

# Feminist Africa

Volume 2, Issue 2 • 2021



**Gender and Sexuality  
in African Futurism**



*Feminist Africa* is Africa's peer-reviewed journal of feminism, gender and women's studies, produced by and for the transnational community of feminist scholars. It provides a platform for intellectual and activist research, dialogue and strategy. *Feminist Africa* attends to the complex and diverse dynamics of creativity and resistance that have emerged in post-colonial Africa, and the manner in which these are shaped by the shifting global, geopolitical configurations of power.

It is currently based at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Accra.

The e-version of this journal is available free on *Feminist Africa*'s open-access website:

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# Feminist Africa 2021, Volume 2, Issue 2 Gender and Sexuality in African Futurism

First published in November 2021 by the  
Institute of African Studies  
University of Ghana  
Kwame Nkrumah Complex  
Anne Jagge Road  
P.O. Box LG 73  
Legon, Accra  
Ghana.

© in published edition: Institute of African Studies University of Ghana  
Ghana, 2021

ISSN: 1726-4596

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FA is published with the support of AWDF, Ford Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and Open Society Initiative for East Africa.

Typesetting and Printing: University of Ghana Press  
Cover design: Eibhlín Ní Chléirigh  
Cover image credit: Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga

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# Gender and Sexuality in African Futurism

## Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué

This *Feminist Africa* issue was inspired by my weekly conversations with five African-born graduate students in “Gender & Sexuality in Afro-Futurism”, an upper-level course offered by the Department of African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. We began the course by discussing why individuals of African descent have been marginalised in science fiction, a genre of fiction that conceptualises future scientific or technological advances. We observed that while White men have long dominated science fiction, Black people have expanded the boundaries of the genre. For instance, we debated how continental Africans have used Afrofuturism—an interdisciplinary genre and movement that emphasises the cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history to address the developing intersection of cultural expressivities and performances with technology in the African diaspora<sup>1</sup>—to imagine diverse futures and the effects of rapidly changing gender ideals in postcolonial contexts. The conversations continued with a discussion of the naming of “Afrofuturism” as a genre and a dialogue of its relevance to the African continent. While Western-based individuals acknowledge how the exchange of cultures and ideas across the Atlantic has influenced Afrofuturism, many African-based individuals feel that the term “Afrofuturism” does not yet fully address concerns grounded in African indigeneity, experiences, and histories. South African writer Mohale Mashigo expressed this by asserting that “Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa.”<sup>2</sup>

In the weeks after this conversation, we surveyed the difference between Afrofuturism and African Futurism, much in the manner that Päivi Väättänen’s 2019 work on the subject matter discerns between Afrofuturism and Nigerian American novelist Nnedi Okorafor’s Africanfuturism<sup>3</sup>. This led us to explore alternative terms such as Afri-futurism, African Afro-Futurism<sup>4</sup>, and Africanfuturism (one word), a term referenced by Okorafor in a November 2018 twitter post, and again in a 2019 blog post<sup>5</sup>. Inspired by the diverse iterations and definitions of the term, we landed on two separate words, “African Futurism”, which I have used as the title for this issue<sup>6</sup>. We defined African Futurism as a genre concerned with the connection between cultural expressivities and performances and technology occurring on

the African continent, and which addresses the history, science, and experiences of people living there. While acknowledging our standpoint and positioning as scholars based in the United States, we identified the primary African Futurist authors and works, including novelists and short story writers (Okorafor's *Binti* series and *Lagoon*; Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* series)<sup>7</sup>, filmmakers (Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*; Frances Bodomo's *Afronaut*; Daniel Obasi's *An Alien in Town* and *Hello, Rain*), digital artists and photographers (Masiyaleti Mbewe; David Alabo; Jacque Njeri; Osborne Macharia; Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, the artist of this issue's cover<sup>8</sup>), and game developers (Andrew Kaggia's *Nairobi Legacy*). This led one graduate student to point out that many of the novels, plays, and films we were reading had female protagonists. The student inquired about the transformative impacts of African Futurism on African women's lives. This is perhaps the central question explored in this issue.

Two related questions were used to guide the contributors' analyses. The first is: how does the African Futurist genre (re)imagine gender norms, sexual identities, and issues of feminism on the continent? The second is: does African Futurism have the transformative power that people on the continent attribute to it, particularly concerning gender norms and relations? Our contributors draw from different disciplines and a wide array of sources to demonstrate how diverse individuals of African descent have used African Futurism as a tool to express and perform varied ideas about gender, sexuality, and feminism in African cultures across time and space. Although this issue focuses on "African Futurism," some contributors preferred to use "Afrofuturism" or another term (i.e., Okorafor's "Africanfuturism"). To preserve the integrity of the work, I did not change which words the authors used. This issue focuses primarily on African Futuristic stories by West African writers. Perhaps, this is because West African writers have dominated the genre, particularly in literature. A future *Feminist Africa* issue on the subject matter might include writers from other regions of Africa such as East and North Africa, illustrating the differing dynamics of issues of gender and sexuality in African Futurism across the continent.

Despite agreeing that "African Futurism" should mostly focus on the African continent, many of the contributors in this issue are aware of the hybridity of the genre and the importance of incorporating diasporic discourses in developing and analysing African Futurism. They emphasise that continental Africans can

never be completely divorced from the ongoing discourses of their counterparts in the diaspora, given their constant exposure to these via the global media. For example, both genres often address issues of gender and sexuality, and mutually operate within heavily patriarchal Black worlds, both in reality and in the fictional worlds they create.

Afrofuturistic and African Futuristic works highlight divergent experiences of people of African descent. For example, *Black Panther*, the immensely popular 2018 Afrofuturistic film, explores themes of cultural identity and race mostly anchored to Black *American* experiences and histories, whereas Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*, an African Futurist film that imagines a dystopian future in East Africa where water shortage and resources have devastated the world, visualises *African* topographies. I suggest that you begin your journey through this issue by reading Arit Oku's work, "Africanfuturism and the Reframing of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor", which analyses two works by Nnedi Okorafor using a gender lens: *Mother of Invention*, a short story about a pregnant woman whose artificial-intelligence-powered smart home acts as a midwife when she goes into labour during a pollen storm in a future Nigeria, and *Binti*, in which a young African girl leaves her home to attend the most prestigious intergalactic university and gets caught in the crossfire of a longstanding war between humans and an alien race. Oku's article outlines the main difference between Okorafor's Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism, illustrating the differences and tensions but also similarities between Western- and African-rooted conceptualisations of the future, of time. Oku's analysis illustrates powerfully that indeed, African Futurism *is* for Africans living in Africa and highlights its myriad interpretations and manifestations across spatial and temporal settings.

Overall, the contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* emphasise an African continental focus and diverse portrayals of gender, sexuality, and feminism in the African Futurism genre, complicating understandings of African women and men, past and present, fictional and real. For example, creators of African Futurism emphasise conceptions of technology, time, and space, which are not always linear or two-dimensional like Western concepts. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi's short story, "Land of My Dreams" illustrates the overlaying nature of time and geographies, blurring the fictional and the real. Rather than theorise what African Futurism *is*, the author *does* African Futurism, both in crafting the

plot and determining a methodological approach to the story. The work is tinged with the heavy mood of dystopic futures—an undesirable world—particularly for women and young girls living in Cameroon, a west-central African country currently embroiled in civil war. The story changes in time and perspectives, carrying readers through overlaying zones of time and space, mapping a visual road through the lives of the key characters.

Delali Kumavie's essay, "Haunted Airports and Sexual Anxieties in Nana Nyarko Boateng's 'Swallowing Ice'" also exemplifies the overlapping conceptualisation of time within African settings that typifies African Futurist imagination. Kumavie's work beckons readers to re-examine the airport as a key space where varied ideas about the nation's future and its cultural values, such as sexual norms and identities, take flight both in the literary work and in the real world of contemporary Ghana. Craftily weaving literature and history, Kumavie uses Boateng's short story about a young woman journalist's anxiety over her queerness, expressed in her sexual intimacies with a cat and in her (fake) newspaper stories about a lesbian couple kissing at Ghana's main international airport, to connect literature, history, and debates about national culture and sexual identities in Ghana, past and present—with the airport as a space in which desires about the nation's future play out.

Minna Salami's Standpoint, "The Liquid Space where African Feminism and African Futurism Meet", like Nfah-Abbenyi's short story and Kumavie's feature, emphasises issues of time. Salami points out that the history of Africa's timeline is conventionally divided by Western notions of time. But, she argues, time in Africa is fluid, overlapping. This disruption of time in African societies illustrates a complex African form and experience of time that African philosophers have long discussed.<sup>9</sup> Salami also points to other signposts of time apart from the precolonial/colonial/postcolonial divide that have defined African history. One of these signposts—in her words, "liquid space"—is fluid and buoyant and is the space, the time, where African Futurism and African Feminism meet and intersect. As she contends, this space is where future changes can be imagined and discussed, drawing from both the past and present, from African feminist activist ideals, and from the diverse expressions of technologies, science, and creativity that underpin the African Futurist genre. Salami further proposes *how* changes can be made, maintaining that ideas do not have to stay

in this “liquid space”, forever enmeshed in the webs of imagination. Indeed, this space, this time, can be a powerful tool to make systemic changes. Thus, the intersection of African Futurism and African Feminism can foster changes, the creativity of imagined changes trickling from the “liquid space”, splashing colours of both conventional and unconventional forms of political and social activism.

The contributors in this issue extend their analysis of nonlinear time in African Futuristic works to endeavour to forge analytical bridges between literature and real life. For instance, Kwame Otu’s work, “When the Lagoons Remember: An Afroqueer Futurist Reading of ‘Blue Ecologies of Agitation’”, uses the key case studies of the real-life Korle Lagoon in Ghana and the fictional lagoon in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, a novel that describes aliens arriving in Lagos, Nigeria and the journeys of the humans to prevent mass extinction by the aliens. It makes an analytical bridge between literature and real-life events, highlighting larger issues of ecological and environmental changes in Africa—a key theme in African Futurism. Otu examines how ecologies of real-life lagoons are toxic zones because of electronic waste (e-waste) dumping sites—spaces that individuals must contend with and navigate daily. Otu’s analysis extends the use of “queer” beyond sexual identities, applying it to non-normative circumstances and existences. The metaphor of the lagoon becomes a way to examine issues of ecological and environmental changes in Africa. Otu conjoins the real-life and fictional lagoons as non-normative sites in that they are utilized for both extraction and deposit, literally and figuratively. By “queering” lagoons, Otu elucidates the difficult situations of the residents and the site itself, illuminating perilous ecological and environmental changes in Africa. The format of Otu’s essay, like Nfah-Abbenyi’s short story, engages readers to convey the *sense* that time and geographies are not linear. The story changes in time and perspectives, carrying the reader through overlapping time and spaces, from fictional lagoons to real ones, not always clear which is which, as the devastating impact of the environmental crisis rings alarmingly in both spaces.

Novels and short stories also explore diverse Africa-focused topics through gendered lenses, as illustrated in Minna Salami’s and Kwame Otu’s analyses. Jenna Hanchey and Godfried Asante’s collaborative contribution, “‘How to Save the World From Aliens, Yet Keep Their Infrastructure’: Repurposing the ‘Master’s

House' in *The Wormwood Trilogy*" examines issues of gender, and, like Arit Oku's analysis, illustrates the blurred and overlapping boundaries and similarities between Afrofuturism and iterations of African Futurism. Hanchey's and Asante's work uses the figure of Oyin Da, one of the central characters in Tade Thompson's *The Wormwood Trilogy*—a tale about an invasion of a giant alien lifeform known as Wormwood in a future Nigeria—as a case study to examine this difference through gendered lenses. The authors assert that iterations of African Futurism are not completely devoid of Western methodological approaches and theories, but that they do, and perhaps *should* employ and repurpose global Western methodological approaches and theories as well as local African ones. Hanchey and Asante draw examples from *The Rosewater Redemption*, the third book in the trilogy, to highlight how Thompson's use of the protagonist, Oyin Da, reveals key issues about gender and sexuality in African contexts. Their examination includes how African Futurist writers use queer and feminist epistemologies to (re)shape and repurpose Western colonial structures—the "Master's House", as they phrase it—for decolonial means. Like Otu, Hanchey and Asante extend the meaning of "queer" beyond sexual identity, describing postcolonial Africa as queer in the colonial patriarchal structures, and that indigenous life has blended inextricably and made it impossible to disentangle diverse cultural and political influences.

In a similar but slightly different fashion from Hanchey and Asante's analyses, Kelsey McFaul re-examines African literary works in her essay, "'One Foot on the Other Side': an Africanfuturist Reading of Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018)". Two texts are at the centre of McFaul's analysis—Okojie's *Butterfly Fish*, a story about a woman who explores her African cultural heritage in Nigeria after her mother's sudden death, and Emezi's *Freshwater*, a novel that dissects the many selves and identities, including Igbo spirits, of its Nigerian protagonist. McFaul maintains that re-examining African literature typically not labelled as science fiction or futurism opens new and different viewpoints about how African authors and their literary texts have grappled with diverse issues, including gender, sexuality, mental health, and relationships with the ecosystem. Thus, the connection with past African Futurist novels provides a new route that yields exciting insights.

Besides literature, this issue features articulations of African Futurism in imagery. Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga provided the cover painting, which is part of his 2016 series, “Mangbetu”. The series explores issues of colonialism, traditions, and the impact of globalisation on the Mangbetu people who inhabit his home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The figures’ bodies and attire visually reflect the dissonance of despair and hope splashed in vibrant colours. They wear bright traditional attire and have artificially elongated heads, in keeping with a Mangbetu practice maintained until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The imagination of the skin as circuit boards presents a strong commentary about the preservation of culture and the future impact of technology and environmental crisis in the DRC. The title of the issue’s cover painting, “Lost”, seems to emphasise the uncertain future of Ilunga’s home country. Yet, the traditional attire—adorned on a female figure—appears to be a message of hope, at least to this editor.

Photos by Zambian queer African Futurist writer, photographer, and activist Masiyaleti Mbewe’s *The Afrofuturist Village* exhibition also exemplify the visual imagination of African Futurism. Through photography and video, the exhibit explores what life might look like under African Futurism envisioning and shows how the genre might actively change and imagine new realities and new ways of living in Southern Africa (see photos on pages 108-113 in this *Feminist Africa* issue).

The role of photography is also evident in Luam Kidane’s review of *Spirit Desire: Resistance, Imagination and Sacred Memories in Haitian Vodoun* by Nigerian activist, blogger, and author Sokari Ekine. Writing under the title “‘Liberation is Necessarily an Act of Culture’: A Review of *Spirit Desire*”, Kidane reminds us it is vital that the African Futurist genre stay in conversation with the diaspora. *Spirit Desire* is a photo book that examines how vodoun, a religion, has been a tool of resistance, decolonisation, and the fostering of community in Haiti. The work seeks to debunk negative portrayals of vodoun through powerful, mostly black-and-white images of African diasporic spiritual expressions, exploring the interconnectedness of disparate conceptions of time: spiritual power and agency drawn from the past, present, and future; spatial settings and states of being; the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible; and the diverse cultural connections of vodoun, including to Africa.

Since late 2019, I have thought more about African Futurism, and the topic matter has infused many aspects of my thinking, including my aesthetics and fashion choices. I thought about it when the COVID-19 pandemic took over our lives and travel restrictions limited our movements. Unable to visit family in Cameroon, I found myself more on WhatsApp, a popular messaging application among individuals with family and friends abroad. I thought about the genre in relation to the news out of Cameroon, where COVID-19 has impacted the lives of many, including my family. I watched burials in Cameroon live on the messaging application, witnessing longstanding traditions about how Cameroonians bury the dead. Friends and family also shared news about new life and births, traditional recipes for health and wellness, unsolicited advice related to expected gender norms, updates from the villages and urban spaces, and videos with accompanying sounds celebrating our culinary culture; the sounds of Cameroon intermixed with technologies, old and new, overlapping worlds. The digital and the real-life collided in a brilliant mix of the past, present, and future in Africa and the diaspora, shaping my viewpoints and experiences of time and geographies, of the lived experiences of African Futurism.

### **Acknowledgements**

The guest editor and contributors would like to thank Amina Mama, Sylvia Tamale, Gertrude Dzifa Torvikey, and Ama Derban for their support, as well as the reviewers. In addition, we thank Masiyaleti Mbewe and Sokari Ekine for graciously allowing us to reproduce their works in this issue. Support for this research was provided by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with funding from the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation, which paid for Congolese artist Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga's cover image.

### **Endnotes**

1. See here for definitions of Afrofuturism: Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180; Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrance Hills Books, 2013), 9. Well-known explorers of Afrofuturism include scholars (e.g., Mark Dery, who coined the term in 1993, Ytasha Womack, and Reynaldo Anderson), novelists, and short

- story writers (e.g., Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany and Nalo Hopkinson) and singers (e.g., Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe).
2. Mohale Mashigo, “‘Afrofuturism is not for Africans Living in Africa’—an Essay by Mohale Mashigo, Excerpted from her New Collection of Short Stories, *Intruders*,” *The Johannesburg Review of Books* October 1, 2019. Available at <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/10/01/afrofuturism-is-not-for-africans-living-in-africa-an-essay-by-mohale-mashigo-excerpted-from-her-new-collection-of-short-stories-intruders/>
  3. Päivi Vääänen, “Afro-Versus Africanfuturism in Nnedi Okorafor’s ‘The Magical Negro’ and ‘Mother of Invention’”, *Vector* 289 (2019). Available at <https://vector-bsfa.com/2019/10/13/afro-versus-african-futurism-in-nnedi-okorafors-the-magical-negro-and-mother-of-invention/>
  4. See the definition for “African Afro-Futurism” here: Gavin Steingo, “African Afro-futurism: Allegories and Speculations,” *Current Musicology* 99–100 (Spring 2017): 45–75. Some practitioners of Afrofuturism prefer the “Afrifuturism” spelling to “Afrofuturism”, such as Duane Deterville, an artist, writer, and scholar of visual culture. See more here: “Duane Deterville Presents ‘Afrifuturism,’” Black Unity Center, San Francisco State University, October 18, 2017. Available at <https://africana.sfsu.edu/news-announce/duane-deterville-presents-afrifuturism>
  5. Nnedi Okorafor, “Africanfuturism Defined”, *Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog* 2019, available at <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/>
  6. We are not the first to employ the use of “African Futurism”. See the following examples where scholars also use the term: Jane Bryce, “African Futurism: Speculative Fictions and ‘Rewriting the Great Book’”, *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 1 (2019): 1–19; Carolyn M. Rouse, “African Futurism: Dreaming in Real Time”, *Proceedings of the African Futures Conference* 1 issue 1 (June 2016): 16–26. Accessed May 3, 2021. Available at <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/j.2573-508X.2016.tb00018.x>; Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, “Afro-Mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices”, *Paradoxa* 25 (2013): 113–130.
  7. See additional examples of literary works within the genre: Wole Talabi, ed. *AfricanFuturism: An Anthology* (Brittle Paper, 2020). Available at

<http://brittlepaper.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Africanfuturism-An-Antology-edited-by-Wole-Talabi.pdf>; and Ainehi Edoro-Glines, founder and editor in chief of *Brittle Paper*, provides a list of new African sci-fi and fantasy novels for Goodreads, a website that recommends books: Cybil, “75 New and Upcoming Sci-Fi and Fantasy from African Authors”, *Goodreads* July 7, 2021. Available at <https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/2130-75-new-and-upcoming-sci-fi-and-fantasy-from-african-authors>

8. See information about his work here: Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, October Gallery, <https://octobergallery.co.uk/artists/kamuanga>
9. See for example, philosopher John Mbiti’s thoughts on African concepts of time and orientation in his ground-breaking book, *African Religions & Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

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# “How to Save the World from Aliens, Yet Keep Their Infrastructure”: Repurposing the “Master’s House” in The Wormwood Trilogy

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## Abstract

In this essay, we examine the figure of Oyin Da in Tade Thompson’s *The Wormwood Trilogy* to demonstrate how Africanfuturism uses colonial infrastructure—or “the master’s house”—in queer ways to resist neocolonialism and produce decolonial contexts of queer and feminist African life. Drawing on Audre Lorde’s often-cited quote, we assert that Oyin Da provides an exemplar of postcolonial realities wherein, sometimes, the master’s house should not be dismantled at all. Instead, Thompson’s trilogy illustrates how Africans can repurpose colonial infrastructure in queer and feminist ways for decolonial ends. We limn the figure of Oyin Da to demonstrate: (1) how the African postcolonial condition itself is a queer one, where there can be no strict separation of colonial structures from indigenous life; (2) how Africanfuturist writers use queer and feminist epistemologies to strategically alter the totality of “the master’s” infrastructure; and (3) how such resistance opens up decolonial possibilities for African queer and feminist liberatory existence.

The final book of Tade Thompson’s *Wormwood Trilogy* confronts the protagonists with a horrifying realisation: aliens are slowly transforming human DNA until it is entirely alien and then transferring alien consciousnesses into the bodies that once were human. The Homians destroyed their planet long ago and uploaded their consciousnesses into a quantum-server on a moonbase to escape the extinction they brought upon themselves. They sent out organic probes called footholders to search for habitable planets to populate. One footholder named Wormwood established itself in Rosewater, Nigeria, beginning the transformation of the indigenous occupants to make way for a quantum transfer that would allow the Homians to continue to live—by taking over the bodies of humans.

Oyin Da, known as Bicycle Girl, the Science Hero of Arodan, narrates the trilogy's final book. She relates how saving the world from the Homians requires no less than the genocide of their species. However, there is a problem for Oyin Da. Her very existence and that of her wife, Nike, and their child, Junior, is only possible because of the alien technology. Oyin Da is actually a ghost, the imprint of a person on the alien xenosphere, the primary mechanism through which human DNA is changed. As she describes it:

The xenosphere is a thoughtspace connecting all humans to each other by way of alien bioengineered neurones in the atmosphere. The aliens use it to store the entire history of mankind, including the biological history, with contextual feelings, everything. Some alien consciousnesses are in there as well as some copies of personalities of dead humans. Ghosts. Like me. (Thompson, 2019: 87)

Travelling through the xenosphere's collective memory of time, Oyin Da acts as a data thief (Samatar, 2017: 175-177), collecting and moving information and even changing the past by editing the consensus of what occurred. She appears as a time-traveller to humans, using the xenosphere to activate their brains so that they think they can see, hear, and touch her. Most of the time, neither she nor anyone else realises she is dead.

In this essay, we examine the figure of Oyin Da in Tade Thompson's *Wormwood Trilogy* to demonstrate how Africanfuturism uses colonial infrastructure—or “the master's house” (Lorde 1984: 110)—in queer ways to resist neocolonialism and produce decolonial contexts of queer and feminist African life. Drawing on Audre Lorde's often-cited quote, “The Master's tools can never dismantle the Master's house” (1984: 110), we assert that Oyin Da provides an exemplar of postcolonial realities wherein, sometimes, attempts at dismantling the master's house may be an unproductive decolonial venture. Instead, Thompson's trilogy illustrates how an appropriate decolonial venture may be to repurpose the “master's house” of colonial infrastructure in queer and feminist ways. *The Wormwood Trilogy* highlights that to free humans from alien colonisation means destroying the aliens. However, there is a dilemma for those characters whose existence depends on those same aliens, such as Oyin Da. Although she combats the aliens, alien technology also sustains her ability to live. Oyin Da's character demonstrates how to exist within complicity and

still struggle against colonization. As she puts it, “this is just another problem to solve. How to save the world from aliens, yet keep their infrastructure.... You know, after the British left, we kept the trains” (Thompson, 2019: 90). If in many Black diasporic contexts, the “master’s house” must be entirely dismantled to enable empowerment, such an approach does not entirely reflect the material realities on the African continent, where the colonial infrastructure is an integral part of the postcolonial context. Instead, it is necessary to deploy alternative epistemologies that are queer and feminist to recreate the “master’s house” as a space for decolonial thought and action.

We specifically draw examples from *The Rosewater Redemption*, the third book in the *Wormwood Trilogy* (Thompson, 2019), to show how the figure of Oyin Da illustrates: (1) how the African postcolonial condition itself is a queer one, where there can be no strict separation of colonial structures from indigenous life; (2) how queer and feminist epistemologies can be used strategically to alter the totality of “the master’s” infrastructure; and (3) how such resistance opens up decolonial possibilities for African queer and feminist liberatory existence.

In this essay, we derive our understanding of Africanfuturism from Okorafor (2019), who defines it as:

Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa.... Its default is non-western; its default/center is African (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.).

Okorafor’s definition of Africanfuturism recognises that African speculative fiction works are distinctive from Afrofuturism. Even though both Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism present important renderings of the future, they respond to different contexts and aim at different audiences. Mohale Mashigo argues, “Africans...need something entirely different from Afrofuturism” (2018: x-xi), and many African authors agree (e.g., Samatar, 2016 and 2017; Talabi, 2020; Wabuke, 2020) because the postcolonial African context requires different liberatory imaginings than the post-slavery Western context does. African authors often feel that Afrofuturism does not recognise the complexities of contemporary life on the continent, and instead uses Africa “as a costume or a stage to play

out...ideas”, rather than predicting “Africa’s future ‘post-colonialism’” in a way that reflects the desires Africans have for their futures (Mashigo, 2018: xi).

