Fuelling Bodies: Movement, embodiment, and climate crisis in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*

Agnieszka Podruczna

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In this article, I offer a reading of Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2009), which depicts the aftermath of a devastating water crisis that forced human communities in East Africa underground in order to survive. Following scholars such as Ritch Calvin, Kirk Bryan Sides, or Mich Nyawalo, who have dissected the film in the context of its treatment of environmental issues and its Africanfuturist leanings, I aim to foreground the function of the body in the film, identifying the peculiar nature of Maitu community's displacement (vertical rather than lateral, confining them to a space which cuts them off from the environment) as the reason for the rise of new forms of bodily exploitation. In my reading of the film, I want to argue that the corporeal hierarchies established within the community facilitate the emergence of what I term "fuelling bodies", forcibly turned by the authoritarian governing body into sources of energy as the last existing natural resource to be exploited. Drawing on the theory of science fiction, Hagar Kotef's writing on movement, and postcolonial theory, I close-read the film to explore the relationship it establishes between displacement and the bodily hierarchies that exist in the community. In turn, I argue that the nature of the Maitu community's displacement gives rise to hindered freedom of movement, bodily oppression, and loss of communal ties and consequently prevents the community from addressing the legacy of the climate crisis, which has arrested them in stasis, leaving them unable to dream of better futures. As I demonstrate, it is only once Asha rejects and actively rebels against the imposed inhibitions of movement and leaves the spaces of containment that make up the Maitu community that she can realise the utopian post-apocalyptic process of renewal and rejuvenation, both for the natural environment and the human communities. **Keywords:** displacement, science fiction, body, movement, resource scarcity.

Introduction

For the past several decades, fictions of climate crisis have represented the imminent changes to the Earth's ecosystems and imagined scenarios that range from catastrophic to hopeful, attempting to reconcile humans' continued habitation of the planet with the rapid transformations it has undergone in the last century. However, many of those mainstream narratives, while debating the fate of the environment, perpetuate the same biases that are currently contributing to the environmental crises in the Global South, insisting upon solutions that are not only too broad but also intensely Western-centric, often disregarding the existence of the Global South entirely. In order to redress that issue, works of postcolonial science fiction have endeavoured to address the matters of climate change from a more nuanced point of view, complicating the way cli-fi responds to the contemporary anxieties of environmental crisis and highlighting the ways in which contemporary politics continue to influence the most affected communities and give rise to new ways of bodily exploitation.

In line with this, in this article I read the themes of displacement and embodiment in the context of the climate crisis in Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2009), suggesting that the peculiar nature of the displacement of the Maitu community (which utilises vertical rather than lateral movement in space, separating them completely from the natural environment rather than simply relocating them to a different area) gives rise to new forms of bodily exploitation. In my reading of the film, I want to argue that this peculiar kind of displacement turns bodies—viewed as the last existing natural resource to be exploited—into energy sources through forced generation of power for the self-sustaining community, while the ways in which the authorities enforce water

Agnieszka Podruczna is assistant professor at the Institute of Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland.
Email: agnieszka.podruczna@us.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0135-0486

conservation facilitates social isolation and estrangement in order to perpetuate the established hierarchies of power. In addition, I look at the ways in which movement, as well as its restriction and the subsequent rejection of that restriction, facilitate the enactment of (through restriction) and rebellion against (through the rejection of that restriction) bodily exploitation, giving rise to two different types of "fuelling bodies". To develop this argument, I close-read the film, drawing on the relevant scholarship ranging from science fiction theory through theories of movement to postcolonial discourse to offer an insight into the corporeal hierarchies that emerge in the Maitu community as a result of their unusual form of displacement. This, in turn, allows me to offer comments on the broader cultural context in which the movie operates and situate it within the current discourses on the narratives of climate crisis. As I argue, the film implicitly critiques the modes of engaging with the issues of climate change in the West, pointing to their sustained inadequacy in the African context. At the same time, the film challenges the dominant imagery of Africa in the age of climate crisis, rejecting Afro-pessimism (which persists as the primary mode of dissecting the relationship between Africa and the climate crisis) and arguing that in this imagined, speculative future, the metaphorical and literal rejuvenation of the natural environment can only be achieved through Asha's rejection of the spaces of containment and confinement that have been established by the hierarchical power structures which govern the Maitu community. Ultimately, then, the film suggests that it is only through uninhibited movement and reestablishing the connection with the natural environment that a new beginning for human communities and the natural world can be facilitated.

