

African Futurism: Speculative Fictions and “Rewriting the Great Book”

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a number of African-authored narratives (novels and film) in the light of recent thinking about futurism and the role of speculative fiction as a means of envisioning the future. Uppinder Mehan, coeditor of the first ever anthology of “postcolonial science fiction and fantasy,” *So Long Been Dreaming*, notes that postcolonial writing has rarely “pondered that strange land of the future” and warns, “If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again” (Mehan 270). Kodwo Eshun, in a seminal essay, expands on this to argue that, while the “practice of countermemory as . . . an ethical commitment to history, the dead and the forgotten” has traditionally relegated futurism to the sidelines of black creativity, this has been progressively challenged by “contemporary African artists . . . [for whom] understanding and intervening in the production and distribution of this dimension constitutes a chronopolitical act” (292). The paper proposes that this chronopolitical act (what in literature we now call speculative fiction) has its roots in African modes of storytelling that draw on myth, orality, and indigenous belief systems that lend themselves to the invention of personal mythologies, the rewriting of history in the light of future realities, and the use of extra-realist or magical phenomena as part of the everyday. Since these elements characterize many novels not thought of as speculative, this suggests that futurism has been a strain in African writing from its inception. The turn from mythic revisioning to speculative fiction as a distinct and recognizable genre in the 21st century has notably been embraced by women writers such as Nnedi Okorafor and Lauren Beukes, in whose work gender/femininity is a determinant in the projection of imagined futures. The paper examines how speculative narrative strategies in a range of texts are brought to bear on specific historical situations on the African continent (those characterized, for example, by genocide, civil war, cross-continental migration, urban dereliction, xenophobia, violence, and the occult) and the potential futures

to which they point. The paper argues, therefore, that such narratives, rather than being relegated to the category of fantasy, deserve attention as key indicators of futuristic thinking.

HISTORY OF A GENRE

The social realist strain of much Anglophone African literature that has, since the inaugural moment of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), dominated the landscape and shaped critical response has always been shadowed by non-realist narrative forms. These have, however, until very recently, tended to be less valued in canonical terms than more conventionally realist novels. The paradigms of postcolonial theory—writing back, hybridity, mimicry, center and periphery, etc.—have tended to privilege explicitly national narratives and concepts of identity-construction. It is notable, for example, that though the novel that gave Chinua Achebe the title “father of African literature” was preceded by Amos Tutuola’s *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1956), it took many years for the latter to be accorded the status it has since attained as a seminal work of African mythopoeic fantasy and precursor of, for example, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (see Quayson). Similarly, another predecessor of *Things Fall Apart*, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954), anticipated a later literary preoccupation with urbanization as opposed to precolonial village life; while his 1978 novel, *Survive the Peace*, which speculatively recreates Lagos as a dystopia in the aftermath of the civil war, is not included in a recent anthology of essays reassessing the literary legacy of Biafra.¹ This may be because novels of the foundational period were concerned with the coming-into-being of a postcolonial national identity seen to be best served by realism as having a relationship with *truth* and therefore to be closer to *history*, to the way things “really” happened, than non-realist modes. Although they are far from being the first to depart from this template, recent speculative novels and films invite us to consider what might happen if submerged, sublimated, or suppressed stories, voices, or philosophies became so dominant as to create a radically different world. They are, however, hardly “new” in the sense of being first-comers in the embracing of speculative fiction by African writers.

In South Africa, for example, science fiction (henceforth *s/f*), and its fellow-traveller, speculative fiction (*spec/fic*), have a long history and generate a lively ongoing dialogue in blogs and online journals. The Science Fiction Society of SA (SfSA) has been in existence since 1969, running an annual short story competition that feeds into a quarterly magazine called *Probe* and producing to date three anthologies, the writers Nick Wood and David Barnett maintain regular blogs on the subject, and the related genre of horror finds an outlet through the online site *Something Wicked*. Rounding up new titles for 2014, South African *s/f* writer and blogger Nick Wood noted that local publishers Jacana, Kwela, and Umuzi had all opened up to speculative fiction (Wood, “Beyond ‘Broken Monsters’”). In terms of the continent more generally, in 2013 the US-based genre journal *Paradoxa* devoted its 25th issue to African science fiction. The editor of that volume, Mark Bould,

traces s/f in Africa back to early 20th-century novels by white SA writers and forward through Kojo Laing, Ben Okri, Sony Labou Tansi, Ngũgĩ, and Kourouma to Waberi, Beukes, and Okorafor, taking in Coetzee and Marechera along the way. To this list, Nick Wood adds Zakes Mda, and Elzette Steenkamp adds Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing (Wood, "Beyond 'Broken Monsters'").

Blogs and essays such as these lead us to the question, have we been reading African s/f all along without knowing it? Could the strain of African writing that Gerald Gaylard calls magical realism, framed a little differently, in fact *be* speculative fiction? And in that case, do we perhaps need an overhaul of definitions? That the linking of s/f with Africa has conventionally been under interrogation, if not erasure, is attested to by Mark Bould, editor of *Paradoxa*, when he asks, "Can we speak of 'African sf?'" (11). Similarly, writer Nick Wood tells of how, when trying to place his novel *The Stone Chameleons* in South Africa, a publisher remarked that "black people don't read science fiction" ("South African SF"). In apparent corroboration, Caribbean-Canadian s/f writer Nalo Hopkinson reports that, "To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization" (7). In a blog post titled "African Science Fiction Is Still Alien," Nnedi Okorafor reports Nigerian filmmaker Tchidi Chikere as saying, "We're not ready for pure science fiction ... only stories that explore ... everyday realities are considered relevant to us for now"; however, she counteracts this by quoting Zimbabwean writer Ivor Hartmann to the effect that, "Most speculative fiction, be it fantasy, sci fi or horror, is firmly rooted in cultural mythologies...," through which, he says, "African writers are already changing the face of literature and beyond..."² Wanuri Kahiu, director of the short s/f film *Pumzi*, agrees. In her own blog she recounts being asked if s/f is new to Africa and responds: "If you listen to the stories that have been told for generations, elements of fantasy, s/f have always existed within them... I am just a new generation of storyteller, using cinema as my tool" (Kolm).