Through the character of Oyin Da, we claim that Thompson’s trilogy presents a distinct perspective on liberatory struggle, one that is particularly salient to Africans rather than the Black diaspora. We argue that Oyin Da demonstrates how Africanfuturism may depend on queering the “master’s house”, or colonial infrastructure, by discarding its *epistemologies* but not necessarily its *technologies*. Here, queering does not pertain to sexuality per se but acts as an analytic of non-normativity. In this way, Oyin Da’s queering of the “master’s” infrastructure is a form of epistemic disobedience that adopts an insurgent worldview and challenges the epistemic dominance of the West (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

### **African Feminism, Queer Africanness, and the “Master’s House”**

Keguro Macharia (2016: 502, 501) writes that the dominance of White Western “social science approaches” in studying African queerness leads to a failure of such analyses to grant Africans “a capacious imagination”. Studies that examine queerness in African fiction are one way of ameliorating this issue. They inherently centre the fruits of African imagination and the power to “continually resist and disrupt heteropatriarchal power” (Asante, 2020b: 117).

Yet, Africanfuturist fiction and its imaginings exist within a postcolonial cultural milieu that cannot be fully separated from Western influences. Postcolonial African subjects live within contexts that Achille Mbembe (2001) describes as convivial, inescapably shaped by colonial structures that Africans cannot ignore. Africanfuturism thus works within the infrastructural remains of colonialism, what Lorde may call “the master’s house”. In her writing, Lorde (1984: 110-111) argues against using “the tools of a racist patriarchy...to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy”. Lorde’s comment specifically refers to the lack of representation of Black and queer women at a feminist humanities conference in the West, using that example to aver that theory developed through White patriarchy cannot be used to dismantle White patriarchy.

In this essay, we make the case that the queering of the colonial infrastructure of “the master’s house” allows for both divestment from the colonial epistemologies meant to subjugate African feminist and queer liberation

and use of the same infrastructure *against* domination. As he relates in interviews, Thompson is frustrated by the under-representation of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) work in African speculative fiction (Ryman, 2017) and the elided histories of women's leadership in African resistance to colonialism (Wood and Thompson, 2017). The character of Oyin Da aligns with a long history of African queer and feminist resistance that is situated in complex localities where global forces of Whiteness and colonialism intersect with and are transformed by contextualised knowledge. Histories of African queer and feminist resistance both critique the uncritical application of Western forms of theorising and emphasise the importance of locality. The politics of locality unearth the contingent and contradictory forms that African feminist and queer resistance sometimes take.

Over the past 20 years, African feminisms have acutely observed the importance of regionally specific knowledge, setting the groundwork for Africanfuturism's deep rootedness in African contexts and lives (Cruz, 2015). Although there have been tensions around what constitutes feminism on the continent (Salo, 2001), Desiree Lewis (2001) denotes a general shift from critiquing the Whiteness of Western feminists to forging connections across differential formations of gender, race, and culture. This shift in critique focuses on regionally specific concerns that transcend "women", the Western-centric biologically-determined subject (Amadiume, 1987; Oyèwùmí, 1997), and their bodies as the only political itinerary of concern for feminists in Africa. If African feminism is "oriented towards praxis, meaning it is rooted in concerns of the everyday" (Cruz 2015: 24), then repurposing even the "master's house" can be useful, allowing for a type of societal manoeuvring that does not always lie outside the material confines of power.

In this manner, African feminist resistance that uses colonial infrastructure against colonialism may also be considered queer. Stella Nyanzi (2014: 61) understands "queer" as resisting "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion" and considers "queer" to envelop "all of us opposed to essentialist patriarchal heterosexist heteronormative binary configurations of sexual orientations and gender identities", denying the binaries that underlie much Western thought on gender and sexuality. Similarly, Abbas and Ekine (2013: 3) define queerness as a "political frame that encompasses gender and sexual plurality and seeks

to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate". The focus on resisting gendered and sexual normativities as they appear in different contexts is essential.

While African feminists have centred Africanness in a way that globalises feminism, queerness disrupts Africanness's presumed stability and fixity across space and time. Queer African scholars and activists have used the LGBTQIA acronym to draw attention to the various forms of discrimination experienced by gender non-conforming and same-gender-loving individuals, while simultaneously critiquing its inability to capture the politics of sexual nonconformity in Africa fully. For instance, Godfried Asante (2020a) introduces the concept of "queerly ambivalent". He argues that for some queer subjects in postcolonial Ghana, queerness registers how one may play with and against oppressive structures through ambivalence. Given the propensity for violence, ambivalence works as a contextualised strategy of survival and resistance. In part, ambivalent practices produce fragmented and hybridised African subjects that operate both within and against colonial structures (Pindi, 2018). Both African queerness and African feminism use the tools at their disposal in given situated contexts, even if they happen to be of Western origin. However, they do so in a way that works against colonial logics rather than for them. Doing so does not render African queerness or African feminism any less African.

Oyin Da is a remarkable character as she collapses many supposedly clear hierarchical categories of being—gay and straight, living and dead, hero and villain. Importantly, Oyin Da provides a guide to African feminist and queer appropriation of the "master's house" that can engender resistance in the present as well as the imagined future. Alien colonisation always resonates with themes of Western imperialism and colonialism, but Thompson (2019: 33, 337) makes the linkages explicit. At one point, Oyin Da states, "I hate to bring the British into this, but it's unavoidable. To understand the future, we need to understand the past, not just as context, but as the seeds of catastrophe." Later, another powerful woman character, Femi, ruminates on how her family history informed her dealings with the aliens:

A story passed down in Femi's family told of the village's first contact with a white man, a wiry, religious specimen with a caravan of porters, whom they welcomed with food and who went everywhere examining

battlements and shrines and food stores. One of the porters warned, in Yoruba, that the man should be put to death, but nobody listened to him. By the time more white men came with their black collaborators, it was too late. Resistance resulted in swift death. Only malaria and indirect rule attenuated the harshness of the colonists. Femi has never forgotten the story (Thompson, 2019: 337).

When the men in the series are willing to leverage the aliens for personal gain or accept their terms without struggle, the women remember their histories. The collaboration between self-serving African male leaders and former colonial powers has led Diabete to ask, “Could it be that the postcolonial era is turning out to be more lethal than the colonial?” (Diabete, 2020: 31). M. Jacqui Alexander (2006: 66) describes this phenomenon as heteropatriarchal recolonisation—“the continuity between the White heteropatriarchal inheritance and black heteropatriarchy”. Here, *Oyin Da* disturbs this linear inheritance by working within colonial infrastructure but against collaboration, queerly resistant in both action and embodiment.

Thompson thus writes a queer and feminist allegory that acts as a critique and commentary on the contemporary state of global coloniality, the struggles within the postcolonial nation, and the struggle for African epistemological freedom within it (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). If the aliens are already here, already inextricably connected to African lives, what is to be done? African feminist and queer praxes arise out of situated relations to the historical layers of racialisation and colonialism (Hanche, 2019; Mougoué, 2019; Asante, 2020a; Diabete, 2020), rendering a context in which hybridity, ambivalence, and disidentification demonstrate how colonial structures—the “master’s house”—can be utilised *against* imperialism.

### Oyin Da and Queer Feminist Resistance

Tade Thompson’s trilogy delves into the past’s layers, examining how the future cannot be disentangled from memory. As the Akan proverb stipulates, “*se wo were fi na wosankɔfa a, yenkyi*,” meaning “it’s not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten”. Time is circular, not linear. Through *Oyin Da*, Thompson advances a future that is not disentangled from colonial *technologies* but refuses colonial *epistemologies* of their use. The trilogy uses queer, trans,

and feminist sensibilities to disrupt the contemporary postcolonial nationalist reframing of African cultural norms as explicitly heterosexual and sexual/gender nonconformity as foreign. The women and queer men are the strongest characters in this book, holding together the broken lives of the heteronormative men around them. The men are often flawed vessels that find redemption in death. And Oyin Da finds redemption in the afterlife. The afterlife, memory, and ancestors provide a connection between the dead and the living--seeking to remind those living how to harness the knowledge of the past through alien technology to seek liberation from its violent usages.

### The Queerness of the Postcolonial Condition

Thompson describes how he wanted the alien invasion in *The Wormwood Trilogy* to analogise neocolonialism's current conditions, rather than emulate classical colonial takeovers (Samatar, 2016; Hopeton Hay Podcasts, 2019). In the postcolonial present, the remnants of colonialism persist through the proliferation of Christian religion, systems of education, global capitalism, and democratic forms of governance. This understanding of neocolonialism has two critical facets for our purposes: first, that the alien invasion necessarily involves complicity; and second, that the invasion is so slow and insidious that most do not realise the need to resist. In this way, the postcolonial condition is a queer one, as the ambivalence of playing both within and against normativity structures its contexts (Asante, 2020a).

If "queer" is understood "as a critical space that pushes the boundaries of what is embraced as normative" (Matebeni and Pereira, 2014: 7), then Thompson presents a queer perspective on neocolonialism--and how it can be resisted. In his novels, the xenosphere is the primary mechanism through which human DNA is being changed. Kaaro, the main character of the first book, thinks that he can stop the colonisation process by thoroughly demolishing the alien infrastructure. This binarised reaction requires the ability to draw a clear line between what is human and alien. As a powerful sensitive--a human who can access and use the xenosphere--he can launch an attack against it. He sets up a contingency plan that activates after his death, setting his ghost on a demolition spree that destroys much of the xenosphere. As he is about to eradicate it (or so he thinks), Oyin Da stops Kaaro:

“It won’t work, Kaaro.” ...

“Why? I can handle Molar. She’s not big and strong, she just thinks she is.”

“Kaaro, you kill her, she’ll just come back. The xenosphere is a quantum system. Molar is a Boltzmann brain. The Homians engineered this space to rapidly multiply probabilities of spontaneous self-awareness. They programmed the precise personality that would become dominant. You’re not Kaaro; he is ashes and dust somewhere in Rosewater. I’m not Bicycle Girl; she is dead somewhere in Arodan.

“Most importantly, brave Kaaro who would gladly sacrifice himself, this won’t stop the Homians. They’ll still be on that moon, on the servers, waiting. Wormwood is here, but there are also other footholders. How long do you think it will take them to figure out how to get back here? ...don’t kill our only link to them.” (Thompson, 2019: 292-293)

The ghost of Kaaro does not realise how deeply the alien technology is ingrained in the earth—even if he manages to destroy *this* xenosphere, it will just come back through one of the other footholders hidden on the planet.

In this sense, alien technology represents the pervasiveness of global capitalism started by European colonialism and eventually spearheaded by the United States after World War II. Furthermore, accompanying the expansion of global capitalism is the colonial/modern organisation of gender and sexuality that feeds capitalism’s cognitive needs. Oyěwùmi’s (1997) study of Yoruba culture shows us that the imposition of the colonial order did more than transform the social organisations around reproduction; colonialism imposed a binary gender system based on the body that limited women’s access to political power, capital, and the labour market. We can read Oyin Da’s point as analogy, taking it to mean that even if Africans can resist one global economic power, the various tentacles and influence of other emerging global superpowers such as China, India, and Brazil would take similar oppressive forms. Africa will always be somehow imbricated in its global flows and relations that destabilise and alter equitable social arrangements around gender and sexuality. Thompson demonstrates that decolonisation is needed, but the question that has stalled its implementation is how it can be done. Given the hybrid nature of African subjectivity, decolonisation needs to be strategic rather than reactionary. The fight is not a clear one, with

Black and White binarised sides, but rather a queer-feminist one, repurposing the master's infrastructure in ways unsanctioned by power.

In this manner, Oyin Da engages in queer logics of ambivalence. Godfried Asante (2020a: 166) defines the queerly ambivalent as “the everyday practices of resistance and survival that draw on dominant (colonial) cultural codes” and reframe them in alternative ways for survival and, sometimes, flourishing. Oyin Da understands that the approach to fighting against oppressive structures must shift given the comprehensive nature of global coloniality and its underpinning rhetoric of modernity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). In this context, the colonial structures of alien technology cannot be completely eradicated without it being unproductive; they are now a part of the Earth. Every person is partially composed of alien DNA. However, *how* Oyin Da utilises alien technology matters. So, she instead comes up with a plan to use the alien xenospheric structure against the aliens themselves—repurposing the “master's house” through anti-colonial epistemologies.

### How Queer Feminist Epistemologies Enable Anti-Colonial Resistance

Oyin Da tells the reader multiple times that she is the wrong person to tell this tale. Wrong, because the two people who ended up saving humanity from the aliens—Kaaro and Oyin Da—were no longer human by the time they did so. Ironically, the ghosts of Kaaro and Oyin Da were only able to exist to save humanity in and through the alien technology of the xenosphere.

Oyin Da's quest to save humanity from the aliens puts her own life and that of her wife and daughter—also constructs within the xenosphere—at risk. Her wife Nike reminds her of this:

“Are you going to continue this crusade?”

“I don't think the aliens are good for humanity, Nike.”

“But we're not human, honey. We are human patterns, but we're stored in and maintained by an alien organic infrastructure. Among other things, the xenosphere is a data server, in which we live, and where we can interact with human consciousnesses if we choose to. I support it's normal to be loyal to your origins, but you have a particular difficulty letting go, which is why we have this recursive argument every time you go gallivanting.” (Thompson, 2019: 89-90)

Oyin Da acts in queerly ambivalent ways, using the xenospheric tools at her disposal to engender resistance to the Homian takeover. Oyin Da thus performs a queer disidentification with coloniality. Disidentifications “allow minoritarian subjects to utilise the code of majority to empower a marginalised positionality that has been historically constructed as unthinkable or impossible” (Eguchi and Asante, 2016: 175). Oyin Da is an im/possible subject, not only because she is a strong queer African woman in a colonial system, but because she is un/dead.

Oyin Da disidentifies from the structures that sustain her existence, using them in queerly ambivalent ways. Like the Homians, Oyin Da is no longer embodied, but unlike the Homians she creates her own form within the xenosphere. She thus presents a way of using the coloniser’s infrastructure without accepting a colonising epistemology of bodily dispossession: she uses the xenosphere to continue to exist, creating her own idea of a body that she can project into the minds of others so that they see her—and she sees herself—as a mid-twenties woman with Afro-puffs. She does not consider stealing others’ bodies—which seems to be the only answer the colonising Homians can conceptualise. The aliens render humans disposable by conceptualising them as “not real” (Thompson, 2019: 199)—similar to how the West construes Africa and Africans as the embodiment of lack (Mbembe, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This highlights an essential difference between the alien colonisers and the human freedom fighters: Oyin Da *knows* “the rot” that she is putting “in [their] souls for all time” by suggesting the death of millions (even if they are already disembodied consciousnesses). But they are dealing with beings that do not recognise humans as real. Oyin Da knows that even though she did not create these terms, she must act to repurpose their infrastructure through a queer-feminist epistemology.

Oyin Da demonstrates that there is no easy way to exist within complicity and still fight against colonisation, but that embracing the queer potential of the postcolonial condition can allow for decolonial resistance. In particular, she and Kaaro devise a plan to use the xenosphere against the aliens: if the aliens can transfer their consciousnesses to human bodies through quantum entanglement in the xenosphere, they can use that pathway to transfer Kaaro’s consciousness to the alien server. In sending Kaaro to erase the alien server holding the Homian consciousnesses on a distant moon, Oyin Da repurposes the alien infrastructure by inhabiting it as a queerly ambivalent subject who eludes detection as an

outsider --in it but not of it--thus, disidentifying from the original meaning to both save humanity and enable the survival of herself and her family.

### **Opening Possibilities for Queer and Feminist Life**

The alien technology of the xenosphere holds possibilities for enabling queer and feminist life in Africa where faux constructions of “African culture” (Tamale, 2011) curtail imagination. Oyin Da can only exist because of the xenosphere, but her existence is one of tremendous power. Not only can she travel through the collective memories of time, moving into the past and even through people’s projections of the future, but she can appear and disappear anywhere at will. Thus, her life as a woman is unconstrained; free of restricted motion, fear of violence, or patriarchal control of any sort. In the first book, she uses this lack of constraint in a feminist manner by enabling others’ liberation, bringing them into a collective commune known as the Lijad. This echoes what Mama points out in a 2001 interview with Elaine Salo: that what binds African feminists is not terminology, but how African material realities inform the deployment of terms such as “feminist” (Salo, 2001). Oyin Da’s material realities as a xenosphere ghost and feminist activist inform the intellectual tools that enable her to liberate the world from the aliens. Remarkably, she often does not remember that she is not alive. Her wife Nike tells her:

“You are the most powerful xenosphere ghost I have ever seen. You being oblivious added an extra dimension. Did you know that solid objects are mostly empty space? Through the xenosphere you can manipulate people’s perceptions and make them sense you—hear, touch, taste, smell and see. You, Oyin Da, do it without thinking.” (Thompson, 2019: 86)

Oyin Da’s life can be one of a time-traveling feminist hero precisely because her queer praxis is elusive to alien infrastructure. The aliens built the technology with her subjugation in mind and ignored how it could also engender resistance, never considering she could adapt to their infrastructure and thrive within it. Notably, she is non-categorical and queerly ambivalent: she is “alive” but dead; she is married, but to another woman; she has a child, but neither a man nor sex was involved in her creation. These forms of queer existence threaten the heterosexist foundations of the postcolonial nation--alien infrastructure--itself an extension of the colonial state (Alexander, 2006). Thus, Oyin Da’s character

resonates with queer African existence within the material contexts of many African postcolonial countries.

In the first book, Oyin Da is drawn to Kaaro, thinking herself enamoured by him. By the third book, the reader finds out that what Oyin Da saw in Kaaro was the xenosphere ghost that would become her wife, Nike. Nike was a powerful sensitive that emplaced her consciousness within Kaaro as she was dying. She was a sex worker during her life on Earth and fell in love with Oyin Da in the xenosphere. They met in the xenosphere, and together they created a child made purely out of the xenosphere. While the xenosphere was built to constrain human life and its potentialities, Oyin Da and Nike have co-opted its totalising power.

Through alien technology, Oyin Da and Nike can build a consensual life free of heterosexist and heteropatriarchal restraints. After losing her memory, Oyin Da asks Nike where they are:

“Who built this place?” I ask.

“We both did. We both are. It is constantly being rebuilt within our agreement.” (Thompson, 2019: 131)

The two continually recreate their home together, challenging the colonial and postcolonial creation of the nuclear family system as the only family system intelligible to the (post)colonial state. There are diverse family systems in several parts of Africa. Nzegwu (2012) explains that “family matters in several African societies deal with different forms of family relationships such as consanguineal, nuclear, mixtures of the two, polygamous, matrilineal, dual descent, matrifocal, and patrifocal. A consanguineal family construes the family as kin while the nuclear family treats the family as a man, his wife and his children”. However, the nuclear family, in particular, is usually paraded as the only family system in Africa, largely as a result of the colonial institutionalisation of capitalist and Victorian models of gender and sexuality, where the idiom of marriage is primarily about gender and is used for social stratification. Oyewùmí (1997) explains that the nuclear family reproduces colonial gendered norms where the male is assumed to be superior and, therefore, a defining category. In this vein, gender is a primary source of hierarchy and oppression within the nuclear family. Oyin Da and Nike disrupt the representation of the nuclear family home as the only family system in Africa, opening up imaginations for alternative forms of queer relations and

kinship structures. The xenosphere allows for a queer-feminist creation of the home outside the instituted colonial gendered and class systems that prioritize masculine labour while subordinating women to the private sphere.

Their daughter, Junior, is a glimpse of queer African possibilities. Nike explains,

“Junior is pure xenosphere, has never been human like you and me. She is an idea made flesh and knows how to survive in this place better than we ever will. This isn’t real, but our minds make it into a facsimile of the life we knew on Earth, so we come along with the same rules that we live with, rules that don’t have to obtain here. We know that intellectually, but our minds still rail against what does not fit ontologically. Junior, on the other hand, has no such restrictions.” (Thompson, 2019: 268)

The birth of Junior in the xenosphere speaks to the wide-ranging possibilities when alien technology is re-purposed and re-thought from decolonial queer-feminist perspectives and speaks to imaginable possibilities outside the heteropatriarchal phallogocentric gaze on the bodies of women and sexual minorities. From this perspective, we argue that, even though there are other possibilities for the future that lie outside of alien technology and infrastructure, such imaginations of the future tend to fail in praxis as they often rely on an idealistic and myopic view of a recuperable stable mythical past (Asante & Pindi, 2020). Mbembe refutes this claim by arguing that the precolonial history of African societies is a “history of colliding cultures” and can hardly be understood outside the paradigms of mobility and displacement. Here, in an attempt to contribute to the discussion on who is and what is African or not African, Mbembe points to the inherent possibilities when we think of “Africanness” (Mbembe, 2020: 58) as an interweaving of a here and there; embracing the ambiguities embedded in postcolonial identities and material realities. Thus, Junior is symbolic of what Hanchey (2020: 120) postulates “as the pulling of yet indescribable futures into being” through decolonial queer and feminist praxis.

Oyin Da and Nike are in the xenosphere, yet firmly embedded in Nigerian culture and struggles. If Africanfuturism is “rooted” in Africa, then its concerns must take African decolonial concerns as their starting point. In African decolonial struggle, it is not the colonial *infrastructure* that cannot be used but rather the colonial *epistemologies* with which the infrastructure is normatively associated. Thompson’s trilogy shows how Africanfuturism may retain the

master's infrastructure but must repurpose its tools through African feminist and queer epistemological values.

## Conclusion

*The Wormwood Trilogy* demonstrates how African feminist and queer approaches open doors to decolonisation where the “master’s house”, such as legal structures, formal education, and academic terminology, need not necessarily be discarded because it can be queerly deployed to resist the patriarchy and heteronormativity of global coloniality. It offers the hope that Africanfuturist work can provide liberatory possibilities for African gender and sexual equality that have been stymied by some African nationalists who insist that LGBTQIA rights and women’s equality are “foreign to African culture”, and by narrow renderings of the continent in diasporic Afrofuturist fantasy.

Africanfuturism thus draws African continental histories into relation with the nuances of the postcolonial and neocolonial conditions in the present to imagine alternative futures that are deeply interventionist. Authors like Tade Thompson recognise the importance of showing the intersecting nuances within struggles for epistemic decolonisation, gendered liberation, and queer futurity, as well as the complex ways they are embedded within global structures of power. Through the character of Oyin Da, Thompson offers hope that the structures of neocolonialism and the biopolitical impulses of the hetero-masculinist postcolonial nation that sometimes feel stifling and overdetermined can not only be fought against—their very institutions can also be turned into weapons for justice.

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# When the Lagoons Remember: An Afroqueer Futurist Reading of "Blue Ecologies of Agitation"

Kwame Edwin Otu

## Abstract

In this essay, I conduct an afroqueer futurist reading of e-waste ecologies in postcolonial Ghana. I bring ethnographic observations undertaken at the Agbogbloshie e-waste dump, arguably the world's largest e-waste dump, in conversation with Nnedi Okorafor's feminist and Africanfuturist novel, *Lagoon*, which focuses on the environmental consequences of petrochemical capitalism in Nigeria. The e-waste dump, located in Accra, Ghana's capital, sits on the Korle Lagoon and Odaw River. These water bodies have become conveyer belts that carry waste from the city into the Atlantic Ocean. Their despoliation is synecdochic of the violent consequences of neoliberal infrastructural modernity. Here, I highlight how a "real" lagoon in Agbogbloshie and a fictional lagoon in petrochemical Nigeria amplify the impacts of ongoing global environmental crises on African bodies. I argue that both the bodies on the e-waste dump in Agbogbloshie and the characters in Okorafor's *Lagoon* embody "agitated ecologies" (i.e., ecologies and bodies overwhelmed by suffering and resignation). How then does a queer novel like *Lagoon*, whose ecological aesthetics imbricate with the queerness of Korle Lagoon, provide a lens through which to explore what some scholars of e-waste in Ghana call "blue political ecologies" of e-waste and vice-versa?

In many ways, Bar Beach was a perfect sample of Nigerian Society. It was a place of mixing. The ocean mixed with the land and the wealthy mixed with the poor. Bar Beach attracted drug dealers, squatters, various accents and languages, seagulls, garbage, biting flies, tourists, all kinds of religious zealots, hawkers, prostitutes, johns, water-loving children and their careless parents.

*Nnedi Okorafor, Lagoon (2014: 7).*

“Abi we dey do work wey many Ghanaians from the South no go do. As for us, ibi borlar work wey we do, like we be borlar people, but eno be so. Ibi sey this system no dey work for us.” (We do the work that southern Ghanaians would not do. We live in a society that imagines us as a people who are trash and deserve to work with trash, but we are not. Ghanaians do not care about northerners. It is as if the system does not work for us). On a hot July day in 2019, this conversation in Ghanaian pidgin unfolded between me and Mustapha, a muscled, angular-faced man in his early thirties. Strolling on a path that snaked along the banks of the Korle Lagoon, we chatted about life. Surrounded by detritus from Accra’s urban landscape, the lagoon, according to the geographers Peter Little and Grace Akese, has been described as a “pollution nightmare”<sup>1</sup> in narratives of global climate change. Old Fadama, an informal settlement and residence to mostly migrant workers from northern Ghana who work on the e-waste deposition site in Agbogbloshie, sits on the lagoon. Popularly known in Ghana as Sodom and Gomorrah, the dump is the world’s largest e-waste site, and its effluence flows directly into the lagoon. E-waste work is gendered, with men and boys working exclusively on e-waste while women and girls engage in food vending or supplying “pure water”, which quenches the thirst of the e-waste workers or is used to extinguish the fires that incinerate electronic gadgets and wires to reveal their treasured parts—copper.<sup>2</sup>

The Korle Lagoon pours into the Atlantic Ocean. Described as a “black nauseating syrup”, (Little and Akese, 2019: 456) its largest tributary, the Odaw River is a sinkhole of urban ruination, evidence of the ills of neoliberal “infrastructural modernity”.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the lagoon is a synecdoche of Africa’s paradoxical location as a site of extraction and deposition, to paraphrase the radical Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (1972). The lagoon and its surroundings have become props in neoliberal experimentations that purport to pursue global environmental justice. Possibly well-intentioned, these pursuits ignore how the destruction of ecologies like the lagoon are far too common in postcolonial Africa. One only has to look at the frequent oil spills in the Niger Delta and small-scale illegal mining activities in Ghana, also known as “galamsey”.