The short film, written and directed by Kenyan filmmaker Kahiu, was initially released on 21 October 2009, followed by a special screening at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival as part of its New African Cinema project. The movie comes in at slightly under 22 minutes in length and tells the story of Asha, a curator at the Virtual Natural History Museum of the Maitu community, a partially subterranean domed community located in East Africa. The movie takes place 35 years after World War III, known also as the Water War. Due to an extreme shortage of water and prolonged droughts which drove the inhabitants of the area below ground, water is now rationed, while the community remains self-sustaining through pollution-free methods of energy production (rowing machines and treadmills) which turn the bodies of the inhabitants into sources of fuel. After establishing the setting and general premise, the movie opens with a dream sequence in which Asha is confronted with a vision of a tree growing in the middle of a desert landscape. The dream is immediately cut short by Asha's reminder to take her dream suppressant. Once she complies, the camera follows her as she walks around the compound, presenting the audience with the everyday routine of the Maitu community. Upon her return to the museum, she finds a package sent to her by an anonymous source from the world outside the compound, containing coordinates and a soil sample which, as Asha discovers, contains an abnormally high water content. This revelation prompts another dream in which Asha once again witnesses a tree growing in the desert. Once she awakens, Asha mixes the fertile soil with a bit of water, and in that soil, she plants the mother seed—a seed of the last surviving tree from before the climate apocalypse. When the community authorities discover her actions, she is punished for her repeated disobedience, and the museum is destroyed. She does, however, manage to save the germinating mother seed and, with the help of a janitor, successfully escapes the compound and embarks on a journey to the place of the coordinates she was sent—the same coordinates where the tree from her dream is supposed to grow—along with the soil sample. Along the way, she witnesses the devastation in the wake of the climate crisis and all the debris of the old world. Once she reaches the spot, she sacrifices herself—that is, the last of her water and the moistness of her breath—in order to plant the mother seed in the ground, letting it feed on her decomposing body as it grows, ultimately transforming into a lush forest as the audience hears the sound of rain beginning to fall during the closing shots of the movie, which signals the oncoming renewal.

Place and displacement: The Maitu community and the concept of home

Displacement is a concept that remains of singular importance to contemporary postcolonial approaches to global mobility. As Douglas Robinson explains in the preface to his book *Displacement and the Somatics of Postcolonial Culture*, "[d]isplacement entered the sociopolitical discourse that feeds postcolonial studies in the sense of the forced geographical removal of individuals from their home or home regions; the people thus removed become displaced persons, also known as forced migrants or refugees" (xx). He goes on to add: "The term was later extended metaphorically to cultural displacements without geographical removal, as when a foreign power invades, occupies, and colonises one's country and imposes a new ideosomatic regulation on one's group, 'displacing' the old cultural regime through education and other forms of social and institutional discipline" (Robinson xx).

Displacement, then, commonly comes to signify at least temporary placelessness, which comes from both the literal as well as metaphorical removal from the place of one's belonging. Whether someone is removed from their place of origin geographically or through the lack of direct access to that ancestral home, the rootlessness of displaced communities emerges as a particularly prominent problematic. The importance of place has become a central theme in much of postcolonial writing, as well as a fundamental concept in postcolonial theory, which commonly explores issues of separation from one's ancestral home. As David Wood remarks in his book *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction*:

> A place is a site of both public and private memory. To dwell in the place is to engage in a continuing exchange of meaning through which one's identity becomes, at least in part, a kind of symbiotic relationship with where one dwells. […] Place here is another way of talking about past and future, about opportunities for action and interaction. The more we accept the importance of place (and correlatively "home") for the construction of identity, the more we will grasp the full significance of "homelessness," loss of nationality, the problems of refugees. (198)

His formulation of the connection between place and memory allows us to articulate a crucial theme in postcolonial fiction writing, since place, understood as the locus of memory, emerges as a theme in much of postcolonial literature, including postcolonial science fiction. The importance of the direct connection between a particular place and the collective as well as individual memory is addressed commonly through the loss of that connection and, by extension, the loss of access to the collective memory of the community.

Pumzi's engagement with this theme, however, further complicates the aforementioned links. This, in turn, is tied to the peculiar nature of the Maitu community's displacement. Formed after the Third World War—also known as the Water War—in which all life on the surface of the Earth was seemingly eradicated and humanity moved to underground communities, the Maitu community (from Kikuyu, meaning mother seed) survives as one of the few enclaves of the human society on the African continent, displaced from its original place of dwelling. The nature of this displacement, however, is vertical rather than lateral. While other forms of displacement commonly encountered in studies of global mobility rely on becoming estranged—through forced migration, whether directly or indirectly—from one's initial place of dwelling, which ultimately becomes "a mythic place, the place of no return, even if it is possible to visit geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin" (Brah 192), the Maitu community rather becomes estranged from the natural environment itself. Forced into enclosed communities partially located underground by the increasingly inhospitable environment on the planet's surface, they lose all connection with the land of their ancestors, which in turn becomes relegated to soil samples to be studied in a lab. This further removes the community from its place of origin, as it is eventually reduced to nothing more than a scientific curiosity viewed through the lens of technofuturistic advancement. Such separation manifests in the film through the use of a colour palette—the muted, washed-out colours on the screen reinforce the consistent imagery that presents the Maitu community as a colourless, sterile environment cut off from the natural world, contrasted with the bright, vivid colours of Asha's visions. That image of artificiality is further reinforced through set design. With the exception of some parts of the Virtual Natural History Museum, which houses the last tangible links to the world outside such as animal remains or dried remnants of plants, the sets presented in the film evoke an image of soulless simplicity and uniformity.

