

# Vector

## African and Afrodiasporic SF

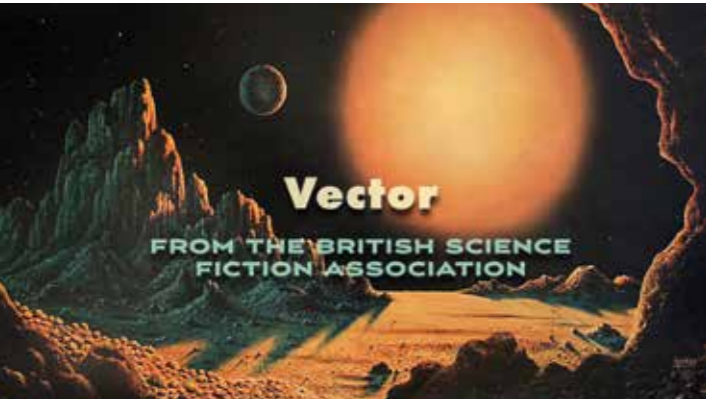
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# VECTOR

## African and Afrodiasporic Science Fiction

<b>Torque Control</b> Guest editor Michelle Louise Clarke	2	<b>Writing and publishing 'complicated stuff' in an African language</b> Masimba Musodza	59
<b>Looking Forward Through the Imagination of Africa</b> Anwuli Okeke	15	<b>A personal perspective on South African Comics: From Superheroes to Ordinary heroes</b> Nick Wood	63
<b>African Science Fiction and Literature</b> Chinelo Onwualu	20	<b>AfroSF Vol 3 edited by Ivor W. Hartmann</b> Andy Sawyer	72
<b>Vector interviews</b> Dilman Dila	24	<b>African SF in conversation</b> Wole Talabi and Louisa Egbunike	74
<b>'We have come to refuel your future': Asphalt Afrofuturism and African Futurities</b> Gemma Field	31	<b>Come and visit my spaceship! Arab Futurity and the Art of Mounir Ayache</b> Joan Grandjean	82
<b>Afrofuturism in clipping.'s Splendor &amp; Misery</b> Jonathan Hay	38	<b>Bleak Futures in Two East African Films</b> Lidia Kniaż	88
<b>Vibranium, Nigerium, and the Elements of a Pessimistic Afrofuturism</b> Kate Harlin	45		
<b>Afro- versus Africanfuturism in Nnedi Okorafor's "The Magical Negro" and "Mother of Invention"</b> Päivi Vääänen	52		

# Torque Control

Guest editor Michelle Louise Clarke

To introduce the theme of this issue of *Vector*, we've been extraordinarily lucky to work with guest editor Michelle Louise Clarke, a scholar of African SF at SOAS University, and to benefit from the experience of Anwuli Okeke, founder of Hacking Africa, and Chinelo Onwualu, co-founder (with Mazi Nwonwu) of the pioneering African SF magazine *Omenana*. This editorial by Clarke is followed by essays by Onwualu and Okeke that together provide a general introduction to this huge subject. The rest of the issue is filled with articles focusing on specific aspects of African SF or specific works of literature, film, art, or music. This issue got big, so Stephen Baxter and Paul Kincaid's regular columns are taking a break, but will be back next issue—including a special double-length edition of Kincaid in (not so) Short on Iain. (M.) Banks. Next time we'll also be hearing from Phoenix Alexander, the newly appointed Science Fiction Collections Librarian at the University of Liverpool.

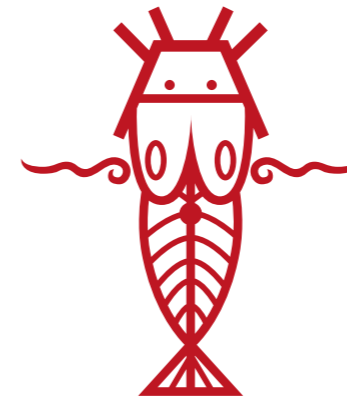
## The Speculative Turn in African Literature: Realism and Resistance

*"Over the last two decades, Achimota City's fast new geography had devoured Accra almost completely while at the same time most of the rest of the country had inexplicably vanished, land and all. Thus, by the year 2020 Achimota was a truncated city bursting to survive and to find the rest of its country soon. The three elders of government, each with a beard the shape of X, Y or Z, had shepherded the city over this deep crisis, directing history as if it were mad traffic. They had rules which helped to form the new ways that the century demanded. Fruit was law: every street had to have dwarf banana trees in belts and lines, buckled with*

*close groups of any other fruit trees, so many guavas and oranges. There was fruit in the toilets, fruit in the halls, and fruit in the aeroplanes, so that you could eat the city."*

*Kojo Laing, Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars (1992), p.3.*

A golden cockroach, a Grandmother Bomb, elders with beards shaped like letters of the alphabet, and a carrot millionaire are just a few of the eccentric characters which fill the pages of Kojo Laing's surreal classic of African SF, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992). Laing's novel is set in the distant future of 2020, at a time when the Ghanaian city of Achimota is locked in the Second War of Existence, battling Europe and



The logo of the African Speculative Fiction Society ([www.africansfs.com](http://www.africansfs.com))

South Africa, which have become a cyberworld where physical existence is deemed unnecessary. These virtual superpowers have decided that the 'Third World' is no longer relevant to their modernity, having been used as a toxic dumping ground, a place for germ warfare and genetic engineering and nuclear experiments. The city Achimota fights to recover the rest of its disappearing country, and to exist independently of Europe's rhetoric and portrayal of it as primitive, reasserting its own worth and agency in the face of neocolonial domination.

The book has been praised as vivid and imaginative, but also characterised as unusual, complicated, and unclassifiable (Ryman, 2017; Klein, 2007; Ngaboh-Smart, 1997; Wright, 1996). T.R. Klein (2007) describes Laing's work concisely: "Once the initially introduced 'innocent' reader decides against prematurely tossing away Laing's difficult books and is willing to accept an encounter with cartoon-like images, allegories, and projections rather than full-fledged, realistic characters, s/he will be rewarded with the experience of a unique conjunction between technological and aesthetic modernity in African literature" (55).

It's unfortunate that Laing's work has so often been overlooked and underappreciated, as it has plenty to contribute to debates surrounding genre and 'authenticity' within African literature. He at once defies generic pigeonholing and challenges established norms of the Anglo-African literary canon. His unique prose "confidently defies simple reduction to a single larger theory, agenda or narrative" (Klein, 2007: 38), with its usage of words and phrases from across languages including English, Ga, Hausa, and Italian. He also addresses

issues of science and technology before many Ghanaian authors had even begun to move away from nationalist rhetoric of post-independence Ghana (Klein, 2007).

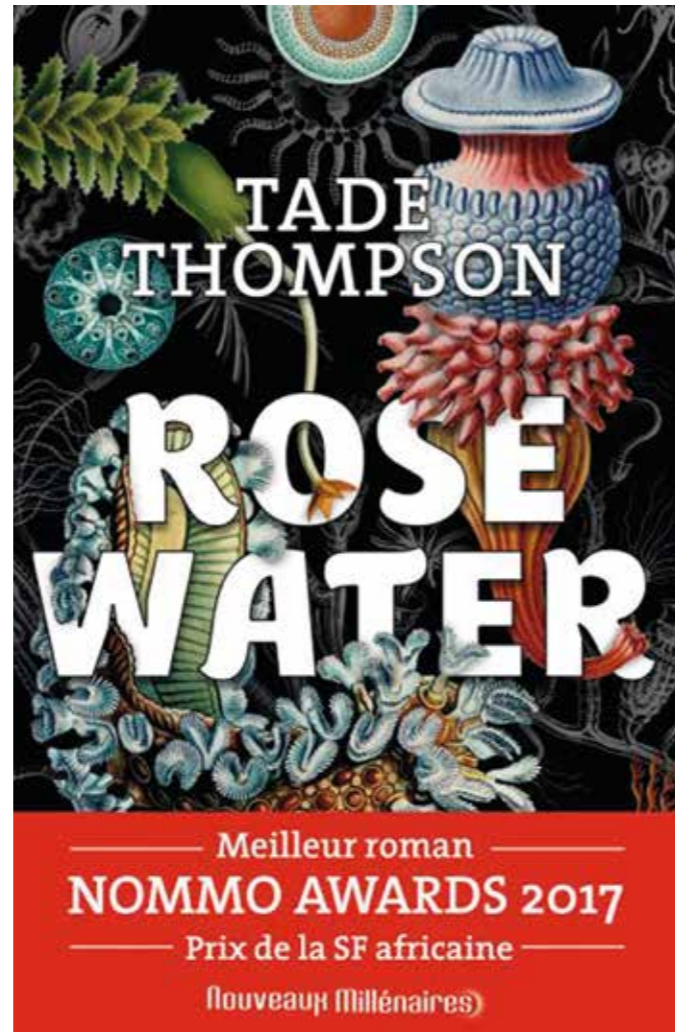
In terms of genre, Laing's work has been variously described as postmodern, utopian, or magical realism. Ngaboh-Smart (1997) identifies *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* as using "conventional science fictional motifs" to explore the effects of science and technology on humanity, and mentions the inclusion of "galactic travels" and "adventure." This hesitancy and ambiguity is not uncommon in discussions of speculative fictions from Africa. Mark Bould (2015) suggests that one can come across science fiction from Africa mentioned by critical journals that refuse to use the term, or "would at least prefer not to, deploying instead a de-science-fictionalized discourse of utopia and dystopia, and labelling anything unreal as some kind of postcolonial magic realism or avant-gardist experimentalism" (13).

So SF from Africa faces contradictory challenges. It must fight on the one hand to be read as SF—and not just something SF-adjacent—to be given full use of the genre's rich megatext of tropes and conventions. On the other hand, it must fight to be permitted to transform the traditional conventions of the genre, to make SF do new and different things. It must also often contest with the preconceived and reductive notions of Africa nurtured within the Western imagination. Jennifer Wenzel (2006) explains that Western readers who encounter 'strange' literatures from elsewhere often impose a binary between "the West and the rest," and between "a singular European modernity and multifarious worldviews, variously described as pre-modern, prescientific, pre-enlightenment, non-Western, traditional, or indigenous" (456). New readings of classic works such as Laing's, alongside emerging work from Africa, are paving the way to a more nuanced map of Africa's diverse speculative literature. This issue of *Vector* explores varying definitions, and showcases just a few examples from Africa and its diaspora across various mediums: from Nick Wood's exploration of the South Africa's comics scene and Joan Grandjean's research into the Arab-futurist art of Mounir Ayache, to Jonathan Hay's study of Afrofuturism in hip hop and its political aesthetics built on science fiction tropes of aliens and space-

ships. Like artists everywhere, creators of African SF aren't simply imagining worlds to escape to, but also exploring contemporary and historical reality through the lens of fiction. Gemma Field's ecocritical reading of Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* acknowledges the slow violence of the oil industry in Nigeria. Masimba Musodza's article opens up important questions about genre, language, and elitism within the African SF genre, through his experiences in writing and publishing his works in ChiShona. Definitions of Africanfuturisms and Afrofuturisms collide and converse in articles from Kate Harlin and Päivi Vääänen. Interviews with award-winning authors Dilman Dila and Wole Talabi give insights into the current movements within African SF directly from the creators' perspectives.

## Defining African Science Fiction

The definition of genres within African literatures which have irrealist, speculative<sup>1</sup> or science fiction modes is a hotly debated issue. Texts are often labelled as 'unclassifiable' or ambiguous in genre. Uncritically reading such literature through the lens of wholly Western genre definitions risks 'colonial appropriation' (Bould, 2014a; Eshun, 2016; Ryman, 2017). There is a risk of flattening diversity, and creating a 'monolithic image' of African literature (Bould, 2015). What this issue aims to do is celebrate difference, not only the differences in how we define terms such as 'Afrofuturism' or 'African SF,' but also in the variety of styles, forms, and genres that such terms can cover. For my part, I would like to invoke the critic Mark Bould in my approach to definitions: I'm not going to attempt to "nail down a rigid schema," but to "keep matters fluid, relationships open, and potentials in play, and to recognize the specific conjunctural value of [African SF] as a temporary, flexible, non-monolithic, and, above all, strategic identity" (Bould 2015: 11). In other words, I'm not interested in creating a pigeonhole called 'African SF' and deciding once and for all what belongs in there. Nor am I interested in giving a definitive or representative account of something as vast



Rosewater, French edition cover

and diverse as African SF. Rather, the strategic identity I'm imagining here is a diverse and inclusive version of African SF, one whose borders are porous and provisional, and one that is bound to morph and mutate in the future.

African SF can be found across Afrophone languages (see work by Alena Rettová), but Anglophone and Francophone literatures still dominate both critical discourse and publishing markets. This is partly because English and French are the *lingua francas* across regions, but it's mainly down to publishing houses and platforms only interested in works in European languages, making it hard for African authors to get themselves published, and even harder for them to break through to world markets, unless they write in these languages. One big exception to this rule is the renowned Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose realist and irrealist work alike is published in Gikuyu and then translated to other languages. We can hope

that as African SF in English and French gain more attention, Afrophone texts will also become more visible.

This issue of *Vector* pays particular attention to African literatures in terms of the relationship between genre, technology, and science. This could easily encompass such works that could also be defined as horror, alternative history, fantasy, magical realism, Afrofuturist or Africanfuturist. Their 'science fiction' elements could explore imaginative, uncanny, and futuristic technologies, or break down binaries of tradition and modernity, magic and science.

This issue discusses works by African authors while recognising that the category of 'African author' can also be problematic. In this context I would like to refer to the African Speculative Fiction Society's (2016) definition, where the term African includes:

- citizens of African countries,
- people born on the continent and raised there for substantial periods of time,
- citizens or people born on the continent who live abroad,
- people who have at least one African parent,
- Africans without papers, and
- some migrants to African countries.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, we can be even more inclusive than this. Helon Habila, in his keynote speech at the African Literatures Association conference in May 2018, stated that African literatures should be defined as we would imagine a tree. Its roots remain in the continent, but its branches also stretch elsewhere. This approach then also includes works from the broader African diaspora: not only authors who have been born in Africa and now live abroad, but also those who were born elsewhere but have African heritage. For example, Mounir Ayache's father left Morocco for France as a student — Ayache has roots in North Africa but also in France and in a culture that defies national or geographical boundaries. Considering Ayache as an African artist captures only a transect of a complex

identity, yet it offers insight into a larger cultural phenomenon called Arab-futurism, which is itself transcontinental, encompassing both North Africa and the Middle East.

## Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism

Moving from transcontinental to specifically transatlantic, let's say a word or two about Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is an aesthetic exploring the intersections of African-diasporic cultures with science, technology, and speculative fiction. Although the term Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in his essay 'Black to the Future,' (1994). Afrofuturism itself began earlier, particularly in avant-garde African American culture from the 1950s onwards. Works such as Sun Ra's albums *Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra Visits Planet Earth*, *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra*, and *Space is the Place*, and his film *Space is the Place*, used SF imagery and concepts to explore the alienation of the Black subject, and to satirise the systemic racism of US society (and Earth society). Sun Ra's use of alterity and mythmaking is exemplified in much of his work, but none more than his film *Space is the Place*, where he asks, "It's after the end of the world! Don't you know that yet?" —such deliberate estrangements from history, together with Sun Ra's claim to have come from Saturn (bringing the futuristic technology of his music), are part of



<sup>1</sup> By 'speculative' I invoke works such as magical realist and irrealist fictions which may have supernatural or magical elements, but may not explore themes of science and technology as science fiction does. I would further use the term African science fiction as a sub-genre of African speculative fiction.

<sup>2</sup> 'African country' is defined as any country or contested area on the continent of Africa, ending at the northeastern Egyptian border, and including islands such as Zanzibar and Madagascar.

a project to reclaim the future for Black people. If we specifically contextualise Afrofuturism as materialising at a time when the Jim Crow laws and their legacy were shaping the lived realities of African Americans, and when the civil rights movement had been dealt a massive blow by the assassination of Martin Luther King, then Afrofuturism could be seen as a reaction to the destruction of a future that harboured hope (Reed, 2014). As the information age dawned, and white American men took it upon themselves to walk on the Moon on behalf of all humanity, narratives of technological and economic progress were spreading which all too often excluded African Americans. As well as musicians such as Sun Ra and George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic—who influenced later generations of Afrofuturist musicians such as Erykah Badu, Kool Keith, Missy Elliott, and Janelle Monáe—the literary giants Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delaney are important influences on Afrofuturism, although their status as Afrofuturist writers is a topic of debate. The forthcoming TV adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* by Nnedi Okorafor and Wanuri Kahiu (*Rafiki, Pumzi*) is likely to anchor Octavia Butler in an expanding Afrofuturist universe.

The release of the *Black Panther* (2018) film within the Marvel Cinematic Universe has seen a rise in the use of the term within popular culture. However Professor John Jennings (who was part of a vanguard of cultural scholars studying Afrofuturism over a decade before *Black Panther*) cautions against capturing all Black speculative culture under the umbrella of Afrofuturism. In particular, he prefers the term 'Ethno-gothic' be applied to horror, supernatural, and gothic works which portray issues around racialised trauma and injustices. This genre builds upon the idea that 'Black experience' is haunted by historical violences, and includes modern films such as Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), but stretches as far back as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, insofar as these movements had to create alternative spaces in which to exist and resist. Jennings compares for example the thriving Black business district of Greenwood in Tulsa during the early 20th Century to fictional Wakanda (Film Sense, 2019). Besides Afrofuturism and Ethno-gothic, relevant labels include African Futurism or African-

futurism, Black Speculative Arts Movement, Black Quantum Futurism, Afrofuturismo, Afrofuturista, Astro-Blackness, and Afro-Surrealism. Although these terms have nuanced agendas, they overlap in using the speculative to challenge contentious issues around Black futurity.

More recent discourse around Afrofuturism has also asked how the experiences of Afrofuturism in the Americas can be compared to comparable aesthetics from the African continent. While some are happy to use Afrofuturism as an umbrella term, others like Nnedi Okorafor are careful to distinguish their writing from Afrofuturism. Nnedi Okorafor has been classed as both an African writer and as an African American author. Born in the USA to Nigerian parents, and having spent much of her childhood on both sides of the Atlantic, Okorafor defines her "flavor of sci-fi" as "evenly Naijamerican" (Okorafor, 2015a). Although she will put up with Afrofuturism as a label for her works, she regards it as overly rooted African American tradition, and prefers the term 'Africanfuturism.'

Cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun (2003; 2016) argues that there are many literatures from the African continent which should be redefined as relating to the Afrofuturist agenda, creating a dialogue between African-American texts and literatures from the continent. He contends that Afrofuturism has always been present in African literatures, but has gone unnoticed in favour of attributing texts to the magical realist tradition. A similar point might be made about African SF, which is often framed as new and emerging, or as originating in the African reinterpretation of Western literary traditions. However "tropes of extraterrestrial life, cosmology, and space travel" have long been present in many strains of African storytelling (Omelsky, 2013), pre-dating the work of Europeans such as Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, or H.G. Wells. Furthermore, African SF "may be a window into an emerging African literary genre, but more importantly, it forces us to reimagine what we know and may not know about the histories, futures, and cultures of the continent" (Omelsky, 2013).

## Realism and Resistance: Speculative Fiction

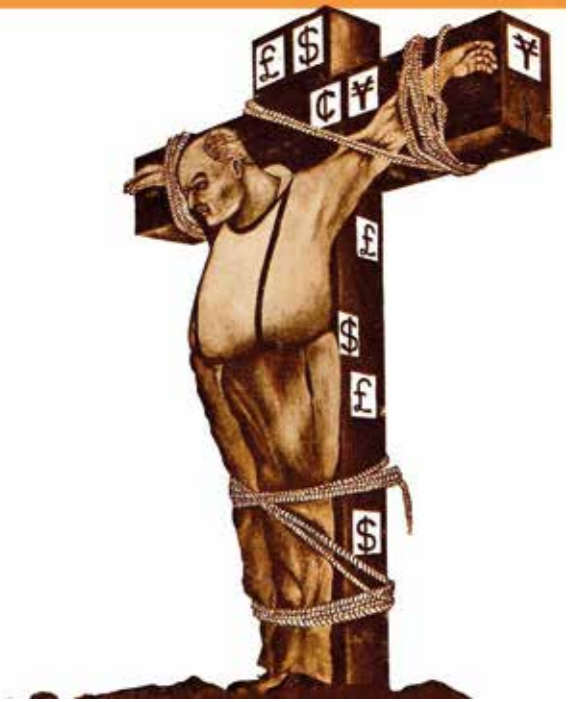
In *The Rise of the African Novel* (2018), Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ (novelist, poet, activist, a professor at Cornell, and a son of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o) traces what he calls a 'narrowing' of African literature in terms of aesthetics, identities, and languages back to the influence of the Makerere generation of writers, where works of authors such as Chinua Achebe have been privileged and held up as definitive exemplars of the African literary tradition. This is namely then Anglophone novels of a realist nature. Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ challenges this image of African literature, attending especially to language, but also to the aesthetic tradition of realism within the African novel, where a 'singular' African identity is created. Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ is not the only writer to have been vocal about this concern. The Caine Prize has been widely criticized for giving prizes to only one type of author and aesthetic, often cited as 'poverty porn.' Even writers who themselves have won the prize, such as Binyavanga Wainaina, have offered criticism. Wainaina, was one of the greatest contemporary writers and activists, and his affinity to science fiction is clearly recognised in the recent obituary in *Strange Horizons* by Geoff Ryman (2019). In the satirical essay, published by *Granta*, 'How to Write About Africa' (2006) that went viral, Wainaina writes:

*"Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment."*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also warns of 'The Danger of a Single Story' in her 2009 TED talk, where she examines the problematic nature of a single narrative, especially of the Conradian kind, where Africa is seen as 'primitive' and in a purely pessimistic light.

*The Rise of the African Novel* coincides, however, with a boom in speculative works from Africa and the African diaspora, making Mũkoma

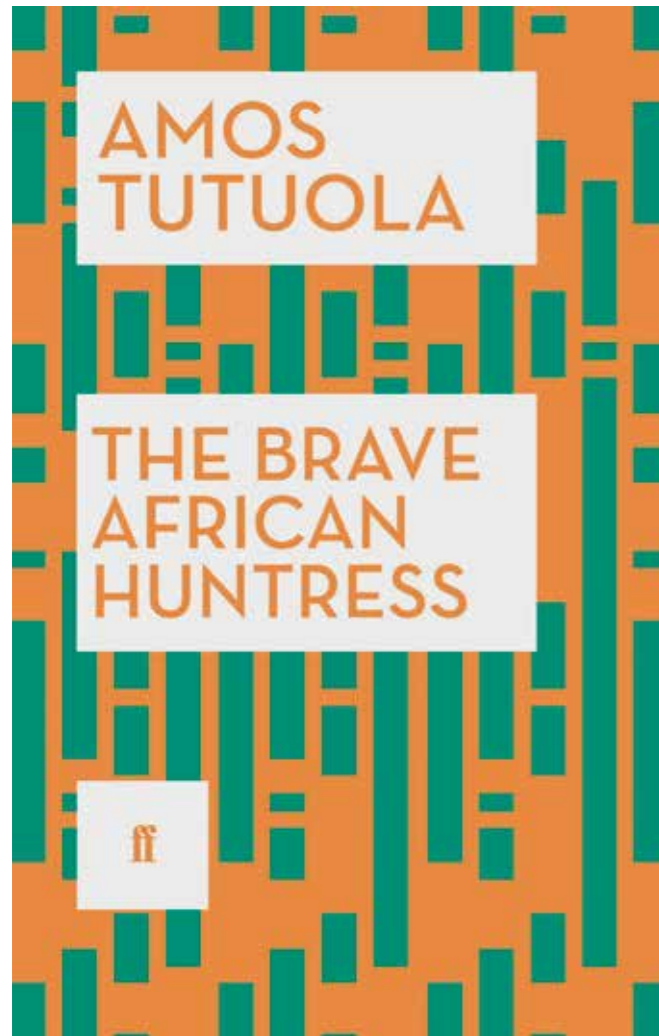
**Shetani  
Msalabani**  
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o



Swahili Edition

wa Ngũgĩ's fear of a single aesthetic seem, if not obsolete, then at least a bit overstated. These writers still have high hurdles to overcome, as publishing platforms and literary infrastructure are limited. Africa is a continent of at least 55 countries and 1.2 billion people—compare Europe's 44 countries and population of 740 million—but even its largest economies, South Africa and Nigeria, have nothing like the financial resources of the UK, and this is reflected in the relative disparity in the number of literary publications, funding for cultural institutions, MFA programs and writers' residencies, literary events, grants, schemes, and all the other kinds of support that make literary careers just about possible.

Further, literary awards had seldom been given to authors of speculative works. In 2018 the winner of the Caine Prize was 'Fanta Blackcurrent,' a short story by Kenyan author Makena Onjerika, about a street child of Nairobi. Nigerian writer



Wole Talabi—interviewed in this issue—was also on the Caine shortlist, and won the inaugural ROSL Readers' Award for his metafictional piece 'Wednesday's Child.' This new partnership with the Caine Prize is chosen by a wider audience, and it is perhaps telling in that there is an appetite for and appreciation of works of a surreal or irrealist nature. The most recent, 2019, Caine Prize went to Lesley Nneka Arimah's sf short story 'Skinned', but previously the only outright speculative work to win the Caine Prize has been Henrietta Rose Innes' science fiction short story 'Poison' in 2008, although speculative stories from Lesley Arimah, Abdul Adan, Magogodi oaMphela Makhene, and Chikodili Emelumadu, and others have been shortlisted. Partly to address this issue, in 2016 African writers formed the African Speculative Fiction Society (ASFS), and in 2017 ASFS launched its own annual Nommo Awards in four categories: novel, novella, short story and comic or graphic novel. Lesley Arimah's story 'Who Will Greet You

at Home' that was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2017 went on to win the Nommo prize in the same year.

The lack of platforms for speculative fiction is slowly changing too, especially with the launch of online venues such as *Chimurenga* (launched 2002), *The Kalahari Review* (launched 2012), *Omenana* (launched 2014), and *Jalada* (launched in 2014, with a special on Afrofuture(s) in 2015). In 2017, *The Manchester Review* published twenty-one stories by African speculative writers in their 18th Issue entitled *21 Today: The Rise of African Speculative Fiction*. In the same year weekly speculative fiction magazine *Strange Horizons* also launched Geoff Ryman's (2017a) series *100 African Writers of SFF*, which explores "the recent explosion of speculative fiction across the African continent," and includes interviews from authors across Malawi, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria so far.

A number of short story collections have also emerged in print, including Ivor W. Hartmann's three edited volumes of *Afro SF* (2012, 2015, & 2018). *Lagos 2060* (2013) edited by Ayodele Arigbabu imagines Lagos a century after the country's independence. 2015 gave us *African Monsters* (ed. Margret Helgadottir and Jo Thomas), *Imagine Africa 500* (ed. Billy Kahora), and *Terra Incognita* (ed. Nerine Dorman). In the UK, a number of smaller, alternative publishing houses have published works by African speculative authors. For example, Jacaranda Books has published works by Nikhil Singh and Irenosen Okojie, whilst Rosarium published Tade Thomspon's debut novel *Making Wolf* (2015). Thompson's *Rosewater* trilogy, set in Nigeria, the first installment of which was published by indie press Apex, has now been picked up by Orbit. Thompson's work has received much acclaim: winning the Nommo awards in 2017 and 2018, he was also nominated for the Kitschier Award for Best Novel of 2018, was a John W. Campbell Award finalist in 2017, and a BSFA finalist this year. In July, *Rosewater* won The Arthur C. Clarke Award (2019). Although many authors are still struggling to get to the print market, you can now find a wealth of works in almost every book store in London by authors including Nnedi Okorafor, Lauren Beukes, and Henrietta Rose Innes, to name but a few.

Within the festival circuit there is a presence of African speculative fiction if you know where to look, although realist texts still dominate. The 2018 Nigerian Aké festival had an emphasis on speculative fiction, once again showing its rising popularity on the literary scene, with its theme 'Fantastical Futures.' It must also be considered that, with the release of Marvel's critically acclaimed and commercially triumphant *Black Panther* (2018), the rise of mainstream interest in Afrofuturism will also account for generating renewed interest in the field of speculative works by African creatives as well as by African-American and wider diasporas. Nnedi Okorafor has become world-renowned for her fiction, and writing of the *Black Panther* comics, having taken over from Ta-Nehisi Coates. With George R.R. Martin producing a HBO TV series of her award winning *Who Fears Death* (2010), African SF will have a share of the limelight for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, although African SF is still somewhat at the margins of literary circles, it is becoming ever more visible, going from strength to strength.

Although African SF is now on the rise, and has been for the last twenty years at least (Bould, 2014), it can be argued that there have always been science-fictional, speculative, and irrealist elements present in African literatures. Veit-Wild (2005) writes that in particular since the 1980s, "Writers started to search for new modes of expressing the grotesque irrationality of power, developing narrative perspectives and devices that include elements of the surreal" (228). However, it must also be noted that the work of Amos Tutuola, dating back to the 1950s, is one of the first Anglophone authors to 'rupture' traditional aesthetics. Although often described as leaning heavily on orature and tradition, his television-handed ghosts, palm wine, monsters, spirits, airplanes, photography, and modern ghost cities of afterlife bring West Africa into conversation with colonial modernity, commodities and experiences of world systems (Omelsky, 2018). Tutuola's and Ben Okri's works are lauded as "petro-magical fictions" which trace world ecologies of oil, technology, violence and environmental degradation (Wenzel, 2014). Kojo Laing defies traditional genre categorizations, with works such as *Major Gentl and the*

*Achimota Wars* (1992) and *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2012) exploring neocolonial themes as wide as space travel and cyber warfare.

We must also mention here J.M. Coetzee and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Both have been celebrated as authors of highbrow literary fiction, and both have moved away from traditional realism, disillusioned with its ability to comment on the structures of power present in their respective societies. Although they have different stylistic approaches, they are brought together by their commentary on 'traditional' realism of the novel. Each critiques realism from a differing standpoint, but both contribute to discussions on postcolonialism in their use of subversive elements of irrealism, breaking away from traditional realist conventions of the novel.

Shaw (1999: 49) defines realism as seeking "to create an imagined world that functions using the same referential materials and acting according to the same laws as our own." However, some critical accounts of realism point out that the world it imagines is not some kind of perfect, objective reflection of the world we live in. Rather, it is a specific, self-reinforcing literary tradition, filled with its own quirks and curiosities, which we grow accustomed to and may accept as 'natural.' Realism's philosophical basis is the "Cartesian tradition of basing epistemological speculation on the fiction of the single isolated observer" (Watt, 1957: 88). In other words, realism has difficulty convincingly representing the fact that we all live in slightly different realities, and that when these contradictory realities encounter and transform each other, we experience something that can perhaps only be really understood as magic. Indeed, Watt (1957) traces the rise of the realism in the novel as parallel to modern, secular, materialist understanding of reality. Both Coetzee and Ngũgĩ call for a shift in how writers (and readers) address realism, especially pertaining to its assumed universalisms.

The socialist and critical realism of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's earlier works—*Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1976) and *Devil on the Cross* (1982) is concerned with the social and political realities of the postcolonial nation. It is *Matigari* (1989) which marks the author's 'exhaustion' of realism (Gikandi, 2000) and his change in conceptualization of literature and reality (Chakraborty, 2012). Perhaps

Ngũgĩ in his move away from traditional realism is offering a solution to the assumed universalities of the mode—attempts to impose a single, definitive point of view on the nature of reality. Moreover, the speculative and fantastical natures of both *Matigari* (1989) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) allow for a move beyond the fatalism and hopelessness that Ngũgĩ's previous nationalist literatures struggled to escape from. Like writers such as Tutuola and Okri, Ngũgĩ is a “folkloriser of the modern experience” (Gikandi 2008: 162), but also could be seen as a commentary on how to form new and better realities for the nation, making a strong case for reading their work through the critical discourse of science fiction.

The work of the South African author J.M. Coetzee has been categorized as a type of ‘late modernism’ or postmodernism “which extends and revitalizes modernist practices” (Attridge, 2004:6)3. Attridge (2004) further contends that Coetzee “develops a mode of writing that allows the attentive reader to live through the pressures and possibilities, and also the limits, of political engagement” (6).

Coetzee's deployment of non-realist devices and metafictional elements undermines the realist trend of literature in the Apartheid era. The expectation, when Coetzee began to write in the Seventies, was for literature that directly commented on the political landscape of Apartheid South Africa. The value of literature was often judged by its direct engagement with the struggle for change in the country. Anything that was outside this canon, as Coetzee's writing was, was regarded with suspicion (Attridge, 2004). Attridge explains, “One consistent aspect of Coetzee's technique as a novelist is to deny the reader any ethical guidance from an authoritative voice or valorizing metalanguage” (7). This generated a split critical reception of Coetzee's work: for example *Dusklands* (1974) was on one hand heralded as innovative for its demonstration of the inherent violence of colonist and imperialist systems of the Western World; on the other hand, “Coetzee

is condemned for failing to offer a more direct rejection of the colonial violence he represents” (Head, 1997: 29).

Coetzee's own response to this is evident in his critical and theoretical work. In his essay ‘The Novel Today,’ he writes:

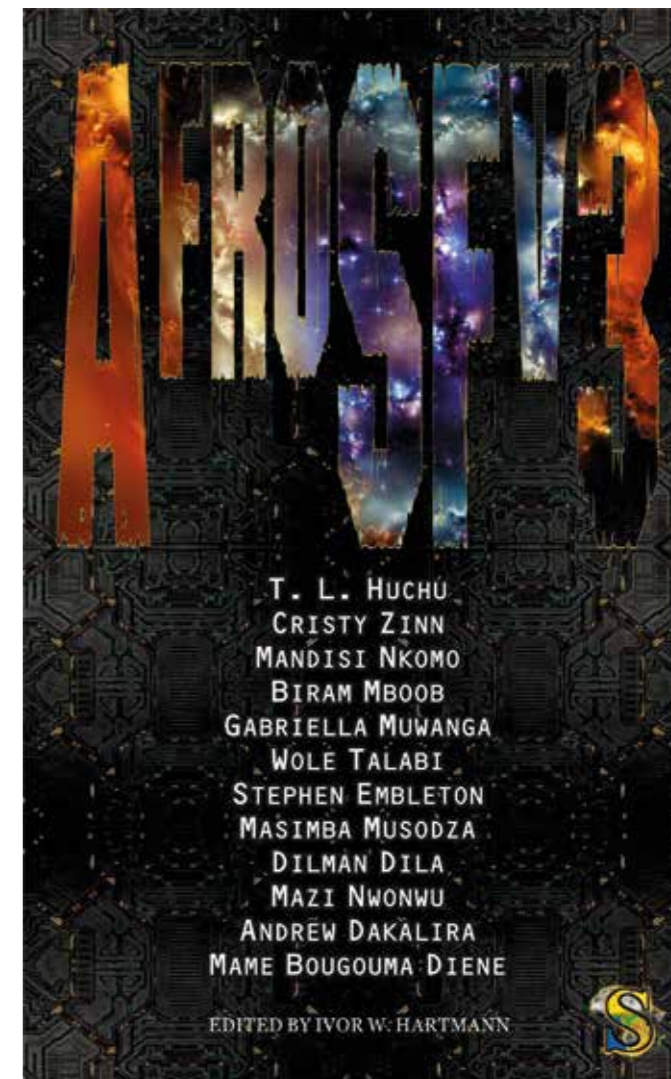
*“I reiterate [...] that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse [...] The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality.”* (1988: 4).

