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Editorial

Genres of displacement: Rewriting environmental crisis from the African continent / Genres du déplacement : réécrire la crise environnementale depuis le continent africain

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi & Magdalena Malinowska

This theme issue on "African Fictions of Environmental Crisis and Displacement" is devoted to literary and cultural representations of human and non-human forms of displacement triggered by environmental crises unfolding on the African continent. Its focus is on how these representations envision and define displacement and its aftermath and what meanings, aesthetic and political, are attached to it. Aiming to foreground those forced to leave but also those forced to stay, the readings in this issue examine the various modes of being in and responding to ecologically vulnerable worlds, both present and future. To broaden the scope of analysis, the contributors move away from the figure of the climate refugee—a figure usually evoked in narratives of displacement and climate disasters—and turn instead to the less troubled concept of displacement. If climate refugees as a category bring together changing environments and forced population movements, they are a symbol of environmental emergency usually tied to Global South populations and emergency discourses. Seeking to sidestep these shortcomings, the contributors thus opt for the concept of displacement, embracing its more inclusive realm and capacious purview. Displacement sidesteps the national bias of refugeehood, recognises the environment as a potential casualty of migratory movements, departs from the anthropocentrism of the category of climate refugee, and complicates the usual geographies of climate-induced migration. In other words, *displacement* opens up a critical space where different *directions*, *scales*, and *actors* can delineate novel aesthetic imaginaries, raise more complex questions about ethics and justice, and re-narrate the relationship between climate change and movement.

To enable this critical reorientation and to examine its theoretical implications, this issue looks to a variety of narratives by African authors and artists. In its recognition that environmental vulnerability knows no national boundaries but also that the worlds imagined by these narratives may no longer necessitate national frameworks, this project focuses on an eclectic body of work cutting across geographies and times. What ties them together, however, providing a common critical denominator, is a number of assumptions: that environmental crises have been an ongoing phenomenon in the Global South, engendered and exacerbated by colonial conquest and neocolonial extraction of natural and human resources; that climate change, therefore, is not an event yet to come (to the dread and thrill of Western audiences) but has instead been a staple ingredient of the quotidian lives of many populations across the Global South; that the notion of emergency, and its biopolitical entourage, is politically and conceptually inadequate to the task of rethinking the present and reimagining the future; that ecological crises are always an outcome of multiple factors rather than a single, natural, and thus uncontrollable cause; and that displacement generates more identities and realities than the prevalent discourses on climate refugees would seem to allow.

The articles gathered in this issue have all been guided by a set of crucial questions: a. How do cultural productions from Africa envisage climate change and displacement beyond the aesthetics of the apocalyptic sublime and hyperbolic renditions? b. What identities and realities do they bring into being as they thrust displacement and climate change into narrative and imaginary proximities? c. What relationships do they forge between

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climate vulnerability and movement? d. What relationships do they imagine between climate change and stasis, recognising that, for some, being forced to stay may be the only available and viable option? e. How do they redefine displacement beyond the parameters of emergency and humanitarian protocols?

In order to extend the critical horizon in which to answer the above questions, the authors purposefully adopt *displacement* as a methodological orientation which brings together environmental humanities and migration studies. An event that at once references unsought mobility and loss of habitat, it seems especially suited to a project examining climate-induced migration. Displacement is a response to climate change, but it also involves movement. It is simultaneously *descriptive* (naming a physical phenomenon which emerges in response to extreme and precarious circumstances) yet also *analytic* (offering modes of thinking about this phenomenon). It is a method of *telling* the story of climate-induced migration (in place of other conceptual frameworks, such as, for example, apocalypse or extinction, which would surely yield different narratives, cultural and theoretical) but also a method of *analysing* this story. It simultaneously registers the materialities of mobility and opens up a space in which to link a set of related inquiries because displacement also mobilises what William Walters has so powerfully called *viapolitics*: "the en-route, the places on the way"; the means by which displacement occurs, that is, the infrastructures which enable, or disable, movement; and "the road or the journey" (471). Tracing the multiple routes displacement inaugurates, the articles in this issue thus seek to problematise displacement beyond its commonly assumed negativity to also attend to the various ways in which it comes about, on one hand, and to the *mise-en-scène* of displacement: what gets left behind and what happens to it, what are the places to which displacement takes its subjects, and how it affects the subjects.

For instance, the first article in the issue, by Katarzyna Więckowska, examines human and non-human forms of mobility and immobility caused by oil extraction as they are represented in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*, with a view to particularising environmental harm and locating it in the histories of colonialism and the realities of postcolonial violence. In his contribution, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz reads Alistair Mackay's *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way*, a South African speculative novel, as a critique of neoliberal economies (the driving force behind climate catastrophe), technologically driven body augmentation, and psychological costs of living with apocalypse. Agnieszka Podruczna explores the significance of displacement in Wanuri Kahiu's dystopian short film *Pumzi*, concentrating on post-crisis abuses of the body as the last resource and the rejuvenating potential of movement. Tochi Onyebuchi's *War Girls* is analysed by Katarzyna Ostalska in terms of how the novel links past events with possible futures across human and more-than-human worlds. Agnieszka Pantuchowicz's contribution looks at Benin's colonial displacements as intimated by Benin's contemporary art, focusing specifically on historical and artistic displacements as repositories of present ecologies and possible futures. Magdalena Malinowska examines how Léonora Miano's *Rouge impératrice* expands the scope of Afrofuturism by envisioning an ecologically harmonious African future that dismantles colonial and capitalist legacies, redefines human-nature relations, and repositions Africa as a sovereign force in the reimagination of global systems. Ewa Macura-Nnamdi reads Henrietta Rose-Innes's short story "Poison," and in particular, its rendition of toxicity, as a critique of apocalyptic eschatologies and human exceptionalism. Finally, the issue also contains two interviews with African and Afropean writers: one with Osahon Ize-Iyamu (Nigeria) and the other with Laura Nsafou (France, Martinique and Democratic Republic of the Congo).

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Ce numéro thématique sur les Fictions africaines de la crise environnementale et du déplacement est consacré aux représentations littéraires et culturelles des formes de déplacement humaines et non humaines provoquées par la crise environnementale qui se déroule sur le continent africain. Il s'intéresse à la manière dont ces représentations conçoivent et définissent le déplacement et ses conséquences, ainsi qu'aux significations – esthétiques et politiques – qui y sont attachées. Cherchant à mettre en lumière à la fois ceux qui sont contraints de partir et ceux qui sont contraints de rester, les lectures proposées dans ce numéro examinent les diverses manières d'habiter et de répondre à des mondes écologiquement vulnérables, tant présents que futurs. Afin d'élargir le champ d'analyse, les contributeurs s'éloignent de la figure du réfugié climatique – une figure généralement évoquée dans les récits de déplacement et de catastrophes climatiques – pour se tourner vers le concept moins

problématique de déplacement. Si la catégorie de réfugié climatique associe les changements environnementaux et les mouvements de population forcés, elle reste un symbole de l'urgence environnementale souvent lié aux populations du Sud global et aux discours d'urgence. Pour contourner ces limites, les auteurs choisissent donc d'adopter le concept de déplacement, avec sa portée plus inclusive et sa capacité à englober des réalités diverses. Le déplacement contourne les biais nationaux liés au statut de réfugié, reconnaît l'environnement comme victime potentielle des mouvements migratoires, s'éloigne de l'anthropocentrisme inhérent à la notion de réfugié climatique, et complexifie les géographies habituelles de la migration induite par le climat. En d'autres termes, *le déplacement* ouvre un espace critique où différentes *directions*, *échelles* et *acteurs* peuvent esquisser de nouveaux imaginaires esthétiques, poser des questions plus complexes sur l'éthique et la justice, et redéfinir la relation entre changement climatique et mobilité.

Afin de permettre cette réorientation critique et d'en examiner les implications théoriques, ce numéro s'appuie sur une variété de récits d'auteurs et d'artistes africains. Reconnaissant que la vulnérabilité environnementale dépasse les frontières nationales, mais aussi que les mondes imaginés dans ces récits ne nécessitent plus forcément de cadres nationaux, ce projet se concentre sur un corpus éclectique traversant différentes géographies et époques. Ce qui les relie, cependant, c'est un ensemble d'hypothèses communes: que les crises environnementales sont un phénomène récurrent dans le Sud global, généré et exacerbé par la conquête coloniale et l'exploitation néocoloniale des ressources naturelles et humaines ; que le changement climatique, par conséquent, n'est pas un événement à venir (contrairement à ce que redoutent ou fantasment les publics occidentaux), mais une composante quotidienne de la vie de nombreuses populations du Sud global ; que la notion d'urgence, et son cortège biopolitique, est politiquement et conceptuellement inadéquate pour repenser le présent et réimaginer l'avenir ; que les crises écologiques résultent toujours de facteurs multiples et non d'une seule cause naturelle, et donc incontrôlable ; et enfin, que le déplacement génère davantage d'identités et de réalités que ne le laissent supposer les discours dominants sur les réfugiés climatiques.

Les articles rassemblés dans ce numéro s'articulent tous autour d'un ensemble de questions fondamentales: a. Comment les productions culturelles africaines envisagent-elles le changement climatique et le déplacement au-delà de l'esthétique du sublime apocalyptique et des récits hyperboliques ? b. Quelles identités et réalités mettent-elles en lumière en rapprochant déplacement et changement climatique dans l'imaginaire narratif ? c. Quelles relations forgent-elles entre vulnérabilité climatique et mobilité ? d. Quelles relations imaginent-elles entre changement climatique et immobilité, en reconnaissant que, pour certains, être contraint de rester est la seule option disponible et viable ? e. Comment redéfinissent-elles le déplacement au-delà des paramètres de l'urgence et des protocoles humanitaires ?

Afin d'élargir le cadre critique nécessaire pour répondre à ces questions, les auteurs adoptent délibérément le déplacement comme orientation méthodologique, à l'intersection des humanités environnementales et des études migratoires. Phénomène évoquant à la fois la mobilité involontaire et la perte d'un habitat, le déplacement semble particulièrement adapté à l'analyse des migrations induites par le climat. Le déplacement est à la fois une réponse au changement climatique et un mouvement. Il est à la fois descriptif (il nomme un phénomène physique qui émerge face à des circonstances extrêmes et précaires) et analytique (il propose des façons de penser ce phénomène). Il constitue un mode de narration des migrations climatiques (en remplacement d'autres cadres conceptuels comme l'apocalypse ou l'extinction, qui produiraient d'autres types de récits culturels et théoriques), mais aussi une méthode d'analyse de ces récits. Il prend en compte les réalités matérielles de la mobilité et crée un espace pour relier diverses questions connexes, car le déplacement mobilise également ce que William Walters appelle puissamment la *viapolitique*: "l'en-route, les lieux sur le chemin"; les moyens par lesquels le déplacement se produit, c'est-à-dire les infrastructures qui permettent ou entravent la mobilité; et "la route ou le voyage" (471). En retraçant les multiples itinéraires que le déplacement inaugure, les articles de ce numéro cherchent ainsi à en problématiser la compréhension habituelle, souvent perçue négativement, et à explorer les multiples façons dont il se manifeste, tout en s'attardant sur la mise en scène du déplacement: ce qui est laissé derrière et ce qu'il en advient, les lieux d'arrivée, et les effets sur les sujets déplacés.

Par exemple, le premier article de Katarzyna Więckowska examine les formes humaines et non humaines de mobilité et d'immobilité provoquées par l'extraction pétrolière, telles qu'elles sont représentées dans *How Beautiful We Were* d'Imbolo Mbue, en cherchant à situer les dommages environnementaux dans les histoires du colonialisme et les réalités de la violence postcoloniale. Dans sa contribution, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz lit *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* d'Alistair Mackay, un roman spéculatif sud-africain, comme une critique des économies néolibérales (moteurs

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de la catastrophe climatique), de l'augmentation corporelle technologique et des coûts psychologiques liés à la vie dans un monde apocalyptique. Agnieszka Podruczna explore l'importance du déplacement dans le court-métrage dystopique *Pumzi* de Wanuri Kahiu, en se concentrant sur l'exploitation du corps, après la crise, en tant que dernière ressource et sur le potentiel régénérateur du mouvement. *War Girls* de Tochi Onyebuchi est analysé par Katarzyna Ostalska en termes de liens entre événements passés et futurs possibles, entre mondes humains et plus-qu'humains. La contribution d'Agnieszka Pantuchowicz porte sur les déplacements coloniaux du Bénin tels que suggérés par l'art contemporain béninois, avec une attention particulière portée aux déplacements historiques et artistiques en tant que réservoirs d'écologies présentes et d'avenirs possibles. Magdalena Malinowska examine comment *Rouge impératrice* de Léonora Miano élargit le champ de l'afrofuturisme en imaginant un avenir africain écologiquement harmonieux, démantelant les héritages coloniaux et capitalistes, redéfinissant les relations homme-nature et replaçant l'Afrique comme force souveraine dans la réinvention des systèmes mondiaux. Ewa Macura-Nnamdi lit la nouvelle "Poison" de Henrietta Rose-Innes, et en particulier sa représentation de la toxicité, comme une critique des eschatologies apocalyptiques et de l'exceptionnalisme humain. Enfin, ce numéro contient aussi deux entretiens avec des écrivains africains et afropéen: l'un avec Osahon Ize-Iyamu (Nigeria), et l'autre avec Laura Nsafou (France, Martinique et République démocratique du Congo).

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Petrocapitalism, displacement, and (im)mobilities in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*

Katarzyna Więckowska

Petrocapitalism, displacement, and (im)mobilities in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*
In this article, I analyse the movement of human and nonhuman bodies in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021). I argue that the depiction of the environmental and social damage caused by oil extraction in the novel resists the dominant discourse of the Anthropocene by refusing to universalise the threats produced by ecological crisis, embedding environmental vulnerability within histories of colonial violence and forced displacement and particularising the bodies that bear the cost of disasters. My reading of toxicity, the flow of capital, and networks of power demonstrates how agency is shaped by mobility, immobility, and attachment to place and points to the possibilities of resistance and change outlined in the book. *How Beautiful We Were* deploys multiple narrators and adopts an innovative way of telling the community's story to convey the multigenerational and ongoing nature of postcolonial trauma. I argue that the use of petro-magic-realism and we-narrative makes the novel an example of collective climate witnessing and provides a means to combat environmental forgetting. Although the shift from forced immobility to forced mobility depicted in Mbue's book may point to dark times ahead, I propose to interpret the focus on children as allowing for imagining the future as a time of positive transformation. **Keywords:** (im)mobility, petrocapitalism, displacement, slow violence, climate witnessing, trauma.

Introduction

In his 2011 book about the slow violence of environmental catastrophes, its damaging effects on communities, and the various types of displacement—"temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological"—that it initiates, Rob Nixon proposes the notion of "displacement without moving" to enable the discussion of not only "the movement of people from their places of belonging" but also "the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (7, 19). Displacement without moving, or stationary displacement, reflects the paradoxical state of "being simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one's living knowledge as one's place loses its life-sustaining features" (19). The destruction of the land dissolves the existing communities and makes them "imaginatively displaced", while the lack of recognition of their experience within the larger national narrative undermines their agency and turns their members into "spectral uninhabitants" of "unimagined communities" (153). Nixon connects such "disappearance" of communities to resource theft, environmental crisis, and modern projects of national development and describes it as part of "actively administered invisibility" (168) that "imaginatively evacuates" particular people from national memory and future and changes their lands into "spaces of amnesia" (151, 153).

In this article, I offer a reading of regimes of (im)mobility in Imbolo Mbue's 2021 novel *How Beautiful We Were*, which depicts the environmental damage caused by oil extraction and the neocolonial practices of petrocapitalism in "the dual crisis of ecology and capital" that Matthew Omelsky calls the African Anthropocene (49). By portraying a community whose members become spectral and who are invisiblised through the lack of recognition by international, national, and local authorities, *How Beautiful We Were* records displacement without moving and the rise of "the environmentalism of the poor", described by Ramachandra Gucha and Joan Martinez-Alier as oppositional actions and behaviours of communities for whom the environment is a source of livelihood (12). In the first part of the article, I focus on displacement, petroviolence, and unimagined communities and

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explore the networks and flows of bodies and toxic substances. The second part deals with mobility justice, (im)mobility, and agency with reference to the control of the movement of humans, resources, and capital that determines the social and power relations depicted in the novel. I place the endeavors to control space and movement in the context of postcolonial trauma and climate witnessing. I conclude the article by analysing the form and narrative structure of the novel as expressing its future orientation and attempting to restore agency to communities in movement.

Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* portrays the experiences of displacement without moving, forced imaginative evacuation, and actively administered invisibility intricately linked to the growth of industrial societies and global capitalism and the ensuing climate crisis in the period known as the Anthropocene. The term "Anthropocene" was proposed in 2000 by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to designate the geological epoch succeeding the Holocene and to emphasise "the growing impacts of human activities" and "the central role of mankind in geology and ecology" from the Industrial Revolution in the latter part of the 18th century onwards (17).[1] The Anthropocene is marked by population growth, excessive resource use, and environmental deterioration, including pollution, ocean acidification, deforestation, urbanisation, biodiversity loss, and species extinction. Will Steffen, Crutzen, and John McNeill link the start of the Anthropocene with the enormous increase in the use of fossil fuels and warn that the pervasive influence of human activities, particularly in the period of the Great Acceleration after 1945, "is pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*" (614). While the term Anthropocene usefully emphasises anthropogenic impacts on the planet and the global sense of uncertainty regarding the future, it also erases differences between people by subsuming all humans under the category of species in a universalising gesture which, as Marco Caracciolo argues, "reflects a set of global historical forces that originated in Western modernity" (10). Jason W. Moore and Justin McBrien draw attention to the role of economic systems in the planetary influence of human activities. Moore proposes the name "Capitalocene" to describe the period beginning in the 16th century and defines capitalism as "a way of organizing nature as a whole" (7). McBrien highlights extinction as the defining feature of the Necrocene period, the "fundamental biogeological moment" of the Capitalocene when capital "necrotizes the entire planet […], unfolding a slow violence" that ultimately leads to "the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples" (116). In a critical intervention, Kathryn Yusoff situates the beginning of the Anthropocene in colonisation (62) and questions the race politics of the period by pointing to the erasure of histories and fates of those who were crucial to carrying through the Industrial Revolution. Stressing the continuing legacy of colonial systems and modes of thinking, she writes: "The Anthropocene is a project initiated and executed through anti-Blackness and inhuman subjective modes, from 1492 to the present" (62). Similarly, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd see "the problem of colonialism as responsible for contemporary environmental crisis" (763) and place the start of the Anthropocene in the colonisation of the Americas: refusing to universalise the concept, they argue that it is more accurate to describe the "humanity" of the Anthropocene as "petrochemical companies and those invested in and profiting from petrocapitalism and colonialism" (765). Davis and Todd claim that, to combat climate change, it is necessary to decolonise the Anthropocene, including the relations between humans and the more-than-human world, through embracing Indigenous knowledge and modes of self-governance (775).[2] The recognition of the importance of making kin and decolonising Earthly relationships distinguishes Donna Haraway's description of the Chthulucene, in which she decenters the human element by emphasising more-than-human entanglements and processes of "living-with and dying-with each other potently" (2).

The concept of the Anthropocene and the critical discussions that followed its introduction demonstrate the significance of human and nonhuman (im)mobilities to current ways of thinking and living and connect climate change with displacements accompanying colonisation, globalisation, and petrocapitalism. Andrew Baldwin posits that "the relation between climate change and human mobility is amongst the most fundamental of our time" (516) and Arun Saldanha stresses the crisis of mobility that accompanies the Anthropocene, which he describes as "a capitalist ecology of distributions and migrations in crisis" (151). Focusing on mobility in the discussion of climate change reveals continuing dependencies and inequalities that contribute to the current crisis and provides the means to construct livable futures because, as Davis and Todd claim, "the resiliency of people across the world for collective continuance is dependent upon this freedom of movement which is systematically denied by the state forms of governance we currently have in place" (775). Accordingly, in this article, I focus on the regulation of movement in *How Beautiful We Were* and approach the novel as questioning the universalism of Anthropocenic discourse that "legitimates and justifies the racialised inequalities that are bound up in social

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geologies" (Yusoff 22). I also argue that the novel highlights the need to pay attention to "transgenerational haunting for the injustices of the past" (Demos 10) in discussions of environmental damage and the future.

Displacement, petroviolence, and toxicity

How Beautiful We Were describes the changes to the lives of the inhabitants of Kosawa, a fictional African village close to a big river, brought about by the activities of Pexton, an American oil company that moves into the region after oil is discovered. The novel depicts the environmental damage caused by oil extraction and the community's attempts to stop it by adopting a range of strategies: appealing to the authorities, informing the international public about the government's and oil company's pernicious activities, attempting to implement democratic processes in the country, and raising armed resistance against the company and corrupt officials. The discovery of oil brings violence to the region that is ubiquitous and invisible and dispersed across time and space (Nixon 2–3). The violence has delayed effects and gradually makes the place uninhabitable and deprives the community of their livelihood: all life disappears from the big river covered with oil and toxic waste, "the smell of Kosawa [becomes] the smell of crude", the noise from the oil field is constant, and the air turns heavy (*How Beautiful We Were* 32). At the end of the book, the process of environmental degradation culminates with the forced removal of the inhabitants and the digging of a new oil well in the now deserted village, which is too toxic to accommodate living beings.

Although the place remains unnamed in the book, there are many similarities between the unidentified big river near which the inhabitants of Kosawa live and the Niger Delta, allegedly the most seriously oil-damaged territory in the world (Steiner).[3] The mode of operation of the oil company in the book follows the Nigerian "blood oil" model, described by the conservation biologist Richard Steiner as producing as much oil as quickly and as cheaply as possible at the cost of the safety of the local community and environment. As he writes, the "blood oil" disaster is a mixture of "environmental devastation, a violent militancy […], human rights abuses, corporate greed and exploitation, epidemic corruption, massive oil theft, sabotage, repression". In Mbue's book, the degradation of the environment displaces the inhabitants of Kosawa without moving, forcing them to live in a place that has lost its life-sustaining features for years and abandon it once it becomes uninhabitable. Although members of the community make repeated attempts to defend their right to the land, they fail because of ubiquitous corruption, global indifference, and the dependence of the country's president on Pexton. The government has given Kosawa to the American oil company, leaving the inhabitants without any legal or political protection. In turn, members of the community rebel, even though they are aware that "we could do nothing to them [Pexton] but they could do anything to us, because they owned us" (*How Beautiful* 11). Like the spaces of amnesia described by Nixon, the village becomes "ghosted" and sacrificed in the name of progress and development; the authorities' refusal to recognise its inhabitants' rights as citizens of the country makes them virtually invisible.[4] Representatives of the community are punished for seeking protection or help from the government: Malabo, the protagonist Thula's father, and his companions never return from their expedition to Bézam, the capital city, which they undertake to inform the authorities of the ecological devastation of their village. Thula's uncle, Bongo, and three other men are executed for taking representatives of Pexton hostage in a futile attempt to draw the government's attention to their problems. Finally, Thula's age-mates, who resort to kidnapping and killing the company's employees to fight for their village, are shot by His Excellency's soldiers and their bodies are transported to a nearby town, where they are laid "at the entrance to the big market so that passersby could take pictures in their minds, spread the story far and wide" (352). The community's efforts to have their precarity recognised by citizens of America end in failure because, although the Movement for the Restoration of the Dignity of Subjugated Peoples helps them file a lawsuit against Pexton in the United States, their case is rejected. While recognising the Kosawa inhabitants' claim as valid, the American judge orders them to take their case to a court in their own country because "America has to respect other countries' boundaries" (343). Juxtaposed against the lack of territorial restrictions in the flow of capital and oil, the court's decision reveals the arbitrariness and artificiality of national divisions and shows that the existence of the border itself produces and perpetuates violence (Jones 11). In practice, the verdict denies retribution to the community due to the corrupted justice system in their country, where "[t]he people who owned those courts were the same people who had given [their] land to Pexton" (*How Beautiful* 343).

Amitav Ghosh links oil extraction with quelling any democratic aspirations (149), and Michael Watts describes petroviolence as creating "a […] culture of terror and a space of death" through the collaboration of the state and transnational capital (9). Mbue's novel depicts the suppression of democratic procedures in a country ruled by a corrupt leader who is dependent on oil companies. It also presents the global refusal to recognise as

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grievable (Butler) the lives of victims of the resource extraction industry. The inhabitants of Kosawa are left helpless by international bodies, whereas Pexton is presented as having the necropolitical power to dictate "who is able to live and who must die" and to designate specific types of bodies as dispensable (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 66, 68). To voice their protest, members of the community use "weapons of the weak", including individual resistance, mass demonstrations, lawsuits, and taking oil officials as temporary "hostages" (Swyngedouw 151–3). They also follow Thula as the initiator and leader of the struggle for democratic rule in the country, endorsing her belief that "[n]o one has the right to make us prisoners on our land" (*How Beautiful* 213). As a leader, Thula uses the knowledge gained during her education in the United States, thanks to a scholarship from the Restoration Movement, and the awareness of global justice movements. Her activism has been inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, Franz Fanon, and Karl Marx, and her leadership is an important reminder that "women in Africa have occupied important roles, including as rulers, since the precolonial era" (Iheka 135). [5] As a teacher and speaker at rallies across the country, Thula uses her freedom to move to make others "perceive the reality of their oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (Freire 30). The driving force for their struggle and transformation is the land, which is presented in the book as a source of nurturance and dignity, as "the most meaningful" and "most essential value" (Fanon 44).

How Beautiful We Were manifests the close link between land and people by highlighting the movement of toxic elements between human bodies, water, and soil. The deaths of children in Kosawa are the first sign that warns the community that their land is becoming uninhabitable and amplifies the sense of displacement without moving. By linking the degradation of their habitat with the children's death, the novel depicts human and nonhuman bodies as entangled and transcorporeal and points to the inherent porosity of borders, including those between the local and the global or personal and political. Stacy Alaimo describes transcorporeality as "the transit between body and environment" that "is exceedingly local", yet "tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption often reveals global networks of social injustice, lax regulations, and environmental degradation" (15). Alaimo argues that acknowledging the permeability of bodies makes it impossible to separate them from the surrounding reality or to extricate the material self "from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial" (20). The bodies of the inhabitants of Kosawa are absorbed in networks that have local material effects but are determined by flows of transnational capital, corrupted political systems, and cultural traditions that bind them to their land in ties of responsibility and reciprocal care. Cajetan Iheka describes oil as a network form because of its "transnational and transoceanic portability, its slipperiness and ability to bridge and widen the gulf between the sites of its drilling and the privileged environments of its use" (107). The movement of oil starts with the land and delimits the spread of toxicity unequally distributed among places and people in a way which, to echo Caracciolo's critique of the Anthropocene, reflects and reinforces "a set of historical forces that originated in Western modernity" (10) and colonialism.

By highlighting the environmental damage to the land and human bodies, Mbue's novel uncovers the hidden networks that regulate the motions of toxicity and are complicit in producing unimagined communities that become displaced without moving. The transcorporeal bond between humans and land and the ongoing environmental degradation leads to the emergence of solastalgia, which Glenn Albrecht describes as "a place-based emotion" that appears when "the place becomes literally toxic, and [...] one's sense of place becomes negative" (37). Solastalgia is "the lived experience of negative environmental change" and "the homesickness you have when you are still at home", caused by witnessing the disappearance of one's place of living (200). The inhabitants of Kosawa are transformed without moving as they experience the gradual disintegration of their home and the loss of their identity derived from their connection to the place and community. The word "emotion", as Albrecht reminds us, is linked to movement through "its origins in the Latin *movēre*, 'to move,' and *ēmovēre*, 'to agitate, disturb'", so that emotions can be understood as simply "that which moves us" (1). *How Beautiful We Were* presents the Anthropocene as the "age of solastalgia", pointing to the future of lasting "chronic distress" and "the loss of loved 'homes' and places at all scales" (Albrecht 10–1). Albrecht writes about the current predominance of Earth-destroying emotions (1), and the novel illustrates this by depicting the "victories" of Pexton and His Majesty's government and the disappearance of Kosawa and the community. While the book seems to suggest that negative emotions will predominate in the future, its emphasis on transcorporeality and unceasing movement of substances, bodies, and feelings points to the possibility of change and the potential of forming nurturing and life-affirming emotions.

(Im)mobilities, agency, and witnessing

Mimi Sheller defines mobility injustice as a movement of resources that works to empower some places and disempower others. She illustrates this by giving the example of the extraction and export of resources from a poor country by a multinational corporation with little profit but much environmental damage to the country and its citizens (13). Such a situation is described in Mbue's novel, where the extraction of natural resources "goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to free them as a way of forcing them to scatter over broad areas" (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 86). *How Beautiful We Were* begins with forced immobility when the community members are displaced without moving; it ends with their forced mobility when they are ordered to leave Kosawa and disperse across the country and abroad. Within this general framework, the novel depicts a series of small- and large-scale mobilities of journeys to school, work, family, other villages and towns, and trips abroad that testify to the complex ways in which humans negotiate forms of movement and relations of power and complicate the opposition between mobility and immobility.[6] Despite the environmental degradation of Kosawa, its inhabitants do not want to leave and decide to fight the company and government to save the place and their homes. In their case, immobility can be seen as voluntary rather than forced and as a decision that requires agency: as Kerilyn Schewel argues, "staying also reflects and requires agency; it is a conscious choice that is renegotiated and repeated throughout the life course" (330). Although some consider relocating to protect their children, most inhabitants choose to stay, including Thula, who returns home after completing her studies in the United States. Most of them "do not wish to migrate and are unable to do so" and represent the category of "acquiescent immobility" (Schewel 336). The determination not to move is vividly presented through Bongo's dream to protect his home by turning himself into "a wall that stretches from the sky to the inner core of the earth, allowing no pipelines to pass through, no poison to flow into our water" (*How Beautiful* 83). The image of the transcorporeal body morphing into a protective wall locates agency in the refusal to move and points to voluntary immobility as a potential strategy of resistance. Still, Bongo's dream only temporarily empowers him to stand up for his community—his act of resistance and the decision to imprison and immobilise representatives of Pexton lead to his death. In the end, the community's resolution to remain cannot be sustained because of the threat of state violence against those who refuse to go, but also because the place transforms into an unknown and hostile entity, where things reveal their power and "curious ability […] to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 6).

Climate change-related movements "involve a wide range of mobilities and immobilities" that are politically motivated, involve disturbance to everyday mobilities and development of adaptive behaviors, and interact with nonhuman mobilities of shifting ecosystems (Boas *et al.* 3367, 3374). The movements of the inhabitants of Kosawa intersect with and are determined by those of animal species, plant life, toxic substances, and fluids like water, whose poisonous effects necessitate the import of safely bottled liquids. The difference between clean and contaminated water and air seems to set the border between the village and Gardens, the company headquarters, where the employees live with their families. The inhabitants of Kosawa believe that Gardens is not polluted because Pexton protects its people until they notice that children and women have disappeared from the place; only the workers are left, suffering from the same diseases that have plagued the community. Changes in the movements of water, oil, and air reshape both places indiscriminately and determine the mobilities of humans and nonhumans, demonstrating that "the mobility of one group can be structurally implicated in the (im)mobility of another" (Saldanha 153) and that the groups may not be only human. In the novel, petroleum is the key nonhuman agent that determines human and more-than-human (im)mobilities and power relations.

The "petro-magic" of oil promises "wealth without work", which is undermined by the novel's use of petro-magic-realism as the means to puncture "the illusions associated with oil" and to "reimagine" the literary and politically "unimagined" communities and populations (Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta" 212–4).[7] Drawing on Stephen Slemon's warning against turning magical realism into "a monumentalizing category" and "a single locus upon which the massive problem of difference in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass" (4089), Jennifer Wenzel argues for re-imagining the complex histories of the Niger Delta in modes that move beyond staple representations of the "resource curse" ("Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" 213). Similarly to magical realism, which can be seen as "the mode of a conflicted consciousness" that discloses the antagonism between various views of culture and history (Wilson 222), petro-magic-realism "combines magical transmogrifications and fantastic landscapes with the monstrous-but-mundane violence of oil extraction, the state violence that supports it, and the environmental

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harm it causes", thereby reimagining, re-politicising, and re-historicising "the resource curse" (Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" 217). *How Beautiful We Were* portrays the violence of oil extraction by stressing the degree to which it has permeated the everyday life of the community and their acceptance of the damage it causes. This is evident in the children's comments and their matter-of-fact remarks on the deaths of their age-mates (see *How Beautiful* 33, 72). The book depicts landscapes that are "recognizably fantastic" but also "recognizably devastated" (Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" 219). It shows the devastation of land progressing alongside the erosion of culture, communal practices, and belief systems that may subvert and oppose the corporate logic of extraction through their insistence on compassion, reciprocity, and care as the basis of the community's organisation. This is conveyed by the story of the beginning of Kosawa with a blood pact between three human brothers and a leopard, whom they freed from a trap so that she could return to her children, and who reciprocated by giving them the territory for their village (*How Beautiful* 30). Juxtaposing the petro-magical promise of quick progress against the slow violence of environmental damage, the book presents the inhabitants of Kosawa as actively engaged in remaking their homes and routes, though within the limits imposed by the larger national and global power structures.

Mbue's novel shows how the flow of water, oil, and pollution combined with people's movements and practices turn Kosawa into a homeplace, thus demonstrating that mobility and place are "mutually constitutive", and that place is formed by "the intersection of mobilities, at different rhythms, scales, and intensities" (Ticktin and Youatt 7–8). The varying intensities of mobilities within and outside the community include Thula's attempts to transform the country into a different place by organising meetings and rallies in villages, towns, and districts to prepare the citizens for Liberation Day, the beginning of the revolution when men and women would "march in protest on a single day, in every town, in every village, all across the nation, fists clenched up and chanting, until the walls of the regime fell down flat" (*How Beautiful* 296). Thula's activism recognises the importance of the co-constitutive relationship of mobility and place, and although the protests fail to bring down the regime, they carve new mobile places and itineraries of resistance and restore to the participants (temporary) freedom of movement. Freeing mobility from corporate and state restrictions evokes the experience of regaining the right to move against the forced migrations and containment imposed by slavery and colonialism; it reaches back to what Achille Mbembe describes as "African precolonial understandings of [human and nonhuman] movement in space" and the perception of borders as "always porous and permeable" ("The idea of a borderless world").[8] Mbembe's idea of a borderless world links "the freedom of self-determination with the aspiration to move freely" (Ticktin and Youatt 10). The protagonists of Mbue's novel struggle to regain their rights to move and stay, and although some of them seem to succeed, their attempts are curbed by the environmental degradation in the Anthropocene and its (unrecognised) implementation of past mobility regimes. *How Beautiful We Were* presents ecological crisis as becoming one more type of violence within the "collective, ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence" (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* 4) that Stef Craps describes as distinguishing postcolonial trauma: rather than the individualised trauma caused by a terrifying event (Craps, *Postcolonial* 31), postcolonial trauma encompasses experiences of multigeneration violence and responds to "multiplicities of violence, suffering, and abuse that ensue from various forms of colonialism" (Iheka 110).

The multigenerational and ongoing nature of postcolonial trauma is captured in the novel by the choice of multiple narrators and by a collective and plural way of storytelling that uses the group as the speaker. *How Beautiful We Were* features several narrators, all members of the Nangi family: Thula, her uncle Bongo, her mother Sachel, her grandmother Yaya, and her younger brother Juba. Every other chapter adopts the perspective of "The Children", Thula's age-mates. The use of multiple narrators enables the presentation of various perspectives and timescales and differing attitudes to corporate actions. The events in the novel cover the period of intensive oil extraction and militarised government interventions from 1980 to 2020; elderly characters like Yaya reminisce about the region's past experiences of slavery and forced labor, which stresses the continuity of the violence. Children as narrators present a unique situation where the group is the speaker, which makes it possible to observe the formation of the community and the mechanisms and relations within the group. Natalya Bekhta calls this narrative situation the we-narrative, where the narrator is "capable of acting collectively, creating collective (common) knowledge, and expressing shared mental states" (182). The homodiegetic we-narrator "communicates information about group membership and thus performs a general discursive function of creating a sense of belonging and difference" (53), illustrating the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion within and outside the group as well as expressing the group's ethos (113). Initially, the first-person plural encompasses all Thula's age-mates, but the size of the

group gradually diminishes as some die, some move to another place, and others leave disturbed by the growing radicalism of the group's actions against Pexton. By the novel's end, there are only five we-narrators left, but they continue to be supported and sheltered by the rest of the community. The use of the we-narrative allows for setting the community apart from other groups and positioning it against the corporation and the government while at the same time portraying it as an internally diversified and dynamic set of individuals whose ethos also undergoes transformation. The narrative situation complicates the simple division into "us" and "them", allowing readers to witness conflicts within the group and learn about the motifs of those who continue to fight or decide to leave. Significantly, we-narrators not only inform readers about the values, beliefs, and goals of the group but the "we" is performative, "creating something that did not exist before" (Bekhta 61). Forming and belonging to the community grants agency to the displaced and immobilised, giving them the power to act as well as bear witness and testify to the ecological degradation of their life environment.

Writing about the current environmental crisis, Shela Sheikh argues that it requires a new mode of human and nonhuman witnessing that is directed towards the future and that is not a singular act but "an ongoing process that entails the simultaneous registration (witnessing) of experiences and representation (bearing witness) to a public" (147). It is a situation in which "the witness can no longer be a solitary figure; rather, the witness must instead be *but one* within a collectivity" (148). The group narrator of *How Beautiful We Were* provides an example of such collective witnessing and of how to (imaginatively) capture the slow and "ongoing violence that is likely [to] spill over into the future" (154). Considering the future-oriented practices of witnessing and violence, it is significant that the chapters narrated in the first-person plural are titled "The Children" and that the dedication opening the novel reads: "For my beautiful, beautiful children." The inclusion of child narrators highlights the need to care for the future: it makes it possible to question the existing social rules and modes of behaviour, inquire into their formation, and examine their impact on future generations. Such narrators bring to the fore issues of intergenerational climate justice and the obligation to consider the future effects of current actions and decisions. Bektha proposes "approaching we-narration as an especially apt technique for exemplifying the social nature of knowledge [...] and for laying bare some of its ideological implications" (134). Mbue's novel allows readers to observe the changing beliefs of we-narrators as they grow up and learn about social rules and power hierarchies, in the process uncovering their arbitrariness and bias. The novel stresses the children's simple naivety by depicting their repeated appeals to common humanity based on compassion; during a meeting with Pexton representatives, for example, the young hope that "the men would look into our eyes and feel something for us. We were children, like their children, and we wanted them to recognize that" (*How Beautiful* 5). This emphasis on innocence may be seen as either a call for cultivating the emotions that Albrecht calls Earth-creating and building a society based on reciprocal care or as an indictment of adults for "all the ways the world has failed to protect its children" (*How Beautiful* 251). The biblical epigraph with which the novel begins seems to promise a better future, indicating that "[t]he people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned", but the fate of the Kosawa community, their final dispersal, and the environmental degradation of their living place point to a much darker time ahead.