The displacement of the Maitu community, however, differs from cultural displacement as understood by Robinson. Whereas those who have been culturally displaced through colonisation (Robinson xx) contend with the tangible presence of the colonising force, whether through direct occupation or indirect attempts at upholding cultural hegemony over the colonised place (xx), Kahiu's film attempts to untangle the complex web of questions concerning the particular nature of cultural displacement in a world in which the colonial Empire is notably absent, even if its faint shadows remain visible in the world outside the compound—in the detritus of the old world, the mound of trash left by the pre-apocalyptic politics of exploitation of the Global South. In this way, *Pumzi* enters a dialogue with the existing speculative narratives of the climate crisis, drawing attention to the post-apocalyptic fallout in a place which, to the Western world, is already the place of the apocalypse, exploited by the hegemonic powers—a place which has already turned into what Delinda Collier calls "the dumping ground of time and material" (n. p.).

Moving bodies: Corporeal hierarchies and freedom of movement

In her book on the politics of movement, Hagar Kotef posits that "[a]sking the question of the political meanings of movement is, perhaps above all, asking how our bodies affect, are affected by, become the vehicle of, or the addressees of political orders, ideologies, institutions, relations, or powers" (4). This question, in turn, remains at the forefront of interest for dystopian narratives—both mainstream and non-mainstream—which make use of displacement and confinement in order to play out the hegemonic hierarchies of power. In juxtaposition to other mainstream visions of a dystopian future in which communities become fixed in place as a mode of isolating people, however, *Pumzi* envisions that inside-outside dichotomy a lot more rigidly. Indeed, the distinction between the outside and the inside is reinforced through the repeated assertions that "the outside is dead" (*Pumzi* 00:07:52), underpinning the political messaging that persists throughout the film. The boundaries between the enclosed community and the outside world are thus strictly mandated, as accessing the surface is not so much made impossible by the conditions of neoliberal hegemony and late-stage capitalism (which renders the subjects' material conditions insufficient for any attempts at leaving, condemning them to live out their lives in poverty and powerlessness), but rather strictly prohibited by law and severely punished.

Nonetheless, even within the enclosed dystopian bubble of the Maitu community, the equal lack of access to the outside world fails to prevent hierarchies of movement—and by extension also hierarchies of bodies—from emerging. In fact, following Kotef's assertion that "political orders are in many ways regimes of movement" (6), in the scarcity world of *Pumzi*, the Maitu community's rigidly enforced boundaries between the inside and outside world aid in strictly limiting and regimenting the movement of its inhabitants, and creating and maintaining corporeal hierarchies through that. As a result, the "apparatus of closure" (Kotef 6) comes to facilitate bodily oppression through the restriction of movement, delineating state-mandated hierarchies of living among the inhabitants of the community.

In the film, government propaganda paints the community as an egalitarian, self-sufficient society. However, in line with Kotef's conceptualisation of movement as "a physical phenomenon that allows different bodies to take form" (14), the visual imagery of the film quickly dispels any such notions of bodily equality, exposing the fact that the response to the post-apocalyptic life conditions in the Maitu community is predicated on upholding the politics of exploitation, now under the guise of self-sustainability policies. In fact, almost since the very beginning of the film, *Pumzi* presents extant corporeal hierarchies predicated on their access to uninhibited movement. Whereas the bodies of the inhabitants are grounded in their corporeal realities, as emphasised by their capability to generate waste that can be recycled into water and their capability to produce energy through the exertion of their physical bodies, the bodies of the Council members—as well as that of Asha's supervisor—appear only in the form of holograms, and their only tangible bodily extension takes the form of the soldiers who maintain the order and enact physical violence on their behalf. The Council's corporeality (along with that of the higher-ranking civil servants) therefore exists only as a hypothetical, never fully realised on-screen. The fact that their bodies are never physically present, in turn, underscores the *de facto* bodily hierarchies that exist within the supposedly egalitarian community. The Council members and Asha's supervisor are free to appear and disappear as they please with the use of the communication devices shown in the scene in which they speak with Asha, carving out a distinctive path of movement for themselves which appears to be inaccessible to some of the other members of the community. In contrast, the other inhabitants of the compound seem to live fragmented, strictly regimented lives that keep them tethered to particular places, predominantly those associated with their employment and, therefore, their role in the machine of the community. Thus, the Council's refusal to let Asha leave the compound in order to investigate the potential for the rejuvenation of the natural environment from which the community has been forcibly severed by the climate apocalypse can be seen as yet another attempt to regulate the "'abnormal' movements" (Kotef vii) of the individual in service of upholding the rigid rules of the compound.

The resulting policies that shape the inhabitants' way of life and demarcate the lines of bodily autonomy and freedom of movement (or lack thereof) constitute, in this understanding, a persistent underscoring of the corporeal hierarchies emerging as a corollary of the unusual form of displacement experienced by the Maitu community. As a consequence, I argue that the community becomes fractured in more than one sense: through estrangement from their bodies and the emergence of what I term fuelling bodies, resulting from their exploitation, through the loosening of social ties, and through the loss of collective memory. This, in turn, locks them into a self-perpetuating cycle of bodily oppression.