Mustapha dismantled obsolete technology for their treasured parts on the dump. Upon arriving in Agbogbloshie from Tamale, his hometown and the capital of Ghana's Northern Region, his hopes for a less precarious life were dashed when he was sucked into the vortex of urban poverty and the virulent ethnic discrimination and islamophobia directed at members of Northern-based ethnic groups by more urban Southern-based ethnic groups, most of whom are Christian.

In this essay, I draw on Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist novel, *Lagoon*, to undertake an afroqueer futurist reading of ecologies like the lagoon Mustapha's life interfaced with.<sup>4</sup> Okorafor's *Lagoon* evokes Patricia McFadden's notion of "contemporarity", which she describes as "the innovative feminist energies and sensibilities that will enable each of us to live the new politics of this moment in African time" (McFadden, 2018: 417). By diagramming modes of African future-making undertaken by the novel's female protagonists—Ayodele and Adaora—the book foregrounds "agitated ecologies" (i.e., ecologies overwhelmed by suffering and resignation), Ayodele's ability to shape-shift, and Adaora's inquisitive traits as critical queer subtexts.

Okorafor's *Lagoon* invites an afroqueer futurist reading. Thus, as a queer novel whose ecological aesthetics imbricate with the queerness of the lagoon itself,<sup>5</sup> it provides a lens to explore what some scholars of e-waste in Ghana call "blue political ecologies of e-waste".<sup>6</sup> Okorafor's evocative description of Bar Beach in the epigraph and Mustapha's life on an e-waste dump adjoining the Korle Lagoon evince the lagoon as a frontier of agitation; a space of anxiety over the excesses of neoliberal modernity.<sup>7</sup> Like the protagonists in Okorafor's novel, namely Ayodele, the emissary; Adaora, the marine biologist; Agu, the soldier, and Anthony Dey Craze, the musician, Mustapha is (1) a spectre that beckons the failings of the neocolonial state and the neoliberal international, and (2) a queer subject whose life agitates the neocolonial/neoliberal nation-state. Here, queer is figured as the placeholder for the "non-normative" in the same way Cathy Cohen (1997) describes the term in her disillusionment with queer politics when she argues:

that a truly radical or transformative politics has not resulted from queer activism. In many instances, instead of destabilising the assumed categories and binaries of sexual identity, queer politics has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between the heterosexual and everything

“queer”. An understanding of the ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalised subjects on both sides of this dichotomy has been left unexamined (Cohen, 1997: 438).

Cohen proceeds to call for “a politics where the non-normative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work” (1997: 438). I read Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, Korle Lagoon, and Mustapha’s life on an e-waste dump as queer instantiations that supply new vocabularies to humanise the bodies we study, without simultaneously diminishing the precarious circumstances surrounding them. Hence, is “queer” a kind of practice that agitates by assembling marginal ecologies against normative regimes?

Arguing that Mustapha’s appearance on the banks of the lagoon marks it as a frontier of agitation, I contend that he is also a frontier African precisely because his multiple marginalisations resulting from his class, gender, rural, ethnic, national, and transnational backgrounds queer him. Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) has argued that the frontier African questions the paradigm of completeness in Western projects that assume wholeness and stability as prerequisites for making sense of subjectivity by gesturing towards “incompleteness”. Accordingly, “no boundary, wall or chasm is challenging enough to defy frontier Africans seeking conversations with and between divides”. Nyamnjoh reminds us, “At the frontiers, anything can be anything” (2017:258). Alongside reading Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, I illuminate, in what follows, Mustapha’s vexatious entanglements with the Korle Lagoon, the e-waste dump, and the extended lives of neoliberal and neocolonial structures of domination and extraction, and his multiple queer locations.

### **Korle Lagoon as a Blue Ecology of Agitation**

In Ayi Kwei Armah’s (1968) postcolonial novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which documents the failures of Ghana’s independence, we encounter one of the earliest and most visceral imageries of the Korle Lagoon from the standpoint of the protagonist. On board public transport crossing the lagoon, he describes his experience thus:

In gusts the heat rises from the market abandoned to the night and to the homeless, dust and perpetual mud covered over with crushed tomatoes and rotten vegetables, eddies from the open end of some

fish head on a dump of refuse and curled-up scales with the hardening corpses of the afternoon's flies around. Another stretch of free sea line. More than half-way now, the world around the central rubbish heap is entered, and smells hit the senses like a strong wall, and even the eyes have something to register. It is so old it has become more than mere rubbish, that is why. It has fused with the earth underneath (1968: 40).

Cynical about the promises of post-independent Ghana in the latter years of its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, Armah renders a critique of nation-state formation at the dawn of independence and the idea of independence itself. The detritus of the urban landscape of Accra, resulting from corruption and poor governance, gutted the postcolonial vision of equality. Several decades after independence, and with the passage of different political regimes, the state of the Korle Lagoon became a stand-in for the uncertainty enabled by the neocolonial and neoliberal regimes left in the wake of Ghana's independence. Indubitably, the state of the lagoon has become a literal and metaphorical embodiment of discontentment with the nation-state. How, then, does the lagoon become an ecological archive – one that not only illumines the failed promises of modernity, but also is a site that incites agitation? This essay is an elaboration of this paradox.

In their examination of e-waste deposition in Agbogbloshie, Peter Little and Grace Akese dwell on how studies of e-waste, globally and particularly in Ghana, ignore blue political ecologies of e-waste (2019). Focusing on the Korle Lagoon, they suggest that attempts to restore this “blue ecology” have faced contestations from “non-blue” sectors. These involve land tenure and housing conflicts, all of which have deep-seated roots in the colonial appropriation of land and the attendant readjustment of land ownership. For them, a blue political ecology of e-waste perspective, which considers the historical forces that contributed to the lagoon's destruction, can illuminate “Ghana's ongoing struggle to negotiate the intersecting problems of urban regeneration, e-waste management, scrap-metal extraction, and lagoon ecological restoration” (2019: 450).

Drawing on the metaphors of “sink” and “residue,” Little and Akese describe the strategic role the Korle Lagoon has played in Accra, suggesting that, “as the major receptacle of runoff in the city, some of the earliest gutters and

sewer pipes first laid to drain the city all connect to the lagoon for final discharge into the sea” (2019: 454). The lagoon’s putrefaction, which Armah viscerally describes, metamorphosed through time into what is now known euphemistically as “Lavender Hill”. A mound of faecal matter, the hill embodies the excesses of neoliberal modernity (Chalfin, 2014). This artificial geography, contiguous with the lagoon, anticipates Little and Akese’s observations that the Korle Lagoon’s emergence as a sink and residue antedates the appearance of the e-waste dump, whose workers are invariably blamed for the lagoon’s ongoing contamination (Little and Akese, 2019). This convergence of sink and residue, extraction and deposition, is archived by the lagoon.

The scrapyards in Agbogbloshie, which is surrounded by informal settlements that serve as havens for the majority of e-waste workers, most of whom are migrants from northern Ghana, “sits on land that is largely part of the lagoon” (Little and Akese, 2019: 454). These settlements, precisely because they are informal, like many low-income suburbs of Accra, lack an organised system of rubbish collection. Hence, in addition to the industrial and semi-industrial waste that drains into the lagoon, effluence from the settlements sitting on the banks, like Old Fadama, Agbogbloshie, Sabon Zongo, and others, flows directly into the lagoon.

Recent narratives on toxic waste dumping in the lagoon tend to scapegoat e-waste workers and the mostly poor residents along its banks.<sup>8</sup> Little and Akese have warned that such representations ignore complex historical contingencies, arguing that “the sources of the lagoon’s pollution are varied, and importantly predate the adjacent e-waste industry along its banks, which only came into prominence in the late 2000s” (2019: 455). The contemporary ecological anxieties around the Korle Lagoon register the ongoing residues of colonisation, neocolonisation, and the structural readjustment of violence under neoliberal projects to restructure the postcolonial state from the eighties through to the nineties (Igoe and Kelsall, 2005; Manuh, 2007).

As a frontier, the lagoon continues to be a site of contestations, especially among the indigenous Ga for whom the Korle has always borne sacred significance. Under the British colonial administration, attempts were made to convert the lagoon into a port to ensure the mitigation of malaria. This restructuring effort met resistance from the indigenous Ga populations

in the area (Dakubu, 1997; Little and Akese, 2019; Quayson, 2014; Roberts, 2010). I argue that the resistance magnifies the lagoon as a site of cultural and spiritual memory, and its politicisation by the indigenous populations was an agitation at the crippling presence of the British (Roberts, 2010; Little and Akese, 2019). The lagoon's vitality as a political ecological frontier continues to play out in contemporary efforts to restore it under the Korle Lagoon Ecological Restoration Project.<sup>9</sup> A neoliberal effort to rescue the lagoon, and reminiscent of those projects that occurred under structural adjustment, the restoration project has yielded little to no change. What does an actual lagoon in Ghana have in common with a fictional lagoon in Nigeria? Both lagoons, I argue, embody the consequences of neocolonial and neoliberal despoliation.

**Okorafor's Lagoon as an Agitated Africanfuturist Post-Apocalyptic Narrative**  
 Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* is arguably an agitated Africanfuturist post-apocalyptic narrative that blends African magical realism<sup>10</sup> with African science fiction to critique Nigeria's petrochemical capitalism. This entanglement "manifests in *Lagoon*", as Melody Jue (2017) underlines, "through the indigenous cosmologies together with the idea of the scientific novum, which combine in the figure of the alien to 'refuel' Lagos' future" (2017:174). The novel's emphasis on the sea's residents agitating or protesting because of the devastation of their habitats by humans is tied to the conditions of working-class Africans, like Mustapha, who bears the burdens wrought by ecological catastrophes. Thus, in many ways, Okorafor mobilises Africa as a site that furnishes a theory of new world-making (Otu, 2021).

Bar Beach, where all the protagonists – Ayodele, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony – first converge shortly before the arrival of the extraterrestrial bodies, is synecdochic of the Niger Delta Region, described as the cursed and blessed region of Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> There, narrates Okorafor, "a perfect sample of Nigerian society" (2014: 7) assembled: the prostitute, who was a secretary by day; the White American businessman, in Nigeria for oil transactions; the woman facing domestic violence at the hands of her husband; the disgruntled soldier, and the disillusioned celebrity musician.

Similar to the Korle Lagoon, Bar Beach was the microscope through which the myriad ecologies of resignation, suffering, and immiseration among the Nigerian masses came to light. It is unsurprising, then, that the Nigerian world turned upside down there, with the landing of a giant meteorite, which plumbed out the ocean's bowels, revealing its monstrously rich marine life. Creating gigantic waves that blurred the boundaries between aquatic and terrestrial, the landing represented the beginning of a new Nigeria as otherworldly bodies that took the form of human bodies began to emerge from the ocean. Emerging from the waves and metamorphosing into a woman was Ayodele. In traditional Nigerian, qua some West African cosmologies, Ayodele is "*mami wata*" – the indigenous equivalent of a mermaid with magical qualities (Jue, 2017). Ayodele's arrival amplifies the African feminist spirit of *Lagoon*. Her shape-shifting abilities, which cause a stir among Nigerian men, threatens heteronationalist patriarchy and transnational petrochemical capitalism.

Represented as the ambassador of the aliens, Ayodele explains to Adaora, Agu, and Anthony that they have been recruited to participate in an exercise to save Nigeria from impending doom. She says:

"Please, all of you, come", Ayodele said, sitting beside Adaora..."you three were chosen"..."you made sense. I know we've made the right choice" (Okorafor, 2014: 52-54).

Having been told about the justification for their recruitment as ambassadors by Ayodele, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony embark on their designated missions throughout the novel to rescue Nigeria from its impending demise, a pursuit that is not without its challenges. It has also become clear to them that Ayodele and the rest of the aliens landing on the shores of Bar Beach are not invaders, but otherworldly bodies with the determined intent to save Nigerians and, in the process, rescue themselves. However, the aliens needed to be human, not only to be heard but to agitate. Thus, Ayodele's invitation to Adaora, Agu, and Anthony suggests the importance of the human body as a canvas of possibility – a possibility that will make agitation palatable for a new future.

A scene from the novel captures the environmental scars resulting from oil drilling conducted by petroleum conglomerates in Nigeria. Here, Agu, the soldier, had been arrested, and the arresting officers had been ordered to follow up on information that "something had gone wrong with the hose attached to

the supply vessel FPSO *Mystras*” (2014: 95). The oilfield where the large vessel and the rig were located had been mostly abandoned because of the ongoing pandemonium triggered by the arrival of the extraterrestrials. The spillage went unnoticed by the officers. However, one of the few rig workers around, Rafiu, an engineer, insisted that there was a leakage that needed fixing and that the oil company *Mystras* had to be notified. In the moment, Rafiu’s “stomach lurched”, reveals Okorafor. “He would never be able to dislodge the guilt he felt for abandoning the oil rig when the hose was spewing oil into the water. He’d become an engineer to save the environment” (2014: 96). Although Rafiu expresses ambivalence, the lack of care shown by the officers epitomises the terrestrial supremacy or “terrecentrism” of humans<sup>12</sup> that faces, as the excerpt below shows, the agitation of oceanic beings. Reminiscent of ethnocentrism, “terrecentrism” here describes how physical geographies acquire supremacy in relation to non-physical ones.

It flew right past the four of them and grazed Agu’s arm before plunking into the water on the other side of the boat. Agu felt a wet sting, and looked down at his arm. It was dribbling with blood from a cut three inches long near his elbow. It only took Agu a moment to realise what had happened. He threw himself down and managed to crane his neck around to see fifty more flying fish zip from the water like poison darts. He shut his eyes and closed his ears. But he could still hear the meaty sound of fish slicing human flesh and the agonised screams of the others (2014: 97).

It is apparent from the above excerpt that the residents of the ocean – the flying fish and swordfish, sharks, sea cows, and other monstrous creatures – are angered by the trepidatious habits of their terrestrial counterparts, the Nigerian subjects animating the novel.

Ayodele’s representation as the emissary from the aquatic world and her intentional selection of Adaora, Agu, and Anthony sets in motion a manifesto for a new world. In this manifesto, the metamorphosed conditions and leftovers of slavery and capitalism, extended by what Patricia McFadden (2011) calls “a neo-colonial/neocapitalist collusionary moment” are brought to bear. Thus, not only are oceanic creatures protesting for a new world for themselves; in fact, their agitation enjoins the Nigerian working class qua the African masses, whose lives

are at the mercies of neocolonial depredation, to speak up and agitate. Although an explicitly blue political ecological frame remains, implicit in the novel is a political attunement to the dangers and damage unleashed by the oil industry on postcolonial Nigeria. For instance, since the discovery of oil in Nigeria, the country has become solely dependent on the exportation of oil.

The emergence of the petrochemical industry displaced local economies that revolved around farming and fishing. That a swordfish destroys pipelines in the novel underscores the violence that petrochemical capitalism continues to wreak for the masses. Sometimes, those affected by this violence express rage. “People get angry”, argues the Cameroonian economic anthropologist, Céléstin Monga (1996), “when they are systematically oppressed, and they develop many ways of escaping repression, some of which may lead to the fragmentation of the most stable countries and the worsening of social conditions; in this new era of democratisation, the vicious legacy of anger is a factor of instability and democratic sustainability” (Monga, 1996: 5). Anger is borne out of agitation.

Transnational oil companies Shell Oil and Chevron own a large share in the Nigerian economy. Together with the Nigerian government, these conglomerates, it is estimated, “have siphoned 30 billion worth of oil from beneath [the] Ogoni [people’s] earth” (Nixon, 2011; Jue, 2017) while polluting the environment. The 1994 execution of Ogoni Human Rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and others, known as the Ogoni Nine, at the hands of Sani Abacha’s regime, underscores Ayodele’s perspicacious invocation to Adaora, Agu, and Anthony about the tragic consequences of oil wealth. She says, “your land is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart” (Okorafor, 2014: 113). The senseless murder of the Ogoni Nine presages Ayodele’s own execution at the end of the novel at the hands of the Nigerian military. These factual and fictional deaths<sup>13</sup> are a powerful reminder of the costs of agitation. Moreover, they foreground the retribution faced by bodies that serve as ambassadors for blue ecologies in particular and ecologies in general.

### **Queering Agitation and Agitating Queer: Embedding Mustapha on the Shores of a Lagoon**

The ethnographic excerpts shared by Mustapha illuminate how blue ecologies agitate through bodies, as we see in the fictional *Lagoon*. Hailing from Ghana’s Northern Region, Mustapha arrived in Accra to escape the treacherous minefields

of poverty, uneven development, and ethnic strife. Like Ayodele, whose shape-shifting abilities in *Lagoon* drew the ire of the Nigerian authorities, Mustapha was shoehorned into the pigeonholes of poverty, criminality, and laziness, simply for being a northerner. In that regard, the lagoon as a frontier of agitation is also a site at which the anxieties around gender, and especially successful and failed manhoods, become tangible. These anxieties need to be registered as agitations against what the feminist, Patricia McFadden, persuasively captures as neocolonial and neoliberal collusion (McFadden, 2011).

The trials and tribulations navigated by Mustapha bespeak the conditions that the working poor in Ghana confront. There is a world in which efforts are made daily to make the inconceivable become conceivable, as Elizabeth Povinelli (2001) would say. The worlds imagined by Mustapha in Agbogbloshie can be described as radical. For Povinelli, radical worlds are created when incommensurable conditions become subject to radical interpretation, thus becoming fertile grounds for life-transforming possibility and impossibility. However, Mustapha criss-crosses these uneven transitions in ways that unsettle our conceptualisation of time and space, much like the waste deposits that distinguish him from Ghanaians who regard themselves as normative.

Residing in a makeshift structure, Mustapha, like the other migrants from northern Ghana, contends with the vagaries of extreme poverty, some of which include the “feminisation of the poor” in an ethno-classist society like Ghana. In a way, being poor, a northerner, and Muslim diminished Mustapha’s access to the dividends that accompany being wealthy, a southerner, and a Christian. This disenfranchisement, the result of his peripheral masculinity, delineates his queerness. It marks him as “non-normative”, to channel Cathy Cohen (1997), similar to how being non-heteronormative marks one as queer.

Mustapha’s daily routine begins very early in the morning and ends at sunset. He leaves his shack in Agbogbloshie and Sodom and Gomorrah, rummaging in various locations in the city for scrap metals. He returns to the waste dump at dusk, where he picks apart the technological parts acquired during his scavenging expedition, which on occasion bear the signatures and the remains of their previous owners. He once dissected a computer with a World Bank sticker embossed on it. Anytime he has the opportunity to retell the story, he does so to prove that he too is a “big man”.<sup>14</sup> In Ghanaian pidgin, Mustapha declares, “You use computer

from World Bank before? I use am. You see sey me, too, I taste America, some. Now, you, you be professor wey you dey university for America but you never use World Bank computer before. Now who be the boss?" Mustapha's declaration is quite perceptive. Deploying the language of "taste", he does not take for granted the fact that his dismantling of the computer for copper wire exposes him to dangerous toxins; but dwells on the fact that this obsolete World Bank equipment allows him to travel through space and time to America—to taste it.

Mustapha earns a little over five dollars on what he describes as a good day; an amount unlikely to take him through the day. However, he earns twice as much as the Ghanaian worker on a minimum wage. The current daily minimum wage in Ghana is GHS 11.82, which is the equivalent of two dollars.<sup>15</sup> In that regard, Mustapha earns a wage that far outpaces the wage received by a civil or public servant, the latter working within the formal economy. Being a citizen in a country in which the informal sector constitutes an integral part of the economy, the wages earned by Mustapha never get programmed into statistical calculations that determine the cost of living for people in Ghana. If Ghana is often touted as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, as was recently declared, conditions in Agbogbloshie suggest otherwise.

Reminiscent of the queer African subject whose existence agitates against the problematic idea of a heterosexual Africa, Mustapha agitates against the fiction of neoliberal perfection which masks the conditions of precarity that besiege his body. Thus, like the non-heteronormative Ghanaian omitted from the heterosexual calculus of the nation-state, he is unaccountable in "Africa Rising" narratives, which mark Ghana as a neoliberal success. This unaccountability is what Ayo Coly (2019) calls "hauntological", which explicates how colonial representations of African women's sexuality continue to hold the African female body hostage in African Studies (2019). This hauntology or unaccountability is akin to Kara Keeling's reading of Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* in her book entitled *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019), an Afrofuturist meditation on the possibilities of Black and queer freedom in projects on radical futurity and technology. For Keeling, the character, Bartleby, remains "unaccountable" to the violent regimes under which he works, precisely "because of the kind of queer formulas they deploy" to refuse the binds that accompany "dominant standards of measure, recognition, and evaluation" (2019: 43).

Mustapha, in a fashion reminiscent of Keeling's assessment and Coly's evaluation of the incarceration of African women's desire in postcolonial African scholarship, is queer precisely because he is not captured by neoliberal calculations of economic success. Thus, my deployment of queer channels the Ugandan feminist Stella Nyanzi, who, concerned about the rigid deployments of queer among queer Africans asks, "Is there a place for heterosexual cisgenders in Africa's queer movement? Is there room for heterosexuals or cisgenders? When firm boundaries are drawn between homosexuals and heterosexuals, isn't this a simplistic restyling of essentialist schisms? Isn't this another polarisation of binary oppositions—this time based on sexual orientation?" (2014: 66).

The afroqueer futurist reading I have performed here responds to Nyanzi's provocation that queer must and should be an "open invitation to all of us opposed to essentialist patriarchal heterosexist heteronormative binary configurations" (Nyanzi, 2014: 67). In the spirit of dismantling rigid dichotomies by offering a reading that is both queer and futurist reading, I argue that the "context" in which Mustapha resides and *Lagoon* as a "text" expose how the collusion between neoliberalism and neocolonialism create deathly conditions for non-normative African subjects. Mustapha's ties to the lagoon through e-waste, on the one hand, magnify his queerness and on the other hand, capture how non-normative bodies are paradoxical sites of life and death. They contend both with carcinogens and other life-threatening chemicals and sociopolitical pathogens like the neocolonial and neoliberal racist policies that perpetuate global ecological crises.

To be clear, these are the forces that ultimately shape and structure those ecologies of agitation that constitute the nests in which Mustapha and many other Ghanaians reside. Predetermined by their marginal locations, Mustapha, like other workers on the dump, traverses multiple jeopardies, ranging from confrontations with Ghana's military and police, urban and landscape efforts to rehabilitate the lagoon and the dump, and Ghana's ever-increasing panoptic upper and middle classes. Yet, despite the challenges that beleaguer him, Mustapha continues to conduct himself as an e-waste worker who envisions a better life for himself and his siblings. Inhabiting a toxic environment that toxifies a lagoon, his life vacillates between life and death. The money he sends back to his family in Tamale brings them life at his own expense and at the cost of a lagoon whose contamination is carried in his body.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how frontiers like lagoons amplify the metamorphic conditions in which subjects like Mustapha reside. In doing so, I underscored the relevance of an afroqueer futurist examination of the impacts of the excesses of techno- and petrochemical capitalisms, the offshoots of racial capitalism on African ecologies and bodies. An afroqueer futurist reading that draws the Africanfuturist novel, *Lagoon*, unifies Mustapha and the Korle Lagoon. It amplifies how an e-waste dump sitting on a lagoon in Agbogbloshie and Sodom and Gomorrah in Accra compels a reckoning with a past of racial capitalism, slavery, and colonialism, the reverberations of which continue to vibrate through both ecological and human bodies. An afroqueer futurist reading enables the knitting of multiple ecologies together: the ecologies of text, the human body, and blue ecologies, and how these blend and bleed into each other. Rather than think about blue ecologies such as the Korle Lagoon apart from the lived experiences of Mustapha, I have underlined here that the lagoon frontier refuses the violent dichotomy between culture and nature and human and ecology by knitting them together, while also amplifying the frictions that such rubs yield (Macharia, 2019). Arguably, the contemporary subjectivities of e-waste workers are traceable to histories of slavery and colonialism, the same histories that racialised and sexualised the African body writ large.

Korle Lagoon, much like Okorafor's *Lagoon*, agitates through the lives of Mustapha and other e-waste workers on the dump, whose bodies make these agitations possible. The lagoons can only remember through human bodies – like Ayodele's appearance on Bar Beach and taking on human form. Against this backdrop, I reiterate Patricia McFadden's notion of contemporarity to magnify what she regards as the innovative strategies at work in African/Black feminist work. My reading of Okorafor's *Lagoon* and Mustapha's connection to the Korle Lagoon amplifies what "the new politics of this moment in African time" (McFadden, 2018: 417) looks like. This politics of human emancipation in the face of a looming ecological crisis is fuelled ultimately by agitation.