The use of we-narrative and homodiegetic narrators in *How Beautiful We Were* restores agency to the group that has been pushed into the space of amnesia and helps reimagine the community that has become spectral. Yet, the novel finishes with the we-narrators having died and other members of the community surviving but having dispersed, no longer emplaced but globally scattered. The children of the children narrators are free to move, but their mobility is restricted by the prohibition against entering ecologically devastated places like Kosawa and the community dissolves when its members become disconnected from the place that made them into a group. I propose to read the pessimistic ending of the novel and its nostalgic view of the past by referring to what Craps describes as the problem of society's environmental memory loss, where each generation, not knowing what a place looked like before, accepts the current state as the norm, losing the ability to recognise the extent of the environmental damage that has occurred ("Lost Words and Lost Worlds: Combatting Environmental Generational Amnesia" 38). Craps argues that literary and cultural works have the potential to counteract the generational amnesia (41). The we-narrative and multiple perspectives of *How Beautiful We Were* turn the book into an act of collective witnessing and a record of the movement of oil, people, emotions, and memories that may help intervene in the global processes of environmental forgetting and make the future "a site of infinite potential rather than foreclosure" (Baldwin 526).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that place, forced (im)mobility, and displacement play the key role in the critique of existing mobility regimes and petroviolence in Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*. I have demonstrated that the focus on children in the novel expresses the desire for a better future, whose arrival is prevented by the environmental degradation of their homeplace and the colonial violence that lives on in the traumatising effects of globalisation and oil extraction, the restrictions of mobility imposed on humans and nonhumans, and the unequal distribution of toxicity. I have situated the discussion of Mbue's book within the various conceptualisations of the Anthropocene to point to the (im)mobility of ideas in critical discourse and highlight the importance of the book's decolonising depiction of how the Earth-changing activities of some humans obliterate the ongoing crises of others. *How Beautiful We Were* offers a record of the displacement of a community gradually deprived of rights and space through acts of actively administered invisibility that reach back to the colonial mechanisms of the past. The inhabitants of Kosawa are physically displaced and emotionally "transported without moving" as they watch their place of living become toxic and their community dissolve with the disappearance of their homes. By focusing on the role the village plays for the community, the book shows that mobility and place are mutually constitutive and depicts the role nonhuman entities play in delineating spaces as (un)livable. The mode of petro-magic-realism unmasks the slow violence that devastates the land and uncovers the destructive ways of living that hide behind the false petro-magical promise of instant success. Significantly, by focusing on community dynamics, the novel creates the space for collectively witnessing and testifying to petroviolence and climate change, thereby restoring agency to the group and enabling movement into the future.

Notes

1. In March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences rejected the proposal to adopt the Anthropocene as Earth's new epoch. Still, it recommended that environmental scholars, social scientists, and the public use the term as it is "an invaluable descriptor in human-environment interactions" (Witze). In this article, I use the term to refer to the period of human activity leading to unprecedented environmental damage and a critical concept that has provoked a discussion that can unsettle the colonial and anthropocentric legacies of modernity.
2. Numerous Indigenous scholars demonstrate that Indigenous peoples have been long exposed to the processes described as specific to the Anthropocene, such as biodiversity loss or relocation. Kyle Whyte, for example, describes settler colonialism "as a form of human expansion that continues to inflict anthropogenic environmental change on indigenous peoples—most recently under the guise of climate destabilization" (207).
3. In a podcast about writing *How Beautiful We Were*, Mbue has pointed to her country of origin, Cameroon, and Nigeria as the key sources of inspiration. She also mentions the influence of the story of the struggle of the Ogoni people against Shell in the Niger Delta, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and reports about ecological catastrophes and resistance to oil companies in other parts of the world, including Standing Rock, Ecuador, and the BP oil spill in America (Mbue and Venugopal).
4. The situation can also be described as an effect of borderisation and the creation of spaces which Mbembe calls death-worlds: "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (*Necropolitics* 92).
5. The novel lists Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), and Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) as inspiring Thula's actions.
6. I draw here on Schewel's argument that immobility is a process that is as complex and dynamic as mobility and that agency is frequently (and wrongly) conflated with human action and movement (329–30).
7. Interestingly, Wenzel describes magical realist texts as similar to oil because "both are commodity exports of the global south in high demand in the northern hemisphere" ("Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature" 456), thereby pointing to the reification of literary forms and their role in imaginatively immobilizing populations.
8. Mbembe writes that "you cannot think of people, without thinking of nonhumans" ("Borderless world").

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Capitalism against the planet: Posthuman ecocriticism in Alistair Mackay's *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way*

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Capitalism against the planet: Posthuman ecocriticism in Alistair Mackay's *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way*

In this article, I examine various dimensions of displacement resulting from the environmental crisis envisaged in the speculative debut novel of the South African author Alistair Mackay: *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* (2022). The theoretical framework is located in the area of posthumanist studies but also involves elements of trauma theory, as the issue of psychological displacement is viewed through E. Ann Kaplan's concept of pre-trauma, a paralysing anxiety about the future disaster evoked by the scenarios of the near apocalypse. I also offer a brief review of the political and economic conditions of post-apartheid South Africa, discussing the country's adoption of neoliberal tenets. Since Mackay's novel represents climate change as the result of ecologically hazardous activities of multinational corporations which stem from their colonial/imperialist commodification of the natural environment, my analysis draws from ecocritical African studies and contemporary critiques of capitalism, thus situating the climatic catastrophe of the Anthropocene in the context of destructive practices of the neoliberalist economy. Furthermore, in this article, I employ the posthumanist perspective (Hayles; Braidotti) to discuss the issue of body augmentation, presenting the reservations of Mackay's characters towards dehumanising effects of integrating our bodies with ultramodern technologies. Finally, a pro-active ecological endeavour of tree-planting is examined in the context of Donna Haraway's notion of the Chthulucene as well as a long-standing African appreciation of the forest—as a biological asset, regulating climate and farming, and as a spiritual one, the abode of deities. **Keywords:** Alistair Mackay, ecocriticism, South Africa, apocalyptic fiction, posthumanism, environment, capitalism, neoliberalism, colonialism.

When a protagonist of Alistair Mackay's novel *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* (2022) addresses the progressing environmental disaster engendered by anthropogenic climate change, he alludes to the strategies people might pursue to confront the predicament:

> Maybe madness is the only sane reaction to the madness we've built around us. Look at what we have to cope with now, with our poor little barely-changed-since-we-were-hunter-gatherers brains. Think about how peaceful we felt at the reforestation festival all those years ago, planting trees. We were filthy and gross, but we were happy. Just two days away from the city did the trick. The wilderness helps so much, and we've torn down every wilderness. (*It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* 227)

Possible routes of escape involve various forms of displacement located in different spheres: not only physical and psychological but also technological, political, and ethical. The invoked "madness" refers not just to psychiatric issues but also to religious fanaticism; a tree-planting project is one of the proactive ecological endeavours mentioned in the narrative; newly devised technologies allow improving human unevolved "hunter-gatherer" brains and enhancing living conditions for the privileged elites. In this article, I will employ the theoretical framework derived from posthumanist studies in order to examine the dimensions of displacement evoked by the environmental crisis envisaged in Mackay's speculative novel. I will, among others, investigate whether, and to what extent, the novel captures the specificity of African ecocritical attitudes, which represent "the

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Southern environmentalisms of the poor (often genuinely heroic and authentic)" as different from "the Northern environmentalisms of the rich (always potentially vainglorious and hypocritical)" by means of recognising the existence of "the ecological gap between coloniser and colonised" (Huggan and Tiffin 2). A brief review of the political and economic circumstances of post-apartheid South Africa, where spirited democratisation coincided with the eager espousal of neoliberal tenets, will allow my analysis to relate the climate catastrophe of the Anthropocene to environmentally destructive practices of late capitalism.

Environmental studies concerning Africa usually connect postcolonial and ecological issues, as this correspondence can provide an effective "means of challenging continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance" (Huggan and Tiffin 2). Just as in the previous centuries the colonial enterprise both objectified indigenous people, often using them as a source of slave labour, and illegitimately took possession of their land, often terraforming it to meet the European standards, now "the second colonial pillage" of the neoliberal economy (Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* 244) is equally insensitive to environmentally hazardous activities which cause the suffering of the people and to the undertakings which can precipitate the agony of the planet. The political-economic context also remains the same: Africa still endures "colonially inherited patterns of resource appropriation", which callously despoils its nature, and the external powers still aim "to erase African worldviews about the environment" (Mushonga and Ogude 2, 5). Postcolonial industrial and business models currently pursued on the continent are based, like previously, on extractivism: given "the absence of processes of structural transformation and the persistence of primary commodity dependence", African economies continue to rely on "extractive cores", and foreign profits still arise from "mining, oil and gas extraction and export-oriented agriculture" (Greco 511). The situation is aggravated by the "uneven geographical distribution of climate change effects". Because of Africa's geographic and economic specificity, its population is particularly vulnerable to climatic afflictions (Mushonga and Ogude 12). The actions of multinational corporations are driven by shareholders' profit, totally disregarding the well-being of local communities whose living conditions and traditional occupations they wreck. For instance, as Ogaga Okuyade observes, the operations of Western oil companies in Nigeria, which have often resulted in the compulsive evacuation of local people, have brought "not only social marginalization but also destruction of the ecology and decomposition of culture" ("Ecocultures and the African Literary Tradition" 470). Just as earlier, the all-too-familiar colonialist logic "privilege[d] dominant cultures above colonised ones", creating "the rationale for the colonial attempt to civilise indigenous societies because the lands of the indigenous people are assumed—from Eurocentric arrogance—to be underdeveloped and empty", today capitalist enterprises lead to "development-induced displacement" which is "devastating to the psyche of the displaced" (Okuyade, "Ecocultures" 469–70). It is only natural, then, that "African eco-criticism did not escape the infusion of colonialism or its aftermath, which is still strongly felt both in African politics and environment. This infusion will [...] form the basis of differentiation from eco-criticism in the North" (Okolo 24).[1]

It seems particularly apt that the novel discussed in this article—a literary intervention on the issue of anthropogenic climate change chiefly fuelled by the neoliberalist economy—should be situated in South Africa. The country is not only the continent's largest coal provider, supplying as much as 90% of coal burned in Africa (Finkeldey 3), but also its most serious greenhouse gas producer, its CO_2 emissions being "twenty times higher than even those of the United States" when measured against per capita Gross Domestic Product (Bond, "Social Movements and Corporate Social Responsibility in South Africa" 1047). South Africa's exorbitant carbon emissions and other forms of pollution result both from the country's customary dependence on electricity provided by coal-fired power plants and the low quality of its coal, which has meagre calorific value and generates high lead, mercury, and sulphur dioxide emissions (Zerizghi *et al.*). Unsurprisingly, business and financial institutions most responsible for fossil fuel-related air pollution in South Africa—like elsewhere—are international key market players and driving forces of the neoliberal economy.

As it happens, South African political transformations that occurred after the African National Congress (ANC) came into power in 1994 did little to remove deep-rooted social inequality. In previous years, local Marxist activists such as Neville Alexander maintained that the struggle to abolish apartheid would also vanquish capitalism because "racial domination and capital accumulation [are] inextricably linked" (Desai 3543). Using the concept of racial capitalism, they recognised that the two formations are not only closely entwined, but that they can work for mutual support.[2] However, despite the ANC's heartening promises, most commentators agree that South Africa's transition has only "reproduced racial capitalism while transforming the dynamics of exploitation and exclusion" (Clarno 34) so that, as Alexander himself concluded, "what we used to call the apartheid-capitalist

system has simply given way to the post-apartheid-capitalist system" (64). In a general critical opinion, despite repealing many apartheid discriminatory regulations such as suffrage laws, South Africa's ANC government retained economic apartheid through its neoliberal policies. Although the ANC openly contested free-market economy models before the 1994 elections, its "largely socialist agenda" was soon "convert[ed] to neoliberal orthodoxy" under unrelenting pressure from the World Bank and other international institutions (Narsiah 30). The Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme, introduced in 1996, observed all "standard neoliberal economic principles [including] deficit reduction, low inflation, trade liberalization, privatization, tax cuts, and deregulation" (Schneider 43). Understandably, the restructuring policy undertaken in the early post-apartheid years "reproduced racial capitalism while leading to important shifts in the racial composition of the elite, the dynamics of exploitation, and the constitution of a racialized surplus population", which all resulted in the emergence of a new Black capitalist class and the growth of Black middle class (Clarno and Vally 3439). Rather than expected general social improvement, the transformation brought South Africa's new democracy "a low-growth, high-poverty, unemployment-ridden, ever more unequal, capital flight prone, volatile, vulnerable, elite-oriented economy" (Bond, "Social" 1038). Neoliberal discourse "has completely overshadowed non-institutional discourses of the marginalised subaltern—the poor and landless black South Africans", voicing the newly adapted ideology of the government and the neo-colonial schemes of international magnates instead (Ndhlovu 133). Needless to say, the colonial extractive patterns, which generated an environmental footprint that is harmful to the land and local communities, have endured, as "the 'historical bloc' around fossil fuels in South Africa remained intact under the ANC" (Finkeldey 38).

The novel examined here, Mackay's 2022 literary debut *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way*, voices acute anxiety about human-induced climate change on two levels: it depicts local effects of the crisis, situating these effects in the South African socio-political and ecological context, and represents a planetary scale of the disaster. The book is set in Cape Town and features two interspersing narrative lines: one covers a 15-year span (resuming in the indeterminate near future), which leads up to an undescribed ecological apocalyptic event (or a series of events) called "the Change", the other covers a brief period of time in the aftermath of this catastrophe.[3] The first story, which encompasses the bulk of the novel, recounts the fates of three gay friends, Luthando, Viwe, and Malcolm, before the impending climate disaster. The second focuses on Milo, a child who lives in the slums in a part of the city that now, after oceans have risen, is an island. The stories converge when we learn that Milo is Luthando's son and that the unidentified refugee he takes care of is Malcolm.

The chronological organisation of the novel's main narrative that positions the plot on four-time planes—fifteen, twelve, nine, and two years before "the Change"—allows the reader to witness incremental steps of environmental degradation, which correspond to the rapid process of global warming in the Anthropocene. Focused on the plot and characters based in South Africa, the story presents both regional and global consequences of climate change: unprecedented spells of hot and dry weather first lead to severe droughts, then to wildfires spreading not only through a subtropical zone but also the Siberian tundra and Canadian forests. Concomitant weather phenomena include devastating anomalies such as cyclones and floods. Rising sea levels cause the inundation of vast coastal areas. In Cape Town, downtown skyscrapers are seized by the ocean, and the residential areas shrink, becoming either submerged in water or captured by flames. As the inhabitable land dwindles worldwide, hosts of refugees seek survival through relocation. This rescue option is not available to animals and plants: wildlife perishes en masse and fast.

The other, shorter narrative line, dated as "Now", takes place in a menacing, bleak, impoverished residential area called Kapelitsha. This designation is an obvious distortion of "Khayelitsha", the name of a township situated on the Cape Flats in the Cape Town municipal area. It is a densely populated, economically disadvantaged district inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Black Africans, mostly native Xhosa speakers (the name means new home in Xhosa). Although rising sea levels have made Mackay's Kapelitsha an island, it retains its prototype's character of sinister urban slums, exaggerating some of its features. Miserable inhabitants live in austere and insecure conditions in primitive shacks; some of them have moved to occupy dilapidated skyscrapers half-submerged in water, with all windows broken, "hundreds of families per floor" (*It Doesn't* 8). The island is not only repulsive, replete with bloated dead bodies, but highly dangerous. An unguarded child can become prey to hungry dwellers who resort to cannibalism. Provisions are scarce: water can only be taken from collection points where one has to queue for hours and the basic source of food for Milo's family is protein procured from fly maggots. People are active mostly at night because during the daytime "stillness hours" the air is too hot to breathe, and

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quick movement makes one's body temperature rise excessively, which leads to organ failure and death. Adverse environmental conditions cause frequent birth malformations and infant deaths. Milo's father's stories about "alarm clocks and cell phones that they used to have, back when there was lightning [sic] in the walls, and about birds that chirped to let you know the day was starting" (9) indicate two dimensions of nostalgia for the lost world, both for the technologies of civilisation and for the delights of nature.

The effect of the anxiety that Mackay evokes in his readers through such a grim vision of the future resembles a state of "pretraumatic stress" induced by "the circulation of futurist disaster narratives" described by E. Ann Kaplan (3). Drawing from a psychological study of American soldiers deployed to Afghanistan, whose anxiety symptoms—similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—related to possible future calamitous events were examined in terms of "Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome", Kaplan diagnoses that Western cultures are prone to fears about the collapse of civilisation brought by environmental cataclysms. She notes that, as "fear, panic, and anxiety pop up regularly [...] in the media [...], warning people about future disaster and enhancing the sense of pretrauma" (10), the catastrophic narratives impel us to identify "with the futurist depleted, destroyed, suffering landscape" (58). The critic analyses the genre she calls "pretrauma cinema", noting that its "viewers witness probable futurist dystopian worlds as they are imagined on film *before* they happen in reality" and thereby occupy a specific position in regard to the threat of human-induced planetary disaster (24, italics in original). Their identification with characters from imaginary narratives of doom can have two effects: "Anxiety about the future incited by such fantasies may produce traumatic emotions similar to those of PTSD and a disabling uncertainty about one's own future. But engaging in such fantasies may, on the contrary, offer [...] 'memory *for* the future,' less a disabling anxiety than a productive warning to bring about needed change" (18, italics in original).

Mackay's title, *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way*, sounds exactly like such a hopeful warning. The connection is emphasised by the fact that PTSD symptoms occur in the novel's characters. Even fifteen years before "the Change", Viwe is in therapy for depression and continual anxiety: thinking about the condition of the planet brings him chest tightness which hampers breathing; he experiences "loss and panic and grief that well up inside him and threaten to blot out his senses" (*It Doesn't* 21). In subsequent years, depression, anxiety disorders, and mental breakdowns become widespread in society, but, given that the world is already collapsing, they are understandable reactions that do not really qualify as *pre*traumatic because, as Malcolm phrases it, "The world's fucking scary these days" (205). In such desperate circumstances, developing a mental condition offers relief through an unconsciously adopted dissociation, a form of psychological displacement for the traumatised subject.

Physical displacement by way of escape to safety and fine living conditions is available only for the chosen few. After "the Change", the elite dwellers of Cape Town reside in an artificially constructed haven of "the Citadel". The Citadel is a city for selected corporate employees, perched favourably on Signal Hill and Lion's Head, two rocky Cape Town landmarks. Its futuristic state-of-the-art design provides the inhabitants with a simulacrum of a dream city. It is protected by security forces, surrounded by flame-retardant walls, and covered by a huge glass dome. It has its own gigantic air conditioning system, which keeps the temperature moderate. It boasts wind turbines, desalination plants, and even irrigation systems to take care of a park and lawns. Supplies, such as grain grown on the Arctic coast, are delivered by corporate ships. As climate changes progress, however, the Citadel becomes merely a temporary solution: its citizens are gradually relocating to corporate territories in the "New Temperate Zones", situated in Greenland, northern Canada, and Alaska. Malcolm, a corporate-employed Citadel resident, is planning to migrate to New Washington, a newly established city in Antarctica, which is fully owned by his company and has the great advantage of being situated "far from the tropical evacuation zones, separated by vast oceans from the refugee crises" (184).

Residential company towns of this kind, an abandoned late-19th-century American invention, have reappeared in speculative dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction since the 1990s. While in some narratives, such as Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*, the rationale follows the original concept of tightly controlled shelters for blue-collar workers, in other works, for instance in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, they are closer to the representation of present-day neoliberal disciplinary structures imposed upon capitalist societies. The denizens of such corporate enclaves can enjoy permanence of employment, comfortable living conditions, and protection against any external threats; in return, they remain docile corporate cogs. This parallels a highly effective strategy of late capitalism which, as Mark Fisher puts it, rests on our general belief that "lowering our expectations [...] is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism" (5). In effect, we cannot think of a viable safe political alternative to capitalism. In Mackay's novel, the Citadel corporate inhabitants face the choice

between compliance with the company's policies, along with mounting dependence, and living in the slums of Kapelitsha. The payment for corporate benefits is their indifference to the miseries of the outsiders, a form of ethical displacement. Yet, eventually, Malcolm's conscience does not allow him to remain the company's slave. He does not want to get involved in creating a body-augmenting device that will have an "additional" function of invigilating its users; instead, he sabotages the project, voluntarily renounces his welfare, and leaves the Citadel, planning to join his friend Luthando in the slums.

In Mackay's narrative, "the Change" functions as a nodal point that accentuates the aggravation of another effect of neoliberalism: the rigid stratification of society between rich and poor. As David Harvey claims, neoliberalisation was a political project meant to "re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" and it was "very effective in revitalizing global capital accumulation" (19). For Naomi Klein, neoliberal politicians, guided by the Chicago School economic ideology, "were not creating a perfectly harmonious economy but turning the already wealthy into the superrich and the organized working class into the disposable poor" (*Shock* 444). Neoliberal schemes led to "the hoarding of [most] wealth by a tiny minority of the world's population" (Klein, *Shock* 445). The phenomenon was proved by various statistics concerning the distribution of financial resources in many countries that introduced this economic line in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Harvey 14–9). One such country was post-apartheid South Africa, where adopting a free-market economy, exacerbated by a continuing colonial "legacy of the dispossession of the indigenous population" (Ndhlovu 131), resulted in an extremely unequal allocation of wealth. While the elites—old white and new Black—of upper- and middle-class South Africans enjoy financial abundance and the safety of their comfortable houses protected by private security companies, the masses—mostly Black—experience systemic unemployment, destitution, and substandard housing. As Andy Clarno and Salim Vally postulate, the South African struggle with racial capitalism has been lost, and the economic logic born from "the marriage between racial domination and capital accumulation" has brought the country "some of the most egregious inequality imaginable" (3442). *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* hyperbolises social stratification through its dramatic contrast between safe and plentiful lives in the futuristic Citadel and the perilous hand-to-mouth existence in the barren Kapelitsha.

In her work about climatic crisis, Klein points out that social polarisation is also effectuated by the pernicious effects of global warming: although earlier environmentalists usually believed that climate change would be "a great equalizer" affecting all humans uniformly and thus uniting them in preventive efforts, it has an opposite effect, "stratifying us further into a society of haves and have-nots, divided between those whose wealth offers them [...] protection from ferocious weather, at least for now, and those left to the mercy of increasingly dysfunctional states" (*This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* 45). The disparity between the Citadel and Kapelitsha illustrates Klein's prediction of future counteractions to climatic anomalies: "In the wealthier nations, we will protect our major cities with costly seawalls and storm barriers while leaving vast areas of coastline that are inhabited by poor and Indigenous people to the ravages of storms and rising seas" (*This Changes* 43).

Mackay's novel expressly declares that we should seek the roots of anthropogenic climate change in a capitalist economy. The protagonists of *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* are aware that since global warming was caused by exorbitant carbon emissions, the main perpetrators are multinational corporations: "Mom says they are the ones who put us in this position in the first place", concedes Milo (*It Doesn't* 12). Luthando and his group of environmental activists are convinced that taking effective climate action cannot be reconciled with retaining the capitalist world order but would require introducing "an entirely reimagined economic system" in order to "abandon the cult of growth and trickle-down benefits" (72). Refuting their political opponents' claim that only development based on neoliberal principles can provide South African citizens with housing and jobs, the activists assert that "infinite growth is the ideology of the cancer cell" (72). Thirty years of post-apartheid history of the country prove them right: while neo-colonial capitalist projects of resource exploitation are often presented as opportunities for local development and economic benefits, such promises are never fulfilled (see, for example, Mushonga and Ogude; Narsiah; Bond, "The Case for Ecosocialism in the Face of the Worsening Climate Crisis"; Clarno). Instead, capital accumulation incurs huge environmental costs, in the form of carbon emissions, droughts, water and soil pollution, as well as vegetation and wildlife loss. Transnational corporations operating in South Africa either control the state legislature to obstruct introducing ecological strategies (Bond, "Case" 488), lobby local authorities to gain permission for environmentally hostile projects (Bond, "Climate, violence, resource

extraction and ecological debt: global implications of an assassination on South Africa's coal mining belt" 1411), or simply "violate laws by illegally dumping waste or emitting effluents into the water and air" (Bond, "Social" 1045).

The involvement of capitalism in the environmental degradation of the planet has been profusely examined, and the discussions have touched the core of the capitalist economy. Fisher, for instance, claims that "[t]he relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental" because this system's inherent need for growth means that "capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability" (18–9). Nancy Fraser believes that capitalism is "the sociohistorical driver of climate change" inasmuch as it "harbors a deep-seated ecological contradiction, which inclines it to environmental crisis" (78). She argues that this system intrinsically relies on nature, "both as a tap for production's inputs and as a sink for disposing its waste", but it manipulates society through the discourse which, on the one hand, establishes economy as a realm of imaginative and profitable human activities and, on the other, presents nature as essentially worthless "stuff", "infinitely self-replenishing and generally available [...] in commodity production" (82). Klein rearticulates this antagonism by stating that "our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life" (*This Changes* 19).

When neoliberalism expresses its disapproval of environmental protection measures, it often resorts to denialism, either by negating the veracity of scientific data concerning global warming, by challenging the claims of corporate accountability, or, at least, by shifting responsibility onto individuals, all in an effort to protect the economic interests of the elites.[4] Yet occasionally the capitalist hostility towards ecological pursuits can take on more aggressive forms, which "systematically sabotage [people's] collective response to climate change" (Klein, *This Changes* 17). The promotion of sustainability is often censured as socialism. Attitudes antagonistic to pro-ecological enterprises are especially common in new African democracies, whose authoritarian governments "often perceive the struggle for environmental justice [...] as political dissent and an act of treason" (Mushonga and Ogude 13). If they consider it necessary, the authorities deploy security forces to repress resistance. Clarno discerns sad irony in this modus operandi: although neoliberalism demands the state's complete withdrawal from the economy, it actually "requires state intervention to support market competition and to address the crises that it generates" (11).

In the last several decades, international corporations have often conspired with corrupt African governments against environmental defenders. A representative example is the false accusation and persecution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. Saro-Wiwa, a writer, environmental activist, and minority rights defender, campaigned against Shell petroleum company, whose crude oil extraction in the Niger Delta led to continuous environmental degradation of the local area. He also protested against the involvement of Nigeria's military government, which conspired with Shell "to devastate the ecosystem and consequently impoverish [his native local] people of Ogoni" (Cliff 60). The writer was sentenced to death by a military tribunal on a trumped-up murder charge and executed, along with his eight compatriots. His prison diary, posthumously published as *A Month and a Day*, became an important stimulus to mobilise "his Ogoni people for their emancipation from the shackles of neglect, exploitation and ecocide" (Cliff 62). As Rob Nixon argues, we need to be mindful of Saro-Wiwa's opinion that "environmentalism needs to be reimagined through the experiences of the minorities who are barely visible on the global economic periphery, where transnationals in the extraction business—be it oil, mining, or timber—operate with maximum impunity" (112).

When capitalists coalesce with African states to accomplish their neo-colonial agendas, they also make extensive use of the media to launch defamatory campaigns disparaging ecological movements. Instances of such populist anti-environmental propaganda are seen in the sections of Mackay's novel set in the earlier stages of the climatic cataclysm. The first strategy of South African media presented in the novel is meant to dilute the problem by using scientific jargon which "obscures the truth [and] downplays the cause of [...] destruction" (*It Doesn't* 136). Subsequently, we find that news coverage of protest actions in the country shows "[n]o empathy for the outrage people feel", belittling the causes of demonstrations but focusing on the "inconvenience to the middle class" instead (66). The authorities officially join in the smear campaign when the president of South Africa accuses the protesters of "being sponsored by foreign non-profit organisations who want to undermine the national development plan [and] destabilise [...] democracy" (72). Counter-demonstrations are organised, with slogans such as "*Environmental Protections Kill Jobs!*" (71, italics in original). The government colludes with corporations to encourage the polarisation of society about the issue, setting ecology directly against the economy. Environmentalists are obviously at a disadvantage: the "big corporates [...] have deep pockets. They can buy

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supporters" (96). They can easily afford to hire "the best post-truth consultants in Africa" who deploy "the silent army of misinformation [...], manipulation [and] fake news" (78), so they easily manage to publicly discredit Luthando, attaching to him the false label of a dangerous criminal.

It Doesn't Have To Be This Way also addresses another fallacy of neoliberal discourse on ecology: that environmental threats can be averted through some forms of extreme technological intervention which Western scientists will develop in a short time. Apart from the already mentioned achievements that facilitate human survival in the Citadel, Mackay introduces to his novel the theme of body augmentation. In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles points out that it is not by coincidence that late twentieth-century films set in apocalyptic surroundings often feature "cybernetic life-forms" because the awareness that the Earth is "rapidly becoming uninhabitable by human beings" drives the contemporary tendency towards "the displacement of presence by pattern" (36). Hayles considers this "pressure toward dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence" (29) as responsible for gradual changes affecting the material structure of the human body and our cognitive processes. Mackay's novel illustrates this scientific trend. While the planet is gradually turning into an inhospitable inferno, company engineers are continuously working on new forms of body augmentation. The access to the devices they design is restricted. Some of them, such as microchips implanted in wrists for identity and banking purposes, are obligatory for the Citadel denizens; others are distributed commercially, so they are attainable only for the corporate-employed elite. Popular merchandise in the novel is an AR implant linked directly to the brain, which allows users to switch the input fed to their corneas between external stimuli, i.e. seeing with their eyes, and internal projections, which include news, messaging, social media, a navigation system, etc. Other applications, more thoroughly integrated with the brain, enable the users to record their dreams or block nightmares. Antidepressants have been replaced with mental wellness apps, which can balance neurotransmitters.

Working to develop such software, Malcolm is also hoping for the ultimate goal: "We're only a few years away from being able to upload human consciousness to the cloud [...]. Then we'll be free from our biology. No more meat cages. No more death. We can live forever" (*It Doesn't* 140). His anticipation corresponds to a transhumanist fantasy propagated by people like Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil who maintain that "transferring our mind into a machine" is a form of "baptism into posthumanism, [...] computerized purification [which] will bring blessed release from the worldly struggles and disappointments, the horror, the pain, and all the misery that organic life brings" (see Dinello 24). Yet, for Viwe, the vision of the eternal existence in which human consciousness, devoid of the body, is "suspended in an endless dream state with no relief" (*It Doesn't* 140), mulling over the same thoughts within its own limits, represents a hopeless limbo. He believes that "[w]e are flesh and blood and consciousness, mixed. You can't separate the data from the hardware [...]. We are animals. Small and frightened. [Our bodies] aren't prisons. They are life rafts. And they are so easy to sink" (162). This belief that transience is an indispensable feature of the human condition affiliates Viwe with Hayles, who declares: "my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival" (5).

A similar opinion is advocated by Rosi Braidotti. Despite perceiving our current posthuman condition as a state which "force[s] a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems" (*The Posthuman* 89), Braidotti postulates that the posthuman subjectivity is "*materialist* and *vitalist*, *embodied* and *embedded*, firmly located somewhere" (*The Posthuman*, 51, my italics). Even though the main characters of *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* are geeky computer programmers, they are distressed by the possible dehumanising effects of integrating human bodies with ultramodern technologies. Luthando is so anxious about engaging in what he calls "virtualling" that he feels the need to do regular "digital detoxes" (*It Doesn't* 212). Even Malcolm, who is enthusiastic about digital enhancements and disembodied consciousness, reaches a breaking point when he works on an application named "Unsuffering", which is supposed to control one's mental well-being by means of neutralising traumatic memories. Thinking about the traditional Japanese pottery technique through which broken objects are glued back together with gold—which actually highlights and elevates the traces of cracks—he determines that suffering is an indispensable aspect of the human condition. Finally, when he asks himself the rhetorical question: "On the spectrum from apes to machines, which

end is more frightening?" (231), he rejects the opportunities offered by the virtual and disembodied version of the posthuman late capitalist existence in the Citadel. He instead opts for the uncertainties of Braidotti's vitalist embodiment, which he will experience in the impoverished, barren Kapelitsha. The decision is irrevocable: in order to remove his cognitive augmentation, he must get the implant in his temple removed. Those who, like Malcolm, choose to restore their embodied humanity to its fullness have to undergo the simple but bloody surgical procedure of retrieving a microchip. This generates an acute state of "Disconnection Sickness" that lasts several weeks. Their brains have to re-adapt to the bareness of the physical world and learn "how to construct meaning from only five senses, how to control muscles and memories without augmentation", while their neural systems are trying to "pour [...] ideas and feelings into amputated hardware, ghost networks" (44).

The procedure of ripping out the microchip is performed by the Shepherds, members of a religious sect that flourishes in Kapelitsha. The Shepherds follow a strategy often pursued by religious movements that appear in various cataclysmic times and threaten the safety of existence and destabilise society.[5] They disseminate the belief that humanity lives in the End Times and the environmental apocalypse is God's punishment. Even though their disapproval of new technologies (such as body augmentation which their followers must jettison) is logically connected with the causes of climate change, they ascribe the catastrophe to a false cause, namely the moral decay of humanity. They define "morality" by evoking selected Christian principles that focus on sexual chastity, and their slogan of repentance is manifested through attempts to enforce heterosexual norms and marital fidelity. Processions of fanatics march through the streets, burning the effigies of reprobates and lynching fornicators. The official penalty for adultery or homosexuality is death. But Viwe spots hypocritical gaps in this ostensibly strict moral course. When a troop of radicals captures an adulterous couple, they punish only the woman. It is not surprising given that the Shepherd militia groups are all-male and, since their principles are based on a patriarchal religious system, introducing double standards of propriety is not unprecedented. On another occasion, when the crowd attacks Luthando, accusing him of being a "sodomite" and claiming that being gay is "un-African", he responds: "Africa's full of gays, always has been. What's un-African is this Bible of yours. You think you're fighting for traditional African values, but you're fighting for a book that was brought in on ships by the colonisers" (166). It appears deeply ironic that an African religious group finds a spiritual answer to a calamity caused by the environmentally reckless actions of a capitalist Western economy in a system of belief acquired from their former Western oppressors.

This becomes even more ironic when we consider that traditional African animistic beliefs celebrate a strong connection between humans and nature. Cajetan Iheka notes that various societies on the continent "are drawn to an ethics of the earth" and that "certain nonhuman forms, including animals [and] plants, [...] are considered viable life forms worthy of respect" (7). Tanure Ojaide, in turn, observes that "[i]n the religions of Africans, nature became an integral aspect of their spirituality [...], thus giving the environment a spiritual dimension" (vi). Since indigenous African people depended on plants and animals for nourishment and shelter, and since they held some natural elements like trees, rivers, or mountains sacred, they lived in a state of equilibrium with the environment. However, "with the coming of Christianity and Islam to Africa, the natural world became a servant of man rather than a partner because of an aloof God, leaving man to control and exploit nature. The result of the Western and Islamic intrusion into Africa [was] the massive environmental degradation of the continent" (Ojaide vi). Accordingly, Iheka argues that ecological attitudes in the neoliberal, neo-colonial times must be founded on abandoning the anthropocentric perspective: "Whereas the project of decolonization proceeded primarily along human lines, [...] the challenge to neoliberalism or late capitalism must include a recognition of nonhumans as companions in a precarious world" (Iheka 5).

Such de-centring of the Anthropos figure aligns with Donna Haraway's proposition in *Staying with the Trouble.* She suggests that the answer to the predicament of the Anthropocene, or the Capitalocene, is what she calls the Chthulucene, an ethical project based on intra-action and response-ability; it rests on "unexpected collaborations and combinations, [...] hot compost files" (4), and is sustained by the rejection of "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism" (30). One of the ways in which this collective effort, this enterprise of "being in this together" (Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* 85), manifests itself in Mackay's novel is the activity of planting trees. Fifteen years before "the Change", Luthando, Viwe, and Malcolm participate in a "reforestation festival" (*It Doesn't* 17), a large community event organised by eco-activists, which is not only an environmental endeavour but also "an act of decolonisation" (18), a reaction to Western degradation of African nature. As Luthando notes, "the white man laid waste to our forests and now we must put it right" (18). In subsequent years,

Luthando single-handedly engages in illegitimate tree-planting in Cape Town on his "one-man reforestation crusade" (56). Paradoxically, this activity, also called "guerrilla gardening", is not legal in South Africa. Instead of being considered a public service, as trees supply oxygen and counteract climate change, it is censured by authorities as defacing property. Luthando has an affection for trees, as they make him calm and happy. He admires their "magic" of "creating life from sunlight and water" (90) and associates them with a long-standing African appreciation of the forest. As a biological asset, they regulate the climate and farming; as a spiritual one, they are the abode of deities.

This motif was seen in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a foundational African prose text that portrayed the forest as an important eco-habitat and a sacred realm (Ernest-Samuel 78–9). The subversive, anti-establishment potential of tree planting, in turn, corresponds to the activity of the Green Belt Movement, which was founded in 1977 by Wangari Maathai. Intended to oppose deforestation and consequent land erosion that resulted from the Kenyan government's promotion of corporate interests, the movement was responsible for planting and nurturing over 51 million trees. Apart from the environmental aspect, their actions, which involved thousands of African women, were meant to confront the male hegemonic schemes that crushed poor rural communities in Kenya. The activists managed to make "a ready symbolic connection between environmental erosion and the erosion of civil rights", in which "each tree planted by the Green Belt Movement stood as a tangible, biological image of steady, sustainable growth, a dramatic counterimage to the ruling elite's [...] plunder of [...] finite natural resources" (Nixon 133). In this way, it gave numerous people "a revived sense of civic agency" (133). Displacing anti-colonial and feminist initiatives onto the innocent ground of environmental practices, Maathai and her followers "foreground[ed] the concerns of women and the exploitation of the environment by patriarchal and capitalist structures" (Iheka 128).

Mackay's novel, like the Green Belt Movement's activity, shows that "land cultivation [can be seen as] an alternative to the destruction that patriarchal systems enact" (Iheka 126). Meditating on the unlawfulness of his guerrilla tree planting, Luthando determines that the very concept of proprietary rights to land is ludicrous because land "existed long before people and our ideas about ownership and rights. It doesn't belong to us. If anything, *the soil owns us*" (*It Doesn't* 53, my italics). Correspondingly, the ethical foundations of Haraway's project of "staying with the trouble" stipulate that "[u]nlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene [...] [H]uman beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story" (Haraway 55).

Luthando also finds out that the very action of terraforming, along with consequent environmental degradation, has always been central to the colonial enterprise. He discovers that early colonial courts in America resolved the disputes over land ownership on the basis of its exploitation: "If you wanted to retain the land in its natural state, that didn't count, but if you wanted to turn a forest into a plantation, it was all yours" (*It Doesn't* 97). The logic of this approach was based on a major tenet of capitalism: the myth of growth. As Tim Jackson points out, the organisation of a capitalist society relies on the conviction that social progress is synonymous with economic expansion, which is measured by rising GDP (17). But although capitalist rhetoric has long been assuring us that "growth is the irreducible norm" (12), the necessity of constant progress is, in fact, a "thermodynamic impossibility" (79), an illusion based on a false premise that we live on a planet with infinite resources. Nonetheless, capitalism asserts that the human "struggle for life" should always be translated to "an inevitable competition" and that it "embed[s] this competition into the institutions of culture: the rules of the market, the ethos of business, the norms of consumer society" (157).

The protagonists of Mackay's novel are aware that they are being bullied by the late-capitalist economy, which demands that they continuously increase consumption, although their needs are more than satisfied. Malcolm considers the irony of using the name "progress" to describe socially and environmentally harmful late-capitalist operations, such as the accumulation of wealth among the elite, replacing human employees with machines, or destroying nature to develop industry. "We aren't progressing; we're metastasising", he concludes (*It Doesn't* 189). He fantasises about alien civilisations in the universe and determines that those that did not perish in environmental disasters must have "survived by learning humility", abandoned the myth of growth, and, instead of "fetishising expansion", learned to "exist in equilibrium with their ecosystems" (189). Jackson's denunciation of the myth of growth invokes Buddhist philosophy when he disagrees with the capitalist dogma saying that power lies "in the endless stimulation of desires achieved only through dominion over others", and postulates that, in truth, it "lies in our ability not to be ruled by our cravings" (161). Indeed, only the willpower to control

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our consumerist desires can help us keep a state of equilibrium with the natural world through a considerate, sustainable existence. Ironically, *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* represents sustainability as a fundamental requirement of a post-catastrophic reality by means of an unsavoury symbol of a fly farm. A staple of Milo's family diet is protein obtained from fly maggots raised on human excrement. In order to secure a regular food supply, the family has to bolt the outhouse to guard their waste, which Luthando takes to the farm every day.