If, as Kahiu suggests, myth, orality, and indigenous belief systems are intrinsic to African modes of speculative storytelling, then narratives from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* to *2000 Seasons* to *Matigari* to *The Famished Road* fall within the purview of speculative fiction. Moreover, even within the realist strain of African writing, speculative elements can be detected, as in Veronique Tadjó's *Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda* (see below). But to revert to the question of definition, what is the distinction between what Tchidi Chikere calls "pure sci fi" and speculative fiction? Taking on this question in the context of South Africa, Nick Wood points out that scarce resources have meant that areas neglected under apartheid education policies remain a challenge today, so that, "With limited access to science and technology, the writings of *hard* science fiction will remain opaque and lack attraction to the majority of potential readers in South Africa" ("South African SF"). Wood, however, attests to the potential of a different mode of apprehending "science" and the natural world when he describes how his experience as a clinical psychologist dealing with a Zulu patient who was cured by becoming a healer/*isangoma* led to his recognition of the limitations of Western scientific/rationalist preconceptions about reality. When a story in which he himself used elements of Zulu beliefs was dismissed by publishers as a "ghost story," he countered that, "This story is about alternative voices and beliefs within a setting traditionally dominated by the louder voices of Western science" and therefore called for a

critical approach that recognized and respected “different ‘plans’ or conceptual ‘blueprints,’ differing foundations (sources of material) and differing perceptions and experiences” (“Our Ancestors Are Not Ghosts”). Wood offers “speculative fiction” and “sci fi strange” as alternative labels to facilitate this recognition. He also invites another look at what we mean by “magical realism”: Zakes Mda, for example, whose work has been thus categorized, credits his “magical inspiration” to “amaXhosa oral traditions of storytelling” (qtd. in Wood, “South African SF”). Orality and traditional cosmologies, then, are a preexisting source of speculation about the nature of reality; nor are they limited to past and present or even earthbound realities, as Dogon astrological wisdom bears witness. But this need for more flexible labels is only a symptom of the need for a revisioning of theory, in particular postcolonial theory, in the light of speculative and futurist fictional writing. Michelle Reid addresses this need in her essay “Postcolonial Science Fiction”:

Traditionally science fiction is a genre characterised by ideals of expansion and colonisation, but it also has the great potential to imagine “otherness” and other ways of being; postcolonial approaches to science fiction seem long overdue. Yet I believe we’re only just beginning to work out what these are. My current thinking is that we have to do more than apply existing postcolonial theories to sf writing—we need to examine what makes science fiction so strongly identified as a literature of empire and expansion, and how this might be resisted and subverted from within the genre itself.

In what follows, therefore, I have chosen, as far as possible, rather than applying a set of ready-made criteria, to tease out the ways texts embody “resistance and subversion” through the generic choices of their authors and in so doing expand the possibilities for figuring otherness beyond the strictly postcolonial. In search of a label to bear the weight of his own practice, filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo offers a thought that may be helpful here:

If technology has been a medium of our utopias won’t it be the role of the filmmaker to *invent with fiction the reality that we will live in tomorrow?* Applied Fiction will be *that new science we need to master* so that machines don’t take over our existence; Applied Fiction as a space for tomorrow’s activism and citizenship. (emphasis added)

By this Bekolo implies the imbrication of theory in text, the work done by the text itself in interpreting the world, in order (as he also says) to change it.

TEXTUAL MULTI-VALENCY

Literary labels, like other kinds of boundaries, are porous and slippery, and an apparently stable sign or category may well point simultaneously in various directions. Gerald Gaylard, for example, shows how his preferred category, magical realism, is affiliated with satire, characterized by techniques of defamiliarization such as “distortion, exaggeration or caricature” (266), as well as folklore elements like tricksterism, paradox, and incongruity (256). One of the greatest incongruities he identifies can be found in Africa’s relationship to technology, which he sees as equally distrusted and desired. While Africa, he says, has a long history

of technology, both pre- and postcolonial, the rejection of Western modernity attendant on decolonization resulted in “a powerful urge to atavism, naturism . . . buffing the glow from a ‘golden age’ of ontological confidence and traditional self-certainty and denouncing the West as a poisonous imperialist force” (Gaylard 154).