Fuelling bodies: Bodily oppression and the technocratic paradigm

In her book *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema*, Sophie Mayer points out a peculiar contradiction regarding the Maitu community inhabitants' bodily condition. When describing the protagonist's living conditions, she notes that "Asha lives and works in one of the surviving underground communities, where water is severely restricted. Dome-dwellers collect and purify their sweat and urine, living closer to their animal bodies despite their hi-tech surroundings" (Mayer 46). Curiously, this comment echoes the work of Qasim, Noreen, and Afza on coloniality and environmental devastation, in which they argue that, in colonial realities, "[i]n many instances, other peoples were 'regarded as part of nature' and, as a result, were treated instrumentally, much like animals" (1938). In this vein, the animal body in *Pumzi* is a body to be used and maltreated, echoing the pre-apocalypse politics of exploitation. In fact, it would appear that upholding those distinctions between the animal body and the hi-tech environment is more crucial than ever before for the survival of the system, marking bodies as resources to be used. This owes predominantly to the fact that the unusual nature of the Maitu community's displacement estranges them completely from the natural environment. Instead, it forces them to live within the sterile confines of the domed, part-underground compound, whose inhospitality is further emphasised in the film through the use of a muted, neutral colour palette of whites, greys, and blacks. Consequently, those living conditions give rise to new forms of bodily oppression that perpetuate exploitative power relations.

As *Pumzi* illustrates, the postcolonial preoccupation with the body also finds its echoes in the science fiction genre, which is more commonly associated with its rejection of the body. In his seminal essay "The Erotic Life of Machines", Steven Shaviro points out that "the dominant narratives of the new technological culture are cyberfictions of disembodiment" (21). Moreover, as he notes, "[i]n line with this, imaginative cyberfictions—science fiction novels and films—have often expressed an extreme ambivalence regarding the body" (Shaviro 21). Similarly, in her introduction to *The Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*, Sherryl Vint remarks that "[t]here is a tendency in some postmodern theory to speak of the body as an obsolete relic, no longer necessary in a world of virtual communication and technological augmentation" (8). However, as she goes on to say,

> [t]he ability to construct the body as passé is a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. […] The body remains relevant to critical work and 'real' life, both because 'real' people continue to suffer or prosper in their material bodies, and because the discourses that structure these material bodies continue to construct and constrain our possible selves. (Vint 8–9)

By centring the body as one of the focal symbols of the film, *Pumzi*, in turn, comments on the ways in which the hegemonic power relations in the age of climate crisis give rise to persevering forms of bodily oppression which, while aiming to address the problems of renewable, non-polluting sources of energy, perpetuate the pre-apocalyptic modes of exploitation of bodies in a new context.

One of the opening scenes of the film sees Asha, a curator in the Maitu community's Virtual Natural History Museum, walking through the sterile, futuristic compound. The long tracking shot allows the audience to observe the daily life of the community, which sustains itself through forced labour masked as propaganda. "MAITU COMMUNITY. 100% SELF POWER GENERATION. 0% POLLUTION" (*Pumzi* 00:01:47), read the posters hanging from the walls, while a group of inhabitants of the community exercise on government-owned gym equipment under armed guard to generate electricity and purify their sweat into potable water. Evocative of seminal texts of the science fiction genre such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, *Pumzi*'s landscape of water scarcity does not allow for even one drop to be wasted. Additionally, due to the lack of other sources of energy, power is also generated exclusively by the members of the community through physical exercise. The corollary of that, however, is the de facto continued exploitation of bodies. Whereas the filtering of water and recycling of bodily fluids appears to be an activity that every single member of the community is engaged in, from a museum curator such as Asha to those ordinarily performing manual labour such as the janitor, the generation of power for the community appears to be much more dependent upon the established hierarchy. As a result, the existing system of power structures introduces corporeal hierarchies and facilitates the emergence of what I call the fuelling bodies—individuals whose main role in the community consists of generating energy through the continued exploitation of their bodies, and who are relegated to the status of objects from which energy can be extracted rather than subjects. In the film, the grim-faced inhabitants of the dome city continue their march on the treadmills and countless repetitions on the rowing machines in a manner evocative of modern-day exploitative labour in Africa's mining and fossil fuel industries. The practices of labour exploitation, in turn, are conveyed through the

images of exercise that powers the symbolic light bulbs placed on the gym equipment. The forced nature of this exercise is further underscored through the presence of armed guards keeping watch over the exercising people, while the sign behind one of them spells out ominously, "NO EXIT" (*Pumzi* 00:01:59).