It Doesn't Have To Be This Way is a sombre apocalyptic vision that shows the prospective effects of "precarious worldings made terribly more precarious by fossil-burning man making new fossils as rapidly as possible in orgies of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene" (Haraway 55). Mackay envisages the long-term effects of neoliberal thought in which "*capital is* […] *a relation to nature*—a cannibalistic, extractive reaction, which consumes ever more biophysical wealth in order to pile up ever more 'value'" (Fraser 83, italics in original). It follows the economic logic whereby rich entrepreneurs reap profits and pass "the environmental costs to those who must live with—and die from—the fallout, including future generations of human beings" (Fraser 83). Yet the book also, as its title suggests, offers hope and sketches possible routes of escape through various forms of displacement. Mackay agrees with posthumanist thinkers that the answer to the "im/possibility of metabolizing the trauma" brought by the ecological catastrophe, and of "transforming the self from victim to survivor", is "a way of un/doing the self, of touching oneself through touching all others, taking in multitudes of Others that make up the very matter of one's being in order to materially transform the self and one's material sense of self" (Barad 237). We can see this in the final fantasy of the dying Milo, who fully unites with nature:

> My body tingles and sprouts. Little green tendrils come alive in the heat and extend from my fingertips, my toes, the backs of my knees. *Plants are the thing to be.* They don't envy; they don't doubt; they don't worry about their parents. I can hear them, the way they talk to one another. I grow long vines from every bone. Leaves spread over my skin, basking in the sunlight. Roots push down into the earth. They grow deeper and deeper, twisting and forking, anchoring me to the rock, holding me steady. I can't move. *My body turns to soil.* My skin glows green, photosynthesising. Sunlight courses through my veins. I am whole, I think. I am everything. (*It Doesn't* 257, my italics)

We can also see this in Luthando's reflection which connects sustainability with homosexuality: "gays are probably the best thing to ever happen to this planet. We reduce overpopulation. We save the world from the toxic masculinity that got us into this mess—domination and conquest instead of nurturing, feminine qualities. We're nature's attempt to self-correct" (156).

The reading of *It Doesn't Have To Be This Way* proposed in my article situates the novel's apocalyptic vision in the context of the devastating actions of the neoliberal economy, which was so enthusiastically, and so recklessly, adopted by South Africa after apartheid. Mackay insistently shows that the climatic catastrophe of the Anthropocene has ensued directly from ecologically pernicious practices of neo-colonial imperialist capitalism, a system that was founded on the myth of inevitable growth and which assumes that the natural environment is inexhaustible. In this way, as I claim, the novel corresponds both to the critiques of capitalism (such as advanced by Fisher, Fraser, or Klein) and to the environmental studies concerning Africa (such as undertaken by Iheka or Okuyade). Mackay's narrative also depicts various forms of displacement—ethical, psychological, physical, and technological—that result from this neoliberal cannibalistic commodification of nature. In relation to the last category of displacement, my discussion invokes Hayles and Braidotti to address the way in which the novel represents the futility of posthuman fantasies of enhancement and power that deny our embeddedness in the material world. As I demonstrate, Mackay aligns with Haraway's ethical project of response-ability, which is manifested through his characters' involvement in the intra-action of tree planting.

Notes

1. For a more extensive discussion of contemporary African (and postcolonial) ecocriticism, see, for instance: Okuyade (*Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes*; "Ecocultures"), Rob Nixon, Cajetan Iheka, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, and Amitav Ghosh.
2. The concept of racial capitalism was also theorised by Cedric J. Robinson (largely in his 1983 book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*). Unlike Alexander, however, Robinson describes the notion as a universal, not locally contextual, quality of capitalist formation. For differences between Robinson and Alexander, see, for example, Clarno and Vally.
3. Mackay draws inspiration from Namwali Serpell's 2019 historical/science-fiction novel *The Old Drift*, which also refers to a catastrophic event as "the Change".

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4. As Klein notes, "Overwhelmingly, climate change deniers are not only conservative but also white and male, a group with higher than average incomes" (*This Changes* 40).
5. One might think, for instance, of the Lollards, initially led by John Wycliffe, whose criticism of the Roman Catholic Church was, among others, a reaction to an outbreak of the bubonic plague in the mid-14th century.

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

Agnieszka Podruczna

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

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

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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).

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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

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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*kin*dling 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,

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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.

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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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The environmental crisis and African women's displacements in *War Girls* by Tochi Onyebuchi

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The environmental crisis and African women's displacements in *War Girls* by Tochi Onyebuchi
In the following article, I explore several types of dislocations (environmental, war, patriarchal, to name but a few) in Tochi Onyebuchi's novel *War Girls* (2019), analysed from the methodological perspective of Africanfuturism. The aim of the article is to show how the second wave of African future-oriented literature (diasporic in this case) looks back to the past (the Nigerian Civil War) in order to seek solutions for the ongoing current problems, such as the devastation of the natural environment, climate change, the participation of underage soldiers in military conflicts, and new forms of capitalism and neolonialisation. The novel is read via historical, sociological, and frequently anthropological sources to demonstrate how the speculative discourse can be firmly grounded in the scientific context. Additionally, I propose a feminist and utopian reading of *War Girls*. The text is divided into parts where key elements of Africanfuturism—such as digitalisation, nanotechnologies, Information Technology, African cosmologies, and oral tradition—are discussed in detail and are shown as existing at the same time, entangled with the past and future simultaneously, within human and more-than-human worlds. **Keywords:** Africanfuturism, War Girls, the environmental crisis, new technologies, posthumanism.

Introduction: Displacement from speculative fiction

In his acknowledgements in *War Girls* (2019), Tochi Onyebuchi writes about the graphics of his critically acclaimed novel: "Many have remarked to me what it has meant to them to see a dark-skinned black girl staring daggers at you from the front cover of a young adult novel, a protagonist, a hero, a badass" (451). The feisty girl with an Augmented arm is Onyii, a former child soldier in the Biafran War of Independence. In the year 2172, 15-year-old Onyii, no longer active in the military, is leading a refugee camp for the Biafran girls in southeastern Nigeria. Onyebuchi's novel is set in the speculative future, but it is embedded in the past events of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War or Biafran War.

Coining the term "Afrofuturism", Mark Dery states that when "imagin[ing] possible futures", Afrofuturist authors will not look back to capitalist, mass-produced "collective fantasies" of white science fiction (180) because "African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come" (182). One such story is the speculative narrative about the Biafran War of Independence depicted in *War Girls*. Unlike the follow-up to *War Girls*, *Rebel Sisters* (2020), Onyebuchi's 2019 novel takes place entirely on earth and is not set in outer space. Speculative fiction, as Margaret Atwood claims in *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, embraces events that could have happened at a present time because the development of science allows for it (88). The technology in *War Girls*, such Artificial Intelligence, nanotechnology, Augmenting, etc. is widely available in the 21st century. Unfortunately, so is the possibility of nuclear war, radiation, and the complete devastation of the natural environment that plagues female protagonists of Onyebuchi's novel. What remains outside the current technological reach is creating sustainable Space Colonies and relocating human and non-human life there to avoid facing the consequences of the war and climate change, as it happens in the speculative year 2172.

Speculative discourse makes it possible to shift past (historical) events into the future, but the possibility of travelling to other planets to settle there remains within the science fiction domain. Afrofuturism is located at the intersection of science fiction and speculative literature. It shares common ground with both these genres,

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but there are also significant differences and new variables that distinguish it. Marleen S. Barr observes that, nowadays, "Black science fiction writers alter genre conventions to change how we read and define science fiction itself" (xv). In Afrofuturism, the key emphasis is put on re-conceptualising the past for the future purposes of Speculative Blackness, using André M. Carrington's concept. Isiah Lavender III defines Afrofuturism as interactions in the fields of "science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures" (2). Following this vein, Lavender III argues that, when negotiating the present, "unlike SF, afrofuturism looks to the past to move forward the aspirations of an entire race in all its cultural complexities" (2). In addition, Afrofuturism is much more than a literary movement, as it embraces various forms of art and cultural activities. With the above in mind, Ytasha L. Womack explains the broad scope of Afrocentric creations:

> Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques. (9)

The third crucial difference arises from the array of writing conventions, connotations, and inspirations involving spirituality, oral tradition, myths, fables, magic, and techno-culture as observed by Dike Okoro (9–14). For him, Afrofuturism aims "to engage society and the world beyond their boundaries with narratives detailing disparate lives in conflict-laden imagined places that linked both to the real and the supernatural" (9).

Bearing this in mind, "merging history, black literature, afrofuturism, and SF require dealing with forms of psychological dislocation / disorientation / trauma / white supremacy from the safe distance offered by science-fictional speculation" (Lavender III 2). Such speculations can be traced back to the need for social justice, which Afrofuturist writers articulate in their future-oriented imaginations (Womack 41). One cannot dismiss the potential for social and political changes that speculative visions carry in the realms of "liberation, justice and freedom" (Zamalin 7). In *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Alex Zamalin reminds one that "black utopian images ranged from black emigration and interracial solidarity to postracialism, Pan-Africanism, and interplanetary escape into the cosmos" (10–1). What is more, as argued by Okoro, African futurist narratives are marked by the aftermath of neocolonialism and postindependence wars and are "interlaced with themes such as gender, poverty, magic, patriarchy, war, tyranny, varying forms of human and environment exploitation and much more that have saturated the vision of authors from the continent" (9).

The first two decades of the 21st century bring about the emergence of Afrofuturism 2.0, which, according to Renaldo Anderson and Charles Jones, situates historical-cultural dislocations within the spheres of nanotechnology, digital age, globalisation, neural networks, transhumanist Augmentations, and the posthuman turn (x). Rooted in these technological changes, Africanfuturism, as defined in 2019 in a blog entry by Nnedi Okorafor ("Africanfuturism defined"), with its non-Western and future-centred speculations, embraces Africa's history, current socio-cultural conditions, and high-tech science as the foundation of creative SF visions. Furthermore, the newest strand of Afrofuturism 2.0, called Astro-Blackness, moves the "nation-state bound analog notion of blackness" into the "post-digital perspectives as a global response to the planetary and near planetary challenges facing black life in the early twenty-first century" (Anderson and Jones viii). In other words, "Afrofuturism 2.0 is the early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking and or appropriating" the emerging areas of biocapitalism and technoculture (Anderson and Jones x).

War Girls belongs to the newest line of Afrocentric literature and is grounded firmly in science and technology but, at the same time, as Lavender III describes it, it is seeking solutions to current problems in past events. *War Girls* has a positive attitude towards the digital and nanotechnology advances of science, seeing Augmented Black female bodies as enhanced and powerful and overcoming neocolonial and environmental injustices. Looking at a futile attempt to create a women-only community based on sisterhood in a war-ridden Nigeria, it raises the question of whether sisterly bonds can be put on par, if not above, national and ethnic identifications.

In this article, I explore African women's displacements resulting from wars, girl soldiering, social exclusions, and patriarchy that are inseparably intertwined with the destruction of the natural environment and exploitative economy of resource management. In doing so, I argue that Onyebuchi's novel speculates that the destruction of the natural environment is an outcome of both patriarchal and neocolonial disregard for more-than-human beings, which, in turn, is analogous with the fate of War Girls, whose values, goals, and needs are similarly manipulated

and abused by male military leaders depicted in the text. In each subsection of this article, I aim to explore one of the aforementioned issues, relating it to the characteristics of Africanfuturist writing discussed above: drawing upon the past and history to transform the future; drawing upon oral tradition; digital technology and Augments; spiritual lore and magic; and resisting patriarchy and devastation of the natural environment.

Africanfuturism and the past that becomes the future: The displacement of girl soldiers in *War Girls*

In *African Literature and Future*, Gbemisola Adeoti expresses his belief that literature can and even should explore the continent's present concerns and past choices, because only from this perspective may future challenges be addressed. Adeoti calls this strategy "peeping ahead from a backward glance" (2). Distinguished by heterogenous narrative patterns, traditions, and sources, Adeoti argues that African literature encompasses diasporic writing as well. American-born Onyebuchi (whose parents are both Igbo) belongs to the diaspora. In *Narrating the New African Diaspora: 21st Century Nigerian Literature in Context*, Maximilian Feldner observes that "[n]ovels written abroad engage with Nigeria but, due to the authors' international experiences and transcultural perspectives [...] are marked by a combination of expressing a devotion to Nigeria without unduly idealizing it and highlighting its faults and problems while explaining and contextualizing them" (4). Furthermore, Feldner indicates that writers disclose shared elements of the Nigerian diasporic literature, such as coming to terms with the political or economic reasons why their families left the country, recognising one's own accounts of migratory displacement, and relating to the culture and literature written in Nigeria and to one's place in an international literary context (13). As Feldner shows, the new wave of African migration happens with intent to a large extent; migrants stay in touch with Nigeria either by visits or/and via digital media and are able to come back to the country of their ancestry any time due to their regulated legal status (Feldner 15–7). One of the main preoccupations of Nigerian diasporic literature is "representations of postcolonial Nigeria" (Feldner 17). What is more, referring to Ogaga Okuyade, Feldner argues that diasporic Nigerian authors are politically oriented because they wish to envisage profound social changes to improve the lives of African citizens (20). This applies to Onyebuchi as well. Such changes and their speculative visions are very much needed because economic inequality, increasing debts, and transformations in global economics amplified social imbalances in Africa, which affected the poorest and the most vulnerable citizens (i.e. children) and contributed to the weakening cultural and ancestral traditional customs in African communities (Honwana 46, 54).

As Onyebuchi declares himself, *War Girls* is more than fiction; it is entangled with his family narrative and his nation's history. The novel's aim is to help in the healing process of African war traumas (450). The writer admits that he has been inspired by his mother's memories of the Biafran War above all (*War Girls* 448). Following this vein, Feldner reminds one that the Biafran War divided people in Nigeria, and the trauma has never been processed completely because the Biafrans' arguments have never been recognised (40). Okoro seems to share this viewpoint, contextualising the Biafran War in present-day Nigeria: "Almost 60 years later, the story of the war is still being told in Nigeria, and the issue of a possible Biafran state has surfaced with the recent agitation for succession. These politicized struggles have a futuristic tie and have been visited for debate since the end of the Nigerian civil". (7)

Not only did adults fight in the wars at the turn of the century in Africa, but children as well (Onyebuchi 448). The phenomenon of underage combatants is enumerated by Adeoti as amongst the most "relevant and topical" problems that African futurist literature needs to deal with (11). Apart from involving children in military conflicts, what distinguishes post-independence wars in Africa, and the so-called modern wars, is the blurred boundaries between militants and noncombatants and the resulting atrocities committed against the civilian population on a large scale. International involvement in the form of mercenaries or weapon supply is also not rare (Honwana 32–4). In Onyebuchi's novel, international Western companies supply weapons to Federal Nigerians.

According to Alcinda Honwana's study *Child Soldiers in Africa*, these modern wars caused massive displacement of children from their family homes, villages, social roles, infanthood, education, and medical care (1–3, 16, 75).[1] In *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers*, Roméo Dallaire explains that in the global war, child soldiers are regarded as the "ultimate cheap, expendable, yet sophisticated human weapon [...] excellent as combatants, as bait for ambushes, as cannon fodder [...] light to transport but still heavy enough to explode land mines so adults can move safely in their wake" (3–4). Following this vein, Beverly Eileen Mitchell adds that children are drafted because of their psychological predisposition: due to their malleability, the training of underage children is undemanding, and they can be manipulated to "obey without

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questioning and to kill without undue scruples" (14). Accordingly, Honwana shares this view, denying, at the same time, the common misconception that the drafting of children is caused by the shortage of adults to fight (44).

While doing the research for his novel, Onyebuchi consulted historical sources and memoirs such as, for instance, *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child* (2017) by Sandra Uwiringiyimana and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2008). In *War Girls*, Onyebuchi's protagonist, Onyii, becomes a girl soldier at the age of eight. Unlike many other children, she is not kidnapped and joins the Biafran army voluntarily. Nonetheless, for most historians and critics alike, the idea of volunteerism amongst child soldiers remains a debatable issue, as children's allegedly volitional motivations may arise from starvation, poverty, economic deprivation, immature expectations, seeking adults' protection during war, or simply because of social pressure (see Honwana 2–3, 14, 37, 54–8; Mitchell 14). Even when joining the army of their own accord, underage soldiers cannot withdraw when they may wish to, regardless of the fact that they are not professional militaries. As argued by Dallaire, "Child soldiers are not weathered warriors who have consciously, willingly and wholeheartedly committed their adult life to the use of force against others and are prepared to pay the price of the same against them" (13).

At this stage, it needs to be explained that, despite "the Africanization of the Child Soldier" as imagined in the West (Rosen), underage combatants and insurgents fought in European or American armies as well (Rosen 182–4). What is more, the recruitment and treatment of child soldiers differed by country (see, for instance, Eichstaedt). Finally, when discussing the phenomenon of child soldiers, one needs to take into account the heterogeneity of underage combatants' experiences, depending upon their age, gender, country, ethnicity, etc. (Rosen 175, 181–2; Honwana 4) and rely upon historical and anthropological accounts instead of imagined abstractions (Rosen 187).

In *War Girls*, the paths to becoming child soldiers are different for Onyii and her older schoolmate, Adaeze. Onyii enlists to be close to Adaeze, who provides her with military training and tries to shape the girl in her own image. Due to Adaeze's influence, Onyii comes to believe that "dying to make Biafra a reality" will make her life meaningful because she "would die using […] [her] skills and abilities to make an impossible thing happen" (308). Adaeze puts the Biafran future above anything else, even above her bond with Onyii, who is infatuated with her. Looking back, Adaeze confesses to Onyii: "'I was once willing to sacrifice you for the glory of Biafra. There was a time when I would have done it without question. I let you run with me on nearly every mission. Every village raid […]. [W]ar […] asks terrible things of you'" (310).

War asks terrible things, especially of women. As regards female underage soldiering, Honwana explains that girls' situations during postindependence wars in Africa were particularly dramatic. *Child Soldiers in Africa* describes that young females, both civilians and militaries, were likely to fall prey to sexual attacks, mutilation, rape, murder, or slavery. In the camps, girls couldn't count on equal treatment, were burdened with all household chores and transporting supplies or ammunition, and were coerced/drugged into having sexual contact with male soldiers. Some of them even gave birth unassisted (Honwana 2, 5, 75–6, 92–9, 102; Mitchell 14–5). Susan Willhauck states that 40% of child soldiers are girls (2), which shows that the numbers are far from marginal.

Onyii's survival strategy relies on being as skilled as possible. She distinguishes herself first as a soldier and then as a combat pilot, receiving the reputation of The Child with Demon Eyes. This notoriety protects her against the abuses that other girls could experience in camps. When the Biafran brigadier tries to force a teenage Onyii to return to active fight, he says to her: "You simply followed the smell of the Nigerians. And you killed all who crossed your path" (99). Biafran militaries prefer to view Onyii as a merciless killer and the perpetrator of violence rather than also/primarily the victim of the war machine. In consequence, adult male soldiers look at Onyii with a mixture of awe and terror.

In *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination: From Patriots to Victims*, David M. Rosen writes: "the concept of the child soldier fuses two very contradictory and powerful ideas, namely the 'innocence' of childhood and the 'evil' of warfare. Thus, from the outset, in modern Western imagination, the very idea of the child soldier seems both aberrant and abhorrent" (175). Moreover, as observed by Honwana, in Angola and Mozambique, people may regard soldiers as impure, possessed by evil spirits of their victims, or war-polluted. Therefore, children who have fought in a war could be displaced from their communities permanently or temporarily (6, 100). What is more, underage soldiers' social status is "inherently unstable, without sanctioned cultural definition, embodying a societal contradistinction, and entirely embedded in conflict" (Honwana 3).

In Onyebuchi's novel, the boundaries between girl soldiers and civilians remain "inherently unstable". Eight-year-old Onyii recalls how the leader intimidated them: "He made me and the other girl stand with the hostages.

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The rest of our squadron were young men, boys, and some older men" (406). In the Biafran War of Independence, as depicted in the novel, the boundaries are obscured not only between civilians and soldiers but also between enemies and allies. During one of the night rides, Onyii's unit attacks the village in Abia State where Ify's family lived. Abia state is situated in the Niger Delta where the division between "us vs. them" is unclear. Historically, during the Biafran War, the "people of the Niger Delta had a unique war time experience as they were probably the only minority groups or region that suffered onslaughts of violence and injustices from both Biafran and Federal armies—double occupation—right in the heart of their homelands" (Ojaruega 206). Furthermore, in *War Girls*, civilians are killed to send a message to Nigerians that Biafrans were not going to take prisoners. Recalling the slaughter in Abia, Onyii reveals that she had no idea what she should do with the village hostages: "We didn't know what else to do. This wasn't a military outpost. This place wasn't of any use to us. But it was our commander's idea to make a broadcast. To give a speech that would be shown to the Nigerians. Justifying what we were about to do" (406). Onyii's confusion regarding civilians indicates her conflicted loyalties and moral dilemmas.

Dallaire argues that child soldiers transgress any traditional classifications assigned to their biological and cultural age (157) even though age is not always the factor that identifies children in Africa but rather their "social roles, expectations, and responsibilities" (Honwana 52). Furthermore, he locates minor combatants somewhere in between adults and children, stressing that they do not fit into any of these categories (Dallaire 4, 157). To understand their status, one needs to transcend the binaries of "civilian and combatant, victim and perpetrator, initiate and initiated, protected and protector [...], innocence and guilt" (Honwana 4). As argued earlier, to prove their place in the army, child soldiers are intimidated to do "more" than adults; they are forced to incite others into combat and be an example for grown-ups (Honwana 50). In *War Girls*, Onyii explains that having shot Ify's mother (during her attempted attack on the other girl soldier) "gave the others the courage. When they saw what I had done, they knew they could do it too. So our commander gave his speech, then lined up the remaining hostages from the village. And we shot them dead" (407).

In Onyebuchi's novel, the end of the Biafran War of Independence makes the existence of child soldiers problematic for both sides. Overnight, instead of war heroes, these children become common criminals who additionally do not qualify for military jurisdiction because, in the eyes of the law, they are too young for that. Honwana claims that "[a]lthough the moral responsibility of individual soldiers may be severely limited by the constraints under which they fought, it is not entirely absent. The consequences of such acts cannot be evaded. In both practical and spiritual terms, child soldiers are marked by their participation in violence and death" (50). In Onyebuchi's novel, when the war comes to end, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is set up to document the atrocities committed by both sides. In consequence, War Girls are going to be judged by "impartial" internationals from Space Colonies who supplied weapons to Federal Nigerians.

Assessing such an option, Onyii chooses death in combat to the verdicts of the commission that she does not recognise. The teenager strongly resents "[b]eing judged by people who think they're better than us? Who interfered in the war when they said they wouldn't and have caused so much death and destruction but will go free and unblamed? It is [...] unjust" (308). Onyii correctly assumes that Western internationals who supported Federal Nigerians have no moral right to decide about the life and death of those who fought in the war. Adaeze comments on the neocolonial involvement of the Western companies and the whites (the *oyinbo*) that wash their hands of responsibility: "It is how the oyinbo do business. They are allergic to claiming responsibility for their actions. This is their history. *Perhaps* they know no other way" (308). Ify goes further than that, underlining that Nigeria would be better off without any foreign involvement: "*Maybe* we do not need the oyinbo. And *maybe* we do not need the Chinese. *Maybe* Nigeria can handle its problems on its own" (342). With her war experiences, Onyii looks at the world disheartened, rightly expecting that she will not survive to see the Independent Biafra: "'*Maybe* it will be always be like this [...]. *Maybe* neither of us will live to see what Biafra might become. This war. It [...] swallows up everything'" (401, italics added). The subsection does not accidentally finish with a plethora of *maybes*. Apart from revisioning the past, Africanfuturism and the act of "peeping ahead from a backward glance" (Adeoti 2) speculate about the potential scenarios for the future. In the case of *War Girls*, these scenarios are rendered in the concessive clauses cited above that indicate the probable directions for Nigeria's future development.

Displaced memories of the African-American diaspora: Tradition of re-tellings in Africanfuturism

Referring to the African-American Diaspora, F. Abiola Irele argues that "An Afrocentric vision in Black literature in America thus appears as an essential element of a liberating consciousness", regarding the diaspora's drawing upon oral tradition as a form of "self-expression" and "the awareness of a particularized experience—historical, social, cultural" (20). Following this line of thought, Kwasi Wiredu comments that every written form has a trace of orality (12), which clearly contradicts the alleged superiority of writing over speech. What is more, with Frederic Jameson in mind, Isidore Okpewho calls for "contemporizing" oral tradition and "their dialogic or dialectical interface with the consumer's location in time" (183).

Ernst R. Wendland distinguishes five features of information applicable to orality: eventive, dialogic, descriptive, commentative, and collateral (47). In *War Girls*, the blocked memories experienced by Onyii are connected with her service as an eight-year-old girl soldier in the Biafran War of Independence. The eventive trait refers to the Abia massacre as "the causal-chronological chain" (47). The dialogic function involves Onyii's attempt to come to terms with her accountability by negotiating her memories with herself, which reaches its peak during the climactic conversation with Ify when she owns up to killing her mother. The descriptive feature is rendered by providing the details and context for the critical night raid on the village. Finally, the commentative function encompasses the arguments about Onyii's young age and her leader's manipulation. The collateral section is realised via Ify's reaction to Onyii's confession. From the anthropological perspective, as stressed by Wiredu, in Africa "the operative ethic is communalism" (15). Therefore, apart from amends (saving little Ify and raising her as her own sister), Onyii's open declaration of guilt is of vital importance. This way, oral literature transcends a plain text, becoming "a totality that conjoins communication and participation the affective field of a communal event" (Irele 37).

Onyii becomes fully conscious of her past actions through the process of re-telling them to Ify. In this practice, she enters the dialogue with her younger self and is able to run through traumatic memories and understand her true motivations. Sean Field claims that "how people utilize memory *and* imagination [...] is fundamental to how people contain their feelings about themselves and compose their pasts into a cohesive sense of self" (3, italics in original). It is only when teenage Onyii becomes the owner of her narrative that she becomes re-connected with her emotions and can overcome the helplessness of a child who had to assume the role of an adult. To render these complex emotions, Onyebuchi follows an oral storytelling tradition prominent in African literature. Simala observes with regard to storytelling that:

> A prevailing conceptualisation of narrative is that it is one of the many modes of transforming knowing into telling. It is the paradigmatic mode in which experience is shared and articulated. Narratives assume many forms; they are heard, seen and read; they are told, performed, painted, sculpted and written. Human beings are immersed in narrative, telling themselves stories and recognising in their own stories, the stories of others. (Simala 23)

In Onyebuchi's novel, Onyii's war memories are fragmented, and they return to her in flashbacks, especially when the girl is under the influence of the Chukwu prophetic powder. Therefore, there are many gaps in what she can remember, and not all the pieces of missing information are provided to readers instantaneously—or ever. "But in all of them, she has a machine rifle in her hands and a machete strapped across her back over her bandolier of bullets. The gun is nearly as big as her. She is eight years old" (92).

In a flashback, Onyii recalls how she used to take her leader's words at face value, believing that Biafran soldiers acted only in self-defence: "Her memories come back to her as strategic manoeuvres [...]. [S]he remembers the raids themselves, the people begging to be spared" (94). Over the course of time, individual corpses changed into "a trail of bodies" that nobody even wished to bury (93). This way, the girl soldier became desensitised and accustomed to death and killing. In retrospection, Adaeze reminds Onyii: "We killed so many people together, and I held you at my side the entire time. Watching as, bit by bit, your innocence bled out of your wounds. This is what war does" (310). Fifteen-year-old Onyii brings the combat memories to mind: "Moving under cover of night to the villages on the outskirts of Nigerian towns and leaving behind a trail of bodies. Her leader had called it liberation, but there was no freedom for the enemy farmers who had lain in pools of their own blood. The weeping families, the people who filled graves" (93).

By re-telling her memories, Onyii can cast doubt on the words of the Biafran military leadership. She questions the oxymoronic phrase "enemy farmers" that is meant to blur the difference between civilians and militants. The eight-year-old girl soldier trusted unquestionably what she was told, namely that in war, there were no

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"civilians" in unarmed villages. Onyii's later cognitive and affective dissonance is an essential part of remembering. "Imaginative remembrance and storytelling also provide containment for a multitude of memories—at times contradictory, at times potentially overwhelming in their emotional impact. The contestations of memory are both over the form and content that is to be retained and/or recreated from our pasts […] [which] involves the co-creation of oral histories" (Field 9–10).

When faced with Ify, Onyii does not deny that she killed her mother in the Abia massacre. What is more, she assumes full responsibility for her actions like an adult whom she had not yet become. Onyebuchi envisions an epic scene in which Onyii can reply to Ify's accusations: "'I was a child!' Onyii roars. 'I was just a child.' Now tears pool in Onyii's eyes. 'I was a little girl with a gun in my hands. I did what I was told. I had no one! No family' […]. She sniffs and wipes her face" (407). The passage's conversational style is saturated with emotional exchanges, pauses, insecurities, and affective repetitions. Through re-tellings, the traumatised speaker suffering from memory loss may reconstruct the past from shattered splinters, which is manifested in the quotation's discontinuous and "broken" syntax and punctuation.

Displaced from their ethnic communities: Feminist utopias in Africanfuturism

The refugee camp for girls, situated in southeastern Nigeria, provides shelter for orphaned Biafran girls, female war refugees, and underage girl soldiers. The War Girls create the community based on their own terms, on the values that were absent in the war-torn reality but much desired by them, which practically fulfils the definition of utopia. Derived from Greek, "utopia" means the 'good place', and the female refugee camp is a good place for all the girls who stay there. Utopia is a beneficial practice in imaging the future built on fair principles, reducing social, class, or ethnic power imbalances. Onyii's recuperative goal becomes protecting the War Girls and creating a "a sanctuary where they could stay and avoid the fate that she had had to endure" (92). Displaced from their homes, the War Girls form a supportive women-only sisterly community in which they learn, work, and fight together. They grow plants in the greenhouse, the younger ones go to school, and babies are looked after by friendly androids. Fifteen-year-old Onyii describes the camp as the only place that has ever signified safety for her (42). Referring to sisterhood, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi indicates that, in Africa, the notion of co-mothering seems to be more culturally relevant (5). Onyii performs both these roles.

Onyebuchi's narrative about two "sisters" being divided, displaced from their fighting communities, constitutes the metaphor of the divisions during the Biafran War. Onyii's (Igbo) and Ify's (Yoruba) lives are entangled throughout the novel. Overall, mutual distrust of ethnic communities and power imbalances permeate the whole novel. In *War Girls*, the civil wars originate when minorities feel excluded, disempowered, and discriminated against:

> For so long, they have visited violence upon us. It never starts with machetes. It starts with shutting the Igbo out of government. Then it becomes giving all the good jobs to the Hausa and the Fulani and the Yoruba. Then we are accused of crimes we do not commit. Called animals. They say we *infest* this country […]. We are blamed for the drought. We are blamed for the radiation. Then we are thrown in jail. Then we are murdered. (234)

Ethnicity and postcolonialism are also connected with patriarchy that, as Philomina E. Okeke-Ihejirika proves, can vary considerably not only across the African continent but also within the same ethnic groups (11, 12, 25). On the whole, Okeke-Ihejirika finds the "hybrid" of colonialism and capitalism (in changing proportions and locations) accountable for gender imbalances in Africa (4). According to Okeke-Ihejirika, the precolonial past allowed Igbo women a degree of sovereignty in the areas of kinship, healing, spirituality, farming, or politics, depending upon their social and familial status (*diala*, the advantaged women, or *osu*, the socially excluded) (12) and belonging, or not, to extended families (13–4). British colonisers that preferred male personnel "invoked its own conventions of a patriarchal tradition, which in many instances found an ally with the indigenous culture" (Okeke-Ihejirika 16). As a result, this blocked African women's access to education and advancement. Okeke-Ihejirika stresses that this mixture of male influence and women's exclusion in postcolonial Nigeria has contributed to women being perceived to be of lesser prominence and significance than men (17). She argues that "new rights and opportunities for women are often seen as inconsistent with the cultural norms to which women should adhere" (6).

Patriarchy introduces its own regulations in which, according to the classic definition by Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, women are objects passed from fathers to husbands. In *War Girls*, the brigadier general declares the act of ownership: "This camp and its contents are being seized by the Republic of New Biafra.

This is now our property" (85). If captured, War Girls could become the enemy's property, but they are equally likely to be kidnapped and "turned into nothing but a machine making their children" by their own soldiers (*War Girls* 43–4). Having been "rescued" by the male Biafran army, War Girls painfully realise that the same ethnic identification and a shared goal cannot overcome patriarchy. Authoritarian male soldiers undermine the value of War Girls' military skills and generally do not perceive them as their equals. "For over forty years of Nigeria's postcolonial history, the political climate has been shaped by a strong military presence with short interludes of civilian intervention" (Okeke-Ihejirika 17). What is more, in the novel, Biafran soldiers look down on underage soldiers, judging girls solely by the standards of physical attractiveness. Girls in the refugee camps, most of whom have limb prostheses, are called "disgusting", "dirty" runaways from husbands (*War Girls* 82). Onyii is bitterly disappointed that the Free Biafran Army is permeated with tribal misogynistic rules: a part of her can't believe this is actually the Biafran military and not some gang of rebels or random terrorists come to collect child brides. She had seen them in action over the years, prowling roads and dipping into the wilderness to snatch up unsuspecting girls to make them slaves (97).

What is more, girls begin to act in a way that is inspired by male soldiers. Under the Biafran military leadership, girls develop their necrophiliac war programme, bringing to life dead boys killed by bombs and turning them into synthetic underage soldiers. By creating zombie child soldiers whose only function is to fight side-by-side with War Girls, Onyii's protégées break the rules of sisterhood with more-than-human beings. In other words, patriarchy destroys all the loyalties that could be supportive of women.

War Girls' alliances with new technologies in Africanfuturism and bodily augmentations

Africanfuturism regards technology, especially digitality and interconnectedness, as the path to a fair and less divided future. In her 2017 TED talk, Okorafor brings to mind one of her visits to Nigeria in the 1990's during which she "started noticing the role of technology in Nigeria: cable TV and cell phones in the village, 419 scammers occupying the cybercafes, the small generator connected to my cousin's desktop computer because the power was always going on and off" ("Sci-Fi stories that imagine a future Africa"). She admits that the scale of interconnectivity and digital immersion inspired her Africanfuturistic writing. In the same video, Okorafor explains why technology plays such a profound role in African future-oriented fiction: "imagine new technologies, ideas, and sociopolitical changes it'll inspire. For Africans, homegrown science fiction can be a will to power. What if? It's a powerful question". Africanfuturist writing sees new technologies as empowering and enhancing positive transformations for all classes, races, and genders. Okeke-Ihejirika criticises Nigerian "men's exclusive access to the science and technology disciplines" (64). She perceives higher education as providing Igbo women "some degree of social mobility" and "tangible contribution to nation building" (Okeke-Ihejirika 7). In *War Girls*, Ify, who designs Accent ("turn[ing] yourself into an invisible router") (74), wants to study science to solve the environmental crisis that devastated half of the Earth:

> She dreams of building extraordinary structures that will beat back the waters that gobble up more and more shoreline with each passing month. And she will figure out how to harness energy and power entire cities with it. She will figure out how to terraform those parts of pasture in the North that the desert has conquered [...]. She will make Nigeria a beacon of light on the continent. (128)

In *War Girls*, technology is all-pervasive. The refugee camp is wired, and it has its own intranet network fuelled by minerals: "All these things happening in the camp's closed network. Bright as ocean water under the sun. Data" (15). In the camp, nanotechnology provides female organisms' life supporting system. If a limb breaks, it can be repaired in in the camp in "auto-body shelters", "[w]here the girls can become Augments, given limbs or organs more powerful than what they were born with" (5). Onyii observes: "[h]alf-limbs only become half-limbs because they're trying to make someone whole. An Augment is not an ugly thing" (5). Onyebuchi's female protagonists who lost their biological limbs are not "half-human" but more, as Okorafor puts it ("Sci-Fi stories").

From fractured Black female bodies in neocolonialism to empowering posthuman Augments

In Onyebuchi's novel, fractured Black female bodies symbolise the nation split by military, patriarchal, and neocolonial conflicts. Sami Schalk argues that "black women's speculative fiction alters the categories of (dis) ability, race, and gender in ways that can be productive, instructional, and thought-provoking" (139). Furthermore, she explains that corporeal impairments ("[e]xtreme scars, missing fingers, missing ears, and mishealed bones")

are historical and material conditions frequently resulting from slavery and, therefore, they cannot be reduced solely to metaphorical signification (Schalk 44). Onyebuchi's opening sentence, "The first thing Onyii does every morning is take off her arm" (3), echoes the first sentence of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred:* "I lost an arm on my last trip. My left arm (9)". In Butler's book, the loss of a limb refers to slavery experienced tangibly due to time travel; in Onyebuchi's novel, it is a result of the Biafran War of Independence. Civil wars in Africa need to be traced back to (neo)colonial legacy which crippled the whole continent because, as argued by Murray drawing upon Clare Barker, "the heritage of postcolonial and decolonising histories [...] created numerous disabilities through conflict or political productions of poverty" (132). What is more, "the prothesis is a device that signifies the convergence of technology, capital, and the 'human'" (Mattar 86), where capital is linked with both the colonial past and neocolonial present.

Looked from a different, subversive perspective, the lack of limbs in *War Girls* is reclaimed as an enhancing commonplace and not a stigmatising condition: "War Girls have gotten used to sleeping without their arms or their legs" (3). António Fernando Cascais points out that, in science fiction literature, disability means much more than the narratives of "cure and correction", where biomedical intervention seems to be the only solution, heavily charged with cultural signification of incompleteness and helplessness (72). In *War Girls*, Augments render unapologetic posthuman transformations, "*ontological condition* in which many humans now, and increasingly will, live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction (networked) with machines and other organic forms (such as body parts from other life forms through xenotransplantation)" (Nayar 3, italics in original). In *War Girls*, Chinelo's body is such a technologically modified organism: "Cyberized, but still, she bleeds red blood" (10). What is more, humans are converged with Augments and with the whole camp-based network. It signifies the posthuman vision of the body that is no longer confined to a biological organism but co-exists with synthetic, digital, and metal forms of matter, "the human as co-evolving, as [...] a network of connections and exchanges as embodiment embedded in [...] cybernetics, consciousness studies, cognitive sciences and computer sciences, and the development of new domains within biomedicine, genetic science and biology such as systems biology" (Nayar 35). Corporeal augmentations raise the issue of boundaries of one's embodiment and selves. Natasha Vita-More explains that, regardless of the corporeal fragmentation, "the content within the brain—memory and nervous system data—must be intact and continuous to evidence personhood over time" (63). I refer to this in the section on re-tellings and Onyii's memories retrieval.

Posthuman identities in *War Girls* create multi-layered organic and metal assemblages with more-than-human beings beautifully rendered in an organic and nonorganic web of digital data that flows like blood in the circulatory system in "the forest of nodes and vectors" (15). War Girls perceive the bodily Augmentations as the extension of the entanglements with more-than-human beings.

Displacement from the natural environment in Africanfuturism: The radioactivity of neocolonialism

In *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*, Shelley Streeby encourages us to "decolonize the imagination by using speculative fiction" (31). In other words, by imagining alternative environmental scenarios concerning the future of the whole planet. Such speculations might help envision the worst-case scenarios and, consequently, ways to avoid them. Taking the least desirable options into account, in *War Girls* the Japanese ambassador to Biafra enumerates them all happening in one line: "earthquakes, nuclear disasters, climate change", only to propose as a solution—leaving the earth behind and moving to Space Colonies where "they cannot follow us" (352). Although the ambassador encourages nations to leave the mess of the Anthropocene behind on earth, not all countries can afford it.