## Endnotes

1. For more, see: Peter C. Little and Grace A. Akese. 2019. "Centering the Korle Lagoon: Exploring Blue Political Ecologies of E-Waste in Ghana", *Journal of Political Ecology* 26:1. Available at <https://doi.org/10.2458/v26i1.22988>
2. I focus particularly on the men because of their dominance on the dump and the configuration of their masculinity as queer in this essay.
3. In her book entitled *Corridor: Media Architectures in American Fiction* (2013), media scholar, Kate Marshall, has a chapter on infrastructural modernity, which examines blocked infrastructure: the foetus-clogged sewers of *Manhattan Transfer* and the corpse-choked furnaces and airshafts of *Native Son*.
4. What I call an Afroqueer futurist reading here is indebted to Afrofeminist futurist readings. In that respect, an Afroqueer futurist reading draws on the same energies and strategies afforded by African feminists – namely, Patricia McFadden, Nnedi Okorafor, among others – invested in radical visions of the future.
5. Catriona Sandilands defines this term more broadly in a blog post: "The term "queer ecology" refers to a loose, interdisciplinary constellation of practices that aim, in different ways, to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature, and also to reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, and environmental politics in light of queer theory." Catriona Sandilands. 2016. "Queer Ecologies." In Adamson, J., Gleason, W. and Pellow, D. eds. *Key Words for Environmental Studies* (New York: New York University Press). Available at <https://keywords.nyupress.org/environmental-studies/essay/queer-ecology/> See here for information on queer ecologies: Catriona Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds. 2010. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
6. Here, I am particularly drawn to Peter Little and Grace Akese's work in which they engage the "particular domain of blue economic critique by focusing on Ghana" (2019: 450). Since the Korle Lagoon, which is central to this ethnographic and theoretical project, remains the focus of their conversation, my use of their term in this essay could not be more appropriate.
7. This illuminates for me those forms of protests and anger that are sparked by the suffering and misery that pushes people into the frontier.

8. See, for example, the documentary, “Welcome to Sodom” by Florian Weigensamer and Christian Krönes (2018).
9. For more, see Peter C. Little and Grace A. Akese. 2019. “Centering the Korle Lagoon: Exploring Blue Political Ecologies of E-Waste in Ghana”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 26:1.
10. What is now regarded as magical realism has always been the reality in African worldviews, where reality and magic are interwoven in productive ways.
11. Bar Beach is now the location for the Eko Atlantic, one of the massive infrastructural projects in Nigeria since the construction of Abuja as the capital of the country. This project is being built on reclaimed land from the Atlantic Ocean, with the intention of preventing erosion of the shoreline of the city of Lagos. An artificial peninsula, the city adjoins Victoria Island and Lagos City. Also, “cursed and blessed” as it is used here derives from a conversation with my uncle who has lived most of his life in Nigeria. He uses the term to describe Nigeria as a land where the discovery of oil will unleash curses rather than blessings.
12. Hence “terrecentrism” underlines how terrestrial inhabitants qua beings not only abuse and misuse terrestrial habitats, but do so at the expense of the aquatic worlds contiguous with the terrestrial and arboreal worlds. Terrestrial inhabitants imagine terrains as the center around which all other habitats revolve.
13. For more of this story, visit <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/s/ken-saro-wiwa/>
14. In Ghanaian parlance, to be a “big man” derives from one’s access to wealth, whether or not one possesses educational degrees. In effect, just having material wealth marks one as wealthy.
15. This daily wage is as of January 2020. For more information visit: <https://alrei.org/research/data-bases/minimum-wages/ghana>

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## "One Foot on the Other Side": An Africanfuturist Reading of Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018)

Kelsey Ann McFaul

### Abstract

This essay argues that Africanfuturism is present in a much wider range of African literature than just those texts with science-fictional or speculative themes. Rather, Africanfuturism is a method of storytelling and of literary criticism that centres African ways of being and thinking and, against inherited traditions that render them science-fictional, affirms that they are real. This essay reads Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) as Africanfuturist texts that unsettle inherited categories of the human and of gender. Their sibling kinship sets new terms for the "what is and will be" of the continent's material, relational, spiritual, and literary futures.

"I wanted the literature I wrote to...go straight to where the soil was, where the fertility was in the landscape... I stood at the border, stood at the edge, and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was."

– Toni Morrison

Africanfuturism, the term coined by writer Nnedi Okorafor, is typically reserved for conversations about African science and speculative fiction, genres that have proliferated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Often, Africanfuturism is situated as the descendant of Afrofuturism<sup>1</sup>, Mark Dery's term for "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns", in part because Okorafor uses his term to define her own (Dery, 1994: 180).

The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view.... Africanfuturism does not HAVE to extend beyond the continent of Africa,

though often it does. Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. This is distinctly different from “Afrofuturism.” (Okorafor, 2019) On one hand, this definition illustrates a common critical posture that, in K’eguro Macharia’s words, “always starts by negating the presumed ‘is’ of African literature: not ethnography, not tradition, not sociology, not western...not hybrid, not (choose your term)” (Samatar et al., 2015). This voiding or “MAKING-nothing” turns African literature into a genre category and Africanfuturism its even further derivative (Samatar et al., 2015). On the other hand, Okorafor’s definition centres the African continent in the imagination and creation of something new. In Macharia’s words, the “nothing” can become a speculative something, “a different kind of starting point” for a method that imagines and enacts a literature centred around African culture, history, reality, and point-of-view (Samatar et al., 2015).<sup>2</sup>

An Africanfuturist method acknowledges the reality of those aspects of ontology and life experience that have been classed as deviant, magical, speculative, or science fictional. Etymologically, its intervention addresses both spatial and temporal scales. South African writer Mohale Mashigo, whose fiction and essays have also contributed to defining Africanfuturism, notes the importance of geographic specificity: Africanfuturism draws on histories, cultures, philosophies, and spiritualities which are “divergent for each country on the continent” (Mashigo, 2018: xi). If this is what an Africanfuturist method can be, it surely encompasses a range of literature far larger than that containing science and speculative themes; indeed, it extends to any text in which an African writer envisions a future that centres the African continent and its epistemologies and lifeworlds. In what follows, I read Irenosen Okojie’s *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* (2018)—two debuts that could hardly be classed as science fiction—as Africanfuturist texts. As part of an emerging literary canon setting the terms of “what is and can/will be” in the future of African literature, these works embody a sibling intertextuality that draws on continental epistemologies to ground narratives of non-humanness, inheritance, and spiritual emergence.

Irenosen Okojie’s debut novel *Butterfly Fish* (2015) brings together four narrative voices, locations, and times. The novel opens with the suicide attempt of its primary protagonist Joy, a British-Nigerian woman in contemporary London, after the death of her mother. Amidst her recovery, Joy inherits a mysterious collection of family possessions and receives visits from a ghost who has travelled

from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kingdom of Benin, another of the novel's space-times.<sup>3</sup> Besides this pre-colonial setting, the novel also includes sections focalised on Joy's mother, Queenie in 1970s London and Queenie's father, Peter in 1950s colonial Nigeria. Shuffling between the present and different pasts, *Butterfly Fish* narrates multiple temporalities on concurrent, kaleidoscopic tracks. Characters in different space-times have similar interactions with particular objects—a palm wine bottle, a bronze bust and key, a fish—that move “on the back of time” and through holes in time, accreting layers of traumatic experience (Okojie, 2015: 162). With the ghost Anon's help, Joy travels back in time to Benin and discovers that the events in her life and in her family's history for which she has failed to find medical or psychological explanations are connected to the inherited bust. Cast in Benin, the bust carries a curse that intensifies with each generation. After a discovery about her parents, and a second suicide attempt where she loses an arm, the novel concludes with Joy's homecoming to Nigeria. She travels to Benin Castle, buries the bust and her ghost, and starts a new life as a village craftsperson.

*Freshwater* (2018) is Akwaeke Emezi's debut work and was initially billed as a novel, though Emezi has since reframed the book as “~5% fiction...and the rest is straight memoir from a spirit first perspective” (Emezi, 2020).<sup>4</sup> Like *Butterfly Fish*, it opens with a making-nothing moment: two spirits are violently torn from their world and made to live within the human body of the protagonist Ada.<sup>5</sup> Ada is an *ogbanje*, a spirit child in Igbo ontology, but her experience is unique because her body holds a collection of spirits rather than just one—a pair of brother-sister spirits named Shadow and Smoke, the deviant and bold *Asughara*, and a meek male alter-ego, St. Vincent. The spirits “hatch” within Ada, often during moments of trauma, and the book renders this breaking open and habitation formally: Ada's body is inhabited by spirits as the text is by sections in different narrative voices. Initially, Ada is voiceless, preferring the spirits to speak on her behalf and to mark her body with tattoos, cuts, breast removal, and suicide attempts. Ada's sense of time is characterised by breaks, jumps, and memory lapses when she is absent from her own body; in contrast, the spirits within her pass fluidly between the borders of life and death. The novel culminates in Ada's acceptance that she is both an *ogbanje* and a child of Ala (the goddess of earth, fertility, creativity, and the underworld in the Igbo *Odinani* pantheon) when she returns to Lagos from America. She realises “how useless it had been to try and become a singular entity” and “[lets] go of being human” (Emezi, 2018: 219, 225).

*Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* centre female and non-gendered African bodies that exist outside the categories constructed by universal humanism and its idea of the human built on the negation of gendered, raced, and differently-abled bodies.<sup>6</sup> Thinkers like Achille Mbembe and Sylvia Wynter have observed that “our present genre of the human, *Man*” is overdetermined by “the ethno-class or Western bourgeois biocentric descriptive statement of the human”, the White bourgeois subject, typically male, who is also the primary protagonist of and audience for European and American science fiction (SF) (Wynter, 2006: 117). The “revalorisation of black peoples”—in other words, a liveable future for Black people—is only possible with the “no less systemic revalorisation of the human being itself, outside the necessarily devalorising terms” of universal humanism (Wynter, 2006: 119). In other words, we need new ways and stories of refiguring the human outside the epistemologies and ontologies of Western biologics and colonial definitions of gender. In her book, *The Invention of Gender*, African feminist Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí asks, “Women? What women? Who qualifies to be a woman in this cultural setting, and on what basis are they identified?” (Oyěwùmí, 1997: 16). Oyěwùmí emphasises the long history of gender as a tool of colonial imposition and the ways it has excluded many expressions of womanhood in preservation of a narrow definition derived from Western experience. She argues that biology is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the social—the national, communal, and societal spaces one’s body exists within. Similarly, writing of African expressions of queerness, B Camminga notes the absence of a binary and universalist understanding of gender and the rarity of language like “switching”, a term “grounded in the Global North”, among trans and non-binary Africans (Camminga, 2020: 824). Camminga suggests that African uses and experiences of terms like “woman”, “queer”, and “transgender” must be “geo- and corpo-politically situated...[and] must expand and transform to fit experiences and actualities” (Camminga, 2020: 825). Both *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* abandon the terms of universalism and take care to centre female and non-gendered African bodies within African social and spiritual environments. Using continental epistemologies to structure embodied relationships and to lay to rest the personal and communal inheritances of the past, *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* are Africanfuturist texts that bring future worlds into being.

In *Butterfly Fish*, Joy is the centre of an intimate and proximate network of non-human objects and a ghost moving through time. Their “unsettling co-existence” does not humanise the objects but rather un-humans Joy, who finds the boundaries between different temporalities and the human and non-human increasingly blurred (Okojie, 2015: 113). When she attempts to make sense of her experience through doctor visits, “anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medication”, she feels like “a stranger in my own body” (Okojie, 2015: 82, 268). She identifies with butterflies pinned behind glass in a museum, and a friend tells her she is in the “pupa stage” (Okojie, 2015: 144). With the same friend, she scoops a fish from the water of her local London pool, gives it “mouth-to-mouth resuscitation”, and plucks a brass key from his mouth, which she later compares to a “tapered brown feminine finger” (Okojie, 2015: 24, 25). She uses the key to time travel to Benin, where

I found myself on...[a] short copper-toned flight of steps.... Brass artefacts were mounted on the walls near the stairwell.... I'd been thrown into something incongruous, like a piece of time landing in a glass bowl.... [The Oba] washed his hands in a metallic bowl, feverishly muttering (Okojie, 2015: 114-15).

Joy's time travel reveals that the Oba is the original target of the curse, which is spun by his father and his murdered childhood friend, and which moves through time attached to bronze objects. Joy returns from Benin to the present using the key from the fish, one of the “hundreds [that] lay on the red earth” outside the Oba's castle, and travels through time to Joy's present (Okojie, 2015: 203). Akin to the Nigerian mudfish, a species both mythical and real that survives ecological disaster “by crawling on land or burying itself in the mud of the streambed” (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2005), the fish follows the same temporal trajectory as Joy's ghost, who begins the novel as one of the Oba's wives. Tracing the movement of objects like the key and fish through the motif of intergenerational inheritance makes visible the novel's framework of linked temporalities and histories. Inheritance gives form and meaning to what Mbembe calls the “entangled time” of “interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures”, the re-emergence of centuries of gendered feudal and colonial violence as ghosts, sexual violence, and suicidal ideation in the present (Mbembe, 2001: 16).

Earth metals like copper and brass play a significant role in *Butterfly Fish*, part of the novel's excavation of an extractive economy with both African and European actors. The Oba obsesses over a new road to bring "more trade for Benin [and] labour" for those who come to the palace "begging for scraps" (Okojie, 2015: 47-48). Beneath the surface of the Oba's splendour is his greed: two concealed murders, and debts to European traders. When he commissions a bust cast from extracted metal to assuage his guilt, the land and its inhabitants go into mourning: children do not sleep for days and wander aimlessly, "tiny brass tears [falling] from the corners of their eyes" (Okojie, 2015: 57). *Butterfly Fish* overlays the history of the Oba's bust with Britain's theft of the Benin Bronzes in 1897, which inaugurated the colonial occupation of Edo State. When Peter is coerced into murdering a fellow Nigerian soldier 60 years later and then compensated with the bust, the novel clearly draws connections between non-human subjects and non-human matter within the context of colonial discourse: Peter is just as disposable, just as much an object to possess and dispose of, as the earth's metal. European and American SF have long mined colonial histories and tropes for their plots and descriptive details. One of Africanfuturism's key interventions, both in its texts and as a way of reading, is to emphasise and account for the legacy of racial capitalism's geo-logic<sup>7</sup> and to emphasise the yoked "exploitation of African peoples [and] the despoilation of the African environment" (Iheka, 2017: 20).

*Butterfly Fish* uses material and spiritual geographies to unsettle the inheritances of past knowledge formations, traumas, and their effects. In addition to stone, liquid geographies and watery landscapes structure non-human, Africanfuturist practices of "world making in the present" (Yusoff, 2018: 63). Initially, water functions as the conductor of the curse's repetitive violence. Peter carries out the murder by drowning, and years later Queenie replicates the drowning with Joy, "pushing [her] shoulders down...shoving [her] head under water" (Okojie, 2015: 325). This is a desperate attempt to erase the evidence of Queenie's rape by her own father. Joy's attempted suicide by drowning also endeavours to repeat this violence, but she is saved when the water communicates with her neighbour through the pipes: "How do you think I knew you were in trouble that day? It was the water that alerted me" (Okojie, 2015: 181). Later, Joy has violent underwater sex in the "small liquid country" of her bathtub, effectively bringing together a confluence of traumatic pasts (Okojie, 2015:

265). Following Frantz Fanon's argument that colonialism's "native principle" of repetition without difference places Africans outside humanity, the creation of new forms of non-human life and African futures requires subverting the law of repetition, or enacting repetition with difference. Queenie and Joy's relationships to water repeat Peter's act differently, gradually moving toward less deadly and less violent modes. The novel's conclusion hinges upon the spiritual relationship of three women across time—Joy, her mother, and the ghost—and brings together its lithic and liquid environments. Joy and Anon return the metal to the earth, laying the past history of extraction to rest in order to make another set of relations possible. In this new world, Joy has an embodied relationality in a rural Nigerian landscape. Her differently-abled body is valued, and she participates in an artistic rather than biologic reproductive economy. In the novel's closing scene, Joy holds her father's diary, "open[s] the pages and [sits] under water, waiting to begin again" (Okojie, 2015: 344). In this future, water is an environment where Joy can hold the inheritances of the past without being overcome by or replicating them. Joy's presence at both the interstices and endpoint of this inheritance, within co-constituted times and spaces, and in relationship with non-human others, is an embodied vision of an African future.

In *Freshwater*, Ada is similarly the centre of a non-human, spiritual lifeworld with significant connections to particular landscapes and histories. In his book *Of Water and the Spirit* (1995), Malidoma Patrice Somé writes about his journey to rediscover the realities of African spiritual life after years of European colonial education. Colonialism not only erased African languages, forms of governance, religion, and culture, but also rendered African ontologies and ways of being outside time and unreal, perhaps even science fictional. Ada, who is largely raised and educated in Western settings, initially has little experience holding multiple realities and spiritualities within a fleshly, human body. Her spirits are also unfamiliar with human form, which they call a "crazed timeline of embodiment" (Emezi, 2018: 186). They relate to Ada's body as "a house...[with] walls of flesh and liquid" that is simultaneously a trap, a tool, and a subject to protect (Emezi, 2018: 4). They organise time to accommodate their desires and modify Ada's body to suit their needs. The brother-sisters' particular vice is Ada's blood, and they order their narrated chapters to focalise moments of self-harm, shuffling, and remixing Ada's pre-teen, teenage, and college years. Asughara emphasises her sexual encounters

in Ada's body, first appearing when Ada is raped in college. While she frames embodiment as protection, she often appropriates the language of sexual violence:

The first thing I did was step forward so I could see through [Ada's] eyes... when I flooded through, she spread herself open and took me in without hesitation...she absorbed me fiercely, all the way; she denied me nothing (Emezi, 2018: 61, 71).

By contrast, Vincent takes Ada's slim body and fashions "a dreambody with reorganised flesh and a penis complete with functioning nerves and expanding blood vessels" (Emezi, 2018: 122). When Vincent floods through, "he kisse[s] women with Ada's mouth"; when Asughara sleeps with male "bodies in backseats and hostel beds and living room floors" (Emezi, 2018: 164, 186). Asughara pushes Ada to a suicide attempt, hoping it will return her to the spirit world; when it fails, the brother-sisters accept "that this body was ours too" and "change the Ada into us", removing her breasts and all signs of her fertility, since *ogbanjes* are averse to reproduction (Emezi, 2018: 187). For Ada's spirits, the boundaries between times, genders, and other human categories are fluid and permeable, a continuum to be shape-shifted across and through and beyond. When Ada gives up being "a singular entity" and learns to control "how we moved," *Freshwater* emerges as a formally polyvocal work of spiritual embodiment and shifts the centre from human to spirit forms of knowing and being (Emezi, 2018: 219).

*Freshwater's* lithic landscape takes on psychological and spiritual dimensions. Like the novel itself, which holds a multiplicity of non-human beings, voices, and temporalities together, Ada's mind is a pantheon, "this marble room that you call your mind" (Emezi, 2018: 48). Western psychoanalysis might diagnose Ada's marble mind as a crypt, "a secret tomb inside the subject" in which unacknowledged trauma is "buried alive" (Abraham and Torok, 1994: 130). Yet its substance links the marble room to the *iyi-uwu*, the *ogbanje* spirits' construction of "bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen, [tied with] a strip of human hide...that says we will come back, that we will not stay in this world" (Emezi, 2018: 14). Typically buried in the ground, Ada's *iyi-uwu* is hidden in various crevices of her body, a body that weathers significant physical and emotional struggle to stay alive. But the marble is also Ada's only safe place, its "cool veined white walls and floors" the place she retreats to when the spirits overtake her body, the place she talks to Yshwa, or Jesus (Emezi, 2018: 75).

The stone pantheon structures the relationship between non-human spirits and deities within Ada's body, her "marbled flesh" (Emezi, 2018: 126). This is not to discount the violence Ada endures, nor to dismiss her efforts to make sense of her experience using medical and psychoanalytical language. Rather *Freshwater* makes an important observation: that psychoanalysis' method of un-burying, or trying to excavate, aspects of African realities can mimic the colonial geo-logics of extraction. *Freshwater's* lithic landscape, or stone space, suggests the work's ability to hold multiple orders to knowledge and ways of being together without contradiction—in other words, its Africanfuturism—all the while focalising the Igbo ontology and spiritual materiality within which Ada ultimately finds her true home. In Ada's case, the stone space that is centred within and extends beyond the body accommodates a multiplicity of embodiments she learns to shuffle through and control with the help of an indigenous spiritual community.

Ada centres herself within Igbo ontology and uses liquid geographies and forms to shape her non-human future. The most important of these is the python, the animal form of the goddess Ala: "All freshwater comes out of the mouth of a python", and all forms of water are connected, so all the embodiments of Ada's life are held within and in relation to Ala (Emezi, 2018: 9). From within a "silver and cool" place of Ala's watery womb where Ada is "suspended and rocked," she is guided to

Curve in on yourself... You will form the inevitable circle, the beginning that is the end. This immortal space is who and where you are, shapeshifter.

Everything is shedding and everything is resurrection" (Emezi, 2018: 224).

The circularity Ala represents is not repetitive but multiple, layered, and embodied. It brings the past and the future into continuity within the circular snakeskin, coiling time around itself in a shimmering braid. Ada is a shapeshifter deity at the centre of a constellation of non-human spirits in interconnected relation. This circular, liquid space-time is a "framework of possibility [for] different forms of life," for a future structured around forms of African spiritual knowledge that recognize the power of non-gendered, queer, shapeshifting bodies outside economies of reproduction (Mbembe, 2015). This new world makes it possible for Ada to finally emerge as a full speaking subject. Not just the godchild of the spring, she is its source: "All freshwater comes out of my mouth" (Emezi, 2018: 226).

The positive resolutions of both *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* hinge on their protagonists' return to the African continent, crossing "the damp roaring ocean" of the Atlantic to arrive in Nigeria after years in England and America (Emezi, 2018: 46). In Caribbean slang, "freshwater" refers to someone who affects an accent after a short or non-existent visit to a colonial metropole, and, in a sense, both works trace the homecoming of characters who have experienced a distancing from African realities. Joy and Ada might also initially appear to be Afropolitans, the term coined by Taiye Selasi to refer to "the newest generation of African emigrants...not citizens, but Africans, of the world" (Selasi, 2005: 36). While *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* share Afropolitanism's sense of multiplicity and movement, the importance of specific geographic locations, and the desire to "define our relationship to the places we live", they do not engage the problem of the nation from which Selasi's term is generated (Selasi, 2005: 37). Rather, these works' interest in place is specific to the sites that will bring them healing and the knowledge they need to survive. Hence, Joy travels directly to Benin Castle in Edo State to "bury the brass head deep in the ground" (Okojie, 2015: 342). Restoring the metal to the earth not only lays the curse to rest but begins to change the land back to "royal land" (Okojie, 2015: 341). Relocating to a village near the castle, Joy learns to make pepper soup and crafts market scenes from found objects as "a kind of therapy", building a creative future outside the curse (Okojie, 2015: 343). In *Freshwater*, Ada meets a Yoruba priest and Igbo historian who teach her the "many connotations" of her name (Emezi, 2018: 225). They teach her to finally "[let] go of being human" and to embrace her multiplicity and divinity (Emezi, 2018: 225). While this happens in Lagos and not "back in the Southeast where we were first born", what seems most important is Ada's relationship to the land itself and to its spirit: "some things must happen on home soil if they are to happen at all" (Emezi, 2018: 211). Both the Edo village and a Lagos hotel room are geographically specific, chosen spaces from which a new non-reproductive future emerges.

As narratives of return, *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* also shed new light on the relationship between genres like Afro- and African-futurism. Sofia Samatar notes that Afrofuturist critics like Dery and Afrofuturist media rarely "glance toward Africa except as a lost realm, the site of the massive alien abduction of the slave trade" (Samatar, 2017: 176). While neither Joy nor Ada are direct descendants

of alien abductees, their journeys register aspects of West African histories of abduction and enslavement and the ways the sea acts as both graveyard abyss and womb in African diasporic imaginaries.<sup>8</sup> *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* emphasise particular locations of return (be they diasporic, familial, spiritual, economic, political, or otherwise) and claim the experiences they narrate as real, not science fictional. Literary critic Wai Chee Dimock suggests we see genres like Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism “not [as] taxonomic classes...but fields at once emerging and ephemeral” (Dimock, 2007: 1379). A new literary criticism that embraces this could be “more fluid...putting less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on its kinships, past, present, and future” (Dimock, 2007: 1379). Thinking beyond inherited categories reveals a kind of “generic wateriness”]” between Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and African literature more broadly (Dimock, 2007: 1379). Dimock suggests that literary criticism that works across genres—between *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater*, for example—develops relationships of “extended kinship” based on “detailed and precise...micro evidence” at the levels of form, textuality, and spirit (Dimock, 2007: 1382). Rather than genealogical and derivative, the connections between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism are co-constituted and symbiotic; texts related as sibling kin rather than parent and child.

As an embodied metaphor, sibling kinship revises African literary criticism, which often maintains hierarchical relationships between literary theory and genre theory like SF, and between literary ancestors (typically male) and their descendants. The sibling relationship between *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* relates a concept and way of reading drawn from genre fiction and SF to a work of literary fiction and a literary memoir. This Africanfuturist method emphasises the relationship of these texts to each other rather than to Nigerian patriarchs of the spirit child or African magical realism like works by Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri. Extending *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater*'s sibling kinship even further could initiate exciting comparisons with the works of Helen Oyeyemi, Chinelo Okparanta, Eloghosa Osunde, and Francesca Ekwayasi, among others.

Africanfuturism breaks open the boundaries between genres and invites new ways of reading for the future within a greater number of literary texts. Reading *Butterfly Fish* and *Freshwater* as Africanfuturist kin makes visible and perhaps brings into being worlds of liberated expression for African women and differently abled and non-human subjects now and in the future. With texts like these as

our guides, the future may be bent differently, less over-determined by inherited categories of sex, gender, the human, and the nation, and instead centred on African forms of embodiment, knowledge, and ontology. The futures these works enact for their protagonists are also possible for African literary criticism more broadly. Africanfuturism creates multiple routes from the “what has been” into an African-centred “what is and can/will be.” What possibilities lie there, in the future, are the writers’ and ours to build.

## Notes

Previous versions of this paper were presented at Boston University Graduate Student Conference in African Studies (Boston, MA; March 2019), the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment Conference (Davis, CA; June 2019), and the African Studies Association Annual Conference (Boston, Massachusetts; November 2019). Sincere thanks to my fellow conference presenters and audience members who provided invaluable feedback and insight, and to the editorial team at *Feminist Africa*.