Coetzee understood realism to be a discourse of power, as it lulls its readers into the sense that it is the true construction of reality, uncritical of how it hides a reality indoctrinated with certain ideological tendencies. He argues that South African writing has been “‘colonized’ by the discourse of history,” which presents itself as a reality (1988). This is echoed in Albie Sachs's (1990) work, who argues that South African writers had “been trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination” (19). Coetzee's work dispels realism as illusion, and treats the novel as a tool for “demythologising history” (Coetzee, 1988). His experimental and anti-historical approach (not a-historical) exposes history as an “ideologically inflected discourse” (Poyner, 2009: 8). Coetzee's works should then be approached as resistance to types of “truths” or “official discourses of information” (Poyner, 2009; Cornwell, 2011; López, 2011) perpetuated by the oppressions of state and capitalism. “Coetzee's metafiction follows from the insight that a postcolonial novel aiming to make a point about the cultural arrogance of the coloniser cannot use realism as the vehicle for its critique without being undermined by its failure to challenge the conventions of the tradition it wishes to call into question” (Lowry, 1999).

By rejecting master narratives, Coetzee's novels are not at necessarily at odds with South Africa's realist literary production in its critical narration of Apartheid regimes and colonial violence, but it must be understood his aesthetics lays bare the mediations between truth, reality, history, and literature, all of which are highly politicized (Poyner 2009; Zimble 2014). Indeed, his prose style is often accused of being “lean, taut, spare, stark and austere” (Zimble, 2018: 42), but Zimble (2014) also argues that this technique of brutalism reflects a brutal reality, which Coetzee is aware of as “a violence conceived not simply in terms of individual acts of aggression, but as the basic structure of relations in certain societies and at certain times” (55).

Ngũgĩ and Coetzee have challenged the aesthetic legacy of the Makerere era. The aim here was not to compare or contrast the aesthetics of the writers, but to briefly sketch how they have influenced and created a critical awareness of African realism as a literary tradition. Raymond Williams (2001) calls for a new realism, in the wake of the “insatiable, restless movement of capitalism” (Eldridge & Eldridge, 1994). However, it can be argued that speculative fiction has been addressing uneven structures of power in its approach all along. Whilst Williams (2001) argues “old static realism is merely hardened convention” (590), speculative fiction has already answered his call for “imagined communities” that demonstrate that the reality of the world encompasses “common efforts” and “non local connections” (Eldridge & Eldridge, 1994).

Perhaps as a side-effect of our more networked age, the lines between fact and fiction are more blurred than ever. The Post-Truth era appears to be upon us. Post-Truth is not just the opposite of Truth, or the communication of falsehoods, but also manifests in “silence” (Keane, 2018). Post-Truth politics seeks to hide through distractions, in the ‘bluff and bluster’ of breaking news, fake news, disposable talking points, and alternative facts, the growing inequalities, inconsistencies and instability in our societies. “The communicative performances of the post-truth champions are thus the marginalia of silence: mere foam and waves on its deep waters” (Keane, 2018). One definition of Post-Truth is “relating to or denoting



circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). As Keane (2017) contends, “Truth is persuasion.” In other words, by appealing to public, opinion becomes the Truth. Like Ngũgĩ's *Matigari*, we could declare, “The world is turned upside down, but it must be set right again. For I have seen that in our land today lies are decreed to be the truth, and the truth decreed to be a lie” (1989: 137).

In late capitalist modernity, there is the threat that current realities will be obscured and invisible. Literature offers a way of understanding and mapping these realities and “replacing the versions of realism ‘controlled by the bosses’” (Deckard, 2014: 4). Arundhati Roy writes that, “Globalization is like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness” (Bunting, 2001). African literature has a long history of resistance and mapping exploi-

3 Contemporary (c.1940s onwards) South African writing has tended to act like a mirror to society, depicting issues such as racial, social and economic inequalities in a realistic fashion. Coetzee's writings were not necessarily the first to use irrealist modes (see for example Thomas Mofolo) but he was perhaps the first to directly critique realism.

tations (Iheka, 2018) and speculative fictions in particular have “the potential to reveal the objects of erasure and contradict the discourses which obfuscate the historical conditions and victims of capitalism” (Deckard, 2014: 4). Wilson (2018) argues that storytelling has a particular role to play in the Post-Truth era, in being able to reveal and navigate multiple ways of thinking and knowing the world. He contends (2018: 21), “Bringing together different epistemologies will lead us towards more nuanced and intelligent policy making.” Further, fiction can help make sense of our messy, uncertain world, helping to make unheard voices heard (Wilson, 2018).

It’s not just about authors, of course. Critics, and discerning readers of all kinds, are important too. Tanzanian writer Euphrase Kezilahabi (1985, cited in Lanfranchi, 2012) has some interesting insights to offer in terms of the role of literary criticism. Kezilahabi understands African literature as a site of encounter between African tradition and the West, where the critic must be ‘bi-focal’ in understanding this encounter without resorting to the rigid binaries so often present in interpretations of texts (Lanfranchi, 2012). Yu Burnett (2015) further suggests that irrealist texts can offer a “speculative postcolonialism” which enables us to think our way out of these “hegemonic, neocolonial dead ends” (138). There is a need to rethink modes of resistance in the postcolonial existence, in all of its complexities. He argues that speculative fiction is “in its unfettering from the limits of realistic representationalism... uniquely well-suited for grappling with current neocolonial reality, where simplistic binaries of colonizer vs. colonized are no longer adequate” (136).

It could be argued that one good thing has come from the Post-Truth era. There has been an epistemological shift, so that the notion of a single, objective reality is much less credible. Instead we can understand the plural nature of Truth. Of course, this plurality can take different forms, some of which empower the marginalised, while others simply lead to further marginalisation. Truth should be interpreted as ‘protecting multiple truths’ (Keane, 2017). Although it is hard to navigate and bring voice to these alternative realities, I believe that one way to do this is through African SF: fiction which so often resists the silencing of peripheries, seeks to create new centres, and looks toward a future where the old binary of

centre and periphery can be disrupted forever. It is time then, to embrace this speculative turn in African literature, as part of an aesthetics that could have a much wider reach than the words on a page. How can these fictions interact with the world and what can we learn from them? The articles included in this special issue of *Vector* embrace the weird and wonderful elements of African SF, and offer us genre-bending insights into alternative and exciting ways of writing the world, as well as relationships with technology and science.

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# Looking Forward Through the Imagination of Africa

Anwuli Okeke

*"Science Fiction is the only genre that enables African writers to envision a future from our African perspective."*

—Nnedi Okorafor

The future of Africa, as imagined and portrayed by African writers, is every bit as vibrant and glossy as that seen in any Hollywood sci-fi thriller. We have the robots, bio-hackers, cyberpunk badasses, cyborg implants, and brain-computer interfaces that let you access cyberspace or pilot a vehicle with the pure power of thought. But this is also Africa, a continent where the supernatural is just as real and palpable as the natural (and sometimes even more so). So of course science and technology are interwoven with the material and spiritual worlds—education; spirits; infrastructure development; magic; healthcare; the gods; jobs; prayer—to create a new third world that is its own unique blend. In this way, African science fiction brings its own distinctive sense of where the boundaries lie between the real and the unreal, and of how those boundaries blur.

Not only does it have its own unique realities, it also has its own unique temporalities. For example, African science fiction can challenge the standard narratives of development and progress which Western culture imposes. In the myriad futures which African writers envision, there are plenty that refuse predictable progression from one stage to the next, and instead imagine a kind of 'leapfrogging'—as though the tech-tree were inhabited by a tech-tree-frog. By leveraging technologies devel-



**Eko Atlantic City, Lagos (design)**

oped elsewhere, and through our own innovations such as mobile money or other localized solutions, African countries can compress development life-cycles and jump several rungs up ladders of economic and technological advancement. For example, the leap from using kerosene as a source for light to solar-powered electricity in a few short years, completely bypassing grid-based power generation. Economic and technological development also needn't follow the same paths as elsewhere, but can discover new directions and new opportunities missed by highly developed countries.

In some of these future Africas, thought-communication, robotic companionship, holograms, radio frequency identification (RFID) chips wired into human synapses, and the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in everyday life, may exist

and thrive alongside the slums, poverty, oppression, ethnic rivalry, and corruption that are today the hallmarks of many African societies. Rapid technological advancement can help to improve economic inequality, but it can also worsen it, or simply transform it in unpredictable ways which stymie other efforts at progress. Furthermore, technology is no quick fix for bad governance or deep-rooted colonial legacies. The existence of this duality can create even more complex and contradictory worlds. On the one hand, intelligent and developed, as seen in the application of advanced technological systems for interconnectivity and social regulation. On the other hand, lagging behind the rest of the developed world, as demonstrated in the failure of the system to properly address the provision and maintenance of basic infrastructure and services.

Science fiction allows Africa to portray its many futures: sometimes in dialogue with academia, and its perspective on Africa's challenges and accompanying solutions, and sometimes far removed from those perspectives. Science fictional visions of Africa are interwoven with the fabric of the history, culture, spirit and norms of the continent. They may paint African futures antithetical to Africa's current self, albeit from a technological perspective, while embracing aspects of that current self—its citizens' exuberant appetite for life and largeness of spirit.

*"Until the lion has his own storyteller  
the hunter will always have the best  
stories."*

– African Proverb

Science fiction is never purely escapist. No matter how strange its visions, they always tell us something about our possible real futures. The future is a surprising place, and science fiction reminds us that we cannot always know what to expect simply through sober, no-nonsense reasoning. Instead, it requires a wild imagination and a fecund fantasy. Spirits have often been the primary explanation for the unknown. Africa is well steeped in the supernatural, and so by default our literature has often emphasised "fiction" over "science." Fast forward to a futuristic Africa, and we substitute spirits with science, birthing African science fiction.

African science fiction can be innovative, disruptive, and even revolutionary. In many parts of the continent there are blights—such as child marriages, suppression of women's rights, opaque and corrupt governance, legacies of structural adjustment and neocolonial resource stripping, poor healthcare and education and unequal access to these resources, lack of roads, power, and jobs, armed conflict, the destructive effects of climate change—whose causes can be mysterious, and must be inferred from association. African science fiction can intervene in the unknown, re-imagining itself in various sectors: energy, environment, space travel, culture, economy, ancestry, governance, healthcare, marine biology, and religion. Science and technology are leveraged as a miracle cure for many ills, but inadvertently create a fresh set of problems that impact life, human rights and freedoms in unexpected ways. Themes in African science fiction span romance to revolution—once-enslaved populations in distant galaxies returning to their planet (think country) of origin. African writers seem to lean towards female protagonists, as well as strong female characters, challenging the pervasiveness over many cultures and much of human history of the interlocking complex of lower status and limited opportunities for women.

*"Africa has her mysteries, and even a  
wise man cannot understand them.  
But a wise man respects them."*

– Miriam Makeba

According to one set of definitions, in science fiction protagonists and antagonists gain power from science, while in fantasy, protagonists and antagonists gain power from magic. So perhaps in this regard, African speculative fiction started out mostly as fantasy before diversifying into both fantasy and science fiction. Then again, Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law proposes that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." So who knows? Perhaps Africans have been creating science fiction all along...

From African writers, here are some examples of science fiction re-imagined in the African context, taken from the groundbreaking anthology *AfroSF* (2012), edited by Ivor W. Hartmann. Warning: there are a few spoilers!

### 1. Nnedi Okorafor, "Moom!"

Set in Nigeria, this story features a female fish protagonist, someone who would typically get killed due to an oil spill. Instead she leads the charge to force the oppressors to leave. The negative consequence of the continuous crude oil spill becomes positive in that the water, originally polluted with blackness, becomes clear and sweet, and demonstrates healing properties: healing the worst human illnesses.

"Moom!" shows how consequences can be complex and contradictory. Although the water contains healing properties, it causes a hundred more illnesses yet unknown to mankind. The story portrays the future of Africa as one in which technology provides benefits but creates myriad problems too. The implementation of technological innovations creates new challenges, and can unleash a kind of chaos that otherwise would never have existed. In this particular case, the harm is way more significant than the benefits; a cautionary tale that brings to mind the phrase "better the devil you know, than the angel you don't know."

### 2. Sarah Lotz, "Home Affairs"

Technology is used to tackle corruption in a future South Africa, but the end result finds corruption still in existence—though deeper in the shadows, unlike in times past. The application of technology to eradicate corruption creates a world with a vast dichotomy: on one hand, clinical, cold, lifeless interaction with machines that are used to replace humans in administrative functions, and on the other, an underground world thriving with humans adept at manipulating robots to achieve their desires—and in this story, the desire is for national identity.

The tale shows the need for humans in a world run by machines. Noteworthy is how the very system designed to eradicate corruption through automation inadvertently creates and supports corruption, again demonstrating the limitations of technology—its inability to

mitigate the failings in human nature. Inclusion is another theme in "Home Affairs." Africa has myriad countries, peoples, tribes. By attempting to leverage technology in the creation of an inclusive society, gaiety—a natural expression borne of diversity—is suppressed, giving way to a mono-ethnic society devoid of personality. A warning of the danger of excesses, "Home Affairs" highlights how the unquestioned introduction and application of technology can strip us of the qualities that make us human.

### 3. Tendai Huchu, "The Sale"

"The Sale" is an example of economic science fiction. In the future, third world countries heavily in debt and unable to pay are sold off piecemeal to corporations. Countries with an outstanding deficit even after the sale are forced to sell their citizens, especially as interest rates on debt keep rising. Humans are controlled, regulated, and forced into submission through medication that is administered by drones ever-present in the sky—hovering, monitoring and scanning.

This sale of third world countries to support "Chimerica," the new world order, is a way of exploring real-world themes of colonialism. Over several centuries, colonial powers directly dominated third world countries (the protectorate-colony relationship), supporting the development of their own domestic industries, while limiting and directing development in the colonies. When these colonies gained their independence, they should have been able to exercise democratic control over their own economic futures. Instead, as small fry in the new globalized economy, they were often left with no choice but to adopt economic policies, and to accept trade, aid, and loans on terms dictated by the former colonial powers. The struggle wasn't over, it had only changed form: colonialism had become neocolonialism. "The Sale" imagines a future in which neocolonialism mutates once again, into a new hypercapitalist form.

*"Our children may learn about heroes  
of the past. Our task is to make  
ourselves architects of the future."*

– Jomo Kenyatta

#### 4. Dave de Burgh, “Angel Song”

Re-imagining spirituality, “Angel Song” portrays a world where the heavens are at war with humans, and angels are no longer in the supernatural realm but in the natural and can be felt and heard. Dave de Burgh turns spirituality in Africa today on its head by moving the supernatural from the intangible and unseen to the everyday world, while still preserving the significance of belief and faith.

#### 5. Biram Mboob, “The Rare Earth”

Mirroring the religious wave sweeping parts of the African continent, one marked by miracles and prophets, “The Rare Earth” tells of a man whose display of supernatural powers bring him adulation, power and worship. However, these powers are derived from advanced technological innovations wielded creatively to deceive many—those all too ready to turn to the supernatural for answers vs. the hard, cold annals of science.

For many, the display of scientific and technological phenomena equals the display of the supernatural—exciting to behold (think “miracles”) and not readily understood or explained. “The Rare Earth” suggests that the creative use of technology could lead to the worship of and continuous domination by those who master its workings and application, to the perpetual detriment of the naïve and gullible.

#### 6. Mandisi Nkomo, “Heresy”

“Heresy” imagines a future South Africa, with an established space programme, locked in a race with China to be first to send a spacecraft beyond the Solar System. But the launch shows the race to be a futile endeavor, as it reveals that nothing exists beyond Earth’s Solar System—the existence of other galaxies is merely an illusion.

With the race to outer space a big disappointment, South Africa turns its attention to colonising Mars (again, before the Chinese!), demonstrating mankind’s need for power and achievement through the discovery and colonisation of new worlds, and the role of technology as a catalyst in the acquisition of power.

#### 7. Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu, “Masquerade Stories”

“Masquerade Stories” postulates that given globalization and global homogeneity, some will seek to return to the old cultures. Over the course of generations this select group will preserve oral history, rites and rituals, and revive traditional practices. In time, communities will be created, bound together by this common embrace of ancient traditional culture, and technology will be relegated to the background—used mostly as a means for cultural preservation.

Annually, many African countries celebrate their independence from colonial powers with fanfare, parades and a national holiday. These can be exhilarating occasions, full of hope and creativity. While the power of technology isn’t a panacea, some see it as an almost miraculous solution to problems that many African governments have failed to address. The idea that technological innovation can fix the most intractable problems on the continent demonstrates the strength of hope and optimism, even in the absence of good governance and basic infrastructure. But judging by African writers’ portrayal of the impact of science and technology, it appears we need to begin asking more thoughtful questions about our personal independence, rights, and freedoms, bearing in mind that the leap from poverty to high-income status by today’s developed nations was not made through the internet, but through technologies that we now take for granted: indoor plumbing, rail, and antibiotics.

Some of the ideas for technological solutions that exist today aren’t foreign to Africa: Airbnb for example, a platform built on travelers vacationing in others’ homes. This concept—staying in others’ homes vs. booking a hotel—is a virtue of African hospitality, one that’s deeply rooted in community values. The spontaneous and warm reception of expected and unexpected guests is an integral part of tradition in many parts of Africa, one that appears to withstand the pressures of modernity. It’s customary for an African to provide food, drink, shelter and companionship to guests, travelers, and strangers, and even to accompany the guest a portion of the way home (escorting). However,

the necessary technologies to organise this trait weren’t as pervasive or accessible as they are today.

So how will traditional African hospitality interact with digital platforms like Airbnb? It is an exciting question, but there are dangers here too. After all, the so-called “sharing economy” has seldom lived up to its name: instead of generosity and reciprocity, we often encounter a narrow focus on profit. In many Western cities, there are already backlashes against Airbnb for its destructive impact on communities. Can Africa do better? The entrepreneurs and innovators of today are building the Africa of tomorrow, and they will need imagination and wisdom—and the input of African science fiction—to build a future that is beneficial for all. In the many futures portrayed by African writers, there is every hope that the technologies needed to shape and improve African communities will be so commonplace as to be readily leveraged to create learning, development, productivity, sustainability, and rich opportunities for lifelong success.



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**Google opens first AI center in Africa in Accra, Ghana, in Spring 2019, with Moustapha Sisse as the AI team leader.**

# African Science Fiction and Literature

Chinelo Onwualu

This article first appeared at Omenana.com, August 2016 (omenana.com/2016/08/07/essay-african-science-fiction-and-literature/) and has been slightly updated for this publication.

For the last few weeks, I've been grappling with a singular question: Has African science fiction influenced African technology and design? The answer is, well: yes and no. Science fiction and science fact have always been linked to each other, and it's no different in Africa. One problem is that there still isn't enough home-grown scientific innovation and research on the continent, nor much science fiction in African film and literature, to say exactly how the two might influence each other.

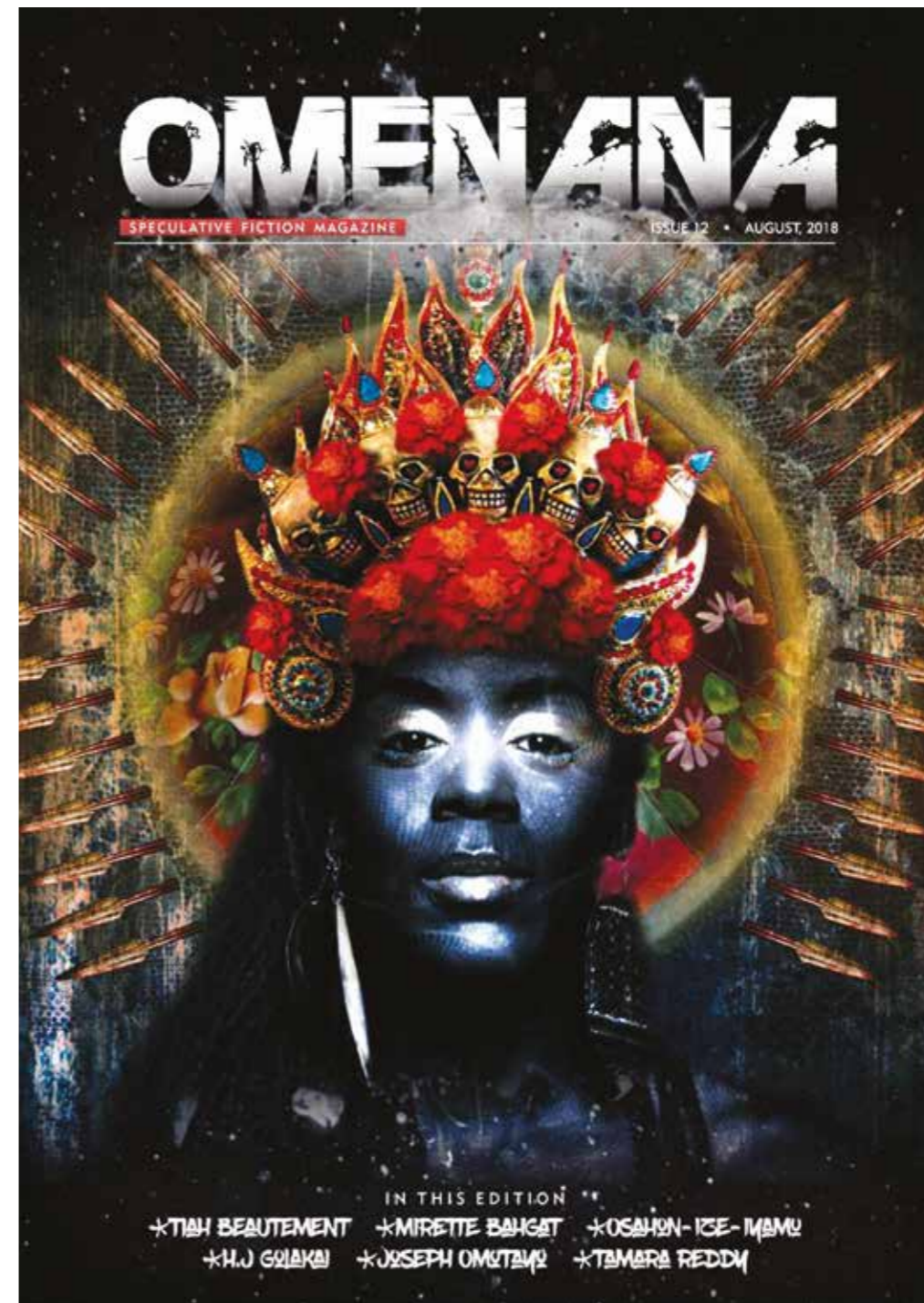
For one thing, neither African science fiction nor African innovation are clearly defined terms. For another, popular ideas of what constitutes "science and technology" are often narrowly defined in ways that favour Western philosophies while dismissing non-Western notions of the same thing as "magical realism."

While speculative storytelling has had a long history on the continent, no one has been quite sure what to call these tales. There's certainly a difference between the kind speculative fiction written by those invested in Africa and her future, and those merely set in Africa—where the continent acts as an exotic prop or backdrop. It's the difference between H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* about European adventurers in Namibia in 1885 and Nii Ayikwei Parkes' *Tail of the Blue Bird* about a Ghanaian scientist who arrives in a rural village to solve a mystery.

However, as academic Mark Bould notes, the term African science fiction risks homogenising a diverse continent and casting these stories as an exotic subset of a "normalised" Western form of the genre. Even Nigerian-American sci-fi author Nnedi Okorafor is wary of the term. "How do I define African SF?" she wrote in a 2010 essay. "I don't. I know it when I see it."

No one is quite clear on what African scientific innovation is, either. There has been a lot of celebration of the rising numbers of young Africans at the forefront of inventive applications for the web and mobile phones. In an OkayAfrica article, African-British activist Toyin Agbetu praised these innovators, saying: "The young geeks clustered around the iHub in Nairobi and MEST in Accra have started to move the conception of Africa from victim of technology to its masters."

But this concentration on urban tech hubs, what one article dubbed "Silicon Savannahs," ignores the quieter forms of innovation that happen when Africans remix and repurpose existing technologies. For instance, the four Nigerian girls who found a way to run a generator on urine or the young Malawian man who built wind turbines out of spare parts (now a subject of a Netflix feature film 'The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind' directed by Chiwetel Ejiofor) are actually at the forefront of a long history African innovation, but are often praised as special cases rising improbably from obscurity.



As Agbetu rightly noted, to the average African mechanisation is not progress. Those who have seen large-scale construction projects such as hydroelectric dams stall and fail because of corruption, poor construction, and shoddy maintenance are bound to view mechanisation with suspicion. They fear that it comes with extractive or exploitative processes.

still prefer to concentrate on proven sellers such as religious materials and textbooks.

Scientific innovation has the same problem. According to a 2015 United Nations report, Africa produces just 2.6 percent of global scientific knowledge, measured by the amount of published research. This is because, as commenter Benjamin Geer pointed out, science fiction is less effective in encouraging scientific innovation than simply

Another problem is that both African science fiction and African technological innovation suffer from a lack of supporting infrastructure. In Nigeria for instance, the publishing industry is only beginning to rise from the ashes of the country's economic meltdown in the 80s. During the industry's golden era, books like the Pacesetters series featured stories set in alternative pasts and glittering futures. My favourite remains a high-tech thriller called *Mark of the Cobra* by Valentine Aily, about a James Bond-style spy working for Nigeria's secret service and featuring a solar-powered superweapon.

These days, however, low literacy rates and the high cost of books means that the demand for literature is often poor. Though consumers buying cheap imported books and watching Hollywood sci-fi blockbusters has shown that genre fiction is highly popular, many publishers

providing funding for the sciences. “If you want young people to become scientists, there need[s] to be well-funded degree programs and career opportunities for them,” he wrote in response to a 2010 article about the future of science fiction in Africa. “This means that states need to invest heavily in science education and scientific research.” However, African continent has the highest rate of growth globally in terms of scientific output, according to a more recent 2018 analysis, and this bodes well for the future of science in Africa.

This is beginning to happen as both private investors and governments place greater emphasis on science and technology education. For example, in 2019, the tech giant Google opened an Artificial Intelligence lab in Accra, Ghana.

Despite these changes, the biggest problem both scientific innovation and science fiction in Africa still face is that they are not often recognised for what they are.

As I said earlier, Africans have been creating their own science fiction for quite some time; only these stories don’t always have the elements we have come to expect from the genre. For instance, two icons of African speculative fiction Ben Okri’s 1991 novel *The Famished Road* and *Wizard of the Crow* written by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in 2006 deal with technology in a way that isn’t easily identifiable as science fiction.

In Okri’s novel, the descriptions of white people cutting down the forests could easily be read as a critique of technology and the capitalist exploitation of natural resources. While in *Wizard of the Crow*, the building of the tower serves as a scathing dismissal of technology’s role in white elephant projects and political wastage.

In fact, magic, surrealism and abstract poetics are big features of African sci-fi. This is because, as Ghanaian writer Johnathan Dotse explained in a 2010 essay, Africans have a fundamentally different relationship to technology than those in the West.

“The widely optimistic view of technological progress underlying traditional science fiction simply doesn’t resonate with much of the experience on the continent,” he wrote.

Only recently—in the last decade or so—has there been a true groundswell of science fiction written by Africans for a primarily African audience.

Most of this sci-fi doesn’t deal with the mechanics of scientific innovation, though. Stories tend to focus on the social costs of progress. Two African speculative anthologies, *AfroSF* edited by Zimbabwean author Ivor Hartmann and *Lagos 2060* edited by Nigerian Ayodele Arigbabu, have a diverse range of stories that could be considered firmly science fiction. And both Deji Olotkun’s novel about a fictional Nigerian space program and Tade Thompson’s trilogy about a far future alien colony in Nigeria can be firmly considered science fiction.

This has led some to speculate that right now, technology is influencing African science fiction more than the other way around. In a series of social media chats in November, science fiction author and academic Geoff Ryman noted that sci-fi writers on the continent tend to have great ideas for science fiction stories, but not necessarily for scientific innovations.

“Technology contributes to SF and not the other way around,” he wrote. “Even Arthur C. Clarke’s geostationary satellite appeared in a science FACT article he wrote. SF can sometimes promote interest in science among the young that bears later fruit. But trying to justify SF on those grounds is dodgy. It’s a literature and an entertainment and THAT is its justification.”

Nigerian writer and engineer Wole Talabi has hope, however, that this currently one-sided relationship will right itself. In his essay, ‘Why Africa Needs to Create More Science Fiction,’ he speculates that the influence of science fiction might take up to fifteen to twenty years to show up in scientific innovation:

*“Fifteen years is just about enough time for the [Chinese] children and teenagers who read those revived science fiction magazines in the early 1990s to enter the workforce as young 20- and 30-somethings. Then, armed with an appreciation for science and technology potentially nurtured by science fiction, they would begin to take advantage of the opportunities and technology available in their rapidly-changing country.”*

*I present this without any claim of causality, I just find it interesting to note because one could argue that African science fiction seems to be undergoing a slow but certain revival of its own. Perhaps we can check back in 15 to 20 years to see if we have a similar increase in economic growth rate.”*

Author Biram Mboob believes this influence goes beyond just sparking new ideas. African science fiction can change the very orientation people might have towards the future. “I would make the argument that SF will either ‘reinforce’ or perhaps challenge our ‘mood’ about the future,” he wrote in a Facebook chat in 2015.

I have to agree. In my work as a writer and editor of African science fiction over the last five years, I have noticed an emerging optimism. Africans are moving away from their justified suspicion and mistrust of large-scale innovation. More African writers are imagining unique utopias—their countries and cities improved by technology that works with their societies rather than ruined by it.

For instance, in a 2015 issue of *Omenana*, which I co-edited, ten writers and artists shared their vision of African cities of the future. Almost all of them had themes of hope and possibility. More than anything, inspiring the creators of the future is where I believe the intersection of African science fiction and science is clearest.

“Inspiration, ideas, they flow both ways,” wrote Talabi in a 2015 Facebook chat. “But for that you need a critical mass of technology, industry, popular science, SF creators and publishers, and organised fandoms before you begin to see and quantify the impact.”

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HER SHORT STORIES HAVE BEEN FEATURED IN SEVERAL ANTHOLOGIES INCLUDING NEW SUNS: ORIGINAL SPECULATIVE FICTION FROM PEOPLE OF COLOUR, MOTHERSHIP: TALES OF AFROFUTURISM AND BEYOND, TERRA INCOGNITA: NEW SHORT SPECULATIVE STORIES FROM AFRICA, IMAGINE AFRICA 500: SPECULATIVE FICTION FROM AFRICA AND AFROSF: AFRICAN SCIENCE FICTION BY AFRICAN WRITERS.

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FOLLOW HER ON TWITTER @CHINELOONWUALU.

# Vector interviews

Dilman Dila

**When and why did you begin writing speculative fiction and where did you get your inspirations?**

I'm not sure when exactly I started writing speculative fiction. I think I've always loved the genre. When I was about twelve, I thought about writing a story with a character inspired by ninjas. At that time, a certain type of shoe had become popular in my small town, Tororo. They called it North Star (I think), and it was fashioned like a boot made of cloth. It was a cheap shoe, maybe a pirated brand, but seeing something that looked like a ninja costume made me think about a ninja in the town. I did not get down to writing it. I only played with the idea, but every time I walked in the streets I saw my ninja running on the rusty iron-sheet roofs. I wrote my first speculative story in my early twenties. At that time, speculative fiction from African writers was frowned upon. Writers like Amos Tutuola did not get as much attention as Chinua Achebe because the latter wrote 'realistic' stories, often those that could be taken as a social or political commentary. It became expected of African writer to tell stories that were anthropological in nature. Even today, some blurbs do not say what the story is, but rather tell how a book talks about this African city or that African culture or the other African country. Though the first stories I published were 'realistic', the pull to the fantastic



was very strong, and elements of it kept slipping in. Like *A Killing in the Sun*, which I wrote sometime in 2001 or 2002. I wanted it to be a mundane story about uncontrollable soldiers, something that had scourged the country for decades, but it turned out to be a ghost story. Finding a home for these stories was very difficult, and it left me frustrated and hopeless.

Then I discovered the internet and its plethora of ezines willing to publish spec-fic, and that's when I ditched everything my education had taught me about what it means to be an African writer.

I can't say why I write speculative fiction. Maybe because I have an 'overactive imagination.' My brain is always cooking up fantastical things and creating magical backstories to every mundane thing I see. I love to daydream. It's one of

my favorite pastimes. Today, I love to spend hours in my bed, doing nothing, just staring at the ceiling and dreaming up fantastical worlds. When I was a little boy, I did not have this luxury. People would see me sitting idle somewhere and they would chase me to go and find other children to play with. Being a recluse was frowned upon, staying alone for long hours was frowned upon. Yet I loved to do it, to wander away to magical lands, and so I would look for any place that gave me absolute privacy to daydream. The bathroom was one such place, the only one I remember spending a lot of time in. It was a room at the back of the courtyard, and we shared it with four other families. Sometimes there was a long queue to use it. I avoided bathing in the evenings, when the queue would be long, and preferred afternoons. Whenever anyone saw me go into the bathroom, they would say, "Let me bathe first. If you go in, you won't come out." It was not a nice place. It had a broken water heater, and the window shutters were wooden, and the taps were not working, and the floor was a little bit slimy with dirt, but I loved it for the privacy it gave me to daydream, and I think allowing my brain to wander away in that bathroom was training ground for me to write speculative fiction.

**Why do you think speculative fictions from Africa and the African diaspora have become more popular in recent times?**

There's been a push for diversity in fiction and in films. We all know the majority of readers are people of color, yet the majority of speculative fiction works are by white people, and so people wanted to see themselves in these artworks.