Something of the resulting ambivalence can be detected in the film *Pumzi*, described by its director as depicting “a futuristic Africa where borders cease to exist and the people who own the resources control the communities” (Kolm). *Ownership* and *control* as foundational principles should alert us to the already-constituted contradictions of this future world. *Pumzi* offers two contrasting mise-en-scenes: one is the interior, the Virtual Natural History Museum where the heroine, Asha, works, where her dreams are tracked and her every move dictated by an unseen voice, where bodily fluids are purified to provide drinking water and brutal punishment is meted out for disobedience; the other, the exterior, is the blighted landscape of an outside world destroyed by war and environmental disaster, where Asha retreats with the magical sprouting seed that has materialized on her desk. Technology, in this scenario, is the means both of survival and surveillance, an authoritarian tool of psychological domination and a path to a viable and virtual future. In the face of this oscillation, as Gaylard puts it, “between modernity and slavery, between obeh and mundanity, between alienation and over-compensation” (156), what, he asks, will “African technological subjects look like?” (157). In Asha’s case, the answer is that she looks like a supermodel—in other words, an icon of Afropolitan modernity; trekking through the desert she even walks like one. In her dream of a tree flourishing in the outside world that is now supposedly devoid of water, she wears dramatic make-up and designer jewelry. In the virtual space of the interior, her gamine figure in white shorts and a skin-revealing top is complemented by her huge kohl-rimmed eyes and shaven head. As Gaylard says, “such subjects often look good” (157), and this emphasis on appearance is a surreal aspect of the relationship to technology. In the case of Kahiu’s film, however, it could equally be read as a sign of resistance to a homogenizing image of African traditional costume and thence to the stereotyped Western media portrayal of African bodies as abject, starving, impoverished, dressed either in rags or wrappers. In its extreme futurism, Asha’s “interior” look speaks of another mode of Africanness; when she ventures outside and pulls a cloth over her head to guard against the sun, or wraps her bare feet in rags, her costume registers the traditional markers of African femininity (the head-covering) and poverty (the bare wrapped feet). These signifiers, combined with the futuristic garb of the interior, tell their own hybrid story. The film’s fabula, though it appears to be one of the rejection of technology in favor of planting the magical seed in the desert, has Asha nurturing it with the last drops of her precious “interior” purified water as well as drops of sweat from her “exterior” body. In this way, the African subject of the future harnesses the potential of nature *and* technology to realize her dream of a new reality.

Though in terms of categories, *Pumzi* is possibly “hard” or “pure” science fiction, the hybridity and ambivalence I have pointed to link it to other examples of magical thinking (a process that exceeds empiricism by its recourse to a spiritual dimension) that are more properly seen as speculative. Veronique Tadjó’s *The Shadow of Imana*, a travelogue of her two trips to Rwanda after the genocide, combines nonfictional techniques of observation and reportage with fictional elements

like interiority, focalization, and voice, making it a text that is difficult to categorize in any absolute way. While *Pumzi* visualizes a post-holocaust planet where humans are in thrall to technology, Tadjó visits sites of genocide that challenge her capacity for description and analysis. In both cases, traditional references provide a narratorial link between an unspeakable actuality and an imaginary alternative. For Tadjó, the problem of how to write what she sees and hears in Rwanda amounts to a crisis of representation itself. Asked to sign the visitors' book at Ntarama Church, site of a memorial to a massacre, all she can write is her name and address (*Imana* 13–14); confronted by stories of the dead, she asks: "If we are absolutely nothing, why take the trouble to write?" (*Imana* 17). Among the answers to this question that she offers in *Shadow of Imana*, the section titled "The Wrath of the Dead" takes the form of a revised orality, whose mythic register invokes the animist concept of the spirit world as an invisible but ever-present adjunct to the world of the living. In this case, however, the dead make themselves a nuisance by importuning the living and reminding them of what they want to forget:

The dead were paying regular visits to the living, and when they were with them, they would ask why they had been killed. The town streets were filled with spirits moving around, whirling in the stifling air. They jostled the living, clambered on their backs, walked alongside them, danced around them, followed them through the crowded alleyways.... They floated among the living who went on leading their daily lives, and whose memory was starting to fade. Wounds remained embedded in their flesh, but those wounds were slowly closing over their nightmares. (*Imana* 41)

A diviner is called who listens carefully to their complaints. Adopting a posture of humility he addresses the dead, telling them: "I am the beggar in search of truth. I am the man lost in the abyss of our violence. I am he who asks you to agree to give the living another chance" (44). By performing certain rituals he successfully persuades the dead to cross over to "the other side of existence" (44). Countering the official memorialization of massacre sites and mass graves, he offers an alternative mode of remembering embodied in animist belief:

"The dead will be reborn in every fragment of life, however small, in every action, however simple it may be. They will be reborn in the dust, in the dancing water, in the children who laugh and play as they clap their hands, in every seed hidden beneath the black earth." (*Imana* 46)

This short section dramatizing the voices of the dead is followed by stories of the living that, though actual witness accounts, are structured as short stories and rendered as fiction. In this way, Tadjó makes the voices of both dead and living audible while relegating her own role as observer and creator to the background.

This refusal of the dead to remain within bounds and at a distance from the living is reminiscent of Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half*, in which a grotesque dictator's desire for absolute power is continually frustrated and undermined by the refusal of those he kills to die. This refusal is embodied in the figure of the dissenter, Martial, who, though hacked and chopped and fed to his own children, endlessly returns, zombie-like, to disrupt the dictator's reality. This novel is an exemplar of the speculative strain in African fiction that works by simultaneously

defamiliarizing and invoking an actual place—here, the Congo of the Mobutu era; in Ngũgĩ's *Devil on the Cross* and *Wizard of the Crow*, Moi's Kenya; in Nganang's *Dog Days* and Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film *Les Saignantes*, Paul Biya's Cameroon; in Dambudzo Marechera's *Black Sunlight* and Taona Chiveneko's *The Hangman's Replacement*, Mugabe's Zimbabwe; and so on. Tadjó too works this speculative strain in her revisioning of the myth of Queen Pokou, in which Kumasi, as place of origin, and Cote d'Ivoire, as point of arrival in the Queen's quest for a site for her people to occupy, are universalized and allegorized. The mythical register Tansi and Tadjó have in common finds expression, for example, in the beauty and capacity for magical transformation of their female personae—Chaidana in *Life and a Half*, Pokou in *Queen Pokou*. Chaidana looks at herself and sees, "a perfectly heavenly body, with the look and symmetrical shape of a carnivore, and crazy curves that seemed to extend into space, cooking raw, carnal electricity" (Tansi 28). This body, which has assimilated its own father's flesh in a cannibalistic feast forced on Chaidana by the dictator, is the means by which she entices, entraps, and assassinates powerful men to enact revenge. In one of her transformations, Pokou becomes a similarly alien and vengeful creature, a *mami-wata* who drives her lovers mad. Through such mythical devices Tadjó, Tansi, and others satirize and destabilize patriarchal power, suggesting through their destructive feminine archetypes the obverse of victimhood and abjection.