In Onyebuchi's novel, the Biafran War of Independence is preceded by a global nuclear conflict that did not start in Africa, but regardless of it, it impacted the whole continent and the rest of the globe. Western superpowers started the nuclear war with one another and, as a result, the radioactive fallout spread all over Africa. In other words, superpowers plagued the Earth with radiation and climate change, and having done so, avoid accountability and move to Space Colonies, where the most affluent Western countries built a shelter protecting them against

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radioactivity. The Big-Big, the nuclear explosion, took place before Onyii's birth, therefore, she has never seen the environment unaffected by radiation:

> Onyii wasn't alive when the oyinbo went to war with themselves and the Big-Big went off an ocean away and the wind swept red clouds over the entire continent [—]. A time before the oyinbo—the whites—raced to the stars and built America and Britain and Scandinavia and other places where they were able to—were the *only* ones able to—hide from what human stupidity had done to the planet. (24, italics in original)

What "human stupidity had done to the planet" in the Anthropocene is inseparably connected with colonialism and the neocolonial attitude towards the natural environment. With regard to Nigeria, it signifies aggressive mining of natural resources (palm and crude oil). Jussi Parikka warns against "establishing neocolonial structures of corporate presence in African countries; from infrastructure to end users, Africa is the next continent of consumers for the global corporations […] [in] the corporate rush to the energy and mineral reserves" (126).

In Onyebuchi's novel, the environmental damage both precedes and follows the Biafran War of Independence and ethnic displacements. In real life Nigeria, as stressed by Okuyade, the defence of human rights goes hand-in-hand with environmental ones (xiii), which proves how entangled and inseparable they both are. In *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature*, Sule E. Egya draws attention to the uniqueness of Nigerian environmental literature, claiming that ecological concern has been present there well before the ecocritical discourse. "[…] Nigerian literature, perhaps more than any other national literatures in Africa, remains a rich resource with which to validate the argument that nature and environment, the biotic and the abiotic life forms, and indeed the relations between the human and the nonhuman, have long been thematised in Africa before the emergence of what we now know as ecocriticism" (3).

Theorists tend to agree that climate change is connected in an intersectional way with deprivation, destitution, and power imbalances (see Parenti; Egya; Poray-Wybranowska). Following this line of thinking, the regions affected by these factors tend to be the most exploited and least protected with regard to climate change consequences, such as drought or desertification. In the case of Nigeria, "[o]ne cannot talk of the environment […] without references to the neo-imperial system of subjugation that use and abuse the human and the nonhuman, almost always in the same breath" (Egya 12). In other words, while exploring the reasons for the environmental devastation in present-day Nigeria, one needs to look back to the colonial past and the entire "catastrophic convergence".

Justyna Poray-Wybranowska refers to Parenti's term "catastrophic convergence" to demonstrate how local and global issues, overlapping with one another, aggravate environmental crises (6). In Nigeria, the natural world's "catastrophic convergence" is most conspicuous in the Niger Delta where crude oil is excavated. In the Delta area, the convergence embodies political, ethnic, and economic factors. Tanure Ojaide argues that nowadays about 20 ethnic groups for whom "the environment itself is the greatest unifier" (20) live in the Niger Delta (13). Therefore, destroying the unity of the natural environment means destruction of the groups' livelihood and their customs. What is more, "[e]thnicism supported by avarice on the part of the military leadership is a weakness exploited by the multinationals for […] the imperialistic agenda of their owners" (Feghabo 52). In *War Girls*, to defeat the Igbo, the Federal government enters into alliances with Western companies and later allows them to seize the land with the precious mineral resources. Ify argues: "Even now, you seek to guarantee the safety of your colonizers. These oyinbo. They don't care about you. They care about your minerals […]. You share no culture with them, and they share no culture with you. And yet you are letting them help you destroy your Igbo brothers and sisters" (237).

To imagine the extent of the ecological damage, one needs to recall the fact that the Niger Delta is called a "Global Biodiversity Hotspot" (Ogbeibu and Oribhabor). It encompasses four very different zones—"coastal barrier lands, mangrove swamp forests, freshwater swamps, and lowland rainforests" —and many species that may become extinct soon (Ogbeibu and Oribhabor). Sunny Awhefeada claims that the Niger Delta turned from a unique, ecologically biodiverse region into the global synonym for unparalleled ecocide, oil spillages, displacement of ethnic communities, a traditional way of earning an living, extreme deprivation, disease, and crime, especially sexual abuse of women living on this territory (96; Okuyade 285). Okuyade speaks of "the rape of the land" (280) which he finds analogous to rapes on women (295). The Niger Delta's oil-spills, acid rain, and the contamination of the land makes the region unsuitable for human and more-than-human living, especially fish (Mowarin 222).

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To render the devastation of the environment, instead of excavating crude oil, Onyebuchi opts for the mining of rare minerals needed for fuel and digitality. In the futuristic narrative, the Western world helps Federal Nigerians to gain access to minerals which they wish to import to Space Colonies militarily. Ify comments critically on global international corporations' involvement in African countries, claiming that they "take and take and take and never to give" (336). When the Biafran War of Independence is over, the mineral trade licences are given to foreign enterprises nearly for free: "the Biafran minister for mineral development had practically given away mining concessions to the Japanese in exchange for a sum of money Onyii knows will go straight to him [...] not to the people who live on that land" (351). Similarly to earlier-cited Okoro, Awhefeada observes that the Nigerian "government looks the other way, provides security [...] and brutally represses any dissenting groups affected by the horrendous deeds of the foreign oil companies" (96). Apart from turning a blind eye to aggressive excavations, Egya claims that Nigerian state governors have "in most cases misappropriated" the United Nations funding for environmental protection (74), which deepened the ecological crisis.

In *War Girls*, radiation, like the neocolonial order, permeates everything and leaves a nuclear imprint on all life forms. The radioactive landscape is reminiscent of the devastated fluvial territory in the Niger Delta. The Redlands, the territory where neither humans nor nonhumans can live, has the highest rating on the Geiger index and signifies "the wound" that severs the whole of Nigeria (*War Girls* 335). In the Midland, "where prosperity begins" (77), there is no radiation, and Nigerians can grow high-taxed crops or other plants there. Historically, on the other hand, Biafrans suffered from starvation on an unprecedented scale during the war (Giovetti). Ify sums up these differences: "a world divided into the dead and the living: red with radiation and poisoned air and hard, unyielding ground; blue with breathable air and vegetation and drinkable water" (336). Radiation permeates the Biafran territory where the War Girls' camp is situated, but, unlike in the Redlands, the mutated plants remain lush and green. "The Redlands just below the Middle Belt, the land taken by radiation. There's nothing to mark it, no recently turned earth to indicate mass graves, no markings of where battles had happened or where villages had been razed or where tent cities had erupted into being. No markings where troops from either side had been stationed. Just untouched redness" (335). The War Girls have to wear skinsuits because, without them, human skin flakes off. Not only people are affected by radiation, more-than-human agents like vegetation and animals are as well: "twisted and contorted [...] into unimaginable beasts. It mutates the flesh. It burns the mind" (418). As a result, mutated species come into life copiously, animals are born with extra limbs or heads, they are aggressive because of pain and radioactive disease, "skinny with radiation poisoning or thick with blight from polluted water" (76). Radiation contaminated drinking water and air, "the earth is red clay. Brown rivers run through it [...]. Radiation hangs thick in the air and glows beneath the soil" (302).

Mutated animals such as "lizards that crawl on six legs like small dragons" (320), two-headed wulfus, and hooved shorthorns tend to be additionally "armored, mechanized so that their biomass melds with wiring and machinery" (111). In Onyebuchi's novel, Green-and-Whites reprogram wired animals "[k]ept alive by techs and coded to kill" (48) to become deadly weapons. Chike captures it as follows: "They have colonized the animals, even" (49). Apart from fear, the War Girls feel empathy towards these exploited more-than-human creatures who's full-of-suffering existence is artificially prolonged for combat purposes: "Plates and circuitry screwed into it, wires disappearing in its rotting flesh. A corrupted thing poisoned even further by the Green-and-Whites" (48). During her stay with Federal Nigerians, Ify learns that they treat wired animals as machines, transforming food into fuel, "controlling the populations, monitoring their intake and their health from afar" (111–2). The lives of more-than-human beings are intertwined with the narrative of pain and control throughout the novel.

The deterritorialisation of Chukwu minerals and Igbo cosmology

In Africanfuturism, cosmology and magic remain vital parts of the narrative, deriving their strength from the land and beliefs connected with it. Okorafor explains that "African science fiction's blood runs deep and it's old, and it's ready to come forth" ("Sci-Fi stories"). In *War Girls*, Onyii regains traumatic memories when she inhales the powdered minerals called Chukwu, the same name as the Igbo deity. In Igbo ontology, minerals are the blood of the soil and crystalised sacred lore of the land. Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere claims that minerals are "endowed with vital force" because "trees, rivers and even rocks as such are believed to have their own gods and goddesses". "Minerals, soil and other inanimate beings" are classified as *Uro*, animals are called *Anu*, and plants *Osisi* (Agbasiere). Minerals, like everything else, come from the supreme deity Chukwu. Emmanuel Oyiaku explains that Chukwu gave rise to both visible and invisible beings and the entire universe. Chukwu belongs to the high deities, invisible ones,

transcending time and space, mighty, superior, intervening in the affairs of the universe and providing judgement, "all seeing" (Agbasiere). Chineke, another name for Chukwu, means "The Creator or the God that created all things" (Oyiaku). Or, as Agbasiere proposes, Chileke, "the creator of the universe encompassing the sky and earth and all the things in them".

In *War Girls*, Chukwu signifies both a material and sacred network of organic and non-organic beings, connecting them with the more-than-human world. Bearing the above in mind, apart from mineral mining's commercial aspect, Onyebuchi underscores its supernatural dimension that Igbo women in his novel recognise. In *War Girls*, the mineral Chukwu, named after the deity, possesses energising qualities as it comes from the land of their ancestors. Biafrans depicted in the novel believe that "[i]f we can't access our minerals, we'll lose all power" (38). The sentence can be interpreted literally as the source of the fuel but also metaphorically as embodying the living matter of their country that they are also a part of. What is more, in Onyebuchi's book, "[i]t's been said that the minerals are the divine right of the Igbo, their blessing from Chukwu, the supreme being whose energy powers all of existence" (7). The crushed mineral has the power to healing and can also be a powerful drug. Onyii receives Chukwu from her girlfriend, Chinelo, to alleviate her physical and emotional pain after the combat in which a brigadier coerced her to participate. As a result of its therapeutic properties, Onyii has visions that bring her troubled memories back and starts a slow recovery process from her war traumas: "[…] crushed crystals. Chukwu. What they call precious minerals they mine from the ground to power their machines. What they call the powder they grind it into and ingest. The energy of the supreme being that gives strength to all things" (69).

The displacement of Chukwu minerals means being cut off from this energy. Parikka repeats after Benjamin Bratton that "we carry small pieces of Africa in our pockets, referring to the role, for instance, of coltan in digital media technologies" (46). In other words, everyone who is using modern technology is entangled in the mineral deterritorialisation process and is its direct beneficiary. Furthermore, Parikka explores interconnections between deterritorialisation of minerals and socio-political mechanisms of the Anthropocene, arguing that to follow the tracks of geological displacements is to understand how the Anthropocene works. "The Anthropocene is a way to demonstrate that geology does not refer exclusively to the ground under our feet. It is constitutive of social and technological relations and environmental and ecological realities. Geology is deterritorialized in the concrete ways that metal and minerals become themselves mobile […]" (46).

In *War Girls*, Onyii very tangibly perceives the causal chain between the materiality of metal ("old and rusted" (7)) washed out by water, like blood running to the sea and hidden in the ground and the genocide of her people. She believes that the access to blood minerals' energy that fuels Western computerisation is the true cause of the Biafran War of Independence: "the mineral derricks […] capable of leaching resources from the Delta. Their resources […]. This is what the Nigerians are killing Biafrans for" (7). Looking at minerals in a broader context, as Parikka suggests, we ought to perceive them not only as a part of the earth but a wider network of humans and nonhumans: political, historical, and social connections arising first from early capitalism and evolving constantly through contemporary Information Technology cognitive capitalism and "geopolitics of the hunt for energy" (viii, 27). What is more, the 21st century's bio-capitalism opened a new market for trading the living material. In *War Girls*, the wired living animals programmed to kill or produce fuel constituted the perfect example of how biomatter could be commodified. "[…] [C]ontemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans. This sort of unity tends to be of the negative kind, a shared form of vulnerability, that is to say, a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats" (Braidotti 30).

In other words, in the 21st century, information, knowledge, biological material, and everything that supports it (minerals) have become new tools for necolonisation and "the search for minerals, metals, and oil across the globe, including Africa; only to return in the refined form of consumer products and the continent reterritorialized as a business opportunity" (Parikka 105). This process involves the deterritorialisation of ecological catastrophes to places like the Niger Delta where labour is inexpensive and regulations protecting the environment are not strictly implemented (Parikka 100). Onyii speculates how to break this vicious cycle: the blue minerals are part of the natural ecosystem of the Delta, they belong to the people who live in this territory, to the ocean where they reside, to the land where their gods are, not to the multinationals that export them, destroying the region and leaving behind its inhabitants in paucity (7). Conflicts over the access to these minerals lead to wars in which girl soldiers fight. In the stories to be excavated are the ones about how cosmologies, geologies, and capitalism become entangled with one another.

Concluding remarks

In the convention of Africanfuturism, Onyebuchi's novel portrays dislocations resulting from the Biafran War of Independence, communal patriarchal structures, and environmental crises. *War Girls* transfers the historical into a futuristic and alternative reality after a global nuclear explosion. By means of this shift, readers are immersed into the daily war reality of girl soldiers and refugees when scientific advancement of nanotechnology is available to everyone, and the present-day digital technologies have reached even higher levels than today. Africanfuturism believes in technology and sees it as the agent of transformative changes, such as Augments discussed earlier. The novel brings a glimpse of hope, mostly via the character of Ify, born as Yoruba and raised as Igbo, whose sisterly bonds with Onyii (Ibgo) signify the possibility of reconciliation and healing.

Notes

1. Honwana (11) provides the numbers for Mozambique: circa 250,000 displaced children; between 8,000 and 10,000 fought during the war as child soldiers.

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From slave trade to fuel tanks: On Benin's colonial displacements

Agnieszka Pantuchowicz

From slave trade to fuel tanks: On Benin's colonial displacements

In this article, I propose the possibility of alternative ways of narrating African histories through art objects as allusive openings inciting a change in Western ways of perceiving the African continent. Based on my experience of visiting the Benin pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024, I will explore the role of artistic ways of alluding to Benin's past and present by way of seemingly cancelling its colonial past through its topographical displacement to the historic Kingdom of Dahomey, a West African kingdom which existed between 1600 and 1904 within the territory of the present-day Republic of Benin. The artists' conflation of Benin with Dahomey will be read as a historical and topographical displacement, which the artworks displayed in the Benin pavilion used as a background for artistic projections of the future, envisioning the necessity of empowering women by way of alluding to the Yoruba tradition of *Gèlèdè* as a dialogical space of rematriation. In this article, I treat the artistic allusive history as a necessary supplement to official histories, which, along with traditional museal practices, constitute what Arjun Appadurai calls "testaments of fixity" – a category which may be held responsible for demoting Africa to the provinces of anthropological and development studies. The return of cultural artefacts looted by colonisers to Benin, alluded to in the exhibition, will be read in the light of Graham Harman's notion of "allure" as an illusion of the possibility of a return to the once lost state of completeness. This impossibility will be brought in through the exhibition's allusion to the ecological threat brought to Benin by traffickers of petrol from Nigeria. The article also brings in a brief analysis of two recent films which I find significant for broadening its perspective: Gina Prince-Bythewood's *The Woman King* (2022) and Mati Diop's *Dahomey* (2024). **Keywords:** Benin, history, displacement, colonialism, slave trade, Venice Biennale 2024.

For the first time in its 60-year history, the 2024 edition of the Venice Biennale presented the Republic of Benin's national pavilion. Located at the Venice Arsenale (rather than in some far-off location as is often the case for African national pavilions), the intention of this inaugural pavilion was to bring the Yoruba *Gèlèdè* traditions highlighting women's vital social and political roles to visitors' attention and to simultaneously inspire them to think about the precariousness and fragility of living in the contemporary world. The poetically sounding title of the Benin pavilion, "Everything Precious Is Fragile", was, in fact, a translation of the term *Gèlèdè*. The title reflected, as Azu Nwagbogu, the curator of the exhibition, put it, "on the way we treat the things that are most important to us" (Horton). Nwagbogu is the founder and director of the African Artists' Foundation, an organisation established in 2007 and based in Lagos. He is also the founder of the annual Lagos Photo Festival and is an internationally acclaimed curator of numerous local and international artistic events and exhibitions. As Rolien Zonneveld put it on the Homecoming Gallery webpage, Nwagbogu "has become a visionary curator" whose mission is to challenge "the lingering cliches that attend Black creative self-representation" (Nwagbogu and Zonneveld). He formulated the complex task of the Venice Biennale as a recommendation to explore "traditional ceremonies and rituals, such as those associated with *Gèlèdè* traditions and Vodoun; Benin's amazon warriors, Agojie, and the role of women in protecting and nurturing the nation; the history of colonialism and slave trade" (Nwagbogu, "Azu Nwagbogu on Curating the Republic of Benin Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale"). Underlining the necessity of restituting the memory of the historical empowerment of women in the *Gèlèdè* tradition and in Benin's historical past, the exhibition interestingly alluded to the country's patriarchal ancestry by way of, perhaps intentionally,

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excluding male monarchic figures. According to Nwagbogu, what "paved the way for *Everything Precious is Fragile*" was another exhibition (C&, "Benin Pavilion for 60th Venice Biennale Announces Artists and Theme", italics in original). It was titled "The Art of Benin of Yesterday and Today: from Restitution to Revelation" and was held in 2022 at the Palais de la Marina in Cotonou in Benin. It displayed 26 objects looted from palaces in Abomey in 1892 by French troops. The objects were first donated to the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography in Paris and then, in 2000, were moved to the Quai Branly Museum, also in Paris. They were sent back to the Republic of Benin in 2021. One of the 26 objects was Sossa Dede's sculpture, which showed King Béhanzin, the 11th king of Danxomè (later renamed Dahomey by the French) who waged war against the French colonisers between 1889 and 1892.

Accompanying Béhanzin were two ceremonial thrones of kings Ghézo and Glèlè and, additionally, "more contemporary art created by 34 Beninese artists such as Dominique Zinkpè, Julien Sinzogan, Yves Apollinaire Pédè, and Ponce Zannou" (Athena Art Foundation). The absence of any figures or effigies of kings at the Venice Biennale seems to be a result of Nwagbogu's hope of bringing in a "reflection around Benin's history and feminism" without explicitly referring to particular historical events, a reflection on "something that we can all relate to and which brings us back to the thing that makes us all feel human" (Horton). The absence of kings in the exhibition seems to be an allusive attempt at looking at the potential of rethinking rematriation through realising Benin's complex historical turbulences reaching back to the military activities of European colonial powers in the 19th-century Scramble for Africa, which gave rise to various pre-colonial non-existent political units. Benin was first created by the French colonial conquest at the end of the 19th century (Ronen, Adotevi and Law), but its present borders and territories cannot be fully identified with those of the historic Kingdom of Dahomey, which constitutes only Benin's southern part. The return of the looted figures to Benin may be seen not as a justice done to a particular political state but as a potential rebuilding of the present as an, however imaginary, way to a non-colonial future in which it is Africa, or its spirit, that can be awakened. The Benin pavilion brought an aesthetic dimension to the displayed artefacts as an invitation to the awakening, or revelation, of creative spirit and genius—a possibility strongly accented by Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin, in the opening address:

> Statues or sculpted doors, elaborate thrones, portable altars […], none of them leave us indifferent. There is no doubt that many of you will come into contact with them and contemplate their exceptional beauty, magnificence and splendour, signs of the prodigy of their creators. Many voices will see them and praise the vision and grandeur of the kings who commissioned them. (Talon)

The genius of the returned kings is a rediscovery of the alleged greatness of the Benin culture and art, and Talon reads it as a beginning of a process of restitution and return which, as yet, is incomplete, a beginning of a longer story to be told by Benin to the world:

> It is the time of restitution that has begun and that will continue resolutely until we reach our objective. For it must be admitted that the 26 royal treasures recovered are only the very first episode of a soap opera that promises other sequences. In this same spirit, we are also beginning the time of revelation: revealing to ourselves the best we have and revealing to others how, without Benin, the world would not be quite the same. (Talon)

Benin is thus posited as indispensable in the making of the world as it is, though what is needed to reveal this significant position is the return of the forcibly pilfered objects to their alleged homeland. Such returnees from the colonial capitals and their museums, the objects, in the eyes of Benin's president, testify to the magnificence of the past, tell the untold story of an enforced absence, though not exactly from the places from which they had been taken, but from the space of another museum or exhibition, in the space offered to them as a regained home.

Arjun Appadurai personifies museum objects and names some of them "accidental refugees" (401) whose relocation, unlike in the case of human refugees, he sees as unintended. Though the objects of his remarks are German museums, some of his observations also refer to museums in other European states. "On the face of it", he writes, "the objects that have ended up in German custodianship did not come to Germany willingly or by their own volition. Like all objects *discovered through conquest*, collection and curation in the great museums of the West, they are accidental refugees" (407, italics added). The idea of discovery through conquest, collection, and curation translates colonialism into an epistemological endeavour in which things are made present and knowable from the outside of their origins as objects of scientific insight. Since only some of them can be taken away to specialised places to be studied, their selection is seen as accidental. On the basis of this premise, Appadurai proposes a

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rereading of stories told by accidental refugees by way of anthropomorphising them, endowing them with the ability to speak, though not exactly with their own voices. Historically, museum objects have "been given voice through the work of the scholars, curators, exhibition professionals and museum educators who have ended up as trustees of these objects" who talked "about their roles, uses and meanings in the places from which they originally came" (407). Their "accidental refugee" status was thus concealed by the image of objects still remaining there and then, enabling an imaginary ocular contact with the where and when to which they once belonged. Interestingly, Appadurai does not consider the possibility of the accidental refugees' return to where they had been taken away from. What he proposes instead is to concentrate on their displacement and circulation. In the hands of scholars and curators, "these objects are made into testaments of fixity and not of circulation, though complex processes of circulation and displacement are what is most important about them" (407). What is thus needed is a certain supplementation of the ways we understand museum artefacts with migrancy so as to make our fixed ways of understanding more vigorous and livelier—in line with the living energy of objects. "Objects too have lives and biographies", writes Appadurai, "and furthermore they can be seen to exert force, purpose, even motive (in the sense of Spinoza's idea of *conatus*)" (405). Admitting them the status of refugees rather than that of dead and passive things, we will be able to hear in their stories what we also hear in the stories of human refugees, which "focus on their dislocation, disenfranchisement and suffering as key elements of who they are" (407). What is thus proposed is the achievement of "a better balance" through seeing both "refugee objects" and "refugee humans" as "complex and interactive mixtures of stability and dislocation" (407).

Talon also sees the objects looted by the French from Danxomè as objects of discovery, though not through conquest. Rather, he sees them as returnees from exile who, telling the history of Danxomè, translate it into the history of Benin, which will also attract emigrants from Benin:

> From the North to the South of the country, from the East to the West and from the farthest reaches of all the diasporas, Beninese people of all generations are invited to come and discover them. As much as any citizen of the world who wants to. These are unique cultural works that tell our history, our identity, our soul. (Talon)

It seems to be here, in the Palais de la Marina, where Appadurai's mixture of stability and dislocation promises a return of stability through the discovery of the spirit of Danxomè, which, as we have seen, is also the spirit of monarchs, simultaneously being the spirit of Benin's exceptionalism. Talon's speech is also addressed to the Beninese diaspora, to emigrants from Benin, and to refugees who are invited to discover what they really are, their souls and identities. This encounter of refugees with the display of returned objects, perhaps with accidental returnees (not all of the looted objects were returned by France in 2021), is a vision of unity and oneness akin to Appadurai's "testaments of fixity" responsible for immobilisation of objects and projections of the stability of historians' or ethnographers' creations. The promise of regained oneness of Benin speaking through its president's speech is a vison resulting from the conflation of sameness and identity with locality. This imaginary oneness, in fact, eliminates the complexity of Benin's past and forgets about what Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall see as "the potential of *sameness-as-worldliness*" (351). Scholarship on Africa frequently followed the paths of seeing Africa along the lines reflected in Talon's address, the lines as it were dictated by the discursive "relegation of the continent to the twin provinces of anthropology and development studies" (Mbembe and Nutall 350). What the two disciplines have brought in is the vision of Africa as inferior, as the world's other, "as a residual entity, the study of which does not contribute anything to the knowledge of the world or of the human condition in general" (351). The foundational assumptions of anthropology and development studies are still the unconscious belief that particular modes of describing reality are appropriate to "modern" societies, on the one hand, and to nonliterate, underdeveloped, and "residual" worlds, on the other hand. In this view, there can be no authentic description of Africa that does not touch on witchcraft, kinship, poverty, or chieftaincy. This compartmentalisation of knowledge undergirds the obsession with Africa's uniqueness, and it feeds the overwhelming neglect of *how* the meanings of Africanness are made (350).

Talon's message is exactly that of a developmental path to a worldliness seen as a return to the universalised world, not through its experience but through an alleged overcoming of the wrongs of colonialism. His Benin follows the universally trodden path to unity as an emergence from its social and topographical complexities into a oneness now emanating as its origin. The return of the refugees, however accidental, attracts and brings back other refugees, simultaneously attracting "any citizen of the world" for whom sameness is a desirable state of being, regardless of the fact that the phrase was first used by Oliver Goldsmith as a way of expressing his

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cosmopolitan spirit. If, as Dan Hicks notes (writing about the brutishness of British museal collections of colonial lootings), organised displays of such collections "re-tell the history of empire, no matter how 'critically' or self-consciously" (xiii), then a crucial aspect of Talon's address is also a re-telling of such a story, though its imperial message gets somehow camouflaged by the allegedly universal dimension of oneness and unity.[1]

Mbembe and Nutall conceive of worldliness as a paradoxical kind of unity founded on diversity. "After all", they write,

> the unity of the world is nothing but its diversity. If, as we believe, the world has nothing other, if it is not subject to any authority, and if it does not have a sovereign, then we must read Africa in the same terms as we read everywhere else. This is not tantamount to diminishing aspects of its supposed originality or even its distinctiveness or the potency of its suffering. It means that scholarship on Africa should be deprovincialized. (351)

An attempt at such a deprovincialisation may be seen in the design of Benin's premiere Venice Biennale exhibition. Talon proposed that Nwagbogu be the curator of the event and that he be handed "a carte blanche" for its curatorial direction (Baumgardner). Nwagbogu is not from Benin and identifies himself as "Western-educated from Anglophone Africa, of Nigeria" (Baumgardner). He is the founder and director of the African Artists' Foundation, which promotes African art and artists. One of its aims is "to become a change-maker through the power of art" (African Artists' Foundation). Before the return of looted artefacts to Benin, Nwagbogu addressed the question of colonial losses at the 2020 annual Lagosphoto Festival which followed the theme of "Rapid Response Restitution" and proposed "a potential model for a broader diasporic and pan-African engagement with questions of restitution and repatriation" (C&, "Lagosphoto Festival 2020: Rapid Response Restitution—Home Museum"). In November 2020, in an interview for *The Guardian*, he compared African cultural heritage losses to phantom limbs, a kind of present absence that Africa should acknowledge:

> When I think of what has happened in terms of our artistic heritage [...] the analogy of the phantom limb phenomenon comes to mind—you have lost a limb, but you feel it is still there. Well, we have lost our heritage and we know we have lost it, but we can somehow still continue even though we are walking on crutches. I am saying, it's time to drop the crutches and feel the pain and the loss. Let us at least acknowledge what has been lost. (O'Hagan)

The losses cannot simply be undone, though the return of looted artefacts to Africa has been a matter of long-lasting disputes and negotiations. As Elias Aguigah notes, "[d]emands for the return of cultural heritage looted from Africa during the colonial period are not a twenty-first century phenomenon. Africans whose (or whose ancestors') belongings were expropriated have kept on claiming these since they were stolen" (157). For Emery Patrick Effiboley, an art historian from the University of Abomey-Calavi, the acknowledgment of the loss proposed by Nwagbogu seems to be too little. Such objects as those looted from Danxomè, which he calls war or blood-related objects,

> should be returned to the intrinsic owners without condition. The reason for this is that these exiled objects belong to a set of objects that has been dismantled by the colonizers. Repatriating them is not only returning them to their home but also completing/re-appropriating the meaning or their original meaning to the benefit of future generations both at home and abroad. (76)

Nwagbogu's Venice Biennale exhibition acknowledged the colonial looting of Africa not only by way of the significant omission of reference to the royal treasures and the figures of masculine monarchs returned to Benin in 2021. Rather than assuming an unquestionable magnitude of Benin's past and promising its renewal, the exhibition was strongly allusive, avoiding strong literal references to established identification of Benin with the birth of voodoo or *Gèlèdè* masks which, as Nwagbogu put it, have become a Pan-African trope, "a very commodified, commercialized, objectified version of something that must be deeper" (Baumgardner). The concept of *Gèlèdè*, though associated with masquerades celebrating Yoruba women and harmonious coexistence with the land, is also etymologically related, as we have seen, to fragility and vulnerability in the title of the exhibition—"Everything precious is fragile". From the catalogue description, we learned that the idea of the presentation is that of bringing "to life the fragility and resurgence of indigenous wisdom, with a focus on the return to mother nature" (Rama). I will not describe and discuss in detail all the works of the artists who presented their works in Venice—Chloé Quenum, Moufouli Bello, Ishola Akpo, and Romuald Hazoumè—which in various ways address and underline the empowerment of femininity and women as bringers of different attitudes to nature and society. For the purpose of this article, I will read them through possible associations and allusions they bring to the

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mind of a non-African reader and interpreter who finds the general design of the exhibition to be an intellectual challenge and an invitation to think about Africa without any pre-formed concepts or stereotypes.

Akpo's huge tapestry that opened the exhibition presented an *Ìyálóde*—a high-ranking Yoruba chieftain—surrounded by an all-female military unit. Here, the issue of empowerment of women was brought to the fore through reference to the Agojie, the Danxomè Amazons who were employed by the largest slave-trading African empire at the time. The tapestry alluded to the Queen of Danxomè, Tassi Hangbe, who ruled the Kingdom of Danxomè for a short time in the early 18th century. Her 98-foot-tall statue now stands at Esplanade des Amazones, a public square located in Cotonou. Though the historical beginnings of women warriors in Dahomey are uncertain, there exists a theory that suggests that they were formed in honour of Queen Hangbe (who ruled from 1708–1711), the twin sister of King Agaja. According to Kplangan, the palace historian, she was the only woman to rule the kingdom. Others believe that Hangbe herself formed the female corps as palace guards. The problem with this theory is that some historians see Hangbe as a legendary figure who may not even have existed (Murtala, Hamza, and Lawal 184).

Akpo's tapestry does not present a real situation, and the artist has alluded to the uncertainty of Hangbe's history by not including her figure and replacing it with the local figure of Ìyálóde, a motherly figure whose chieftaincy questions the traditional delegation of power to men. The tapestry belongs to a series of collages titled *Traces d'une reine/ Traces of a Queen* in which Akpo, as he himself admits, has "deliberately substituted the heads of the sovereigns for that of the queens, thus staging archives to the glory of the latter. I propose another version of history by rehabilitating these women" (8). The queen in the tapestry also alludes to other African women rulers other than Tassi Hangbe who have been half-forgotten or erased from the African memory. "I decided to explore", Akpo told Elisa Dainelli,

> the memories and heritage of forgotten, neglected, or even erased pre-colonial African queens such as— Tassi Hangbé (ruling Danxomè between 1708 and 1711), Njinga (ruling Angola between 1582–1663), Ndaté Yalla Mbodj from Linguere Wollof, (ruling Senegal between 1810–1860). During my research, I noticed the absence of archives despite the importance and the real political weight of these queens ruling different kingdoms of the continent, so I started to excavate and collect information that led me to tell the complexity of the story of these queens. (Akpo and Dainelli 8)

The erasure of Queen Hangbe's traces was not the work of the colonisers but, according to a legend, may be ascribed to her power-hungry brother, Agaja. This story was told to BBC correspondent Fleur Macdonald by the current Queen Hangbe (the ancestor of the 18th-century Hangbe) with whom Macdonald had been granted an audience in Abomey in 2018. The Queen also told her that all traces of her ancestor's reign were erased by Agaja, who believed that only men should hold the throne. In a dusty museum that lies within the walls of the Royal Palaces in Abomey, the monarchs' elaborate bronze sceptres are displayed in order of their reign. There is no sign of one belonging to Hangbe, and some historians question whether she existed at all (Macdonald).

The story told by Akpo in Venice proposed a vision of the uncertainty and fragility of imperial histories by bringing in the complexity of the distribution of power and its gendering. Though solidity seems to be a positive aspect of cultural or social constructs, Akpo drew attention to the possibility of re-reading fragility, of seeing in it not something to be strengthened, but as a constitutive element of cultures where the imposition of a seemingly desirable, solid order of things is, in fact, a way of concealing a weakness via promises of improvement.

Though colonialism is perceived as an explicit expression of bringing the exemplary stable and solid order of things to places seen as weak, fragile, and inferior, it is the inherent fragility of things that it attempts to somehow cover with what Shakespeare saw as "bold stern looks" of strong men—of conquistadores, soldiers, kings. Fragilities of political states, both the colonised and the colonising ones, are, according to the traditional image of history *magistra vitae*, errors or mistakes that should be eliminated if our future is to be successful. What some historians propose, however, is a study of "'fragilities' rather than posited 'successful' mechanisms of rule that can lead to understanding of political and social change" (Yoffee 3) and the "fragile nature and the means by which rulers sought to manage their fractious infrastructures" (1).

Akpo's allusion to the Dahomey Amazons is also an allusion to the colonial re-naming of giving familiar names to things and phenomena as a way of, however illusory, mastering them. The term "Amazons" (*Les amazons*) does not exist in the Fon language spoken in Dahomey, and the women warriors were called Agojie, Mino, and Gbeto, the names whose senses ranged from elephant huntresses (Gbeto) to "our mothers" (Mino), the last term signifying a respect for women as mothers "known to be over-protective and highly sacrificial for their

children's survival at all costs" (Murtala, Hamza, and Lawal 182). Interestingly, this protective facet of the warrior women can be seen in King Gezo's decision to make the Agojie not only part the army but also his bodyguards, in which position their main role was "to prevent rebellion among the male soldiers" (184). Most of them were also ceremonially married to the king, a tradition that was one of King Gezo's arguments against the demand to end the slave trade in Dahomey that was brought to him by a British mission in 1850. According to an account of the king's conversation with the British, he said: "I cannot send my women to cultivate the soil, it would kill them" (qtd in Law 215). Since what the British emissaries demanded was that Dahomey re-orients its overseas commerce from slaves to agricultural produce, this re-orientation would also mean a renunciation of what Robin Law calls its "military prowess" (Law 215) in whose building women played a significant role. Akpo's tapestry does not explicitly refer to the historical entanglements in the slave trade. The dispatch of the empowerment of women is carried by the allusive variety of possible historical readings and re-readings that a museal gaze might somehow lose. The symbolic beheading of kings and reimagining them "as female royals elided from history" (Johnson-Nwosu, Morrison, and da Silva) is also a gesture toward an excavation of the palimpsestic history of femininity in which Africa plays a significant role.

The Dahomey women warriors have become figures of fighting feminists in Gina Prince-Bythewood's 2022 film *The Woman King*, whose narrative somehow uncurls and smooths the complexities of the West African kingdoms of the past, projecting upon them the dualities of Western discourses of power and gendering, which reifies cultural essentialism and its constructs. The man/woman duality, as rendered in the film's feminist perspective, may well be seen as an imposition of a typically Western prototype of the emancipation and liberation of women. For Manu Ampim, the film constitutes a clear example of "white feminist propaganda", as "there are literally no good or honorable African men in the movie" (2). What the film reflects seems to be a result of what Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí sees as "somatocentricity" of the Western dual approach to sex and gender divisions. In *The Invention of Women* (2001), she claims the woman question is "a Western-derived issue—a legacy of the age-old somatocentricity in Western thought" (ix). The book provides strong arguments for claiming that the Western perspective on African cultures is frequently based on linguistic misunderstandings, also as regards the positioning of man as a binary opposite of woman. "The usual gloss of the Yoruba categories *obinrin* and *okunrin* as 'female/woman' and 'male/man,' respectively", she writes, "is a mistranslation" (32). Oyěwùmí strongly critiques Western feminism, seeing in it the work of "the unbridled universalism" (195). She perceives of Western feminism as a part of the Western "mishmash theory of Africa", whose projections resulted in the continent's unbridled homogenisation of African cultures even when it is clear that these cultures do not share identical institutions or histories. There is no question that Africans have many things in common and that some generalisations are possible. But care must be taken in deciding how these claims are to be made and at what level they are to be applied, given the paucity of detailed, historically grounded, and culturally informed studies of many African societies (xiv).

The unbridled universalism, along with the unbridled homogenisation resulting from some mishmashed theorisations, may be read as an invitation to bridling, and thus of controlling and restraining universalism's and homogenisation's totalising tendencies by way of diminishing the scope of analytical vision to localities and things which are common. It is not, she writes, that "gender categories are necessarily limited to the West, particularly in the contemporary period. Rather, I am suggesting that discussions of social categories should be defined and grounded in the local milieu, rather than based on 'universal' findings made in the West" (16).

In Prince-Bythewood's film, women are shown as powerful not only as warriors who ruthlessly slaughter men in the initial scene of the film, which may be read as an extreme version of the struggle against patriarchy. Patriarchy's presence within the social sphere of the filmic Dahomey is also signalled at in the beginning of the film through the offering of one of the protagonists of the film, Nawi, to King Gezo by her father as a punishment for her refusal to marry one of her suitors. The father's will remains unfulfilled because another woman, Izogie, sees her resistance as a symptom of power and manages to enlist her as one of the Agojie—the warrior women. The makers of the film project this image of liberated women upon the Agojie and portray them as liberators who fight against the slave-trading kingdom of Oyo, simultaneously fighting against European trade and thus against the slave trade in general. The film, as one critic notes, ignores the fact "that the warrior women (known as Agojie) were employed in the largest slave-trading empire in West Africa, but are presented as victims and heroes in the film" (Ampim 1). Though King Gezo, at least according to some sources, refused the British demand to give up slavery, the filmic Dahomey is envisioned as a liberator state that carries the banner of universal freedom, sharing it, perhaps paradoxically, with the British. The film camouflages the active involvement of Dahomey in the slave

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trade, simultaneously positing the peacefulness of agricultural life (Gezo's choice of palm olive production over slavery) as the eventual effect of the state's involvement in the war with the belligerent Oyo.

The idea of sugar-coated versions of history, such as that portrayed in *The Woman King*, carries within itself a promise of a true history, which, as true, should be one. So should be Oyěwùmí's search for a comprehensive theory of Africa in which mishmash should give way to some more orderly theorisations, avoiding the Western "blaxploitations" of Africa, be it in film, history, anthropology, or, more generally, cultural studies. The film does represent, to use Oyěwùmí's phrasing, "the feminist charge to make women visible", which "is carried out by submerging many local and regional categories, which in effect imposes Western cultural values" (78). However, the question that may be asked here is that of finding a way to give a voice to those localities and regionalities from the position of an observer, be it Western or non-Western, which avoids generalisations and universalisation. The question is, broadly speaking, translational, and may be approached via thinking about translation strategies and their choices in order to avoid and minimise mistranslations. Perhaps researchers could accept, at least partly, the position of translators rather than that of tellers of the original, of translators who, as Mona Baker puts it, "are alert to the gender issue and to the violence of colonialism" (287).