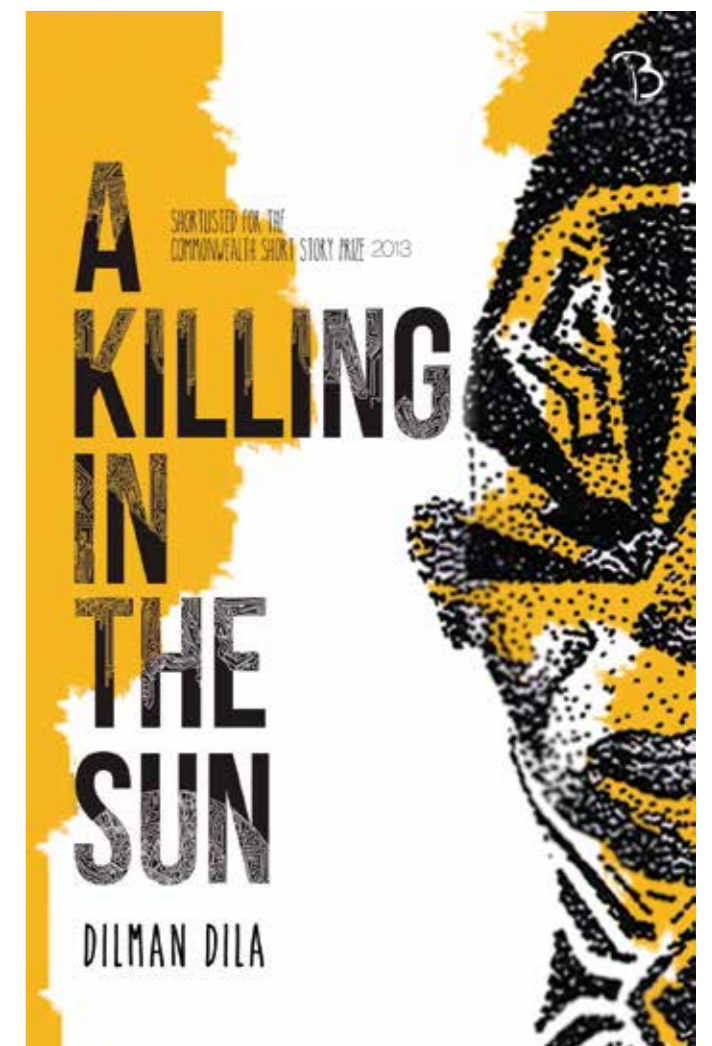
But I think many Africans are simply finding the stories they love to read in written form, and stories that are about them. Most people still enjoy oral stories, and these are often fantastical in nature. Not in the classic way of sitting around the fire and telling folk tales, but some of these stories end up in newspapers, with headlines like 'Witchdoctor sues Parliament Speaker for failure to pay him.' (This is a recent case, of a traditional healer who claimed the speaker of the Ugandan parliament owed her success to him, and she did not pay him for the charms he gave her to succeed). I think

people on the continent are beginning to appreciate reading these kinds of things in good fiction, not just in hearsays.

**You are both a writer and filmmaker—how do these creative processes feed into each other?**

I am more than just a writer and filmmaker. With an overactive imagination, there's always a story lurking in my subconscious, and if I stick to one media I wouldn't cope. I've written radio plays, stage plays, poetry, and recently I went into digital arts and fell in love with it at once. I love telling stories and it does not make sense to stick to one format. Whether it's a book, or a poem, or digital art, the uniting factor is story, and I believe I'm a storyteller.

From the idea stage, I know whether a story will be prose, or film, or radio play. Only recently have I started to think of multi-platform stories, like the one in *AfroSF v3*, "Safari Nyota," which





**Her Broken Shadow**

I want to be prose, a web series, a video game, and a graphic novel, each platform with a slightly different storyline.

I started as a writer, and it taught me a lot about developing characters, for with prose, you have a lot of freedom to give the reader a character's backstory. Writing radio plays and stage plays helped me master dialog. When I went into film, I learned a lot about plotting, since films are time-bound. This kind of made my prose writing sparser than it used to be, and led me to develop a visual style. As I go more into digital arts, I'm beginning to pay a lot of attention to details. There are things I used to ignore in my writing, especially when describing characters, but now, when making a piece of digital art, I have to think about the minute details, and I find myself thinking about this when writing, and I believe it will help me grow.

**Can you tell us more about your film Her Broken Shadow—what themes or messages were you most keen to convey?**

*Her Broken Shadow* was a very personal project. Anyone who has gone through a breakup in their thirties will, for a moment, worry about growing old alone. There are a lot of lonely people out there, and social media and urbanization make loneliness an epidemic. I read a story about a socialite in the UK, who died and no one noticed until three years later, when someone found her in a living room. That was the immediate spark of this film.

As a full time writer, being alone is part of the job, yet society does not expect us to be alone. It wants us to socialize, to get married, to have children, to have friends, but writing is about sitting alone for hours. It's the ultimate symbol of loneli-

ness, and that is why I made the main character a writer. I did borrow a lot from my own life, as I've had a lot of philosophical questions. The ancient puzzle: are we just characters in a story? A disability made my childhood a nightmare. I used to ask myself, "Why me?" Anyone going through tough times will ask that question. As a Christian child, I believed God planned the world, along with my life, and that made me really angry with him. One reason I stopped being a Christian. If this God is really full of love, why does he pick some people to suffer while he blesses others with happiness? That question still bugs me, and in *Her Broken Shadow*, I was trying to get rid of it.

**What projects are you currently working on?**

I'm working on a short film, *Akoota*, themed around gene-drive technology and indigenous knowledge. I have mixed feelings towards gene-drives. While it could advance the quality of human life, and wipe out sickness, it can be weaponised, and it raises a lot of questions, like eugenics in a racially divided world, corporate ownership of biological organisms in a system that values monetary profit over humanity and life; it makes me wonder how poor and vulnerable communities will survive in a world where every crop they plant, or every insect that flies around their faces, is owned and controlled by someone else. These worries feed into *Akoota*.

I'm also working on an immersive documentary story. I want to create an installation where, when someone walks into a room, they see a series of images on the wall, maybe photographs, maybe digital images, but most likely alternate reality images, and each, through an app, triggers off a video, or a text, or an audio. At the end of the day, all these images will tell a non-linear story about something. Currently, it's maternal health in Uganda, and I've made six images, but the idea is still very much in development and I'm still exploring the technologies that I can use to create it.

**Does language play an important role in your work?**

Yes. In most of the stories I write, the characters are not talking in English. However, I can only write fluently in English, because of the education system, and sometimes it is very difficult to convey exactly what the character is saying. For

example, in many Ugandan languages, the greeting is something like "well done," which could mean, "thanks for doing a good job," or "you've worked hard." When I put it in English, it feels like Person A is thanking Person B for work that Person B did for Person A, yet Person A is simply thanking Person B for work that Person B did for themselves. In English, saying a character said "hello" does not convey the true meaning of the greeting.

With film, I previously used English because it is the national language in Uganda, and there is no unifying local language, as there is Kiswahili in Kenya or Tanzania. To make a film in a local language, I have to cast actors based on what they speak, rather than how they perform. But then, having actors speak English has a lot of disadvantages because some actors are not as comfortable with the language as they are with their mother tongues, and so this noticeably affects their performance.

With the recent short film, *Akoota*, I used Acholi. I had to go out of Kampala city to find actors. In Kampala, it is difficult to find two actors who speak the same local language fluently. In Gulu, I

did not have to worry about this, for most actors would speak Acholi. I was rewarded immensely. I think they gave me good performances, though they were inexperienced, because they were using their language.

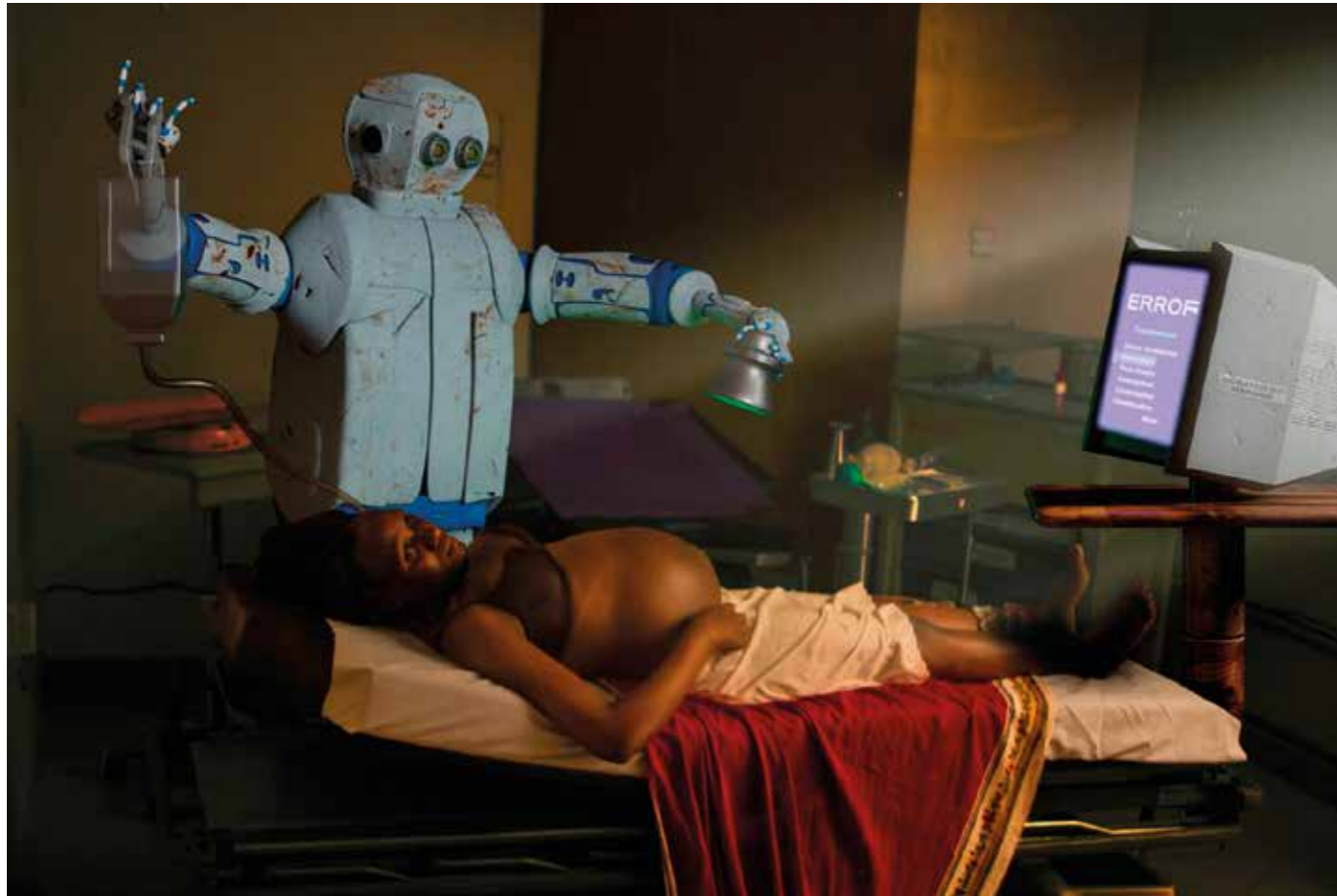
There however was a push against using Acholi. The lead actress, on reading the script, told me, 'This story is too good for Acholi.' It is a science fiction set in the future, and she could not imagine it happening, mostly because of how she has been conditioned to think about herself, and her language.

**Your fictions merge narratives from local sources with those technologies that arrive from the West, often exploring the conflict. Do you think that fiction can play a role in reconciling various types of knowledge? Or is the opposite more important to you—bringing into sharp focus the risks of importing science and technology into Africa?**

The former is what I go for. Fiction can play a great role in advancing different types of knowledge, in making people aware that science and technol-



**On the set of Akoota**



ogy does not all come from one part of the world. Because of colonialism, Africa as a whole suffers from a serious lack of confidence, and this contributes to poverty and dependence. Africans look at their own sciences and think of it as primitive, and backward, and evil. No country can 'develop' if they do not see science and technology in their own past.

Championing various types of knowledge does not mean turning your back to science and technology, rather, it is about finding similarities in all knowledge systems. Say mathematics, we all think it comes from Middle East/Europe, and yet many knowledge systems in Africa have highly advanced mathematical principles and theories.

What I see as a risk is the continued importation of science and technology without regard of local knowledge systems. For example, gene-drive technology is being championed as the best option to eradicate malaria, by rewriting the gene of the anopheles, and yet many communities have ways of controlling mosquitoes. In Karamoja, they use a plant called lothiru to keep a house free of mosquitoes all night. If the governments was to see science in this local method, it would have promoted ways of using lothiru on a large

scale, maybe to make mosquito-repellant paint, or candles, or something, but it ignores such knowledge and instead looks outside for solutions. That is the risk I see.

**Your work highlights traditional African science and technology. Do you see it as a mission to remind people of the scientific African heritage and the alternative futures based on local innovations rather than imported ones?**

I'm not sure it's a mission. I just want to imagine what it would have been like had colonialism not happened. Some of the worlds I build have Europeans and Africans interacting without violence, learning from each other, respecting each other's cultures... I'm yet to write a story based on this world, though.

I don't think local innovations can work as islands separated from imported ones. I see a merging of the various knowledge systems, which is always how humans have learned and prospered from the beginning of time. Ron Eglash, a respected mathematician, has said that the binary code we use in digital machines today has its roots in an African divination system, and he traces this back a thou-

sand years, how the divination system moved from West Africa to Europe and how it evolved through the ages to present day binary code. This kind of sharing stopped when colonialism and racism sprung up in Europe, and now the problem we have is that one knowledge system (European) came in and replaced another knowledge system (African), and this is something I aim at highlighting in my stories, that African peoples will only develop if they start looking within themselves for solutions to their problems, some solutions which they have had all along but ignore because they think it is backward and inferior to imported ones.

**Do you think your work reflects specific aspects of a conversation about science and technology in Africa, if so which?**

Yes, and mostly, it has something to do with medicine and health care. This is one aspect of science and technology in Africa that survived colonialism and still thrives today. The installation I mentioned earlier draws inspiration from a report by a colonialist doctor, Felkin, who visited parts of Uganda in the late 1800s, and witnessed traditional healers carrying out a caesarean operation. They seemed to be doing it at ease, and had done it for a while, yet their European counterparts had not yet mastered the science. However, Felkin primitivised what he saw, to fit the European view of savage Africa. I read between the lines, and I see that these traditional healers had an expert

understanding of the human anatomy, that they could stitch up the mother and within two weeks she would have no signs of the operation, and I see that it must have taken them a long time to learn and master this skill. These are some of the things I try to talk about in my works.

**What is it about other speculative novels and stories from Africa besides your own that you find exciting?**

Mostly, I find the short stories more interesting, especially horrors. I love reading about monsters and creatures other than vampires and werewolves and dragons. Many writers are talking about the creatures from their neighborhoods and this is pleasing to read. I loved this about the anthologies, *African Monsters*, edited by Margret Helgadóttir, and *A World of Horror* edited by Eric J. Guignard. I contributed to both these anthologies, but I was pleasantly surprised by the wealth of creatures I encountered.

In science fiction, there is a tendency to merge spirituality and science, and this also is great because most science fiction from the West does not have magic, and yet the reality in Africa is that spirits exists besides technology. Some healers have Twitter accounts and do divination over tweets. I've been to a few shrines where I saw laptops and a TV beside cowrie shells and skins. I saw one healer using parts of a cellphone in her divination, along with coins, and she explained





that the spirits tell her whatever she has to use. This merging blurring of lines between fantasy and science fiction gets me real excited.

**Could you recommend us some reading from other authors?**

I loved *Beasts Made of Night* by Tochi Onyebuchi. It was a great read, fast paced, and I think he built up his characters really well. I did not like the ending, which I thought was too sudden, maybe as he prepares for a sequel, and it felt a little bit anticlimactic, but I'm eager to read more from him.

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# 'We have come to refuel your future': Asphalt Afrofuturism and African Futurities

Gemma Field

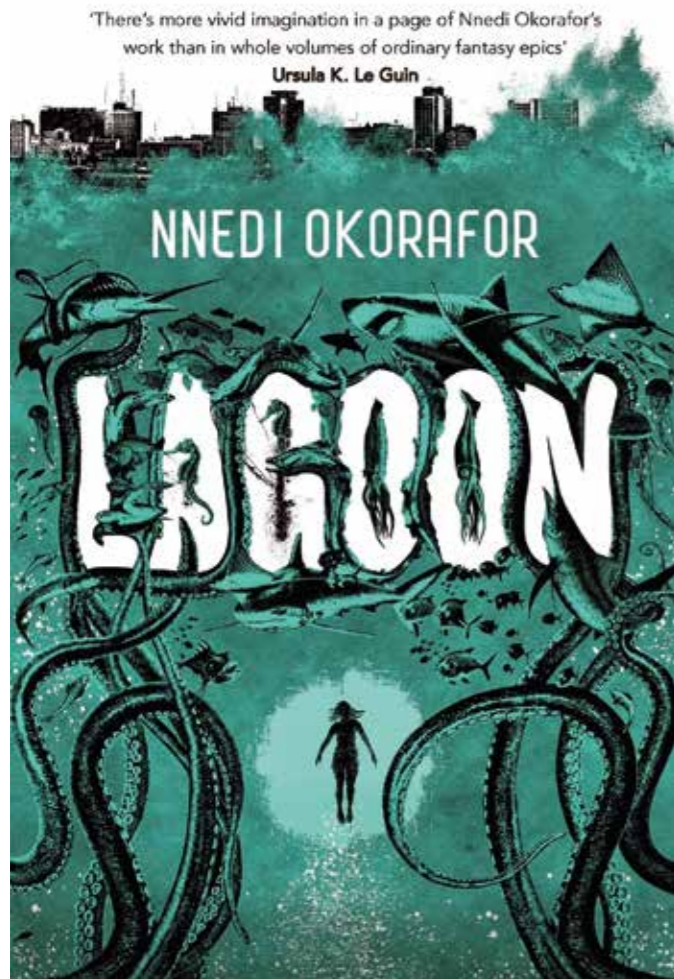
This article takes as its starting point the wildly popular and commercially successful African science-fiction novel *Lagoon*, written by Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor. *Lagoon* is an ideal site in which to explore the environmental and political concerns that are common themes in the fantastical literature of West Africa, and to demonstrate the efficacy of broadly Afrofuturist aesthetics, both in problematising and reimagining environmental politics in modern Nigeria.

*Lagoon* tells the story of an alien invasion that unfolds on the shores of Lagos, Nigeria. The novel playfully subverts the structures of alien invasion science fiction, revitalising tired tropes by synthesising them with West African mythology and fantastic futurism. Against the backdrop of the ultra-urban, somewhat dysfunctional metropolis of her native Lagos, Okorafor draws attention to the consequences of neocolonial developmentalism in Nigeria. *Lagoon* examines in particular the toxic politics surrounding the country's oil industry, politics that are bound up with what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence" (3). In these respects, Okorafor's novel draws from a rich tradition of non-realist Anglophone African engagement with the consequences of neocolonial developmentalism: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), in which spirit-human interplay is complicated by the socially and environmentally disruptive imposition of a road that takes on a dangerous life of its own, is perhaps *Lagoon*'s closest antecedent; works such as Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit* (1995) and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) are also worth noting.

*Lagoon* follows the alien ambassador Ayodele as she establishes contact with an assortment of aquatic and terrestrial Earthlings. Ayodele promises that her people have no malevolent designs for Earth, asking only to assimilate while offering miraculous technology. Intersecting plotlines follow various characters (human, animal, and supernatural) who undergo fundamental changes because of the "radical new possibilities" (Okorafor, 269) that Ayodele and her people bring.

The aliens are a catalyst for change in the city of Lagos and its waters, plunging both into chaos while also bringing forth new forms of life and possibilities. Folkloric forces emerge in brief narrative interludes throughout the novel: the spider-trickster Uhide and the mythical living masque Ijele are the most prominent. These 'super-humans' apparently discover Ayodele's nature, and overcome a variety of fantastic and institutional obstacles in their attempts to resolve the crisis, eventually recruiting the President of Nigeria to their cause.

We also meet other non-human characters with their own rich histories, quirks, and agendas, including a "monstrous" (Okorafor, 21) swordfish, determined to destroy an offshore oil rig and given the power to do so by the aliens, and a sentient, predatory highway that calls itself the "Bone Collector." It is these two characters I will focus on in this article. But before I turn to them, I first want to offer a very brief overview of Afrofuturism. Although Okorafor herself has expressed mixed feelings about the label, certain aspects nevertheless remain a useful lens on her work.

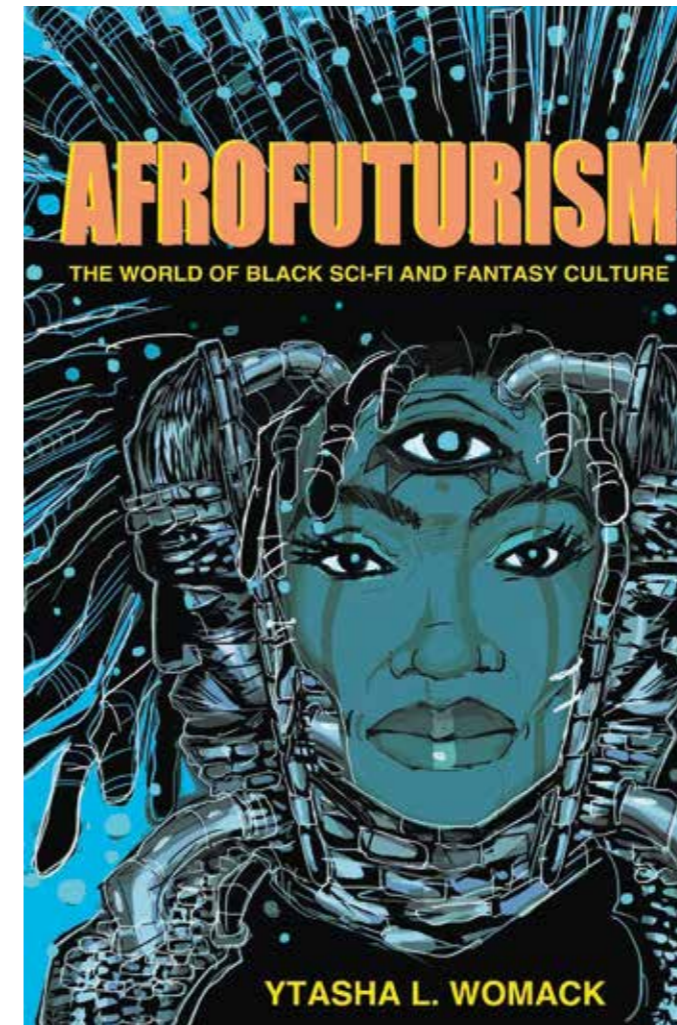


Afrofuturism is a broad category of aesthetic and intellectual projects, whose main frame of reference includes the cultural products, history, and future of Africa and the African diaspora. In her foundational study, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (23). For Womack, Afrofuturism has characteristic thematic concerns, and also a distinctive epistemology, i.e. distinctive kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing. That is, Afrofuturism draws indigenous mythology and cosmology together with technologies past, present, and future, in order to envision, describe, and realise a liberatory future. As Womack describes, Afrofuturism “combines elements of science-fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magical realism with non-Western beliefs... re-envisioning of the past alongside speculation about the future” (Womack, 24). Academic study of Afrofuturism essentially began with Mark Dery’s 1994 essay “Black to the Future.” However, the

aesthetic and ideology can be traced to earlier jazz and funk pioneers like Sun Ra, George Clinton and P-Funk, who employed space age theatrics and political lyrics with cosmic themes to raise African American consciousness. These innovators drew parallels between the archetypes of science-fiction and Afro-diasporic experiences, and tapped into the alienation from white American society experienced by people whose ancestors had been abducted and forced into servitude. Kodwo Eshun argues that the psychological dislocation, existential chaos, dehumanization and alienation widely held to be the hallmarks of twentieth century modernism, were experienced much earlier by the victims of the Middle Passage and their descendants: he suggests “situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (Eshun, 286-8) in an Afrocentric paradigm.

In addition to its exploration of alienation and modernity, Afrofuturism also seeks to illuminate “the role of science and technology in the black experience overall” (Womack, 29). This means working to recover marginalised histories: everything from the aural innovations of Jimi Hendrix and other African American pioneers of rock music, to the telecommunications inventions of Dr Shirley Jackson, to the work of Katharine Johnson, the NASA mathematician whose work on orbital mechanics played a fundamental role in the moon-landing and subsequent Apollo missions; to the history of Henrietta Lacks, whose unique DNA (obtained without her consent) was propagated as the first immortal cell line at Johns Hopkins University in 1951. (The study of Lacks’s DNA has paved the way for numerous medical innovations, the most famous of these being the polio vaccine). The Afrofuturist project undertakes historical and discursive activism in “uncovering these inventors past and present and incorporating their stories into larger conversations about science, technology, creativity and race” (Womack, 49).

Eshun’s essay “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” in true sf style, sets out as a thought experiment: what if, thousands of years from now, archaeologists from the highly enlightened and technologically advanced United States of Africa were to exhume and examine the cultural products of the present? “They would be struck,” Eshun suggests, “by how much Afrodiasporic subjectivity in the twentieth century constituted



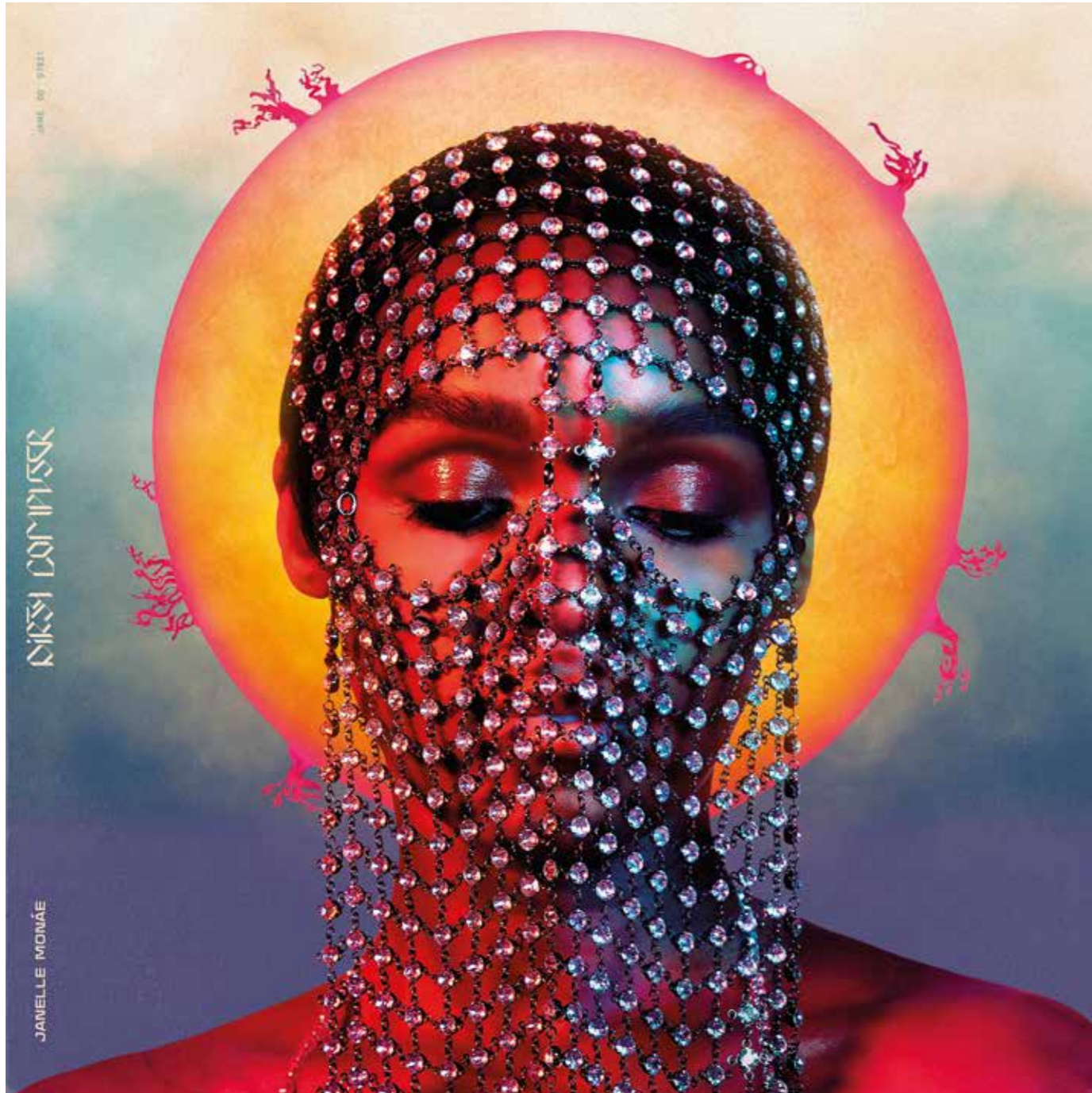
itself through the cultural project of recovery” (Eshun, 287): the process of undoing the erasure of black presence in culture and society over time and space. Accordingly, he suggests assembling an arsenal of “countermemories” (Eshun, 288) to resist the colonially-inscribed past and taking ownership of the future. These countermemories constitute “an ethical commitment to history, the dead and the forgotten, the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counterfutures,” in order to create alternatives to dominant narratives that have marginalised or erased accounts of that founding trauma, and have consistently downplayed the roles of Africans and African Americans in science ever since.

In addition to its concern with alienation, and with science and technology, Afrofuturism has a science fictional interest in temporality. That is, Afrofuturism asserts that reclaiming the past, and reinscribing it within our present culture, is a crucial step toward establishing racial and social justice in the future. Art and activism are thus closely linked in Afrofuturism: evidence of this approach is avail-

able, for example, in the “cybersoul” of Janelle Monáe’s android alter-ego Cindi Mayweather, who “shows us new liberatory possibilities created by African-American cultural production in concert with contemporary technological transformation” (English and Kim, 218). Cindi Mayweather’s narrative lays claim to both the future and past as she escapes the enslavement of the Palace of Dogs (an asylum) to start a robotic electronic revolution that reaches its apotheosis in the “emotion picture” *Dirty Computer*. There is undeniable recuperative power in a unified attempt in politics and the arts to “to unearth the missing history of the people of African descent and their roles in science, technology and science-fiction...[and] to reintegrate people of the colour into the discussion of cyberculture, modern science, technology and sci-fi pop culture” (Womack, 29, 30).

With this Afrocentric paradigm in mind, we might also consider the emergence of “the futures industry,” a term used to refer to the collective infrastructure that profits from “the envisioning, management and delivery of reliable futures” (Eshun, 289)—from stockbroking, to Silicone Valley, to election results—that has become increasingly prominent in determining the course of development in Africa. The questions of who gets to live in this future, and who will be relegated to the past, are central concerns of Afrofuturism. The value of information in this future-now is paramount: it “circulates as an increasingly valuable commodity” (Eshun, 290). For Eshun, “Afrofuturism’s first priority is to recognise that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futuristic projection” (291), from weather to resources to migration to politics and conflict. There is always a reliable trade in market projections of Africa’s socio-economic crises.

From Afrofuturist imaginings, to those of the futures industry, energy and the environment are crucial factors in Africa’s future. In *Lagoon*, science and technology are misused in the profit-seeking plunder of Nigeria’s natural resources, resulting in social injustice and alienation. *Lagoon*’s Lagos is a prime example of the “soul-crushing corruption” (Okorafor, 57) that accompanies such extractivist-capitalist development: the army is a law unto itself, ordinary people eke out a living running 419 scams, but most significantly, the country’s roads have been neglected to such an extent that the



motorway has begun to prey upon living creatures. The paradoxical “resource curse” — a term coined by Richard Auty, and taken up by Nixon in his book *Slow Violence* — suggests a correlation between resource abundance and troubled economic development. Nixon suggests that such countries may suffer from overdependence on revenue from oil exports, leaving other areas of the economy underdeveloped, and encouraging rent-seeking, as the “highly concentrated revenue stream is readily diverted away from social and infrastructural investments and into offshore bank accounts” (Nixon, 70). Political power can become predicated on “controlling the central resource

[rather than] on strengthening civic expectations”; consequently, “national cohesion and stability may be jeopardized by exaggerated inequalities” (Nixon, 70) as the revenues from the nation’s natural wealth is siphoned off by Western companies.

The Niger Delta and the coast hold large oil reserves, but Nigeria’s mineral wealth belies a “resource curse” of persistent political instability and a legacy of widespread environmental devastation, and associated deleterious effects on health, safety, corporate and political governance, economic opportunities, and the wellbeing of local communities. *Lagoon* highlights the violent dysfunction in two key moments: on the

offshore rig, the site of oil extraction, and the predatory highway, a combination of asphalt and oil-powered vehicles. These dramatic moments in the text call attention to the environmental and social problems of Nigeria’s oil-based society.

In contrast to humans acting under the incentives of extractivist capitalism, Okorafor’s aliens are markedly empathetic and considerate towards the natural environment and non-human actors. They “ask such good questions” (6) of the marine life, immediately establishing a rapport with the fish, pointing to an alternative to Western anthropocentrism and neocolonial economics. The swordfish is accorded agency, subjectivity, and a key role in the narrative: she starts the novel and sets the whole series of events in motion by attacking the oil rig. When she encounters the alien ambassadors, she asks for the power to realise her goal of destroying the rig once and for all, and “they make it so” (Okorafor, 7).

Ayodele’s association with indigenous mythology and cosmology suggests that these alien “invaders” are not the stock figures of monstrous, extraterrestrial conquerors. Rather, they are potential collaborators in a project of recovery, along the lines suggested by Eshun. Upon examining her, Adoara remarks that Ayodele “looked like a member of her own family”; further, Ayodele’s appearance textually references Mami Wata, the “pantheon of African water creatures” (Womack, 71). Half human and half sea creature, they are “bringers of divine law” (Womack, 70) in West African mythology.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what we expect from much of the Anglo-American canon of sf, these aliens offer redemption and renewal: a chance to make a complete break with dirty sources of energy and repair the seemingly irreparable ecological damage to our planet.

There is much to be gleaned from a close reading of Chapter 19, titled “Offshore,” in which Agu and the swordfish come to a head in the shadow of the oil rig. By bringing Agu and his fellow soldiers to defend the rig from the sea creatures who have begun to violently resist, Okorafor is highlighting the bonds between international oil companies and the Nigerian government. As the swordfish reminds us, the rig is the alien in this

ecosystem; this interpretation is strengthened by Agu’s description of the oil infrastructure as the “decades-old monster, a hulking, unnatural contraption of production facilities, drilling rigs and crew quarters...usually a place of noise and activity” (Okorafor, 95). In the encounter, Agu’s fellow soldiers are ripped apart by the razor-sharp fins of alien-enhanced flying fish, and only Agu’s supernatural powers save him from the same fate.