## Endnotes

1. For definitions of Afrofuturism beyond Dery, see Adriano Elia, *The Languages of Afrofuturism*. University of Salento (2015), available at <https://doi.org/10.1285/i22390359v12p83>; Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism”, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3: 2 (2003), 287–302, available at <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021>; and Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago Review Press (2013).
2. Namwali Serpell notes the *ex nihilo* moment—emergence from nothing or rather emergence from the presumed nothing—that begins Nnedi Okorafor’s novel *Lagoon* (2014), arguably the novel where Okorafor enacts her definition of Africanfuturism mostly directly. See Namwali Serpell, “Africanfuturism: Everything and Nothing”, *Public Books* (2016), available at <https://www.publicbooks.org/afrofuturism-everything-and-nothing/>.
3. The Kingdom of Benin corresponds to present-day Edo State, Nigeria.
4. In further support of *Freshwater* as autobiography or memoir, the book gives

the meaning of Ada's name as "the egg of a python...the flesh form of the god Ala" (Emezi, 2018: 9). Ada is the name traditionally given to firstborn Igbo daughters, while Akwaeke, the writer's name, combines the Igbo words for egg (àkwá) and python (éké). I'm grateful to an audience comment at the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment conference for this insight.

5. This paper follows *Freshwater* in using female pronouns for Ada, but the writer Akwaeke Emezi is a non-human spirit without a gender. For more of Emezi's writing on this topic, see Akwaeke Emezi, "Transition: My Surgeries Were a Bridge across Realities, a Spirit Customizing Its Vessel to Reflect Its Nature", *The Cut*, 19 January 2018, available at <https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/writer-and-artist-akwaeke-emezi-gender-transition-and-ogbanje.html>; Akwaeke Emezi, "Akwaeke Emezi On The Toni Morrison Quote That Changed Their Life", *Them* (2019), available at <https://www.them.us/story/toni-morrison>; and Maiysha Kai, "The Root Presents: It's Lit! Explores the Ethereal With Akwaeke Emezi", *The Root* (2021), <https://www.theroot.com/it-s-a-spiritual-thing-the-root-presents-its-lit-exp-1847341151>.
6. See Mbembe (2001) and Wynter (2006). Mbembe (2001) observes that "Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world" (2). Wynter (2006) adds that "gender role allocations mapped onto the biologically determined anatomical differences between male and female have been an indispensable function of the instituting of our *genres* or sociogenic *kinds* of being human" (117).
7. I borrow this term from Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018). Yusoff understands geology as a category and practice of dispossession, a geo-logic of property that links raced bodies and landscapes through their inhumanity and, therefore, disposability (2018: 3). "[I]mperial and ongoing (settler) colonialisms" underpinned by a universal humanism, she writes, "have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence" (xiii).
8. For the ocean as grave and womb, see Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (trans. Betsy Wing), University of Michigan Press (1997). Many scholars have noted the importance of the (Atlantic) ocean within Afro-futurism, including

Ruth Mayer, "'Africa As an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds", *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 45: 4 (2000), 555–566, and Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago: Lawrance Hills Books (2013). Creative works include *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond* (ed. Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall), Rosarium Publishing (2013) and Rivers Solomon, *The Deep*, Saga Press (2020).

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# Haunted Airports and Sexual Anxieties in Nana Nyarko Boateng's "Swallowing Ice"

Delali Kumavie

## Abstract

This essay argues that the airport is an international borderland where the nation attempts to position itself within the futural orientation of transit while also making gestures to cement its sovereignty. Drawing on Ghanaian writer Nana Nyarko Boateng's short story, "Swallowing Ice", which tells the story of two women French-kissing at the airport in Accra, the essay interrogates how the airport's embodiment of a kind of transit future is destabilised by the haunting of the present and past of the nation-state. Using Ayo Coly's notion of "postcolonial hauntology", I argue that non-heteronormative sexualities and the anxieties they generate form part of a historical continuum that is haunted by colonialist impositions on sexuality. Ultimately, the airport in "Swallowing Ice" functions as a stage on which same-sex desires and intimacies destabilise the nation's imaginaries of itself.

Welcome!! Akwaaba!! Ghana warmly welcomes all visitors of goodwill. Ghana does not welcome paedophiles [sic] and other sexual deviants [in red font]. Indeed [sic] Ghana imposes extremely harsh penalties on such sexually aberrant behaviour. If you are in Ghana for such activity, then for everyone's good, including your own, we suggest you go elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

International airports are the structural representation of a nation-state's geographical limits. Thus, to encounter the words above, as Kwame Otu did in 2012 on a sign at Kotoka International Airport (KIA) in Accra, Ghana, indicates that the nation-state into which he was entering placed a particular significance on sexual practices and identities. The sign, created by the Ghana Tourism Industry, sought to inform visitors and Ghanaians re-entering the country that "sexual deviants",

a category into which the nation-state “slots ‘homosexuals,’” were not welcome in Ghana (Otu, 2022: 2). Further, the ambiguous language of the sign, as Otu points out, is exemplified in the sentence, “Ghana does not welcome paedophiles [sic] and other sexual deviants”, written in a distinctive red colour which focalises sexual practices and identities as a primary concern of the Ghanaian nation-state (Otu, 2022: 3). The sign simultaneously communicates that the limits of Ghana’s hospitality are intertwined with sexual practices and identities, even as it transmits unclear parameters for acceptable sexual behaviour within the borders of the Ghanaian nation-state. Removed during a multi-year renovation at KIA, the sign’s institutionalisation of sexual ambiguities and anxieties haunts the airport, notwithstanding its vision of becoming the preferred aviation hub for West Africa.

Signs (such as the above) reinforce the airport as a site where the nation-state attempts to define the limits of its territory and the ideologies that underpin its national identity. They place sexual identities and practices at the core of the nation’s imaginary of itself, scripting sexuality into its ideologies. As the writer Pico Iyer puts it, the airport is the nation’s “business card and its handshake” (2000: 46). As a space that regulates human and material access into the nation, the airport establishes the real and symbolic boundaries around which the nation converges and diverges. In this way, technologies of travel and mobility bear significant implications for understanding national histories and aspirations. And in the case of KIA, the convergence of anxieties around sexual practices and desires at the airport permits a closer examination of how the airport entwines national identity with sexuality. Further, the airport as a technological space that connects the nation to the world often contradicts the nation’s ideologies and imaginaries of itself as a sovereign state. In this essay, I examine Ghanaian writer Nana Nyarko Boateng’s short story, “Swallowing Ice”, which stages a confrontation with the nation’s view of sexuality, forcing onto this nation-defining space the sexual identities and expressions that the sign above describes as “deviant”. Published in *Lusaka Punk and Other Stories: The Caine Prize for African Writing 2015*, the story highlights how these non-heteronormative sexualities and the anxieties they generate form part of a historical continuum that is haunted by colonialist impositions on sexuality. The airport in “Swallowing Ice” functions as a stage on which same-sex desires and intimacies destabilise the nation’s imaginaries of itself.

### Transit Past and Futures

Transit technologies and their attendant infrastructure play a critical role in Afro- and African-futurist texts. Africanfuturism, for instance, appropriates local and indigenous forms of transit that range from knowledge of walking in the deserts and through forests, to the ability to fly, as well as forms of transit brought by European imperialism such as the slave ship, the public bus, the train, and the airport. Africanfuturism's appropriations localise or fundamentally change these multiple forms of transit, imbuing them with a temporal futurity that allows them to be sites where the work of speculation and invention can take place. As borderland zones, these transit sites, and particularly airports, operate through a series of binaries that sort, through spatial ordering, citizen from foreigner, insider from outsider, departures from arrivals (Fuller and Harley, 2004). Through the management of the flow of goods and people into and out of the space-time of the nation-state, the airport also shapes and reshapes perception of time. Irrespective of where it is located geographically, the airport marks an ever-approaching future and a present steadily transforming into the past. It is the site where our future arrival and our current locality converge.

The airport, however, must be considered within a genealogy of transit technology and infrastructure in Africa. The train, automobile, and later, the airplane all marked, at different points, the attainment of a seemingly futuristic technology that changed the way that people moved through space and time. In early African literature, the “cars, trains and aeroplanes without number”, as the young protagonist of Mongo Beti's 1956 novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* puts it, were imagined by colonised people as the ultimate symbol of European technological modernity (Beti, 1971: 47). The airplane and its attendant infrastructure, the airport, exemplified the transposition of the future into the present. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, aviation captivated the world and marked a transition into a new world order. It made it possible to see the world from an aerial vantage, instituting a perspective that trained people to perceive themselves as global citizens (Schwartz, 2014: 28). Put more succinctly, contestations over the future, or the imaginaries of the future in Africa, became indubitably tied to transit. This meant that colonial modernity, as a forebearer to global modernity, emphasised infrastructure as a fundamental signifier of civilisation (previously called the civilising mission). Africa's admission into “global modernity” was often reduced to the presence or

absence of constructed environments (such as airports, roads, and rail lines) which were seen as the primary measure of development (Iheka, 2018: 10). This has resulted in a trend where most governments in pursuit of developmental agendas invest more in structures targeted towards an elite minority, such as airports, than in other, more vital infrastructural enterprises such as hospitals.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the vast resources directed towards transit hubs like airports, there exist particular forms of gratuitous and structural violence endemic to these transit hubs and technologies, such as interrogations, intrusive searches, and intimidation by state and private security firms. In other words, despite the persisting forms of violence that airports engender, they remain a necessary structure of mobility and global travel. Even in imaginaries of the future, where writers attempt to “reintegrate people of colour into the discussion of cyberculture, modern science, technology, and science fiction”, this “reintegration” does not cause the violence of racism or sexism experienced in these spaces to disappear (Womack, 2013: 17). In the imaginaries of writers such as Nnedi Okorafor or Nana Nyarko Boateng, the airport and other transit technologies become spaces to intervene in the structures and ideologies that enact violence on African travellers without erasing the historical forces, as well as the local and international power hierarchies, that govern these spaces.

Thus, Africanfuturism (one word), in its narrative form, contends, not only with the technologies of travel but also with the “interactions experienced or represented within those spaces” (Caprotti, 2011: 384). Africanfuturism, as defined by Nnedi Okorafor in her blog post of October 19, 2019, “Africanfuturism Defined”, foregrounds a rootedness in African geopolitical spaces, traditions, cultures, and cosmologies, but is also deeply “concerned with visions of the future,” and is fundamentally “interested in technology” (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). Yet Okorafor’s insistence on a fidelity to Africa warrants questions about the relationship between mobility and Africanfuturism. In her own works, mobility is foundational to imaginaries of the future. For instance, in her trilogy, *Binti* (2020), the protagonist must pass through an airport-like space to board a spaceship to her university, and more recognisably in the graphic novel, *LaGuardia* (2019), the airport’s delineation between citizens, foreigners, and aliens lays the foundation for the central conflict. In these worlds, the airport and its imaginative progeny are part of a technological landscape of transit and mobility, as well as its violent contradictory underbelly.

Boateng's short story, "Swallowing Ice", in its realist interpretation of the possible chain of events that might be set in motion in the wake of two Ghanaian women French-kissing at the airport, might not on the surface meet the criteria for the narratives that fall within futurist genres. Yet, it is, nonetheless, a story that is invested in the geopolitical space of the continent and envisions a future that is conditioned by the past and present of an African nation. I interpret Jane Bryce's description of African speculative fiction and futurism as "textually multi-valent" works that address the "social real" through "the fantastical, the grotesque, and the other-worldly" as applicable to Boateng's story (Bryce, 2019: 9). The story experiments with layered narrative perspectives to interrogate same-sex practices and desire as entwined with the airport as a technological transit centre. This, in part, justifies my reading of the story through a futurist lens. Additionally, the story seeks to imagine a parallel world where the debates about same-sex intimacies are not focalised around unnamed and unknown others, but on the lives of Ghanaians living in Ghana and abroad.

"Swallowing Ice" takes advantage of the temporal convergences at the airport to interrogate the ongoing debates around same-sex desire and sexuality in Ghana. For those well-versed in Ghanaian political history, KIA is a rather auspicious setting because it played a crucial role in the reimagining of the modern Ghanaian nation-state after its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was ousted from power. While the airport had held significance for Nkrumah's vision of modernisation and nation-building for independent Ghana<sup>3</sup>, after the 1966 coup d'état that removed him from power, it became the death place of one of the military leaders responsible for that coup d'état, Lieutenant General Emmanuel Kwasi Kotoka. Kotoka was killed at the forecourt of the airport (now the domestic Terminals One and Two) in a subsequent, failed coup attempt, and the airport was subsequently renamed Kotoka International Airport. That this stage where the drama of decolonisation and its afterlives unfolded is also, in 2015, imagined to be the ground zero of another struggle for how the nation defines itself, this time in opposition to same-sex sexualities, invokes what Ayo Coly describes as "postcolonial hauntology" (Coly, 2019). Drawing from Derrida's (2006) concept of hauntology and what Coly refers to as "Fanon's amendment", Coly argues that Fanonian hauntology points to the repeated and inescapable presence of colonial epistemologies in postcolonial subjectivities (Coly, 2019: 14). Depicting the ways postcolonial discourse and

literature have been unable to overcome the overdetermining of the African female body with aberrant sexual excess, Coly frames the discursive remains of colonial epistemologies, which underscore discursive practices around the African female body and sexuality, as a haunting. For example, Coly argues that one such haunting is an “angst about the female body” that sustains the “tentative engagements of African women with the sexual female body” (Coly, 2019: 3). What emerges in “Swallowing Ice” is a future haunted by both a deep and forgotten past where sexuality was not defined by colonial epistemologies, and a recent past where the ongoing trauma of colonialism is mixed with a religious zeal that seeks to define the future of the nation through the complex terrain of sexuality.

### **Haunted Airports and Imaginaries of Sexual (Un)Freedom**

Boateng’s “Swallowing Ice” depicts the airport as a site haunted by the nation’s multiple histories and imaginaries. It is both a microcosm of the nation where its curated identity and aspirations are on display, and a palimpsest where the older vestiges of British colonialism are entangled with postcolonial aspirations of global significance through a tourism-driven neoliberal economy. Brema, the protagonist of “Swallowing Ice”, works as a journalist who invents the news. This speculative act allows Brema to explore other possible timelines in which the nation-state’s stance on sexuality and sexual expression is interrogated at the airport. The airport is an apt setting for inventing this future as it remains an important site for the struggle over the identity of the nation. In other words, the airport is the site where the nation’s struggle over its global future is visible in the discursive framing of the nation’s image. In “Swallowing Ice”, the future of the nation brushes up against its present and past, creating a kind of palimpsestic memory, where the traces of the past surface in the present to haunt the future.

In the unfolding drama that pitches the two women against the mob and the state, Boateng’s short story complicates the nation-state and its self-fashioning at the airport by bringing to the fore questions of sexuality and sexual practices that are seemingly unimaginable (Boateng, 2015: 159-60). The airport’s shiny façade, through which the nation stakes its self-image and ideologies (however problematic and ambiguous), forms the backdrop upon which the spectrum of sexuality that exists within the nation can be put on display. Brema’s invented story, or story within a story, is about two women, Miss Serwaa Boadu and Miss

Jane Owusu, who are attacked by a mob at the arrivals hall at KIA for French kissing. The story – written under the pseudonym Vivian Quack and entitled “Gayism at KIA—Two Arrested!” – reports on an incident at KIA where two women were attacked by a mob. By staging this display of same-sex intimacy in the public sphere of the airport, Boateng unshrouds and forces into the public space the seemingly hidden, non-heteronormative sexualities that the nation seeks to define as “aberrant”.

Two persons have been arrested for allegedly committing lesbian acts at Kotoka International Airport.... The alleged incident occurred on the evening of 17 May 2013, a few minutes after Miss Boadu’s plane landed at KIA from the US. As soon as Miss Boadu got to the arrival hall, Miss Owusu ran and went to embrace her, after which they were seen French kissing, much to the shock and disgust of the crowd, who had gathered at the arrival hall (Boateng, 2015:159-160).

The so-called “lesbian acts” as a shorthand for non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality and sexual desire in the airport removes the secrecy that renders “hidden and unspoken” the sexual practices that the sign with which this essay begins seeks to disavow (Mwangi, 2009: 189; Otu, 2020: 222; Dankwa, 2021: 4-6). Same-sex intimacy at the airport, especially at the arrivals hall where a microcosm of the nation watches, amounts to acting out in public something that is supposed to exist only in the dark, hidden realm of secrets. As the state has a “monopoly on the legitimate use” of violence, the crowd’s threat of violence, suggested by the visible presentation of “shock and disgust,” positions them as the deputised representatives of the nation-state and its ideologies which are in direct opposition to the display of same-sex desires and intimacies (Weber, 2015: 136).

As the sole international airport in Ghana, KIA has long been the site where the nation attempts to define its position on sexuality. It is a place where the nation concentrates the display of its sovereignty, even as it negotiates the limits of such sovereignty within a global world system. When imagined as an oppositional space where the airport’s technological futurity encounters the seemingly regressive struggle over sexual expression, understanding the airport within longer historical processes complicates this binary. The key actors – the two women, the mob, and the legal system – each distort the binary between the progressive airport space

and the regressive homophobic characterisation of everyday people in countries like Ghana. While the legal system is baffled by the legal ramification of two women kissing, the crowd is certain that this intimate act is a violation of a sort and attempts to enact its form of justice. Whereas the 1992 Constitution of Ghana ambiguously criminalises “unnatural carnal knowledge”, which is often interpreted as non-heterosexual sexual acts, the crowd, comprised of citizens, workers, and onlookers, suffers no such ambiguity in its response to such displays of non-heteronormative sexualities. In this tense zone where the postcolonial travelling class is placed on display for the labouring class, the infiltration of neoliberal capital and its attendant ideologies are concentrated and contested. It is in considering the irreconcilable gap between a tentative legal system and an assertive crowd that “Swallowing Ice” re-narrativises the conflicting legal ramifications of the kiss:

Lawyers contacted are torn about whether or not the accused persons can be properly charged and convicted for unnatural carnal knowledge. While some criminal lawyers opined that lesbianism was unnatural, contrary to Ghana’s customary and criminal laws as well as its Constitution, others were of the view that the criminal code did not specifically prohibit lesbian acts (Boateng, 2015: 160).

In the absence of state-defined legislation, either in the customary or criminal code, the crowd’s “shock and disgust” supplements the justice system. Affective reactions such as the crowd’s, entwined with the gaps in the constitution of Ghana has, in 2021, led to a draft bill submitted to Ghana’s parliament called, “Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, 2021”, which criminalises LGBTQI+ individuals as well as any person or group who sympathises with them. It proposes up to a ten-year prison sentence for LGBTQI+ people, and any groups or individuals who advocate for their rights, sympathise, or offer social or medical support.<sup>4</sup> The far-reaching scope of the law also targets academics, activists, or anyone in Ghana who creates or posts content across social media platforms in support of LGBTQI+ issues. Though this law is still in its infancy and must go through several other stages before it becomes law, it represents an attempt by some lawmakers and institutions to legally codify into law what the crowd in “Swallowing Ice” merely threatens. Similar laws in Uganda, Nigeria, and other African states have sought to impose what Sylvia Tamale has called a

“compulsory heterosexuality” that is “secured by penal laws” which criminalise same-sex intimacies as “sex against the order of nature” (Tamale, 2009: 58; Nyanzi, 2013). These laws, like those enacted in Uganda and proposed in Ghana, seek simultaneously to clarify ambiguous legal language inherited from colonialism and enact punitive legislation against same-sex sexual practices and intimacies. Despite the long history of same-sex intimate relations across the African continent, they continue to be framed as “un-African” or an imposition by Euro-American nation-states – a kind of sexual neocolonial project (Tamale, 2009: 58; Wahab, 2016; Okanlawon, 2018).

Yet what Boateng’s story ultimately shows is that the African female body continues to be the site where these legal battles over sexuality occur. By rehearsing the ongoing debates about same-sex intimacy through the mob’s violent reaction, Boateng’s story also reveals African female bodies to be the “host” to ongoing postcolonial anxieties of female sexuality that are founded in “colonial statements” (Coly, 2019: 17). Suppose we think about the mob’s actions as mimicking and repurposing imbibed perspectives and practices that have been assumed to be indigenous to Africa. In that case, their reaction ceases to be solely legible as a violent reaction to the public display of same-sex intimacy. Rather, the mob’s reaction becomes haunted by the entrenchment of colonial epistemologies of sexual desire nurtured through Christian civilizing missions from Europe (the dominant religion in modern-day Ghana is Christianity). These beliefs are in turn imagined as the moral foundations of the Ghanaian nation-state. Opposition to same-sex intimacy can thus be read as part of a colonial heritage whose remains cannot be articulated as such. In opposing and punishing these women, the nameless and faceless crowd, it seems, is enacting a protest against something larger and older than the two women French-kissing. The two women, unluckily, become a synecdoche of global forces, which the mob is increasingly powerless against, even though these forces have long had a stronghold in the nation.

Brema’s imaginative news story transforms the airport into a staging ground that demonstrates the speculative potential of invention to unsettle deep-seated anxieties around African (and Black) women’s sexuality. As a space that regulates human and material access into the nation, the airport constitutes the real and symbolic boundaries that converge in the nation-state. Through characters who are Ghanaian, Boateng highlights that these non-heteronormative sexualities

are part of the fabric of the nation's past and present and will surely be part of the nation's future. Many religious organisations, particularly the Christian Council of Ghana, remain unequivocal about their posture towards same-sex identities and practices, citing the Bible and so-called "African traditions" as the source of their contestation. While elite Ghanaians can afford to live relatively secure lives regardless of their sexual proclivities, those subjected to the strict enforcement of such laws by popular state proxy, as Boateng's story shows, are everywhere waiting to mete out the justice that the state cannot or has not yet defined for itself.

However, the airport's initiation of a global perspective does not negate the hold of the nation-state on identity and forms of belonging. As exemplified in Boateng's short story, the airport allows for conflicts over global citizenship, national belonging, and sexual identities and practices to be made visible. "Swallowing Ice" imagines the airport as a space where the struggle over non-heteronormative sexuality is choreographed and acted out, and in so doing, offers a brief glimpse into another future where sexual expression is unrestricted by the heteronormative imaginary of the Ghanaian nation-state. In this way, Boateng's short story makes visible the tension between the futurity of the airport and the seemingly regressive understanding of sexuality and sexual expression in Ghana. "Swallowing Ice" shows how sexuality is marked by an impassable internal contradiction whose legacy is falsely attributed to a past that precedes colonialism when it is actually rooted in the persisting remains of colonial epistemology.

## Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Kwame Otu for permission to cite from his forthcoming monograph on queer self-making in contemporary Ghana where he provides a nuanced analysis of what this sign signifies about the limits of same-sex intimacies in Ghana.
2. See Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel's (2018) collection, *The Promise of Infrastructure*, for a more detailed analysis of the intersection between infrastructure and uneven and unequal distribution of resources in the so-called Global South.
3. In addition to the renovation of the airport, Nkrumah also supported other aviation-centred projects including the Afienua Gliding School which was founded by former Nazi pilot Hanna Reitsch (Allman, 2013: 108).
4. The "Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, 2021," if passed in its current form, would also criminalise intersex people and recommends "gender realignment" surgery for such individuals. The law's far-reaching attempts to criminalise sexual practices and identities has been described as "draconian". A copy of the bill can be read here: <https://citinewsroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/LGBT-BILL.pdf>

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# Africanfuturism and the Reframing<sup>1</sup> of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor

Arit Oku

## Abstract

Marvel's *Black Panther* movie, released in 2018, sparked renewed interest in the genre of science fiction (SF), particularly in Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism (AF) as SF subgenres that promote Black and African themes and heritage. This study delineates the similarities and differences between Afrofuturism and AF using two writings by Nnedi Okorafor to explore gender issues in AF—"Mother of Invention" (2018) and *Binti* (2015). Thus, the study applies a gender lens framed by feminist theories of science, technology, and ecofeminism to analyse the two fictional works and investigate how African speculative fiction portrays gender, technology, and power. Results demonstrate how literary imagination and creativity in AF is overturning gender stereotypes, changing existing gender-power dynamics, and offering a platform for reframing gender and relationships with technology. AF literature also allows the reader to envision alternative pathways for Africa's post-crisis development and economic prosperity.

## Introduction

Marvel's *Black Panther* movie, released in 2018, sparked renewed interest in the genre of science fiction (SF), particularly in Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism (AF) as subgenres that promote Black and African themes and heritage. The release of *Black Panther* prompted discussions among scholars and practitioners about the usefulness of the Afrofuturism genre in the African context.<sup>2</sup> This work responds to the subject matter's ongoing debates by delineating the similarities and differences between Afrofuturism and AF. Further, I apply a gender lens framed by feminist theories of science, technology, and ecofeminism to analyse two fictional works by Nigerian American novelist Nnedi Okorafor.

I agree with the observation made by Burnett (2015) in his study of Okorafor's written works, in which he asserts that "Okorafor shows postcolonial speculative fiction's potential as a site for counterhegemonic discourse, as a space for examining

possibilities that are not available within mainstream realist literature” (Burnett, 2015: 134). I have selected two of Okorafor’s stories to expand “counterhegemonic discourse” about the connections between African women, feminism science and technology in AF literature—“Mother of Invention” (2018) and *Binti* (2015). Both selected works have female protagonists who interface directly with technology, albeit on different levels and in different circumstances. Such AF stories offer a new platform for rethinking gender roles, reproductive health and rights, gender-power dynamics, and the gender division of labour in Africa.