Precisely the same process is at work in Jean-Pierre Bekolo's 2005 film *Les Saignantes*, which was characterized on its appearance as "one of the first science fiction films to come out of Africa" ("Jean-Pierre Bekolo"). The "bloodettes" of the title (young women, equally vampish and vampiric) recall Chaidana in their embodiment of desirable and deadly femininity, the weapon with which they seduce and murder corrupt and powerful men. Beyond this explicit critique of patriarchy, however, the film throws out a series of challenging questions that address the nature of genre in cinema. Periodically, old-fashioned inter-titles appear that ask:

How can you make an anticipation film in a country that has no future? How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party? How can you make an action film in a country where acting is subversive? How can you film a love story in a society where love is impossible? How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden? How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after? (*Les Saignantes*)

Drawing attention to the function of genre in the way narratives are understood by audiences, and therefore to its role in generating meaning, Bekolo also highlights its reliance on a certain level of culturally stable and socially shared assumptions and expectations. The generic instability of the film—a "stylized sci-fi-action-horror hybrid"—is a response to and a comment on the systemic political and economic dysfunctionality of a particular country at a particular time. Yet, for Bekolo, critiquing the present is not enough: "Chaque fois qu'on parle de l'Afrique, on en parle au passé et au présent. Jamais de l'avenir. Pourtant, cet avenir sera là, surtout pour les jeunes. Et ce qu'on en fera sera ce qu'on aura pensé aujourd'hui" "Each time one speaks of Africa, it's in the context of the past or the present. Never the future. But that future will arrive, above all for the young. And what we'll do

with it then will be what we'll have thought of today' (qtd. in Mollo Olinga). The female voiceover that accompanies the action and contributes powerfully to its effect of defamiliarization tells us: "We were pretty, we were ripe, we were ferocious. We were *saignantes*. We were the offering promised at the feast." Thus, from the outset, sex and femininity are indelibly linked to consumption and death; the cannibal theme is paradoxically refracted in the scene where Chouchou and Majolie, the bloodettes, take the body of the Secretary General of the Civil Cabinet, who has died during sex with Majolie, to a butcher's shop to be disposed of, and the butcher recognizes him by tasting a morsel of his flesh. However, the words that follow the earlier declaration also link femininity to the future and to the fate of the country itself: "We were living in 2025. There was no place for despair. We had to move on, that's all. The country could not continue like that without a future. It had to change." This change is also linked, visually and semiotically, to a secret Beti female ritual called Mevougou, which, the opening voiceover tells us,

... is neither a living thing nor an object ... not a place, much less a moment ... neither a desire nor a state of mind ... something we can see and experience but cannot quite define. You don't decide to see Mevougou, Mevougou appears to you ... invites itself. Like that day in 2025 in this country when Mevougou cast its spell on us. We had to take it and use it.

If traditionally Mevougou was an alternative source of power evoked at times of acute national crisis, in the world of the film it is more ambiguous, an instrument with the potential for both destruction and transformation. As in *Pumzi*, where Asha is subject to a trio of powerful women known as the Council, who appear to her as a holograph and issue their mandates from a distance, in *Les Saignantes* Mevougou is represented by a group of older women, including Chouchou's mother, who appear to her on her cellphone and are constantly calling her to account. Where in *Pumzi* this matriarchate is authoritarian and repressive, in *Les Saignantes* it combines mystery, enigma, and threat with positive feminine power. Though it remains ambivalent, as in the voiceover's question "How does one recognize Mevougou from others in this country where the dead refuse to separate from the living?," it is clear that Bekolo's Cameroon (like Tadjó's Rwanda and Tansi's unnamed country in *Life and a Half*) requires the intervention of a magical or spiritual power in order to reestablish the boundary between living and dead. In this way, while traditional practices and beliefs are recuperated from their association with the past to become active agents of a speculative future, their deployment is not without risk and the outcome has yet to be ascertained.

African futuristic films may be few and far between, but even so, recurrent themes and motifs sketch the gestalt of an emerging genre. A much earlier film, *Yeelen* (1987), stages the conflict between a corrupt patriarchy and a youthful hero in classical epic terms. The 13th-century setting makes it seem inevitable that this conflict will be masculine, and indeed the main role given to women in the film is as bearer of the sons of the future, while the hero, Nianankoro, battles it out with his father, Soma. Yet *Yeelen's* filiation with the later films can be traced in its dramatization of Bambara myth, its use of the Komo blacksmith secret society and such visual symbols as the wastes of desert sand through which Nianankoro, like Asha, tracks, and the magical egg that, like Asha's magical seed, contains the

promise of the future.³ At a semiotic level, the masculine and feminine energies that drive the narratives are signified by the fiery sunrise that opens *Yeelen* and the image of the moon at the start and end of *Les Saignantes*, as well as the fact that the former is predominantly shot in daylight and the latter at night. While it is unlikely that Bekolo was consciously reversing Cisse's image the parallelism is striking, emphasizing the underlying binary opposition that structures both films—immutable in one, radically destabilized in the other. What makes *Yeelen*, with its spectacular magical effects, seem archaic is less its setting in the past than its relegation of femininity to the margins. The future envisaged by Africa's speculative artists will be mediated, it would appear, through the agency of women and young women at that. As Matthew Omelsky puts it, in Bekolo's work "... women are the radical cyborgian subjects who undermine organic notions of femininity, the female body and masculinist power structures" (9).