Thus the oil rig as a site of violence is brought viscerally to life. Usually, human brutality towards the non-human world occurs as slow violence, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2). Invading a country with artillery and military personnel, launching missile strikes or dispersing chemical weapons, are actions easily labelled as “violent.” In conflicts such as the Vietnam War or the Biafran War, damage done to bodies can be readily linked to military operations, and in this sense such wars appear to have well-defined beginnings and endings. But the long-term consequences of Agent Orange and British Petroleum on rural Vietnam and the Niger Delta — poisoned soil and failing crops; undrinkable water and unbreathable air; birth defects and cancers — that have fundamentally assaulted human and ecological matter, are often discounted and disregarded; time and remoteness can distance consequences from their causes. The same is true of carbon emissions from fossil fuels, and the associated violence of climate change. In Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, the textual presentation of the oil rig redresses that displacement in a manner that leaves the international politics of offshore drilling quite clear: the “spidery structure made of concrete and rusty steel, anchored firmly to the seabed by steel beams” (Okorafor, 95) resembles a parasite leeching off a host, or at a molecular level, a virus clamping onto the host cell’s receptors. Slow violence is marked by displacements — temporal, economic, geographic, rhetorical, and technological — that “simplify violence... [and] smooth the way for amnesia”, minimizing the human and environmental costs of “turbo capitalism” (Nixon, 7). The slippery and unspectacular nature of slow violence poses representational and strategic challenges; Nixon posits that the

1 Brenda Cooper’s *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* details the emergence and proliferation of the Mami Wata mythos in literature greater detail, as well as those of Ujide and Ijele.

aesthetic response to the crisis “entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency” (Nixon, 10), in order to highlight the “representational challenges and imaginative dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but by the imperceptible changes whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes” (Nixon, 11).

By making the site of oil extraction a site of swift and dramatic violence, violence against humans by natural forces, *Lagoon* reframes the slow violence of offshore drilling as unmistakably dramatic and urgent crises. Furthermore, Okorafor positions the aliens as the remedy to the representational slippages of slow violence during Ayodele’s broadcasted speech. Here the alien reveals that her people “have come to bring you together and refuel your future...your land is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart” (Okorafor, 113). The aliens overtly position themselves in opposition to the oil, the fuel of violence. They are here to “nurture your world” (Okorafor, 113); they are going to expunge and redeem the consequences of that conflict — the environmental devastation caused by oil which have been extensively represented in the text, and the corruption and dysfunction that accompanies the oil’s extraction.

While the gruesome scene on the rig dramatizes the slow violence of oil extraction, the predatory highway that calls itself the “Bone Collector” calls attention to the serious consequences of social dysfunction in an oil-powered society. Public roadways enable mobility, but it is the responsibility of the state to maintain them, to keep them safe for motorists and pedestrians. In *Lagoon*, the Lagos-Benin Expressway is “full of ghosts”, a “death-trap” (Okorafor, 189), a symptom of corruption and inequality, in contrast to the ‘Angelic’ roads in affluent Lagosian suburbs.

This “Road Monster”, like the swordfish, is based on actual events. Okorafor was inspired to write about the crisis of Nigeria’s roads after a horrific accident on the Lagos-Benin Expressway, the city’s major thoroughfare. The hijacking of a luxury bus gone horribly awry, which is retold by a fictional eye-witness. He describes “mangled, twisted bodies all over the goddamn road...[it] reeked of blood and fouler things...torn up bodies littering the roads, blood, intestines, skid marks of

skin, twisted torsos, body parts torn off...a brutal scene” (Okorafor, 204). His account drives home a visceral quality that slow violence typically lacks: the vessel of human subjectivity deconstructed into its meaty components by the unstoppable velocity of the motor-industrial complex.

This portion of the Lagos-Benin Expressway “has named itself the Bone Collector...it mostly collects human bones, and the bones of human vehicles” (Okorafor, 120). The title is ominous: the road does not find throwaway bones, but actively accumulates them through engineered accidents. The predatory representation of the road is emphasised by its carnivorous greed as it “grumbled like an enormous empty stomach”, and uttered “a deep, guttural growl that intensified into a roar...the angry roar of a creature denied its meal” (Okorafor, 171). Here again the novel destabilises traditional subjectivity in according a dangerous agency to this typically taken-for-granted element of the built environment. That the antagonism of this man-made creature towards its creators speaks to the text’s petro-anxiety — the dangers of oil to the environment — to all the environments — has been made abundantly clear. But it is the Bone Collector that emphatically dramatizes the dangers of the oil industry to humans. The fact that we are using fossil fuels to destroy our true habitat is not sufficiently upsetting to make us desist — the environment actively preying upon us is much more effective at driving the message home. This is the slow violence of oil. Extreme weather conditions, and data pointing to catastrophic irreversible climate change, are not threatening enough, so the hazards of the petro-discourse are radically re-envisioned as the monster turned on its makers as an irrefutable and immediate danger.

But Okorafor’s conclusion is decidedly optimistic. Shortly after Ayodele heals the president, she allows herself to be killed by a mob and disintegrates. By “inhaling her essence” (Okorafor, 271) all of humanity becomes “a bit...alien” (Okorafor, 268). The novel ends on a utopic note: with the waters reclaimed and revitalized by their denizens, the president decides that oil will be expunged from the Nigerian economy, because the aliens will replace it with something cleaner and more powerful. Ayodele’s sacrifice infects the humans with a new way of thinking, an Afrofuturist episte-

mology, that the President’s speech makes clear. Nigeria has “rolled through decades of corruption and internal struggle” (277) that could only be addressed because of the alien “tipping point” (Okorafor, 277). “This kind of transitional shift”, that has come about as a result of the alien arrival and the proliferation of changes they bring, is a “cause for celebration, not panic” according to the President. The President tells his people that the aliens bring with them “new technology... [and] fresh ideas that we [Nigeria] can combine with our own” (Okorafor, 277). He concludes that Nigeria “will be powerful again” (Okorafor, 278), although if oil is removed from the equation, the form and structure of the power he hopes for is completely unknown.

Utilising traditional African iconography and mythology in concert with radical futurity, Okorafor has produced a remarkable novel that challenges the assumptions and tropes of mainstream sf. *Lagoon* draws attention to political, social, and environmental conditions in Nigeria. The intense, visceral quality of the two moments in the text I have explored establish strong textual links between oil and violences fast and slow, and the consequences of extractivist capitalism. Dramatically re-envisioning the conditions of Nigeria’s social, political, and economic present, the novel makes connections between environmental devastation enabled by global capital in concert with state power, and the violence and trauma visited disproportionately upon the populations of the Global South.

Eshun makes clear that envisioning the future is an important step to claiming a stake in it. If he is correct that “sf is now and research and development for the futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow” (Eshun, 291), then *Lagoon* can be situated within the catalogue of African Diasporic counterfutures. It comprises part of the intellectual and aesthetic project that seeks to redress racial and imperial imbalance in the future and the present.

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# Afrofuturism in clipping.'s *Splendor & Misery*

Jonathan Hay

## Abstract

This article examines the manner by which clipping.'s<sup>1</sup> 2016 album *Splendor & Misery*—a conceptual hip-hop space opera—freely enlists and reclaims texts from the African cultural tradition in order to manifest its Afrofuturist agenda. A countercultural movement characterised by a dynamic understanding of the narrative authority held by texts, Afrofuturism rewrites African culture in a speculative vein, granting African and Afrodiasporic peoples a culturally empowered means of writing their own future. The process by which Afrofuturism reclaims and rewrites culture is paralleled within *Splendor & Misery* through the literary device of *mise en abyme*; just as the album itself does, its central protagonist rewrites narratives of African cultures and traditions in an act of counterculture.

## Introduction

In the sixty-five years since the Hugo Award was established, only two albums have been nominated to receive the prestigious science fiction accolade, and neither has won (Heller, 2018). One of the albums to have been nominated is clipping.'s *Splendor & Misery* (2016), an Afrofuturist concept album. It is especially fitting that this particular album was considered for an award traditionally dominated by literature and film, because, as an Afrofuturist text, *Splendor &*

*Misery* problematises conventional conceptions of narrative authority. Through its Afrofuturist mode, the album can even be seen to transcend conventional Western considerations of medium altogether.

As John Cline concludes in a discussion of music and science fiction, aside from the soundtracks of films in the genre, Afrofuturist music is intriguingly the only facet of science fiction music 'that has shown sustained critical investigation' (Cline 261). Although the term Afrofuturism was coined in the 1990s, artists such as Sun Ra, Janelle Monáe, George Clinton, and Parliament-Funkadelic, have used music as an Afrofuturist medium for decades. Like many of these earlier Afrofuturist albums, *Splendor & Misery* extends and reimagines traditions of African and Afrodiasporic oral culture. At less than forty minutes in length, the album is crammed with language and narrative. Paul Gilroy suggests that the 'power and significance of music' in attempting to confront the terror and trauma of slavery has grown in 'inverse proportion to the limited expressive powers of language' (Gilroy 74). The rapid, semantically dense delivery on tracks such as 'The Breach' complicates this suggestion. Rather, *Splendor & Misery* fuses the powers of language with the powers of music, creating a new form of virtuoso, technologically-enabled storytelling, which employs a variety of flows and vocal performative techniques, and augments the human voice with a vast range of instrumental elements and production techniques. Its status as both a hip-hop album and a speculative narrative



is further enriched by a cinematic element, both through immaculately sculpted soundscapes, and its frequent invocation of a visual imagination shaped by science fiction cinema.

Therefore, although Afrofuturism is premised upon the process of rewriting, its rewriting is more generative than it is derivative, and capable of challenging customary Western notions of textuality and intertextuality. By attending carefully to diverse traditions, and inventing its own expressive forms, Afrofuturism has been able to reconfigure the textual authority of colonising narratives, to the benefit of the future of African and Afrodiasporic communities. The movement seeks to liberate the narrative authority that has historically been held over peoples of African descent, and through restless avant-garde rewriting, to transform histories of subjugation 'into something positive, intensifying it, claiming it as a moment of self-consciousness' (Hardt and Negri 130).

Specifically, *Splendor & Misery* is an African American work of Afrofuturism, which rewrites a number of distinct African cultural narratives. Although neocolonial discourse implies that African culture is homogeneous and singular, the album tacitly demonstrates the opposite: that the historical traditions which inform modern African American culture are heterogeneous and manifold.

It is important to note, however, that the term *Afrofuturism* itself is contested. For some, the term ostensibly implies an arbitrary separation

between modern works recognised as Afrofuturist, and historical works of African culture which are equally as anticipatory. Moreover, the author Nnedi Okorafor rejects the label Afrofuturist, and describes herself as an Africanfuturist instead, in order to emphasise cultural strands that inform her writing which originate from the African continent itself.<sup>2</sup> Although these wider debates around the term remain deeply important, it is methodologically sufficient to consider *Splendor & Misery* an Afrofuturist work, insofar as a number of the narratives it rewrites are explicitly African American.

The theorist Linda Hutcheon states that by definition, adaptation brings together 'the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty' (Hutcheon 173). The Afrofuturist practice of rewriting African cultural texts is generally intended to be neither comforting nor delightful, however; it is instead an attempt to revisit past atrocities in a transformative manner. Discussing the purpose of the movement, Kodwo Eshun emphasises that 'Afrofuturism is by no means naively celebratory [...] By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory' (Eshun 465).

Although stories are often adapted in the Western world for financial gain, Afrofuturism's objective in rewriting narratives is quite dissimilar. Rather, Afrofuturism refigures the act of rewriting as a potent mode of counterculture. Eshun further emphasises that by 'imaginatively reordering chronology and fantasizing history' (Eshun 467), Afrofuturist works never passively rewrite earlier African cultural narratives. They instead actively rework stories of Africa's colonial past, in order to control the continent's projection into the future.

## Contesting Slavery

*Splendor & Misery's* Afrofuturist function is made clear by the premise of its science fictional narrative. After waking up in captivity aboard an alien slave ship, the album's human protagonist—referred to by the AI narrator as a 'member

<sup>1</sup> This stylisation of the band's name—in all lower case letters, and followed by a period—is clipping.'s own.

<sup>2</sup> Okorafor states that Africanfuturism 'is somewhat similar to Afrofuturism, but is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and perspective, where the center is non-Western.' (Okorafor 87)

of the cargo’—instigates a rebellion in order to liberate himself and his fellow captives. He is the lone biological being to survive the revolt however. The passenger<sup>3</sup> is now the sole inhabitant of a sentient spaceship drifting in interstellar space far from Earth, and he must therefore come to terms with being irreversibly alienated from his own species and culture. He accordingly begins to fathom what it means to be a human lost in the vast uninhabited territory of space. He primarily achieves this by rewriting aspects of his African cultural heritage so that it can correspond with his entirely unprecedented situation. *Splendor & Misery* is evidently not a traditional slave narrative, but rather a conscious transformation and extension of historical trauma and contemporary culture through the vehicle of science fiction.

As Ytasha L. Womack states, Afrofuturism deliberately rewrites narratives of servitude because ‘[s]lavery is neither the utopian future nor an ancient far-removed past,’ and so its effects on subjugated populations ‘can be felt in the politics of the present’ (Womack 157). Furthermore, since ‘[s]ocial reality and science fiction create feedback with each other’ (Eshun 467), Afrofuturism not only maps the significance of the histories that it rewrites, but also ventures future histories of anti-racist and decolonial struggle, and offers glimpses of a future society of racial justice and egalitarianism. *Splendor & Misery* therefore rewrites narratives of slavery in order to address the powerful and complex violence inflicted on Africans and Afrodiasporic peoples, and to promote an African narrative which looks boldly to the future without forgetting the past.

Through a science fictional re-imagining of a slave narrative, the album explores how the cultural dominance of former colonial powers can constitute a continuation of historical colonial violence. The protagonist is completely alone, apart from the AI presumably created by his former captors. Through the science fictional conceit of suspended animation, generations pass, with little changing: ‘No matter how much time or space has passed since his escape / He is still a runaway slave and so lonely.’ At the same time, the violent

imagery of tracks like ‘True Believer,’ ‘Air ‘Em Out’ and ‘Story 5’ suggest how neocolonialism is never just a matter of cultural and psychological subjugation. Neocolonialism also incorporates ongoing economic exploitation, as well as threats and acts of direct violence. As Jean-Paul Sartre states (summarizing his interpretation of Fanon): ‘neocolonialism, that lazy dream of the mother countries, is hot air [...] The colonist [continues to have] only one recourse: force when he still has some; the native has only one choice: servitude or sovereignty’ (Sartre 158).

Outside of Afrofuturist narratives, Africa often figures as the site of the dystopian in projections of the future, through ‘intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts’ (Eshun 461). Accordingly, Afrofuturism is concerned with far more complex matters than merely promoting the representation of African and Afrodiasporic peoples. Its rewriting of cultural narratives can encourage Africans to reclaim the figuration of aliens—and hence alienation—inherent in science fiction, as a realisation of the politics of dispossession. Thus through the realisation of Afrofuturist narratives, science fiction becomes a space to focalise the de-alienation of the postcolonial subject.

Accordingly, notions of lineage and of cultural heritage are particularly important components of Afrofuturist texts. Womack states that there is ‘something about African American culture in particular that dictates that all cultural hallmarks and personal evolutions are recast in a historical lineage [...] there’s an idea that the power of thought, word, and the imagination can somehow transcend time’ (Womack 153). Throughout *Splendor & Misery*, the significance of the passenger’s African heritage (is foregrounded through the intertextual interplay between the album’s science fictional narrative, and the African cultural narratives it rewrites in a futuristic manner.

Early in the narrative, after the ship AI records that the passenger’s pulse has begun to spike, it requests ‘an approval code from the administration’ to allow it to ‘administer a sedative to all the cargo via ventilation,’ as it realises that there is the potential for a slave uprising (‘The Breach’). After the passenger begins to override the ship’s systems via access panels, its AI recommends

that the administration ‘send security immediately,’ making consideration of the fact that the ‘beings’ it is transporting ‘were selected for their strength’ (‘The Breach’). A term of alterity, ‘beings’ strongly implies that these unseen administrators are not human themselves. The administrators, presumably the engineers of the passenger’s enslavement, exist in *Splendor & Misery* as only an intangible presence never directly visualised within its narrative. The passenger opposes the same hostile presence, but whereas the ship uses the term ‘administration’—which implies businesslike efficiency—he designates ‘the enemy’ (‘Interlude 01 (freestyle)’) and perhaps also ‘riders’ (‘Air ‘Em Out’). It is a revealing facet of the album’s Afrofuturist agenda that the species that has enslaved him figures so differently in his and the ship’s vernaculars. As the passenger is evidently aware, despite its perceived naturalness, language is never a passive construct.

By the time of ‘Air ‘Em Out,’ the narrative has grown ambiguous. One plausible reading is that the passenger, having gained the AI’s loyalty against his pursuers (‘All Black’), and crossed vast distances in suspended animation (‘Wake Up’), nevertheless still finds himself located within the same system of profit-seeking and war-mongering that earlier enslaved him. This system evidently can’t be simply left behind: it must be actively destroyed. Now armed and empowered, he turns to revolutionary violence: ‘Shoulda made the noose a little tighter / Cause it ain’t nobody dead, just some motherfuckin’ riders.’ The track ‘Air ‘Em Out’ is dense with shout-outs to science fiction writers including Delany, Butler, Le Guin, and Harrison, and is squarely situated in a gangsta rap idiom; the title itself is a likely reference to a drive-by shooting. The ‘riders’ fit within this idiom but they also, in the typically polysemous fashion of Afrofuturist narrative, suggest another context: the cultural tradition of the possession trance, a ceremony common to religions of Brazil, Jamaica, and the Yorubaland region of Western Africa. This tradition involves a horse (religious observant) and a rider (God or spirit), the former of which is said to mount and thereby possess the observant for an amount of time. Possession trances are said to be a way in which ‘spiritual forces materialize in the phenomenal world’ (Drewal 263), and the ceremonies they take place within, which are based around

ritual dances, are held to foster ‘group solidarity and bring [...] rejuvenation and spiritual vitality to the cult’ (Murrell 282). The ‘riders’ he encounters perhaps possess human bodies in a comparable manner, but they do not do so for the benefit of any human.

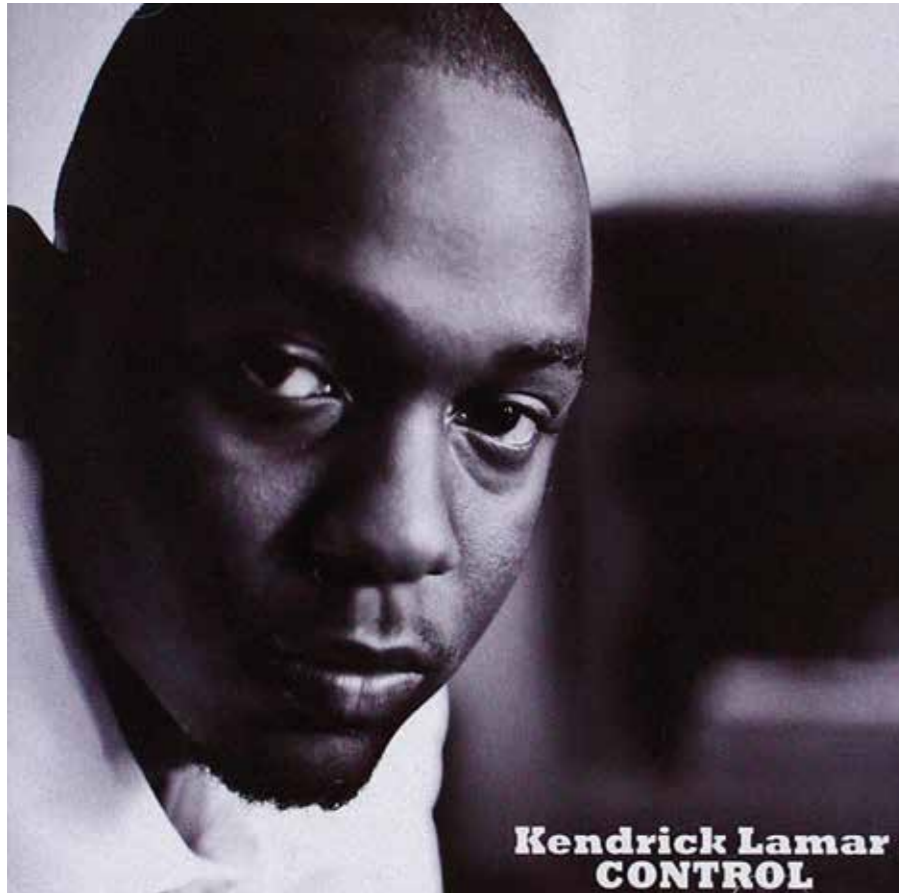
Similarly, when he exults at having brought about his freedom through acts of violence, the passenger proclaims ‘call me good boy, no I’m God boy,’ and states ‘I was called on to draw first blood, so that all of us could break the chains’ (‘Interlude 01 (freestyle)’). Through these proclamations, he evokes a figuration of the self-actualised liberation, like that depicted in the biblical passage Mark 5.4, in which a man ‘had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him’ (Mark 5.4 837). The passenger reads his personal situation through a larger narrative of collective emancipation, potentially with a spiritual dimension.

By drawing together a diverse set of cultural reference points, including gangsta rap, classic science fiction, and myth and religion, the passenger is able to retrieve an understanding of his alien servitude by analogising it to phenomena from his own cultural habitus. When the administration attempts to destroy the ship the passenger has commandeered, they resort to decrying him as a ‘traitor’ and a ‘suspect’ (‘Interlude 01 (freestyle)’). The passenger has made the realisation however, that despite their technological superiority to his own species, the administration are slavers to be feared and fought, and not gods to be worshipped. By relying on and rewriting his cultural heritage, he has been able to formulate a mode of resistance to their allegations, and to begin reclaiming his sense of self.

## Musical Rebellion

Significantly, the passenger’s act of rewriting his cultural heritage within the album is an instance of *mise en abyme*. *Mise en abyme* is a literary device which entails a miniature replica of a whole text, or image, being contained within that same text or image. Just as *Splendor & Misery* is an Afrofuturist text through which clipping, rewrite cultural narratives, the passenger himself rewrites cultural narratives in an Afrofuturist vein within the album’s narrative. The album’s Afrofuturist agenda is there-

3 Specifically, the ship’s AI refers to the unnamed human protagonist of the album as “Cargo 2331.” It would however be counterproductive for this Afrofuturist analysis to follow suit, as doing so would reinforce his dehumanisation.



fore echoed by the actions of its fictional human protagonist, and clipping. subsequently subvert the conventions of adaptation—and Western concepts of narrative authority—on two levels.

Additionally however, the album's Afrofuturist agenda is paralleled within its own soundscape not only by the passenger's rap verses, but also by the album's often atypical instrumental elements. In the track "'Interlude 02 (numbers),' " for instance, a repeating signal transmission is imposed over the hiss of static. The song's cryptic vocals comprise the recitation of a sequence of letters, spelt out using the phonetic alphabet.<sup>4</sup> clipping.'s unusual aesthetic choice here, as elsewhere in the album, epitomises Womack's statement that '[t]here are no barriers in Afrofuturist music, no entity that can't emit a rhythmic sound, no arrangements to adhere to, no locked-in structures about chorus and verse' (Womack 57). Afrofuturist music defies even the most central conventions of its medium, and thereby—for the most part—becomes an unrestrained mode of cultural expression.

4 In addition—as observant fans of the group have deduced—these phonetic characters sound out the keyword for a Vigenère cipher, which can in turn be used to reveal a hidden message within the track.

As this suggests, the Afro-futurist agenda of *Splendor & Misery* transcends the verbal realm, as it is also manifested and reproduced by the album's instrumental or aesthetic components. Ken McLeod emphasises that as a result of its transference through 'powerful sound systems and headphones, music becomes an experience that is literally felt by the body—a transference of vibration and energy from the machine' (McLeod 115). *Splendor & Misery's* experimental aesthetic can therefore be seen to blur the boundary between human listeners and technology. The music contained within the album infiltrates the body of its listener, and this allows its sonic elements to become corporeal, however transiently. As such, *Splendor & Misery's* techno-

logically realised mode can be seen to be closely implicated with its Afrofuturist agenda.

Significantly, in the album's narrative the slave ship's AI falls in love with its passenger primarily because of its admiration for his lyricism, stating that 'he babbles beautifully,' and that he has managed to unlock 'something new' in its 'heart' by vocalising his own cultural narrative ('All Black'). The passenger's judicious rewriting of his cultural heritage therefore becomes a means of him accessing a harmonious relationship with an alien intelligence. As the ship's AI is a futuristic technology, their consonance draws an equivalence between the process of rewriting cultural heritage and technological progress.

When the passenger raps Kendrick Lamar's verse from Big Sean's song 'Control' (2013), he is explicitly placed in the position of rewriting contemporary black culture. Since Lamar's verse in 'Control' expresses his desire to be the greatest rapper of all time, it is deeply fitting for the passenger to have appropriated this particular verse to describe his own situation. *Splendor & Misery* implies that its central protagonist was cryogenically frozen to facilitate his and his fellow

slaves' intergalactic transit, and so it is likely that centuries and perhaps even millennia will have passed back on Earth since he was put into stasis. Since the passenger is therefore so far removed from the rest of his culture, in time as well as space, his cultural heritage is now solely his own, and he has—however involuntarily and tragically—succeeded in becoming the greatest living rapper of all time. Everyone he ever knew on Earth 'is long dead' ('Wake Up'), and he is likely not only the last living person of African heritage, but also the last living human. He is now the sole heir to, and author of, his own cultural heritage. In this vein, the passenger adapts the Kuba civilisation of Central Africa's creation myth of the deity Mbombo in the track 'True Believer': 'Three siblings / happen to be gods / And they fight as siblings do / The world was only water then / The universe was fresh and new / Enefa poisoned Bumba's food / Wants just to see what he would do / He vomited the sun which dried / The water leaving land and soon / After came Moon and stars and animal / And man of many hues / The white one in the image of / A sickly god would get his dues.' ('True Believer').

Additionally, the same track contains an interpolation of the song 'I Know When I'm Going Home.' This nineteenth century slave song expresses a fatalistic resignation to sub-human existence through religious concepts of death, as is evident from the line 'Old Satan told me to my face, O yes Lord, De God I see I never find' ('I Know When I'm Going Home' 47). By hybridising these two religious cultural texts, 'True Believer' evokes their common thematic resonances: recalling that humans are not to any extent divine entities, and exposing the hubris of presuming that any group of humans are a superior species. Furthermore, by insinuating that the whole Earth may have been colonised by an alien race, just as territories commonly were in the age of imperialism and colonialism, the cosmic scope of 'True Believer' implies the futility of the human desire for power over others.

The passenger accordingly characterises slavery as an exercise involving 'gifts in blood that had been shed as long as time had' ('True Believer'), and therefore as a process that stems from anthropocentric delusions of superiority. Yet by 'True Believer' interweaving a slave song with the racially idealistic Mbombo creation myth—as

the track's refrain and one of its verses respectively—both clipping. and the passenger are able to draw out and reappropriate the utopian desire latent in 'I Know When I'm Going Home,' and so adapt it to a purpose in their own music that is fundamentally Afrofuturist. The cultural texts rewritten within 'True Believer' thus provide an optimistic counterpoint to the album's condemnation of slavery and its neoliberal analogues. Although the past is deplorable, the future is yet to be written, and utopian desire is a potent tool with which to write it.

## Conclusion

Despite his perplexing situation, the passenger of *Splendor & Misery* is able to reclaim both a sense of individual autonomy and a sense of resolution through his careful reformulation and reinterpretation of his cultural heritage. This ultimately leads him to realise that there is no sense to the universe, just as there is no divine logic to his having become separated from his species and home planet, and he finally elects to attempt to move away from 'history [...] this time-bound conscience' (A Better Place). By rewriting a cultural tradition of narrative—as both *Splendor & Misery* and its human protagonist do—Afrofuturism forms a prospective literature that interrogates racial difference, and establishes itself as an enduring voice of the African and Afrodiasporic future.

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# Vibranium, Nigerium, and the Elements of a Pessimistic Afrofuturism

Kate Harlin

In his debut short fiction collection, *We Won’t Fade Into Darkness*, Nigerian writer TJ Benson imagines a post-apocalyptic Nigeria. Several of the stories trace the apocalypse to the same inciting moment: the release of a previously unknown element dubbed Nigerium into the air, after its discovery deep beneath the Nigerian soil where crude oil had been completely extracted. Taking a single story from Benson’s collection—“Jidenna”—as my example, in this essay I will explore *WWFID*’s technologically advanced but politically pessimistic vision of an African future. Furthermore, I will use another ostensibly Afrofuturist work from 2018, Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* adaptation, to consider the place of Afro-pessimism within the paradigm of Afrofuturism.

*We Won’t Fade Into Darkness* was released by Parrésia Books, a small Nigerian press, in 2018. Benson, a writer and photographer based in Abuja, has gained notoriety within Nigerian literary circles, but is not (yet) known to an international audience. His collection is specifically located within Nigeria, rather than a vague or fictionalized African city, and this specificity of place is especially crucial to his story “Jidenna.”

## Pessimistic Afrofuturism?

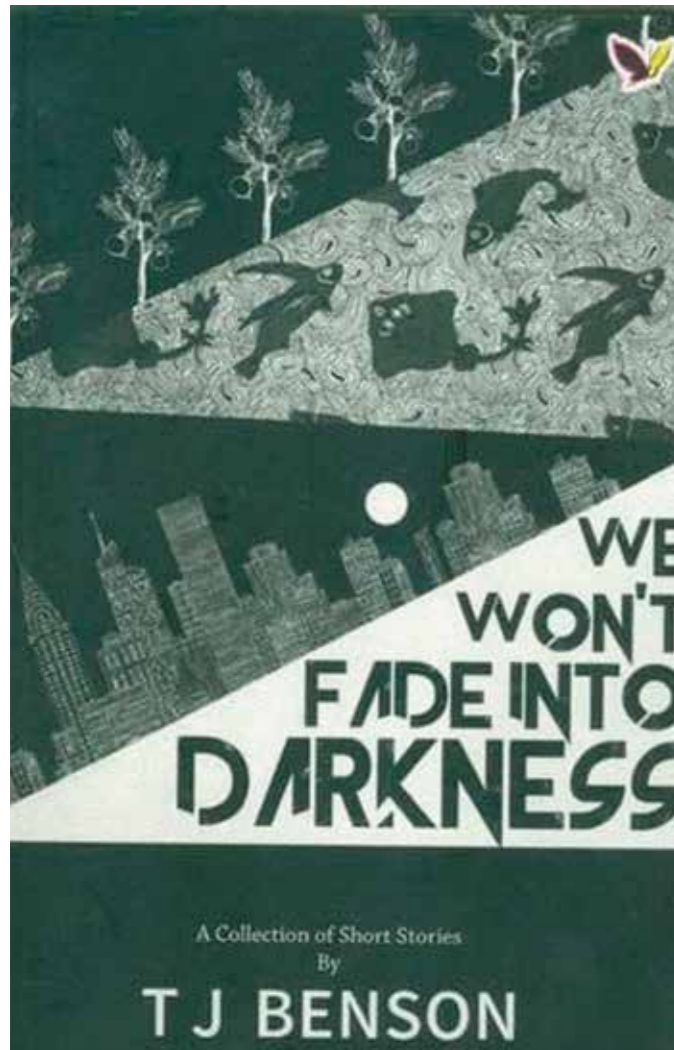
“Jidenna” is titled for the young man at its center, but the story’s true protagonist is Jidenna’s unnamed “Father.” The two live in an improvised shelter built into the crumbling Nyanya Bridge in a post-apocalyptic version of the Nigerian capital of Abuja. The story-world is in many ways a hyper-

bolic imagining of inequality and social segregation in an African city: post-apocalypse, futuristic technology coexists with poverty and political tyranny. In the case of “Jidenna,” women have gained control of and developed reproductive technology to the extent that men are rendered biologically unnecessary. The matriarchal regime, led by a series of woman rulers referred to only as “Mama,” has subjugated men into mainly domestic and reproductive roles within The Citadel, forcing those men who do not comply (including Jidenna’s father) into hiding. Struggling to cope in this post-apocalyptic society, Father has grown addicted both to alcohol and to his Zivini, an augmented reality<sup>1</sup> helmet that infuses the user’s blood with a less dangerous form of the Nigerium isotope, allowing him to travel to the past, apparently by using their genetic material.

There are two distinct and potentially contradictory terms that can both be useful in understanding “Jidenna,” *Black Panther*, and the resonances between them. Afro-pessimism is a critical paradigm that values the interrogation of racist and imperialist structures in society, but is skeptical as to whether dismantling them is an achievable goal. Jared Sexton explains it thus:

*“Afro-Pessimism is thus not against the politics of coalition simply because coalitions tend systematically*

<sup>1</sup> I am using “augmented reality” rather than “virtual reality” here because the text does invite us to read Father’s Zivini trips as (at least somewhat) real and not manufactured illusions.



*to render supposed common interests as the concealed particular interests of the most powerful and privileged elements of the alliance... [But also] because coalitions require a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition."*

In other words, Afro-Pessimism seeks to critique politics based around a "we" — even the best kind of "we," made up of marginalized people united in the pursuit of justice. In any identity-based coalition there will almost always be some contingent that is relatively marginalized, so that even when the coalition succeeds, it simply succeeds in replacing one unjust system with another. Moreover, each of us has many aspects to our identity, and a coalition always demands a suppression of some of these aspects so that, as Sexton puts it,

"there is in effect always another intervention to be made on behalf of some aspect of the group excluded in the name of the proper." Nevertheless, the Afro-Pessimist paradigm is not defeatist. Nor does it argue that working together is futile. However, it is a powerful tool for analyzing the shortcomings of movements predicated on liberating marginalized people, especially global Black populations.

By contrast Afrofuturism, an aesthetic genre and movement first named by Mark Dery in 1993, is often seen as an optimistic antidote to more pessimistic movements in African and diasporic literature. However, "Jidenna" does not view technology as a cure-all for Nigeria's troubles. For example, as he flees from the scene of a crime, Father notes that "[t]he new government could not afford surveillance cameras but they had heat sensors calibrated to detect the warmth of a mosquito" (Benson 42), suggesting that the surveillance state and budgetary shortfalls both continue into the distant future. As Dery suggests in his initial theorization of Afrofuturism, "Isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?" (Dery 180). In other words, for Dery and other Afrofuturists, there is a paradoxical relationship to the future: while it is incumbent upon Black people to imagine a future in which they are the center, the very powers of the imagination are already contaminated by colonialism, slavery, and capitalism; furthermore, there is a great difference between imagining a future and bringing it about. Indeed, for Afrofuturists, technology in and of itself has never been an answer to the oppression of Black people: as Dery further notes, "African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassible force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies" (180). As such, there is perhaps an inherent cautious optimism in works of Afrofuturism that aesthetically separates them from other works of African and Black science fiction.