### **Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism: Similarities and Differences**

Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism have strong connections, and there is variety in the genres as well. Science and technoculture<sup>3</sup> loom large in both genres. Afrofuturism, like AF, uses “technoculture and science fiction as a lens for understanding the Black experience” (Strong and Chaplin, 2019: 58). As many scholars have asserted, sometimes the distinctions between both genres are subtle, and it is hard to separate the distinguishing filaments. Wabuke (2020), for instance, suggests that “Black Speculative Literature” could become the language that is adopted – inclusive of Afrofuturism, AF, and Africanjujuism.<sup>4</sup> Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism are also both agenda setting. In AF, for example a technologically advanced Africa that has overcome many of its currently daunting challenges and is enjoying the benefits of socio-economic and political development dominates the imagination.

The *Black Panther* movie perhaps best exemplifies the bridge between AF and Afrofuturism, demonstrating how the separating lines have been blurred. A product of the American Marvel Comics family, the film is set in a fictitious but technologically advanced African country. Wakanda is rich in vibranium and this gives its inhabitants mastery of technology. The film largely focuses on T’Challa (played by late American actor Chadwick Boseman) who is to become king after his father’s death. He confronts a formidable enemy from within the clan as he prepares for his installation ceremonies. Yes, despite the focus on T’Challa, one of the most memorable scenes for Nigerian viewers was at the start of the movie when Wakanda’s heroic female warriors, Nakia (played by Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong’o) and Okoye (played by Zimbabwean-American actress Danai Gurira), fight terrorists alongside T’Challa in Nigeria’s Sambisa Forest<sup>5</sup> and release kidnapped women and children.

The film's theme appealed to African sensibilities, showing off a mix of African cultures and traditional heritage in a manner that bred "fictive kinship" between Africans and African Americans, formed not by DNA but by shared experience (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Beyond African American audiences, the movie enchanted Black viewers across the world. As Strong and Chaplin (2019) observe, *Black Panther* did expand Blackness globally.

Both Afrofuturism and AF also grapple with issues of chronological time, emphasising futurity. Strong and Chaplin (2019) suggest that *Black Panther* was endearing to Black audiences across the world because of its futuristic portrayal of an uncolonised Africa; far from the familiar stereotypes of a continent devastated by war, violence, disease, and famine (58). Strong and Chaplin (2019) observe that the movie *Black Panther* succeeded in bending time and space and thus, "merging both ancestral history and future possibility with the spiritual" (59).

Like Afrofuturism, AF uses "the speculative to challenge contentious issues around Black futurity" (Clark, 2019: n.p.). Though futuristic, AF also permits a re-imagining of the historical past and a recasting of the narrative to show what it should be (Austen-Peters, 2018). The AF genre tinkers easily with chronological time, introducing a fluidity: it can reverse into the historical past full throttle, bend time, and accelerate into the future. As Omelsky (2014) points out, a post-crisis African science fiction (SF) story can overcome "climate change, nuclear radiation, and the imbalances of global capitalism" (34).

But to be clear, themes of futurism have always been present in African literature. Bryce (2019) notes that futurism has been a strain in African writing from its inception and is reflective of Africa's strong folkloric storytelling, filled with magical tales. Bryce (2019) argues that earlier non-realist writing by Africans such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) were not initially celebrated in the same way that realist works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) were widely acclaimed. Indeed, Bryce (2019) positions Tutuola's work as a precursor to recent speculative fictional works from Nigeria like Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991).

The longstanding themes of futurism in African writing aside, there are subtle differences between AF and Afrofuturism, despite their "fictive kinship" ties. Some writers insist that works in the AF tradition must be distinctly about Africa, or Africans on the continent, or Africa-born immigrants living in the diaspora.

Päivi Väättänen points to Africa's discursive absence from America's SF, especially where technology and social development are concerned, as to why AF must be "rooted geographically and culturally on the continent" (2019: n.p.). Steingo (2017) introduces the term "African Afro-futurist" to describe speculative fiction coming out of Africa, suggesting that "rather than thinking about AF in the Americas and Africa as distinct movements...it may be useful to establish a more inclusive Black Atlantic narrative" (50). While Steingo's naming addresses the lives of individuals in Africa as well as in the diaspora, using the term "Africanfuturism" gives the genre a more targeted African focus. Similarly, Okorafor notes that while Afrofuturism may be a subset of SF, it is of a different "ancestral bloodline".<sup>6</sup> The bloodline, she admits, is Western SF which is mostly White and male. Western SF has the reputation of casting other races as the "other". As Okorafor contends, this is one of the key departure points – the break away from the male and White hegemony of Western SF is a characteristic of AF. As she asserts in her blog, "Africanfuturism is concerned about visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centred on and predominantly written by people of African descent...and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa" (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.).

Frequently, in AF literature, women are equal participants with males, and beneficiaries of the progress achieved in technology and other areas. In this study, I use feminism, "the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes", as a lens for understanding the framing of gender in Okorafor's works (Brunell and Burkett, 2021: para. 1). Specifically, theories of ecofeminism—the power dynamics between gender, capitalism, and patriarchy (Mies and Shiva, 1991)—will be applied.

### **A Synopsis of "Mother of Invention" and Binti**

"Mother of Invention" (2018), a short story, is set in fictitious New Delta in futuristic Nigeria. Twenty-nine-year-old Anwuli's lover abandons her and returns to his wife and children when she announces her pregnancy. Fortunately, he had built them a smart house, Obi 3, that they both shared before the relationship ended. Due to the dangers of an impending pollen storm, Anwuli is advised by her doctor and her smart house to leave New Delta for safer territory. She is allergic to the pollen from a genetically-engineered grass that grows in New Delta that could kill her and her unborn baby. But she remains adamant in her refusal to vacate her

home. “The house was her respect; what else could she claim she’d earned from the relationship? She knew it was irrational and maybe even deadly, but she took her chances (Okorafor, 2018: 6).” Fortunately, the house has a plan – that she is unaware of – to protect her and her baby.

*Binti* (2015) documents the adventures of 16-year-old Binti from Namibia<sup>7</sup>, southern Africa. She is of the Himba ethnic group in northwest Namibia. Binti is skilled in technology and mathematics, skills in which her ethnic group have specialised know-how. She takes a bold step in applying, gaining admission, and receiving a scholarship to the foremost university located on another planet. She leaves home secretly in order not to be discouraged by her family and joins the ship that takes her from the familiar into unknown territory. The Himba are very conservative, and no Himba had ever undertaken such a journey. On her way, Binti engages with non-human characters known as the Meduse. She succeeds in brokering peace between the human and non-human characters following an attack of the ship by the Meduse that causes the death of all on board. Binti is the only human survivor among students and professors on the way to Oomza University.

### The Africanfuturist Worlds of Binti and Anwuli

While *Binti* facilitates a re-imagining of rural Africa, “Mother of Invention” rivets our focus on a more urban, post-crisis African setting. However, rural (and even urban) electrification is still a challenge in Nigeria, for instance, and this further deepens disparities in access to technology especially for rural dwellers, and most especially for women who bear the brunt of unremunerated, tedious, and unending domestic and farm labour.

Okorafor probes existing practices that are injurious to women. In “Mother of Invention”, she turns the spotlight on reproductive and maternal health, (single) motherhood, and intimate relationships where male deceit and infidelity fester, leading to abandonment. No wonder Dowdall describes Okorafor’s “feminist fantasy” style as a “narrative of resistance” and “a radical counter-narrative to Eurocentric perceptions of Africa” (2013: 1).

Tiedeu (2020) questions African women’s under-representation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). African women make up half of the continent’s population, and their under-representation means “scientific work is missing women’s perspectives and contributions” (Tiedeu, 2020: para. 6).

It is laudable that Okorafor overturns gender stereotypes in her presentation of women regarding STEM. Women-friendly technologies reduce their notoriously laborious domestic chores and enhance wellness and productivity.

Binti has achieved proficiency as a harmoniser. She builds the finest astrolabes (a practical technological tool) that even non-Himba utilise. Remarkably, her proficiency is the result of skills she inherited from her mother, who is gifted in mathematics. The Africa of AF is a science and technology-savvy one for urban and rural dwellers, and both females and males (and even non-human creatures like the Meduse), who know how to produce and (or) operate and enjoy the benefits of technological devices.

Binti scores so high in the mathematics entrance examination into Oomza University that she obtains a full scholarship. She decides to leave her people in pursuit of tertiary education. Binti is adventurous in disengaging from the known and stepping into a world that no other person from her ethnic group had ever dared to explore. She contradicts gender and age stereotypes:

I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life. I was leaving in the dead of the night, and they had no clue...  
My parents would never imagine I'd do such a thing in a million years  
(Okorafor, 2015: 6).

Binti is ambitious even though she was born within a culture that prefers to keep to itself. "We Himba don't travel", Binti accedes (Okorafor, 2015: 8). She turns her back on marriage, admitting that if she remains at home, her prospects of marriage are 100 per cent assured, but going away would plummet her marriageability to zero level because "no man wanted a woman who had run away" (8).

She does not conform to the standards set by the people she meets, who find her hairstyle, mode of dressing, and her skincare product made from orange clay awkward. When asked, "Why are you covered in red, greasy clay and weighed down by all those steel anklets?", Binti explains that she is Himba (Okorafor, 2015: 14). One cannot help commending Binti for the pride she has in her cultural heritage.

Binti has the strength and will to decide to turn her back on family and marriage and to prioritise education. She admits that she has never taken such a decision before. She ponders this move for a while, weighing the strengths and threats that the decision holds. The pull of knowledge takes precedence over other

considerations. Indeed, Binti defies gender stereotypes that cast women and girls as emotional, lacking decision-making ability, and weak. In the characterisation of Binti, we catch a glimpse of Okorafor's feminist thought. Binti defies the motherhood pull that is an element of African feminine existence. Yet, she is independent and embraces Himba cultural practices which lean in the direction of African gender norms.

In "Mother of Invention" (Okorafor, 2018), Anwuli loves her smart home, and she converses with it. Her smart home is designed to respond to her every need, offering her protection. It anticipates every source of danger in preparing to serve as her place of refuge in the threatening pollen tsunami. The house responds to Anwuli's emotional and psychological needs and her inner struggles, considering the threat to her health and life. Thus, the house protects her in the same manner that her womb protects her unborn baby. It sings to her and comforts her when she is tense. "You are fine; your baby is fine; everything is fiiiiine", it croons (Okorafor, 2018: 5). There is a natural connection between Anwuli and her dwelling place. Anwuli's home – Obi 3 – is the third house that her ex-fiancé Bayo built. It is smaller in size than Obi 1 (where he lives with his wife), and Obi 2 – his office. However, Obi 3 is the most technologically advanced of these smart houses.

The feminist undertones of "Mother of Invention" and *Binti* are clear. Anwuli is independent and challenges gender boundaries. Anwuli's friends and even her parents and relatives desert her because she is considered a homewrecker due to her relationship with her lover, who later abandons her. Unlike Binti, who is disturbed about leaving home without informing her family, Anwuli seems unbothered about the backbiting going on among family, neighbours, and friends. Besides her ex-lover, her technology and artificial intelligence devices (computers and drones) represent the only family she possesses. Although Anwuli seems unbothered about her alienation from parents and other family members, one can sense bitterness reflected in the scathing remarks she makes about those who deserted her.

The technology in use in both stories is indigenous and is an extension of Africa's flora and fauna, making for sustainability. In the AF tradition, African cultures and spirituality form a cohesive and organic whole. Indeed, Okorafor (2009) describes her brand of speculative fiction as "organic fantasy" because it "emerges from the very nature of its story" (275). Describing how she envisions her fictive Ooni Kingdom of Ginen, she says there is "a perfect marriage between

the ancient and the modern, nature and technology” (281). Rather than being constructed with brick and sand, houses grow like plants. “Ginen is a series of African stereotypes that I turned on their heads” (Okorafor, 2009: 281).

We see examples of these overturned stereotypes and the unity between nature and technology in both “Mother of Invention” and *Binti*. For example, the spaceship *Binti* boards to Oomza University – the Third Fish – is designed in the form of a shrimp so the exoskeletons can “withstand the harshness of space” (Okorafor, 2015: 13). Her home, though the oldest house in her village, is fitted with environmentally-friendly materials, such as solar panels and bioluminescent plants that glow at night and stop emitting light at sunrise. Ecofeminism affirms these eco-friendly technologies. The spacecraft and house are designed to conserve and promote wellness and are pollution-free.

In “Mother of Invention”, New Delta has become the world’s greenest place in complete contrast to the old order – Nigeria’s Niger Delta region, where extractive activities by oil companies have polluted the sources of livelihood of the residents. The air-scrubbing genetically-modified grass (periwinkle) that grows in New Delta replaced oil as the country’s major revenue earner, reducing the destructive impact of oil extraction. However, leadership structures are still operating in the mode of the old order, repeating the same mistakes made in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Revenue from the sale of periwinkle is going into government coffers while the host community, New Delta, continues to suffer neglect. The result is that government fails to spot the changes in the grass pollination system, leading to “pollination misalignment” (Okorafor, 2018: 19) and the pollen tsunami that put Anwuli and her unborn child in grave danger. It triggered an ailment – *Izeuzere*. Because of their gender roles – reproduction and reproductive functions – women suffer more from leadership failure.

While gender and heteronormative hierarchies appear minimised in futuristic Africa, it is paradoxical that both women (Anwuli and her ex’s wife) depend completely on smart houses built by the man who deceived them both. Code’s (1981) questions are relevant here: Who is the knower where knowledge about science and technology is in question? Are women unable to also design and build a smart house? Do they lack the skills or financial clout to do this because they are women? Is a woman restrained from building or buying her own property due to socially constructed barriers? As Code (1981) rightly notes, “Many kinds of knowledge and many skills have, historically speaking, been inaccessible for

women from a purely practical point of view. Women were simply not permitted to learn” (268).

Binti took her place among the intelligentsia of her world on the journey to Oomza University: “outward-looking people who loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing” (Okorafor 2015: 15). Describing Binti, Okorafor explains in a TED talk titled, “Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa”, that “as the story progresses, she [Binti] becomes not other, but more” (Okorafor, 2017: 03.04 mins.).

This art of leaving, and thus becoming more, is at the heart of AF and Afrofuturism. Leaving her home to another planet to study does not diminish Binti; she takes along her cultural mementoes and adds on other attributes as she continues her journey. She adds value to her world by brokering a peace accord between the Oomza University authorities and the Meduse.

Okorafor draws deeply from the traditional and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people. She uses Igbo names in “Mother of Invention” and explores the African worldview in both works. For example, Igbo spiritual beliefs strongly refer to the *Ogbanje*<sup>8</sup> concept and the Igbo word for a house – *Obi*. The name Anwuli in Igbo means “joy”. Anwuli’s information video features a man with a cane dressed as an elder from Anwuli’s village in Arochukwu.

Likewise, Binti brings alive the culture and lifestyle of the Himba. She observes, “Our land is desert, but we live in the region where there is sacred red clay.... Because my people are sons and daughters of the soil” (Okorafor, 2015: 34). She does not cringe from applying *otjize* (red clay) to her hair and body even when those around her find the smell offensive. In a bid to defend herself in the face of attack from non-human creatures known as Meduse, she wields her *edan*<sup>9</sup> as her protection and it has a devastating effect on the Meduse (17).

As the story of “Mother of Invention” unfolds, we feel Anwuli’s birth pangs, and her fears recall the fact that more women die from pregnancy-related complications in Nigeria than in most countries of the world. Beyond this, a pollen tsunami is also looming, and the fear is that it will trigger fatal complications in people with a respiratory condition known as *Izeuzere*. We follow the decisions she makes and why she makes them. We empathise with her determination to defy death, to stay back and establish possession of her home, striving to make a home for and her forthcoming infant amidst environmental crises.

The ecofeminist undertones of “Mother of Invention” are clear. Operating from the premise that women are largely responsible for harnessing the earth’s resources to nurture their families through domestic food production, and therefore must guard jealously this earth-wealth, African ecofeminism, championed by global figures like Kenyan Wangari Maathai and her Greenbelt Movement, Ruth Nyambura of the African EcoFeminist Collective, and organisations like Concerned Farmers Association (Ghana) and Kizibi Community Seed Bank (Uganda) are working to enshrine environmental sustainability continent-wide and locally through various strategies (Kelleher, 2019). These strategies include challenging patriarchal and neo-colonial systems that imperil the continent, critiquing gender-power structures, interrogating multinational capitalism, and curbing the destructive tendencies of extractive industries while protecting biodiversity and precious seeds (Kelleher, 2019).

Anwuli’s smart home provides a model for protecting women through the delicate process of birthing a child, which heightens a mother’s vulnerability. The house ensures that Anwuli receives skilled and optimal-quality care throughout her pregnancy, delivery, and post-natal period. “Mother of Invention” touches on salient issues. Hardly do families, governments, and even health care providers respond as Obi 3 does to every present and anticipated need of Anwuli and her baby. There is a relationship of mutual trust that even her ex-fiancé was incapable of providing.

## Conclusion

This study examines the nature of the genre of AF and the contributions of Nnedi Okorafor’s fiction, within the framework of ecofeminism, gender, science, and technology. The analysis shows that AF, like Afrofuturism, is an offshoot of Western SF, is agenda-setting by nature, and developed in response to the gaps created by the near-absence of positive or empowering Black and African themes in Western SF.

Okorafor’s organic fantasy style grounds her stories in the African soil, drawing deep, refreshing draughts of freshness from the traditions, beliefs, and worldview of the Igbo. *Binti* unveils the cultures and traditions of the Himba. Okorafor unabashedly presents strong African female characters in a manner that is startling and defies gender stereotypes. The style grows on the reader if not

repulsed by the sheer scale of the technology and development landscape that Okorafor paints. She lights up Africa's future in new ways that almost cause the reader acquainted with the existing narratives to gasp in disbelief.

In the heat of the excitement over the movie *Black Panther*, a friend observed that after watching the dramatic rescue of Nigeria's Chibok girls from Sambisa Forest, she left the cinema hall with a sinking heart because she suddenly realised that in real life, some of the girls were still trapped in the forest. Notwithstanding, fantasy has a role to play in assisting us to see differently, think out-of-the-box, or discard the box. As the scales fall off our eyes, we see endless possibilities. Undoubtedly, there is a need to reframe technology for women as a fun tool for dismantling patriarchal oppressions and for easing the workload that gender roles impose on females. Okorafor does an excellent job of this, modelling to younger women the potential power within their reach.

Okorafor uses the tool of speculative fiction to showcase alternative pathways for Africa's post-crisis development and economic prosperity, enabling one to focus on astonishing future possibilities, rather than the excruciatingly painful present. Conserving and not harming our living environments certainly will get us there faster. Indeed, who does not long for a post-crisis Africa?

## Endnotes

1. We reframe when we consider the use of alternative lenses and determine to look at an issue in another way that challenges our previous beliefs.
2. For example, Chikafa-Chipiro (2019) speaks extensively about the Black Panther movie's phenomenal representation of Black womanhood, noting that it is "a return to the source of sorts which recalls African women warriors who have been celebrated in the African past" (4).
3. "A culture as informed or defined by its technological activity, especially a culture characterised by a high level of technological development; (also) the practices, attitudes, etc., characteristic of those proficient in the use of information technology" (Oxford Lexico dictionary).
4. According to Okorafor, "Africanjujuism, [is] an inherent aspect of Nigerian culture in which magical fetishism is displayed through wearing exuberant head ornaments." (Paige, 2018: n.p.)
5. On 14 April 2014, a terrorist group known as Boko Haram that operates in the West Africa region broke into a school in Borno State in Nigeria's northeast at night and abducted 276 female students from the hostel. Many have since been rescued, but a number are still in the hands of their abductors.
6. Okorafor (2017:03.47 mins) Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa.
7. "This ecoregion has been arid for 55 million years due to climatic conditions, thankfully not attributable to human environmental excesses. Though located in Namibia, the desert extends to Angola and South Africa. Available at <https://www.worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/at1315>
8. Ogbanje refers to children who die and are believed to reincarnate several times due to the alliance of the said children with certain deities or spirits (Ilechukwu, 2007).
9. An object she picks up around her living environment. She had no idea of its spiritual/mystical powers until she came face to face with the Meduse threat; a pointer to the need to protect our environment so we can enjoy optimal benefits from it. As described in *Binti*, it has a stellated cube shape with intricate loops and swirls of blue and black and white. See Nnedi Okorafor. 2015. *Binti* (New York: Tor Books).

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# The Liquid Space where African Feminism and African Futurism Meet

Minna Salami

## Abstract

African feminist traditions are marked by resistance to the status quo. African futurism typically focuses on imagining potential transformations. The merging of the two fields of thought is both urgent and generative.

We are already in the future. I am writing these words in a moment that is my present but will be the past as you read these same words in the future.

We do not approach futurism with this panoramic mindset. Rather, we endow futurism with a certainty whereby the present is hyperreal, and the future exists in a fabulist realm where things will be more magical tomorrow. This approach is a danger for Africa and its descendants.

We compartmentalise lived experience into the past, present, and future, but just as this text complicates the straightforwardness of such a fragmented sense of time, so, too, do all material and abstract realities flow in and out of one another. Rather than being linear, the passage of time is like the course of a river that swells and curves, forwards, downwards, yonder, and sideways, in response to circumstances within and beyond its streams.

When we break up time, we also split our experience of it, which is how history is typically understood in Westernised thought. Consequently, when it comes to African history, conventional scholarship fragments time into precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods corresponding with the past, present, and future. In return, these splits prompt us to think of time as producing solid entities and notions such as nation-states, ethnic groups, independence, and decolonisation within predetermined periods and political eras. Futurism then becomes about projecting an era yet ahead, a “post”-postcolonial or even a *transcolonial* Africa.

But Africans especially ought to know that time is more disobedient than that. Precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa share more in common than such neatly organised periods suggest. Colonialism is not the defining story of

Africa that it is made to seem. Rather, to stay with the metaphor, the era of colonialism is like a dam that has restricted the stream of African ways from flowing smoothly along the course of time. Yet, while a dam may divert water from flowing, it does not stop it. Streams of water keep moving into one another and into lakes, lagoons, and deltas. So, too, do African ways and modes of being entangle, despite the event of colonialism.

There are other signposts, other defining moments along the river of African history. One of those points of reference is the liquid space where African feminism and African futurism meet. I'm referring to this confluence as a *liquid* space to reflect that it is a place of uncertainty. Like water, it has no shape. It connotes a moving spatiality in which there is room to evoke beauty – fluidity, harmony, softness. But water bodies also reflect the things that we associate with destructive power: global economics, conflict, and exploitation. The intersection of African feminism and African futurism reflects a spacetime of both resistance and hope.

Colonialism is a significant rupture in the fabric of African life, beyond doubt, but it *is* a signpost in the course of time, rather than the journey itself. As Ali Mazrui (2010) writes in *The Guardian*, “One of the many devastating consequences of colonialism, in its imposition of one mode of thought and way of life, attempting to destroy all others, is that it shallows our imaginations, too closely confining them to present, near-recent, experience.”

All of this matters because how an event is periodised shapes how it is analysed. Colonialism forces people who have experienced colonisation to imagine their social and cultural trajectories from the event of occupation. Consequently, they come to see freedom as synonymous with freedom from Western dominance. And this in return—in a world where Western dominance is ubiquitous—nurtures a mindset of escapism and self-deception.

One hundred years from now, in 2121, will the legacies of slavery and colonialism still impact Africa negatively? Will patriarchy still have a damning effect on African women's lives? The answer is yes, they will. The impact of patriarchy, slavery, and colonialism can never be anything but negative. But the more we identify and engage with other signposts that mark the passage of time, the more events that evoke progressive transformation and imagination will also stand out along the socio-historical journey.

Imagination, it is worth noting, is neither positive nor negative. Imagination can be used to construct progressive change, or it can be used to design weapons and kidnap schoolgirls through terror attacks. Imagination requires the company of something more—compassion, love, awareness—to be elevating.

That is the type of imaginative transformation of African societies that feminists have been conjuring. It leads me to wonder: what would our African women ancestors say about African futurism? What would women like Adelaide Casely-Hayford, the Ghanaian feminist and educator; or Wangari Maathai, Kenyan ecofeminist and Nobel laureate; or Nana Yaa Asantewa, Ghanaian chief of army; or Winnie Madikizela Mandela, South African anti-apartheid activist and politician; or Queen Nzinga of Angola; or Sophie Bosede Oluwole, Nigerian feminist philosopher; or Yvonne Vera, the Zimbabwean feminist writer, have to tell us about the role of the future?

My hunch is that they would convey seriousness on the matter. The situation of women means that the future is more important than most people imagine. While Euro-patriarchal knowledge, which is thought that is biased both by Eurocentrism and patriarchy (Salami, 2020), claims to know objective, “solid” truths about the world, including the future, African women ancestors would approach the future with a sensibility that also knows “poetic” truths about the world and the future. They would resist being waylaid by cool trends, the aesthetics of outer space, fetishizing speculation, hi-tech gadgets and fantasy, and other patterns of our times that encourage us toward an individualist escapism, which Africans cannot afford to uncritically indulge in. I believe that they would say the same thing they said about African pasts: namely that society needs to be transformed; patriarchy needs to go; exploitation needs to end; the marginalisation of women must stop.

If the past decade was one of cataclysmic change with an even more dramatic pandemic ending scene, we have only experienced the tip of the iceberg of a world in flux. The near future will be marked by even more rapid transformation than humanity has ever known. Globally, we are grappling with enormous social, ecological, technological, and biological harms. It is likely that by 2030, artificial intelligence, robotics, and blockchain technologies will have made global society even more unrecognisable than the coronavirus pandemic has. The budding nanotechnological revolution—a technology that enables the manipulation of

matter at atomic level— poses a threat to our planet. Detrimental social ills such as sexism, racism, and classism are not only still prevalent; they are exacerbated by authoritarianism and corruption. Poverty and hunger are increasing, and Africa, with its compromised position in the global order, is especially vulnerable to these tidal restructurings. While development in the West is relatively linear, Africa has societies that are feudal, agricultural, sultanate, etc., alongside effervescent modern cities and democracies. In addition, each society is enmeshed in a global network that exploits Africa and a patriarchal hierarchy that suppresses women.