Artistic expression is also a form of translation. Art can be treated, as Candice P. Boyd—an Australian artist-geographer—proposes, as a vehicle for knowledge translation and exchange. What she calls "arts-based knowledge translation" posits art as a "valid and powerful tool for translating knowledge—whether that knowledge be originally created through arts-based practices or by other means" (2). This kind of approach to art and knowledge "can be applied across the spectrum of academic disciplines regardless of the type of knowledge being translated" (9). Art objects do not only carry certain aesthetic qualities; they also transmit "'felt knowledges' so that they might be 'felt' again" (92). Though felt knowledge cannot be an object of any scientific accuracy, it may well be treated as an incitement to inquire into some more stable footing of the feeling carried by translation.

The story told by Akpo in Venice does not bring any certain kind of knowledge about Benin, about its history and social and political complexities concerning gender roles, power, slavery, or colonisation. The tapestry is a translation of a complex original whose map is a palimpsestic layering of its past, which is also palimpsestic. It does not constitute a singular object but brings in what Eric Taxier proposes as a brief insight into Graham Harman's concept of allure: "a nonliteral experience of an object's displacement from its qualities that draws attention to a deeper reality" (599). Harman himself explains the senses of allure in his *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, alluding to a present absence of sorts: "What we find in allure are absent objects signaling from beyond—from a level of reality that we do not currently occupy and can never occupy, since it belongs to the object itself and not to any relation we could ever have with it. Allure is the presence of objects to each other in absent form" (245–6). In an interview with Lucy Kimbell, Harman links allure with allusion in the context of the impossibility of fullness of expression:

> We are substantial forms, meaning that each of us has a definite structure that can be alluded to or approximated, but never exhaustively described or expressed. This scares many people because it sounds like a soul. But I see nothing wrong with souls, as long as we don't arbitrarily posit that these souls last forever and go to heaven or hell. (Kimbell 8)

Akpo's tapestry does not present things fully. It hints at what is not there as an object, alluding to something that each of us can approximate. Its ascription to a geographical location, to Benin, is a topographical orientation point that is not a point of destination but a place of transition, a translated place that invites us to trace its origins, which may well be entangled with our own.

Bello's works shown at the Venice Biennale may be read as questioning simple objectivity, even as regards colours. Her installation of four portraits of African women surprises with their blue skins. This exploration of women's visibility, in fact, alludes to the *generality* of blackness of African people and, as she said in an interview, the choice of the colour is in a way quite realistic: "My paintings are interested in the representation of the black woman and her visibility. There are as many colours of Black skin as Black people, and the blue allows me to gather all its nuances since the deepest Black skin colour is almost blue" (Bello and Ghoualmia).

Quenum's series of glass objects titled *L'heure Blue*, which was displayed as part of the Benin pavilion, makes use of the glass window of the Venice Arsenal—the location of the pavilion. The obvious allusion to fragility in the title of the exhibition is accompanied by an allusion to Il Arsenale as the place of building ships at the time of the colonial and imperial sway of Venice, a reminder of "Venice's own role in the history of slavery"—as Quenum herself put it (Baumgardner). The display of glass objects in Venice may also incite one to associate them with

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the long Venetian tradition of glass manufacturing, with glass beads constituting a significant colonial product. Glass beads "were used as a form of barter along the trade routes across the African territory. From Venice, they were sent to Liverpool, Amsterdam and Lisboa, and from there to the African and American colonies" (Alternative Venice). This may link Quenum's work with Akpo's tapestry on which women are wearing beads which, most probably, do not come from Venice, but were produced in those territories of West Africa which now encompass parts of Nigeria as well as the Republic of Benin. Glass bead production within this region predates colonial times, and the beads worn by the warrior women in the tapestry may have been home-produced. However, a report from a meeting of King Gezo with a French trade firm agent newly arrived in Abomey informs us that "Gezo would have expected a new French agent to bring gifts such as 'cloth, *verroterie* (glass beads), powder, and arms'" (Regis 15).

Akpo and Quenum's works do not refer explicitly to any incidents from Danxomè's, Dahomey's, or Benin's history, leaving the questions of colonialism and slavery only allusively present, though possible to be deciphered. Unlike the filmic Dahomey in *The Woman King,* in which the camouflage of the slave trade positioned Dahomey as an abolitionist leader, the exhibition only hints at Dahomey's presence beneath the present Benin, which it officially represents. This article was in fact incited by the Benin pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and it seems to be highly probable that the exhibition made Benin a recognisable part of the contemporary world to numerous visitors not as one more place on its maps, but as a voice of a young African state apprehending the fragility of mapping and historicising the world in accordance with a single pattern. Without condemning its pasts, it alludes to a possibility of looking at them through artistic expression, also as fragile and passing, though possible to be interpreted in artistic translations as silenced. If colonialism was a way of silencing indigenous voices, the exhibition, in a way, brings them back not as original ones, but as translated into a language that carries Harman's experience of displacement.

The Venice Biennale's Benin pavilion is a displaced place that foreignises rather than domesticates. The terms "foreignization" and "domestication" have been proposed by Lawrence Venuti in his numerous writings on translation. Domestication constitutes "erasure of the foreignness of the foreign text by rewriting it in the terms of the receiving language and culture" (257). The artefacts in the Benin pavilion avoid domestication and make the foreign not only visible but also felt—the task of arts-based knowledge translation (see above) opening various paths to the knowledge and understanding of the silenced foreign. "Through the exhibition", Nwagbogu said, "we challenge the epistemic injustice of the silencing of indigenous voices all over the world" (Rama). What this statement also addresses is the epistemic injustice of official histories, which tend to institutionalise forgetfulness, as José Rabasa writes in the context of colonial topographies (Rabasa 3). Perhaps the absence of Dahomey kings in Nwagbogu's exhibition also brings to the fore the epistemic injustice of history by way of withdrawing kings and replacing them by way of invoking the *Gèlèdè* celebration of the feminine. Interestingly, the question of the kingly voice and its muffling has been taken up in Mati Diop's 2024 film titled *Dahomey*, in which she documents the return of looted artefacts from France to Benin. The document is partly narrated by King Gezo speaking with a ghostly voice, which Diop describes in an interview as neither male nor female: "we created a genderless vocal texture in deep, metallic frequencies. I wanted a texture with a futurist aesthetic, like a creature in a genre movie that would break with the whole folklore-and-tradition image in which 'African ancestrality' is too often confined" ("Film Afri ca 2024: Opening and Closing Film Announcement"). Gezo, numbered as the 26th artefact to be transported to Benin from France, speaks in the Fon language (Fongbe), and his words "delivered in the low rumble of [his] voice suggest the disorientation of emerging from 'the kingdom of night' into a place far removed from the country I saw in my dreams" (Rooney). Though King Gezo seems to be absent from the Venice Biennale, the presence of the Queen Hangbe tapestry brings in a certain historical disorientation by mixing the themes of royalty, colonialism, and slavery with the empowerment of women, thus also dismantling the vision of the unity of contemporary Benin offered in its president's speech celebrating the return of royal statues. A part of the recent construction of this unity can be seen in the ambivalence of a concrete and bronze arch named The Door of No Return (*La Porte du Non-Retour*) erected in Ouidah as a part of the pan-African Slave Root Project. The arch ends the road leading from the slave market to slave ships destined for the Americas, and it commemorates the enslaved rather than the enslavers.[2]

On leaving the Benin pavilion, visitors passed through Hazoumè's gate-like construction—a heavy installation of plastic petrol containers reminiscent of *Gèlèdè* masks. The installation which, in the catalogue, figures as resembling "a round-shaped vodun sanctuary" suggests not only a return to "the maternal womb of the

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earth" but is also an ecological hint towards the pan-African problem of increasing pollution, which, in Benin, is strongly connected with illegal gas trafficking from Nigeria. It involves the construction of numerous small roadside stalls around the country, along with the traffickers transporting drums of petrol on motorbikes (called "human bombs"). Javier Corso, a Spanish photographer who documented the gasoline smuggling to Benin, titled his photo essay *Essence du Bénin*, thus (mingling the French word petrol with its English sense of core) positing petrol as the "heart" of the state, as the basis of Benin's economic functioning. According to Corso, "both the people and the stability of Benin are completely dependent on an activity which remains strictly off the books" (Corso). The monarchs of old gave way to the rule of an anarchy of sorts, to illicit *essence* traffickers put in motion by the demands of capitalism, who found an allusive reflection in Hazoumè's work, which, in turn, alludes to the *Gèlèdè* tradition and its promise of peace and social accord. As Cyril-Mary Pius Olatunji and Mojalefa Lehlohonolo Johannes Koenane note in their rumination on *Gèlèdè*, a significant aspect of capitalism is a shortage of care: "Yoruba people see the modern capitalist economic system which expects women to toil and struggle with their naturally well-built and more brawny male counterparts as being too harsh, exploitative and unfair to females, as it denies them the care and admiration that nature in its wisdom has bequeathed them as their legitimate right" (Olatunji and Koenane 49).

This image of a historically and topographically displaced place carrying the name of Benin brought to the Venice Biennale addresses the necessity of caring not only about history of powers, but also, and importantly so, about places, however displaced they are—of caring, in the senses of minding, tending, and weighing, the "wheres" of our living.

Conclusion

In the article, I have shown that artworks can allusively supplement official histories. This is relevant especially in the case of African states, whose historical narratives were frequently a reprise of the Western models of history, which posited Africa as an inferior space awaiting development. The Benin pavilion at the 2024 Venice Biennale reflects both the necessity and the possibility of changing historical imaginings of times and places, so as to reflect the complexities of African realities which evade simple historisations and consider the displacement of the places resulting from the 19th-century Scramble for Africa. Also, King Gezo's voice from Mati Diop's film *Dahomey* seems to be a voice of the allurement of indecision which speaks against the grain of the imaginary female heroism of a masculinized woman in Prince-Bythewood's *The Woman King* in which the straightforward vision of Dahomey's past in fact imposes its reading as an, however unintended, allusion. What I have proposed is a supplementation of history with an allusive kind of knowledge drawn from various artistic works expressing the allure of Africa rather than its superficial realities via allusion, seen as a device of escape from the fixity of colonial judgements and taxonomies.

Notes

1. Hicks does not refer in his book to the French looting of Dahomey, but to the collection of Benin Bronzes looted by the British colonisers from Benin City in 1897 which, as he claims, "holds lessons for many other cases" (16).
2. More recently, in order to increase the tourist popularity of the place, the authorities have decided to build a marina in the immediate vicinity of the monument. This decision triggered large-scale forced evictions. Some of the evictees who were interviewed by Amnesty International said that they had "received nothing for the loss of their home and their displacement".

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Réinventer l'avenir global dans *Rouge impératrice* de Léonora Miano: entre afrofuturisme et écotopie

Magdalena Malinowska

Reinventing the global future: *Rouge impératrice* by Léonora Miano between Afrofuturism and ecotopia

This article highlights the ability of afrofuturism to imagine alternative futures in response to contemporary challenges by examining *Rouge impératrice* (2019) by Léonora Miano. Set in 2124 in a unified Africa entering its golden age, this novel explores an equitable and ecological future in response to the collapse of Europe. Through a critique of historical and current power structures, *Rouge impératrice* deconstructs the Anthropocene imaginary, emphasizing ecological inequalities and the devastating effects of colonialism and capitalism. The work proposes an animist and decolonial relationship with nature, offering innovative solutions to the climate crisis. By reconfiguring migratory dynamics and deconstructing the victim narrative often associated with migrants, Miano places Africa as a central actor in a project of renewal, while outlining a utopian model based on self-sufficiency and symbiosis with the environment. This novel enriches afrofuturism by providing a radical reflection on the relationship between humanity, nature, and power, while reimagining a possible future in which Africa reshapes global relations. **Keywords:** Afrofuturism, climate crisis, colonialism, decolonization, utopia.

Introduction

L'humanité est désormais une force géologique capable de modifier le climat terrestre et les conditions de vie de l'ensemble des êtres vivants pour des millénaires, comme l'a pertinemment observé l'historien indien Dipesh Chakrabarty (2). Cet impact, jusqu'à présent principalement négatif, se manifeste par l'augmentation des températures moyennes, la multiplication des phénomènes climatiques extrêmes, la transformation des écosystèmes et le déclin de la biodiversité. Ces bouleversements engendrent des déplacements de populations contraintes de s'exposer à divers risques, tels que la précarité économique, l'instabilité politique ou encore des conflits liés aux ressources.

Face à cette incertitude, les imaginaires collectifs oscillent entre un optimisme inébranlable et des visions apocalyptiques, inspirant des productions artistiques qui tentent de raconter des futurs possibles. Cependant, ces récits tendent soit à ignorer la crise climatique, soit à la présenter comme un désastre inéluctable, empêchant ainsi une véritable prise de conscience. Le romancier indien Amitav Ghosh observe, dans ce contexte, que les générations futures percevront l'époque actuelle comme "le Grand Dérangement": une période où les formes d'art dominantes ont dissimulé la gravité de la situation, empêchant les individus de saisir pleinement les réalités de leur condition, tout en nourrissant une illusion de normalité. Selon lui, ce déni artistique et culturel contribue à l'incapacité des sociétés à concevoir des solutions adaptées et à agir en conséquence.

Le mouvement philosophique et culturel de l'afrofuturisme cherche à renverser cette dynamique en proposant des visions alternatives de l'avenir, centrées sur les populations dites subalternes (Spivak), notamment celles du continent africain et de sa diaspora. Il ne s'agit pas nécessairement de peindre un futur glorieux ou prospère, mais plutôt d'ouvrir des perspectives vers un monde plus juste, équitable et durable. En intégrant les traditions et les cosmologies africaines, il redéfinit les rapports entre humains et environnement, remettant en cause les logiques extractivistes et productivistes héritées du colonialisme. L'afrofuturisme offre ainsi une lecture singulière des

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enjeux climatiques, en proposant une vision de l'avenir à la fois critique et porteuse d'espoir, où la technologie et la spiritualité se conjuguent pour imaginer des formes alternatives de progrès.

Le présent article vise à mettre en lumière la capacité de l'afrofuturisme à concevoir des futurs alternatifs répondant aux défis du présent. Pour ce faire, nous examinerons *Rouge impératrice* (2019), roman de l'écrivaine franco-camerounaise Léonora Miano, dont l'action se déroule en 2124 dans une Afrique unifiée entrant dans son âge d'or, tandis que l'Europe s'effondre à la suite d'un mystérieux "Sinistre". Nous tenterons de démontrer que ce roman, en tant qu'œuvre afrofuturiste, propose une lecture inédite de la crise climatique en développant une vision de l'avenir à la fois équitable et écologique. Nous commencerons par définir l'afrofuturisme avant d'explorer la vision du futur développée dans le roman, en abordant son regard critique sur le capitalisme et l'Anthropocène, sa relation animiste avec la nature et l'impact de la crise climatique, pour enfin interroger sa dimension utopique.

L'afrofuturisme et un avenir afrocentré

Pour pleinement comprendre la dimension afrofuturiste du roman de Miano, il convient d'esquisser l'histoire de ce courant. Le terme *afrofuturisme* apparaît pour la première fois en 1994 dans l'article *Black to the Future* de Mark Dery, en référence à la fiction spéculative afro-américaine (180). Dery y interroge l'absence relative des auteurs noirs dans la science-fiction et explore comment les artistes afro-américains utilisent ce genre pour repenser l'histoire et l'avenir des populations noires. En se développant, le genre, parfois qualifié d'*afrofuturisme 2.0*, a transcendé les frontières des États-Unis pour reconnaître les spécificités des mouvements futuristes noirs, comme le *Caribbean Futurism* ou l'*African Futurism* (Anderson et Jones x). Cette version élargie favorise une orientation afrocentrée et panafricaine, qui remet en question les récits occidentaux dominants en réaffirmant les visions du monde propres aux sociétés africaines et diasporiques.

Bien que l'afrofuturisme ait tardé à se faire connaître dans les milieux francophones, il a progressivement gagné en reconnaissance au cours de la dernière décennie[1]. La définition de ce phénomène en français existe néanmoins depuis plusieurs années, grâce à Achille Mbembe, qui le décrit comme un mouvement qui mélange science-fiction, techno-culture et cosmogonies non-européennes, afin d'interroger le passé colonial et la condition des peuples noirs dans le présent (125). L'ouvrage *L'Afrique au futur* d'Anthony Mangeon enrichit cette définition en présentant l'afrofuturisme comme une exploration d'un monde afrocentré, conscient des héritages coloniaux et raciaux, tout en projetant des alternatives dans d'autres mondes et temporalités (Mangeon 24).

Les œuvres afrofuturistes s'inspirent également des pratiques traditionnelles des populations indigènes et des perspectives du Sud global, offrant des visions de futurs durables ancrés dans des savoirs locaux (Winter 189). Dans ce cadre, l'afrofuturisme s'affirme comme un contre-récit à l'avenir global tel qu'il est conçu par les paradigmes occidentaux. Il critique la domination des Lumières et leur vision déshumanisante du monde (Mbembe 125), qui ont longtemps nié aux populations africaines leur pleine subjectivité. Historiquement, ces populations ont été représentées par des récits extérieurs; il devient dès lors essentiel qu'elles puissent se réapproprier leur propre futur et s'imaginer dans des rôles de protagonistes et de héros (Chonville *et al*. 181).

Néanmoins, le terme "afrofuturisme" est contesté par plusieurs chercheurs et artistes, dont l'écrivaine Nnedi Okorafor, qui préfère l'expression *Africanfuturism*[2], plus ancrée dans les cultures et mythologies africaines et moins influencée par l'Occident. Léonora Miano est également critique vis-à-vis de l'afrofuturisme, soulignant que le terme "futurisme" évoque un courant littéraire européen dont les codes ne correspondent pas à la réalité africaine:

> [d]ans *afrofuturisme*, c'est le terme futuriste qui me dérange. Le futurisme, c'est un courant littéraire européen qui a des codes bien particuliers. Je ne crois pas qu'il suffise de mettre "afro "ou autre chose devant pour que la notion perde son identité. Moi je n'ai pas envie d'imaginer que l'Afrique n'a pas été colonisée, qu'elle n'a pas connu les déportations transatlantiques ni les traites transsahariennes. L'Afrique existe précisément sous le nom "Afrique" parce que ces événements ont eu lieu. (Lagarde ; voir aussi Miano, *Afropéa*)

Cependant, *Rouge impératrice* comporte plusieurs éléments caractéristiques de l'afrofuturisme. Situé dans un avenir lointain, le roman allie technologies sophistiquées, spiritualité traditionnelle et références aux cultures africaines, tout en mettant en avant une relation renouvelée avec l'environnement. Qui plus est, dans ce cas le futurisme n'a rien à voir avec les avant-gardes italiennes et russes (Eshun 291). En réalité, l'afrofuturisme ne vise pas à effacer l'histoire douloureuse du continent africain. Il s'appuie au contraire sur une relecture critique du passé un processus que Kodwo Eshun appelle la "contre-mémoire" (289). Cette approche permet, non seulement de revisiter les récits historiques sous un prisme décolonial, mais aussi d'envisager des futurs où les sociétés africaines se réapproprient

pleinement leur destinée en dehors des cadres imposés par les paradigmes occidentaux. En imaginant un avenir de l'Afrique ancré dans les traumatismes de la traite et du colonialisme, *Rouge impératrice* s'inscrit pleinement dans cette démarche afrofuturiste.

Regard critique sur le capitalisme et l'Anthropocène

Une des caractéristiques de l'afrofuturisme est qu'il ne se limite pas à un imaginaire spéculatif, mais il intègre également une critique des injustices écologiques et coloniales en interrogeant la manière dont les structures de pouvoir historiques, comme l'esclavage et la colonisation, continuent d'influencer les rapports entre les humains et l'environnement. Selon Susana Morris, l'afrofuturisme est subversif en ce qu'il revisite le passé pour révéler les liens entre la crise écologique actuelle et ces systèmes de domination. Le colonialisme et l'esclavagisme, en particulier, ont alimenté l'avidité des puissances impériales et contribué à la dégradation environnementale (Kloetzli).

Rouge impératrice (dorénavant *Rouge*) illustre cette dynamique en critiquant le capitalisme et l'impérialisme, voire le néocolonialisme, du Nord global. Les protagonistes jugent l'époque actuelle comme "le temps de la pollution aux gaz d'échappement" (*Rouge* 62) et "du capitalisme débridé" (*Rouge* 532). Le capitalisme est présenté ici comme un système extérieur au continent africain, étranger et complètement inconforme aux valeurs du Katiopa unifié, notamment en raison de son individualisme exacerbé et de sa logique d'exploitation. La colonisation passée n'a apporté que "le règne de l'argent et les empoisonnements de toutes sortes" (*Rouge* 164), le "progrès dont la prospérité exigeait le sacrifice de l'être à l'avoir, le caprice individuel érigé en principe, l'institutionnalisation des déviances, la destruction de la nature" (*Rouge* 12). Ainsi, la narration contredit la prétendue "mission civilisatrice" de la colonisation, qui n'a fait qu'imposer l'approche capitaliste à tous les domaines de la vie sociale. Le capitalisme est sévèrement critiqué en tant que système fondé sur le "progrès constant" et aveugle, qui conduit à l'exploitation du vivant et du non-vivant au nom de la civilisation occidentale.

De plus, l'écrivaine tourne en ridicule l'attitude contradictoire des Occidentaux face au climat: "L'humanité, à la fois affolée par les conséquences de ses actes et infatuée d'elle-même, se croyait l'origine d'un nouveau temps géologique. Elle en était terrifiée, elle s'en félicitait. L'humanité… Enfin, ceux qui s'étaient arrogé le droit de parler et d'agir en son nom" (*Rouge* 11). Cette critique prononcée par un des narrateurs, Igazi, le *kalala* (responsable de la sécurité intérieure et chef d'état-major), s'inscrit dans un débat plus large concernant l'appellation de l'ère géologique actuelle comme "Anthropocène". Ce que l'on reproche le plus souvent à ce terme, comme le souligne Gabrielle Hecht, c'est qu'il masque d'importantes inégalités en attribuant uniformément la responsabilité de la crise écologique à toute l'humanité (Hecht 110). Malcom Ferdinand, de son côté, met en évidence comment cette vision homogène occulte les rapports de force entre le Nord et le Sud global (Ferdinand 17–18). Toutefois, certains chercheurs continuent d'employer ce terme pour souligner que l'impact humain sur l'environnement dépasse les cadres politiques et culturels. Pour eux, l'Anthropocène met en avant une rupture écologique majeure, même si sa définition reste contestée.

Les racines du changement climatique plongent dans l'histoire de l'impérialisme occidental, qui a bâti le capitalisme sur un modèle d'extraction exploitant à la fois les êtres vivants et les ressources naturelles. Dans son essai *A Million Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff reprend cette critique en montrant comment la notion d'Anthropocène efface les dimensions raciales et coloniales de cette histoire. Elle propose ainsi le concept de "Géologie Blanche" pour souligner que la catastrophe environnementale actuelle découle directement des logiques d'oppression et de dépossession instaurées dès l'époque coloniale. La chercheuse met également l'accent sur l'hypocrisie des sociétés européennes et nord-américaines qui ne se préoccupent de la crise climatique que lorsqu'elles sont directement menacées par ses conséquences: "[i]f the Anthropocene proclaims a sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities, it does so in the wake of histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization, and capitalism" (Yusoff). Dans les fragments cités ci-dessus, Miano émet la même critique en dévoilant différentes formes d'oppression cachées derrière le "projet civilisationnel" de la colonisation.

Face à ces limites de l'appellation "Anthropocène", plusieurs chercheurs ont proposé d'autres concepts pour mieux rendre compte des inégalités environnementales: Jason Moore parle de "Capitalocène" pour souligner la responsabilité du capitalisme dans la crise écologique ; Nicholas Mirzoeff introduit le "White Supremacy Scene", en insistant sur les liens entre catastrophe environnementale et suprématie blanche ; enfin, Donna Haraway

propose le "Chthulucene", qui invite à dépasser l'anthropocentrisme et à repenser les relations entre humains et non-humains sur un mode collaboratif. Ces différentes conceptualisations soulignent que la crise écologique n'est pas qu'une question abstraite de temporalité géologique, mais bien un phénomène inscrit dans des dynamiques historiques et systémiques d'inégalités. En ce sens, elles permettent de mieux comprendre pourquoi les impacts du changement climatique se distribuent de manière profondément inégale à travers le monde. Comme le soulignent Maha Al-Zu'bi *et al*., "[t]he countries of Africa have contributed comparatively little to anthropogenic emissions, yet the continent feels the impact of global warming in many different ways, with changes in hydroclimate, biodiversity and wildfire dynamics already visible today" (1078).

C'est dans ce contexte que Léonora Miano ajoute sa voix à ce débat d'actualité à travers les propos de ses narrateurs, Boya et Igazi, qui dénoncent d'un côté le rôle destructeur du capitalisme multinational, et de l'autre, l'arrogance des sociétés du Nord global. Celles-ci, tout en perpétuant des rapports néocoloniaux, continuent de s'ériger en arbitres des décisions climatiques mondiales. Un exemple frappant en est le fonctionnement des COP (Conférences des Nations unies sur le climat), où les grandes puissances économiques imposent des mesures souvent inadaptées aux réalités des pays du Sud, pourtant les plus affectés par la crise environnementale. Ainsi, en s'inscrivant dans ces discussions théoriques, *Rouge impératrice* donne une dimension narrative et incarnée à ces critiques du capitalisme et du néocolonialisme climatique.

L'esprit animiste au cœur de l'approche katiopienne de la nature

Dans son rapport à l'environnement, le Katiopa rejette la logique capitaliste qui "cherche à tout calculer et à tout convertir en marchandise que l'on peut échanger" (Mbembe 129). À l'inverse, la vision écologique des katiopiens s'inscrit dans ce que Alice Lefilleul appelle "les géographies animistes" (60). L'animisme est ainsi défini par Philippe Descola dans *Par-delà Nature et Culture*:

> Des forêts luxuriantes de l'Amazonie aux étendues glacées de l'Arctique canadien, certains peuples conçoivent donc leur insertion dans l'environnement d'une manière fort différente de la nôtre. Ils ne se pensent pas comme des collectifs sociaux gérant leurs relations à un écosystème, mais comme de simples composantes d'un ensemble plus vaste au sein duquel aucune discrimination véritable n'est établie entre humains et non-humains. (Descola 3)

L'esprit animiste, qui est au cœur du projet katiopien, valorise l'importance de tous les êtres et leur coexistence harmonieuse. Cela transparaît dans les passages évoquant le Mobembo, qui relie la côte à l'intérieur du Continent, et dont le parcours respecte la nature environnante: "[Boya] aimait ce voyage, en particulier la traversée de ce tronçon de forêt équatoriale où la végétation semblait prête à dévorer l'engin. On avait tenté de limiter les violences faites à la nature, la laissant prospérer le long de la voie. Celle-ci s'enfonçait alors dans une masse verte, et il n'était pas rare d'apercevoir des singes dans les arbres" (*Rouge* 140). Là où la voie ferrée risquait de perturber l'environnement, certaines municipalités se sont opposées à sa traversée: "[c]ertaines localités en avaient refusé le passage afin de préserver leur faune et leur flore. Le Mobembo empruntait donc parfois de curieux détours sur la ligne descendant vers le sud" (*Rouge* 277). Le développement technologique du continent unifié prouve que la préoccupation pour la nature ne doit pas faire obstacle au progrès et que ce dernier ne doit pas nécessairement signifier une soumission totale aux lois du marché.

L'approche respectueuse de la nature se retrouve également dans les villes où les espaces verts dominent: "[l]es murs végétalisés des places, les immeubles en terre crue, les jardins communaux [qui] évoquaient un souci de communion avec l'environnement" (*Rouge* 148). Il ne s'agit pas d'une insertion fortuite de d'espaces naturels dans l'aménagement urbain, mais d'une ville écoresponsable où tous les êtres coexistent harmonieusement. D'autres initiatives écologiques renforcent cette vision: la promotion de la marche à pied, l'utilisation des transports en commun par tous, ainsi que des véhicules écologiques tels que motos électriques et bicyclettes, tandis que les voitures personnelles sont fortement taxées (*Rouge* 62–63). L'attachement profond des Katiopiens à leur terre, qu'ils appellent la Terre-Mère, s'incarne particulièrement dans la *kitenta* (capitale), Mbanza, présentée comme "la vitrine de l'État" (*Rouge* 556). Son architecture, en harmonie avec l'environnement, contraste avec celle de Munza, une autre ville, marquée par des influences occidentales et symbolisant une époque "où la conquête de la matière, du confort, s'était effectuée au prix de la santé des générations futures" (*Rouge* 148).

La volonté de communion avec l'environnement qui vient d'être mentionnée est avant tout visible dans les espaces "de la mémoire heureuse", appelés d'ordinaire "le jardin de nos mères" et "la vallée de nos pères". On y voue beaucoup de respect aux arbres qui sont envisagés non comme de la matière première à exploiter, mais

comme des témoins de l'histoire, dépositaires de la mémoire ancestrale: "On y venait aussi pour étreindre un grand arbre ayant vu passer les âges, et qui pouvait être le double végétal d'une personne arrachée aux siens par la Maafa. Ceux qui savaient écouter accédaient à la parole de ces arbres qui détenaient bien plus de connaissances que les livres d'histoire" (*Rouge* 60). Dans ce fragment, il est mention de la Maafa, c'est-à-dire de la traite négrière pendant laquelle plusieurs millions de personnes ont été capturées et déportées outre-Atlantique. Le souvenir de ces événements n'est donc pas refoulé de l'histoire officielle de l'État ; au contraire, il est entretenu pour honorer les victimes et de perpétuer leur mémoire. Cela témoigne d'une relation forte entre les humains et la nature, qui n'est pas un simple décor des événements historiques, mais y participe et en témoigne. Cette approche semble d'ailleurs caractéristique du continent. En analysant le rôle des arbres dans les cultures africaines, M. Dores Cruz met en avant le caractère mémoriel de ces derniers, qui forment un continuum entre le monde des vivants et celui des ancêtres. Elle souligne aussi une relation profonde entre les ancêtres historiques et les lieux: "[t]he trees and tree groves, in their association with ancestral beliefs and their relationship with historic events and personages, form a network of social relations among humans, ancestors, and the material world of nature, and archaeological evidence of these ancestors" (125).

L'esprit animiste des Katiopiens, visible dans leur approche à la nature, est contrasté par Miano avec l'écologie à l'occidentale prônée par un groupe de "fondamentalistes verts" appelés les Gens de Benkos: "Les habitants du lieu, plusieurs milliers de personnes à ce que l'on disait, étaient pacifistes et opposés à tout mode de vie les éloignant d'une relation constante avec la nature" (*Rouge* 144). Le nom du groupe rend hommage à Domingo Benkos Biohó, le leader le plus reconnu parmi tous les esclaves noirs de la région de Carthagène des Indes (Colombie) au 17e siècle (Castaño 70). À l'instar d'une secte, ils habitent un territoire appelé Matuna (autre référence à Biohó) et envisagent un renouveau de la société s'appuyant sur l'énergie féminine, l'harmonie avec l'écosystème et le rejet du mercantilisme. Leur écologie, qui fait penser au mode de vie des hippies, découle du rejet du capitalisme, mais reste superficielle. Comme le remarque Igazi, "[l]'harmonie avec la nature, ce n'était pas cela. Il y avait d'ailleurs une hypocrisie à prétendre se soucier de la planète quand on s'inquiétait surtout pour la survie des humains. La terre s'adapterait à toutes les mutations, aux ères géologiques encore inconnues, mais pourrait devenir inhospitalière au genre humain. C'était la perspective de cette disparition qui tourmentait les fondamentalistes verts qu'étaient les Gens de Benkos" (*Rouge* 169). La réflexion d'Igazi souligne un aspect fondamental du rapport entre l'humanité et la nature, souvent négligé dans certaines approches écologiques modernes. En critiquant les Gens de Benkos, il dénonce leur vision de l'écologie, qui repose sur une forme d'anthropocentrisme profond, où la priorité est donnée à la survie et au confort humain plutôt qu'à une véritable harmonie avec l'ensemble du vivant. Ce qui dérange Igazi, c'est l'hypocrisie qui émane de ce discours: il ne s'agit pas de protéger la Terre pour elle-même ou pour ses écosystèmes, mais bien pour garantir la survie de l'espèce humaine dans un monde en mutation. La Terre, selon lui, n'a pas besoin de l'homme pour s'adapter, et son avenir n'est pas conditionné par la présence ou l'absence de l'humanité. Au contraire, c'est l'homme qui risque de devenir inhospitalier à la Terre si ses actions continuent d'endommager l'environnement de manière irréversible.

Cette critique rejoint celle des visions apocalyptiques de la crise climatique, souvent accusées de se concentrer principalement sur la survie humaine, négligeant les besoins des autres formes de vie. En présentant la crise écologique comme une menace uniquement pour l'humanité, ces visions restent figées dans une perspective anthropocentrique, basée sur des hiérarchies ontologiques (humain vs. non-humain, culture vs. nature, etc.) et sur la conviction de l'exceptionnalisme humain. À l'inverse, les Katiopiens, avec leur vision animiste, reconnaissent la valeur intrinsèque de la nature et considèrent que chaque être, humain ou non, joue un rôle dans l'équilibre global. Cette approche propose une relation plus respectueuse et inclusive entre l'humanité et l'environnement.

Les marques de la crise climatique dans le Katiopa

Quant à la crise climatique, si elle ne se trouve pas au cœur de l'intrigue, elle est évoquée à plusieurs reprises, témoignant d'un bouleversement environnemental qui affecte le Katiopa. Parmi ses effets les plus visibles figure l'ensevelissement des zones côtières:

> À l'ouest du Continent, l'érosion côtière avait sévi pendant des décennies, effaçant ce qui avait été la côte atlantique, si bien qu'une ville comme Mbanza, la kitenta du Katiopa unifié, qui se nichait jadis à quelques encablures de Kinkala, donnait dorénavant sur l'océan. Plus que partout ailleurs, les vagues y avaient avalé la terre […]. La superficie du Continent restait considérable, mais elle avait diminué et les terres englouties par les eaux avaient emporté dans leur noyade une partie des ressources agricoles. (*Rouge* 18)

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L'impact de cette montée des eaux est double: d'un côté, la disparition de terres cultivables qui fragilise la sécurité alimentaire du Katiopa, et de l'autre, l'évolution du paysage urbain, notamment la transformation d'une cité jadis huppée en terrain vague et déserté:

> La plupart [des appartements] donnaient maintenant sur l'océan qui, depuis, avait dévoré la berge, si bien que les constructions les mieux situées jadis subissaient désormais l'attaque constante des vagues. À marée haute, les eaux s'y engouffraient, débordant ensuite dans une nzela puis dans une autre, jusqu'à l'inondation complète de la zone. (*Rouge* 13)

Ce phénomène, bien que fictionnel, fait écho à la réalité actuelle de nombreux pays insulaires et côtiers, confrontés à l'érosion et à la montée des eaux en raison du réchauffement climatique. Miano illustre ainsi les conséquences directes de la crise écologique sur la société katiopienne, mettant en lumière les bouleversements économiques et humains qu'elle engendre.

Par ailleurs, l'océan n'est pas seulement un espace en mutation géophysique, il est aussi un lieu de mémoire pour l'héroïne, Boya. L'Atlantique a marqué son histoire familiale, notamment à travers le destin tragique de ses ancêtres, des sœurs jumelles Inina et Inyemba, qui "avaient péri durant la traversée [et] leurs dépouilles reposaient au fond de l'eau" (*Rouge* 207). On leur a offert une sépulture symbolique en forme de tronc de bananier enfoui dans la terre, non loin de l'océan, devenu dès lors le lieu d'enterrement des femmes de la famille. Leurs tombes se sont également trouvées englouties par l'Atlantique, des décennies, voire des siècles plus tard. C'est pourquoi les aïeules de la femme rouge ont choisi l'océan pour leur demeure dans l'autre "versant de la vie" (*Rouge* 417). Dans cette perspective, la mer devient un espace liminal entre l'histoire et le présent, entre le souvenir et l'effacement. La représentation des ancêtres immergés, notamment la vision d'une aïeule chantant sur les rochers, évoque la figure de Mami Wata, divinité aquatique du panthéon africain souvent associée aux déportés de la traite négrière (Womack 87).

Il est à noter que l'Atlantique noir est un motif récurrent dans l'imaginaire afrofuturiste. Dans les années 1990, le groupe de musiciens afro-américains Drexciya a proposé une interprétation inédite du Passage du milieu en imaginant une nouvelle race de créatures subaquatiques, descendants des femmes africaines enceintes et jetées par-dessus bord pendant la traversée du bateau négrier. Ce mythe a inspiré d'autres artistes et penseurs, notamment Ellen Gallagher, Ruth Mayer ou Ben Williams (Eshun 300). Bien que Miano ne fasse pas référence à Drexciya, elle inscrit son récit dans cette même dynamique mémorielle, où l'océan devient le témoin silencieux d'une histoire de violences et de résistances.

En parallèle, l'auteure établit un lien entre l'engloutissement des terres et les disparitions humaines causées par la traite transatlantique. Dans les deux cas, l'océan agit comme un tombeau. Miano met ainsi en lumière une continuité entre les destructions du passé et celles du présent, toutes deux liées aux logiques impérialistes et capitalistes ayant façonné le monde. Cette double disparition—écologique et culturelle—illustre la manière dont l'environnement et l'histoire sont inextricablement liés.

Cependant, la montée des eaux n'est pas le seul symptôme du dérèglement climatique évoqué dans le roman. Un autre marqueur crucial est l'élévation des températures, qui transforme des régions autrefois tempérées en zones écrasées par la chaleur: "grandes chaleurs qui, tout le jour, accabl[ent] les habitants de la *kitenta* [...] dans cette région autrefois préservée des touffeurs" (*Rouge* 377).[3] Face à ces bouleversements, les Katiopiens développent des stratégies d'adaptation. L'une des réponses majeures à cette crise passe par un retour aux pratiques ancestrales et une reconnexion avec la nature: "Peu à peu, on avait renoué avec la terre les relations anciennes, ce qui s'était révélé salvateur" (*Rouge* 622). Le retour aux pratiques traditionnelles et la réconciliation avec la nature ont permis de porter secours tant aux humains qu'aux non-humains. Ce retour à la terre inscrit le Katiopa dans une logique écotopique, une utopie écologique inspirée du roman *Ecotopia* d'Ernest Callenbach (1975). Dans ce modèle fictif, la hiérarchie des valeurs est inversée: la préservation des écosystèmes devient primordiale, tandis que les principes du capitalisme consumériste sont remis en question. Miano reprend cette approche en l'ancrant dans une vision afrofuturiste, où le continent africain devient un espace d'innovation écologique et politique.

Certes, tout le monde n'a pas été épargné par le changement climatique, les sécheresses ayant entraîné la désertification d'une partie du continent, ce qui a provoqué à leur tour des déplacements, tant internes "vers les territoires préservés de la Terre Mère", qu'externes vers le Pongo (l'Europe) (*Rouge* 622). Toutefois, l'univers de *Rouge impératrice* propose une inversion des dynamiques migratoires classiques: "Aux émigrés de la faim ou des conflits, s'étaient ajoutés ceux du climat, des cohortes de gens déterminés à survivre dans un Katiopa hors-sol [...]" (*Rouge* 82). Contrairement aux discours géopolitiques dominants qui conçoivent l'Europe et l'Amérique du

Nord comme des refuges pour les populations du Sud global, Miano imagine une Afrique qui attire des migrants climatiques européens. Comme le souligne Wesner Bruel Obolo, le Katiopa devient ainsi un acteur humanitaire, bouleversant les hiérarchies héritées de la colonisation.