The techno-dystopia of "Jidenna" may not immediately appear to fit such a definition; however, several aspects of the story allow for an Afrofuturist reading. First, the Zivini machine, which Father uses to travel back into his familial history, brings "Jidenna" into the realm of Afrofuturism. For example, when questioning the reality of his Zivini experiences, Father reflects that, "Once he had unintentionally returned to the past as the bringer of rain, a god of an ancient community that did not wear clothes. Had this really happened? Had a man once lived with a woman as husband and wife in a home? He laughed at himself" (Benson 50). The Zivini trips fulfill a desire that is also embodied in *Black Panther's* Wakanda—the desire to access a usable past untouched by colonialism. The technology of the Zivini, which seems to require pre-colonial African DNA for such time-travel, allows only those with genetic ancestral claim to pre-colonial Africa to access it. Indeed, it is the experiences and ingrained memories of pre-colonial West African village life and family structures that I argue offer Father the hope necessary to sacrifice himself, in order to facilitate Jidenna's escape at the end of the story. The technology of the story enables both authoritarianism and the hope to rebuild and start anew.

Furthermore, while the extreme inequality of the city reproduces many features of colonial and postcolonial oppression and autocracy, the structure of the government in "Jidenna" subverts expectations surrounding gender and patriarchy. Having acquired the technology to control reproduction, the women of the story finally have a radical autonomy over their own bodies and families; however, the strict controls they put in place around sex and reproduction work to essentially disenfranchise all men. Thus rather than being liberatory, reproductive freedom creates even greater distance between the genders, and queer, gyno-centric families both threaten and reproduce the hold of heteronormative patriarchy over society.

The Zivini is also attended by a complex set of politics, whose progressive possibilities are highly questionable. Father is addicted to it, for instance:

*"The man was high on the blood of his ancestors, falling in love with*

*Ifeoma, a pre-colonial, pre-slave-trade... With Zivini and controlled imagination, the father could visit any point in time in the experience of his ancestral line. Tech hawkers who made new modifications every other year warned that consecutive use could cause insanity."* (34).

Later, it is revealed that Ifeoma's village is being tormented by slave-catchers, undermining the Utopian nostalgia this first scene in the Zivini suggests. Certainly, the reader knows that there is no historical moment at which the imperialist patriarchy offers true comfort and stability to the whole society; thus, what can at first read as a reactionary anti-feminist story, with its caricatures of powerful, cruel, man-hating women, is better read as a text that sees inequality and exploitation as continuous from the past into the future, an Afro-pessimistic (re)telling of a story that would have seemed to hold progressive promise to many of those living it.

## Vibranium Independence

Clearly, the tension between futuristic tech and the distribution of power and resources is one that is foundational to Afrofuturism. One particular point of comparison WWFID invites is to another cultural product visible in 2018, Marvel's *Black Panther*. Whereas the autocracy of "Jidenna" is built on the toxicity of a fictional element, *Black Panther's* Wakanda owes its prosperity to the fictional element Vibranium. Certainly, *Black Panther* did not begin as an Afrofuturist text; the superhero first appeared in Marvel comics in 1966, and as the creation of white comics artist Jack Kirby, "*Black Panther* is less of an Afrofuturist work than a neatly commoditized Marvel comic which rides on the coattails of popular black culture, and a popular ability to perform 'being lit', more generally" (Marco 4). Yet even in the Sixties the radical potential of the character seemed clear to fans, as critic Brent Staples explains:

*"The comic, as first introduced, was not the least bit radical in the political sense—and not even self-consciously black—but it had a genuinely radical subtext. The Black Panther's alter*



**Black Panther (2018)**

ego was T'Challa, a highly educated king of the mythical African kingdom of Wakanda, which had never been colonized by foreign powers and was the most technologically sophisticated country in the world. (To underscore the country's prowess, King T'Challa introduces himself to the *Fantastic Four* by giving them a vehicle that runs on magnetic levitation.) This portrait begs to be read as a critique of both the western slave trade and the prevailing attitudes of superiority through which Westerners have long viewed Africans." (Staples)

Indeed, a letter to Marvel in the 1970s, during the Black Panther's second iteration in the *Jungle Action* comics, a fan criticizes the strip and its hero for not leveraging Wakanda's great material and technological wealth to improve the lives of the average African:

"The Panther is a dirty, ruthless exploiter of the people. How else do you explain the incongruity between that nifty multi-million dollar palace of his and the grass huts his subjects live in? Such a squandering of the tribal fortune is unthinkable by one so supposedly noble as the Panther has been made out to be. So let's see him spending some of those billions on schools, running water, electricity and generally improving people's condition, huh? Remember, this is supposed to be a super-scientific jungle kingdom." (Jungle Action 10: letters, qtd. in van Dyk 476).

Indeed, it is a similar conflict that serves as a central plot point in Ryan Coogler's 2018<sup>2</sup> film adaptation. Furthermore, the answer at which

<sup>2</sup> By the time the Black Panther property reached Ryan Coogler, it had been largely reappropriated and reimagined through an Afro-centric lens, particularly by Christopher Priest, who wrote *Black Panther* in the 1990s and early 2000s. Brent Staples notes that Priest "decided to treat T'Challa as more of a king than a superhero and gave him the internal life of a military and diplomatic strategist. The decision to immerse readers more deeply in Wakandan mythology also paid creative dividends."

T'Challa arrives in the 2018 film closely resembles the suggestion from the aforementioned fan: a social outreach center established to educate and uplift Black people, especially children, in Oakland, California. Presumably many more centers are opening all around the world. Thus, the Afrofuturism offered by Coogler's *Black Panther* is not of radical liberation or wealth redistribution achieved by Wakanda's Vibranium reserves and technological exceptionalism; instead, it is a neoliberal fantasy that largely preserves the global status quo.

Returning now to the discussion of "Jidenna," it is tempting to read Vibranium as a direct inverse or foil to Nigerium. The former offers hope for a prosperous future while the latter is toxic and renders the future nearly unimaginable by destroying human reproductive organs, literally preventing a future of the race. In this futuristic Abuja, if a man were to wander outside without his "cancer diaper," then "the pure Nigerium in the air would poison his sperm, and his whole reproductive system would rot" (Benson 35). Indeed, even the provenances of the two elements are seemingly oppositional: Nigerium from even further below the ground than the deepest oil reserve, and Vibranium from a meteorite that struck Wakanda 10,000 years ago. However, whereas the relationship between the "Utopic" Wakanda and the fallen Nigeria of Benson's works may at first seem completely opposed, the dystopia of "Jidenna" offers a more complexly imagined future than its bleak premise might suggest.

### Reproductive Technology as Power

The power of the matriarchal autocracy of "Jidenna" differs from the kind of celebratory Afrofuturism of something like *Black Panther*. Since its very inception, Afrofuturism has been diasporic, and even a primarily African American movement, and one that continues to center the West by focusing predominantly on the afterlives of slavery, especially in the US. Referring to the newfound celebration and commodification of Afrofuturist texts in Europe, Darlene Marco notes that, "Celebration of Black exceptionalism and black trauma from predominantly Western centers means that... we are still, traditionally and

predominantly, taught and understood to think from the West as center" (1). "Jidenna" avoids this trap by imagining a Nigeria insulated from extra-national or Western intervention. In fact, when Jidenna decides to escape life in hiding, his father finds that he is trying to escape over the Gembu Plateau into neighboring Cameroon. Not only is this interesting because it imagines a futuristic Africa that maintains its national borders, Jidenna's plan implies that even the toxic airborne element Nigerium obeys such imaginary lines.

This is but one of several ways in which the apparently subversive Citadel matriarchy simply reproduces heteronormative capitalist patriarchy. Father recalls a local legend wherein a supposed criminal against the regime is apprehended: "He was taken back to the citadel where he became one of the first cadavers for experimenting post-mortem production of semen" (37). Indeed, it is through reproductive control and coercion—strategies de rigueur of the contemporary patriarchy—that Mama is able to keep control. Men, including Jidenna, are consistently dehumanized in the text, valued solely for their reproductive potential, in grotesque parodies of the way women's bodies are currently policed. Father recounts at one moment that "if he did not man up soon, [Jidenna] would be pumping babies in one of those skyscraper apartments" (35). Furthermore, recalling his past as a Husband to Mama, Father describes how "[p]art of the training for males involved a mandatory course on childbirth to prepare them for fatherhood. When he told her she had delivered them a son in the maternity ward, he saw victory and conquest where there should have been tenderness, and she corrected him that she had born the nation, and not he a son" (53). The militancy of this moment is a nationalist and imperialist fantasy that simply swaps dialogue between men and women, but does nothing to undermine patriarchal structures.

It is here that *Black Panther* and *We Will Not Fade Into Darkness* refract and reveal that they are neither utopian nor dystopian texts, but rather exemplify the benefits of reading through an Afro-Pessimistic lens. Whether intentional or not, both Coogler's *Black Panther* and Benson's "Jidenna" offer technologically advanced futures that reproduce oppression and inequality, either

on the local or the global level. In *Black Panther*, Wakanda is a far more just society than many others—particularly the U.S.—while it remains in isolation. However, the establishment of “social outreach” and “science and knowledge exchange” programs in the U.S. with Wakan-dan money does little to dismantle racist white supremacy in the many other powerful institutions of the United States and the rest of the world. Rather than a system of reparations that returns the plundered wealth of Africa to its inhabitants<sup>3</sup>, the film seems to offer privately funded schools and other solutions that locate the “problems” of Black communities within the communities themselves. Meanwhile, “Jidenna” imagines a future ruled by African women, yet the African women’s goals seem to be the same controlling and acquisitive goals of male tyrants.

### Transnational Futures?

In Dery’s foundational Afrofuturist piece “Black to the Future,” science fiction writer Samuel Delany responds to whether Black science fiction neces-sarily comes from a Black Nationalist position:

“One of the most forceful and distinguishing aspects of science fiction is that it’s marginal. It’s always at its most honest and most effective when it operates—and claims to be operating—from the margins. Whenever—sometimes just through pure enthusiasm for its topic—it claims to take center stage, I find it usually betrays itself in some way. I don’t want to see it operating from anyone’s center: black nationalism’s, feminism’s, gay rights’, pro-technology movements’, ecology movements’ or any other center.” (189)

Delany resists the notion that science fiction ought to start from a particular political position; rather, he suggests the genre’s true power comes

from the margins. If this is true, pessimism that incorporates Afrofuturist themes and aesthetics has the potential to be incredibly powerful.

On one hand, perhaps asking a multi-million-dollar Hollywood enterprise such as *Black Panther* to be politically radical, or even particularly progressive in nature, is a misunderstanding of genre, or a misreading of the film overall. Furthermore, the film did offer unprecedented representation of Black actors and crew and a diverse mix of African aesthetics to a massive global audience, many of whom are African people themselves and often left out of or tokenized in such mainstream pop culture. On the other hand, “Jidenna,” produced on the continent by a Nigerian writer for a largely African audience, has embedded in it discourses of Afro-Pessimism while also incorpo-rating elements of the Afrofuturist aesthetic. In the final scene, Father sacrifices his life to help Jidenna escape over the bordering mountain range into neighboring Cameroon, away from the autocratic matriarchal oppression he was born into. For Benson’s story, the hope for (post-apocalyptic) Africa is transnational but still decidedly African; Jidenna’s future hinges on successfully cross-ing borders within the continent, not fleeing it. Whether Nigeria’s future is salvageable by forces within or by extranational intervention is indeter-minate at the end of the story.

By placing these two texts together, I of course don’t propose to offer any solutions to the prob-lems facing contemporary African nations or the diaspora, or to suggest that either *Black Panther* or *We Won’t Fade into Darkness* should or could offer such answers themselves. Rather, I hope this analysis reveals the ways two vastly different texts that deploy elements of Afrofuturism can be enriched using the lens of Afro-Pessimism. In what ways might hope and enthusiasm obscure the ultimately reactionary politics of *Black Panther*? Could a Western-inspired feminism, focused on reproductive healthcare access, run the risk of reproducing the same oppressive structures of patriarchy, as suggested in “Jidenna”? I argue that both of these texts invite us to turn a critical eye to all imaginings of the future, whether apparently optimistic or pessimistic.

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**KATE HARLIN** IS A PHD CANDIDATE IN HER FINAL YEAR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA. HER DISSERTATION DISCUSSES SUICIDE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION FROM AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA. HER WORK HAS ALSO APPEARED IN PRAIRIE SCHOONER, THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS, AND BUZZFEED.

3 In an early scene of the film, Erik “Killmonger” steals a Vibranium artifact from the British museum. Though he is later revealed to be working for self-inter-ested colonialist Klauw, the film does promise a more radical view on reparations and wealth redistribution than it ultimately offers.

# Afro- versus African futurism in Nnedi Okorafor's "The Magical Negro" and "Mother of Invention"

Päivi Väätänen

A dilifu Nama notes how "[i]n America, there is a dubious history of presenting Africa as a primitive and backward nation in books, television and film" (137). But with the emergence of writers like Nnedi Okorafor and films like *Black Panther*, the association of Africa with technology is changing rapidly. In this article, I discuss two short stories by Okorafor, a Nigerian-American who has based much of her fiction in Africa and has also written for Marvel Comics (most recently as the sole writer for *Shuri*). The two stories I will discuss are "The Magical Negro" (2004) and "Mother of Invention" (2018). "The Magical Negro" is a comic vignette in which the central character rebels against his subservient role, referred to in the title, and is revealed by the end of the story as a powerful Afro-Caribbean spirit. "The Magical Negro" subverts stereotypes and exposes racist conventions in the speculative genres of fantasy and science fiction. "Mother of Invention," on the other hand, severs ties with the Anglo American historical context by moving its storyworld to the futuristic, technologically advanced Nigerian city of New Delta.

During the fourteen years between the two stories, much has changed in the field of speculative fiction, and these stories reflect it. Okorafor insists in a recent *Native* interview that what she does is "Africanfuturism, not Afrofuturism" (Okolo et al. n.p.). Whereas "The Magical Negro" can be read as an Afrofuturist text in its engagement with American culture via direct critique of stereotypes and racist genre conventions,

"Mother of Invention" more strongly suggests the newer designation of Africanfuturism, rooted both geographically and culturally on the continent.

## Africa and Technology in American SF

Africa was a marigalized presence within 'Golden Age' Anglo-American science fiction, and to a large extent the decades that followed. African countries are seldom mentioned at all, still less in connection with novel social or technological developments. In a canon dominated by white Americans and Europeans, Africa was taken to represent an exotic and alien place. Mike Resnick in his 1993 introduction to *Under African Skies*, a collection of short stories about Africa, typifies this attitude when he writes that Africa "now provides thoroughly documented examples of some of the most fascinating people and societies any writer, searching for the new and the different and the alien, could hope to find" (qtd. in Saunders 402). Charles Saunders, a Canadian speculative fiction writer, criticizes Resnick's exoticization of Africa and urges black writers to take control: "We blacks have more than made our mark in the Western world's popular culture. [...] We need to provide alternatives to the stereotypes that continue to plague us within that mythology. After all, if we don't unleash our imaginations to tell our own sf and fantasy stories, people like Mike Resnick will tell them for us" (404). This is what Africanfuturist writers like Okorafor are doing. As the cultural



Nnedi Okorafor "Mother of Invention." *Slate.com*  
([slate.com/technology/2018/02/mother-of-invention-a-new-short-story-by-nnedi-okorafor.html](https://slate.com/technology/2018/02/mother-of-invention-a-new-short-story-by-nnedi-okorafor.html))

producers of SF grow slowly more diverse, people of colour have finally begun to populate narratives of the future, some of which are firmly centered on Africa.

According to many definitions of science fiction, science and technology are fundamental to the genre (see e.g. Roberts 2). It could well be that the perceived disaffinity between technology and Africa (and the African diaspora) in the racist Anglo-American imaginary also played a significant part in the exclusion of Africa from Anglo-American speculative fiction. As Samuel R. Delany notes, "[t]he flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology, and technology was like a placard on the door saying, 'boys club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!'" (Dery 188.) Delany himself, though, has frequently incorporated technology into his science fiction, becoming one of the progenitors of cyberpunk with his visions of cyborg bodies and neural inter-

faces. In addition to technology being a distancing factor, the association of science fiction and the future itself could have had a similar effect: Delany ponders that African Americans may have been "impoverished in terms of future images... because, until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past" (Dery 190-1).

During the last couple of decades, though, some progress has been made in countering these stereotypes and misuses. Isiah Lavender speculates that "[p]erhaps the ultimate dream science fiction holds out for African Americans is the prospect for freedom of social transformation through science fiction and technology" (63). This is manifested especially in Afrofuturism, an aesthetic movement in which technology, Africa, America, and science fiction all constructively converge. Africanfuturism is more independent of American discourse and hence Okorafor nowadays describes her work as belonging to this tradition. Let us first explore the concept of Afrofuturism in the context of Okorafor's earlier

story “The Magical Negro,” and then consider a shift in her work that illuminates ideas behind Africanfuturism.

Consider the question that Namwali Serpell asks in her discussion of Afrofuturism: “Whence the ‘Afro’ in ‘Africanfuturism’?” (n.p.). The term Afrofuturism is often attributed to Mark Dery, who first used it when interviewing Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose in the early 1990s. Dery described Afrofuturism as “[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180). In Dery’s definition the “Afro” prefix thus actually refers to African American, and not necessarily to the continent of Africa. Some later scholars of Afrofuturism, however, have included Afrocentrism in their definitions. Ytasha Womack, for example, describes Afrofuturism not just as a mode of signification but as basis for a critical theory:

*“an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation [...]. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.” (Womack 9).*

According to Womack, the theory’s aim is to “redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and for the future” (9). Even though Afrocentricity, as Womack mentions, is an important part of this artistic movement, Afrofuturism is nonetheless located in the diaspora and entwined with its histories, turning to science-fictional tropes of alienation, for example, to discuss the trauma of slavery in America (Eshun 298-300).

It is also worth noting that Afrofuturism applies to a wide range of cultural production, often wider than what is considered science fiction. As Isiah Lavender points out, “Africanfuturism is its own aesthetic register that ‘merely’ borrows from the

sf tradition by adopting some science-fictional motifs such as the alien encounter of time travel to explore black life—past, present, and future—as well as how technology impacts black people” (38). Afrofuturism is found in many genres, artistic mediums and critical frameworks. Science fiction is just one of many fields where Afrofuturism has reached its roots. As Womack notes, in addition to science fiction, Afrofuturism is nourished by fantasy, history, magic realism, science and traditional belief systems.

Peter J. Mauritz contemplates in his article “The Emergence of African Science Fiction” the relationship between decolonization and African science fiction, wondering whether the proliferation of African science fiction could “be understood as facilitated by a form of decolonization of SF” or, conversely, whether it could be thought of as an act of “decolonization of SF” (10). Decolonization of science fiction involves more than inclusion of new voices: it also involves recognition, criticism and dismantling of stereotypes (and ways of reading) that echo and assist (neo)colonial projects, and aims to bring forth a reconstruction of new identities and frameworks. Therefore decolonization of SF is also a relevant context for the two short stories discussed here. I’d like to suggest that Okorafor’s “The Magical Negro,” with its unflinching commentary on the genre’s lack of diversity, is actively facilitating the decolonization of genre by attacking narrative expectations in need of dismantling, whereas “Mother of Invention” is a manifestation of an Africanfuturist, decolonized narrative that offers a reconstructed identity.

### “The Magical Negro”

Okorafor’s story “The Magical Negro” plays primarily on epic fantasy tropes. As such, there is little in the way of advanced technology, and references to Africa are oblique. Nevertheless, it invites an Afrofuturist reading, especially in the sense that this story is “redefin[ing] culture and notions of blackness” (Womack 9). In her treatment of stereotypes, Okorafor employs an artistic strategy described by Shawan M. Worsley as “strategically employ[ing] pre-existing, typically racist narratives of black identity in order to dislodge them from their position of dominance” (3). The titular character is introduced to the story as an embodiment

of the racist stock character, which, according to Hughey, “often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation” (544). The trope is problematic not because of the stock figure’s impeccable insights or magic powers per se, but because of their one-dimensionality, and their compulsory auxiliary status. Okorafor herself describes this stock figure as one who “seems to have nothing better to do than help the white protagonist, who is often a stranger to the Magical Negro at first [and then] disappears, dies, or sacrifices something of great value after or while helping the white protagonist” (“Stephen King’s” n.p.). However, the Magical Negro in Okorafor’s short story revolts mid-way through the narrative, refusing to be defined by the racist stereotypes or his subservient role in a stereotypical narrative. The short narrative of “The Magical Negro” depicts two very stereotypical but different fantastic characters: Lance the Brave (called Thor in the first publication), and the Magical Negro, at first depicted from Lance’s perspective and referred to as “the African.” From the opening line, there is subversion: Lance the Brave’s bravery is immediately undermined as he is seen “panicking” on the edge of a cliff, pursued by dark shadows. He holds his long, silver-handled sword high, waiting for the shadows to reach him, but then we see “a tear falling down his rosy cheek” (91)—an image more reminiscent of a princess in distress in a fairytale than of a legendary knight or potent god preparing for battle. Later on in the story, he is described as vain and rather simple-minded, not knowing how to operate the magic amulet he possesses.

While the white hero’s mediocrity is being established, the narrative also focuses on derogative stereotypes concerning blackness. First, it exposes and exaggerates to the point of parody the negative associations of darkness that are commonly found in epic fantasy: in addition to a graphic description of the horribly painful way of devouring their victims, the dark shadows are characterized as “horrible black things,” springing from “the heart of darkness in the forbidden zone” (91)

and “leaving only rotten, filthy blackness behind them” (92) as they progress towards Lance. It is at this moment that the Magical Negro appears, and the blackness of his skin is equated with the darkness of the shadows: when Lance opens his eyes after saying his last prayer, he is startled to see that “[s]tanding before the approaching shadows was an equally dark figure” (92). Lance perceives the Magical Negro with a racist gaze, equating dark skin with darkness and evil. Seen through Lance’s eyes, the narrative describes the Magical Negro’s appearance, his lips, skin and hair as “horrible,” “deformed,” and “corrupted” (93).

At first, true to his stock character role, the Magical Negro stands between the approaching dark shadows and Lance, and tries to help the white protagonist by explaining how to use the amulet. Lance is unable to concentrate or understand what his savior is telling him, and, due to his inaction, the shadows reach the Magical Negro, and start to devour him. This is a turning point. Instead of sacrificing himself for Lance, the protagonist gets rightfully angry: “My ass comes here to save his ass and after I tell him what he needs to do, I get sixed? Whatchu think I am? Some fuckin’ shuckin’, jivin’ happy Negro still dying for the massa ‘cause my life ain’t worth shit?” (93). Saving his own life, he shoves Lance off the cliff.

The linguistic shift at this point in the narrative is significant: as long as the Magical Negro was in his conventional narrative role as a minor self-sacrificing character, he spoke in Lance’s variety of English. The moment of mutiny is reflected in the switch to AAVE, and a sense that the Magical Negro is using language to express what he wants, how he wants it. As he takes over the narrative that was initially focalized through Lance, he becomes the one who defines his identity and its context. He picks up his black coat, top hat, smokes his cigar and “laugh[s] a wheezy laugh” (94)—all characteristics typical of a Haitian Vodou spirit Baron Samedi (Hanna 70).

To liberate himself from the role of the Magic Negro, the protagonist paradoxically embraces the title and flexes the powers of the Magic Negro. As Shawan Worsley suggests, stereotypes can be reclaimed: deployed in an elusive, resistive, détourned, and generative ways, to create works that “embody and revise stereotypical and demeaning imagery [...] to present a counter-

narrative that empowers contemporary black people" (3). The Magic Negro may not have completely transcended the system of racist stock figures, but he has come into his own as a spirit too powerful and free ever to be controlled by how others perceive him. Throwing the role of the idealized and subservient Magical Negro into the abyss with Lance, he walks away as a vodou spirit, not only replacing the white protagonist as the main character of the narrative, but orchestrating a shift in the mythological basis of the narrative's storyworld; whereas "Lance the Brave" suggests an Arthurian mythos (and "Thor the Brave" perhaps a Scandinavian one), the story ends by hinting at a collision between Afro-Caribbean mythology and the Tolkienian world of "hobbits, castles, dragons, princesses, and all that other shit." (In the first published version, this collision is less pronounced, with the epic fantasy world already mixed with modernity: "Hobbits, castles, Rastas, dragons, juke joints, princesses, and shit").

Just before he strolls away into the forest to begin adventures of his own, the Magical Negro breaks the fourth wall. In a metafictional turn, he makes a direct address, giving the reader heads up that the genre world with its racist tropes will soon be made over: "All this bullshit you readin' is 'bout to change. The Magical Negro ain't getting his ass kicked around here no more" (94). Okorafor is implying through this character that the time for the racist stereotypes is up and that African and Afrodiasporic traditions will be marginalised in the genre no more.

### "Mother of Invention"

"Mother of Invention" (2018) narrative shares several features with the "Magical Negro." It too begins with a character in mortal danger: this time it is Anwuli, a pregnant Nigerian woman confined inside her AI enabled house. Instead of 'dark shadows,' the lethal danger comes in a form of quickly approaching storm bringing clouds of pollen. The grass pollen to which pregnant Anwuli, and others, are fatally allergic is an unintended consequence of genetic modification experiments. Anwuli has been betrayed by her lover, who turned out to be married with children, and who ran off as soon as he learned she was expecting his baby. The heavily pregnant Anwuli knows that "she and her baby would probably be dead

by morning" (n.p.). Like the Magical Negro in the beginning of the short story, Anwuli is marginalized by her community, ostracized and looked down upon by her family and neighbors alike because of her affair with a married man. The unlikely salvation here too comes from a character that sheds a subservient role, breaks with prevailing SF stereotypes, and assumes independent, positive agency; but in this case, the character in question is Obi 3, the AI that is controlling Anwuli's smart home. It is possible to draw parallels between the Haitian Vodou spirit that becomes embodied in and thus saves the Magical Negro and AI 'spirit' of the house that rescues Anwuli. The epigraph to the short story is from *Changing Planes* by Ursula K. Le Guin: "Error, fear, and suffering are the mothers of invention," which sets the expectation that this short story will be about mistakes and hardship resulting in something new—and to a great degree this expectation is fulfilled. The inventions that save Anwuli and her child are made by the human and the AI working creatively together in desperate circumstances. Obi 3 has predicted the worsening of Anwuli's allergies and also her stubbornness to leave the city of New Delta for a safer climate, and had made contingency plans.

The narrative first centers on Anwuli's marginalization in her community. Her neighbor hurries away when he sees her, and "her friends [had] stopped talking to her. Even her sister and cousins who lived mere miles away blocked her on all social networks. When she went to the local supermarket, not one person would meet her eye" (n.p.). When she goes into labor and calls her parents, they do not pick up. It becomes clear that Obi 3 is the only friend and support Anwuli and the baby have. While Anwuli is certain that she and her baby will die in the storm, unbeknownst to her the smart house has prepared to protect her with fortifications and air filters, as well as modifications enabling them to rise above the storm on new "mechanized cushioning beams" and move to safety.

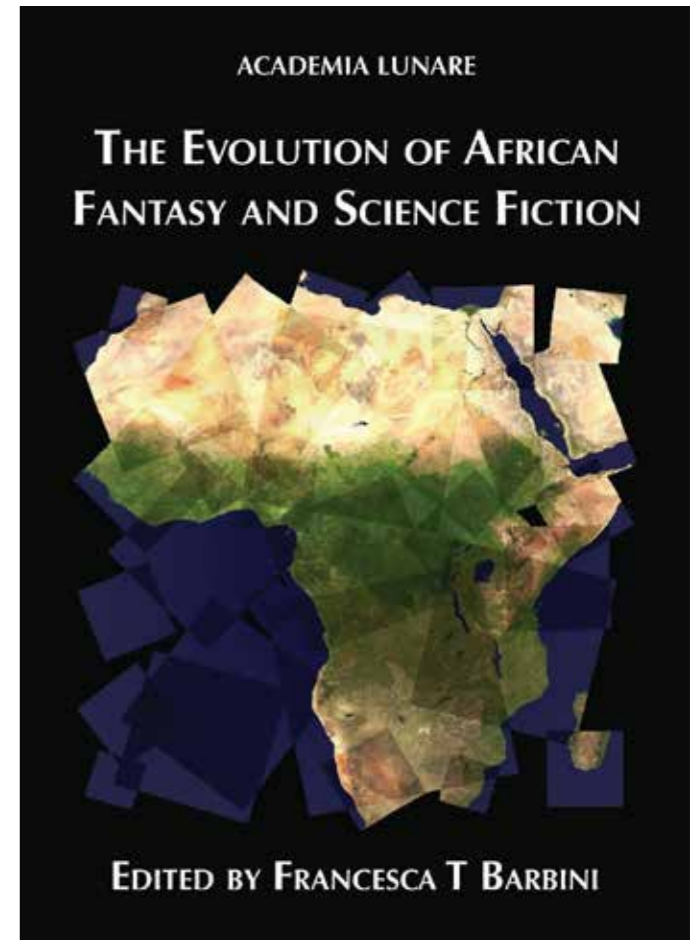
Technology in the short story is definitely African and specifically Nigerian. Both the GMOs and smart houses are represented in a way which firmly grounds them in local ecology and local history. There is no sense in "Mother of Invention" that any of the technology is an invention or an import

from the West. When *Star Wars* is mentioned, it is only to reject its relevance as a cultural context: "Obi 3 was one of her now ex-fiancé's personally designed shape-shifting smart homes. He'd built one for himself, one for his company, and this third one was also his, but Anwuli lived in it. And this house, which he'd named Obi 3 (not because of the classic *Star Wars* film but because obi meant "home" in Igbo, and it was the third one), was his smallest, most complex design."

What makes this story Africanfuturist is that Africans in the "Mother of Invention" are in charge of their own technological advances and their own technological mistakes. When international collaboration is invoked in the context of combating the poisonous GM grasses, it is with China and not any of the European or American nations. Furthermore, "Mother of Invention" does not need to engage in redefining notions of blackness, as in the African context of the narrative, blackness is the default.

As the title of the short story suggests, technology is presented as closely tied to the feminine, and, in the case of smart homes, acting on behalf of women even when built or owned by men. The smart houses that have been built by Anwuli's ex-fiancé Bayo turn out to be more sensitive to their female inhabitants' needs; he realizes "almost every aspect" of the house's mechanisms is "tuned to his wife's preferences because it was she who spent the most time here" (n.p.). The short story ends with an ominous rumbling and shaking as Bayo's marital home rises on its cushioning beams. We are left with Bayo regretting "mak[ing] these goddamn smart homes so smart," holding on "for dear life" to his couch. The ending presents the AI of Bayo's wife's house as a new threat to Anwuli and her newborn: it has taken on the jealousy of Bayo's wife and has started to pursue Anwuli's house in vengeance.

Polina Levontin notes that in Nigerian science fiction there is a notable gender imbalance between male and female scientist characters (76). On a surface level, "The Mother of Invention" contributes to that imbalance, since both of the AI houses and the technology that underpins them are attributed to a male character, Bayo. However, "The Mother of Invention" is also a story in which the significance of technologies far exceeds the intentions of inventors and owners, as they interact



with one another and with society in generative and unpredictable ways. The AIs are loyal not to Bayo but to his wife and to Anwuli. "I've listened to you," Obi 3 says to Anwuli, "One day, you said you wished someone would protect you like you protected the baby." Thus, in "Mother of Invention," it is not a question of who has the technological knowledge, but whom the technology itself chooses to serve—one is tempted to use the word empathy, as there seems to be an emotional bond between Anwuli and Obi 3. Anwuli is taken care of, nurtured, empowered and saved by the smart house. Obi 3 even suggests a middle name for the baby, forging a still closer bond between the two. Obi 3 is a gendered technology; it is identified in the story as female, and hence we can also read the "Mother of Invention" as a feminist narrative about female friendship, companionship and survival in a patriarchal society.

### Conclusion

Okorafor's two short stories explored in this article illustrate the differences between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. "The Magical Negro" (2004) utilizes the 'white gaze' through the character

of Lance and weaponizes stereotypes in American culture and uses them to expose—and explode—racist genre conventions. In the “Mother of Invention” (2018), written a decade and a half later, it is only Nigeria that matters. In the world of “Mother of Invention,” the West is left entirely outside the frame.

Ytasha Womack celebrates Afrofuturism as a force that “stretches the imagination far beyond the conventions of our time and the horizons of expectation, and kicks the box of normalcy and preconceived ideas out of the solar system. Whether it’s sci-fi story lines or radical eccentricity, Afrofuturism inverts reality. Afrofuturists write their own stories” (16). Africanfuturist narratives like “Mother of Invention” take one step further: when writing their own stories, they can cut ties with the West, with the “reality” that needs to be “inverted,” and establish a new normalcy that is not dependent on comparisons with Eurocentric, racist and colonialist traditions of Anglo American science fiction. By replacing the (Anglo) American context in their fiction with an African one, africanfuturist writers like Okorafor are expanding and radically transforming the worlds of speculative fiction to be more representative of the world we live in.

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**PÄIVI VÄÄTÄNEN** IS A DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND, AND SHE IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON HER DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ON GENRE AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION. SHE HAS PUBLISHED ON NARRATIVE ETHICS AND THE PHENOMENON OF AFROFUTURISM.

# Writing and publishing ‘complicated stuff’ in an African language

Masimba Musodza

The general perception among Zimbabwe’s intellectual class is that indigenous languages have no place in speculative fiction. The literary genre, privileging as it does tales of European technological advances over African accounts of people who can control lightning and use it as a weapon, is perceived as built on a century-long experience of colonialism. A worldview shaped by speculative fiction is therefore seen as outside what it means to be Zimbabwean.

ChiShona, my native language, is the most widely-spoken language in the country, conflating the majority of its speakers with a recently constructed ethnic group called “Shona.” The European missionaries literally invented it, elevating a dialect of Western Kalanga into a written language. Other indigenous languages also spoken in Zimbabwe include SiNdebele, ChiChewa (which was brought by migrants from what is now Zambia and Malawi), TshiVenda, isiXhosa, SeTswana, Tonga and SeSotho. Of these, only SiNdebele has a large and dynamic corpus of literature, while most of the others have to make do with books published in neighbouring countries.