While it might initially appear that the labour is heavily encouraged but voluntary, undertaken equally by the members of the community for the good of all as evidenced by the propaganda posters on the walls and the announcer's voice droning on repeatedly, encouraging the inhabitants: "Do your share today. Generate energy for your community. Be a self-power generator. Kinetic energy. Zero percent pollution, a hundred percent self-sustainable" (*Pumzi* 00:01:42–00:01:53), the audience soon realises that the voluntary nature of this labour is nothing more than an illusion. Once Asha resists the decree of the Council, the authoritarian governing body of the community, she is arrested by the security forces and sentenced to manual labour. This shift from her occupation and status as a custodian of the local museum, performing intellectual rather than manual labour, to her body becoming a cog in the machine of energy generation elucidates the troubling dichotomy of the corporeal hierarchies emerging in the community as a result of the nature of their displacement. Here, Asha becomes "constituted (or rather deconstituted) as [an] unruly [subject] whose movement is a problem to be managed" (Kotef 5). Following her act of disobedience, in which she insists upon being able to move beyond the strictly enforced boundaries of the compound, she appears to lose what little freedom of movement she is afforded in the first place. She is instead symbolically forced into an oxymoronic static "movement" in place during her exercise, fixed in the corporeal hierarchy and becoming one of the fuelling bodies.

Consequently, despite the self-governance and seeming self-sustainability of the Maitu community, the inherited legacy of the climate crisis continues to erode the material conditions of the inhabitants of the place, including their corporeality. The exploitation of their bodies is motivated by their separation from the natural environment and their continued displacement, invoking a mechanism that Kwasi Densu discusses in his article "Omenala: Toward an African-Centered Ecophilosophy and Political Ecology". In this article, Densu argues that, in the context of Africana studies, it is impossible to critique exploitation under the capitalist system as long as "[t]he focus remains on the social relations of production (unequal distribution of wealth, power, and technology), to the exclusion of humanity's relationship with the natural world. In essence, human sociohistorical development is extracted out of the earth's history and its ecological processes" (33). As an echo of this contemporary real-world problem, in the futuristic world of *Pumzi*, the unwillingness of the Council to acknowledge the vital connection between human society and the natural world (illustrated by their refusal of Asha's mission) is what enables the continued exploitation of the fuelling bodies. This, in turn, further estranges the inhabitants from their bodies, turning them into sources of renewable energy. The body, then, seen as the last remaining natural resource, must be used and abused, exploited in the service of the community, echoing the existing power dynamics in the age of climate crisis.

Ties and ruptures: Isolation and loss of community in Pumzi

The film suggests that when human bodies are transformed into what the Council perceives to be natural resources to be mined and exploited for the greater good of the community, what follows is the subsequent loosening of social ties within the society. This is further aided by the way in which the authorities enforce water conservation. This form of social isolation comes as a result of the Maitu community's peculiar form of displacement: despite the propaganda emphasis on community and interconnectedness, the social system that emerges as a result of the loss of access to and complete separation from the natural environment serves to foster isolation and separation, loosening familial and social ties at the same time. In fact, we see none of the former, and very little of the latter, in *Pumzi*. The film underscores this theme in several ways, which I will discuss in this section, emphasising the dissolution of social ties as deeply detrimental to the good of the community as a whole. In this way, *Pumzi* also poses the question of what it means for a place to be habitable and hospitable, positing that, despite initial appearances to the contrary (as the literal last place where humanity can survive in this part of the world), the displaced Maitu community is neither.

In fact, the entire runtime of the film is permeated by a persisting sense of loneliness and isolation. The people that the audience observes on-screen barely interact with each other. Instead, they are left to lead their parallel lives in separation from other inhabitants, playing out the imposed hierarchies of living and reinforcing the extant power structures. The film emphasises this not only on the narrative level but also through its set and costume design and the use of sound. Curiously, on the rare occasions when the characters do interact with each other,

those interactions fall solely into three different categories: technology-assisted interpersonal communication, state-sanctioned violence, and acts of social disobedience.

Due to the severe water shortage, all interpersonal communication within the community is strictly conducted through electronic devices, the physicality confined to utility. In the scene in which Asha contacts the Council to request permission to venture beyond the domed community in search of the coordinates from which the soil sample originated, she is seen communicating with the councilpersons via screen and keyboard. The sound design in the movie underscores the isolating effect of the near-total lack of speech during its runtime. The soundscape of the movie focuses on the ambient sounds of the environment, relegating human speech to artificially generated voices mediated through communication devices. As Ritch Calvin argues, "[t]his technologically mediated speech indicates that the citizens have no voice. The authoritarian government silences all dissenters" (25). Mayer, on the other hand, points out that, in the same scene, "[…] Asha types her impassioned statements to her overseers, to be read by a computer-generated voice, and their voices are similarly heard without the movement of their lips. No-one can afford to parch their throat by speaking" (47). These two remarks point towards the intricate connection between the resource scarcity brought about by the climate crisis (resulting in the community's ultimate displacement) which justifies the authoritarian rule over the place, and the ways in which everyday human interactions such as speaking become affected as a result. The forbiddance of direct communication can be seen, then, as a step towards further isolating the inhabitants of the community from the most basic biological functions of their bodies and from one another, fostering a hostile environment predicated on the disruption of social ties in the face of resource scarcity, which in turn serves to uphold the existing social order—the exact same mechanism which Calvin mentions in his argument.