Cette reconfiguration s'incarne notamment dans la politique d'Ilunga, le *mokonzi*, qui rejette la xénophobie et prône une intégration des "Sinistrés" européens, tout en posant des conditions claires: "Katiopa, tu l'aimes ou tu le quittes" (*Rouge* 436). Cette phrase, en écho à la rhétorique de l'extrême droite française ("France, tu l'aimes ou tu la quittes"), est ici détournée pour offrir aux réfugiés climatiques une véritable agentivité, les incitant à s'intégrer plutôt qu'à subir une relégation identitaire. En ce sens, Miano déconstruit l'imaginaire victimaire souvent associé aux migrants, et redéfinit le rôle du Katiopa comme un espace d'accueil et de renouveau[4].

À travers ces multiples dimensions, *Rouge impératrice* s'inscrit dans une réflexion à la fois écologique, politique et historique, où la crise climatique ne se limite pas à un phénomène naturel, mais apparaît comme un révélateur des inégalités structurelles du monde contemporain.

Rouge impératrice: une écotopie afrofuturiste

Les défis soulevés dans le roman – crise climatique, adaptation environnementale, liens avec la nature, spiritualité et mémoire ancestrale – trouvent une réponse dans la société du Katiopa unifié. Ce projet politique, bien que perfectible, porte en lui une utopie émancipatrice au sens de Françoise Vergès (246). Bien que cette société ne soit pas encore idéale, la conception de l'État dans la narration tend vers un horizon utopique. D'une part, Miano dépasse les prédictions fatalistes sur le réchauffement climatique et les migrations forcées en imaginant un avenir où l'Afrique n'est pas condamnée à l'aridité et à l'effacement. D'autre part, elle inscrit cette vision dans l'héritage historique des relations entre l'Afrique et l'Occident pour "faire advenir [...] un monde enfin débarrassé des clivages raciaux et de leurs héritages colonialistes" (Mangeon 178). Comme le souligne Paul Ricœur, l'utopie permet à la fois une contestation radicale des idéologies dominantes et une projection dans un ailleurs possible (63). *Rouge impératrice* s'inscrit pleinement dans cette double démarche en critiquant l'impérialisme, le colonialisme et le capitalisme, tout en esquissant un modèle alternatif pour l'Afrique.

Le texte met en avant l'intention utopique de l'État katiopien, notamment à travers les étapes de construction de cette société nouvelle: "La deuxième étape de ce processus consisterait dans la démonstration, non seulement de l'autosuffisance, mais aussi de la plénitude. [...] Il fallait à présent bâtir. Faire du Katiopa unifié un joyau. Viendrait ensuite la troisième phase, celle du rayonnement" (*Rouge* 100–1). En raison de son caractère inachevé, nous proposons de qualifier cette vision d'*utopia incepta*, une utopie en gestation, encore imparfaite mais orientée vers un futur souhaitable.

La démarche de Miano s'inscrit dans une écologie décoloniale, définie comme "une écologie des transbordés par les traites européennes, une écologie qui entretient des continuités avec les communautés indigènes africaine et amérindienne, mais n'est réductible ni à l'une ni à l'autre" (Ferdinand 32). Cette perspective propose des modes de coexistence alternatifs qui rompent avec les paradigmes occidentaux dominants. Ainsi, *Rouge Impératrice* relève de l'écotopie, une vision fondée sur l'idée que l'amélioration des conditions humaines passe par une refonte des relations entre les humains et leur environnement naturel (Morizot 119).

Enfin, Miano inscrit son récit parmi les "récits racontables de l'avenir" (Gaudin 5), car sa vision repose sur des données objectives: abondance de terres arables, ressources en eau et en énergie, forêts, croissance démographique et économique, autant d'éléments qui font de l'Afrique "le coffre-fort du monde" (Mangeon 19) et pourraient concrétiser l'avenir prospère imaginé dans *Rouge Impératrice*.

Conclusion

Rouge impératrice de Léonora Miano s'inscrit pleinement dans une démarche critique à l'égard des systèmes de pouvoir historiques et actuels, notamment le capitalisme, le colonialisme et leurs héritages. En déconstruisant l'imaginaire de l'Anthropocène, le roman remet en question les conceptions dominantes de la responsabilité écologique, soulignant les inégalités entre le Nord et le Sud global, et la manière dont l'histoire coloniale a façonné la crise climatique actuelle. Par cette critique, Miano engage une réflexion radicale sur les rapports de domination et la décolonisation des imaginaires écologiques. En parallèle, l'œuvre propose une approche animiste et décoloniale de la nature, en intégrant une spiritualité et une mémoire ancestrale dans la gestion des ressources naturelles. À travers l'idéologie du Katiopa unifié, le roman esquisse des solutions innovantes pour faire face à la crise climatique, offrant une vision d'autosuffisance et de prospérité fondée sur une relation respectueuse

et symbiotique avec l'environnement. En abordant la question des déplacements climatiques, *Rouge impératrice* propose une inversion des dynamiques migratoires classiques. Là où les discours dominants imaginent l'Europe et l'Amérique du Nord comme des refuges pour les migrants climatiques, Miano envisage une Afrique qui attire les populations du Nord, un Katiopa devenu un espace d'accueil pour les "Sinistrés" européens. Par cette inversion, le roman déconstruit l'imaginaire victimaire souvent associé aux migrants, en redéfinissant leur agentivité et leur capacité à s'intégrer dans une société nouvelle, offrant ainsi un modèle alternatif de solidarité et d'accueil. Enfin, la dimension utopique de *Rouge impératrice* se manifeste dans la vision d'un avenir où l'Afrique, loin d'être condamnée par les dérives écologiques et économiques du passé, s'affirme comme un acteur majeur dans la réorganisation des rapports mondiaux. Bien que cette utopie soit encore en gestation, elle propose une projection vers un futur souhaitable, une *utopia incepta* qui, tout en étant perfectible, offre un horizon d'émancipation et de renouvellement radical des rapports entre l'humain et la nature. En ce sens, Miano nous invite à repenser non seulement le passé, mais aussi le futur, dans une démarche où l'Afrique, sa mémoire, ses ressources et sa créativité deviennent les piliers d'un monde plus juste et plus durable. Ainsi, en combinant critique historique, utopie sociale et vision écologique, *Rouge impératrice* enrichit l'afrofuturisme en proposant un récit qui non seulement déconstruit les rapports de pouvoir hérités, mais offre aussi des pistes concrètes et innovantes pour un futur où l'Afrique joue un rôle clé dans la transformation globale des relations humaines et environnementales.

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Notes

1. Les premières publications monographiques en français consacrées à l'afrofuturisme sont apparues en 2022 et ce sont *L'Afrique au futur* d'Anthony Mangeon et le numéro 54 de la revue *Études littéraires africaines* sous la direction de Ninon Chavoz et d'Anthony Mangeon intitulé "Futurs africains: utopies et dystopies".
2. Le terme français le plus proche serait "le futurisme africain". Cependant, la traduction vers le français de cette notion pose problème, car dans la proposition d'Okorafor il s'agit d'un seul mot, pendant qu'en français la construction d'un lemme indépendant par juxtaposition de deux lexèmes soudés est dans ce cas-là impossible.
3. C'est pourquoi nous ne partageons pas l'avis de Mélissa Buecher-Nelson que le continent "semble miraculeusement épargné par les changements climatiques" (115).
4. Florian Alix remarque que Miano lutte également contre "un imaginaire victimaire, très souvent associé aux femmes africaines dans les représentations médiatiques et les discours sociaux" (84).

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Toxic mobilities and the politics of unending in Henrietta Rose-Innes's "Poison"

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Toxic mobilities and the politics of unending in Henrietta Rose-Innes's "Poison"
The few readings of Henrietta Rose-Innes's short story "Poison" have so far focused on how it critiques the racial politics of eco-apocalypse and the ways narratives of the end are inflected by the privilege of whiteness. In this paper, I take a different approach, examining the eponymous poison and the ways it is narrated to challenge not merely the eschatological sentiments underlying the prevalent imaginaries of the future but also the (anthropocentric) idea of the end itself as an expected and natural denouement to the world. Reading the toxic conceptually, I suggest toxicity becomes a signifier of *no-end*. Inspired by recent scholarship on toxicity, especially Daniel Hofmann's stunning take on the toxic, I cull from its properties its resistance to endings, looking at how toxicity can help us think beyond human exceptionalism and the human species' extinction this exceptionalism propounds. I highlight, in particular, the motility and persistence of toxic matter, which unsettles what Achille Mbembe calls the regimes of borderisation. Mobile and enduring, travelling freely across all kinds of entities, human and otherwise, Rose-Innes' toxicity re-scripts the dominant narratives of eco-apocalypse, offering a vision of the future world which may be mutated yet is ongoing and fuelled by toxified, recomposed, perishable human bodies. **Keywords**: Henrietta Rose-Innes, toxicity, eco-apocalypse, end, mobility, "Poison".

I

A "chemical regime of living" is a relatively novel historical conjunction, Michelle Murphy tells us, in which "not just genomes but the atmosphere, water, soil, nourishment, commodities and our very bodies are apprehendable as caught in possibly toxic molecular relations" ("Chemical Regimes of Living" 697). Ubiquitous, though unevenly distributed, this chemical regime problematises our temporal frameworks, both in how it confounds our comprehension of time and renders the human species temporally insignificant by comparison: "Constant exposure to industrial chemicals is paired with the fact that many of these chemicals persist in a geological time frame that exceeds the timescale of the human species, meaning chemical legacies will characterize the planet for both immediate and distant futures" (Liboiron, Tironi and Calvillo 332). This "new age of toxicity" (332) does not only inaugurate a temporal rescaling of the human species but also, consequently, intervenes into discourses of extinction, re-defining the horizon of the future as feasible *without* human life.

In this paper, I take up the capacity of the toxic to exceed fathomable temporalities and examine the critical potential of toxicity as represented in Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story "Poison" in order to challenge the eco-apocalyptic idea of the end as a temporal terminus of the environmentally degraded Earth. Foregrounding the longevity of the toxic, I posit toxicity as a concept to think with rather than as a specific reality wreaking havoc on environments and their inhabitants (human and other-than-human). Given its largely allegorical tenor, "Poison" lends itself to such a reading: the generically called, but never specified, toxic substance remains unnamed and otherwise unidentified. Most specifically, I focus on the properties of toxicity as perennially durable and on the motility of the poison as a signifier of unending and survival. Inspired by Achille Mbembe's recently offered reflections on the future of the Earth, I read the toxic as sabotaging the world-destroying processes of borderisation on one hand. On the other, I juxtapose the story's perishable bodies with the enduring materiality of toxicity. Both help inscribe unending as the horizon of the future outside the hubris of human exceptionalism.

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II

In one section of her introduction to *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*, Jennifer Wenzel offers a challenge to the prevalent depictions of climate eschatologies, suggesting a disenchantment of the narratives of the end. If eco-apocalypse has been deployed as a genre of choice to speak of the imminent catastrophe triggered by environmental degradation and the ensuing climate change, it has been characterised by what she calls a "mode of unimagining the future" where "attachments to the status quo" fail to get loosened (32) and bring about a radical change. Significantly, for Wenzel the problem with eco-apocalypse lies in its too heavy investment in the "crisis of futurity" and an inadequate concern for the present (32). Following Mary Louise Pratt, Wenzel notes the temporal inequalities that mar the lives of those excluded from the narratives spawned by the crises of futurity. She asks: "What does it mean to be evicted from the future in this way: to confront not the 'end' of the world, but having been shut out of the temporal horizon of its desires and ends?" (32). At stake is a glaring contrast between "the future lost to climate change as the belated cost of modernity's chain of ease, as opposed to never having enjoyed the benefits of modernity to begin with" (33). This contrast (but also this eviction from the future of the wretched of the world) comes into full view in the eco-apocalyptic narratives which envision the end as a civilisational regress into the deplorable conditions, aesthetic, material, and political of the Global South driven as they are by the fear that "the Third World's present offers an image of the First World's future" (36). Thus the trouble with the stories of the end is their failure to recognise the present as in need of radical transformation and their penchant for projecting this misrecognised present as the telos of the changing climate. The political impotence of eco-apocalypse, Wenzel argues, stems both from representing the "here *as* there" (36) and from concealing or disregarding the ongoing apocalypses already lived in the Global South.

In contrast to the politically barren scenarios so often offered by eco-apocalypse—and many Anthropocene—narratives, Wenzel suggests a turn towards the present and the "*histories* of exploitation that endure into the present" (41, italics in the original). "Such a capacity to reimagine alternative possibility in the present", Wenzel argues, "might be able to grapple more meaningfully with pasts that aren't even pasts, and futures—both imagined and unimagined—that may never arrive" (42). Wenzel's concluding bid for a cultivation of "desires for something other than an ending" (41), for a re-oriented optics not only sensitive to the inequalities which have made many already live in catastrophic circumstances but also able to envision alternatives to the *now*, is not a call for a disregard of the tangible losses afflicting the human and the other-than-human worlds. Rather, it resonates with a need to find "ways of dwelling in the crisis" (Buell 291), with and in the damage already done.

Wenzel is not, of course, the only scholar to note and critique the futuristic narratives offering apocalyptic speculation about the end of times (which are mostly also imagined as solely human) and the multiple ways in which they conceal or disregard the historically determined and ongoing injustices and inequalities. Axelle Karera, for instance, speaks of the "rampant inability to imagine alternative futures outside an apocalyptic state of emergency that is mostly inspired by a narrative of vitality, and in which disposable life or 'life-death' remains largely unaccounted for" (33). Failure to heed ongoing "black suffering" and include "matters of race" in the discourses on the Anthropocene does not simply depoliticise these discourses but also renders the post-apocalyptic visions of the future mere repetitions of the present with its "anti-black racist practices" (34). Srinivas Aravamudan points to what he calls the "escapist philosophy of various dimensions of the hypothesis concerning the Anthropocene" which often aims to purge realities of the "human messiness in our involvement with the world" (20). Noting how ideas of extinction become mobilised in the service of right-wing extremism, Mbembe draws our attention to the increasingly popular narratives of replacement in which "the Whites, a 'declining and dying race,' are undergoing bio-racial substitution by the 'hordes' from elsewhere, so-called coloured peoples" (90). This "eschato-apocalyptic line of thinking" and its pernicious uses effectively occlude the minimal requirements for a re-inhabiting of the Earth, namely, the "right to breathe" (90–1) and the "right to a future" [...]. Both are requisite for a "truly planetary consciousness" and for the development of "a democracy open to all living beings, beyond species and races" (91). The "theologies of extinction", as Mbembe calls them, not only traffic in hierarchical categories but remain blind to the existing structural inequalities destructive of the environment in the first place.

Examining ideas of the end across philosophical and cultural discourses, Ben Ware traces the different ways in which the immanent end is imagined to either arrive in a spectacularly sudden way or to keep arriving indefinitely to the pleasures of those awaiting it. In doing so, he camouflages the desire for the preservation of the status quo. As he puts it, "the desperate attempt to preserve the 'human' as it already exists under capitalism" is

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simultaneous with a relegation of the ending to the future (27). Similar to Karera, Aravamudan, and Mbembe, Ware ties the preclusion of the end to a radical termination of present conditions. He argues that:

> only the collective negation of *this world* ends the prospect of the end of *the world*. […] To terminate the threat of the end (as the biological end of all things) will therefore mean beginning again at the end […]: abolishing a mode of political and economic life which seeks to tether us all—the *yet to be born*—to a sick but undying present. (28–9, italics in the original).

These critiques of the various desires for the end are precisely critiques of *desires*: they probe their motivations and symptoms and reveal the less obvious meanings these desires conceal. They do not, however, question the very idea that the anthropocenic harm unfolding steadily and unevenly across different parts of the world will necessarily lead to *an end*. In other words, in eco-apocalyptic narratives and some of these critiques, *the end* is posited as an unquestionable culmination of a certain story of progress. Whatever the details of this story, the end is its assumed finale. It is a moment in time towards which everything is gravitating, which will mark an all-concluding caesura beyond which everything will cease to exist. The end is taken for granted as the telos of different destructive phenomena and deeds (past or present). Put simply, these narratives stipulate that there is going to be an end. Yet to posit an end in such a fashion is a thoroughly anthropocentric gesture, which rests on "human exceptionalism" because a vision of such an end can only make sense "from the human standpoint" (Ware 4). At stake is also an often tacit agreement that the end as envisioned, anticipated, dreaded, bemoaned, etc., is an essentially human end. It is often, therefore, imagined as the end of the human species with a concomitant assumption that the end of human beings will be the end of everything.

Noting, among other things, the "ecological melancholy that anticipates mass extinction", Aravamudan reminds us, shrewdly, that:

> the human is not the only subject or object. Endings are also mutations. The end of a singular species would still not be the end of all genres. There will be a post-ontological future of unnameable others […]. What began as catachronism, the burdensome experience of 'living in the end times,' could morph into the birth of many brave new worlds populated by those that come after the subject. (25)

If not entirely along the lines of what I wish to suggest in this paper, Aravamudan nevertheless not only questions the finitude of the end posited by Anthropocene narratives but also challenges the very idea of an end as an expected outcome of the eco-apocalypse. His take on *endings* as *mutations* and his confidence in beginnings rather than endings not only displace humans as the locus and authors of the end but also invite a closer look at the possibility of displacing (the very idea of) the end from the horizon of the future.

In this paper, I follow Wenzel's bid (shared by the other scholars) to cultivate "desires for something other than an ending" (41) on the one hand. On the other, I attempt to find ways of challenging the concept of the end as a culminating moment of eco-apocalypse and ponder what it could mean to inscribe *unending* into the narratives of the end of times. To do so, I turn to the toxic as a materiality with which to think of the concept of *no-end*. Probing its multifarious resistances to eschatology and its unperishable nature, I trace the imaginative use of the toxic as an exercise in thinking of climate catastrophe otherwise. Reading Rose-Innes's short story "Poison", a compact yet compelling narrative, I look at the imaginative work the toxic does to complicate the neat progression from environmental degradation to an apocalyptic denouement.

III

If this reading of Rose-Innes' story seems detached from realities marred and tragically affected by toxic environments, it is substantially motivated by the narrative strategy "Poison" deploys and its rendition of the chemical contamination at the centre of the story as an emergency. While offering enough details to geographically and nationally locate the story's background (Johannesburg, South Africa), Rose-Innes nevertheless withholds significant portions of information, leaving the readers with almost generic narrative elements (human and other-than-human), including the eponymous poison. The sparsely fleshed context and mostly anonymous characters render the story almost allegorical, turning the human and other-than-human protagonists into representatives of particular genres.[1] If other readings of the story have mostly focused on how its genericity speaks of South Africa's racial histories and realities in relation to eco-apocalypse (Thurman; Wenzel), I turn instead to the ways Rose-Innes thematises toxicity, shifting the focus from the realities of harm (the aftermath of the contamination the story narrates remains conjectural) to the imaginative and conceptual work the toxic does in the story.

First published in 2007, Rose-Innes' "Poison" is set in contemporary Cape Town and depicts an *en masse* migration from the city in the aftermath of a massive chemical explosion, which remains unspecified and unnamed throughout. Its protagonist, a young woman called Lynn, gets stranded at a petrol station together with a few other people who, like her, took too long to leave. The failing infrastructure (no gas in the petrol pumps, no cell phone network, no electricity, and no running water) and the looming post-explosion toxicity generate improvised collaborations, across class and race, among the few people now desperate to flee. They scavenge the remaining petrol; they share the money from the till to pay a taxi driver; they confer and plot in order to orchestrate an effective flight away from the poisoned city. Lynn, however, for unexplained reasons and to our bewilderment, is reluctant to leave and ultimately decides to stay behind at the station, on one hand seemingly reconciled with the effects of the explosion, yet on the other still somewhat confident in the protective power of the state.

Titled "Poison", the story naturally brings the toxic into its narrative focus. It not only revolves, conceptually, around the chemical explosion that sets the inhabitants of Cape Town into flight (and the story into narrative motion) but also offers a whole gamut of epithets describing the visual, haptic, and olfactory properties of the palpable, biological effects of the contamination. The presence of these various materialities of the toxic signifies more than the mere requirements of the genre. In one of the few readings of the story, Wenzel notes the generic character of its narrative ingredients: "The dead birds and mysterious oily rain falling from the sky are stock images of eco-apocalypse" (38). Wenzel is far from dismissing Rose-Innes' story on this ground, however. She looks at how Rose-Innes tampers with these standard narrative elements in order to remain attuned to the "histories of social division that perform the experience and imagination of eco-apocalypse" (40). Wenzel's critical interest, then, lies in how Rose-Innes rewrites the eco-apocalyptic imaginary in ways that enable the recognition of these divisions *in the present* and invite a vision of "futurity without reinscribing troubled histories" (38). In this paper, I also respond to the unique optics of "Poison" enabled by the story's handling of the toxic. Far from being simple generic elements to be found in numerous stories of eco-apocalypse, the images representing the toxic aftermath of the Cape Town explosion and their narrative significance offer the means with which to critique "the melancholy lure of eco-apocalypse" which continues to be driven by "the desire to imagine our own destruction" (Aravamudan 41). In "Poison", the toxic figures the persistence of the world, the durable and interminable continuity of what is other than human, challenging the temporal framework eco-apocalyptic narratives commonly deploy.

The toxic has often been described as perennially enduring (Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations"; Nixon; Nading), able to outlive other matter and organisms. That is, it can travel across bodies, space, and time (e.g. the name *persistent organic pollutants* aptly captures and reflects this potential). In the chapter suggestively titled "Ecologies of the Aftermath", in which Rob Nixon talks of the *slow violence* of the Gulf War, he reminds us that "Depleted uranium (DU)" used in the munitions deployed in the war "possesses a durability beyond our comprehension: it had a radioactive half-life of 4.51 billion years. When it enters the environment, DU effectively does so for all time, with consequences that are resistant to military metrics, consequences that we are incompetent to judge" (201). While not all chemical substances enjoy such an unfathomable and indefinite existence, other scholars have likewise noted their unique perdurability, their mutational existence across time and both human and other-than-human infrastructures. Murphy, for example, describes the persistent properties of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), noting how they continue into the "intergenerational future" (497) through the "temporal and geographical extensiveness of chemical relations" (498). Moreover, their "metabolic activations can cascade intergenerationally across bodies", which, Murphy concludes, "makes Monsanto, which manufactured most of the world's PCBs, a grand-kin of sorts, a toxic relation inscribed into energy infrastructures, white privilege, Indigenous dispossession, anti-blackness, water, and metabolism" (499). Writing of the materiality of plastics, Max *Liboir*on reminds us that they "have the capacity to act over generations, and even over millennia" (*Pollution is Colonialism* 10). Their ubiquity across "bodies, ecosystems, consumer products, and landscapes" (Redefining pollution and action: The matter of plastics" 96) renders them mobile and persistent yet also challenging to science. As Liboiron puts it, "plastic pollution currently exceeds the ability of traditional scientific methods to explain its fate and transport, as well as its persistence and effects" ("Matter of plastics" 89). Beyond scientific discourses, in a more common parlance, the toxic has been credited with affects expressive of what is severe and irreparable. With the word toxicity itself signalling the "threat of permanence", Mel Y. Chen notes how it is differentiated from intoxication, which connotes "inconsequentiality, everyday tolerability and easy recoverability" (6).

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There is yet another way in which the toxic signifies persistence and unending existence. In his astounding piece on toxicity, Danny Hoffman examines the material and conceptual remits of the toxic. Differentiating it from the cultural and political work *waste* does (understood as an object of displacement that serves to demarcate a whole gamut of boundaries), Hoffman suggests that the toxic "seems a different order of term. A poison beyond matter-out-of-place, something more than the by-products of an existing order. Is there need for a term that names what cannot be reclaimed?" For Hoffman, the toxic "name[s] a space beyond remediation. Forces that do not simply reinforce the existing order, however unequal or unjust". Hoffman's insistence on defining toxicity as what cannot be reclaimed also situates it in a temporal framework of infinity. To reclaim and remediate something inevitably entails endings and beginnings. *Reclaimed* evokes a usefulness that has come to an end and which is either being restored or replaced with a different kind. While Hoffman does not explicitly discuss the perennial nature of the toxic, his take on toxicity is premised on its persistence and resistance to being re-processed, to becoming something else, something less pernicious and noxious. Reclamations rest on a circulation of uses and their termination. Toxicity, in Hoffman's understanding, is what resists being subjected to such processes.

If nothing is known about the unspecified chemical ominously travelling, in various forms and textures, out of Cape Town, Rose-Innes' story nevertheless endows it with the temporal and material properties of the toxic. Described as "black grime", a "coating of foul stuff", an "alien gel", "some tarry black precipitate", sticky dampness enveloping the feathers of dead birds or grease oiling Lynn's hair, the toxic is represented as a sticky ineradicable substance. Towards the end of the story, Lynn notes how "Blades of grass at the side of the road were streaked with black, and the ground seemed to be smoking, a layer of foul steam around her ankles". If these epithets convey a sense of durability by evoking different degrees of stickiness, they are also redolent of a more lasting permanence. Signalled by colour and texture, and most explicitly referenced by tar, these images also speak of carbon. An epitome of environmental degradation but also of lasting durability, this elemental affinity lends the eponymous poison a life exceeding the temporal framework of the story. If the narrative carbonises the contamination to emphasise the interminable longevity of the unnamed substance, it also likens it to a massive bulk unmovable by human effort. "Concealing Devil's Peak", an imposing massif forming a backdrop to Cape Town, "an oily cloud [...] so black, so large" hung over the city. "Even as they watched, it boiled up taller and taller into the sky, a plume twice as high as the mountain". The haptic and visual heaviness of the accumulating contamination concretises and fixes its presence in space as lasting.

Depicted as adhesive and thus either impossible or difficult to remove, yet also carbonised into timelessness, these images of viscosity not only connote permanence and a certain material recalcitrance but also contrast with the otherwise perishable bodies and objects. Whatever undoing the poisonous explosion portends, graphically rendered by the image of dead birds, the glutinous chemical enjoys an interminable life in comparison to other decomposable matter. This contrast is most compellingly conveyed by the juxtaposition of the toxic substances with Lynn's physical fragility. At the beginning of the story, she is, in a sense, already dead, a somewhat proleptically and vicariously rendered fact revealed almost at the end of the narrative. It opens with Lynn realising she has been contaminated as she wakes up three days after the explosion, "with a burning in the back of her throat so horrible she understood it was no hangover". As the story unfolds, she is progressively represented as a veritable body of toxicity: as "she felt the poisons gush out of her", "her skin [...] oozing it" and "her eyes as pink as if she'd been weeping". While nothing is known about the unnamed chemical and its hazards, the gravity of Lynn's condition comes into full view towards the end of the story when Lynn spots dead birds: "She counted five small bodies of birds, feathers damp and stuck together". These birds herald Lynn's fate, evidencing the deadly damage caused by the chemical, a lifeless aftermath of exposure to toxicity, the carbonised materiality of which proceeds within an endless temporal framework. If Lynn remains alive until the end of the story, she is, nevertheless, narrated as outlived by the poisonous matter that has clearly already penetrated her body.

The story of "Poison" is woven around the juxtaposition of perishable matter with the material durability of the eponymous chemical. This narrative effect is conveyed not only by the carbonisation of the unnamed substance and the simultaneous erosion of human and other-than-human life. That is, via disparate temporalities they are capable of spanning. "Poison" endows the toxic with an ambulatory vitality which renders the abruptly stalled surroundings lifeless. Indeed, the story unsettles the familiar distribution of mobility by having human movement sabotaged or literally halted by the motile poison. The disruption is graphically signalled by the startling uselessness of the road Lynn contemplates: "Standing alone on the highway was unnerving. This was for cars. The road surface was not meant to be touched with hands or feet, to be examined too closely or in

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stillness". The explosion suspends human traffic, turning the highway into a defamiliarised landscape in which the absence of moving cars is an eerie signifier of the locomotive infrastructures gone into disuse. The empty road signifies an end to human movement paradoxically effected by a shortage of fuel, another carbon-related matter, the carbonised chemical itself remaining mobile throughout.

"Poison" links the cause of the termination of movement with the toxic, rendering toxicity an agent of corrosion that effects and reveals the vehicular impotence of the infrastructures of mobility. When Lynn stumbles upon a dilapidated version of her Toyota, she proleptically and prophetically anticipates the failure of technologies propelling human movement:

> Lynn laughed out loud. Her car! Her own car, twenty years on: the same model blue Toyota, but reduced to a shell. The remaining patches of crackled paint had faded to the colour of a long-ago summer sky. The roof had rusted clean through in places, and the bottom edges of the doors were rotten with corrosion. Old carpeting was piled on the back seat and all the doors were open. Seeing the smooth finish go scabrous and raw gave Lynn a twinge at the back of her teeth.

This image neatly encapsulates the unrelenting labours of toxicity, its material liveliness which manifests itself in its traversal of surfaces and its displacement and consumption of other matter and material. The car becomes, by contrast, an object of literal sedimentation, a deposited mobility whose locomotive potential is no longer able to produce and sustain movement.

If the failing infrastructures (the highway; the car) are represented as incapable of propelling the movement of human bodies, they also indicate an end to life. Indeed, the dramatic tenor of Rose-Innes' text rests on the management of flight, a successful escape from the contaminated city which the story depicts as a poisonous trap. The narrative establishes a direct link between the ability to travel, to be transported by the vehicles of mobility and survival. Yet the proximity of movement and toxicity in the production of death also manifests itself in a more tangible fashion as the chemical is envisioned as affecting the loss of the locomotive capacity of the human body. When Lynn ponders the possible modes of flight to use, she imagines the poison exhausting and impeding her body: "To leave the car would be to disintegrate, to merge with that shifting world. How far could she walk, anyway, before weakness made her stumble? Before the air thickened into some alien gel, impossible to wade through, to breathe?" Explicitly conflating moving and breathing, and thus moving and living, this vignette represents the toxic as killing movement and, thus, life.

In stark contrast to unmoving, dead, or dying bodies of objects and of humans comes the travelling toxic, depicted by the narrative as motile and fugitive: "The cloud was creeping higher behind her back, casting a dull murk, not solid enough to be a shadow. She could see veils of dirty rain bleeding from its near edge. […] [It] was growing. As she watched, a deep rose-coloured occlusion extended towards her, pulling a wash of darkness across the sky". And later: "The clouds had retreated somewhat and were boiling grumpily over the mountain". Personified by the narrative, the chemical assumes a life of its own, conveyed, almost literally, by the vibrant ambulatory verbs, all of them expressing movement across space, an agential incursion into and an occupation of the atmosphere. In this rendition, the toxic travels freely, permeating atmospheric textures and traversing boundaries, indifferent to infrastructural shortages and shortcomings. Indeed, it is its capacity to move unhindered that the narrative conflates with its menace. Though never explicitly stated, the mass exodus from the city of Johannesburg appears to be a frantic flight from the advancing contamination, its encroaching clouds threatening to overtake the fleeing people.

The motile nature of the toxic is most vividly rendered with Lynn's tangible and visceral experience of the poison as her body becomes a locus of movement and stasis, life and death, end and endlessness. The beginning of the story depicts Lynn as already contaminated, the chemical engrafted into her bodily tissue. Three days after the explosion, "she'd woken up with the burning in the back of her throat so horrible that she understood it was no hangover, and that she had to move". She will never move, as we soon discover, trapped at the petrol station by the shortage of fuel, on the one hand, but also rendered immobile by the penetrative substance that has permeated

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her body and made it incapable of moving (it is actually the latter that prevents her from joining the taxi as, at the very last moment when she is about to make her decision, the poison halts her in place):

> her stomach hurt. […] All at once her digestion seemed to have speeded dramatically. Guts whining, she trotted to the bathroom. […] In the basin mirror, Lynn's face was startingly grimed. Her choppy dark hair was greasy, her eyes as pink as if she'd been weeping. Contamination. Sitting on the black plastic toilet seat, she felt the poisons gush out of her. She wiped her face with paper and looked closely at the black specks smeared on to the tissue. Her skin was oozing it. She held the wadded paper to her nose. A faint coppery smell. […] Her empty guts felt liquid, but strained to force anything out. The headache was back.

A leaky infrastructure for the mysterious toxic substances, Lynn becomes a site of transit as the chemical moves through and across her body while she remains immobile, rendered stationary by the very poison that now penetrates her pores and orifices. This image of Lynn's contaminated body vividly conveys the significance of the contrast the story establishes between the vibrancy of the toxic and Lynn's (imminent) lifelessness. Toxicity appropriates movement as its mode of existence while keeping the human body in check, unable to move and soon to perish. It simultaneously conflates immobility with an end, Lynn's poisoned body a herald of an ending she cannot undo. The story posits the poison as what continues, in space and time, through and across other matter, representing Lynn as proleptically dead, thus already stilled (irrespective of the infrastructural shortages that prevent her from moving).

Tying moving to living, Rose-Innes' story allies itself with Mbembe's recent reflections on what he calls the earthly community. In a somewhat startlingly prophetic way, "Poison" depicts the animating capacity of movement, its ability not just to set things and bodies in motion but also to thus infuse life into them. The narrative makes movement a signifier of life, thus offering, *avant la lettre*, a literary diagnosis of what Mbembe identifies as one of the processes characterising present times. In *The Earthly Community*, he speaks of "the dialectics of entanglement and separation" (70), a condition of simultaneously conflicting phenomena whereby, on one hand, "speed and an intensification of connections" have been generating an unprecedented ravelling of proximities, "a new distribution of the Earth and spread of population movements" (70). On the other, there has been a growing tendency "toward contraction, toward containment, toward enclosure, as well as various forms of entrapment, detention, and incarceration" (70). Within this novel dispensation, Mbembe argues that "to be alive, or to remain alive, is increasingly tantamount to being able to move speedily" (70). Driven by movement and its containment, both physical and virtual, this order necessarily valorises mobility, transforming borders into quasi-animate mobile structures with a life of their own which create "a segmented planet of multiple speed regimes" (71).

Mbembe notes that these phenomena are inseparable from a concomitant "merging of life and mobility" (73), a curious attachment of life to what is moving. As a result, not only does the human body get decomposed and recomposed, but "life itself is taken as something that can be calculated and recombined" (73). These Frankensteinian (re)assemblages go hand in hand with a "bifurcation between life and bodies" as "not all bodies are viewed as containing life" (73). Those considered unliving are "discounted bodies" (73) populating zones of exclusion and marked for disposal. "Dismissed as lifeless" (70), they are also bodies that are prevented from moving or whose movement is severely restricted. Whether it is the discounted bodies, hindered to move at their discretion, or the bodies of privilege, traversing borderisation grids, or the bioavailable bodies in transit, life comes to be understood as what has the capacity to move. This also means, if one were to infer it from Mbembe's analysis, that (unencumbered, uncontained) movement is a signifier of life, both its manifestation and its guarantor.

"Poison" no doubt offers itself as an allegory of the critical yet also exploitable value of mobility, of the ways being able to move saves and secures life. Indeed, the story revolves around a flight from the contaminated city and narrates the biological costs of thwarted or delayed movement, thus explicitly linking survival to mobility. There is, however, yet another, less conspicuous, affinity between life and movement which the story puts forward. If Mbembe's discussion of the conjunction of living and moving refers to human bodies and what derives from them, I suggest extending this merging to non-human substances and entities. If movement is now, as Mbembe argues, a sign of living, an act of relocation by which we recognise something to be alive, then this understanding clearly expands the remit of life, inevitably re-defining what it means to be living. Put slightly differently and in reference to the epigraph above, if what moves is what survives and lives, toxic matter may thus have become a paragon of living. It could indeed be argued that its persistence, its interminable longevity, is partly owed to its capacity to remain in transit, to travel across space and its various materialities, and hence across time. "Poison" narrates the

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life of the toxic as incessant movement, its change of location what secures its existence. Amidst the human and other-than-human lives populating the narrative landscape of Rose-Innes' story, toxicity is *the* surviving subject.

Yet "Poison" is not a narrative interested in a re-distribution of life across non-human entities, a re-definition of what it means to be living (a project already put forward by new materialisms where all matter is seen as living and lively).[2] Its insistence on crediting toxicity with a certain perdurability which manifests itself in/via movement aligns the narrative much more compellingly with the destabilising work of the figures of the Desert, the Animist and the Virus which undermine what Elizabeth Povinelli calls geontology, "a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife" (4). Indeed, these figures' unsettling interventions do not consist in their bid for inclusion into the remit of what counts as life but their disruption of the clear-cut difference between Life and Nonlife. As Povinelli argues, "other forms of existence (other existents) cannot merely be included in the ways we have understood the qualities of being and life but will need [...] to displace the division of Life and Nonlife" (15). Such inclusion would obviously perpetuate the division between "the lively and the inert" (5)—that is, geontopower itself. For Povinelli, these figures are "diagnostic and symptomatic of the present way in which liberalism governs difference and markets in a differential social geography" (15); they are "expressions" of power and "windows into its operation" (15). Similarly, Rose-Innes' toxic both destabilises the Life/Nonlife division but also reveals and sidesteps the operations of power shaping the eco-apocalyptic narratives of the end. Rather than another vibrant matter, the toxic helps to imagine a world without us along non-eschatological lines, removing the ending from the horizon of the future.

To redefine living along these lines is not only to unsettle the eco-apocalyptic script and the human exceptionalism it rests on and reproduces. It is also to question and undo what Mbembe describes as the "dialectic of entanglement and separation" (70), two concomitant processes that define the conditions of living at present. The former results from increased mobility and acceleration (which gives rise to unprecedented proximity among people); the latter refers to containment, a tireless erection of borders and walls to keep certain populations apart. This paradigm is essentially about movement—either its freedom or prevention (70). It rests on "borderization", which results in "the creation of a segmented planet of multiple speed regimes" (71). This, in turn, derives from two different though related architectures of power: "the law of nations" (102) and a "new geometry of technology" (103), both which rely on "the logic of the barrier" (102). What Mbembe calls the earthly community, by contrast, calls for "porosities", "passages", and "bridges" (110) for a new conception of the Earth to emerge. "The combustion of the earth" has already radically subverted the processes of borderisation and the traditional geometries of power. "There can be no refuge", Mbembe claims, as "the boundary lies everywhere" (116). Such radical undoing of borders is a prerequisite for the coming of the Earth, a utopian project to be yet carried out. The Earth "is a name that will always refer to a reality that is unable to be found, to a time ever ahead of us, to a space opposed in all points to that of States, a space irreducible to that of empires and nations, with their countless walls, borders, and enclosures" (26).

Read in its allegorical tenor, "Poison" posits the toxic as a sabotage to boundaries. As its ontologies always gesture towards "a time ever ahead of us", its carbonised viscosity translatable into a timeless permanence, it meanwhile travels across walls and enclosures (including the epidermal enclosures of the human body). Along the way, it reveals and constitutes the world as essentially porous, thus setting itself against the anti-ecology of the dialectic of entanglement and containment. It is the uncontainable character of the world revealed by the motile toxic substances as they travel across bodies and boundaries that proves to be the most unimaginable vision for Lynn. Her inability to conceive "the earthly community" together with her anti-ecological disposition more generally come into full view at the end of the story when Lynn regards the atmospheric manifestation of the chemical poisoning and is able to only perceive it as a bounded, containable, and clearly demarcated ocular phenomenon:

> She'd been here three days and her head felt clear. While there'd been a few bursts of strange rain, the chemical storm had not progressed further down the highway. It seemed the pollution had created its own weather system over the mountain, a knot of ugly cloud. She felt washed up on the edge of it, resting her oil-clogged wings on a quiet shore.