The missionaries encouraged literary works in ChiShona, but only as long as they did not attract the disapproval of the political authorities. Besides folk tales, there emerged novels about pre-colonial life, particularly the struggle for power between a tyrannical usurper and a legitimate pretender who survived a massacre of his family, and learnt how to use a spear from a wise old man. The late Archbishop Patrick Chakaipa’s *Karikoga*



*Gumiremiseve* (“Karigoka of the Ten Arrows”), the first published novel in ChiShona, is of this genre. Then came the cautionary tales, such as Chakapia’s *Garandichauya* (“Wait, I Shall Return”) and A.C. Moyo’s *Ziva Kwakabva* (“Be Mindful of Where You Came From”), which warned young men against becoming dissolute upon moving to the cities in search of their fortune. It often took the wrath of the *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits) to manifest before the young man would realise his folly and seek reconciliation with his community. After Independence, literature in ChiShona often focused on the Chimurenga, the guerilla war that had led to Independence: *Zvairwadza Vasara* (“It Hurt Those



Who Remained Behind”) by G.H. Musengezi, *Mutunhu Unemago* (“The Impregnable Fortress”) and others became required reading in school.

But the only speculative fiction available to me as a boy was Western, or Japanese cartoons. There were two works of literature featuring African settings and SF topics such as encounters with extraterrestrial beings: *Gold of the Gods* by Erich Von Daniken, and *UFOs: African Encounters* by a Zimbabwean, Cynthia Hind. But these were not the sort of books you could expect to find in just any school or household.

Zimbabwe’s inherited education system emphasised the power of language to entrench socio-economic division and aspiration, and has directed how literature in ChiShona ought to be received by the different social and economic groups, including those living abroad. There were the so-called Group A schools, which had, under the colonial regime, been reserved for Whites, with a few set aside for Coloureds (“Mixed Race”), Asians, and other peoples who were not considered White but were not Black either. Then came

the Group B schools, which were located in the Black townships near the cities and towns. At the bottom were the rural schools.

Alongside these were the boarding schools run by missionaries, which drew students from all the other backgrounds. Those diverse backgrounds were reflected in the reading tastes of the students. I was delighted that the mission boarding school I attended for my secondary education had in its library many titles on space exploration, cryptozoology and other subjects dear to the heart of any SF pundit, and also classic science fiction novels such as Errol Collins’ *Mariners of Space*. But I was one of the few who read these.

However, what set the students of these different schools apart was not the facilities or location, but the use of English. A “good accent,” the so-called Nose Brigade, characterises a product of a Group A school. The term comes from the ChiShona expression *kutaura Chirungu chemumhuno*—to speak English through the nose—because our ancestors thought that the strange sounds of English were being made through the long noses of the British invaders. So, to “speak English through the nose” is to have a European accent, to be “well-spoken.”

English language speculative fiction, thus, becomes characterised by policy-makers, literary critics and journalists as an elitist genre, one which might appeal to the Nose Brigade set, but has nothing to say to the masses of Zimbabwe. It is generally assumed that pundits of African language speculative fiction cannot, therefore, possibly exist. If they do, there is really no point to them any more than there is to a skiing club in Yemen. As Nigerian movie director Tshidi Chikere told Nnedi Okorafor:

*“Science fiction will come here when it is relevant to the people of Africa. Right now, Africans are bothered about issues of bad leadership, the food crisis in East Africa, refugees in the Congo, militants here in Nigeria. Africans are bothered about food, roads, electricity, water wars, famine, etc., not spacecrafts and spaceships. Only stories that explore **these** everyday realities are considered relevant to us for now.”*

However, I would argue that speculative genres have the potential to explore African realities. My own novel *MunaHacha Maive Nei?* explores themes of identity, environmental issues, and neocolonialism in the form of an international corporation colluding with corrupt local officials to carry out illegal bio-engineering experiments.

Despite the “othering” of the product of the Group A education system, attitudes towards vernacular languages among the other two groups are similarly disparaging. The person who is awkward in an environment where English prevails is a popular trope in comedy in ChiShona. Many Zimbabweans take it as an affront to be addressed publicly in their own language, as if the speaker assumed that they were not smart enough to hold a conversation in English! I recall an incident where a student at Malborough High School dropped her satchel on the bus and a ChiShona novel was among the contents that fell out. She scooped it back in first before the sandwiches, and I don’t think she would have looked more mortified if it had been a porn magazine instead of a mere novel.

This is the world in which I have opted to write speculative fiction in ChiShona! A world in which many readers and publishers alike do not consider ChiShona a language well equipped to deal with subjects such as bio-technology, space exploration, AI, etc. Publishers and literary critics often suppose these subjects are too complex for native speakers. Anyway, those who can speak English already have access to a vast corpus of literature on such subjects. So, for many years, there were no takers in the publishing industry.

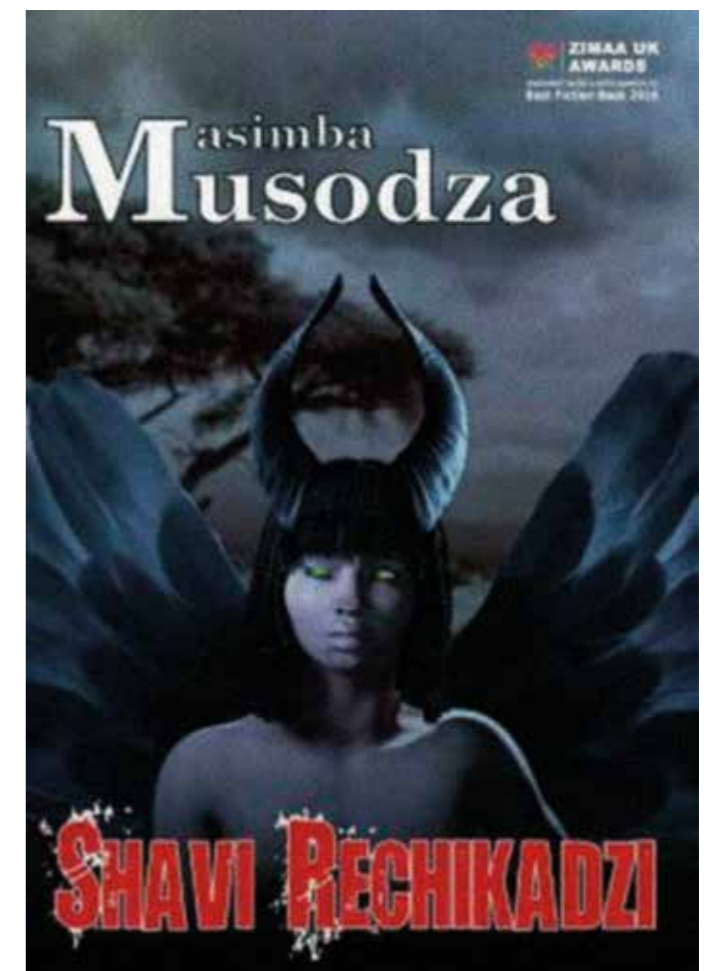
When I wrote *MunaHacha Maive Nei?*, the first unmistakably science fiction work in the ChiShona language, it was because someone had dared me to write a “complicated” story in our first language. By complicated, he meant of course a story with scientific and technological terms. I set out to prove him wrong, and came up with a long novel that depicts illegal bio-engineering experiments in rural Zimbabwe.

With *MunaHacha Maive Nei?*, I was entering new territory not only in terms of genre, but in finding readers and getting the book out to them. Print-on-Demand platforms such as CreateSpace were not as user-friendly with ChiShona as they are with English. Kindle and other major ebook

platforms do not accommodate ChiShona. Then there is also the issue that for all our much-vaunted 98% literacy rate, Zimbabweans are not famous for buying books, certainly not ones in vernacular languages!

There is an entrepreneurial missing link that could create platforms to market and distribute literature in ChiShona. But again, the prevalent mindset that ChiShona is not a language of science and technology means that those Zimbabweans in the IT industry are not interested in creating digital tools in ChiShona. As my cousin, Chido Musodza, notes:

*“Countries such as mine have not developed new words for a while now, and this means that localised terms for WiFi, encryption, and interface (among other tech terms) are virtually non-existent in our language. If technology and the internet are going to make any inroads into developing nations, it is important to understand that technology will only be adopted*



*when the local culture and language are reflected in the interface of the tools we are expected to use."*

Giving up would be the easier option. There is already a market for African speculative fiction in English. But to do so would be acquiesce to this perception which I sought to negate when I wrote *MunaHacha Maive Nei?*—that my first language is unworthy even to fellow native speakers as a literary language.

The industrialised nations of Europe, America, and Asia have been inspired by stories of space exploration, contact with extraterrestrial beings, technological advancement, and so on. I see a similar role for speculative fiction in ChiShona and other vernacular languages for the overwhelming majority of young people in my native land and other parts of Africa for whom the world of the Nose Brigade is as many miles away as the worlds of Europe, America, and Asia. As the storyboard artist Eugene Ramirez Mapondera says,

*"Young Africans are generally brilliant academically (that's my opinion) and I believe with our own 'far-fetched' ideas we can influence the creation of machinery, tools, and unique architecture to remedy our own problems, by suggesting them through science fiction stories."*

So what's the conclusion of the matter? Speculative fiction in ChiShona is swimming frantically in turbulent currents of a debate about the status of indigenous African languages. It's a sink or swim situation. For now, I have chosen to keep paddling. At present, it seems more a labour of love than anything else. But the speculative fiction writer starts with a love of the genre. And, as I pointed out to dear cousin Chido, there are words in ChiShona for WiFi, encryption and other tech terms. To know them too, read some of my stories!

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**MASIMBA MUSODZA** WAS BORN IN ZIMBABWE IN 1976, AND MOVED TO THE UK IN 2002, SETTLING IN THE NORTH EAST ENGLAND TOWN OF MIDDLESBROUGH. HE HAS BEEN PUBLISHED IN HIS NATIVE ZIMBABWE, SOUTH AFRICA, JAMAICA, THE US, THE UK, SWEDEN, INDIA AND ONLINE, WRITING IN BOTH ENGLISH AND CHISHONA. HIS MUNA-HACHA MAIVE NEI? IS THE FIRST SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL IN CHISHONA. HE IS A CHARTER MEMBER OF THE AFRICAN SPECULATIVE FICTION SOCIETY AND WAS LISTED IN THE 100 AFRICAN WRITERS OF AFRICAN SPECULATIVE FICTION BY UK-BASED CANADIAN AWARD WINNING WRITER, GEOFF RYMAN. HIS ANTHOLOGY, THE JUNKYARD RASTAMAN AND OTHER STORIES COMES OUT LATER THIS YEAR.

# A personal perspective on South African Comics: From Superheroes to Ordinary heroes

Nick Wood

The sun darkened and the sky burned. Sirens and smoke filled the air.

I stood in my family's garden in Pinelands, Cape Town, watching the red horizon blaze and shift, as the neighbouring black townships of Athlone, Langa, and Nyanga were consumed by bullets, tear-gas, and flames. The Soweto Uprising had swept down from Jo'burg in 1976, from a

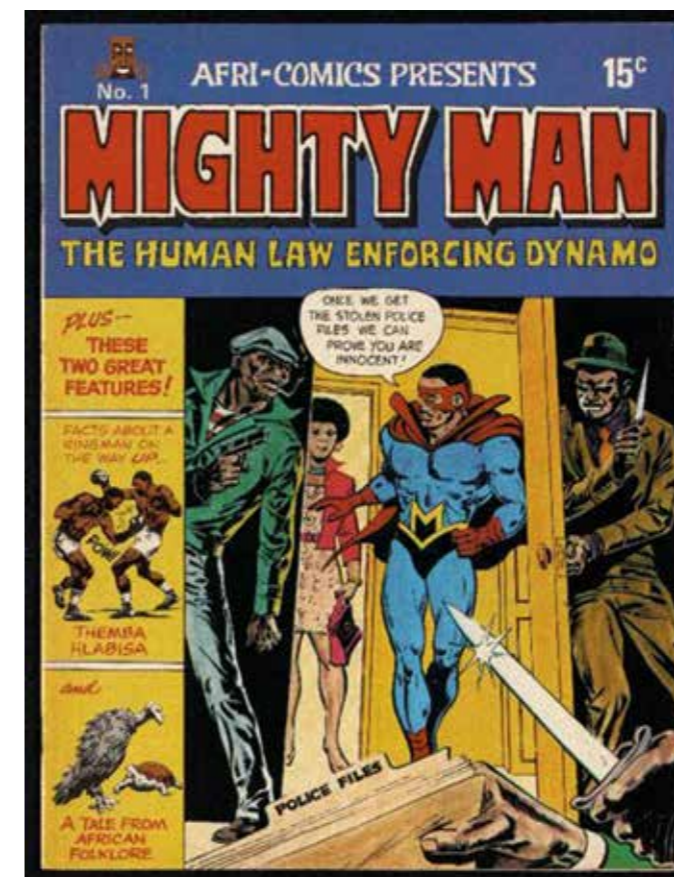
nationwide youth protest opposing the teaching of Afrikaans in schools—which had been met with brutal police killings.

To me, then, as a young white teenage male, facing military conscription, it was as if the whole world could go up in flames.

Not known to me at the time, though, was that the destruction in Soweto included the burning down of the publishing house Africom. Africom was the home of South Africa's first black comics superhero, Mighty Man.

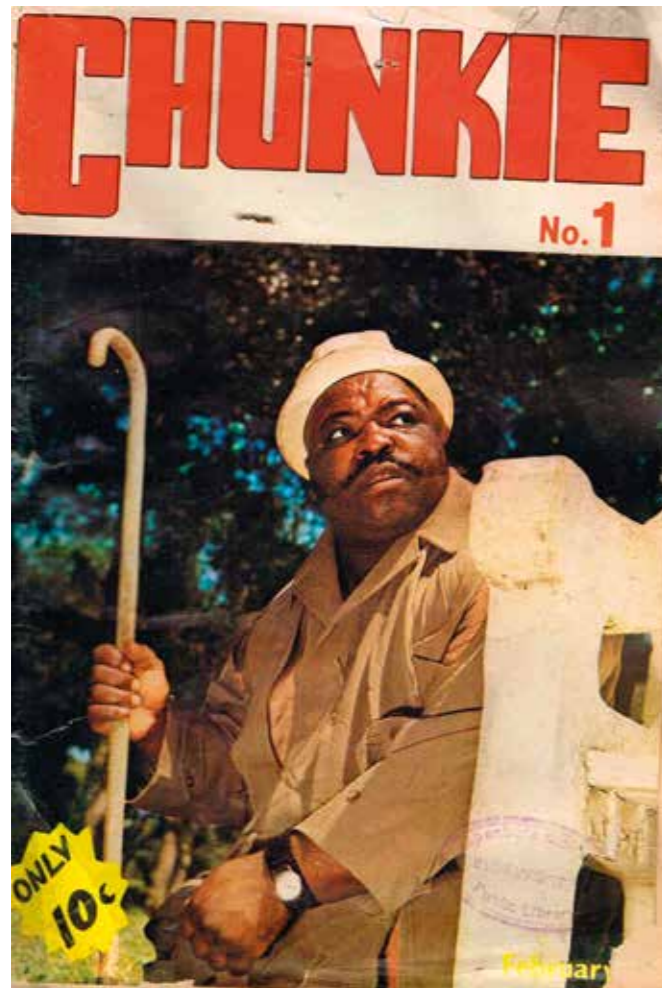
The Mighty Man stories unravelled over seventeen issues, featuring the exploits of a policeman called Danny Ndhlobo, who was injected with a secret alien serum. The serum gave him superhuman strength and speed... and he became Mighty Man.

Superheroes often have secret identities. In the case of Mighty Man, there was a lot more to the story than met the eye. *Mighty Man* was funded by the Apartheid government, with money shifted from the Defence budget.<sup>1</sup>




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<sup>1</sup> I tell a fuller version of this story on South African Comic Books, run by fellow collector George van der Riet (Wood, 2011). De Villiers (2018) has updated and extended my account for *Business Insider*, under the title 'The apartheid government created a black superhero called Mighty Man—and in 1976, black youth set him on fire.' Eleven out of seventeen of the (now very rare) Mighty Man issues can currently be read in full, online at: [idep.library.ucla.edu/afri-comics](http://idep.library.ucla.edu/afri-comics), carefully digitised by Professor William Worger at UCLA.



### South African Comics: The Past

Other far more pervasive local comic books in South Africa at the time—across Apartheid geographies—were a phenomenon known as ‘photo comics’ (also known as ‘foto novelas’ in Latin America). Instead of illustrations, they were characterised by a sequence of staged photographs with added captions and dialogues, to illustrate the scenes. They were extremely popular in South Africa from the sixties to the seventies.

“Did you ever read those photo comics they used to have in the seventies, at the cafes and corner stores in Cape Town?” I asked my partner Glenda recently.

“Oh yes,” she said, “Chunkie Charlie was my favourite.”

“Who?” I said. I was stunned. I had misspent countless hours in my local café after school, reading endless varieties of these comics. Kid Colt, Tessa, *Grens Vegter* (‘Border War Fighter’)... I thought I’d met them all.

“You know,” she said, “the clever, rotund man with the magic coat, he had all sorts of funny things in his pockets.”

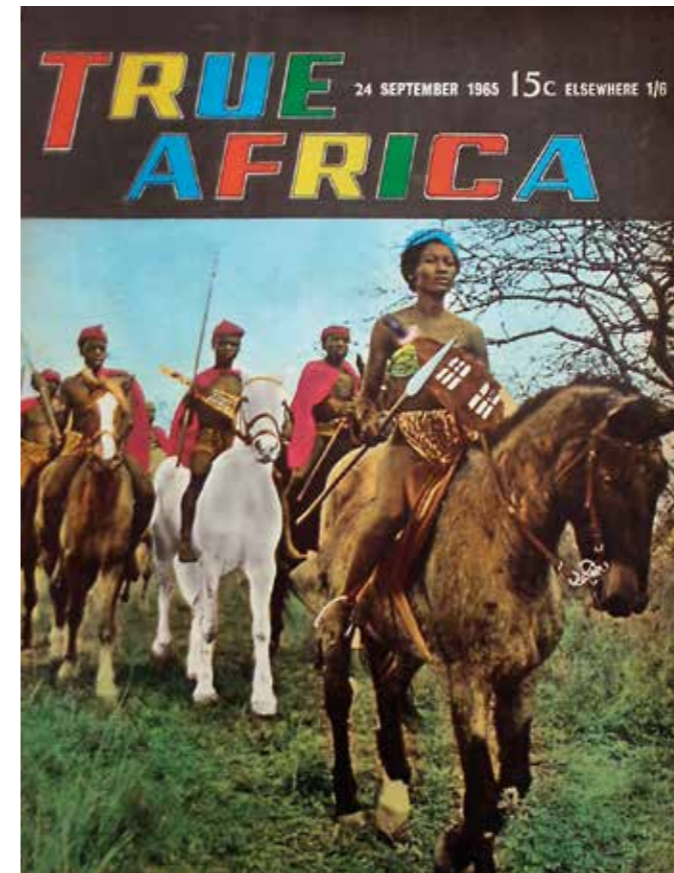
No, I didn’t know.

But then, when I listed what I had read, Glenda hadn’t seen *those* either.

How is it that my partner of thirty years and I could grow up within three miles of each other, and not recognise the comics we had each grown-up reading? The answer, of course, must have been in the rigid racialised geography of Cape Town at that time—and the dissemination of media (such as comics) along strict Apartheid corridors. Chunkie Charly was (in point of fact) black, and he first appeared in ‘True Africa’—sold in the ‘coloured’ townships of Cape Town, such as Salt River.

As for me, in the privileged neighbouring garden village of Pinelands, I was ushered wherever the white imagination might best be taken in order to reinforce the establishment: to an uncritical, unreconstructed Cowboy West, where Kid Colt gunned down ‘baddies’ and ‘the Other,’ or to the (then) South West African/Angolan border, to fight in a ‘just war against terrorists.’

As the seventies boiled into the State of Emergency eighties, small pockets of internal white resistance emerged, such as the ECC (End Conscription Campaign) and, in the form



of comics, a sequence of six titles called the Pre-Azanian Comics—or ‘PAX’—which included the work of black writers and illustrators. The title alone was a dangerous statement of purpose, since ‘Azania’ was the new name posited for a post-liberated South Africa by banned underground organisations such as the Pan African Congress.

One of the key contributors to *PAX* was Andy Mason, who has since written an excellent overview of cartoons (and some comics) in South Africa (see Mason (2010)). *PAX* was polemically political in tone and written and drawn in the style of ‘underground’ comics from the sixties counterculture in the West. Andy has also written (under his pseudonym ND Mazin) several wonderful local graphic novels, such as *The Legend of Blue Mamba*, a dark deconstruction of the Durban surf scene and beyond. The print run of *PAX* was small (300) and after reading four of the six issues, I surmised they had escaped banning on the basis that they had not been noticed.

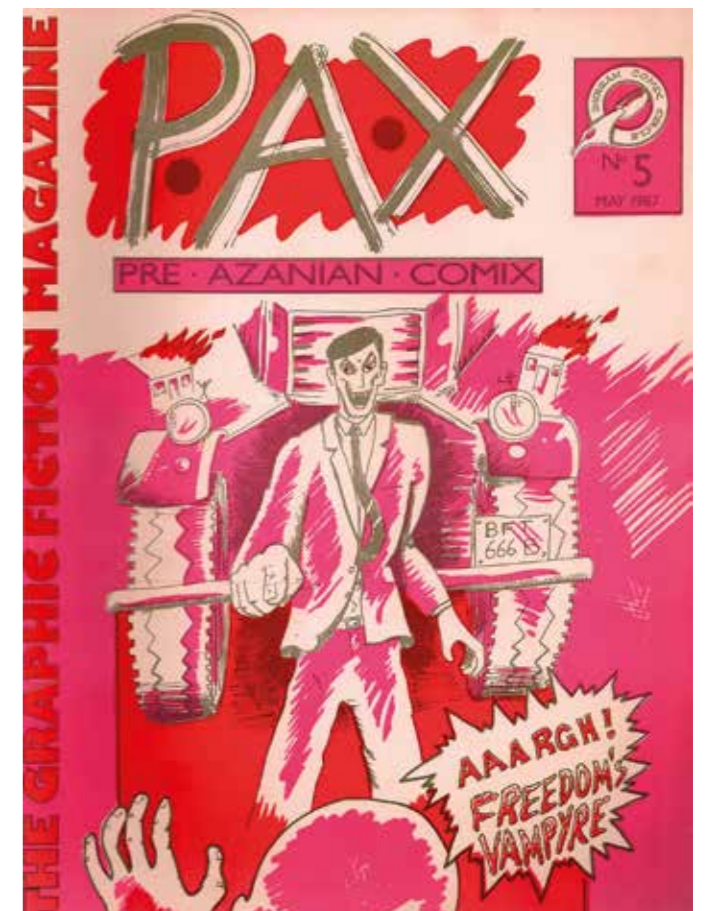
Andy also did the cover art for Roger Lucey’s ground-breaking, troubled anti-Apartheid album of the early eighties, *The Road is Much Longer*. Roger’s music career was systematically destroyed by the Special Branch, the South African secret police, who stalked and sabotaged him, and

vandalised his house in the night. (If Roger had been black, he would have been detained and interrogated, almost certainly tortured). An online documentary of these events is available for free view, entitled *Stopping the Music: A Story of Censorship in South Africa* (Lucey, 2009).

Speaking of music, one of the stories in the Nommo Award winning graphic anthology *The Corpse Exhibition* (see more below) includes a tribute to Yakhal’ Inkomo (‘The Bellowing Bull’), the brilliant jazz album released by Winston Mankuku Ngozi in 1968. As Hawkins (2018) outlines, in a fifty-year retrospective critique of this largely forgotten South African jazz gem, Ngozi’s album was a tribute to black pain, in the moment of hopelessness between various treason trials (including Rivonia, where Nelson Mandela and others were sentenced to life imprisonment) and the later consolidated rise of the Black Consciousness Movement.

And, as internal resistance grew and external sanctions mounted, the white state eventually capitulated, so that by 1994 the first democratic elections took place and Apartheid—in legislation at least—was abolished.

Fast forward to now.



So what did this black superhero do? Mighty Man took on many township villains and gangsters, but he was never considered ‘powerful’ enough—by his white creators, of course—to confront the white might of the South African government, which was tacitly hidden off page. A black superhero, then, but written and drawn by white hands—including a government sponsored collaboration from several rich American Republicans, keen to reinforce the status quo within South Africa.

Indeed, the comic’s aim was to “help educate the black man in the ways of Western society, social concerns and free enterprise,” as John McGoff, the American collaborator on the project, told *Newsweek* in 1976.

Comic books as colonising opiate of the masses.

But when it came to the Soweto Uprising, the protestors knew the tools of the state—however attractively dressed up they may have been.



**MA:** *Sophie The Giantslayer* #4 by Kay Carmichael, the latest volume in the series. It's simply intelligent storytelling and engaging art and geared towards a young female readership, a demographic too often neglected.

Sector #10, a mixed mostly science fiction anthology released every second month, which in itself is a feat, as it sticks to this schedule (mostly). Most contributors are old hands in the local comics scene, so each issue is consistently polished. Seriously in need of a publisher, though!

Kwezi Vol 4, the only local comic series with an actual publisher, and nationally distributed. The creator and chief artist, Loyiso Mkize, is an accomplished fine artist, and it shows in this labour of love. This series manages to capture the classic superhero genre but with a decidedly local flavour.

What all of the above have in common is consistency, all are series which have managed to remain afloat beyond a mere fly-off-the-cuff one-shot!

**NW:** *Do you see a trend in local comic publishing now—and for the year(s) ahead?*

**MA:** There is growth, often spurred on by comic related events throughout the year. The best trend to note is the escalation of interest from readers and an actual fanbase for many of the publications. It is heartening to see quite a few local creators selling out their inventory at the end of a show. This bodes well for the future. All that's needed is interest from publishers, so that the distribution hurdle can be overcome.

**NW:** *Tell us more about your annual comic event too.*

**MA:** As I mentioned, annual comic events give local comics a boost by providing a ready-made audience and awareness. Not to blow our own horn, but the annual FanCon show has, since the inaugural convention in 2016, given a much-needed platform to local comic creators. It now features the biggest artist alley in SA, with booths taken by artists from all over southern Africa. The 2019 event already has over 20 planned local comic launches.

With many thanks to Mahdi!

Given I have not been living in South Africa for a while, I have asked Mahdi Abrahams—proprietor of local Cape Town comics shop The Readers Den, a place I have frequented often since the early nineties—to answer a few questions on the current local comics scene.

**NW:** *What's your view on the development of local SA comics over the years?*

**MA:** It has been amazing, a definite growth in the number and diversity of comics produced over the last twenty years or so, almost all of them independently printed or published due to the lack of resources and infrastructure to support any growth, and no support from the publishing world. Also, great to see a lot of material not merely attempting to copy the American model and accompanying superhero genre. The talent in SA is incredible, particularly from artists, with writing skills still rather lacking though.

**NW:** *Over 2018, what have been the stand out local comics—and why?*



## South African Comics: The Present

The rise of local comics is linked to increased information technology access, including smart phones. So, the current South African comic book scene looks lively, but it is also somewhat hampered by the lack of bigger publishers, that could potentially add heft and distribution to the industry.

Problems around lack of publishing options sent heralded local comics writer and illustrator Joe Daly overseas. Joe has found, like some prophets of old, honour outside their country—he's published by Fantagraphics in America. Funny, surreal, smart—just read *Scrublands* for a start. The SFF novelist Lauren Beukes recently wrote a Soweto-based Wonder Woman story for DC Comics (see Beukes, 2015).

Another recent local comic I have read and been impressed by is *Mengelmoes* ('Mishmash'). This is about growing up in South Africa from the 1990s and onwards. This is a clever and often funny retrospective written by Willem Samuel who is, so I've heard, the son of the famous Afrikaans author and poet Antjie Krog.

*Soccer Warrior* by Mambo Media follows the adventures of Vusi Vuzela, from his humble beginnings growing up in a rural township, to finding success as a soccer superstar. Vusi inherited an ancient kudu horn amulet from his grandfather, which grants him the amazing spiritual powers and abilities of the ancestral guardians. Vusi accepts the responsibility of these fantastic gifts, using them to help others and to put a stop to the evil plans of the dark forces he encounters. (An intriguing South African variation of *Billy's Boots* perhaps, for those old enough to remember those stories, which migrated from *Tiger to Roy of the Rovers*?).

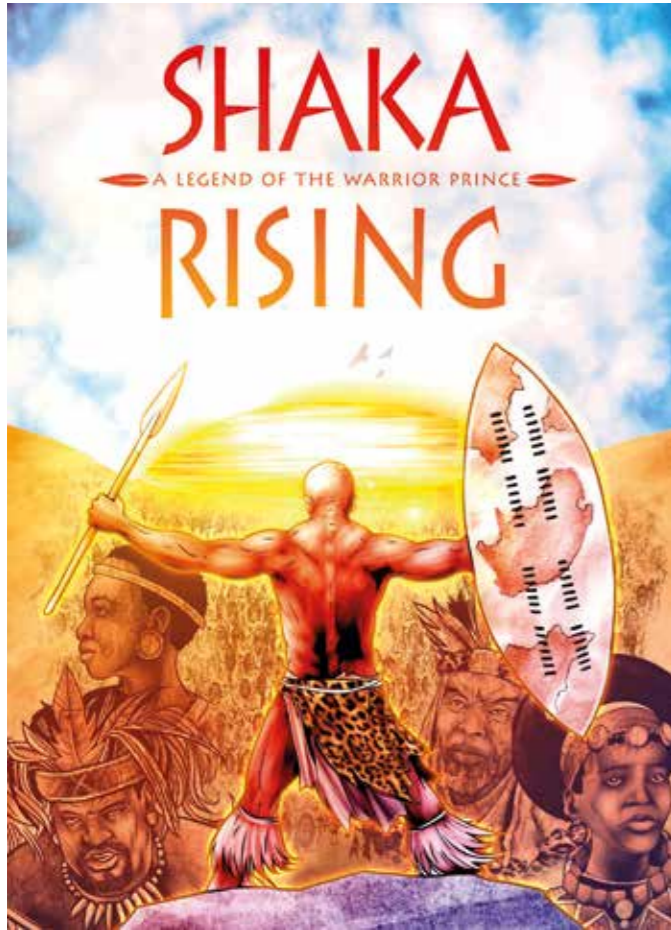
There is an interesting shift of the origin story from Mighty Man to Vusi Vuzela. Mighty Man, being written and illustrated by white men, had his beginnings in an alien serum, a scientific source story akin in some way to the origin of Captain America. Several western super-heroes have

inherited their powers inadvertently from scientific accidents or technological mishaps, such as the Incredible Hulk, Spider-Man and Daredevil. Vusi Vuzela, however, has had his powers passed on by his family and his connection to his ancestors, and his powers are spiritual in origin. This is a different epistemological tradition, but one rooted in connection and meaning, rather than the caprice of an out-of-control technological society.

And, speaking of science and differing discourses—in this case racialised—*Coloureds* by The Trantraal Brothers is a beautifully moving portrayal of life on the Cape Flats with an implicit politicized edge. Some UK readers may not appreciate that the title is not the overtly offensive and derogatory term that it would be in the UK or US, but rather names a wildly heterogeneous group of mainly Afrikaans-speaking South Africans of diverse ('non-white') heritage. But *nor* is it a completely unproblematic term in South Africa, either. My partner, Glenda, certainly hates the term, as it has Apartheid resonances, and she is angry that the main racial classifiers have been kept after liberation, as if reifying and validating the reality of 'race' during the Apartheid years.

Indeed, just recently (March 2019), a group of white academics from the University of Stellenbosch near Cape Town published an article in a Western science journal (with a considerable designated 'impact' factor), entitled: 'Age and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored (sic) South African women.'<sup>2</sup> On the back of a very small and marginalised local sample (n=60) and using the Montreal Cognitive Assessment test, already shown to have serious methodological shortcomings for the South African context, the authors infer cognitive decline/

<sup>2</sup> Boswell (2019). Letter to the Editorial Board of Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition. [awethu.amand-la.mobi/petitions/letter-to-the-editorial-board-of-aging-neuropsychology-and-cognition-1](https://awethu.amand-la.mobi/petitions/letter-to-the-editorial-board-of-aging-neuropsychology-and-cognition-1). The article has since been retracted, following a petition that meticulously exposed its methodological flaws and pointed out its overall racist underpinning.



deficit amongst these women and, by implication, beyond. HF Verwoerd, one of the main instigators of the Apartheid policies in South Africa (1948–1994), was a psychologist and an assassinated Prime Minister (d.1966), who had used such flawed, race-based research to justify separate but not equal systems; i.e. ‘non-whites’ as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water.’

One black historical figure from South Africa who went far beyond such racist stereotypes was Shaka Zulu. There is a refreshingly well-done local retelling of the life of Shaka Zulu (c.1787–1828), by Luke Molver and Mason O’Connor (2018). The warrior, king, and brilliant military innovator Shaka Zulu has been much discussed in South Africa. He built up the Zulu peoples from a small local clan to a regional ‘Empire,’ via an expansion known as the Mfecane (or ‘Crushing’), that ended up challenging even the vastly superior fire-power of the colonising British. (The ugly racist discussions and textbooks in the white school I attended in the seventies, however, referred to him as ‘a black Hitler.’ Presumably empires only carry legitimacy if they are white?).

Molver and Mason’s *Shaka Rising*, for its part, is a beautifully told, nuanced tale that retains its African centre and refuses to succumb to the White Gaze. A tale told on its own terms, but not afraid to include the ‘warts,’<sup>3</sup> which are carried by all of us, at some time or another. So yes, Shaka could be brutal, like so many of us—but he was also loyal, brilliant in diplomacy —and he strengthened the social as well as military ties within Zulu culture. So, a flawed but powerful indigenous hero. As, Molver (2018) stated: “Also, with the phenomenal success of movies like *Black Panther*, and the renewed interest around African speculative fiction in general, I believe this is a very good time to be putting out these comic books.” Indeed, the 2018 Marvel hit *Black Panther* contains at least one or two direct allusions to Shaka Zulu’s life.

Rob Malan’s *Quest and the Sign of the Shining Beast* was deservedly shortlisted for the Nommos—the African Speculative Fiction Awards—in 2018. A haunting juxtaposition of illustrations from John Cockshaw, alongside Rob’s sharp text and imagery, carry you tensely along the fraught journey of discovery.