Les Saignantes alerts us to another recurring trope of speculative narratives: cannibalism, a destabilizing metaphor that signifies opposing faces of power—greed and sacrifice. Once again, it has a long history. In the 13th-century Mande epic *Sundiata*, the hero's cutting off pieces of his leg to feed his griot is a powerful metaphor for good leadership—the leader who feeds, rather than consumes, his people. The obverse, leader(s)-as-consumer(s), drives the narrative of the as yet critically unnoticed 2014 Zimbabwean novel, *The Hangman's Replacement*, by Taona D. Chiveneko. This serpentine satire, populated by grotesques, dramatizes the search for a hangman whose skills will enable the bringing back of the lapsed death penalty. The hangman is sought by those in power to provide a decoy for a terrifying carnivorous flame lily with a taste for human corpses, which it is threatening to expose no matter where they have been hidden or how they have been killed. Dreading such exposure, the big shots and self-serving apparatchiks who run the country require a supply of legitimate corpses to deflect the flesh-eating flower. In this novel, the flame lily, or gloriosa, the national flower of Zimbabwe, becomes a cannibalistic metaphor for the country eating itself. In Neil Blomkamp's South African s/f film *District Nine*, the Nigerian warlord believes he can acquire the unlikely hero, Wikus's, power by consuming his arm, which has been infected/contaminated/deformed through contact with the alien creatures inhabiting the fenced-off zone of the title. Cannibalism, both as taboo and figure of abjection, traditionally marks the limit of human social order, hence its resonance for speculative fictions that explore that boundary. It is also a means by which the other becomes the self, muddying the line between subject and object, ruler and ruled, denying the very separatism by which power is maintained. As a metaphor it extends to Asha's use of her own bodily fluids to feed the magic seed, to Rwanda's murderous self-immolation, Chaidana's carnivorous body, the bloodettes as offering at the feast. As can be seen from these examples, from early epic to 21st-century cinema, the motif of cannibalism recurs as a signifier with magical properties, incorporating both desire for power and its self-consuming excess. In recent fictions, it appears as a symptom of the failure of a social order constructed by and within global capitalism and its racial hierarchies. In this way, I suggest, the fantastical, the grotesque, and the other-worldly are the means through which speculative fiction, rather than distancing itself, in fact addresses the social real. In its attention to the abject body, African speculative fiction may also be seen to complicate the Western sci-fi fantasy of the technologically enhanced body,

the cyborg figure that transcends human frailty; or, as Malisa Kurtz puts it, to “confront cyberpunk’s fantasies of disembodiment” (66).⁴

Though with these examples it may seem we are some way from conventional s/f, they in fact return us to the question of definitions. In his essay “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” Kodwo Eshun reiterates Toni Morrison’s contention that “the African slaves that experienced capture, theft, abduction and mutilation were the first moderns” (297), thus embedding traumatic memory at the heart of Afrodiasporic experience. Arguing that the “practice of countermemory as ... an ethical commitment to history, the dead and the forgotten” has traditionally relegated futurism to the sidelines of black creativity, Eshun shows how this has been progressively challenged by “contemporary African artists ... [for whom] understanding and intervening in the production and distribution of this dimension constitutes a chronopolitical act” (292). One of the tools of such artists has been the invention of personal mythologies and the rewriting of history in the light of future realities. (Through this lens we can see Yambo Ouologuem and Ayi Kwei Armah as earlier exemplars.) Above all, science fiction offers a vehicle for “allegories for the systemic experience of post-slavery black subjects in the twentieth century” (Eshun 299). For example, the Middle Passage is refigured as extraterrestrial abduction, “not to question the reality of slavery but to defamiliarise it through a temporal switchback that reroutes its implications through postwar social fiction, cultural fantasy and modern science fiction, all of which begin to seem like elaborate ways of concealing and admitting trauma” (Eshun 300). This is made possible, claims Eshun, because “Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science fiction are one and the same” (298).

Tadjo performs such an intervention in the representation of trauma resulting from the genocide in Rwanda, drawing on an indigenous mode of spiritual apprehension to create a fantasy of an alternative future. The grotesqueries of dictators in novels by Tansi, Chiveneko, Ngũgĩ, and Nganang are magnified to cartoon-like effect, projecting a world in which obscene power has become embodied and immortal. These novels, then, serve for my purposes as ur-texts of speculative rewriting, invoking orality and myth to defamiliarize and challenge the assimilation of violence into the everyday. Rewriting the script of vengeance based on false modes of memorialization, Tadjo also points the way to a transformation of consciousness and subjecthood. If the dead, in *Imana* and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, or dogs, in Nganang’s *Dog Days*, or aliens, in Blomkamp’s *District Nine*, are subjects who have rights and express their desires, the concept of the human is radically altered. In exploring this alteration, speculative fiction novels and films challenge us to reassess the boundaries of our own subjectivity.

SHAPING THE GENRE

Since a key aspect of this radical alteration of humanness has always been the unsettling/queering of gender and the generation of alternative forms of femininity, it is no surprise that the turn from mythic revisioning to speculative fiction as a distinct and recognizable genre in the 21st century has notably been taken up by women writers of African descent. The phrase “rewriting the Great Book” in my title is taken from Nnedi Okorafor’s novel *Who Fears Death* (hereafter *WFD*)

to denote the specifically anti-patriarchal strain of much spec/fic, the subjection of all forms of traditional authority—parental, gendered, gerontocratic, religious, social, governmental—to interrogation and deconstruction. In what follows I aim, through close reading, to explore further some of the narrative elements by which this emergent spec/fic appears to define itself.