As Lynn imagines her own body and the body of the world around her as (ideally) policeable entities (the only way, in fact, she is able to think of herself and her surroundings) whose contours distinctly and conspicuously delineate beginnings and ends, simultaneously (re)producing a sense of reassurance that comes with enclosures,

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she both fails to envision the future as anything but a reproduction of the present while also succumbing to a vision of the world which continues without her:

> Sooner or later, rescue would come. The ambulances with flashing lights, the men in luminous vests with equipment and supplies. Or maybe just a stream of people driving back home. But if rescue took too long, then there was always the black bicycle that she'd found leaned up against the petrol pump. […] Maybe tomorrow, or the day after. And when this was all over, she was definitely going to go on a proper detox. Give up all junk food, alcohol. Some time soon.
>
> Lynn snapped open a packet of salt-n-vinegar. Behind her, the last of the sunset lingered, poison violet and puce, but she didn't turn to look. She wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veldt. If she closed her eyes, she might hear a frog, just one, starting its evening song beyond the fence.

These last paragraphs of the story merit a closer reading for the ambiguity they convey as they bring into proximity an apparent (yet misleading) confidence in a restoration of the receding world, a recapturing of a momentarily lost reality and the lives it accommodated *and* an indefinite deferral of that restoration, a withholding of what is expected to return but will not. The confidence manifests itself in Lynn's somewhat naïve belief in an uninterrupted provision of state security and in the ultimate arrival of help. Despite the deadly contamination, the machine of statehood is imagined as surviving the toxic odds. Relatedly, Lynn credits boundaries with a capacity to deliver an understandable, manageable, and redeemable reality, one where toxicity can be zoned off so that idyllic *green* worlds can continue to enthral us with their clean natural beauty.

The juxtaposition of the purity of the veldt and the pollution epitomised by Lynn and the packet of chips (both of which, we can imagine, would make it *across* the fence, Lynn's toxic body and the chips as the only food she is left with) summons the familiar paradigm based on "colonial land relations" (Liboiron, *Pollution* 5) within which pollution is handled by practices of removal to land considered a site of assimilation for polluting substances and materials (10–2). Explicating their claim that pollution is colonialism, Liboiron point out that the availability of land as "a sink to store or process waste" (11) and, more generally, "access to Indigenous Land and its ability to produce value for settle and colonial desires and futures" (11) have been enabled by a preceding violence of the colonial appropriation of land (11). The very idea of environmentalism rests on the prior availability of land for the disposal of waste and other uses. This logic is clearly visible in Lynn's approach to the homestead behind the gas station. Once "on the other side of the fence", she muses: "Smelling its grassy breath, Lynn felt a tremor of adventure. She could be here for days" (104). Lynn now claimed the purity of the veldt as a space of respite from the contaminating outside: "Out back here, the sky looked completely clear, as if the petrol station marked the limit of the zone of contamination." It generates an uncomplicated sense of entitlement. She appropriates the zone of purity, bringing in her wake the settler-colonial attitude to land as she assumes she can simply take it and thus pollute it. As Wenzel notes, Lynn's stance is marred by "the difficulty of changing the environmental order of things and slowing down the momentum of harm" (39). Lynn's wistful gaze and appropriative deportment are enabled by and reproduce this paradigm that structures the world into the space of purity from which pollution is removed *and* the space of dirt, the value of which lies in its capacity to assimilate this dirt. The fence, a material symbol of Mbembe's borderisation practices, is a requisite for this paradigm to work. The veldt is not just a space to be colonised, but a future "sink to store or process waste" (Liboiron, *Pollution* 10), a piece of land which Lynn cannot perceive of other than as offering itself to her polluting practices.

But then the confidence Lynn displays cannot but be compromised by the unmistakable loss of the world she wishes was still graspable and appropriable. The lexicon of uncertainty ("sooner or later", "or maybe", "Maybe tomorrow, or the day after") intimates an already forfeited reality, speaking more of Lynn's wishful thinking (her desire to keep the world preserved as it is) rather than of certitude. Yet it is significant to note here that the concluding paragraphs of "Poison" do not offer themselves as narrating an end, even though ends are clearly portended and underway. These paragraphs gesture towards two critical horizons. One emerges out of Lynn's fatuous understanding of the end as an event that can be adjourned by a reproduction of familiar scripts premised on a belief in the liberal narratives of self-care on one hand and on an assumed elsewhere to which toxicities can be relegated in processes of detoxification on the other. In other words, to prevent the end from occurring, Lynn imagines it is sufficient to resort to self-discipline and control. Here, unending is tied to the reproduction of the same. The other horizon challenges and critiques the former. It boldly suggests that the end of Lynn's world (and her body) is not the end of the world as such. Whatever Lynn's lame predictions about the coming, miraculous salvation, she has already been contaminated, her body now toxic matter itself, amalgamated into other toxicities

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and living a recomposed life beyond her intentions and choices. "Poison" is thus a decidedly against-the-grain narrative as the end of the world is re-scripted as merely accommodating a host of perishable entities (including the human being) yet continues in an unrelenting fashion. Offering a vision of the world without us as a viable project, the story represents toxicity as what outlives the discourses that render it removable and eradicable.

IV

Thematising the toxic as a motile matter, penetrative, durable, and destructive, Rose-Innes' "Poison" re-writes eco-apocalypse into a narrative about endings *but also* continuities. Foregrounding and capitalising on the properties of the toxic as an embodiment of what lasts, what eludes the distinction between Life and Nonlife, what moves freely in an unhampered way across other bodies and entities, the story renders the toxic a signifier of unending. Represented as an obstinately enduring presence, toxicity constitutes a unique lens through which to examine and challenge both the desires for the end and the almost quasi-religious convictions that the future stores *an end*. Seen as an agent of incessant, unstoppable movement, the toxic, paradoxically, re-invents the future as a mutated yet ongoing temporality in which toxified human bodies make the world last rather than end.

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Notes

1. Other scholars have likewise noted the allegorical potential of the story. Christopher Thurman, for example, offers an "allegorical reading of the focalizing protagonist of 'Poison', Lynn, and her white identity" (61). Similarly, Wenzel notes the generic quality of the story, building her reading around race and class markers which render the story an allegory of South Africa's "troubled histories" (38), with Lynn "a surrogate for the rapt but ultimately unmoved reader of apocalyptic narratives" (39). Both readings foreground the racial layers of the narrative, examining how the genericity of its elements creates a "microcosm of South African society" (Thurman 63).
2. The most well-known, perhaps, is Jane Bennett's concept of *vibrant matter*. For critiques of Bennet's "vibrant matter", see, among others, Povinelli's *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*; Joseph Pugliese's *Biopolitics: Forensic Ecologies of Violence*; and Gabrielle Hecht's "Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence".

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Interview

"The future is often the past in a different font": An interview with Osahon Ize-Iyamu

Osahon Ize-Iyamu & Ewa Macura-Nnamdi

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi interviewed Ize-Iyamu over email in February 2025.

EMN: This special issue is devoted to African fictions of environmental crisis and displacement. As editors, we have been especially interested in how African culture imagines human and other-than-human forms of displacement in the face of environmental crises. How do you see their connection?
OII: I think African culture and displacement have a direct connection. For many African cultures that were subjected to colonial rule, displacement is a topic that's familiar because it's the consequence of our present reality. Thinking about displacement in the context of climate change is not difficult to envision, as it's already been our past. To give an example: colonialism evidently led to the erasure of certain aspects of cultural understanding, so consequently, many individuals' views on culture and tradition in the present day are viewed through a lens that has been affected by colonial conditions. Because we live in a post-colonial society, we will always suffer a displacement from who we once were. If we consider this reality, then it's easy to estimate that a future climate dystopia will lead to another displacement—we will evolve and significantly change from who we once were, and we will lose what we could have become if we lived in better conditions. This is what I think. The future is often the past in a different font.

EMN: While registering micro-scale displacements, your story, "More Sea Than Tar", seems more interested in staying put, getting stuck in toxic environments. What are you trying to say with this move?
OII: I think the story highlights the fact that environmental degradation has forced us to live and work in toxic environments. On a day-to-day basis, many people are forced to live in polluted megacities for the sake of work. Toxicity is often our current reality, and it feels important to portray a dystopia that doesn't move away from that reality.

EMN: Despite the pessimistic scenario the story depicts, it also seems to strike an optimistic chord in that it implements the idea cogently expressed by a scholar, Srinivas Aravamudan, who said in reference to the concepts of the Anthropocene that "endings are also mutations". As readers, we are told explicitly that the world into which Uti, the narrator and protagonist, ventures with his father and brother is a mutated world, born of the amalgamation of organic and non-organic matter. It is not the end of the world but a world unlike ours. Disgusting and filthy as it is, it is also alive and novel. What function does mutation play in this and other stories and, more generally, in thinking about the future?
OII: Mutation is a fascinating concept: it is a distortion of our norm, but it also builds on something that already exists. The function of mutation in this story is to highlight the ways in which rot and waste in Nigeria have entirely consumed people's reality. People try to make positive uses of this mutation: they make cars based on

Osahon Ize-Iyamu is a Nigerian writer. He is an alumnus of the Alpha Young Writers Workshop and the Clarion Writer's Workshop. His work has been published in magazines such as ***The Rumpus, Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld, Reckoning***, and *Lightspeed Magazine*. He is the recipient of a MacDowell fellowship and has spoken about his work at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, Story Hour, and Berlin's Climate Culture Festival.
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trash juice; they use trash to build boats. As we think about a better future, we have to acknowledge that we are already living in mutation. The question is how we can transform our mutilated resources into a world that can heal us?

EMN: Is there any literary trend/genre you would like to identify your texts with? We assume that scholars will tend to align your work with Afrofuturism or Africanfuturism. But you may see things differently. How do you position yourself on the literary scene?
OII: I try not to think too much about literary trends and genres, even though I know they can be quite useful for many. A lot of my work is Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, but a lot of it is also based on Afrosurrealism (which is perfectly defined by Gautam Bhatia, as a genre that blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal, that bends reality, fractures time, and allows the living and the dead to exist side-by-side. It's all a matter of perspective, and I align with all).

EMN: Whom would you name as your literary influences?
OII: Chinua Achebe, Nnedi Okorafor, Eloghosa Osunde, and so many more to name.

EMN: Why do you think writing about the future is important?
OII: It's important because it allows us to visualize all possible outcomes of our current reality. As an African writer, I think it's even more important to write stories about the future, as African futures are still infrequently portrayed in other forms of media. When African readers are able to see themselves in advanced societies, they can envision alternate realities and even hopeful futures.

EMN: How is your work received in Nigeria?
OII: To my knowledge, I think it's been received quite well. Speculative short fiction is a genre that's recently begun to garner attention from readers in the country, so I look forward to more readers' thoughts and engagement as they come across my work.

EMN: "More Sea Than Tar" and "What Floats in a Flotsam River" clearly align themselves with other recent narratives thematizing water, such as Ben Okri's "Three Parables about Water" and "The Secret Source", Imbolo Mbue's How Beautiful We Were, and Wanuri Kahiu's short film Puzmi. Your stories weave their narratives around water, too. The former depicts water as a disgusting cesspool, contaminated beyond recognition. The latter, in a similar vein, represents the eponymous river as a reservoir of "muck and filth". Yet, paradoxically, both also represent water as generous and hospitable. Perhaps infinitely so. Would you elaborate on your literary interest in water?
OII: My fascination with water comes from my experience with water bodies. While where I grew up, Benin City, does not have such a large body of water as Lagos, for example, I do remember seeing waste and water co-existing in everything from rivers to gutters. It made me realise at a young age that humanity's relationship with water is deeply flawed. Water is our source of nourishment, but our sources of water, where we draw this nourishment from, are often the most waste-filled places. The paradox is something I've always felt the need to capture.

EMN: Both these stories also forefront toxicity, to the extent that one can have the impression it is a character in its own right. Why have you found it significant to credit toxicity with so much narrative power and prominence?
OII: We live in a world that is deeply toxic, and I think that when a reality is portrayed as strongly as it exists it often feels like a thing that has its own voice. Toxicity in these stories, however, does not appear without any reason: in both, we can see the way in which the world's toxicity affects the mindsets of each individual. It is significant to highlight because it ultimately shows readers that degradation is more than just nature's problem—it intersects to affect our minds, our societies, and our state of being.

EMN: "More Sea Than Tar" does not tell us much about where the filth in the water comes from or who is responsible. Was it a deliberate decision?
OII: It wasn't a deliberate decision, but it is one I've come to appreciate as the years have passed. I think focusing on who is responsible would divert readers away from the central theme of the story, which is how individuals adapt in the face of disasters. The question of who is responsible and where the filth comes from is equally as important, but it makes the reader focus on the instigators, instead of thinking about this as a story of survival.

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EMN: Talking of a different kind of displacement. In a 2019 article in The Guardian, Chika Unigwe harshly and justly reprimanded Western media and audiences for their privileging of young Westerners and their climate activism. The face of this activism has invariably been Greta Thunberg. Unigwe censures the erasure by Western media of climate activists from the Global South. Do you see yourself as a climate activist, and do you see your work as countering the tendencies Unigwe reproaches?

OII: I believe that every writer's words have the power to bring about activism, but I also would be hesitant to call myself a climate activist, simply because I don't think that it is a title I've earned. In regard to my work, while I am grateful for the attention it has received from Western media, I do think that the Western world has a lot of work to do in spotlighting and supporting activists from other parts of the world if they are to truly counter their tendency of privilege. There are steps in the right direction, but more can be always done.

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Entretien

Sur l'afrofuturisme, la crise climatique, la toxicité et la magie dans *Nos jours brûlés*: Entretien avec Laura Nsafou

Laura Nsafou & Magdalena Malinowska

MM: Dans les interviews que vous avez accordés à l'occasion de la sortie de Nos jours brûlés, *vous admettez que votre trilogie s'inscrit dans le courant de l'afrofuturisme. Vous déclarez également votre attachement à ce courant dans le "Manifeste pour l'afrofuturisme 3.0", coécrit avec Nadia Chonville et Michael Roch. Que l'afrofuturisme représente-t-il pour vous, et pourquoi avez-vous choisi d'en faire partie? Vous semble-t-il particulièrement pertinent pour imaginer l'avenir de notre monde?*
LN: L'afrofuturisme est pour moi un courant artistique riche, qui rappelle que la capacité de créer et d'imaginer est indispensable pour penser d'autres mondes et les rendre possibles. C'est un moteur qui me parle beaucoup en tant qu'autrice afrodescendante née en Occident, et en tant qu'afroféministe, de pouvoir explorer un autre imaginaire, quand celui d'occident pense uniquement les communautés noires sous l'angle de sujet ou à travers des images funèbres et/ou misérabilistes. Je vois l'afrofuturisme, non pas comme une réponse à cet imaginaire raciste étriqué, mais comme un terrain afrocentré créatif qui rappelle que les personnes noires existent en dehors de celui-ci. C'est en tout cas ce que j'ai voulu explorer avec *Nos jours brûlés*.

MM: L'afrofuturisme est bien implanté dans le monde anglophone. Pensez-vous qu'il trouve aujourd'hui une place particulière en littérature francophone?
LN: Pour avoir une vue d'ensemble, il faudrait se pencher également sur la production de récits afrofuturistes en auto-édition, car on ne peut pas s'interroger sur la production de récits afrocentrés sans analyser les discriminations que les auteur.e.s rencontrent quand ils/elles proposent ce type de récits aux maisons d'édition traditionnelle. Je pense donc que l'on assiste à un intérêt plus marqué pour l'afrofuturisme francophone, mais que les œuvres visibles—dont les miennes—ne sont que le sommet de l'iceberg.

MM: Quelles sont vos influences littéraires? D'où tirez-vous de l'inspiration?
LN: Des autrices comme Nnedi Okorafor et Octavia Butler m'ont vraiment offert "des premières fois" en littérature. C'est particulièrement le cas de *Mauvaise graine* de Butler, qui m'a marqué et fait partie de mes romans favoris, parce qu'il m'a montré du fantastique avec des divinités africaines, alors que je ne pensais pas cela possible de lire de tels univers. Il y a aussi ce qu'on appelle le réalisme magique en Occident, mais qui pour moi est juste un héritage de notre diaspora, qui m'a beaucoup inspiré; quand Toni Morrison, Simone Schwartz Bart ou d'autres passent du réel à l'invisible sans crier gare, elles cassent une lecture occidentale et binaire où il y aurait le réel et l'irréel. C'est un trait culturel qui m'a fait requestionner ce que l'on considère comme science et comme technologie dans la SF occidentale. La magie dans *Nos jours brûlés* est une technologie et une science, avec des fondements spirituels, mais cela n'en est pas moins une science.

Laura Nsafou est une écrivaine française d'origine martiniquaise et congolaise, autrice du blog *Mrs Roots*. Elle a publié des romans, des bandes dessinées et des livres pour enfants, notamment *Comme un million de papillons noirs* (Cambourakis, 2018). Son œuvre la plus récente est une trilogie afrofuturiste publiée chez Albin Michel comprenant *Nos jours brûlés* (2021), *Les Flammes ivoire* (2022) et *Le Dernier feu* (2023). Les trois tomes racontent les périples d'Elikia, une jeune fille dont le nom signifie "espoir", qui parcourt l'Afrique francophone afin de trouver le Soleil, disparu mystérieusement 20 ans auparavant. Ce voyage initiatique la dirigera vers un monde invisible plein de magie dont elle ignorait jusque-là l'existence.

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MM: Pouvez-vous développer un peu cette idée de la magie comme science et technologie?
LN: Eh bien, l'essayiste et guérisseur Patrice Malidoma Some rappelait dans son livre Water and Spirits que la colonisation ne s'était pas limitée à la violence sur les hommes africains, c'est aussi la conception de leur réalité qui a été réécrite par les colons. En conséquence, la binarité entre réel et spirituel est un héritage colonial, avec une conception de la science comme mesure de la réalité, etc. J'aimais donc l'idée de prendre comme point de départ un imaginaire avant cette binarité. Ainsi la magie d'Elikia et de l'invisible, ses règles, ses effets par combinaison *fait* science dans *Nos jours brûlés*. De la même façon que la communication par tambour était l'un des premiers modes de communication à distance, sans fil, etc. C'était un exercice de créativité décoloniale de penser autrement tout ça.

MM: Dans cette trilogie, vous imaginez notre planète dans 24 ans, dévastée par la crise climatique, plongée dans l'obscurité. Vous évoquez également "l'économie de l'obscurité", c'est-à-dire l'attitude de certains individus cherchant à tirer le maximum de profit de cette situation au détriment de la nature. Cette notion est liée non seulement à la problématique de la dégradation de l'environnement, mais aussi à celle de la justice environnementale. Ces problématiques sont-elles importantes pour vous?
LN: Oui, notamment parce qu'elles mutent dans un système capitaliste et individualiste. Plus que des individus tirant profit de l'obscurité, l'économie de l'obscurité rebat les cartes entre les pays du Nord et les pays du Sud, qui ont les endroits les plus éclairés dans cet univers. On a donc un inversement des rapports de pouvoir, que je n'ai pu explorer sans une nouvelle crossover, "De l'autre côté de la nuit" (in volume: *Afrofuturisme. L'avenir change de visage*, MNÉMOS 2022). C'était passionnant de travailler et de questionner la notion de responsabilité collective, comme le requiert la justice sociale et climatique.

MM: Pouvez-vous nous dire un peu plus à propos de cette nouvelle?
LN: "De l'autre côté de la nuit" se concentre sur la Grande Nuit du point de vue des hommes. Comment s'organisent les classes pauvres, condamnées à l'obscurité, quand les classes riches monopolisent les sources d'énergie, jusqu'à construire des cités lumières excluantes? Les mouvements de résistance veillant à redistribuer la lumière y sont perçus comme des terroristes; c'est ce que l'on découvre dans cette nouvelle.

MM: La disparition du soleil, survenue environ vingt ans avant le début de l'intrigue, résulte d'une confrontation entre des divinités diurnes et nocturnes, menant à la victoire de Guddi, l'Être de la Nuit. Toutefois, pourrait-on lire Nos jours brûlés comme une parabole sur la crise climatique, d'autant plus que la transformation de la planète que vous décrivez semble étrangement proche des prédictions des climatologues? Prenons par exemple ce passage: "En l'absence de soleil, la terre s'était transformée: sa composition s'était altérée au fil des orages, des nuits, et des tempêtes de sable çà et là. Dans certains pays, la saison des pluies pouvait durer des années, noyant les cultures jusqu'à modifier la flore de toute une région, quand d'autres endroits subissaient, eux, des hivers interminables" (Nos jours brûlés 26). *Peut-on dire que, dans l'univers que vous créez, la crise environnementale est autant théogénique qu'anthropogénique?*
LN: Totalement, sachant que l'univers puise dans des cosmogonies africaines, souvent imprégnées d'animisme, qui placent l'homme à hauteur du vivant. Il n'a aucune supériorité, il n'est qu'un maillon du vivant différent des autres. Les travaux de Séverine Kodjo-Grandvaux m'ont beaucoup intéressé pour ce qu'ils révélaient sur la dimension coloniale de vouloir dominer le monde: elles expliquent notamment que c'est parce que les hommes ont réalisé leur petitesse dans l'univers qu'ils ont voulu dominer d'autres peuples et théoriser une hiérarchie (pour faire très court).

MM: Donc, comment voyez-vous l'enchevêtrement entre le colonialisme et la dégradation de l'environnement? Comment votre trilogie répond-elle à cet enchevêtrement?
LN: C'est indissociable. Le colonialisme visait l'assujettissement des peuples et/ou l'annihilation de ces derniers, en passant par l'accaparement des terres. De nombreuses espèces animales et végétales ont disparu, etc. C'est pourquoi les questions de justice environnementale sont indissociables de la justice sociale. La nature en mutation de la Grande Nuit qui reprend ses droits et qui représente un danger pour l'homme est une réponse à cette colonialité, et pour défaire cette Grande Nuit, les moyens ne sont pas dans la matérialité; Elikia doit trouver les savoirs perdus, dépourvus de cette binarité coloniale, pour trouver le moyen de ramener le soleil. C'était un peu le noyau, avec pour thématique, l'espoir politique.

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MM: À cause de la Grande Nuit, l'environnement subit des mutations et devient de plus en plus toxique: des plantes appelées "nocturnes" remplacent progressivement d'autres espèces végétales, et des créatures animales dangereuses apparaissent, comme des umdhlebis, des lézarunes, des impundulus … La nature devient donc toxique et extrêmement hostile pour les humains. D'où vous est venue l'idée de ce renversement des rapports de force entre l'environnement et l'humanité? Et quelle place occupent, dans votre vision du futur, les questions de toxicité et de mutation?

LN: Je pense que la crise climatique y est pour beaucoup, et aussi l'envie de transgresser cette espèce de déni collectif que l'on peut avoir en se disant "oui, les conséquences du changement climatique sont en cours, mais le pire arrivera dans très très longtemps", vision qui est tronquée et occidentalocentrée au possible quand on sait que des pays du Sud comme l'Indonésie ont déjà vu disparaître certaines de leurs îles. Avoir cette approche dystopique du futur en faisant de la nature le principal facteur de toxicité, c'était un moyen de mettre tout cela en avant, mais aussi de m'appuyer sur la cosmogonie que j'avais créée.

MM: Ce numéro thématique de Tydskrif vir Letterkunde *étant consacré aux déplacements en lien avec la crise climatique, j'aimerais vous poser une question sur ce sujet. Dans votre trilogie, les humains ont renoncé à l'idée de se déplacer et privilégient l'immobilité ou les voyages virtuels. Dans un contexte où les migrations climatiques sont à la fois prédites et redoutées, pourquoi avoir fait ce choix d'une immobilité généralisée? Quels sont les enjeux (esthétiques et politiques) d'un tel parti pris face aux conséquences de la dégradation de l'environnement?*

LN: Je ne pense pas que la disparition du soleil se traduirait par autre chose qu'un état de sidération et de repli sur soi. Ensuite, aux vues des politiques migratoires d'aujourd'hui qui se soldent par des décès par milliers, un refus d'entraide et une fascisation grimpante, cela me semblait plus probable de présenter aussi la possibilité de se déplacer comme étant peu accessible. Dans *Nos jours brûlés*, se déplacer est un risque constant dans une faune et une flore qui ont rendu les cartes établies par l'homme complètement obsolètes, mais aussi le fait de dépendre de la lumière et de l'obscurité intensifie la prise de risque. Enfin, c'est un parti pris qui permet également de mesurer le choix de Diba, la mère d'Elikia, qui décide de croire qu'il est possible de changer les choses. La base d'un changement politique, c'est déjà de croire que l'on peut influencer son environnement. C'est ce que je voulais explorer avec cette trilogie.

MM: Comment avez-vous travaillé la langue et le style pour refléter cet univers?

LN: Je pense que le point de départ a déjà été le fait d'identifier la voix d'Elikia. La voix de quelqu'un qui s'était acclimaté de ce monde, car c'était le seul qu'elle connaissait. Ensuite, j'ai vraiment cherché à jouer sur l'oralité et sur les codes du conte quand il fallait aborder l'aspect mythologique. Enfin, pour les savoir perdus, notamment "Les Chants nocturnes", j'avais vraiment envie de convoquer des images, plutôt qu'un récit explicite sur la genèse des deums, parce que c'est aussi casser le rapport entre signifiant et signifié. Un exemple que j'aime beaucoup, c'est celui que donne la journaliste et poétesse Douce Dibondo, qui expliquait qu'en lingala, le mot Moyindo, qui veut dire Noir, signifie littéralement Embrassé par le soleil. Le sens en dit long sur l'imaginaire non occidental de ceux qui se sont nommés.

MM: Avant d'écrire la trilogie Nos jours brûlés *qui est destinée aux adolescents et jeunes adultes, vous avez publié des livres pour enfants. Pourquoi ce choix du public? En quoi écrire pour les jeunes lecteurs est important pour vous?*

LN: Comme beaucoup d'auteur.ice.s, j'ai d'abord une histoire avant de songer ou non à quel public elle s'adresserait. J'écrivais des romans bien avant d'écrire des albums jeunesse, alors ce n'était pas une décision que j'ai prise, mais plutôt la voix d'Elikia qui m'est ainsi venue. Dans tous les cas, j'ai toujours voulu m'investir dans des récits pour différents publics, car l'accessibilité à des imaginaires se joue aussi dans le fait de diversifier ses formats.

MM: Quelle est la réception de vos livres en France? Sont-ils également lus en dehors de l'Hexagone? Avez-vous eu des retours de lecteurs qui vous ont surprise ou particulièrement marquée?

LN: Effectivement, que ce soit de la part de lecteur.ice.s de France ou d'ailleurs, le retour que j'en ai, ce sont souvent des lecteurs noirs qui me disent avoir pensé que certains genres littéraires n'étaient pas pour eux, avant de s'apercevoir que ce qui leur manquait, c'était de s'y voir. Que ce soit d'ailleurs pour *Nos jours brûlés* ou pour ma BD. Beaucoup ont été marqués de trouver un univers où la présence de personnages noirs n'était pas justifiée, mais juste un état de fait, et d'explorer également un héritage diasporique. À l'inverse, les autres lecteurs s'étonnaient que

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ce soit si rare de voir un univers imaginaire inspiré d'Afrique francophone et me demandaient d'autres références. Ou une suite!

MM: Quel avenir imaginez-vous? Est-ce que l'écriture sur l'avenir est importante pour vous et pourquoi? En quoi constitue-t-elle un défi?
LN: Toute écriture est importante pour moi et je trouve que le plus urgent est qu'elle ne soit pas uniquement une réponse aux problèmes actuels, mais qu'elle soit cultivée avec une vraie diversité. En ce moment, je travaille beaucoup sur de la fantasy médiévale inspirée de cultures africaines, et c'est un exercice d'imagination particulièrement riche face à un imaginaire colonial qui a réécrit l'histoire des pays africains comme ayant commencé avec l'esclavage. Je n'ai donc pas l'impression de rétablir ce qui existait dans les sociétés précoloniales, comme le font très bien des historiens, mais d'explorer une troisième voie.

MM: Nous croisons donc les doigts pour vos prochaines publications! Merci beaucoup pour vos réponses et surtout de nous avoir accordé votre temps!
LN: Merci!

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Récits de vie au Burkina Faso: Enjeux, rhétorique, réception.
Edgard Sankara.
Harmattan, 2016. 201 pp.
ISBN 978-2-343098-77-7

L'ouvrage d'Edgard Sankara explore la dynamique des récits de vie au Burkina Faso, en mettant l'accent sur leurs dimensions sociopolitiques, rhétoriques et culturelles. Sankara analyse ces récits comme des instruments de construction identitaire et de préservation de la mémoire nationale. Ces récits, souvent entre mémoire individuelle et témoignage collectif, jouent un rôle crucial dans la transmission de la mémoire et dans la contestation des récits officiels. Son ouvrage est subdivisé en plusieurs parties dont nous faisons l'économie dans ce travail. Cela sera suivi d'une analyse critique de l'ouvrage.

L'auteur montre, dès l'entame que la pratique des récits de vie au Burkina Faso a longtemps été entravée par des régimes autoritaires et l'héritage de la censure coloniale. Ce n'est qu'après les années 1990, avec la démocratisation, que ces récits se multiplient, notamment à travers des autobiographies et des mémoires de figures politiques comme Adama Toure, Saye Zerbo, et Valère Some. Ces récits offrent une réflexion sur l'histoire nationale et les luttes politiques et sociales de l'époque. Sankara distingue plusieurs formes de récits : autobiographies (récits à la première personne), biographies (récits par un tiers) et mémoires (témoignages d'événements vécus), bien que la catégorisation de ces œuvres reste complexe. Des auteurs comme Adama Toure refusent des étiquettes trop strictes, comme l'appellation "mémoires", soulignant ainsi la diversité et la subjectivité des récits.

Sankara fait ensuite une analyse rhétorique qui met en lumière les stratégies narratives des auteurs, notamment la construction d'identités et la transmission de valeurs culturelles. Il explore les autobiographies co-écrites, où l'auteur et le rédacteur collaborent pour produire le texte, souvent dans une perspective anthropologique. L'exemple de Joseph-Mukassa Some, dont l'autobiographie est rédigée avec Yves Bourron, soulève des questions sur la paternité de l'œuvre et sur le rôle de l'ethnologue comme médiateur culturel. Ce phénomène révèle l'absence d'une tradition d'autobiographie écrite de manière autonome au Burkina Faso. Selon Philippe Lejeune, la collaboration permet de garantir l'authenticité des récits tout en attribuant une forme d'auteur au rédacteur.

Dans le premier chapitre, l'auteur rappelle que la réception de ces récits varie en fonction des publics (académiques, politiques, populaires) et met en lumière leur rôle essentiel dans la construction de la mémoire collective. Malgré leur subjectivité, ces récits participent à la transmission de la mémoire et à la critique des narrations officielles. Ils servent de sources pour l'écriture de l'histoire, notamment dans un contexte où les archives publiques sont souvent fragiles et incomplètes.

Le deuxième chapitre de l'ouvrage explore les mémoires d'Amadou Hampâté Ba et de Birago Diop sur la Haute-Volta coloniale. Ba, en particulier, fournit une perspective nuancée sur la domination coloniale, mettant en évidence les résistances des chefs locaux et les actions justes de certains administrateurs coloniaux. Diop, de son côté, adopte un regard complémentaire, oscillant entre proximité avec les colons et fidélité à ses racines africaines. Ces récits, bien que rarement valorisés par la critique, sont des archives vivantes essentielles à l'histoire coloniale, permettant de compléter les récits officiels.

Le chapitre trois s'intéresse aux récits de vie postcoloniaux, en particulier ceux d'Adama Dramé, griot, et de "Hawa", prostituée burkinabè. Ces récits, issus d'entretiens oraux, soulèvent des interrogations sur l'authenticité et la médiation des transcripteurs, souvent occidentaux. Sankara analyse comment ces récits créent un jeu de miroirs entre la culture burkinabè et l'Occident et comment la médiation influe sur la perception des identités. Dramé, par exemple, critique le regard ethnocentrique des Européens sur l'Afrique, soulignant la superficialité de leurs savoirs. Il milite pour une réappropriation de la culture traditionnelle africaine, se positionnant contre la modernité occidentale qui marginalise les traditions africaines.

Dramé se distingue par sa critique de l'adhésion des élites africaines aux symboles de la modernité occidentale, tout en plaidant pour la valorisation de la culture africaine traditionnelle. Il propose des solutions pour préserver la tradition, comme la création de médias dédiés à la culture traditionnelle. Sa réflexion

dépasse les critiques sociales pour offrir une alternative postcoloniale, intégrant tradition et modernité. Cette démarche, selon lui, est essentielle pour préserver l'identité culturelle dans le contexte d'une Afrique moderne.

L'auteur va s'intéresser particulièrement à l'autobiographie de Malidoma Patrice Some, *Of Water and the Spirit*, un exemple de récit de vie postcolonial. Some, un Dagara, raconte son enlèvement par les Jésuites et sa réintégration dans sa culture traditionnelle. Son récit, bien que marqué par des contradictions et des incohérences, offre une réflexion sur les ravages du colonialisme et la perte des savoirs traditionnels. Il critique le rôle du colonialisme et du christianisme dans cette perte, tout en valorisant les rituels d'initiation traditionnels comme modèles de cohésion sociale. Cependant, la réception de son ouvrage varie. Certains le critiquent pour son coté fiction, tandis que d'autres soulignent la portée symbolique de son témoignage.

Sankara conclut son ouvrage en suggérant que ces récits de vie, bien qu'ils soient partis pris personnels et argumentatifs, constituent une archive mémorielle cruciale pour l'histoire du Burkina Faso. Ces récits, souvent produits par des figures politiques ou sociales, sont des instruments de réhabilitation ou de légitimation, visant à influencer la perception publique ou à réécrire certains aspects de l'histoire nationale. Certains récits, comme ceux de Laurent Bado ou Pierre Zabre, sont des dispositifs de persuasion, visant à rectifier des malentendus ou à défendre une image publique. D'autres récits, plus neutres en apparence, permettent une réflexion sur les événements historiques et offrent des perspectives alternatives.

D'un point de vue critique, l'ouvrage de Sankara constitue une contribution importante à la compréhension des récits de vie dans le contexte politique, social et culturel du Burkina Faso. À travers une analyse méticuleuse des récits autobiographiques, des mémoires et des témoignages, Sankara explore la fonction de ces récits dans la construction de la mémoire collective et la réécriture de l'histoire nationale. L'ouvrage montre que les récits de vie, loin d'être de simples témoignages personnels, sont des espaces d'affrontement idéologique où chaque auteur cherche à réécrire l'histoire collective du Burkina Faso. Ces récits, qu'ils soient autobiographiques ou médiatisés, jouent un rôle crucial dans la transmission de la mémoire nationale et la critique des récits dominants, contribuant à façonner une histoire vivante et dynamique du pays. L'ouvrage s'intéresse à des figures politiques et sociales de premier plan, tout en abordant des récits moins connus, ce qui en fait un travail précieux pour les chercheurs en histoire, littérature et études postcoloniales.

Sankara pose les bases de son analyse en soulignant les obstacles rencontrés par les récits de vie sous les régimes autoritaires et la censure coloniale. Cette contextualisation est essentielle pour comprendre pourquoi les récits de vie ont pris une telle importance dans le Burkina Faso post-1990. L'ouvrage démontre clairement que ces récits, loin d'être de simples témoignages personnels, sont des instruments de contestation politique et sociale, visant à réhabiliter certaines figures historiques et à réécrire l'histoire du pays.

Un des mérites de l'ouvrage est la manière dont Sankara met en lumière la diversité des récits, qu'ils soient autobiographiques, biographiques ou des mémoires. Cette distinction permet de mieux comprendre les différentes approches utilisées par les auteurs pour raconter leur vécu et leur vision de l'histoire. En outre, Sankara souligne l'importance des récits de vie comme médiums de résistance contre les versions officielles de l'histoire, ce qui enrichit le débat autour de la mémoire et de l'identité nationale.

L'analyse des stratégies narratives utilisées par les auteurs, en particulier la question de la co-écriture des autobiographies, est un autre point fort de cet ouvrage. L'auteur examine les rôles des médiateurs culturels, comme les ethnologues, dans la production de ces récits. Cette réflexion permet de comprendre l'impact de la médiation sur la forme et le contenu des récits et soulève des questions intéressantes sur la paternité des œuvres et l'authenticité de ces témoignages.

Bien que l'analyse des différentes formes de récits soit précieuse, elle pourrait prêter à confusion. La frontière entre autobiographies, mémoires et biographies reste floue à certains endroits, ce qui peut rendre la classification des récits plus complexe qu'elle ne le devrait. Cette question de catégorisation aurait mérité d'être davantage clarifiée, notamment à travers des exemples précis qui illustrent les limites de ces catégories.

Si l'ouvrage couvre une grande variété de récits, il reste focalisé sur les récits issus de personnalités politiques ou sociales de premier plan. Bien que ces récits aient une valeur indéniable, l'ouvrage aurait gagné à intégrer davantage de témoignages de citoyens ordinaires, dont les récits sont souvent plus difficiles à recueillir, mais tout aussi révélateurs des dynamiques sociales et politiques du pays. L'absence de cette dimension pourrait donner une vision partielle de la réalité des récits de vie au Burkina Faso.

L'ouvrage reste très académique dans sa démarche, ce qui peut le rendre difficile d'accès pour un large public. Bien que la dimension théorique soit nécessaire pour structurer l'analyse, une approche plus concrète et plus proche des récits eux-mêmes aurait renforcé l'impact du texte. Par exemple, davantage de récits analysés en détail, avec des extraits représentatifs, auraient permis de rendre l'ouvrage plus vivant et d'illustrer les idées abstraites de manière plus tangible.

En conclusion, *Récits de vie au Burkina Faso* est une œuvre académique précieuse qui éclaire la manière dont les récits personnels contribuent à la construction de la mémoire collective et à la réécriture de l'histoire du pays. À travers son analyse des récits de figures politiques et sociales, Sankara parvient à montrer l'importance de ces témoignages dans la critique des narrations dominantes. Toutefois, l'ouvrage aurait gagné en clarté et en diversité en abordant des récits moins institutionnels et en affinant sa catégorisation des différentes formes de récits. Malgré ces quelques limites, l'ouvrage est un excellent point de départ pour ceux qui s'intéressent aux enjeux de la mémoire, de l'identité et de l'histoire au Burkina Faso.

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'n Huldiging: Antjie Krog: 'n Ondersoekte lewe.
Louise Viljoen (red.).
Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2024. 408 pp.
ISBN 9781485315933.

Naas N. P. van Wyk Louw en D. J. Opperman staan Breyten Breytenbach en Antjie Krog bekend as seker van die grootste digters wat Afrikaans al opgelewer het. Hoewel daar uit Krog se pen nog net twaalf digbundels verskyn het sedert sy gedebuteer het met *Dogter van Jefta* in 1970, is haar poësie-uitset maar nog 'n bepaald klein deel van 'n groter, diverse oeuvre. Krog se digkuns en ander werk word uitstekend verken in *Antjie Krog: 'n Ondersoekte lewe*, onder redakteurskap van Louise Viljoen, waardeur Krog ook nou vereer word met 'n boek in die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns se huldigingsreeks oor Hertzogpryswenners.

Hierdie teks is tot dusver een van die beste boeke wat in hierdie reeks afgelewer is. Onder die ervare hand van Viljoen, self een van die voorste kenners van Krog se werk, is hierdie teks 'n belangrike bydrae tot die navorsingskorpus oor die werk van hierdie belangrike digter, skrywer, vertaler, joernalis en openbare figuur.