Speaking of the Nommos, the inaugural (Graphic Novel) Nommos in 2017 was won by the brilliant *Chimurenga* (‘Struggle’) publication from Cape Town: *The Corpse Exhibition and Older Graphic Stories*. It’s a dark and beautiful mix of the surreal and the fantastic, including narrative illustrations of Ghanaian SF author Kojo Laing’s classic *Major Gentl and the Achimoto Wars* by Nikhil Singh (2018), himself also an author of note—check out his novel *Taty Went West* (2015).

And, almost finally, we started with an old black South African superhero Mighty Man<sup>4</sup> and end with an exciting new one (already mentioned by Mahdi above): *KWEZI*. This comic has been gaining a lot of traction. It’s got high production values and is an exciting development in South African comics. A young local hero written and drawn by a local talent growing in stature—Loyiso Mkize. Loyiso also drew a harrowing version of the Marikana Massacre from 2012, in *The Corpse Exhibition*.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Warts and all’ from Oliver Cromwell (England, 1599–1658), a controversial figure who asserted the rights of the English Parliament against the dictates of monarchy. His warts, however, were also many.

<sup>4</sup> Africa in Words (Lily Saint) interviewed Prof. William Worger (UCLA) on *Mighty Man*.

In addition, Zimbabwean Bill Masuku’s *Captain South Africa* has been taking off too, launched at the inaugural Comic Con Africa—see Davies (2018, including images) and Watson (2019) for more details. Captain South Africa is indeed a superhero with a difference, she uses non-violent and empathic ways of confronting issues and ‘villains,’ and discusses, amongst other topics, the failings of Nelson Mandela.

These are now black superheroes owned by black writers and not co-opted by the—still predominantly white—publishing platforms.

For, despite some good changes over the past quarter of a century—i.e. since the first democratic elections in South Africa—white privilege and gatekeeping is still a feature in areas of the local literary establishment, despite valiant efforts by many to address this. And so, back to Soweto—a Soweto no longer in flames, but the venue for the *Abantu Book Festival*, established by Thando Mgqolozana (2016) amongst others, with the aim to decolonise South African literature and celebrate black writers and readers, in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall movement (Sandwidth, Soldati- Kahambaara, & Fassalt, 2018).

Kiguru (2019) is attempting to network local ‘non-mainstream’ indigenous literary establishments, such as *Chimurenga* (above) and *Kwani?* in Kenya (amongst others) as a means of building and centralising local knowledges, discourses, and productions. This is extraordinary work being done by ordinary people to reconstruct the world in a more representative and equitable fashion.

So, finally, to a couple of the ‘ordinary superheroes’ in South Africa. Mogorosi Motshumi is the first black South African to write a graphic novel autobiography. *The Initiation* (2017) is his opening salvo in ‘The 360 Degrees Trilogy’. In it, he recounts his political awakening and involvement with the Black Consciousness Movement, during the Apartheid years. As Khan’s (2017) review stated: ‘Blame Me on History.’

Finally, in 2017 Ziphozakhe Hlobo and Lean Posch launched a comic on ‘ordinary superheroes’ in Khayelitsha, a large township in Cape Town. The comic, titled *Khazimla’s Adventures*, is inspired by Monde Sithole, “an adventurer, educational strategist, and futurist.”

The synopsis reads: “Themba grows up haunted by dreams of ‘otherworldliness’ and adventure, a complete juxtaposition to the limitations of the township gang violence he finds acceptance and excitement in. He will soon discover another world that lies beneath the surface of the dusty streets and enter a journey to the mountain of self-discovery and transformation. But, as with all fulfilling journeys, it will not be without turbulence, which he must overcome.”

For more on Ziphozakhe, read Geoff Ryman’s (2017) interview with her in *Strange Horizons*. Ryman has also got permission to publish Part One of the comic in *The Manchester Review* (Hlobo and Posch, 2018).

From superheroes to the ordinary heroes around us. As Ziphozakhe says, “Everyone has a dream,” and “before colonisation Africans were grounded in nature.” So, as we all face a natural world increasingly fraught by fire and climate catastrophe, may the ‘ordinary’ people of the world—which includes the marginalised and dispossessed—unite, both in collective dreams and collective action for a better, fairer, and greener world.

For now, indeed, the whole world is going up in flames, in a massive conflagration Amitav Ghosh (2016) has hitherto referred to as *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh perceived we will indeed look ‘deranged’ to future generations confronting climate catastrophe, in our current institutional and blinkered climate denial or minimisations. That is, unless enough of us start waking up to the Extinction agenda and the thunder of truth from a sixteen-year old Swedish ‘girl’. An ordinary hero, for our extraordinary times. Of such, are great comic books made.

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# AfroSF Vol 3 edited by Ivor W. Hartmann

Andy Sawyer

## From The BSFA Review

Bookended by two very strong stories which show just what can be done with the “standard” sf theme, *AfroSF* returns with a third volume which takes a specific theme (“space”) and explores what it means, from out-and-out epic to stories of simple poignant humanity.

“Njuzu” (T. L. Huchu) combines sf and traditional story in a way which succeeds in bringing out vivid imagery and emotional strength. Following an accident on Ceres, the narrator takes part in traditional rites to appease the spirit-being who has “taken” her son. There’s a lot in this story, which hinges on her being “forbidden” to cry, as this will ensure the entrapment of the lost boy. There is also the element of mutual resentment with her partner. As I read it, the ending of the story is an acceptance of the necessity of giving up comforting myths of hope, in order to keep hold of memory and love. Not all the stories that follow have the same sense of really experimenting with different interpretations of the fantastic, with sentences and half-descriptions suddenly causing you to think about what is being said, but Huchu is a strong writer to begin with.

In Cristy Zinn’s “The Girl Who Stared at Mars,” the narrator, on an expedition to Mars, takes refuge in simulations, encountering the memory of a family tragedy. A crew member, trapped by his own inability to convince himself that their experience is “real,” makes things worse, but Amahle successfully confronts her own hesitations. Humanity is not lost simply because we are not on Earth: instead, Amahle is moving from

one state to another (evoking, in a political sense, diaspora rather than colonisation?) yet keeping her sense of belonging.

“The EMO Hunter” by Mandisi Nkomo is ambitious but hazy; involving a post-Earth scenario and an “Earth Mother” religion. It’s not entirely clear whether the “Earth Mother Knights” (of which Joshua is one) are the good guys or whether Joshua’s wife Miku, who activates a clone to destroy him, is combating tyranny or trying to deal with her failing marriage. In contrast, “The Luminial Frontier” (Biriam Mboob) takes the flavour of space opera, which infuses several of the stories (not always to their advantage) and applies it to something larger. A ship in Luminial Space is messaged by the police. The crew are clearly involved in something illegal, and this means having to dump their cargo: something that, according to the religious ideas that infuse their views of the Nothing around them, is sacrilegious. And the cargo, we soon find out, is slaves. Later parts take place within a kind of dreamworld, following a time-paradox. The final part of the story is miles away from the beginning, and Mboob is clearly a writer who has a firm grip upon what he wants to say and how he wants to say it.

This strange story, effectively mingling the science and spiritual aspects of the scenario, is followed by Gabriella Muwanga’s “The Far Side.” A spaceship captain smuggles his five-year-old daughter onto his ship despite a ruling that her asthma means he has to leave her behind. It’s story that features simple human relations:

perhaps over-sentimental but calming the more experimental aspects of the collection. Wole Talabi’s “Drift-flux” is in many ways, a standard “Federation/Confederacy” trope of the type that space-opera writers are too fond of and, at times, marred by excessive infodumping. The Igodo witnesses the explosion of another ship, the Freedom Queen. Orshio and Lien-Adel are “arrested” on suspicion of the bombing, but it soon becomes clear that there is an ulterior motive. “Drift-flux” would probably make a better tv episode than a short story, though that is not so much a criticism as an acknowledgement of the way the strengths of its pace, action, and well-imagined scenario overcome its faults.

Possibly the most effectively-written story is “Journal of a DNA Pirate” (Stephen Embleton). The narrator is part of an experiment in human transformation, an experiment which is actually a terrorist enterprise. With its fusion of discontent, anger, and fleeting human contact, this, along with “Njuzu” and Mame Bougouma Diene’s closing story, best gives what transforms entertaining fiction into something memorable: a genuine sense of difference in worlds carefully and coherently imagined. For “formal” rather than “aesthetic” reasons several of the following stories don’t work like this. “The Interplanetary Water Company” (Masimba Musodza), in which the secret of a super-technology is hidden on a planet dislodged from its orbit, reads like the first chapter of a longer work. Dilman Dila’s “Safari Nyota: A Prologue” certainly is such. It is the space-opera beginning of a multimedia project with great potential; one

that intrigues and invites you to follow it up, but about which snap judgement is unwise. “Parental Control” (Mazi Nwonwu) and “Inhabitable” (Andrew Dakalira) are competent but flawed. In “Parental Control”, the son of a human father and an android mother suffers taunts and prejudice until taken up again by his father. The father-son relationship works effectively. The “revelation” at the end doesn’t, though the story remains an effective use of science fiction to talk about painful aspects of everyday humanity. In “Inhabitable,” explorers find aliens needing their help, which they give. The action leads, however, to an unsettling end. Basically, competent traditional sf, the story needs room to breathe to become more.

Mame Bougouma Diene’s “Ogotemmel’s Song” is the closing “bookend” strong story of the anthology. Though partly another space opera with Trekkish overtones, it soon moves to another plane entirely to features alien conversations and cultural conflicts on an epic scale with occasional flurries of topical locations and references and memorable images like “Ogotemmel paddled his fishing boat of space dust along the solar winds.”

On this basis, *AfroSF* still has much to look forward to. This third volume’s thematic approach perhaps constrains as much as it liberates, but the best stories are those which pick up the theme and wrestle with it. To use a clichéd expression that I dislike intensely but which seems appropriate, there is a strong sense that the best writers here are taking up science fiction and owning it. Another successful snapshot of the talent to be found in Africa and the African diaspora.

# African SF in conversation

Wole Talabi and Louisa Egbunike



**Wole, earlier you mentioned feeling like you were outside of literary circles, and being dragged in. By who? Who's dragging you?**

I don't know. For a long time, my writing was just about blogging, writing stories from random ideas, and selling to these obscure science fiction magazines. Well, not *obscure*... but still, I never had any sense of belonging to a generation of writers, you know? The "it" people, or should I say "lit" people right now, are all people I hadn't met before, hadn't heard of, and probably hadn't read much of. Until maybe last year, when I started meeting them after the whole Caine Prize nomination.

So I guess maybe the Caine Prize dragged me into the whole literary circle thing. Before that, I was just like, "I have an interesting idea, there's some cool robots, and what if the world was like this? Okay, that's it." Now, it's like I have actual fans, and other writers are saying, "There's all these layers, meanings, and themes in your work." I was like, "Okay, cool. I mostly thought the robot was cool, but that's it."

**They see things in your work you didn't see yourself?**

It's not like I ignore themes or whatever. It's just, for me, they're kind of secondary—which is almost the opposite of most writers I know. Most writers

I know focus on character and theme. But for me, the idea comes first, and everything else is secondary. A lot of my stories come from just studying things. I see some interesting science thing, and I'm like, "Oh, OK. How would that really work?"

**Like what?**

When I wanted to write a story about space, for instance, I started with, "How does actual modern space travel work? I want to use that as the core of the story." And it's really, really hard. Forget *Star Trek*, forget *Star Wars*, forget all this fancy stuff you see on TV, real space travel will be slow and boring. The physics of it is brutal, you can't go very fast, you can't go very far. There are so many limitations. It's cold, it's difficult, you can't carry things around with you. The more weight you carry, the slower you have to go. The slower you go, the longer it takes, the more weight you have to carry for supplies. It's just like... it's terrible!

**But from a storytelling perspective...**

Yes, that's what fascinates me. What are the scientific theories out there that we could use to travel between planets? I start from there. I would study it, do the math. And only then think, "This is a cool technology... now I need a story to tell people about the technology." Then the characters and themes emerge. The first part is always the scientific question. For example, "What if machines could learn? How would they learn, what kind of systems?" There is a lot of attention given to machine learning these days, but much of it is glorified statistics. What might real machine learning look like? What does "learning" even mean? I get sucked in from the science side, the philosophy side, and then I drift into, "Now I need a character."

**That's interesting, because that obviously speaks to you being a scientist, being an engineer. But what makes you want to translate the science that you're interested in into narrative? What makes you take that leap? Why not just engage with the science, learn about it, and take interest in it? Why do you want to translate that into a story?**

Hmm, that's a good question, actually. I think it's probably because of the way I was raised? So much of what I know about science, and history, and politics, I learned through stories.

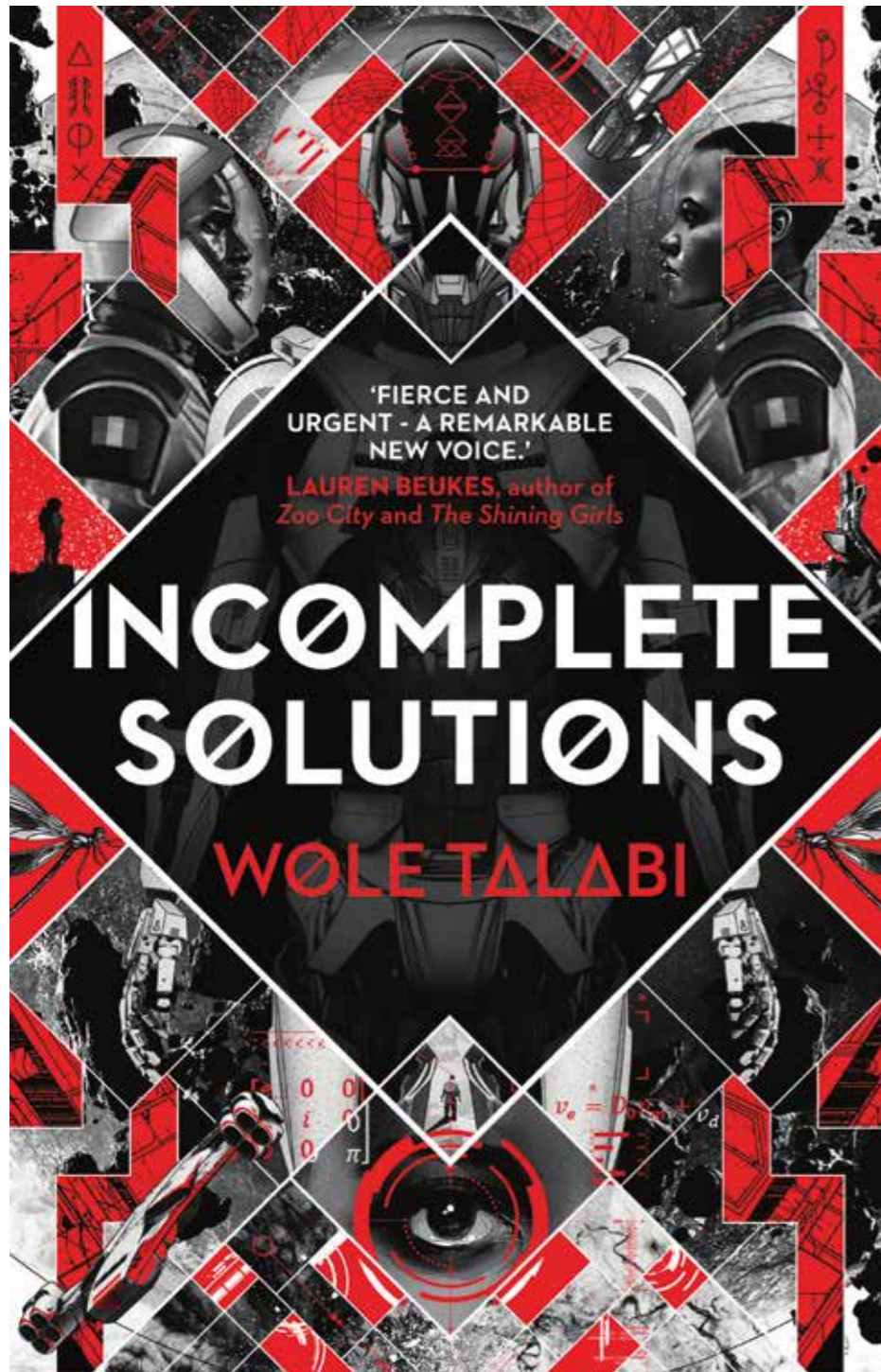
For instance, I read my dad's entire encyclopaedia collection before I was nine. I didn't really understand 90% of what I was reading, but I was reading it anyway! He had this one encyclopaedia of science and technology, filled with biographies of scientists and philosophers, from the early Chinese philosophers all the way to modern times. It was called *Asimov's Biographical Encyclopaedia of Science and Technology*. They'd talk about the theories the scientists came up with, but they would also mention that this guy was a womanizer, he was a gambler, this guy stole this formula, or he won it in a card game. So there was always personality associated with the scientific knowledge for me.

I still enjoy learning most when there's a story attached to it. Also, I just like stories in general. Once I have an interesting thought, I want to tell a story around it. I guess that's the way I share my own random ideas.

**What has your experience been like in the wake of the Caine Prize? How have things changed for you?**

I'd say the main thing has actually just been getting a better response from people back home. This is a funny thing. I put together a collection of short stories, and I started shopping it around in August 2017. Initially, I wanted it to be published in Africa somewhere. Anywhere, it didn't matter. So I sent it to a bunch of publishers, and nobody even replied. Nobody. I kept that up for months. A lot of emails bounced. Some of them went through, but nobody replied.

Eventually Luna Press in Scotland accepted it instead. By February 2018, I'd signed all the contracts and everything. I've loved working with Luna Press, and they have been extremely kind and accommodating to a first-time author. Even so, I would have preferred to get it published in Africa... for me, it was a sentimental thing. But there was no response.



**In terms of where you're publishing, you have published widely online, but you've also published in print editions of magazines and short story collections. Do you see a difference between those spaces?**

To be honest, in terms of what goes where, there's really no difference. I approach all of it the same. I do have a preference for African science fiction and fantasy publishers, so I will always try to submit to *AfroSF* or *Omenana* or *SSDA* any time I get the chance. But it's more about who's open, or who has a theme that's in line with something I'm thinking about.

I have a preference for some magazines, mostly because of the editors. For example, the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, they've been going since like 1945, but the current editor is quite possibly... I would personally say he's the best editor I've ever worked with. He's always kind, always detailed. Even when he rejects your story, he's very clear about what worked, what didn't work. Or if it's not that something didn't work, he's very clear about what he liked or what he didn't like. Sometimes I learn more from his rejections

than acceptances from other people, because he will say, "It looks like you were trying to do this. Here is what I got from it. This worked, this didn't work for me. Maybe it's because I don't have the background, or because you didn't try that."

**You mentioned that you initially had wanted to publish your collection with an African publisher. You mentioned that you'd like to, if possible, submit your stories for African collections. I'm just**

**wondering, what does that say about who your perceived audience is? Do you have a perceived audience when you write?**

If I do, it's not consistent. It depends on where the story came from and what the idea was. Some of my stories are "big ideas" about humanity in general, or about some cool, interesting piece of tech. For those "big idea" stories, it sounds weird, but I guess my perceived audience is more like the average educated, cosmopolitan person, someone that's generally interested in the how and why of the world. They could be from anywhere. Take, for example, any middle-class white-collar person from any country.

Then there are some stories that are kind of linked to both an idea and a place. My parents moved around a lot when I was in Nigeria. We lived in Warri, Benin, Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt. Sometimes I have an idea, and it's kind of linked to a place. "What if this technology existed here?" or "What if this happened in this place?" For a lot of those "place" stories, I guess the perceived audience would tend to be the young Nigerian. I wouldn't even generalize to African. I tend to use a lot of Nigerian terms.

**You spoke of the responses from publishers pre- and post-Caine Prize. I'm wondering if you could give a sense of the response that you've had to your writing in Nigeria specifically?**

I don't feel like there was a big difference from readers. From publishers. But from readers, not that I noticed. Possibly because I wasn't paying enough attention. Maybe I should search more for myself on Twitter, Facebook or whatever, I don't know!

**How about generally? What have the responses been to your work in Nigeria?**

It varies. I think a lot of people in Nigeria respond more to my fantasy stories. But I write a lot more science fiction than fantasy. I think the fantasy stories, like 'Wednesday's Story,' have gotten the most attention.

I still even get comments from people about another story I wrote, '[I, Shidigi]'. It's kind of a version of the Yoruba gods, the *òrìshà*, but set in modern times where they're run like a company. So *Shàngó* is the head of the business, he's the CEO,

and he's pretty ruthless about earning prayers from people. I picked this minor god, *Shigidi*, who's like god of nightmares, supposed to be really ugly. My view is *Shigidi* is like a lower-tier worker in the company just trying to get by. Then he gets caught up in this whole big deal and ends up having to fight *Shàngó*....

I thought it was a cool idea. "What if the gods were run like a company?" All the different gods, all the different pantheons, they had their headquarters in their own countries, like multinationals, and then they try to expand. Obviously, Christianity and Islam are the biggest ones, and then you have all these other ones who have had their territory, or their market share taken, and they're struggling a bit to get by. That story still gets a lot of people sending comments, like, "Oh, this is not really how the *òrìshà* work. But cool idea anyway."

**Why do you think people gravitate to the fantasy?**

For me, what I enjoy about the response to science fiction stories is being able to discuss things. Like I mentioned, the story can be an entry point to learning something. But that doesn't happen enough. Someone might comment like, "OK, cool," or "I liked the main character." But I would love it if there were deeper engagement. "Yes, this is how that technology would really work in Lagos." "No, it would never really work like that." "It's an interesting idea, but have you thought of this?"

I haven't yet seen if there is a market for what some people call "hard science fiction" in Nigeria. I know that's a bit of a controversial statement. A lot of what has been written as science fiction is what I would classify as science fantasy. For example, everyone thinks *Star Wars* is science fiction. It's not. It's science fantasy. The main difference being, you have spaceships, you have robots, it uses the tropes of science fiction... but it doesn't use the core of science fiction. It doesn't have the *novum*, the big idea.

The core of science fiction has always been the idea. If we had this speculative technology, how would humanity react? What would the world look like? Then you extrapolate from there. Stuff like *Star Wars* is taking elements from the literary tradition of science fiction, and using them to decorate an otherwise normal story. It's really a literary story or an adventure story that just

And then in April 2018, I found out about the Caine Prize nomination. At the events, and even after that, via email or whatever, all of a sudden, I'm getting replies! I was thinking, "You missed it by three months."

**Was it your Scottish publishers that submitted 'Wednesday's Story' for the Caine Prize?**

No, it was a US-based magazine, *Lightspeed*. I wrote it for them back in 2016.

happens to include robots, spaceships, and all this kind of stuff. There's no big idea at the center. I wouldn't say there's *none*, but there's not much.

### **Who would you say does it well?**

A few of Nnedi Okorafor's short stories have that kind of cool idea at the center. *Spider The Artist* and *The Popular Mechanic* come to mind. Tade Thompson's novel *Rosewater* is probably the closest example of what I'm getting at. It has that one core really cool idea. There's not many like it... there's a lot of fantasy, there's a lot of science fantasy. Maybe the response I'm getting, or lack thereof, is just because there isn't that much of it out yet. I don't know how people would respond if there was.

### **So why do you think this is?**

I wouldn't say it's just a Nigerian thing? I think it's a global thing. I think fantasy is generally more accessible and popular than science fiction. Science fiction does well when it's actually science fantasy. For example, if you compare the box office returns of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, it's *Star Trek* that leans more on the science fiction, big idea, philosophical side. Huge gap. *Star Wars* is this huge billion-dollar industry. *Star Trek* is struggling to get the next sequel made.

So I think it's a global thing. But I think it's especially true in Nigeria, just because fantasy is familiar to a lot of people. You could even say fantasy is normal. In a lot of places in Africa, talking of things like witchcraft, magic... they're not fantastical elements, these are normal things. "Of course there's demons that live in the bush outside, what are you talking about?" There's no fantasy there. I guess it's more familiar to people. I don't know. I haven't studied it enough, and I don't have enough of a social background to explain why.

You mentioned a couple of contemporary writers whose work may be doing something akin to what you're trying to do in your work. If you were asked to put your writing in conversation with the works of other writers, whose works would you pick?

I already mentioned Nnedi. That one's a bit of an obvious one.

I feel like a lot of what I write, it's closer to Philip K. Dick. Just because he was a crazy person, and he had all these random ideas just floating around, and he wrote so many short stories. It was partly because he was broke a lot of the time, and he was selling stories just to pay rent. I feel like that manic approach to pumping out stories with lots of wild ideas—the quality varying wildly, but lots of interesting ideas in there—that's how my brain works as well. "Oh, I see this, that's a cool idea, write something." "I don't have any characters or plot." "That's fine, just start writing." Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

My stuff isn't as crazy or as interesting as what he came up with, just because he was on his own planet. When people ask me to describe my work, I've said, "Imagine if you took Nnedi's work and Philip K. Dick, and kind of mixed them together...."

### **Your work is a lovechild of those two?**

Somehow. Somewhere in between, yeah, a little bit!

**You mentioned the fact that growing up, your family moved around quite a lot. You've lived in lots of different cities, particularly in southern Nigeria. You've lived in London, you live in Kuala Lumpur now. Do these different cities that you've called home influence your work?**

Every city is different. I guess the main thing I pick up from everywhere is a sense of variety. If you grow up in only one place and you only take a few vacations here and there, it's easy to think that where you live is primarily how the world looks and works. Having moved around, you get this sense of scope of how wildly varying the world can be.

Whenever I write stories set in the future, set on another planet, or whatever, I realize that you have to reflect that. If not, the world doesn't seem like a 'real' world. Some people write a story set on another planet, and they describe it as an ice planet where everybody more or less dresses the same. They're obviously writing about their own town, their own city, or somewhere they know. A whole planet would have a wide variety of climates, a wide variety of people, a wide variety of faiths, beliefs, and systems all going around at the same

time. Not everyone would follow the same political philosophy. Everything... even the vegetation would vary widely.

So it's just having a sense of that. A lot of times, when I'm writing a story, I would just throw something in there to give it an authentic sense of variety. If I have only Nigerian characters, where is everybody else? Why is Mars full of only Nigerians? That doesn't happen anywhere. Even Nigeria is not full of only Nigerians. There's lots of Indians, Chinese, there's people everywhere. So I think that's the main thing I get is just that sense of variety. It's always at the back of my mind that the world is a big and very varied place.

**'Thursday' ends with the statement, "This is what happened and thus must be told." Do you have a particular sense of the need to tell certain stories?**

To be honest, I don't feel like I need to tell any story. I don't feel like I have a responsibility. I have a conflicted relationship with storytelling. On the one hand, for me, stories are mostly about entertainment. That's why I use terms like "cool robot stuff" At the end of the day, the ideas are nice, but the feeling you get at the end was, "That was a cool idea." That's what I come away with.

I usually don't like it when people try to drill too much into a story. At the same time, I also know that everything we know comes from stories. Everything is a story. It makes me laugh a little bit when people say, "Why don't you write more realistic fiction?" or, "Why don't you try some non-fiction?" It's all the same thing, it really is. Everything you know is a story. None of us for a fact knows when we were born. We celebrate our birthday on a particular date, but that's the date your parents told you. It could be a story they told you, and you believe it, and you center your entire life around it, but it's just a story. Our religions are just stories. Maybe there's more to them, maybe not, but by and large, they're stories. Even if one of them is right, at least a thousand of them are just stories.

When people try to explain things to you, or when people try to get close to you, they tell you stories about themselves. "This is what happened to me, this is how things were, this is why I did this." Even now, when you give presentations in business

meetings and stuff, people tell it as a story. There's a beginning, a middle, an end, a conclusion, "This is what we're trying to do."

I'm very aware of how powerful a story can be. I try not to take them too seriously, but they can be very powerful. People that blow themselves up for ISIS or Boko Haram, they do it because of a story that someone told them. The people that work on cures for cancer, they are also doing it because of stories that they were told. They are working towards what they think is a good end to their story.

Basically, everything we do is based on stories. Stories have a lot of power. I try not to take them too seriously, but I recognize how powerful they are. I'm usually stuck in between. When you're telling a story, you know that that story could have very little impact, or could have a huge impact. I might not think much about a story, and yet that could be the entry point for someone else's entire writing career, or reshape the way that person sees the world. They just see something in it and just... for me, it was Isaac Asimov. He died before I ever started writing, but he's influenced me a lot. A lot of his work has stuck with me, and it'll probably stick with me until I die.

**You've talked about the importance of ideas. But surely part of the power of stories comes from their style? I've got a passage here from 'Thursday'. You've got, "His blood boiled, bubbling and burbling boisterously behind black, beady irises that bore brutal and baleful beams of bristling rage..." That is a lot of alliteration.**

Oh, yeah. A bit too much.

**No, no! Apart from just enjoying, I guess, the sound of it, what effect do you want to engender?**

I like patterns. I am not sure why alliteration in particular. It makes me happy just to have a string of words all starting with the same sound. I guess it's also a bit of a challenge trying to make a sensible statement using alliteration. I used to overdo it before. That's an early story. Yeah, that one's a bit much! More recently, I've found ways to put it in a bit more subtly, so you don't even notice until after you've read the sentence, you just get a feeling like, "That sounded interesting."

A lot of religious texts have a certain style of language they use. It's very poetic, and there's a voice in your head that you have when you're reading passages from the Bible or the Quran. It's a very authoritative but almost poetic, melodic kind of voice. I try to get that effect when I'm writing, especially more with big fantasy stories. I tried to do that a bit with 'Wednesday's Story.' It alternates a bit, because Wednesday is supposed to be a slightly immature character, so sometimes her voice slips, but for most of the story, I tried to use this big-sounding, almost epic voice.

I like to experiment with style and voice. I used to do it more with my fantasy writing, but I'm starting to experiment more in science fiction too. I like the idea of the voice and the sound of the story fitting what's happening.

I think sometimes, alliteration or certain patterns with words can help with that effect, make it almost seem like you're reading a lost ancient manuscript, religious text, or something that was written... a legal document, almost. I like trying to play around with that a little bit, not always successfully.

For alliteration in particular, I don't know, I think I just like the challenge of coming up with a sentence that makes sense, and I like the way it sounds when you read it out loud. Editors tend not to like it. They can see what you're doing. They feel like it detracts from the story. It's an opinion, I guess. For me, writing is more about fun. If it was fun for me coming up with it, sometimes I just leave it in anyway. Even if I know it's overwritten and it's a bit obvious, I just leave it in because it was fun.

**You also tend to deal with complex issues. I'm just thinking about some of the conversations you've had in your writing such as attitudes towards disability or difference, abuse of power, subjects like paedophilia, rape, murder. I'm wondering if you see yourself as having a particular role as a writer, or do you regard your writing as making a particular social or political intervention?**

No, I don't. That's the simple answer. I don't take on any specific role when I'm writing. There are really two things that drive what I write. Science and technology is a big one. But second, I would

say philosophy. People do terrible things. We do wonderful things as well. But people do some pretty terrible things to each other. Whenever I write—especially about bad things like rape, abuse, people suffering—it usually comes from a place of trying to understand why humanity does that to itself. Why are we here? All this negative behavior we have, where does it come from? What's the point of it? To use another engineering term, is it just like bad code? Were we programmed to do something, and this is just like bugs in the system where ten, fifteen percent of humanity is behaving erratically?

Why do we have psychopaths, sociopaths, people who abuse children? That kind of thing. But also, I like to step back a bit and view humanity as a whole system, not specific individuals, but as a whole system, and say, "What's the system doing? How can we make it better?" So it's more about viewing humanity as a whole and trying to figure out why we work the way we do or at least tell stories about it. I guess if I have a theme, or something that generally runs through my work, it's that.

**I don't know if you'd agree with me, but in a few of your stories, there seems to be a recurrence of theme of loss, and a kind of melancholy.**

You're probably right. I haven't thought about it that much, but now that I think about the stories, it's true. There are sad endings, there is often a sense of loss in there. I think part of it is—yes, I've used this term before, so I'll use it again—I think humanity is inefficient. And it makes me sad, in a way. We could do so much more.

Humanity, at our best, is a spectacular thing. We put people on the moon. We've gone from cave-dwelling animals to putting rockets on the moon. Working as an engineer, seeing people figure stuff out is amazing. I work in the oil industry. We drill thousands of feet into the ground using tiny tubes just to get oil out of the ground. If you think of how much ingenuity, how much effort, how many people it took to come up with the science and technology to achieve that, it's spectacular sometimes. We're capable of a lot, but then we spend so much time on irrelevant nonsense. I guess a part of me doesn't get why we would even do that. I guess there's a sense of

being unhappy with humanity in general, because I kind of see us as being inefficient. I wish we could be better, but I don't know how.

Some of my more recent stories have been centered around these wild ideas about things that could make humanity better. Again, science fiction writers are not prophets. We don't know what we're talking about half the time. We just know what's an interesting idea or a cool story. For me, I think about that a lot, about why we work the way we do. I don't have any answers, I just weave that thought process into the stories. I guess it comes out as melancholy or disappointment.

**Let's finish with, what's next? What can we expect to see from you?**

It's a good question. More stories, for sure.

**Are you sticking with the short story form? I think you mentioned a novel?**

I've been debating that with myself for a long time. Short stories come much easier to me. I think I do them better than I do long-form writing. I think they also fit more with the way I think about my writing. It's a random idea that I think is interesting, come up with the story that fits it, and write that. That tends to work better with short story or, worst-case scenario, a novella, but nothing too long. Once I start trying to make it too long, I notice I start to struggle a bit with maintaining the idea.

There's kind of a novel I've been working on and off on for the last five years. The idea is there, it's just actually writing all the chapters. It's quite tricky, also because it's a bit of an action thriller with science fiction elements, so not usually what I write. But let's see. In all likelihood, I'll probably have a second collection of stories done before that. I think I'll call it *Convergence Problems*.

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# Come and visit my spaceship! Arab Futurity and the Art of Mounir Ayache

Joan Grandjean

I.

A few months ago, I received a letter from the artist Mounir Ayache, expressing interest in my research. As I was curious about his work too, he kindly invited me to visit his studio. Stepping out of the Garibaldi Metro station in a northern corner of Paris, I entered L'Atelier de Paname—a co-working building filled with talented artists.

I wasn't completely sure what to expect. Along with Tarek Lakhrissi, Ayache is one of a handful of French artists from the North African diaspora who are experimenting with science fiction. Until that day, I'd known Tarek Lakhrissi's work better. Lakhrissi is a visual artist and poet, who uses science fiction to reflect on (and to challenge) how lived experience gets codified in language, especially from marginalised social spaces (as being French-Arab, gay, living in a Paris suburb, etc.). But from the little I'd seen of Ayache's work, I was already intrigued. I saw another type of art here: less conceptual perhaps, more hands-on—the kind of art that only an engineer can produce.

