begot American capitalism: slavery. Some critics understand Mami Wata as a "'capitalist' deity par excellence" – after all, her name, pidgin English for "Mother Water," is in the language that facilitated the slave trade (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art). In *Bayou Magic*, however, Mami Wata – who appears here as a mermaid – enables Maddy to comprehend the destruction wrought by capitalism throughout the centuries. As such, the novel connects current exploitation of labor and the environment to the enslavement of millions of Africans.

At Maddy's entreaty, Mami Wata and other mermaids construct a levy to protect the bayou from the oil spill. At first blush, this miraculous solution seems poorly conceived: it offers an easy and impossible response to the outrageous damage of oil-based capitalism. But this fantastical resolution forces us to confront our fantastical constructions of children's literature. We often imagine children's literature as a space for resisting capitalism's logic, a logic that normalizes oppression. But can children's literature really push back against the very structures that produce and disseminate it?