The germ of Okorafor's novel came, she tells us in her acknowledgements, from a news report on the ethnic conflict in Darfur, which saw rape used as a weapon of genocide by the Janjaweed (nomadic Arabs) against settled African farmers (Wax). The specifically feminine forms of suffering that ensued (in other words, traumas inflicted on and experienced through the female body) drive the narrative of Nkorafor's novel. The location, meanwhile, is displaced from Darfur to a non-specific futuristic African terrain where the opposing Nuru and Okeke bear a strong resemblance to Hausa and Igbo during the Nigerian Civil War. The traumatic memory of rape, passed on to Onyesonwu, the novel's heroine, by her mother impels her quest to challenge and defeat her father, a powerful magician who seeks the end of the Okeke as a people. Children born of "weaponised rape" in this novel are known as Ewu (incidentally, the Igbo word for "goat") and are outcasts from or misfits in society. As a quest heroine, Onyesonwu is doubly cursed: as a woman and as an Ewu; to compensate, she is possessed of magical powers to rival her father's. The Great Book is the sacred text that enshrines the myth of origin by which the status of the Okeke is decreed to be that of slaves to the Nuru masters. From the outset, Onyesonwu doubts the veracity of the Great Book and questions its legitimacy. A storyteller who recounts its myth of origin also tells of a prophecy that "a Nuru man will come and force the Great Book's rewriting" (*WFD* 102). In the event, it becomes clear that the Nuru man is in fact an Ewu woman with magical powers, one who can reverse the effects of clitoridectomy, transform herself into an eagle, and restore the dead to life. The story is told retrospectively by Onyesonwu, who, having destroyed her father, has been hunted and captured by Nuru and is to be stoned to death. But beyond defeating her father, her mission to "rewrite the Great Book" has been accomplished with the help of friends who accompanied her and protected her with their own lives. Having performed the task of magical rewriting, she finds herself simultaneously inhabiting two realities:

The moment I finished with that book, something began to happen. As it happened, I got up to run and realized I was caught. What I can tell you is that the book and all that it touched and then all that touched what it touched and so on, everything . . . began to shift. Not to the wilderness, that wouldn't have scared me. Someplace else. I dare say a pocket in time, a slit in time and space. To a place where all was grey and white and black. I would have loved to stand and watch. But by then they were dragging me by my hair past what remained of Luyu's body, onto one of the boats. They were too blind to see what had begun to happen. (*WFD* 409)

Onyesonwu is stoned to death but not before she has liberated the Okeke and Nuru women, endowing them with abilities they had never previously had. So the story ends—or does it? Of the remaining two short chapters, one contains nothing but a peacock symbol, the other acknowledges that "Indeed, Onyesonwu did die, for something must be written before it can be rewritten" (*WFD* 415). But

in leaving the peacock symbol in her cell, she also signals her intention to be part of the new world she has created. Beyond this epilogue there is one last chapter: "Chapter 1: Rewritten," in which Okorafor rewrites the ending of her own book, making Onyesonwu transform herself and escape to a place where she will be reunited with her lost companions. At this point Okorafor makes Onyesonwu's thoughts turn to the Palm Wine Drunkard's (sic) realization that "if his tapper was dead and gone, then he must be somewhere else. And so the Drunkard's quest began" (*WFD* 418). This reference to an ur-text of Nigerian literature signifies the filiation between Tutuola's retold oral tales and her own narrative, claiming a genealogy for speculative fiction that includes orality, mythology, and animist belief. Referencing the "real" Africa(s) of Darfur and Rwanda, sites that appear to bear out the negative prediction that "Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia" (*Eshun* 292), Tadjó, Okorafor, and others (p)rewrite and revision the future. In this they participate in Afrofuturism's concern "with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the prophetic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional" (*Eshun* 293).

It seems that, just as Nick Wood implies in "Our Ancestors Are Not Ghosts," animist spirituality and magic do indeed play a central role in African speculative fiction. Wood's call for a critical approach that recognizes and respects "different 'plans' or conceptual 'blueprints,' differing foundations . . . and differing perceptions and experiences," is answered by the Comaroffs' ethnographic explorations of the "occult economy," or "magical means for material ends," in millennial South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 297). Recognizing the ubiquity and efficacy of magic in contemporary life, as well as its capacity for transformation and reinvention, they demonstrate that the contemporary occult is no throwback to tradition, but rather that "new situations demand new magic" (Comaroff and Comaroff 283). This gives rise, they suggest, to "planetary species whose existence conflates the virtual with the veritable, the cinematic with the scientific, gods with godzillas, the prophetic with the profitable"—a description that could have been written for Okorafor's *Lagoon*, the novel that follows *Who Fears Death*. Here, Okorafor envisages an extraterrestrial aquatic invasion whose point of entry is Lagos, Nigeria's largest and most bewildering city. This novel's shape-shifting femininity and magical powers extend beyond the protagonist to characters such as a prostitute, transgender activists, a popular musician, and a swordfish. The novel opens with the swordfish, "slic(ing) through the water, imagining herself a deadly beam of black light. The current parts against her sleek, smooth skin. If any fish gets in her way, she will spear it and keep right on going. She is on a mission. She is angry. She will succeed and then they will leave for good . . ." (*Lagoon* 3). This vision of the swordfish as a harbinger of the invasion that is about to happen is reminiscent of "a science-fictional retelling of the Middle Passage," as described by Eshun in his essay, in which the US-based group Drexiciya invented creatures called "Drexiciyans": "water-breathing, aquatically-mutated descendants of 'pregnant America-bound African slaves thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo'" (300). Whether consciously or not, the history of Lagos as a trade center and its situation on the slave coast lurk in the subtext of Okorafor's story of invasion from the sea. Her creation of a sentient fish, fully conscious and determined on its mission, is consonant with

the idea of revenants from the distant past as well as with genetic mutations in the present and future.