As we brace ourselves for deep shifts – Information Age to Knowledge Age; modernity to postmodernity; human to transhuman; Holocene to Anthropocene – alongside unfolding crises in the continent: the expanding of militants in the Sahel and post-pandemic recessions, all while endangering the nonhuman natural world and the species it inhabits (including humans), we need to recall that future society is going to come from today's society. If we insist on freedom today, then we will find our way there. I am reminded of another feminist ancestor, Nigerian scholar Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's (1974) poem where she says, "Dance with us a dance of the future/They will not let us sit in peace".

Insisting on freedom means not letting the future "sit in peace". This is why feminists are always killjoys. I don't mean that we refrain from being joyous and hopeful about the future. But we should also be disruptive already in the future sense. As I work in the social sciences, my bias leads me to say that a key way of disrupting means deep and radical communication. There is a need for robust public discussion. Whether it is events, educational programmes, festivals, think tanks, books or journals, there is a need to revivify discussion about what we want in our present and future. Otherwise, if we are not speaking to each other across the divided boundaries that are set up by gender, ethnicity, and class, how can we foster a future that benefits Africans? African feminism helps us to foster critical discussion on these pressing topics. These conversations, therefore, need to include everyone, not only the young on whom futurist conversations tend to focus, but also the elders, children, and refugees. What can someone who has lived on African soil for 80 years say about the future? After all, we are in some ways living in the spacetime that represented their future decades ago. What can someone who has had to leave their home say about this? And what might a five-year-old say about African futurism and feminism? We only have one Africa. We are all responsible for it in different ways.

At the moment, the future of the African continent looks like a fire. It will take a wet and fluid place where thought leads to discussion, and where discussion leads to awareness, to quench the flames. This place is the liquid space where African feminism and African futurism meet. The future needs African feminist opposition to the patriarchal status quo, but, as I said at the start of this standpoint, we are already in the future.

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# Land of My Dreams

Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi

## Abstract

An unrelenting policy of francophonisation of the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon spawned a secessionist movement, culminating in a declaration of war in November 2017 against secessionists by the Cameroon nation-state. “Land of My Dreams” is a short story about a mother and daughter living through this war in Bamenda, Cameroon’s North West region. It captures the trauma of war on the Anglophone populations of the North West and South West, and highlights how the scars of war are written on and in the bodies of women and girl-children. The mother is consumed with colonial and recent post-colonial histories, and her day-to-day engagements can only draw on that past to anchor the setbacks of the present. Her ten-year-old daughter is acutely aware of the present but engages with their current predicament as a means to imagining a different Cameroonian and African future not only for her family but especially for her female gender.

A warm spurt bathes my thighs, and a heat wave spreads through my body like ink on blotting paper. My inner thighs tickle and I brush one against the other. Liquid settles in the moon-shaped depression where the foam mattress cuddles my bum. My nightgown slowly clings to my natal cleft, and I gently close my thighs. I feel the cloth linger, caressing my perineum. I am drifting in and out of sleep when a cold tingling rushes my skin. I shift from lying on my back to my side and a trickle travels down my thigh onto the bedsheet. A chill forces me upright and I lift the blanket off my body. I look down at my nightgown. I was not dreaming after all.

I jump out of bed and scramble to my feet.

I have wet my bed.

Again.

The last time I lost control, I told myself that was the last time. I told myself I was strong enough, old enough to stop bedwetting. But strange things have been happening lately. You see, a man came to our house. A stranger. We had never seen him in our quarter. A total stranger. He opened the gate, walked to

the main entrance, opened the door without knocking, stepped into the parlour, and asked whether my parents were home. No polite greeting like a normal human being would proffer. A normal person would say, “Ah salut oh. Wuna deh house?”<sup>1</sup> Not this man. Something about him frightened me. I stared at his face and all I could think of were those moments my mother would ask in exasperation, “Are you deaf? Are you mute?” Those questions required no answer as mother and child understood none was necessary. “Wuna papa and mami deh house?” he asked again. My head bopped up and down, but the man wouldn’t take his eyes off me. I wrested my body from his scrutiny, ran through the parlour and upstairs to tell my parents there was a strange man at the door. They went downstairs to welcome the visitor. I motioned to my siblings and cousins who joined me at our favourite spot at the top of the stairs where we would sit to watch the spectacles of life unfold downstairs.

“Massa,<sup>2</sup> ah salut,” my father greeted.

“Wuna deh house?” the stranger replied.

Daddy gestured to a chair. They all sat down.

The stranger began to speak - “Papa Angela, these are troubled times. We have to work together to reach our goals, for things to change. The right hand must wash the left hand. That’s why I am here, in person, in your house, to collect your financial contribution to the cause.”

The children huddled on the stairs around me eyed each other. One by one, we shrugged and spread our palms out as the priest would in Sunday prayer. For one, the stranger had switched from Pidgin to straight English.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, I was surprised the stranger knew my name. Only family, friends, and people in our quarter called my mother, Mami Angela, and my father, Papa Angela, in honour of their last child – me. I once asked my mother, “If you have another child after me, what would they call you?” That woman looked me straight in the eye and told a bald-faced lie, “No one can ever replace you,” she said.

“Massa, excuse me. I am a bit confused. What cause are you talking about?”

The stranger retorted, “Is there another cause besides the current Anglophone Crisis? On 30 November 2017, the president of *La République*<sup>4</sup> declared war on us and when someone declares war on your home, you don’t run into your bedroom and cover your head with your wife’s wrappa.<sup>5</sup> We must get

our independence back and to help us wage and win this war of independence; we need money to buy sugarcane and groundnuts.<sup>6</sup> How do you expect us to break free from the chains of this colonial monster? Everything else we've done has failed. Now that we are at war, I don't have to remind you what needs to be done to send them packing from our homes, from our land. The contribution I require from you today, right now, is five hundred thousand francs."

"Massa, I don't have money. You know things are bad. Where do you expect me to get that kind of money?"

"Mr. John, the fight for liberation is not cheap. You spent millions to build this big house. I know exactly how much you are paid each month by this colonial government. A big civil servant of La République like you. Need I say more?" His unblinking eyes fixed on my father. "I am here for your contribution..."

"Massa, who sent you?"

"I am not here to talk politics or play games with you . . ."

The *ndzang*<sup>7</sup> dance ringtone of my mother's Tecno phone suddenly filled the room. She looked at the stranger. The man nodded.

"Hello."

"Yes, allo ma."

"George, where are you? You don't finish?"<sup>8</sup>

George was my cousin. He had travelled to Mbengwi to seek admission to secondary school. He was on his way back when three young men accosted him while he was waiting at a motor park for transportation. One of the boys instructed him to call his mother. George looked confused. "Who are you?" George asked. "Didn't you hear me? I said call your mother!" And so, he called.

"George, has something happened? George, na weti?<sup>9</sup> Why you no di answer?"

"Give me the phone," the stranger said.

He stood up and stepped outside the door. His lanky figure framed the door and a long shadow in the shape of a coffin fell across the dining table. He proceeded to have a conversation, speaking so loudly we wondered why he bothered to go outside. We could hear him instructing someone to let the boy go. He stressed he had everything under control and repeated the blunt order: "Leave that pikin<sup>10</sup> make yi go." He stepped back into the living room and a screen of sunlight fell across the plastic tablecloth, enlivening his face. He tossed the phone to my mother and turned towards my father, but remained standing.

“You say weti now, Massa? I don’t have time to waste here.”

“Massa, I have already told you that I don’t . . .”

“ ‘I don’t’ no di buy petrol. ‘I don’t’ no di buy gun. ‘I don’t’ no di fight BIR.<sup>11</sup> ‘I don’t’ no di do anything. I no want hear dat your ‘I don’t’ again.”

“Massa, you want say make I lie?” my father pleaded with the stranger.

“Look, as a sign of good faith I have instructed my boys to let your relative go. Don’t make me change my mind.”

“Massa, we don’t want that. I beg, please give me some time to see what I can do. I honestly don’t have anything in the house to give you right now. Please.”

“Ah go come back the day after tomorrow.”

The stranger’s departure reminded me of the steady and relentless darkening of the sky during the rainy season. The impending nightfall would hasten the tired legs of peasants returning home from toiling on the farm accompanied solely by loud chirping crickets. That seasonal evening shadow crept progressively through our entire house. Adults and children alike sat in silence – a rare occurrence in a home where our screams, cries, and laughter filled every waking hour, often driving our mother to distraction. This was the day that thing the old people can’t stop talking about – that thing called The Anglophone Crisis<sup>12</sup> – found its way to our door and wormed itself into the intimacy of our dreams. We did not imagine; indeed, could not have known then, how much worse things would get.

That day, the stranger shattered the veneer of peace our parents had scrupulously moulded around us within the walls of our home. It was also the first night I wet my bed. The man would come back, each time with a different companion, to collect money and to ask Daddy for guns. I have only ever seen guns on CRTV<sup>13</sup> and Africa Magic programmes. Why would this man think my father had guns in our house? They searched every room and never found any guns, but that did not stop them from coming back. The last time we spied him walking towards our house, my younger brother, Peter, took off like a gazelle intent on outsmarting a lioness. He tore through our neighbour’s cornfield, feet snapping cornstalks, slapping the earth “tat! tat! tat! tat!” as he ran, and calling out to Mommy at the top of his lungs.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy that man is coming,” Peter burst into our room, screaming at his father, gesturing towards the door. “Mommy, we saw him up there on the road. He is coming to the house. Mommy, he is coming.”

“Peter, slow down. Slow down,” I said.

“But Mommy, that bad man is coming to our house. We saw him up there by the main road. He is coming.”

Out of breath, Peter bent down and grabbed both knees to steady himself. His back arched and his stomach heaved with each breath like a malaria patient wrenching to vomit. Peter struggled to steady his breathing and calm his trembling hands. My husband took one look at his son and sprang to his feet. He rifled through the mess on the cane cupboard at the foot of our bed with both hands. Two books, a Manu Dibango CD, a box of matches, a flashlight, and a beer opener flew out of his fingers in rapid succession, landing on various objects in the room. Peter jumped up and caught the cow horn hurtling towards me before the cone-shaped tip of the cup could do damage to my right earlobe.

John finally found his wallet underneath the Guardian Post newspaper he had finished reading before going to bed and dashed out of the room. He ran downstairs and out through the back door. The sound of loud clucking protests and wing flaps drifted upstairs from the backyard. He apologized for interrupting the chickens’ midday rummage, skirted around the hen snapping bolt-upright, wings outspread to protect her clutch, and picked a path through the garden. I could barely see his head. The tall leafy cornstalks parted open and closed behind him like Venus flytraps. Only the top of his head appeared and disappeared above the leaves as he raced along the furrows. In all the years I have known him, I have never seen my husband run, let alone that fast. By the time the stranger knocked on the front door, he had reached the main road and was safely on an *okada*<sup>14</sup> which spirited him away.

∴

My parents abandoned our house, located 15 kilometres from the city, and hastily moved us to a small one-bedroom apartment in town. At bedtime, they slept in the bedroom, and we piled all the cane chairs into one corner of the parlour, spread foam mattresses on the floor and lay down for the night. During the day, we bumped into each other so often that the one thing I looked forward to was leaving the apartment and going to school.

One fateful morning, my life changed forever. I woke up and dutifully did my chores – fold blanket and bedsheet; roll up foam mattress; tie foam mattress with a cloth string; store mattress upright in the corner; brush teeth; wet palms and moisten hair; wash face, arms and legs with cold water; apply Vaseline to face, arms, thighs, and legs; put on uniform; comb hair. Satisfied with my morning ritual, I told my mother I was ready to leave for school. Not long ago, she would have asked whether I was back from mass—the 6 a.m. Short Mass. My answer would have been a solemn yes. At ten years of age, I was preparing for my First Holy Communion. The preparations for this big day included catechism classes, and come rain or shine, the 6 a.m. week-day mass. I slept in some Saturday mornings – the only day the 6 a.m. mass was optional – but on Sundays, our entire family attended High Mass. I had stopped attending that 6 a.m. mass since our relocation. “It is too dangerous,” my mother would say. Today, when I told her I was ready, I expected her to give me breakfast: bread with fried egg and brewed Diawara tea or puff-puff with pear and tea. My mother opened her mouth and made a joke instead.

“You are not going to school today.”

I blinked; my mouth wide open.

“You heard me. Now, close your mouth.”

Who is this woman? I wondered.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Mommy, everything I do now is too dangerous. You have stopped me from going to mass. I don’t know what will happen with my Holy Communion. Now you are saying I can’t go to school. How will I prepare for my Common Entrance Exam? How will I gain admission to a Catholic boarding secondary school next year? You know I want to attend Our Lady of Lourdes.”

“Little One, do you think I don’t want you to go to school?”

My ears perked up. I know I’m in dangerous territory when my mother calls me “Little One”. To my horror, she dropped to her knees, her frame bearing down on her calves, the heels supporting and holding up her rear. I caught a glimpse of the soles of her feet and toes peeking out from underneath her *kaba*.<sup>15</sup> My mother bowed her head in the manner of an old woman kneeling in front of a patriarch for a favour only he could grant. She held my little hands in her palms. They felt warm and comforting.

“You know there’s an extended ghost town in effect this week. Not just on Mondays anymore. They’re calling for another lockdown. They’re forbidding children from going to school . . .”

“Why? Why is going to school such a bad thing?”

My mother, still kneeling, held me close to her chest. I sobbed loudly on her shoulder. Snot dangled from my nostrils and drew squiggly lines down her nape.

“Nothing bad or wrong with going to school,” she whispered, her lips close to my ear. “Right now it’s just too dangerous for you to go to school. You’ve heard about school children ambushed and beaten on their way to school, their books taken away from them, some kidnapped, some even killed.”

“I have, Mommy,” I nodded. “But Paul and Grace are in school.”

“True, but your brother and sister are at boarding school. They have people protecting them within the walls of their schools. You know many schools have been destroyed. Yours, thank the gods, is still standing. But if you go to school, you will be alone, and we won’t be there to protect you. Do you understand?”

I nodded. I tried to wipe away the mucus now pooling around her collar, but she gently steered my hand toward my face.

“Now wipe your eyes. Come, I think we still have a few eggs,” she said, firmly clasping my hand and walking me over to the kerosene stove.

She grabbed Le Boxeur match from the windowsill, held the matchbox with her left hand, and popped open the box with the nail of her right middle finger. She selected a safety match, closed the box, struck the red head of the matchstick against the grey coarse surface, and tossed the matchbox on the ground near the stove. She held the stick firmly between her thumb and index finger, skilfully moving the flame around the wick, all the while complaining as she often does these days. “This flame should be blue, not red, not orange; BLUE, and we need a new wick,” she mumbled. I agreed wholeheartedly, since it is the girls’ job to scrub the soot off those aluminium pots. My mother spooned refined Mayor cooking oil into a frying pan and placed the pan on the stove. She cracked two eggs into a plastic bowl, added a generous heap of sliced onions and a pinch of salt, fork-whisking everything with rapid movements of her wrist, and poured the blend into the smoking frying pan. She let it sizzle and then flipped the omelette over, but would occasionally press down on the sides and mostly on the thick middle of the omelette with the tines of the fork. I’ve never understood why

she does that. She gave me half the omelette with four slices of the Kumba bread that I prefer to boulangerie bread. I like Kumba bread because it does not lose its softness the way stale baguettes can harden to stone. Mommy also took out the Rosa margarine tub hidden from view in the cupboard and placed it on the table. I sat down, made the sign of the cross, and said a prayer: Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy goodness, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen. My mother sat next to me but did not join me in prayer. She looked worried and distant. To be honest, Mommy and Daddy had looked that way for quite some time now. The mother I knew would have scolded me for not making the sign of the cross after I finished the prayer. I had no appetite, but I was eager to eat the food she had prepared just for me. I scraped margarine off the bottom of the tub with the tip of my teaspoon, spread it on one slice of bread; cut and placed half of the omelette on top of the margarine, and topped it with another slice of bread. I held up my pain *chargé* with both hands. I was about to take a bite when the *ndzang* dance tune intruded on our thoughts. Mommy's younger sister was calling to check on us. They spoke for a few minutes and the line went dead.

“Network problem,” Mommy said, shaking her head.

I smiled. Network problem is the euphemism adults use to describe the internet blackouts the government uses to punish us in the NoSo.<sup>16</sup> My mother's phone rang again, and I could hear my aunt, the one who lives in Douala, asking whether we were all right. My mother often talked about how grateful she was that her sister lived with her husband and children in Douala, far away from the war, but that didn't stop Mommy from accusing her sister of enjoying the protection of a “wicked” government. My aunt had learned to ignore her big sister when she said such hurtful things; worse, when her sister called her an honorary francophone. “You are talking nonsense. This war has made you crazy. You think saying such rubbish will stop me from checking on you?” my aunt would retort with a wry laugh on the other end of the line. Today, my aunt was desperate for news about their younger brother who had vanished some months before. Some said he had joined the *Amba Boys*<sup>17</sup> and was living with them in the bush. Some said he was a coward who had run away from the fight to hide in the village. The last we heard, he was stuck somewhere in Befang; some said at Bombe near the Nigerian border, but no one really knew his whereabouts. My mother dreaded each new speculation, but especially resented the malicious gossip surrounding his disappearance.

“Hmm, my sister, our wanderer returned yesterday,” Mommy resumed the conversation. “He is sleeping. You should have seen him. He looked like a ghost. All bones. He says they have destroyed the bridge and large portions of the road to the village. He had to cross in the river. Thank God, it is the dry season. He would’ve been stuck on the other side. There’s no movement, unless you are lucky enough to find a brave okada driver. He was cornered by a group of young men and he survived by surrendering his ID card. They destroyed it right in front of him, so he took to the backroads avoiding checkpoints, spending nights in open fields. Thank God, it is the dry season. He says he didn’t mind the mosquitoes but he worried about snakes and wild animals. Sometimes he heard gunshots and worried about stray bullets. He passed through villages that have been burnt to the ground and their farm crops deliberately destroyed. You hear all these stories about people abandoning their old and disabled while fleeing into the bush, trekking for days, carrying a few possessions on their backs and heads. You hear about women giving birth in the bush. Alone. Folks abandoning dead ones, leaving them to rot in the open. God forbid! You hear about these things, but he saw the devastation in different places with his own eyes. Your brother trekked for one week. I have no idea how he fed himself. He hasn’t told me the whole story. As for me, I’ve just explained to Angela why she cannot go to school . . .”

My aunt must have said something that made my mother very angry.

“Stop telling me to send my children to you or to whomever!” she shouted into the phone. “My children will die here with me. I will not send them to that place to be spat on. War profiteers are using subventions from your government to open private schools with which to bleed us dry . . .”

“Oh, now it is my government?” my aunt yelled back at her sister.

My mother held her phone away from her ear.

“Yes, your wicked, corrupt government. Those people are making bundles of money on the backs of our children in their so-called Anglophone schools. Those warmongers do not want this conflict tearing families apart to end. Our people are living in the bush like animals, scattered everywhere, taking shelter where and when they can. Those of us not living in the bush have no jobs, no means to make a living. Your government curfews and Ambazonia lockdowns are killing us. Even I, your sister, had to abandon my home. We are packed like Titus sardines in this small apartment. Others are jam-packed in Anglophone ghettos

over there. Aren't you the one telling me stories of our daughters, sisters, and mothers prostituting themselves to feed their families over there; of our women killed by unscrupulous men and discarded like doti?<sup>18</sup> *Chei!*"

"My sister, what has this government done for me? You know how I live here. You know how much I suffer here and you keep saying you people, you people . . . Stop saying that to me or maggots will eat your intestines."<sup>19</sup>

"Yes, you people say we are the cause of rent hikes and high food prices in your cities. We are the cause of food scarcity in your markets. You people have no shame! Why would I send my children to a place like that? This morning I had to hold my girl child in my arms and tell her she cannot go to school. In the time of our grandmothers, girl-children were used to being left behind. Those were supposed to be bygone days. I never imagined a day would come when I would have to tell my girl child to stay home from school. How did we get here?"

"Big Sis. Mama, I beg you. I am asking you to send my children to live with me. Let me worry about their schooling here while you worry about staying alive there."

"I'll think about it."

"Good. Wake up my brother. I want to hear from the horse's own mouth."

..

My sister always says that when our mother starts ranting about "that government," you can cook a pot of egusi soup and it would be ready before she's done. My mother has changed. She was never a quiet woman, mind you. But this war that came to our land has transformed her into a different person. If she wasn't my mother, I would've said she was going mad. She's unusually irritable. She cries a lot at night, especially when she thinks we are fast asleep. She talks endlessly about La République and the Amba Boys, stressing that neither side will surrender until we are all dead. When she is stuck at home because of lockdown, she repeats the same things over and over: "Those people send teachers with no knowledge of English to teach our children in a language our children don't understand. Those teachers cannot explain math and science concepts in a language our children understand. Those people just want to destroy our children with their *franglais*, as if we are not assimilated enough. Those people want to stunt our children's development the same way their lawyers and judges degrade us with French law. Bilingual country, my foot! Everywhere we look those people are in our courts, our schools, our civil service, our administration; everywhere we

turn, French and francophone policies are breathing down our necks, choking the very air we breathe!" At that point in her rant my mother, like clockwork, would leave the house to pace up and down the front lawn. Today, I waited. When she stepped outside, I followed suit. She walked towards the end of the veranda, and I slipped away in the opposite direction.

\* \*

The roads were eerily quiet as I walked to school. A sea of blue would have filled the streets by now, the girls in sky-blue dresses with white-collar trim and white belts neatly tied around the waist, the boys in sky-blue shirts with white-collar trim and khaki shorts. Some children would be chatting or singing church songs; some gossiping about the conversations they overheard last night; some would deliberately ignore the chatterboxes, aware they might become targets of more gossip; some would be running all the way to school, shouting a good morning as they sped by; others might be walking and eating the puff-puff or piece of bread they had grabbed off a plate before rushing out the door. I decided to take a short cut, the one I always use when I am late returning from school.

"Don't you know there's no school today?" came a woman's stern voice. "Did your parents not hear the lockdown order?"

A wall of moving flesh swathed in a faded wax print obstructed my path, blocking out the sunlight. A strong smell of smoke sailed up my nostrils where my face came to rest on the wrappa securely knotted around the woman's waist.

"Turn around and go back home," she commanded.

\* \*

A few months ago, after my brother disappeared, my womb stitched its mouth shut. I interpreted its grief as a benevolent sign to spend the money for monthly pads on more pressing family needs. This is something that happens to young widows, my mother had said with a nonchalant sweep of her hand. The womb protects the widow in her mourning, my mother had reassured me. Where was that reassurance when I needed it? A few hours after chatting with my sister, the news came. "School children have been kidnapped." Again. Little One was nowhere in sight. I felt dizzy and my feet wobbled. I was stuck on bended knee, my head in my palms, when a bolt hit my body and the shock ripped through the stitching. My womb offered no resistance and for the first time in months, it wept a crimson tide, marking my wrappa like a thousand ink splotches on blotting paper.

## Endnotes

1. “Wuna,” Pidgin English expression meaning “you” (plural); “Wuna deh house?” is a form of greeting meaning, “Are you at home?”; Similarly, “Wuna papa and mami deh house?” means, “Are your father and mother at home?”
2. A form of address meaning “Mister” or “Sir” in Pidgin English.
3. Colloquial expression, meaning Cameroon Standard English.
4. Term used by secessionists to refer to francophone Cameroon and/or the government of President Paul Biya. Francophone Cameroun earned the right to self-determination as La République du Cameroun under Ahmadou Ahidjo. La République du Cameroun and the British Southern Cameroon merged as two federated states of East Cameroon and West Cameroon in 1961. In 1972, Ahidjo transformed the federal republic into a unitary state and changed the name of the country to La République Unie du Cameroun (a united republic in name only to many Anglophones). Two years after he succeeded Ahidjo, Biya passed a law in 1984 changing the name from La République Unie du Cameroun to La République du Cameroun. This represented a reversion to the French colonial legacy and, as such, led Anglophones to see themselves as a colony of La République.
5. A loincloth.
6. Sugarcane: euphemism for guns; groundnuts: euphemism for bullets.
7. A Beba women’s dance. Men cannot and do not take part in the ndzang; they can watch, sing, dance or offer praise from the side lines, and like the other spectators, must stand outside and away from the intimate circle of women dancing the ndzang.
8. “You don finish?” meaning, “Are you done?”; “Have you accomplished the task?”
9. A question meaning “what?” in Pidgin English; “na weti?” also means, “what is it?”; “what’s wrong?”
10. Pidgin English meaning “child”.
11. Acronym for Batallion d’intervention rapide (Rapid Intervention Battalion), an elite Special Forces army unit. Thousands of these forces have been deployed in the Anglophone regions since 2017. Their presence was reinforced with the creation, by presidential decree on 21 February 2018, of the fifth RMIA (Région militaire interarmées). The RMIA5, with its command centre in Bamenda, was specifically created for military operations in the North West and South West regions.