It becomes even more significant, then, that the only moment in which the audience can witness physical interactions between the characters is the scene in which Asha is assaulted by the compound's security personnel for refusing to comply with the Council's orders. This scene sees Asha dragged across the floor in a clear display of one of the only forms of bodily contact permissible within the Maitu community (and the only one that is not implied but shown explicitly: authoritarian violence). The curious absence of any other forms of touch, in turn, serves as a further commentary on isolation and estrangement from the corporeal and the subsequent dissolution of social ties. While it could be argued that the reasons for such restrictions are purely pragmatic in nature, it is necessary to consider how such rules are meant to uphold the existing corporeal hierarchies and power structures at the same time. Similarly to the forbiddance of speech, which, as Calvin points out, is meant to function as an authoritarian measure of control that symbolically takes away the community members' voice (25), the forbiddance of touch is a means of control over the inhabitants, ceding the privilege of touch to the repressive state apparatuses. In addition, this distinction between those who can and those who cannot touch further ossifies the existing corporeal hierarchies. The withdrawn, hologram bodies of the Council remain distanced from the rest of the populace; they enact their will through the only bodily extension they display in the film—the compound security. At the same time, the bodies of the other inhabitants—and in particular the fuelling bodies—become objects of state violence, an extension of their exploitation in the context of energy generation.

Nonetheless, despite the strict limits imposed upon the ways in which the inhabitants (and as a result their bodies) can connect within the walls of the compound, *Pumzi*'s narrative finds a more intimate, direct connection which Asha is able to make, and which directly contributes to her successful escape with the Maitu (mother) seed, which she plants in the fertile soil to allow it to germinate. At the beginning of the film, the audience observes her encounter with a janitor in one of the compound's public bathrooms. After purifying her urine into water, Asha is seen sharing some of it with a nameless, silent figure in an act of disobedience against the seemingly forbidden sharing of resources in the face of strict rationing, implied by the earlier scene in which Asha ventures out to receive her daily allocation of water. This connection, then, in a sense facilitates Asha's subsequent rootedness and successful attempt at breaking away from the extant authoritarian power structures within the community, as the janitor assists her in her escape from the compound and steals the old-fashioned brass compass which Asha uses to navigate her way to the coordinates sent along with the soil sample. Through this moment of connectedness, the two women enable a process that allows them to counter the effects of the Maitu community's displacement and the subsequent dissolution of social ties. This kind of kinship evokes Donna J. Haraway's work on making kin in what she terms the Chthulucene—her alternative to the notion of the Anthropocene. In her work, Haraway underscores the importance of ties that bind all beings—human or otherwise—positing that "making—and recognizing—kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part" (102)

of existing in the age of the *Chthulucene*. In this kind of bridging of gaps and boundaries, "the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense" (103), as "all critters share a common 'flesh,' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically" (103). Even though Haraway's writing moves beyond the boundaries of the human, she underscores that necessity in all kinds of relationships, including those between people. Further, despite the fact that the world of *Pumzi* has arguably moved beyond the Anthropocene (or the Chthulucene, as Haraway would have it), in my reading of the film it appears that Kahiu argues precisely for rekindling and maintaining this type of relation even in the post-Anthropocene world, extending the reach of those ties of kinship. It is not without significance here that the connection between Asha and the nameless janitor is mediated solely through the objects of the past (the Maitu seed, the brass compass, even the water which once could be shared freely, echoing the pre-apocalyptic times). It could be argued, then, that in *Pumzi*, Asha takes up the task of rekindling the social—human—ties between herself and the nameless janitor as the first step towards re*kind*ling her relationship with the natural environment as a whole. It becomes significant, therefore, that the forging of this relationship, however fleeting and temporary, directly precedes Asha's escape from the compound, allowing her to fully grasp her kinship with the janitor and extend that into the natural world outside once she leaves. This, in turn, constitutes an act of rebellion against not only the restriction of movement placed upon the fuelling bodies (through the connection with the janitor aiding Asha's escape) but also against the forced dissolution of social ties.

Suppressed dreams: Displacement and the loss of collective memory

Following from Wood's remarks on the importance of place for private and public/collective memory (198), the inhabitants of the Maitu community also experience what I would argue is a prolonged loss of collective memory. The film's continuous use of the motif of dreaming and the suppression of dreaming becomes a testament to that loss, as the audience gradually comes to realise that the entire community is reliant on the compulsory use of dream suppressants. This, in turn, signifies the community's inability to dream beyond the present as well as the loss of access to the repository of ancestral memory, resulting from the community's displacement. Not only are they unable to dream about the future, incapable of projecting their hopes for a better world, but they are also equally forbidden from dreaming about the past (symbolised in the film by the imagery of underwater roots in Asha's dream). The compulsory focus on the present reality, enforced medically by the Council's orders, closes off all access to other temporal dimensions, arresting the community in the moment and inhibiting not only the movement of bodies but also the movement of minds.