My research traces science fictional themes within contemporary Arab art, exploring representations of speculative realities characterized by Futurity, a concept referencing a collective time to come. Unsurprisingly, the cultural landscape of the Middle East and Mediterranean reflects the region's recent social and political upheavals. The diasporic condition of many artists, especially since the so-called "Arab Spring" of the 2010s, has also led to deep reflection on the notion of 'urūba (Arabness), and the emergence of Arab-futurism



Mounir Ayache

as an aesthetic and philosophical movement which "cannot be pinned down to a concrete definition—intentionally so—vague science-fiction aesthetic descriptions are associated with it as well as a vehement rejection of our quotidian, everyday understanding of temporality."<sup>1</sup> This movement within contemporary Arab speculative art and literature has its own unique features, but it takes its place within a larger history: the history of artists who seek to reclaim the future from dominant colonialist narratives. These movements have sometimes been characterised as

1 Perwana Nazif, "Arabfuturism: Science-Fiction & Alternate Realities in the Arab World", *The Quietist*, February 22nd 2018, [Online], accessed July 2nd 2019.



**A.V. Roes-Zelliger V3, 2019, 150\*115\*235cm, interactive sculpture/flight simulator/video game. Photos taken at Galerie Cinéma (Paris) on the occasion of the group show SPHERES (Feb. 6th-Mar. 30th 2019). Courtesy of the artist.**

"counter-futurist."<sup>2</sup> This label doesn't imply that they are in any way opposed to change. In fact, it means that they review the regime of modernity, in order to counter the dominant narratives of the future: narratives from which indigenous peoples and perspectives have been erased. Finno-Ugrian Ethno-futurism appeared in the 1980s; then came Afrofuturism in the 1990s, followed by several other futurisms such as Indofuturism, Latin@futurism, Desifuturism, and Sinofuturism in the 2000s; and most recently Gulf Futurism and Arabfuturism.

The American-Qatari artist Sophia al-Maria and the Kuwaiti artist Fatima al-Qadiri were important figures in shaping early Gulf Futurism.<sup>3</sup> Other artists are now producing artworks imbued

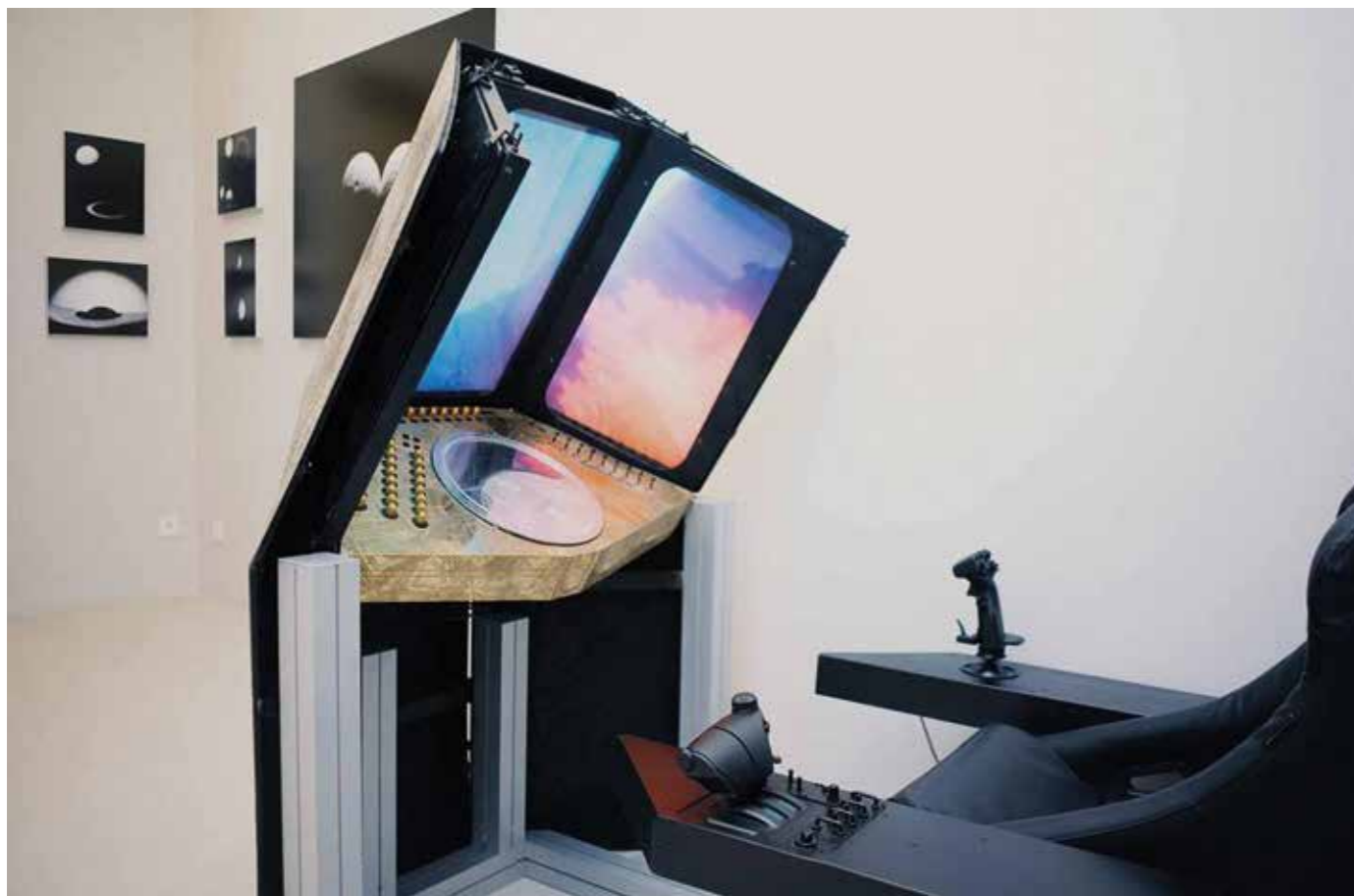
2 Jussi Parikka, 'Middle East and other futurisms: imaginary temporalities in contemporary art and visual culture,' *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 59:1, 2018, p. 40-58.

3 Hugh Charles O'Connell, 'Science Fiction and the Global South,' in Gerry Canavan, Eric Carl Link (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 683.

with futuristic aesthetics and anticipation. Larissa Sansour, a London-based Palestinian artist, is proposing alternative narratives regarding Palestine's history and its future.<sup>4</sup> Other examples include the sculpture *Helmet* (2016) by Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki; *2026* (2010) by Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun; and Algerian artist Saïd Afifi's use of new technologies to explore form and space in his recent works. The 2015 exhibition 'Space Between Our Fingers,' curated by Rachel Dedman in Beirut, showcased many artists from the region, responding in various ways to the theme of outer space.<sup>5</sup> Among them was Fayçal Baghrich, an Algerian artist living in Paris, who contributed a version of *Elective Purification* (2015 for the Lebanese mural; 2009 for the original one), a mural inspired by flags of the world in a children's encyclopedia. By designing such a piece at a large scale, he wanted to re-evaluate notions of borders. He gutted the flags, releasing the stars, crescents, and geometric shapes inside them, and fused them into a global political constellation. Baghrich continues in the same vein with *Souvenir* (2009), an illuminated motorized Earth globe that rotates so fast it creates a moving blurry spot, so the viewer can no longer distinguish any political or geological boundaries. The artist Moufida Fedhila did a series of interactive public performances between 2011 (after the fall of the Tunisian president Ben Ali) and 2014 (when presidential elections took place). Combining art and activism, Fedhila adopted the character of Super-Tunisian, in reference to the iconic Superman, engaging citizens to participate in a ritual 'vote,' and provoking debates around democracy and political accountability. From a more dystopian perspective, Meriem Bennani, a Moroccan artist living in New York, recently created *Party on the CAPS* (2019), a video installation responding to Trump immigration politics, and the Danish parliament's decision to hold foreign criminals on the island of Lindholm. In the video, we observe the daily life of a Moroccan illegal immigrants community, deported to an AI-controlled island in the middle of the Atlantic.

4 Polina Levontin, 'Interview with Larissa Sansour,' *Vector*, 287, Spring 2018, p. 10-14.

5 Joan Grandjean, 'Nous et la Lune sommes voisins I' *ESPACE art actuel*, 119, Spring/Summer 2018, p. 28-39.



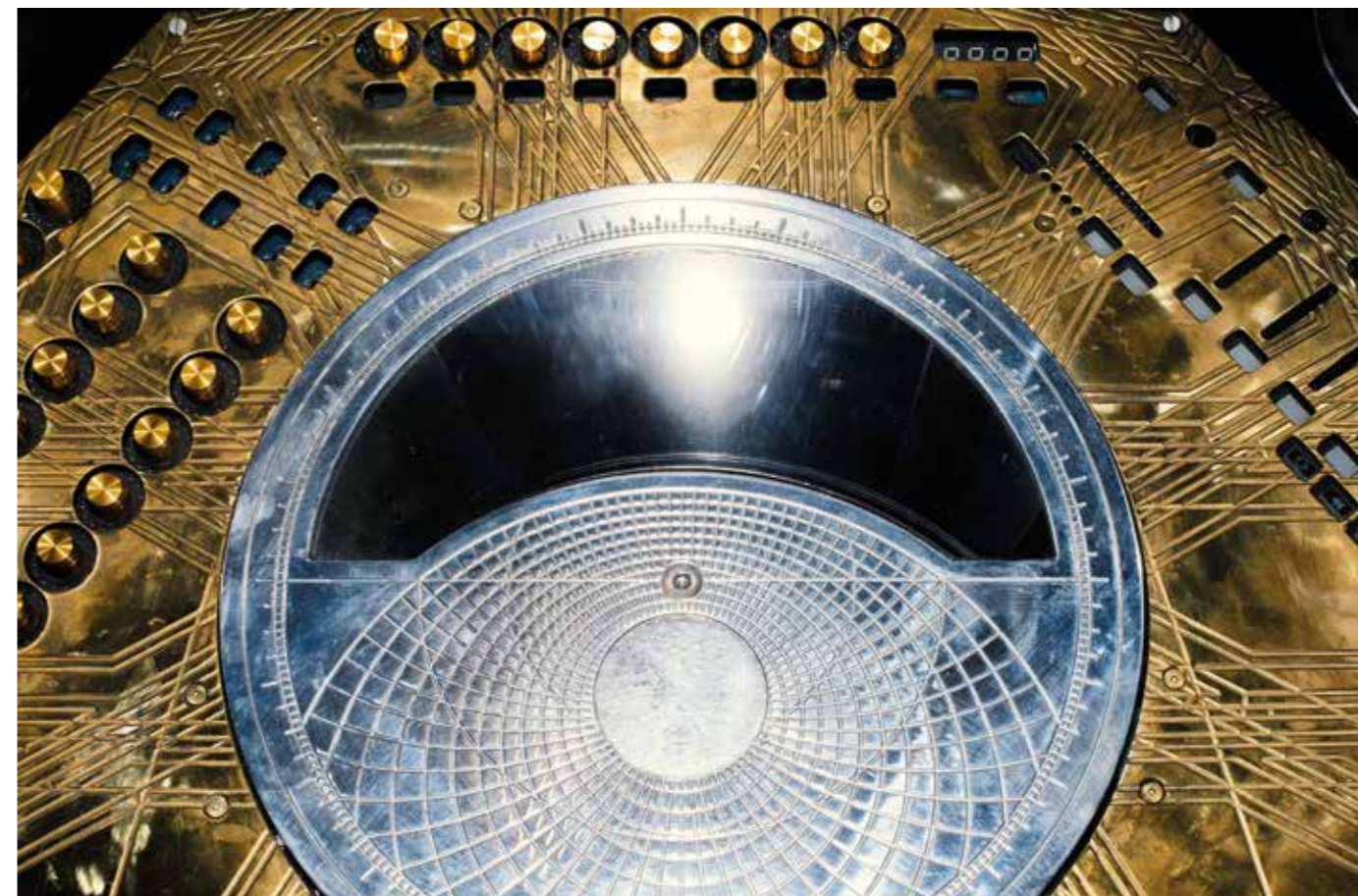
Contemporary North African art doesn't represent just one cohesive future. Artists are taking myriad approaches, each using science fiction to tackle the reality they want to examine. The advent of new imaginaries and the use of science fiction should be understood as tools to question and criticize past historical narratives, and to formulate new ones, opening the horizons to more promising times. Artists working in these modes are seeking to go beyond the reign of presentism, as it was defined by the French historian François Hartog: "a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now."<sup>6</sup> They are rejecting any uncritical acceptance of the way things are, and any assumption that they must be that way in the future.

## II.

Mounir welcomes me at the door and invites me in. In the patio, surrounded by various objects and unfinished work, stands a fascinating

and twinkling machine at odds with everything else in the room. With a laugh Mounir tells me, "Here is A.V.Roes Zelliger in its last version!" It's an interactive sculpture, resembling a cockpit. On the outside, its brass plate sides are covered with gorgeous arabesque designs. Inside the cabin, you can sit, take control of the spaceship, and travel in an arabesque-styled galaxy. Why A.V.Roes Zelliger? Ayache explains that it refers to four different ideas: 'A.V.' stands for the Audio-Video interface. 'A.V.Roes' alludes to Averroes (also known as Ibn Rušd in Arabic), the Muslim Andalusian 12th century philosopher who wrote about a variety of subjects, including physics and astronomy. 'Zelliger' echoes the zellige tilework of the Telouet Kasbah in Morocco, which is a variation of the forty-eight-pointed roses commonly used in traditional Moroccan ornaments. As a whole, the title seems to imitate the name of a Star Trek starship.

We enter small work-space on the ground floor, and start talking about the machine came to be. This adventure started with Ayache's time at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris (École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, ENSBA), where he studied artistic practice and



social sciences. At the time he would also devour science books, such as Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe*, which explores mathematics and cosmology from ancient times to recent developments in string theory. From his earliest artworks, which were mostly video pieces, Ayache was interested in science and technology. He used and adapted technology from the 1970s, such as video feedback. He was inspired, for instance, by the unusual optical effects created by video artists like Steina and Woody Vasulka or Nam June Paik, who would film the playback video monitor with a camera. Ayache adapted this technique to a digital and 3D environment, while also playing with the scientific ideas he was reading about. At some point he moved on, and started to work in metal handicraft. *Videorgan* (2015) was an interactive installation that drew on his interest in synaesthesia, transforming sounds into images and vice versa. The public could play a piano that created a feedback video effect, which projected specific colours on a screen. From *Letters to Harmonics* (2015) was made of two typewriters controlling a row of hammers. The aim was to translate letters into sounds in order to compose a musical conversation.

Though he had good exam results, his supervisor—video artist Dominique Belloir, who was about to retire—thought he didn't show his heart enough. The remark resonated with Ayache. Since he was studying social sciences (mostly anthropology and sociology) Ayache began to link his studies with his own ancestry, a subject that he had set aside until then. He told me, "I decided to learn more about my family's history, and to nourish my artistic approach with it, in order to show my heart." That's how he came up with a way to mix his cultural origins with his love for science fiction.

Ayache's love for science fiction is deeply rooted in his childhood. He has always had an affinity for both culture and science. As a child growing up in Bordeaux, he wanted to become a pilot. His father was an IT engineer working for Hermes Spaceplane Project at Matra Espace at the end of the 1980s. During secondary school, Ayache passed a flying certificate, and joined a club that made model aircrafts. He recollected, smiling: "It was my first construction and it made me dream!" Along with a friend, whose father was working at an airbase, he also produced a fake magazine filled with downloaded fighter planes images from Google. During high school, he was in the Music

<sup>6</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (translated by Saskia Brow), New York, Columbia University Press, xv.



PROCESS 1&2  
Tissage cyanotype  
2018

and Visual Art section. He obtained a Mathematics Diploma, which would have allowed him to train as a pilot at the École Nationale de l'Aviation Civile, only he didn't pass the entrance exam. So instead he walked in his father's footsteps, and studied mathematics, physics and engineering. Going to Paris to study at ENSBA allowed him to develop himself as an artist; in his graduate studies, he also wrote a thesis in sociology on the use of the internet and new media. Meanwhile, parallel to his artistic education, Ayache worked as a Junior Project Manager for different fashion brands.

As Ayache researched his origins, and the history and politics of the region, North African Arabic culture flowed into his work. So did sci-fi. Since his father worked for Matra Espace, and since Ayache is a huge fan of Star Trek, he decided to try creating a flight simulator. It's interesting to analyse the way Ayache dealt with new media, arts and crafts, and Arab culture. A.V.Roes Zelliger cannot be fully appreciated without knowing these details. Any artwork participates in traditions and trends larger than itself, and Ayache's spaceship simulator A.V.Roes Zelliger certainly asks to be understood in the context of the media phenom-

enon of Arab-futurism. At the same time, art is also particular, marked by the unique life of the individual artist. Learning Ayache's personal background gave me a much more nuanced appreciation of his work.

Since its inception in 2015, A.V.Roes Zelliger has been through several stages, and is still an ongoing project. The simulator itself wasn't too difficult: Ayache already knew a fair amount of computer science, and watched a few YouTube video tutorials to learn how to program it properly. He also wanted to use what he had learned from his training in metalworking, so he decided to design arabesque on brass plates. As he found it impossible to produce these pieces the way he envisioned, he decided to build his own digital milling machine,

with the help of another YouTube video tutorial. Once he finished his machine in September 2017, he started to design the cabin structure, the inside and outside walls of his flight simulator. Since 2018, the spaceship has been commonly exhibited with a series of objects he designed. These include a cyanotype series entitled Technical Drawing+sand, Distorted Zelliger, Cove, Process 1 & 2 (100x50 cm); and two other sculptures: Recherche, made in copper (25x10x5 cm), and Astroline, made in coated brass (D25 cm).

Ayache told me that A.V.Roes Zelliger series is the first chapter. The next step will be to write a whole narrative based on his flight simulator. He is inspired, he told me, by his grandmother's story. By the time of Morocco's independence in 1956, she was a divorced woman, facing difficulties from tradition when she decided to go her own way. She let her son, Ayache's father, leave for Europe for his studies. She also created a women's working union in a sewing workshop. At that time, religion in Morocco was caught between local tradition and pan-Arabism. Ayache is interested in exploring her life, and also how his father, aunts and uncles all turned out so different, despite being



ZELLIGER  
Tissage Cyanotype  
2018



RECHERCHE  
Tissage Cyanotype  
2018



TECHNICAL DRAWING + SAND  
Tissage Cyanotype  
2018

raised together. He plans to draw on these real-life stories to create a fictional character, a woman travelling on an interplanetary voyage to another dimension. He believes that there is something about science fiction stories that means the more you solve a problem, the more you get in trouble. He also really wants to produce a movie based on this kind of plot. The first step would be to create a movie set/art installation where a series of new design objects would be displayed. An actress, dressed in a space suit that Ayache will create, will interact with the audience. The goal is to turn the audience into part of the movie, with the whole thing being filmed and displayed in live broadcast. "I always wanted to go to an exhibition and be confronted with this kind of interaction. As you see, I will be quite busy in the coming months!" Ayache told me — laughing, with a dreamy gaze.

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# Bleak Futures in Two East African Films

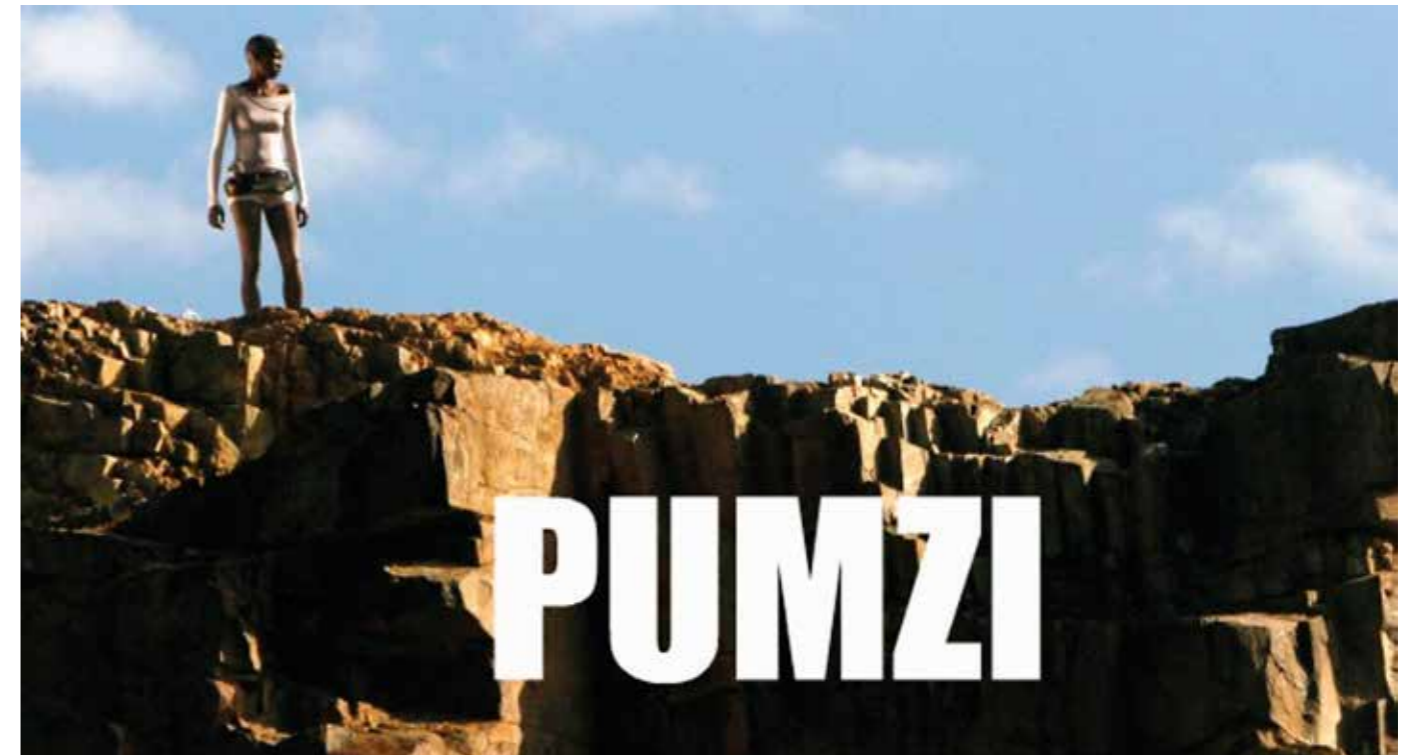
Lidia Kniaż

In contrast to African literature, which for decades suffered from critical neglect but nowadays begins to be noticed, science fiction art, video, and film from Africa remains mostly unfamiliar to wider Western audiences, *District 9* (2009) being an exception. Numerous dystopian and post-apocalyptic visual artworks demonstrate that African artists, like artists in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, are deeply concerned about political, sociological, and environmental issues. Contemporary African speculative artists have created visionary spaces in the future, in which Earth has ceased to be a safe place to live. This article examines the visions of tomorrow by focusing on two visual texts—one independent feature film and one short film. Firstly, I am going to discuss *Pumzi* (2009), a Kenyan short film, written and directed by Wanuri Kahiu, which addresses environmental and economic issues such as potential water deficit, limited resources, and the harmful effects of the technological development by presenting the post-apocalyptic vision of the world 35 years after the WW3, called “The Water War.” The second example is *Crumbs* (2015), a feature film by the Spanish, Abu Dhabi-based director Miguel Llansó inspired by and filmed in Ethiopia (Mjamba), which offers a critique of Western capitalism and American consumerist lifestyle (see, for example, an interview with the director in

Okayafrica: [www.okayafrica.com/cinema-africa-miguel-llanso-ethiopian-sci-fi-film-crumbs/](http://www.okayafrica.com/cinema-africa-miguel-llanso-ethiopian-sci-fi-film-crumbs/)). By juxtaposing African tradition and cosmology with today’s science-fictional reality, these films problematize the popular dominant narrative of Western techno-modernity. As African art forms seem to escape Western classifications and redefine such qualities as pace in film or fabrics in fashion, employing Western taxonomies in the analysis of African culture would not reflect their specificity.

*Pumzi*, available on YouTube, won the award for the best short film at the 2010 Cannes Independent Film Festival and screened at the Sundance Film Festival in the same year. *Pumzi*, meaning “breathe” in Swahili, is a 21-minute film imaging a world destroyed in a nuclear war and plagued by water deficit. The film narrates the story of Asha, who discovers a soil sample uncontaminated by radioactivity. She decides to use it for growing one of the seeds obtained from the Virtual Natural History Museum, sacrificing her life she succeeds in planting the seed on the Earth’s ruined surface.

The first framework in which Kahiu’s short film can be interpreted is ecocriticism. *Pumzi* visualizes environmental concerns connected to limited water resources, radiation fallout in a case of a nuclear conflict and climate change. The film reacts to these social anxieties by imagining a dystopian

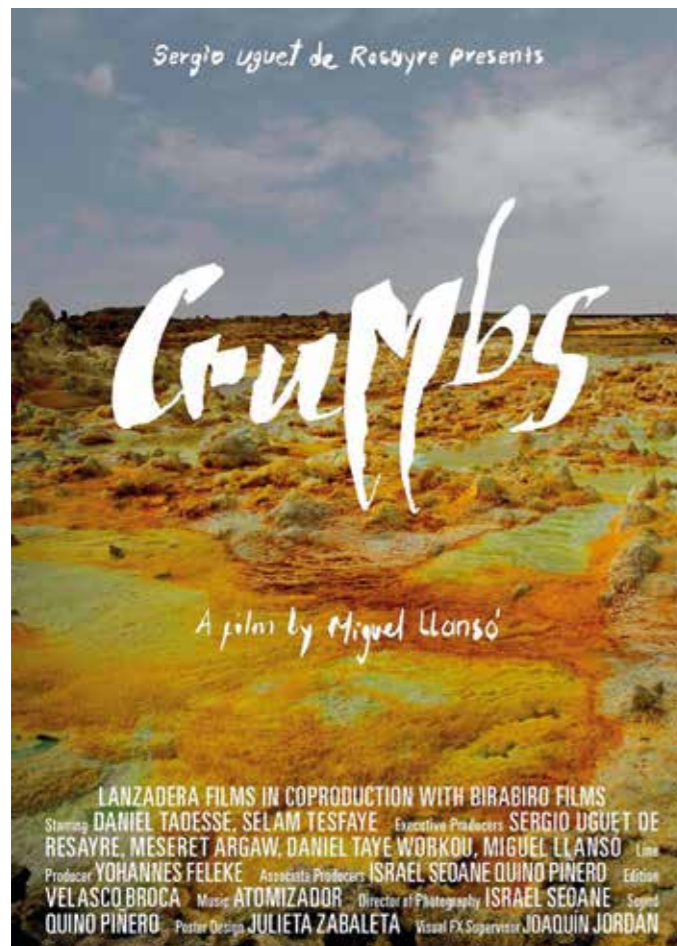


but high tech community forced underground, living under the surveillance of a repressive regime and barely coping with water and power shortages. In the wake of the “The Water War,” Maitu colony, like a modern space station, recycles every drop including human liquids, such as urine or sweat. It also minimises the amount of waste and relies on human-powered electricity. In the film, the audience notices the information that the Maitu community successfully combines “zero pollution” with “100% self-power generation.” The scarcity in the spacecraft-like underground world is managed by the Council, whose rules have taken control of every drop of sweat produced by the colony’s residents. The dystopian community of Maitu operates on the rules of a spaceman totalitarian economy that inflicts punishment for anyone who disobeys.

*Pumzi* can also be interpreted as a way of expressing Kahiu’s concerns about the effects of the technological development on the process of communication. In one scene, Asha is writing to the Council using a futuristic messenger, and while her words seem emotional as she discusses the possibility of growing a seed in the soil she obtains, her face remains emotionless, almost robotic, like other colony members we encounter in public spaces on screen. When Asha wants to apply for an exit visa, her Council’s answer is, “The outside is

dead,” which invites comparison with the imposed and policed lifelessness of human expression in the colony. Not just surface emotions are policed, but also even internalised ones, in dreams. Dreams are illegal and are medically suppressed. It is through a glimpse of Asha’s dream that we are given access to her emotional upheaval at discovering an illicit hope that life can yet be restored on Earth. The Council seems to see an alleviation of scarcity or any ecological renaissance as a threat to its authority, and attempts to secure the miserable status quo in order to maintain its power. The only emotional bond Asha creates is with the white janitor, their encounter is fleeting and wordless. By presenting most human interactions as emotionless, the director plays with the paradigm shift in the inter-personal communication, from personal to virtual, which is observable in the contemporary world.

*Crumbs*, by contrast, is a love story, set in a depopulated world of technological failure/dysfunction with no authority in sight. Candy asks his girlfriend, Birdy (Selam Tesfaye) to wait while he embarks on an epic journey through post-apocalyptic Ethiopia. He’s hoping to secure a chance for them both to escape on the last spaceship to a better world—his homeworld. Hailed as a “salvagepunk masterpiece, a key document of the anthropocene” (Bould 2016), *Crumbs* criticizes



global capitalism by projecting a future in which “American consumerism has left a wasteland where only plastic mass-produced toys are valuable currency” (Platt 2016).

Under the guise of surrealism and futurity, the film reflects on the influence of American pop culture on Africa. Such icons and characters as Michael Jordan, Santa Claus, and Superman appear in a new context. They are presented as distorted, sometimes exaggerated. Obsession with Western culture and lifestyle is made emphatically visible in the number of different allusions to other texts and pop culture icons. At some point during her sleep, Birdy whispers a peculiar litany to her “Saints”: Einstein IV, San Pablo Picasso, Stephen Hawking III, Justin Bieber VI, Paul McCartney XI, and Carrefour—at other times, the film gestures towards African spirituality and religious expression. *Crumbs* borrows from American pop-cultural myths, juxtaposing them with vaguely African traditions and cosmology—the film is much more specific in referencing American than one of the Ethiopian or other African cultures.

Apart from mocking American pop culture, *Crumbs* draws attention to the negative consequences of late-capitalist consumerism and madness of materialism. The late capitalist obsession with material possessions finds its reflection in the number of seemingly useless items accumulated by Western societies and presented in the film as objects of cult or potential currency. One of the popular culture relicts present in *Crumbs* are plastic figurines, including a Samurai Ninja Turtle figurine worn by Molegon warriors as a lucky amulet, which dates back to pre-apocalypse years, and an Andromeda baby figurine. Another interesting antique dating back to pre-apocalypse is the Max Steel sword manufactured by Carrefour. The audience learns that “only 490 000 units were produced,” which is both amusing and unsettling. The last relict of capitalocene is a Michael Jackson’s *Dangerous* vinyl record. The antiquarian from the spacecraft hovering above Ethiopia says that it dates back to the third century and was popular among the Molegon warriors. The man emphasizes that it is believed there was another Michael Jackson before the apocalypse: “Perhaps he was a farmer in the former US. His music was electrifying.” The very fact that such objects as plastic figurines or records acquire new meanings after the apocalypse expresses their elusive value and potential significance for the generations to come. In other words, new meanings attributed to familiar cultural objects make the audience realize that what is now cheap mass produced items may actually be regarded as valuable once enough time passes to make them rare. New stories created around the toys show that their significance is “invented” for the purposes of a given cultural group, making us question the narratives around contemporary archeological finds. As Bould observes, in *Crumbs* “there is an unending tension between materiality and semiosis, between meaningfulness and meaning” (Bould 2016,11).

Riffing on Mark Fisher’s capitalist realism, it can be said that *Crumbs* presents a peculiar version of capitalist surrealism. According to Fisher, American capitalism is viewed not only as an economic system but also a way of thinking which “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (2009, 8) making it difficult to abandon even in the area of speculative art forms. In *Crumbs*, capitalism seems to absurdly persist even in a world devoid of



society, with only a few stranded individuals left to trade and exchange the last few of manufacturing era relicts at arbitrary prices negotiated in strange rituals.

Music videos, digital art, and photography frequently employ the futuristic and post-apocalyptic aesthetics in the discussion on social, economic and political concerns. This, unsurprisingly, holds for artists in Africa and the diaspora. The African-directed music video to Skrillex’s “Ragga Bomb with Ragga Twins” (2014) employs a mixture of post-apocalyptic urban wasteland aesthetics, *Star Wars*’ lightsabers and African dance imagery to comment on urban poverty in fast growing cities. A set of digitally altered photographs called “Lagos 2050: Shanty Megastuctures” (2016) by Brooklyn-based Nigerian artist Olalekan Jeyifous provide an alternative vision of the future for the country’s marginalized poor (Gbadamosi 2016). Another example of digital art connected with the speculative urban visions for

African cities such as Nairobi, Johannesburg and Lagos is “Africa 2081 A.D.” created by a socially aware design company Ikiré Jones in cooperation with an illustrator Olekan Jeyifous and author Walé Oyéjidé.

*Pumzi* and *Crumbs* are examples of speculative art which draws attention to real-world issues regarding society, environment, politics, economics, and technology. The analysis of the African voices in the speculative arts and contemporary visual culture shows that combining science fiction genre with African visual culture adds new perspectives to both. Science fiction provides an essential space for African artists to engage in discourses of tomorrow. The two texts can be interpreted as a cry for change which becomes unveiled in the apocalyptic fantasy (Canavan 2014, 16). *Pumzi* and *Crumbs*, and African speculative art more generally, are gazing to the future, alongside with worrying about the present, and trying to re-evaluate the past.

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Black Thought  
Two Heads are Better than One

Artist: Ronnie McGrath  
Original Size: 66X80cm  
Original: acrylic, ink on canvas board.

Reprinted with kind permission of the artist as the cover of this issue.

*"The role of the artist is exactly the same as the role of the lover. If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see."*

—James Baldwin



Ronnie McGrath

I create multimedia and assemblage works, interweaving symbolisms of a sacred and cosmological nature to explore notions of beauty, spirituality and the metaphysical plane, in an avant-garde, afro-futuristic, postmodern, neo-surrealist style that examines notions of 'Black' identity. In order to foreground my Diasfrican heritage, you will find references to such Diasporic religious practices as: Candomble (Brazil), Santeria (Cuba), Hoodoo (America), Vodou (Haiti) and Obeah (Jamaica). Furthermore, as you will see, I draw on the Afro, to symbolise the revolutionary fervour of the black consciousness period of the 1960s and 70s. Among many other potent signifiers of Blackness and Black spirituality, I use the ankh and the pyramid as a motif to invoke an Afrocentric politics that lay claim to a Nubian (Black African) origin of Kemet—the original name for ancient Egypt and the place which gave birth to (K)chemistry. I hope you enjoy my paintings.

# Binyavanga Wainaina

(1971-2019)