Ideas of dystopia, zombification, animality, and death as the ultimate line of flight, all of which play a part in the novels discussed or referenced so far, are explored in depth in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*. Set in a futuristic dystopian Johannesburg, Zinzi December, Beukes's young female hero, ekes out an existence in a liminal zone over-determined by a number of social edicts and taboos. The dysfunctional district, familiar from Phaswane Mpe's post-apartheid novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, has now, in "the post-'Born Free' era" (ZC 159), been conclusively designated the abode of a criminal underclass, members of which are relegated to semi-derelict condemned tenements where they survive off the grid, as it were. What identifies this underclass and forecloses any possibility of rehabilitation to mainstream society is a form of magical punishment that condemns its members to carry everywhere with them an embodied sign of their crimes. This takes the form of a symbiotic relationship with an animal, not of their choice, which arrives magically and from which or whom they can only be parted by death. Death itself is no longer a simple extinction, but something popularly known as Hell's Undertow, or scientifically as "shadow-self absorption" (ZC 181), anticipation of which condemns aposymbiots or "zoos" to suffer trauma in the form of an "irrefutable and ever-increasing sense of oblivion" (ZC 181). In Zinzi's case, this manifests as a hallucinatory awareness of "shadows starting to drop from trees and axles and other dark places and coagulating ... accompanied by a howling sucking smacking sound like the sky tearing at an aeroplane" (ZC 198).

What merits this terrifying form of delayed punishment is a crime, usually a murder, whether intentional or otherwise. The technical term for animalled humans is "aposymbiots," known as "zoos"—hence *Zoo City*. Zinzi's animal is a sloth, hence Sloth Girl. A compensatory mechanism for being animalled is the acquisition of a special magical talent, or *shavi*. Zinzi's is the power to perceive attachments to lost things and find them, for which she is hired to track down a lost girl, one half of a singing duo being promoted by Odi Huron, legendary music producer and recluse. This leads her into a world of black magic where the odious Odi (in another permutation of the leader-as-consumer) preys on the bodies of the young musicians he promotes, consuming their body parts as *muti* to bolster his own failing powers.

This summary has been necessary to introduce the features of the narrative I want to talk about: the use of animals as a means of othering humans and the use of othered humans to feed a perverted power. Both can be framed within an African shamanistic tradition that acknowledges animal subjectivity, as well as consumption of body parts as a way of accessing power. Wendy Woodward, in *The Animal Gaze*, proposes that in southern African fiction:

... many writers imagine kinship between humans and animals so that their knowledge productions become "relational epistemologies"... for they extend agency from the human to the non-human and replace the dichotomizing concepts of "self" and "other" with the notions of "we" and "another" to convey an acceptance of an "interconnection" between beings that is heterarchical or egalitarian, rather than hierarchical. (3–4)

As Woodward points out, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical framework offers a similar departure from Cartesian dualism. According to Deleuze and Guattari, human beings are captive to the "abstract machine" of capitalism, by which we are produced or "nailed down" as bodies and as subjects (*A Thousand Plateaus* 159). A qualified freedom is possible, however, by means of "lines of flight," modes of resistance to the domination of the abstract machine. Lines of flight, in turn, are accessed by a process of "becoming-animal," by which they mean a breaking down of the structures of consciousness determined by the machine. To quote the website Philosophy for Change: "Lines of flight are bolts of pent-up energy that break through the cracks in a system of control and shoot off on the diagonal. By the light of their passage, they reveal the open spaces beyond the limits of what exists" ("Lines of Flight"). Meanwhile, according to Deleuze and Guattari:

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out a path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs. (qtd. in Bruns 704n7)

Strictly speaking, Beukes's animalled humans (zoos) are not covered by this definition since they do not choose this refusal of signification and embrace of flux, it is imposed on them by the machine itself. However, in practice, what we see in the novel is indeed a form of altered consciousness on the part of zoos, for whom their animals are neither pets nor anthropomorphic mirrors of themselves, but wild creatures that retain their essential otherness even while codependent with human hosts. At various points in the novel, Zinzi lets herself be guided by her sloth in situations where his animal instincts are more useful than her human faculties—when she can't see, for example. Although not anthropomorphic, Beukes's animals conform to Woodward's definition of animal subjectivity:

... an animal is represented as a subject when he or she is regarded as an individual, sentient being who experiences emotions, who possibly enacts morality, who has agency, intentionality, a sense of the teleology of her or his life, as well as the ability to recognize and fear death and its advent. (7)

Zoos can, therefore, be seen as becoming-animal, in the sense that human and animal nature are in a non-hierarchical relationship of mutual dependency and respect: they live liminal lives at a tangent to social mechanisms of organization and control; and above all, within the dominant frame of rationality they represent, not opposition, but a radical difference that collapses the foundational Cartesian concept of duality.

Like *Who Fears Death*, the novel is a quest story. Zinzi has been given the task of finding Song, the girl-half of a teenage singing duo, but at the moment when she succeeds in finding her, one of Odi Huron's henchmen steps in and abducts her. At the climax of the novel, Zinzi and the Sloth, accompanied by Benoit, Zinzi's Congolese lover and his Mongoose, break into Odi Huron's house looking for Song and her brother S'bu. When a huge albino crocodile rises out of the swimming pool and grabs Benoit, Zinzi and the Sloth dive in after them, following them down to

an underground cave where a horrific sacrifice of animal victims is taking place. Meanwhile, as a means of ridding himself of his own animal, the crocodile, Huron, is goading S'bu to kill his sister and so become animalled himself, accepting the crocodile and freeing Huron. As soon as S'bu does so, Huron's assistant, Amira, kills him. The crocodile turns on Huron, the police arrive, Amira vanishes, Zinzi and Benoit and their animals survive.