The scenes in which Asha dreams reoccur throughout the film, but from the very first time the dream sequence appears in the narrative, it elucidates the metaphor used by Kahiu in order to comment on the way in which the loss of collective memory stems from the displacement of the community and contributes to its further fracturing. When Asha dreams, she dreams not only of the Maitu tree, flourishing among the arid landscape of the post-apocalypse, but also of being submerged in water, signifying a return to one's origins, a return to the roots—a metaphor made all the more apparent by the symbolic roots seen under the surface of the water in her dream, and often seen as recurring imagery of the connection to the past in much of postcolonial science fiction (Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*; Suzette Mayr's "Toot Sweet Matricia"; Kalamu ya Salaam's "Trance"). However, each time Asha is awoken from those dreams by the computer-generated voice droning, "Dream Detected: Take Your Dream Suppressants" (*Pumzi* 00:01:12–00:01:19). The authoritarian control, then, extends beyond just the realm of the corporeal. Rather, it extends through the control over the body, conceptualised as what Rosi Braidotti calls "an enfleshed kind of memory" (156), and its displacement from the natural environment. The hegemonic politics of exploitation and isolation sever the ties with the collective memory of the community. The Virtual Natural History Museum—the only tangible link to the past—remains empty, with Asha as its only temporary resident and custodian. The other inhabitants of the Maitu community are notably absent from that space, symbolically unable to conceive of their own connection with the past and the potential for a different future, inhibited by the dream suppressants. In this way, the compound regime ensures obedience and perpetuation of the established hierarchies of living and embodiment.

This, in turn, is done in order to ensure the compound's continued existence, since, as Kirk Bryan Sides argues, "the sustainability of the compound is actually threatened by the thought of reforming life outside of itself" (111). Therefore, by suppressing dreams and, by extension, suppressing the collective memory of the community, already fractured by its earlier displacement through the loss of direct access to their ancestral home,

the established system can continue undisturbed. This importance of maintaining the status quo for the sake of perpetuation of the system is further underscored by the scene in which Asha contacts the Council. Upon sharing with them her recent dream, which came to her after touching and smelling the soil sample, she receives strict orders to take her dream suppressants. This order, in turn, suppresses not only the utopian potential of her vision but also the collective memory of her community which Asha—the only apparent custodian of the shared past—has been able to access directly through her dream in order to be able to imagine a better future, beginning with the preserved Maitu seed. This suppression, however, remains only temporary.

Refusal and renewal: Towards a new ecology

Asha's disobedience signals a direct refusal of the extant power relations into which her existence has been inscribed. As Sides argues:

> Asha's journey directly from the wreckage of the natural history museum, beyond the boundaries of the compound and through the seemingly endless desert-scape outside in order to plant the Mother seed, in its determination to start a biological world over, is also an attempt to replant a certain narrative on the earth, as well as a narrative of life on the earth. It is a desperate attempt to survive in the world, as opposed to simply on it; even if this kind of survival means an almost certain death. This mode of survival is outside, indeed anathema, to the blind and repetitive logics represented by the compound. (115)

This escape and subsequent journey through the desert wasteland among the heaps of trash, therefore, symbolise the search for more nuanced approaches to the climate crisis. As Chikwurah Destiny Isiguzo argues in an essay on postcolonial ecocriticism in the African context, many of the contemporary ecocritical approaches remain insufficient in clarifying the strategies of resistance and survival in the age of climate crisis beyond the sphere of Northern environmentalism. According to his reading of Caminero-Santangelo and Myers's critiques of discursive frameworks such as deep ecology, critical approaches to the environmental crisis often constitute a cover for "a bourgeois environmentalism that tends to represent and sell the idea of Edenic nature, a pure state of nature with amnesia towards the impacts of racism and colonialism in the degradation, displacement, disruption and exploitation of ecosystem people" (47–8). Kahiu's film arguably speaks against that, bearing witness to the scale of devastation brought about by politics of exploitation and proposing alternatives to the existing modes of speaking about the climate crisis by insisting upon "the necessity of utopian visions" (Nyawalo 217). It seems, moreover, that Kahiu sees the restorative potential of Asha's undertaking precisely in attempting to reconnect with the place of origin of her community, continuously trapped within the sterile walls of the compound. According to Amanda Renée Rico, "Kahiu's *Pumzi* relies heavily on ecological imagery as a site of rootedness. Asha […] seeks to escape her sterile and inorganic post-apocalyptic compound in order to both literally and figuratively 'root' herself in a natural environment" (89). Therefore, Asha's ultimate rejection of the Council's established hierarchies of living and movement and her subsequent return to the ancestral land of the community facilitates new modes of renewal—or at the very least, a hope for such renewal.

Her journey also abounds in symbolism. Aided by the old-fashioned, low-tech brass compass and keeping the germinating seed in a simple jar, Asha's self-appointed mission harkens back to the times before the apocalypse. Another important symbol of her temporal as well as spatial return comes in the form of the garment she wears as she traverses the inhospitable desert of the post-apocalyptic wasteland. As Collier says:

> As Asha contemplates her next move, she plucks from the mound of trash a kanga, an Eastern African machine-stamped cloth wrap now faded from an eternity in the harsh sun. […] Standing at a threshold of use and non-use, the kanga negotiates time and human/organic ecology. Asha mediates a transition from the past when Africa was on the brink of ecological destruction (now), to the filmic time of Asha's post-apocalyptic world; her actions ultimately set off a chain of events that lead to a utopian future. (n. p.)