12. The Cameroon nation-state has been plagued for decades by what has been referred to as “The Anglophone Problem.” The most recent Anglophone crisis that erupted in 2016 began with a strike of Anglophone lawyers from 11 to 14 October, and a peaceful demonstration on November 8 called for by the Anglophone Common Law Lawyers’ Associations. A strike of solidarity was then called for by the Teachers’ Trade Unions of the English Sub-system of Education for the same day of November 8. The government responded to the peaceful demonstrations with military force and, since November 2016, the violence has been raging in the North West and South West regions with spillover effects in other regions and neighbouring countries. Confrontations between military forces and a longstanding secessionist movement subsequently led, on 1 October 2017, to a declaration of independence of the self-proclaimed state of Ambazonia and of the ruinous war declared by President Paul Biya against the Ambazonia separatist forces on 30 November 2017.
13. Cameroon Radio Television; government-owned and controlled media company.
14. Name for motorcycle taxis; popular for their cheaper pricing and their drivers’ ability to weave through traffic and ferry passengers to their destinations faster than a car.
15. Kaba ngondo is the traditional dress of Sawa women in Douala and the coastal region of Cameroon. A free-flowing dress from the neck to the ankles made from different materials but especially from colourful wax or other less expensive cotton prints, this attire is popularly known throughout Cameroon simply as kaba. It can be worn for daily use or designed for specific occasions, ceremonies, festivities and women can make specific fashion statements with their kaba.
16. Term used during the insurgency to refer to the English-speaking North West and South West regions.
17. Combatants of armed groups of separatists who are fighting for the self-proclaimed state of Ambazonia.
18. Pidgin English expression meaning dirt; garbage.
19. Beba expression meaning “You will have chronic diarrhoea.”

## The Afrofuturist Village

### Masiyaleti Mbewe

Under the Future Africa Visions in Time touring exhibition, The Afrofuturist Village by Zambian queer futurist writer, photographer, and activist Masiyaleti Mbewe, is an ongoing exhibition that uses various mediums (text, video, and photography) to examine the different identities, diverse cultures, and languages that might exist in the Afrofuture.

This exhibition focuses on using space as one of the central themes, such as how Black people occupy space, and how we can re-imagine non-monolithic ideas of Blackness in the future. The exhibition also questions why “space is the place” and theorises a future that does not require a Black exodus into outer space, but rather imagines a world that sustains Blackness on this earth.

The Afrofuturist Village establishes how the concept of Afrofuturism can be applied to the African experience. By linking the various histories of African languages, post-colonial narratives, and the desire to reconnect, re-establish and renew, The Afrofuturist Village practically explores theories of space transcendence to promote inclusivity in Afrofuturism.

The exhibition utilises braille for the blind and visually impaired, and sign language interpretations for deaf and hard-of-hearing communities to make the exhibition and its core message more inclusive and accessible to *all* Black people.

Lastly, The Afrofuturist Village is the groundwork for more expansive future exhibitions—The Afrofuturist Town, The Afrofuturist City, and eventually, The Afrofuturist Metropolis.

A selection of images from The Afrofuturist Village

- Title of Work: Asteria
- Shot on a Nikon D7000
- 1/4 (First Edition)
- Year: 2018

**Caption:** Inclusive Futures

Black people living with disabilities should not be an afterthought when we imagine the future. Asteria represents this future.



- Title of Work: Tove the Guardian
- Shot on a Nikon D7000
- 3/4 (First Edition)
- Year: 2018

**Caption:** Non-Monolithic Futures

Black people living with albinism, vitiligo, and other skin conditions that affect the production of pigment in Black people are not tokenized or fetishized in the Afrofuture. Tove represents the shift of these perspectives that pigeonhole Blackness as a set of specific things that cannot exist beyond colonial imaginaries. Blackness is diverse.



- Title of Work: Masi and Anxiety
- Shot on a Nikon D7000
- 2/4 (First Edition)
- Year: 2018

**Caption:** Mental Futures

In the Afrofuture, the re-examination of traditional African rituals is explored to provide healing for Black womxn, men, and non-binary people. Emerging new technologies facilitated by Black innovation are used to treat anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses.



- Title of Work: Gender on the Moon
- Shot on a Nikon D7000
- 2/4 (First Edition)
- Year: 2018

**Caption:** Future Genders

All gender identities are celebrated in the Afrofuture; the imagined future is a safe space for all members of the LGBTQAI+ community.



- Title of Work: Diana's Landing
- Shot on a Nikon D7000
- 2/4 (First Edition)
- Year: 2018

**Caption:** Future Womxnhood

Black womxn are unapologetic; they are protected, they are loved, and they are celebrated.



## "Liberation is Necessarily an Act of Culture": A Review of *Spirit Desire*

Luam Kidane

*Spirit Desire: Resistance, Imagination and Sacred Memories in Haitian Vodoun*  
by Sokari Ekine. San Francisco: Blurb Books, 2018



In the middle of *Spirit Desire*, a photo book on Haitian Vodoun, you see Sokari Ekine, the photographer, for the first time. Standing in the waters of Sodo, Haiti, she is metaphysically encountering Haitian ancestors in the liminal space between Africa and Haiti, where Haiti is Africa and Africa is Haiti. In what is, arguably, the most captivating and visually compelling photograph of the collection, the collision between composition, ritual, histories of enslavement, and intimacy is knowingly loud and silent. As you take in the photograph, the sound of the water crashing on the rocks crescendos out of the page and surrounds you; the silence of the water as it engulfs Ekine can be felt in your held breath.

But a review of *Spirit Desire* cannot be reduced to an analysis of the technical merits of the images you see throughout the photo book. To do that would be to miss the contribution that Ekine is making as a cultural producer. The draw of this photo book lies in the way it presents images that act as portals through which Ekine invites you, even if only for a few moments, to establish a link with Black people in Haiti who practise Vodoun, a Haitian spiritual practice with links to western Africa – to witness their survival, joy, and continued resistance.

In a talk given at the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture Series at Syracuse University in 1970, Amílcar Cabral, one of the founders of the *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*, spoke on how cultural production is central to African peoples' struggle against domination. He argues that foreign domination relies on two aspects – murder and the erasure of the people's culture. As long as people produce their own histories and cultures, "foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation" (Cabral, 1970). So, for Cabral, "national liberation is necessarily an act of culture" (Cabral, 1970). Though his comments concern national liberation, which makes sense given that he was immersed in the liberation of Portuguese-occupied Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau, we can transpose the point he is making outside of the confines of the nation-state. Liberation *is* necessarily an act of culture. It is from this lineage that Ekine's work in *Spirit Desire* flows. Through this photo book, Ekine is not only a photographer but also a learner and an archivist when she urges you to see

Vodoun as a site of resistance, decolonization and community. The series which includes images of everyday living, ritual and ceremony, aims to shift the gaze from representations that depict Vodoun as negative and present a decolonizing narrative: one in which Vodouisants engage with a consciousness and spirituality that celebrates our humanity rather than focusing on a set of prescribed normative identities (Ekine, 2018: 5)

## Looking



In the photos of *Spirit Desire*, you are pulled to sit between the nodes of time. Ekine asks you to abandon the day-to-day linearity which governs your life so that you can immerse yourself in the interlocking and fluid movement of the past, present, and future. In these nodes, the past, the future, and the present are distinct and one.

The photo book opens with photographs of the markings of death. You see a grave and mounds which are, perhaps, burial mounds. Death is the first, but not the only, element that is present. Life is also present here because the viewer and the photographer are also there. Through these images, Ekine performs the duality that she calls on in the introduction to the photo book. *Looking* at these sites of transition, of death, make them also sites of life. As she asserts,

What we witness, if we look closely is, the duality and fluidity, all that takes place, is taking place, has passed from and between ancestor to ancestor, from the once visible to the invisible, and eventually returning to what we discern as the body in flesh (Ekine, 2018: 8).

## Metamorphoses

From this interaction between life and death, Ekine travels to Lakou Badjo. It is the start of a nine-day celebration at the Lakou, a communal compound of people related by ancestry and Vodoun. On January 3, the birthday of the founder of the Lakou, Badjo Pady, is celebrated. Badjo was born to enslaved parents who escaped to fight in the Haitian Revolution. In 1792, Badjo founded what is now Lakou Badjo.

In the photographs of the Lakou Badjo celebrations, Ekine explores the metamorphoses of time. The images that Ekine captures of people dancing are simultaneous snapshots of the Haitian people's revolutionary victory, the destruction of African peoples and their communities by enslavement, the struggles against neo-colonialism, and of people gathering in the present to celebrate and build what will come. In each image, you see what was, what is, and what will be. Every moment is different but also retains something of the moment before it.

## Movement



Bound by both the weight and the lightness of centuries past, Ekine's focus on the ritual of dancing at the Lakou Badjo celebration surfaces the constant movement in Vodoun between remembering and forgetting and building and deconstructing—of the practice of embracing and releasing. “Ritual dance, like possession, is transformational,” Ekine explains. “Both enable you to free yourself by providing you with the opportunity to ‘[lose] your life’, providing you ‘Pédi laviou’, even if only for a few moments.” (Ekine, 2018: 19)

This meditation on the relationality present in movement is picked up again by Ekine in her photographic encounter with Tire Machèt. During the Haitian Revolution, individuals improvised fighting materials. Even though people were able to obtain guns from time to time, these were often unavailable for the fighters to use in combat – hence the necessary emergence of Tire Machèt. Derived from African traditions of dance, acrobatics, and martial arts, Tire Machèt, like Capoeira in Brazil, is a set of movements that are used in combat. Ekine remarks that Tire Machèt “is the language of bodies in motion, speaking at the same time as opposition and as mirrors of self” (Ekine, 2018: 62). Like the dancing in Lakou Badjo, the movement of Tire Machèt is an art of losing and finding yourself, of understanding when which is necessary for life.

## Relationality



The photographs throughout *Spirit Desire* are buoyed by the idea and practice of interdependence between people and nature, descendants, and ancestors, and between the photographer, the looker, and the subject being photographed. As Ekine comments,

[t]he Lakou forms the foundation on which Vodoun philosophy and way of being is sustained. The integration of the spiritual with nature and community each interdependent on the other, both the living and the dead, the present and the past, the human and the spiritual are present in the lakou (Ekine, 2018: 48).

This emphasis on interdependence is not a haphazard artistic choice. In an artistic genre inundated by detachment and voyeurism, this emphasis is a marked political gesture by Ekine. Each person who is photographed, each of Ekine's collaborators, is inviting you into the Lakou, into the everyday of people who live, and struggle, and laugh, and thrive. In a dialogue across borders, across space, and across time, *Spirit Desire* urges a disordering of the linear way individuals encounter information. It invites you to embody the experience of interdependence as the looker. What you will do with this encounter is a central question of this photographic project from Ekine and each of her collaborators. For the moments you are with *Spirit Desire*, you, too, are a subject of the work. You, too, are implicated.

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## Methodologies in Caribbean Research on Gender and Sexuality, edited by Kamala Kempadoo and Halimah A.F. DeShong. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2020.

Sylvia Tamale

This compendium is a breath of fresh air for those frustrated with dominant narratives that feed into the (neo)colonial, Eurocentric and hetero-patriarchal projects. The authors engage in counter readings of conventional archives and produce knowledge from unconventional sources. What better way to decolonize knowledge production than theorizing gender and sexuality “from the bottom up” and approaching history “from the inside out”? Largely, but not exclusively, the focus is the Anglophone Caribbean experience, but its basic rationale and principles certainly hold useful lessons for all marginalized communities “othered” by dominant Western perspectives.

The 29 chapters are organized into seven thematic sections, extending from “History” to “Researching Gender and Sexualities”, to “Reflections on Positionality – Lessons from the Field.” Together, these provide a useful one-stop reference of Caribbean feminist research practices and methodologies spanning approximately 50 years. Only nine of the chapters are original texts, the rest being reprints that document historical depths and temporal shifts in methodological approaches. The editors seem to have decided to focus on methodology, acknowledging that some of the content of the older reprints tends to reinforce essentialist notions of gender identity and sexuality.

Overall, the collection is a treasure trove, organizing into a coherent whole the scattered jigsaw pieces of Caribbean studies of gender and sexuality. The resource is an inspiration for anyone beyond the Caribbean islands interested in critical epistemic principles that disrupt dominant knowledge systems. The key threads running through most chapters include feminist methodologies, gendered relations of power, multi/interdisciplinarity, and anti-colonial/inclusive approaches. Research approaches based on the mainstream principles of “objectivity” and “neutrality” are mostly dismissed.

The section “History and Historiography” makes a compelling case for adopting non-Eurocentric approaches to researching feminist history. It opens with Lucille Mathurin Mair’s reflections on her unconventional data sources in researching women

and gender relations in the 1960s. She urges us never to shy away from revealing fragmented histories (*herstories*) simply because of the lack of a written or digitized record. Histories can be excavated with the creative and nuanced application of multidisciplinary tools embracing literature, linguistics, ethnography, archaeology, sociology, and anthropology. Mary Chamberlain's essay pitches the complex depths of oral sources through her research on women who migrated from Barbados to Britain. Her captivating insights are derived from listening to her respondents "in stereo" and analysing their "para-language" (or sub-text) channelled from subjective memory. Bridget Breton's chapter comprises of a comprehensive review of feminist approaches to gender history in Anglo-Caribbean countries, showing how their differing focus from the traditional reconstructs historical narratives.

No feminist organizing for social transformation can succeed without being informed by a process known as "action research." This methodology is imperative for heightening feminist consciousness and bridging the gap between theory and practice. The next section of the volume fleshes this out through various case studies that exemplify research praxis as employed by various local feminist organizations in Haiti, Guyana, Cuba, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic, and the Pan-Caribbean Association of Feminist Research and Action. These studies illuminate the link between macro-structures and the micro life experiences of women. The essays in this section also highlight key concepts in feminist research such as intersectionality, praxis, and reflexivity.

The next conceptual knot weaves through the different approaches deployed in researching gender and sexuality in the Caribbean. As per the editors, the pieces "provide key methodological insights for the production of both single and multi-method research on Caribbean gender relations" (Kempadoo and DeShong, 2020: 12) Their value lies in articulating intricate methodological processes of feminist knowledge production ranging from ethnography to life histories, to participatory rural appraisal, to survey research. Again, an emphasis is placed on multi- and interdisciplinary approaches, using multi-methods to understand gender and sexuality fully. Linda Peake makes a case for feminist quantitative research, arguing that not only does it yield measurable results demanded by most funding agencies, but that no method is inherently feminist.

Perhaps the most captivating section of the volume deals directly with sexualities research. The authors of the five chapters therein share the commitment of "locating 'embodied' research relationships as key sites of analysis for the production

of knowledge” (15). Angelique Nixon and Rosamond King provide an overview of “feminist theories at the core of feminist methodologies” in sexuality research and tease out the politics, contradictions, and colonial legacies in the Caribbean sexual landscape (269). Gloria Wekker’s fascinating chapter touches on methodological issues regarding woman-to-woman desire, ageism, and identity, narrating the erotic life story of the amazing 80-something-year-old Afro-Surinamese, Misi Juliette Cummings. Her complex, multi-layered and malleable bonds with women would reductively be identified as lesbianism in the West but are distinctively referred to as *mati* in Suriname. Wekker further addresses the ethical dilemmas involved in the researcher’s developing an intimate relationship with informant Cummings during the study. Kamala Kempadoo highlights the methodological clarity for studying the often taboo and under-researched topic of transactional sex. Her qualitative studies yield new insights and theoretical formulations in the area of sexual labour. On his part, Murray unpacks the specific “operation of identity politics in Barbados against a backdrop of the dominance of a global North nomenclature and conceptualization of sexual politics” (17). In the final chapter, Ghisyawan introduces us to the fascinating technique of subjective mapping as a research tool for studying same-sex-loving women in Trinidad and Tobago.

The section on “Researching the Visual and Cultural” focuses on decolonial feminist methodologies for producing and analysing technologies of vision such as films, photographs, and paintings. Authors address questions such as, how do we produce knowledge from photographic representations of women (Roshini Kempadoo)? How can a film be gender-analysed through visual ethnography (Deborah Thomas)? And what methodological relevance do concepts such as space and time hold to the production and reception of visual images (Patricia Mohammed)? The three chapters usefully offer epistemological transformation of knowledge production in an area largely still in its infancy in the Global South. Yet another section is devoted to “methods for making visible unnamed voices, subjectivities, and materialities through analysis of discourses, represented especially by talk, speech, and written scripts” (19). The methodologies foregrounded by the authors here are closely linked to the previous section on “Researching the Visual and Cultural”, as well as Chamberlain’s study on oral sources in Chapter Three. Michelle Rowley uses the term “voicing” to analyse different levels of articulated consciousness, alienation, action, and inaction of Tobagonian mothers (matrifolk). She aims to construct a bridge between theory and method through “the *talk* of the

narrative” which signals different worldviews (415). Latoya Lazarus directs readers to the discourses of conservative and evangelical Christians on the “controversial” topics of homosexuality and sexual and reproductive rights, combining the “Caribbean feminist standpoint” methodology with elements of social constructivism. Also, using the tools of discourse analysis (419), Halimah DeShong adopts a decolonial feminist stance to “read” talk and text on gender-based violence among Caribbean heterosexual unions in the final chapter of the section.

The volume concludes with a reflexive section where five authors reflect on the methodological positionality of the “native anthropologist” in ethnographic research. They consider statuses such as race, ethnicity, class, and returnee to reflect upon their insider/outsider positions and their influence on knowledge production. They further examine how the theoretical frameworks they adopt, their choice of research topics, and the selection of data-collecting methods influence power relations (between the researcher and the researched) and their findings.

After turning the final page of this monumental 540-page anthology, I was struck by the conspicuous gap between Caribbean and African feminist scholarship. It is ironic that colonialism and coloniality have somehow succeeded in alienating diasporic African scholars from the scholarship emanating from their ancestral homeland. Most references outside the Caribbean made in the book originated from the Global North. There is hardly any review or acknowledgment of the existing anti-colonial/decolonial literature on gender and sexuality from Africa. This largely inward-looking Caribbean approach to the issues denies a transnational sensitivity that would emphasize Pan-African connections and solidarity in the struggle for transformational decolonization. To cite but a few examples: Kempadoo’s chapter on “Researching Caribbean Sexual Labour” could have usefully drawn parallels from Chi Mgbako’s *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa* (2016); Honor Ford Smith’s analysis of rape could have dovetailed with earlier in-depth analyses by African scholars such as Pumla Dineo Gqola’s *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015); and for understanding the queer geographies of Trinidad and Tobago, Ghisyawan could have referenced African activist-scholars like Zethu Matebeni who have written extensively about the intriguing method of mapping in sexuality research. For an otherwise excellent anthology, the African “blind-spot” in the book is regrettable as it emphasizes the spatial and political separation of the island nations from their ancestral continent.

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## Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture, by Simidele Dosekun. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020.

Rosemary Oyinlola Popoola

*Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* seeks to recentre and challenge dominant narratives about postfeminism from the standpoint of often silenced and marginalized women of the Global South, specifically socio-economically privileged Nigerian women. Over many years, postfeminism has been framed as the exclusive preserve of White women and girls—with only a few exceptional Black women like singer Beyoncé Knowles and model Tyra Banks seen as qualified to embody postfeminism in Western narratives. Dosekun challenges the hegemonic Western narrative about feminism by insisting that postfeminism is “a culture that circulates both performatively and transnationally” (Dosekun, 2020: 5). Drawing from the lived experiences of 18 middle-class women in Lagos, the author argues that postfeminist subjects are not just Westernized women, but also women of other parts of the world. In many ways, the book is an indictment of postfeminist ideals. It highlights the lives of a specific group of women in Lagos who have embraced a spectacular style of femininity as a new form of female empowerment and agency. The text interrogates the promises and illusions of happiness that postfeminism offers women, “the forms of unhappiness that they conceal”, the contradictions of the women who exemplify it, and how these new styles of hyperfemininity have continued to subjugate women to patriarchy and structures of oppression in ways that they are either conscious or unconscious of (3). Ultimately, as the author powerfully asserts, the book is about how the idea of postfeminism “is lived and inhabited in the flesh” (3).

Drawing from diverse conceptual, epistemological, and methodological viewpoints, Dosekun insists that globalization, media, local history, location, and economic status play significant roles in how postfeminism is lived or experienced in Lagos. The book claims a space for Black women in postfeminist discourse. It is a paradigm shift, a total departure from how we conceive the who, where, and how of postfeminism. The five-chapter book covers issues ranging from historical

background to spectacularized dress style in Lagos; how class division and economic inequality allow a certain class of women to afford the consumerist and individualistic lifestyle that postfeminism offers; sources from which they finance their fashion; polemics about the authenticity and appropriateness of their fashion, and the risk that beauty technologies pose to women and the society where spectacularized femininity is associated with being intellectually deficient.

Chapter One gives African women agency in self-fashioning and fashionability by positioning them as active participants and creators of transnational fashion trends. Dosekun argues that fashion is not imported into Africa but is a product of African women's creativity and ingenuity, spanning centuries of independent internal evolution and external contact. Drawing from a multiplicity of historical and ethnographic sources, the author positions fashion and fashionability as indigenous to Lagos. She asks readers to think beyond colonial narratives that suggest that Lagos is the hub of fashion and fashionability because of its precolonial/colonial contact with the Western world or because it was the former capital of Nigeria. Chapter Two underscores the place of power and culture in shaping the subjectivity of women in postfeminism. It engages with the numerous ways in which attitude, mannerism, bodily stylistics, demeanour, dress practice, beauty repertoires, and use of beauty technologies by middle-class women in Lagos simultaneously contradict and conform to postfeminist ideas. It highlights the constraint, discomfort, and even physical pains embedded in beauty practices and technologies. Relying on interviews with women across various professions—from banking to media—the author highlights the tedious and laborious processes associated with embodying postfeminism, as well as the financial cost.

Chapter Three shifts attention to the economics of hyperfemininity, visibility, and stylization; the numerous physical and social-psychic risks that women encounter in pursuit of feminine ideals; the aesthetic labour that spectacular femininity demands, and the feminine rationality that can turn a woman into an “aesthetic entrepreneur” (123). Equally significant are the rationality, strategy, and experiences, and the skilled and quasi-scientific approach that women use to solve beauty problems, as well as the “solutions” they employ, along with the risk of attachment to beauty technologies (94).

In Chapter Four, Dosekun tackles the politics, psychology, nationalism, racism, and antiracism around Black hair and hair practices, and Black beauty and

repertoires. The author moves from focusing on the generalities of postfeminist beauty standards to engaging with the politics of Black hair and beauty, as well as with the intersection of race, history, politics, scientific racism, and location in shaping understandings and politics of hair. Dosekun challenges the dominant thinking about Black hair, beauty, and practices that suggest Black women's use of weaves and processed hair, among others, are expressions of "a racial inferiority complex" and an orientation towards "white aesthetics" (88). She emphasizes the fluidity of the concept of Blackness and the multiple ways and forms of Black beauty, pointing to how Black hair practices are constantly evolving, and changing. Dosekun argues "that black beauty is a complex construct" that is not always "centered on whiteness" (89). The author asserts that the women she focuses on bought hair originating outside White bodies, particularly from places like Brazil and India, affirming that Black women did not desire nor aspire to Whiteness (67-8; 92). Dosekun argues that we must accept those who use weaves and other beauty repertoires of Whiteness as agentic without forgetting the painful history and conditions that render them desirable for many Black women.

The final chapter takes on the question of dominant gendered ontologies and epistemologies of the body over mind and examines how middle-class women in Lagos navigate this tension by aligning themselves with "masculinized norms of character and substance" to negate the "stereotype of exaggerated femininity as a fruitless and intellectually vacant subject position" (120). The chapter focuses on how Dosekun's participants navigate between "what others might make of them and how they saw and felt about themselves" and how they seek to find a middle point (116). Through the lived experiences of her participants, Dosekun reveals that whatever her "intelligence, professionalism, and sense of empowerment," the spectacular professional woman is not beyond sexist interpretation by members of society (127).

Dosekun's work highlights how postfeminism, through the promissory note of a new feminine beauty and desirability, pushes women towards detrimental technologies and practices and acts. More so, it unearths the cruelties of neoliberalism and how consumerism pushes women to pursue ideals and standards that are "impossible to inhabit" (143). Finally, she asks her audience to be alert to a new, stylish, and fun feminism that is touted by celebrities and media because "feminism cannot be happy, cannot be popular, [and] cannot be fashionable" (145).

The book will appeal to scholars across diverse fields. It transcends disciplinary boundaries and is a valuable text for social activists, scholars, and students of history, gender, women's studies, women's history, feminism, media, cultural studies, globalization, and development. In addition, the textuality of this book gives agency to the voices, echoes, and imagery that readers may have heard or seen about women around them or those whom they personally know.

## Contributors

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Arit Oku is a gender and development specialist and technical writer with over 15 years of experience in Sub-Saharan Africa supporting equality, inclusivity, development communications, sustainability, and sexual and reproductive health programmes. She has two M.A. degrees in Women and Development, and in Literature, and is working on her Ph.D. in Gender and Development. Arit lives in Lagos, Nigeria, and her work contributes to the achievement of equitable and sustainable systems across all sectors of society.

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## **Luam Kidane**

An African of Eritrean origin, Luam Kidane's curatorial work, research, and writing examines movement building at the intersections of indigenous governance models, cultural production, and articulations of self-determination. Luam has worked as a researcher and strategist on food sovereignty, political economy, gender, sexuality, and cultural production.

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## Minna Salami

Minna Salami's writing and research focus on the inner and external worlds of women in the 21st century. She is the author of the internationally acclaimed book, *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*, a collection of essays exploring universal ideas with an Africa-centred, decolonial, and feminist perspective, which has been translated into several languages. She is co-director of the feminist movement, Activate, and a Senior Research Associate at Perspectiva. She sits on the advisory board of the African Feminist Initiative at Pennsylvania State University and the editorial board of the *Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Sahel*, as well as the *Emerge* platform. Her blog, *MsAfropolitan*, has won several awards.

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A publication of the  
Institute of African Studies  
University of Ghana

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