To revert to the Comaroffs, Beukes's novel performs in fiction what they observe about occult practices not only in Africa, but globally, as giving rise to "narratives of witchcraft, body parts, zombies and the brutalization of children" (281). In South Africa, according to the Comaroffs, it is the youth who have been most let down by the failed promises of the post-apartheid era:

They are the repressed for whom the promise of postcolonial return is most obviously blocked by the hardening materialities of life at this coordinate on the map of global capital. As a result, rather than the more familiar axes of social division—class, race, gender, social division—the dominant line of cleavage here has become generation. (284)

Huron embodies a social fear of witches as producers of zombies whom they control, practitioners of ritual murders by which they enrich themselves and consumers of body parts by which they attain magical power. He exemplifies the man who amasses fabulous but unshared wealth with no visible source; young people—the musicians he adopts and promotes—are his victims and a young woman, Zinzi, his downfall. Ultimately, the novel dramatizes what the Comaroffs describe as:

The new nightmare ... of street terror run amok; of a state in retreat; of crime as routinised redistribution ... of a new topography of public space marked by few zones of safety and many of danger; of gated communities and razor-fenced houses; of uncivil cityscapes viciously contested by youth gangs, Islamic vigilantes, drug dealers, car-jackers and other distinctly unromantic social bandits ... (ZC 292)

Beukes's use of speculative fiction is to consider how, in such conditions, young dissenters might survive, if not thrive. The Jo'burg she creates is a recognizable, if slightly off-kilter, version of reality, exhibiting familiar post-apartheid social features, including xenophobia. The end of the novel has Benoit in hospital and Zinzi driving thousands of miles north to find his family in a refugee camp in Kigali and bring them back to South Africa. "I have" she says:

An *amaShangaan* bag full of fake cash. I have a bundle of photographs. I have print-outs of emails from a UN aid-worker. I have Benoit's family's name and ID numbers and application papers for asylum in South Africa. (ZC 348)

What she has, in other words, is good *muti* to enable her to right a wrong that no government or UN agency has been able to correct. Her *muti* is the opposite of Huron's in every way—aimed at restitution, not appropriation, at honoring the other even at the expense of self. In focusing on recent novels by women for my close-readings, I do not mean to suggest that writers of a particular period or gender have a monopoly on or superior claim to the genre of spec/fic—far from

it. I could equally have made the case by focusing on works by Kojo Laing, Mia Couto, or Ivan Vladislavic. Rather, that these novels are the latest manifestations in the *longue durée* of African futurism. What I hope is evident from my readings is how the rewriting of the Other, in all its many guises, is central to speculative fiction as it is being written in Africa: nature-as-other in *Punzi*, the dead-as-other in *Imana* (among other novels), woman-born-of-rape and mixed-race child-as-other in *Who Fears Death*, cyborg- or extraterrestrial-as-other in *Lagoon*. This revised Otherness is embodied clearly and dramatically in *Zoo City*, which deconstructs a whole series of related binaries—animal-as-other, foreigner-as-other, even criminal-as-other—through its central metaphor of the “animalled” human. In these African speculative fictions, gender/femininity is a key determinant in the projection of imagined futures, the materiality of chronopolitical intervention, and the *difference* of an African version of the historical future. Such narrative strategies are brought to bear both on specific histories and the potential futures to which they point. To take one last but preeminent example, in *In the United States of Africa*, Abdourahman Waberi upends geopolitical certainties by a revisioning of the world as dominated by Africa-as-superpower, the haven sought by thousands of benighted European refugees who cling precariously to life in Africa’s thriving cities. By this one all-encompassing gesture, Waberi destabilizes fixed ontologies and supposedly known knowns. “African man,” he tells us:

... felt sure of himself very early on. He saw himself as a superior being on this earth, without equal, since he was separated from other peoples and races by an infinitely vast space. He elaborated a system of values by which his throne is at the top. The others—natives, barbarians, primitives, pagans (almost always white)—are reduced to the rank of pariahs. The universe seems to have been created only to raise him up, to celebrate him. (33)

And yet, the prideful masculinity designated by the laudatory appellation “African man” is ironized by the fact that the entire narrative is addressed to Maya, a young woman artist—who is white. Adopted and brought up by African parents as their own child, this most futuristic of African heroines is a product not of ethnic or racial purity, but of hybridity and imagination. Like all artists, she is “exiled at the root” (110) and, with “a gift for fruitful nomadism” (107), destined to “be another and yourself at the same time” (110). Maya’s transcendent Otherness offers the clearest possible statement of the potential multiplicity of African identities, and of the role of art in realizing them. Through speculative fiction, Waberi and other writers stake their claim to Africa’s future, resignifying “Africa” as a sign of liberation from and transformation of known realities. Given a contested past and a precarious present, this is both a necessary and radically visionary act.

NOTES

1. See Tsika for a discussion of these two Ekwensi novels. The anthology referenced here is edited by Falola and Ezekwem.

2. Tchidi Chikere has since confessed to having changed his mind: “At the time I said that (two years earlier) I was looking at science fiction purely as technology and alien invasion. Looking at it from a broader perspective, I think s/f encapsulates

magical realism, the infusion of the *deus ex machina* and every other thing that is supernatural within a tale" ("Is Science Fiction Coming to Africa").

3. See MacRae for a discussion of the political dimension of the film.

4. Matthew Omelsky's 2012 essay, "Jean-Pierre Bekolo's African Cyborgian Thought," fully elaborates what he calls "Bekolo's sustained engagement with youth resulting in what might be called an 'African cyborgian thought.'" He traces Bekolo's links to Donna Haraway's "iconic politics of the cyborg," showing how he "articulates a distinct reconfiguration of the cyborg for African spaces."

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