The kanga, then, becomes a symbol of Asha's journey towards a new, utopian future which she dreamed up in her vision while remaining cognisant of the fact that she cannot simply return to the past; the kanga is rescued from the mound of detritus, faded and irrevocably changed by the passage of time, but still useful as she gives it purpose once again. Therefore, *Pumzi* sees the rejuvenating potential of Asha's journey not in the impossible return to a place that no longer exists, but rather in bridging the gaps between past, present, and future, allowing for new ecologies to be born out of the union.

Asha's journey to plant the mother tree is symbolic of precisely that kind of process: as the symbolic custodian of the past, implied by her role as the custodian of the Virtual Natural History Museum, she is carrying with her the entire history of her community, including the technological knowledge which has allowed her to recognise the potential of such rejuvenation and embark upon her journey. Asha's symbolic connection with the past through her position at the museum is further discussed by Mich Nyawalo, who says:

> The museum, in this and other contexts, operates as a heterotopia of time because of its impetus to collect everything, to stop time [...]. It is in the natural museum that Asha locates the maitu (mother) seed, also defined as "our truth," which she uses to forge a new beginning. This "truth"—stored in a museum—might also connote a sense of hyper-historical awareness that enables one to see beyond the boundaries of immediate events and social realities. (219)

In this sense, then, Asha's position within the community makes her uniquely predisposed to bringing together the temporal dimensions to dream of a better future for her community and its descendants. The Maitu seed, the scarf, and the compass might belong to the past, but Asha herself and her dream belong to the present and the future, realising the cyborgian potentialities of her endeavour. As Matthew Omelsky writes: "To be sure, the seed will be a new kind of tree, a cyborg mutant tree, grown from an amalgam of nuclear contaminated and uncontaminated soil. New life will be a cyborg life" (46). In the merging of the old with the new, it is ultimately Asha's body that symbolically bridges the temporal dimensions, bringing hope for a new beginning in addressing and overcoming the climate crisis, as well as facilitating the possibility of new modes of being with nature. In her journey to plant the Maitu tree, Asha's final act is that of giving. While the corporeal hierarchies established within the Maitu community to regulate movement made her body into a cog in the hegemonic machine of exploitation and a natural resource to be mined, her choice to shield the growing seed with her own body, to give it her own breath and the last of her water, and nourish it with her own decomposing body makes her into another kind of fuelling body, one filled with potential. Freed from the hierarchical power structures which constrain movement and inhibit revitalisation, her body is now able to nurture, using its own organic matter as biofuel for the growing seed. As she falls into her endless sleep and symbolically gives birth to the new Maitu tree, she becomes reconnected with the land of her ancestors, yet her body remains far from static. The process of her decomposition brings with it yet another dimension of movement, as her remains turned into nourishment travel through the root system of this newly emerged ecosystem, further freeing Asha from the constraints placed upon her by the Maitu community. At the same time, she contributes not only her body but also her knowledge and lived experience to whatever new life may emerge on the surface afterwards, proving right the assertion made by Haraway that "[r]enewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct" (101).

The last frames of the film bring confirmation to the hopeful tone of the ending as the lone tree stretches into a boundless forest and the audience can hear the first drops of rain beginning to fall along with thunder sounding in the distance, bringing a new beginning to a world parched by the apocalypse of the climate crisis. Asha's willing sacrifice of her body enables growth which gives way to the symbolic cleansing of the land of her ancestors, ravaged by the politics of resource exploitation. In this way, *Pumzi* argues for the necessity of the connectedness between the corporeal and the ecological, suppressed by the authorities of the compound, signalling a potential for rejuvenation and a more complex response to the current concerns of the climate crisis.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Kahiu's *Pumzi* emerges as an invaluable contribution to the ongoing discussion of the climate crisis and displacement in the Global South. Through the analysis of the film's plot, imagery, and symbolism, I have demonstrated that *Pumzi* imagines the world of scarcity as marked by the rise of oppressive power structures predicated upon established corporeal hierarchies, which facilitate the emergence of what I call the fuelling bodies. Those modes of oppression, in turn, are enabled by the precise nature of the Maitu community's displacement, imagined as a vertical rather than lateral movement in space, which estranges the inhabitants of the Maitu community not only from their ancestral land but also from the natural environment as a whole, giving rise to new forms of bodily exploitation. As I have demonstrated, in the post-apocalyptic world of *Pumzi*, the (fuelling) body emerges as the last natural resource to be mined and exploited. This process is accompanied by strict inhibition of movement, resulting from the existing power relations that seek to regulate access to the world outside their control. The condition of the compound's inhabitants, in turn, is marked by isolation and the

loosening of social ties, as touch and speaking are prohibited, further estranging the dome-dwellers from their own corporeality. As I suggest, it is only in reconnecting with the corporeal and in facilitating more intimate connections (be they between people or between people and land) that one can attempt to imagine better futures in the face of the climate crisis in the Global South.

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