Die boek open met 'n kort woord vooraf deur die redakteur, gevolg deur 'n insiggewende onderhoud wat met die digter gevoer word deur Alfred Schaffer. Die onderhoud getuig van Schaffer se uitstekende kennis van Krog se oeuvre, en terselfdertyd toon dit ook weer die belangrike (dog teësinnige) rol wat Krog volstaan as belangrike (Suid-)Afrikaanse openbare intellektueel. Reeds in hierdie onderhoud vind die leser talle onderwerpe en diskoerse vanuit en oor Krog se werk en openbare beeld wat onder bespreking kom in die daaropvolgende hoofstukke van die boek. Wat verál in die gesprek met Schaffer uitstaan, is Krog se perspektief op die outonomie van die digter/skrywer. In aansluiting by die slotreëls van die gedig "die vulgariteit van verse" in *Plunder* (2023)—"ek vysel taal soos ek wil / en fok julle" (103)—spreek Krog haar telkens uit teen beperkinge op die vryheid van digters. Sy sê onder meer dat sy "wil skryf wat en soos ek wil" (28), dat sy vasskop "wanneer daar eise van buite aan my gestel word as digter" (15) en dat sy die eise self sal stel, terwyl sy ook wys op die "slagyster" van "gewildheid" en hoe dit die digter se werk negatief kan beïnvloed (18). Uiteindelik maak sy ook 'n opmerking waarop jonger digters en skrywers gerus ag kan slaan: "Die oomblik as die publiek of die kritici 'n stem in my kop kry, sterf my gewete, dink ek" (30).

Die eerste akademiese hoofstuk van die teks is dié van Louise Viljoen, en is getitel "Die 'verruklike afhanklikheid van taal': Antjie Krog en 'n loopbaan in taal" (37–100). Hierdie bydrae is weliswaar die langste van die agt akademiese stukke in die boek, maar dit is 'n ondersoek wat getuig van Viljoen se besondere kennis van Krog se werk. Nie net word Krog se dinamiese en ingewikkelde verhouding met taal goed hier vasgevat nie, maar dit word ook vir die leser duidelik waarom Krog se invloed op die Afrikaanse letterkunde veel verder strek as haar digkuns deurdat sy soos André P. Brink met 'n reeks vertalings (van allerhande tekssoorte en genres) hierdie letterkunde daadwerklik verruim het. Viljoen toon oortuigend in haar hoofstuk aan dat "Krog se hantering van taal […] dus vreesloos [is], wars van wat veilig, aanvaarbaar of behoorlik geag word deur die samelewing" (88). Hierdie bespreking sal vir 'n geruime tyd geag word as een van die mees gesaghebbende stukke oor Krog se werk wat tot nog toe verskyn het.

In "Vergestaltings van die outobiografiese spreker in Antjie Krog se *Lady Anne* (1989)" skryf Ihette

Senekal boeiend oor die komplekse verhouding tussen outografiese eienskappe van Krog en die digterlike verwerking (en bewerking) van hierdie elemente, waardeur die grense tussen digter en spreker opsetlik vervaag word (101–37). Hoewel daar dalk diegene is wat hulle verset teen die gebruik van 'n term soos digter-spreker—'n term wat by uitstek in ondersoeke oor Krog aangewend word—draf Senekal kritiek onderhoudend kaf met haar analise van die digbundel waarvoor Krog die eerste maal met die Hertzogprys vereer is. By hierdie soort benadering word daar nie in die slaggat van die *intentional fallacy* getrap nie: "[Die] ontleding en bestudering van outobiografiese tekste (gedigte) [het nie ten doel] om afleidings te maak of tot insigte te kom oor die skrywer se persoonlike lewe nie" (108). Eerder as wat outobiografiese gegewens "gesien word as 'n suiwer feitelike weergawe van die outeur se lewe", skryf Senekal, word dit beskou as "tekenend van die outeur se wêreldbeskouing en beeld van die self tydens die skryf van die gedig" (108). Vervolgens dui sy aan in 'n gedetailleerde ontleding van 'n aantal gedigte uit *Lady Anne* (met hier en daar verbande wat ook met ander bundels en gedigte van Krog getrek word) hoe relasionaliteit saam met die genoemde leesstrategie ryk interpretasiemoontlikhede vir die werk van 'n digter soos Krog kan oplewer.

Op haar beurt tref Karin van Marle 'n interessante vergelyking in haar hoofstuk, getitel "Amor mundi: Antjie Krog en Hannah Arendt se liefde vir die wêreld—oordeel, versoening en saamleef" (138–63). Met Krog en Arendt se skrywes oor onderskeidelik (en onder meer) Suid-Afrika se Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie en die verhoor van Nazi-bevelvoerder Adolf Eichmann lê hier ryke stof vir kritiese vergelyking, en dit is noemenswaardig dat die Krog-huldiging ook 'n bydrae van 'n navorser soos Van Marle ingesluit het, aangesien sy nie vanuit 'n streng literêre of literatuurwetenskaplike benadering skryf nie, maar eerder vanuit die benadering van die regsleer. Hoewel die vergelyking interessant is en die hoofstuk daardeur iets nuuts oor Krog se werk belig, is dit myns insiens 'n bietjie jammer vir die oordrewenheid van die slot waarin Krog en Arendt se beskouings beskryf word as "groter as wat in woorde vasgevat kan word" en dat dit "dit vir ons moontlik [maak] om dalk net aan wonderwerke te glo" (161). Sulke taalgebruik voel ontuis in 'n akademiese teks.

Die vierde hoofstuk se titel lui "Postkoloniale satire in enkele gedigte deur Antjie Krog en Ronelda Kamfer" (164–95). Hierin verken Jacomien van Niekerk 'n aantal postkoloniale satiriese gedigte van hierdie twee digters, en val die klem op die "wrang wyse [waarop] die spot gedryf word met koloniale opvattings" (165). Terwyl Van Niekerk se hoofstuk weens beperkte ruimte slegs op 'n handvol gedigte kan fokus, bestaan die geleentheid vir meer indringende en uitvoerige ondersoeke oor hierdie tematiek, soos die navorser ook aandui.

In die daaropvolgende hoofstuk deur Maria Snyman word daar, soos met Van Marle se bydrae, nog 'n minder gewone benadering tot Krog se werk gevolg. Die titel van Snyman se stuk is "Stansa my steen, laat die bot koppe lig skep: Antjie Krog se *Mede-wete/Synapse* gelees as 'n verregaande vermaaklike draakstekery met akademiese geletterdheid" (196–232). Ofskoon die hoofstuk iets aantoon van die reikwydte van die poësie, steun hierdie artikel op 'n lang rits bronne en is dit ook voorsien van 'n lang lys eindnote. Die navorser se styl is loslittig, maar die benadering voel met tye opaak. Hierdie bydrae verryk nietemin die diversiteit van die aanbod, al gaan dit nie noodwendig elke leser beïndruk nie.

Marlies Taljaard sluit met haar bydrae in sekere opsigte aan by die hoofstukke deur Viljoen en Senekal. In "'Geen vlerke stut meer …': geselekteerde gedigte in Antjie Krog se *Mede-wete* gelees as outobiografiese postsekulêre laatwerk" (233–64) tipeer Taljaard die bepaalde digbundel as "laatwerk […] met outobiografiese kenmerke" (235). 'n Aantal gedigte word deeglik ontleed aan die hand van "[t]eorieë oor outobiografie as spirituele praktyk […], postsekularisme en ekopsigologie" (235–6), en die navorser toon aan hoe interverbondenheid en interafhanklikheid tussen alle lewende wesens sodoende deur die spreker(s) in die tersaaklike gedigte verken word.

Krog se rol as vertaler kry aandag in die hoofstuk, "'op 'n derderangse verhoog vol swape en gierende grapjasse': Antjie Krog se vertaling van Tom Lanoye se *Koningin Lear*," deur Danie Stander (265–302). Hierdie hoofstuk open met 'n beduidende aanhaling van Krog: "The moment you translate, you start transforming self and others." Stander laat die lig val op Krog se bydrae tot Afrikaanse dramavertalings, en wys ook in sy stuk op Krog se unieke "vertaalpoëtika", wat gekenmerk word deur "onsuiwerheid" (297). Verder voer Stander aan dat Krog optree as "transgressiewe en eksperimentele vertaler" wat as 'n "skrywerlike agent […] latente (dikwels libidinale en ander veragtelike) impulse in die teks en in die samelewing uitlig, toelig, verhelder, en sodoende nuwe perspektiewe kanaliseer en vergroot" (297).

Andries Visagie sluit die huldiging af met 'n artikel wat handel oor 'n deel van Krog se oeuvre wat tot dusver beperkte aandag geniet het. In "Interverbondenheid in

Antjie Krog se gedigte vir kinders oor feetjies en fynbos" steun die navorser op 'n benadering wat gevoed word met aspekte van die ekokritiek. Hierdeur toon Visagie hoe die digter se "poëtikale visie op interverbondenheid in haar feetjiegedigte aan kinderlesers oorgedra word" (304), en sodoende sluit ook hierdie hoofstuk goed aan by aspekte van sommige van die voorafgaande bydraes. Hierbenewens bied Visagie se bydrae ook 'n interessante kontekstualisering van hoe Krog se feetjiegedigte aansluit by tradisies in ander letterkundes, en hoe die digter ook innoveer deur juis op 'n unieke inheemse plantgroep soos fynbos te fokus. Wat seer seker ook met die lees van die laaste hoofstuk duidelik word, is dat daar 'n aantal mooi goue drade deur hierdie boek loop, en dit illustreer sodoende die beste eienskappe van hierdie huldigingsreeks en die waarde wat dit vir navorsers en algemene lesers kan inhou.

Antjie Krog: 'n Ondersoekte lewe volg 'n meer akademiese aanpak as sommige van die ander bundels in hierdie reeks. Die boek is goed versorg, en beskik ook oor 'n lang "uitgesoekte" bibliografie wat veral vir studente en navorsers goud werd is. Soos met ander aflewerings in die reeks, is daar 'n reeks mooi foto's van Krog in die boek ingesluit. Daar is natuurlik foto's van Krog saam met ander belangrike nasionale en internasionale literêre en kulturele figure, en ook politici, onder andere Breyten Breytenbach, André P. Brink, Tom Lanoye, Juliette Binoche, Johann Johl, D.J. Opperman, J.M. Coetzee, Nelson Mandela, Allan Boesak en Desmond Tutu. Hiernaas is ook meer persoonlike foto's van Krog saam met haar man en kinders, en haar ma, die skrywer Dot Serfontein.

Hierdie boek verteenwoordig 'n belangrike bydrae tot die literatuurstudie en -kritiek in Afrikaans, en die werk van 'n belangrike en invloedryke digter en skrywer word met verskeidenheid en diepgang daarin verken.

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Bloedsomer.
Sidney Gilroy.
Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2024. 304 pp.
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Dit gebeur selde dat 'n spanningsroman tegelyk beïndruk én teleurstel, maar Sidney Gilroy se jongste misdaadverhaal, *Bloedsomer*, laat my met só 'n teenstrydige gevoel. Hier is 'n boek vol belofte: dit is klaarblyklik goed geskryf en bevat al die klassieke bestanddele van 'n riller—van 'n grieselrige moordtoneel en enigmatiese leidrade tot ou geraamtes in die kas wat dreig om uit te breek—en tog het die boek my oorwegend koud gelaat. *Bloedsomer* dwing my om my eie reaksie te bevraagteken: lê die probleem by die teks self, of is ek as leser dalk afgestomp deur die genre se holruggeryde konvensies? Hierdie resensie is gevolglik nie 'n onkritiese loflied nie, maar eerder 'n besinning oor waarom 'n belowende verhaal my net ten dele meegevoer het.

Die 44-jarige Sidney Gilroy het hom sedert sy debuut in 2019 gevestig as 'n noemenswaardige stem in die Afrikaanse misdaadfiksie en 'n liefling van die media wat gereeld uitgenooi word om op radioprogramme en boekfeeste te verskyn. Sy vorige drie romans—*Klikbek*, *Middernag* en *Vlam*—het die gewilde speurder Sollie Mthembu as hoofkarakter. Gilroy se misdaadverhale het 'n sterk sosio-politieke inslag: die onderliggende sielkundige en maatskaplike oorsake van misdaad geniet by hom dikwels meer aandag as blote aksie. Met *Bloedsomer*, sy vierde roman, betree hy tewens nuwe terrein deur sy bekende speurheld te verruil vir 'n nuwe protagonis, ene Petunia Moraleng. Hierdie klemverskuiwing na 'n swart vrou as hoofkarakter spreek van 'n skrywer wat nie skroom om buite sy eie persoonlike verwysingsraamwerk te tree nie en demonstreer dat hy nie in 'n voorspelbare formule wil vasval nie.

Bloedsomer speel af op Mooibaai, 'n fiksionele kusdorpie in die Suid-Kaap. Hier beland Petunia, met wie lesers in *Vlam* vlugtig kennis gemaak het, nadat sy pas gedemoveer is van kaptein na konstabel. Petunia is weg onder 'n wolk van korrupsie-aantygings uit Parys in die Vrystaat en moet vervolgens in Mooibaai haar voete probeer vind. Skaars het sy begin soek na 'n blyplek op dié vakansiedrop of die lyke van hawelose mense begin ophoop, en Petunia moet saam met haar hardekoejawel-kollega die moorde probeer oplos. Wat volg is 'n ondersoek wat spoedig uitkring. Daar is 'n albaster, 'n sinistere Russiese kaptein, 'n geheimsinnige plaas genaamd Moordenaarskuil, en 'n testament wat meer verswyg as wat dit onthul. Deur achronologiese

tydspronge heen en Gilroy se filmiese verwisseling van perspektief, ontvou 'n digte verhaal van hebsug, erfsonde, geestesversteuring en skrynende ongelykheid wat tot ver buite die grense van Mooibaai strek. Niks is presies soos wat dit lyk nie.

Daar is heelwat in *Bloedsomer* wat bewonderenswaardig is. Gilroy is duidelik 'n bedrewe skrywer. In plaas van blote skok-effekte (ofskoon daar genoeg gru-beskrywings is om die nekhare van selfs die mees gesoute krimi-leser te laat rys) word die spanning in hierdie roman gaandeweg opgebou tot 'n allemagtige klimaks, en die veelheid intriges word met selfvertroue verweef. Verder spreek die boek ook belangrike temas aan: te midde van die bloedspoor is daar kommentaar op gebrokenheid in gesinne en die uitbuiting van kwesbare mense in die samelewing. Hierdie diepere dimensie verleen aan die verhaal 'n erns wat dit bo goedkoop vermaak verhef. Op papier is al die regte elemente dus teenwoordig.

Tog het *Bloedsomer* my nie deurgaans oorrompel nie. Wat die karakterisering betref, moet ek bely dat Petunia nie baie diep in my hart ingekruip het nie, ondanks al die lof wat haar toegeswaai is deur ander resensente. Sy word uitgebeeld as 'n held met voete van klei (en 'n seer knie), wat vermoedelik veronderstel is om die gemiddelde leser makliker met haar te laat identifiseer, maar ek vind haar die toonbeeld van "meh": nie besonder briljant as speurder nie, maar ook nie besonder innemend of komies nie. Gilroy hét kennelik met Petunia 'n waagstuk probeer, en hoewel dit ongetwyfeld verfrissend is om 'n sterk swart vrou as speurder in 'n Afrikaanse speurverhaal te sien (vergelyk byvoorbeeld die nimlike kaptein Mbali Kaleni in Deon Meyer se werk), is dit te betwyfel of Petunia in die heugenis van Afrikaanse misdaadfiksie onthou sal word as 'n huishoudelike naam. Daarteenoor is seker die interessantste figuur in die roman 'n tienermeisie met die naam Albaster wat 'n soort kluisenaarsbestaan voer in 'n kusgrot op die buitewyke van Mooibaai, maar helaas word haar potensiaal net gedeeltelik ontgin en haar karakter bly onderontwikkeld.

Blykbaar het die manuskrip oorspronklik *Albaster* geheet, en dit sou waarskynlik beter gewerk het, want dit sou die klem op die regte plek gelê het, maar oënskynlik het die uitgewer en/of skrywer uiteindelik besluit op *Bloedsomer*. Jonathan Amid beskryf die titel as "evokatief" in sy *Netwerk24*-resensie (18 Maart 2024), maar as jy my vra, is *Bloedsomer* as titel so clichématig as wat dit niksseggend is—selfs nadat 'n mens die boek klaar gelees het werp hierdie kardinale stukkie parateks geen nuwe lig nie. Ten slotte voel die roman se aksiebelaaide ontknoping, hoewel uiters kinematies, ietwat dik vir 'n daalder en die raaisel rondom die Arno/Roan-anagram behoort vir 'n skerp leser reeds vroeg sigbaar te wees. Dit verdien ook vermelding dat disassosiatiewe identiteitsteuring (DID) nie noodwendig 'n nuwe verskynsel in die Afrikaanse misdaadfiksie is soos wat sommige kommentatore suggereer nie—vergelyk in dié opsig byvoorbeeld Rika Cloete se *Skadukant* wat in 2020 verskyn het.

My taksering van *Bloedsomer* is uiteindelik tweeledig. Aan die een kant lewer Gilroy 'n tegnies goed-afgeronde, meervlakkige spanningsroman—sy stilistiese vakmanskap kan nie betwyfel word nie en veral sy prosa sonder fieterjasies is besonder geskik vir die misdaadgenre. Aan die ander kant het hierdie boek my nie affektief geroer nie. Dit is die paradoks: 'n roman kan tegelyk vaardig geskryf en tog onbevredigend wees. Miskien verklap dit meer van my eie vermoeidheid met die genrekonvensies as van Gilroy se skryfvernuf; lesers met vars oë mag anders voel. Uiteindelik behoort nuuskierige lesers *Bloedsomer* self te lees. Dalk vind jy dit meer meesleurend as ek.

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Die onsigbare.
P. J. O. Jonker.
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Op die voorplat van P. J. O. Jonker se debuutroman, *Die onsigbare*, word die foto-afdruk van 'n vrouerug, weerloos naak met 'n sliert weggeveegde hare in die nek, visueel gekombineer met die silhoeët van 'n dier uit 'n wildekatfamilie. In hoofstuk 1 blyk reeds vir onkundiges oor wildekatspesies dat dit 'n rooikat is.

Die visuele prominensie van die rooikat op 'n tak en afgeëts teen die ondergaande son, asof getatoeëer op die vrouerug met rooibruin hare, vestig die vermoede van 'n verband tussen 'n vrou en 'n wildekat in die roman. Die kleurbeskrywing van die rooikat, verskaf deur die Suid-Afrikaanse Biodiversiteitsinstituut, versterk hierdie vermoede: Die rooikat is 'n groot, rooibruin kat met punterige swart ore, 'n romerige kleur onderbuik met vaag oranje kolle op die maag (Ndovu en Le Roux). Die leser wat nuuskierig genoeg is om op die internet iets oor die aard van die rooikat te wete te probeer kom, sou

vind dat dié kat 'n geheimsinnige en alleenlopende dier is wat verkies om snags te beweeg. So 'n leser spring weg met as 'bonus' daardie net-net waarneembare tintel van opwinding om die voshaarvrou in die verhaal te ontmoet.

Draai jy die boek om, tref die woorde op die agterplat jou as gevolg van die intensiteit van verskeie gegewe saamgepers in 'n enkele sin: "Wanneer spraakstramme skaapboer Jada Olivier op sy Karooplaas Erfdeel met die bewustelose, gebroke liggaam van 'n vreemdeling aankom, sluit hy die ketting van die plaashek en raak 'n gevangene van sy besluit." In dié sin word die interseksie gevind van drie tematiese sirkels, geassosieer met drie goed uitgewerkte verhaallyne. Elkeen hiervan is gelaai met worsteling: Jada as alleenloper-gelowige, Jada as boer met 'n vrees vir hoogtes en vir val, en sy liefde vir 'n vrou wat 'n bestaan uit prostitusie gemaak het.

Hierdie is pynlike en eerlike storielyne. Daar is gebeure en tonele wat dieper as in die leser se klere gaan sit. *Die onsigbare* ontroer én ontstem, maar die verhaal is ontdaan van die soort sentimentaliteit wat bedoel is om op die leser se hartsnare te tokkel. Sonder enige sogenaamde 'kerksousie' vloei die eerste gebeurelyn vanaf Jada se bekering as 'n seun tot by die onthutsende besluit om die vrou vir wie se leefwyse hy gru se stukkende liggaam plaas toe te bring, in gehoorsaamheid aan die bevel van God om haar lief te hê "totdat sy mooi is" (167). In die tweede verhaallyn word boerdery van alle idille gestroop; die lewe op Erfdeel behels moeilike verhoudings met werkers, stof, hitte en 'n genadelose werklas (182, 277). In die subtiel romantiese derde verhaallyn projekteer die meisie wat Jada plaas toe bring om vir haar genesing te bied haar woede op hom, "gereed om [...] diep vanuit haar onsekerhede haar wapens te lanseer. Aanklag. Belediging. Vloek." (173).

Die onsigbare vind staanplek tussen 'n hele aantal romans waarin hegte vrou-natuur-verbande op tematiese vlak uitgehef word. Hieronder tel *Toorbos* van Dalene Matthee (2005), *Die swye van Mario Salviati* van Etienne van Heerden (2006), *Stiltetyd* deur Marita van der Vyver (2006), *Chinchilla* uit die pen van Nanette van Heerden (2007), *Sabbatsreis* (Annelie Botes) wat in dieselfde jaar verskyn, Marié Heese se *Vuurklip* (2013) en Ingrid Winterbach se *Die troebel tyd* (2018). Die roman vorm natuurlik ook deel van 'n bewonderenswaardige plaasromanskat in Afrikaans. Hoe Jonker se debuut in die tradisie van die plaasroman gewortel is en terselfdertyd ook daarvan wegbreek, is 'n bevestiging van die koppige oorlewingsvermoë van die Afrikaanse plaasroman—in wisselende vorms, vir byna 'n eeu al. Só word gemotiveer deur resensente wat Jonker se roman reeds in die hand gehad het (Joan Hambidge, Louise Viljoen, Chris van der Merwe).

Erfdeel word baie onverwags Jada se verantwoordelikheid toe hy, die vierde Jan-Dawid Olivier wat op dié grond gebore is (52), sy ouers onverwags in 'n motorongeluk verloor. Die volgende groot draaipunt kom wanneer Jada as Jongboer van die Jaar 'n konferensie in Kaapstad bywoon en die meisie met die besonderse stem en die mooi mond ontmoet. Dae later, uit 'n totaal onverwagte sameloop van omstandighede, koers hy met die "erg vernielde" Lydia/ Lida/ Lea (131, 143, 144) in sy bakkie terug plaas toe. Anys, wat jare al 'n moederrol in Jada se lewe vervul, neem haar versorging oor. Hiervoor kies Jada 'n veepos op 'n weggesteekte deel van die plaas wat só bergagtig en moeilik toeganklik is dat 'n donkie voorrade soontoe moet neem. Die meisie is egter nie van plan om te bly nie en al wat Jada van haar oorhou, is 'n raaiselagtige briefie waarin sy haar ware naam agterlaat: Katryn. Saam met 'n leegheid in Jada, 'n "afwesigheid" só "skreiend" dat sy keel rou is daarvan (321).

Een van die mees prominente aspekte wat in vorige besprekings van *Die onsigbare* uitgelig is, is die rykheid aan literêr intertekstuele verbande met, onder andere, werke van Etienne Leroux (Viljoen 14), Jung (Hambidge), en die Bybel (Hambidge, Van der Merwe). Die bril waardeur ek kies om die boek te takseer, bied my 'n benaderingshoek wat nog nie benut is nie; ek konsentreer op die rol wat intertekstualiteit op nieliterêre vlak in die roman speel. Hier wil ek verwys na veel meer as slegs die nieliterêre interteks van die politieke en sosiale werklikhede van Suid-Afrika, in die oorgangstyd vóór die 1994-verkiesing, wat die tydraam vir die romangebeure bied. Jada boer met skape in die Karoo, aan die voet van die Swartberge. Die nieliterêre buitetekste wat in 'n groter mate boei, is dié van boerdery as 'n wetenskap eweveel as 'n fyn ontwikkelde kuns, van die veld as kennisbron, en van die natuur as 'n hartstog wat Jada se waarneming en menswees met sensitiwiteit en eerbied kleur.

Dit is meestal in outobiografiese besonderhede wat nieliterêre intertekstualiteit neerslag vind in *Die onsigbare*. Uit 'n onderhoud wat Trisa Hugo met die skrywer voer blyk dat hy, benewens wynmaker by Bonnievale te wees, ook 'n Karooboer is wat 'n spesiale holte vir sy voet vind op sy plaas buite Koffiefontein. "*Die onsigbare* is so goed soos 'n ware verhaal vir my", vertel Jonker. "Daar is nie navorsing wat hierin gegaan het nie, liewer belewing en inlewing. Ek weet hoe ruik skaapwol, hoe dit voel as 'n skaap jou kaal voet raaktrap."

Uit sy eie boerderybelewenis kom treffende woordelikse demonstrasies van die *hoe* omtrent die "uitmekaar haal" van 'n geslagte wildsbok ("'n mens sny nie 'n bok op nie" (290)), van die soort aanvoeling en noukeurigheid wat by die "klas" van wolgehalte nodig is (78), en van die metodiese aanpak van 'n taak soos skaapskeer: "Knip-knip begin die hande die lemme stuur. Die wol op die skaap se regterskouer en voorbeen. Bors. Regterrib en maag. Linkerskouer en voorbeen. Linkerrib. Om die uier. […] Al ruglangs van die nek af tot by die boude. Die vag val soos 'n jas van die skaap af weg" (79).

Die taalgevoelige wyse waarop die gespesialiseerde kennis van die kundige skaapboer as metateks deel van die leeservaring gemaak word, voeg waarde toe aan die opteken van oorgelewerde metodes op hierdie gebied wat Jada se pa as kenniserfenis aan hom nalaat. Selfs 'vakspesialiste' uit die vroeëre werklikheid van skaapboerdery, byvoorbeeld die nomadiese spanne skaapskeerders, duik in helder besonderhede voor die leser se geestesoog op aan die hand van die trefseker en genuanseerde beskrywing: "[Hulle is] geplooi en songebak. Skraal en goedig. Tande rond en bont in die mond. Dalk 'n kroes stuk grysbaard onder die ken […]. 'n Velthoed. Vaal broek. Sy brandstof is Boxer-twak en Kloof-koffie. Sy skaapskêr sy trots" (82).

Die onsigbare verteenwoordig verhaalkuns waar die gesprek met die nieliterêre intertekstuele gegewe van die plaas- en veldwêreld soms grens aan natuurpoësie. 'n Sopie brandewyn in Jada se glas, teen die lig gehou, het "die kleur van rooigrond. Rooikatpels. Vuur. Rooigras. Die kleur van haar hare" (330). Daar word verwys na die "lip van die krans" (301); na 'n lam wat uit sy geboortesak losskeur en wankelrig regopkom, eufories, as "beskonke van die lewe" (328).

Die waarneming en taalgebruik van die natuurgeoriënteerde mens is tegnieke met behulp waarvan die biografiese besonderhede van die skrywer as buiteteks die roman ingedra word. Jonker se persoonlike natuurgerigtheid is duidelik herkenbaar in sy taalgebruik tydens die onderhoud wat Hugo met hom voer. Hy verwys na die onmoontlikheid om die plaasroman "(te) kis en begrawe", en motiveer dit só: "Ná 'n bui reën in die boekewêreld, as ons weer sien, spruit 'n nuwe saailing grasgroen in 'n ander gedaante uit die klam grond." Ook die aard van die plaasroman word vasgevat in Jonker in spontane natuurtaal: "In 'n plaasroman praat die klippe."

Dieselfde natuurgerigtheid word blootgelê in die waarneming en taalgebruik van Jada. Die skrywer self se natuursensitiwiteit as vorm van metateks vorm die stramien waarop die karakter van die hoof-figuur geweef word. Jada se menswees is gevorm deur die bergwêreld waar hy grootword, waar hy die witkruisarend "opwaarts soos 'n vlieër wat laat los is" die hoogtes in sien sweef op daardie bepalende oomblik toe hy sy pa beloof om Erfdeel nooit te verkoop nie (10). As volwasse man bly dieselfde bergomgewing Jada se plek van eerbied en belofte. Wanneer hy trou aan Katryn sweer, is dit by die bergpoel op daardie hoogste stukkie plato; vanaf die perd se rug lê die Karoo "nat en pas geverf met kleure wat deurmekaar vloei" (322). Natuurgekleurde waarneming bly selfs deel van Jada by die stadskongres waar hy as 'n spreker optree, maar homself ervaar as "'n springhaas verstar in die helder lig van sy eie projeksie" op die seminaarskerm (123). Die verlamming van sy tong in die angstige oomblikke vóór sy aanbieding word beleef as "'n windstilte"; sy oë soek deur die kongresgangers "soos wanneer mens 'n groot kamp skaap bymekaarmaak en in die maling van die kraal 'n spesifieke een wil uitvang" (129).

Ook in onbewaakte oomblikke word Jada se ingesteldheid op natuurdinge helder in sy taal verbeeld; die gesprek met die natuur as interteks by wyse waarvan die skrywer se biografiese teenwoordigheid in die roman bevestig en herhaal word, vloei spontaan voort. Só is daar die oomblik toe die waarheid omtrent die plek wat Katryn onvoorsiens in sy bestaan begin uitkerf het, Jada onvoorbereid tref, en: "'Ek het jou lief,' glip dit uit soos 'n lam by 'n maklike geboorte, dié wat so verrassend gladweg kan uitsjloep uit die ooi" (188). Jada is haar egter ewe skielik ook weer kwyt, en in radeloosheid word gegryp na 'n natuurbeeld wat tegelykertyd demonstreer hoe die hoofkarakter onteenseglik die taaljas van die skrywer dra: "Hy wens hy kan soos 'n erdvark 'n miershoop deursoek, groot hompe van die stad met 'n kragtige klou eenkant toe skuif en met […] 'n erdvarktong die donker gange deursoek" (216).

Die toemaak van die boek bring die besef dat die roman met hierdie treffende omslagontwerp—die rooikat soos lyfkuns op die rug van die rooihaarvrou ingeëts—*meer* as net die parallelle tussen 'n spesifieke vroue- en kat-'karakter' wou kommunikeer. Dit gee op 'n ruimer wyse, deur die intertekstuele spel met die natuurwerklikheid as die skrywer se eie, selfgekose en -verklaarde bestaanswerklikheid, gestalte aan die mens-natuur-verbintenis wat op die voorplat reeds visueel so sterk gesuggereer is.

Die onsigbare is 'n ryk debuut.

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om my kastele in Spanje te sloop.
Jaco Barnard-Naudé.
Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2024. 85 pp.
ISBN 9780798184540.

Die oplossing vir 'n probleem, en die regte manier om 'n vraag te stel, is volgens Anton Chekhov twee heeltemal verskillende dinge. Net laasgenoemde is die kunstenaar se plig. Die verse in Jaco Barnard-Naudé se debuutbundel *om my kastele in Spanje te sloop* (2024) het my hieraan laat dink. Die gedigte neem naamlik keer op keer 'n vraende, ondersoekende ingesteldheid ten opsigte van die menslike kondisie aan, nie met die oog om antwoorde te verskaf nie, maar in 'n poging om nuwe, kunstige maniere van dink oop te skryf.

Die bundel open met as motto twee vrae van die Britse romansier John Galsworthy: "Of what do we moderns dream? What are our castles in Spain?" Met hierdie vrae word 'n aantal deurlopende temas en onderwerpe wat in die bundel na vore kom, aan die orde gestel. In die eerste plek is daar die vraag oor waaroor die moderne mens, en spesifiek moderne kunstenaars, droom en kuns maak. Daar is immers niks nuuts onder die son nie, met die gevolg dat die moderne digter kan voel dat die impuls om te dig tog niks waardevols kan oplewer nie. Die tweede vraag belig die eerste verder: wat is die ideale wat moderne mense vir hulself stel? Of wat *namens* hulle gestel word? Wat is die ideale waarna moderne digters streef? Is daardie ideale navolgenswaardig, of bloot illusies wat eerder stelselmatig afgebreek moet word? Die digter ondersoek hierdie vrae deur nadenkend om te gaan met kuns en die daad van kunsmaak. Hy doen dit deur poëtiese gesprekke aan te knoop met verskillende bekende kunstenaars en kunswerke. Daar word in die bundel verwys na beeldende kunstenaars so uiteenlopend as Picasso, Bruegel, Miró, Goya, Velazquez, Duchamp, Vermeer, Andy Warhol, Julian Stańczak en Basquiat. Dan is daar ook intertekstuele gesprekke met denkers, skrywers en digters soos Antonin Artaud, Daniel Dafoe, Denis Diderot, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Nietzsche, Žižek, Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath en Ted Hughes. Afrikaanse digters soos Eybers, Opperman, Van Wyk Louw, Sheila Cussons en Loftus Marais word ook by die verwikkelde intertekstuele gesprek betrek. Die onderliggende vraag bly deurentyd: wat sê kuns oor die werklikheid, en watter rol speel die individuele kunstenaar?

Die sterk introspektiewe draad wat deur die bundel loop, word in die tweede motto met Sigmund Freud se verwysing na die afbreek van sy eie (lug) kastele in Spanje, ingelui. In gedigte wat verwys na Freud ("unbewust" (13); "Freud aan Fließ, 23 Maart 1900" (51); "Freud-museum, Londen" (83)) en Lacan ("Opperman avec Lacan" (59)) raak dit duidelik dat die digter welbekend is met die psigoanalitiese proses, en dat hy die poëtiese potensiaal daarvan ten volle ontgin. Om jou kastele in 'n proses van psigoanalise te sloop, beteken om vraend te staan ten opsigte van die realiteit wat jy van jou (genetiese, digterlike, filosofiese, kunstige, ekologiese, ens.) voorouers geërf het. Dit is 'n pynlike en bloedige proses, wat jou "ontsaglik armoedig" (51) kan laat. Die slotgedig van die bundel, "Freud-museum, Londen" (83), laat die leser met die nugter gedagte dat die proses om eie kastele te sloop nie sommer 'n maklike proses is nie, en dat die Groot Wiggelaar (Freud) vir seker nie alles hieroor geweet het nie. Die bundel kan in geheel getipeer word as 'n queer terugskrywing na die 'ouerfiguur' (sien bv. "unbewust" (13)), maar dit verval nie in ekkerigheid of sinisme nie. Daar is eerder sprake van 'n benuttig van die geleentheid om die kastele "weer van voor af op te bou" (51), al is dit 'n moeisame proses.

Wat is die digter se rol in hierdie opsig? Die eerste gedig in die bundel kan gelees word as 'n tipe skadeloosstelling: al wat die digter eintlik kan doen, is om te fnuik met woorde. Hy fnuik die leser en hy fnuik homself: "die denke dig / gefnuik" (9). Die maak van kuns, soos gedigte, is "alewige oëverblindery" (38). Dit kan maar net tot 'n mate opbou en troos. Soos Barnard-

Naudé dit in die poëtikale strofe uit die gedig "Spanje, Auden" (27) stel:

> […] om poësie te skryf ís nie ambulansdryf
> want dis gister, vandag en môre in een
> dit snel te hulp, maar demp nie die bloed nie
> dit mop op, maar laai nie in nie, nee
> dis helende wond en oop graf
> dis die skitter van dooie sterre en absoluut onaf.

Alhoewel daar dus nie sprake is van idealisme in die bundel nie, kan daar tog 'n toekomsgerigtheid aangevoel word. Poësie het dalk nie die krag om probleme op te los nie, maar dit kan belangrike vrae stel. Dit kan bestaande idees herbesoek en herskryf, uitgediende mites afbreek, en nuwes maak. Voorbeelde wat die omvang van hierdie proses uitbeeld, is "Spanje, Auden" (27), "Sylvia praat terug" (34), "Mars—Velazquez" (36), "Aesopus—Velazquez" (38), "Plato maak seker" (54), "skoppensboere" (75), "Opperman avec Lacan" (59), "Bjorn Czepan (1979–2010)" (60) en "'J'ai perdu mon Eurydice'—Gluck" (.65). Die nuwe, herskrewe 'mites' is nie bedoel as antwoorde op die moeilike vrae van menswees nie, maar dit kan wel as (versigtige) rigtingwysers beskou word.

Daar kan derhalwe 'n duidelike sensitiwiteit vir die mag van taal en woorde in die bundel aangevoel word. Woorde het krag en kan wapens wees. Heelparty gedigte in die bundel wys hoe mense mekaar met woorde seer kan maak, maar ook dat woorde krag het om te skep, teenkanting te bied en ook om te troos. Woorde, veral in die vorm van poësie, is veelvlakkig en het meervoudige potensialiteite. Verskeie van die gedigte kan beskryf word as pogings om die trauma van wat dit is om te leef, in woorde om te sit. In die sesde afdeling van die bundel is daar tragiese verhale van kindertrauma aan die hand van ouers wat self getraumatiseer is. Sien byvoorbeeld "*U eie keuse*, Radio Suid-Afrika, 1989" (69), "Mamma is nie meer 'n" (70), "oordrag" (71), "'die huisgesin' maak dit nie" (72) en "sekwense aan my pa" (76–9). Dan is daar verskeie gedigte waarin die nagevolge van liefdesteleurstellings beskryf word, bv. "o, my geliefde Spanjaard" (17), "Marilyn Privata" (21) "Victoria Stasie-vaarwel" (26), "Boodskap van 'n vriend—Miró" (31) en "tuis ná 28 dae" (80). Almal het trauma, en trauma, en die onbewuste, is moeilik om te verwoord.

Hiermee worstel die digter deurentyd: om aan te hou om woorde te soek om die skynbaar onsêbare dinge wél te sê, of ten minste indringende vrae te vra daaroor, selfs al beteken dit dat die pogings aan kritiek onderwerp word. Dit beteken nie noodwendig dat die trauma verwerk is nie, maar wel dat dit in woorde vasgelê is. Dat die proses om onreg miskien eendag te begryp en te transendeer, met 'n kwashaal, 'n woord of 'n versreël kan begin. Dit herinner aan Marlene van Niekerk se veelseggende woorde uit die bundel *Kaar*: "naas binnehuisversiering is poësie ook 'n wapen".

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Ek en jy bestaan nie.
Danie Marais.
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ISBN 978-0-624-09500-2.

Danie Marais se jongste digbundel *ek en jy bestaan nie* is 'n filosofiese besinning oor die sondes van die vaders, 'n skuldbelydenis oor die digter-spreker se eie aandadigheid aan 'n stuk geskiedenis wat "steeds / na bloed proe" (62). Wat hiermee verband hou, is 'n bepeinsing oor sy digterskap, oor die feit dat hy skryf vir "mense wie se dae getel behoort te wees […]" (74), omdat dit "tyd [is] vir die wit man om stil te bly" (66). Dié mymerings word in 'n alledaagse, anekdotiese praatstyl oorgedra, sodat die leser direk by die kwessies van wit skuld en 'n strewe na versoening betrek word.

In hierdie opsig sluit *ek en jy bestaan nie* aan by Marais se vorige drie bundels, naamlik *In die buitenste ruimte* (2006), *Al is die maan 'n misverstand* (2009) en *Solank verlange die sweep swaai* (2014), want dié digbundels bevat ook oorwegend verhalende praatgedigte wat onder andere handel oor ouerskap, egskeiding en verlies. In *ek en jy bestaan nie* word daar egter gelyktydig diep én wyd gekyk, want hier gaan dit oor meer as 'n persoonlike geskiedenis: dit kring ook uit tot familie- en landsgeskiedenis. Tydspronge tussen verskillende eras verloop naatloos van gedig tot gedig—van die koloniale tydperk tot dekolonisering; van 'n boheemse bestaan in Duitsland, tot die lewe van 'n "sad dad" (83) in die "suburbs" (25); van die 1990's se "maagdelike hoop" (26), tot die huidige politieke onverdraagsaamheid, vergestalt in die #MeToo-beweging se kanselleringskultuur van "Fuck white people" (50).

In 'n poging om sy huidige situasie te verstaan, gryp die digter-spreker, soos byvoorbeeld in "Oupa-dominee Dirk Jordaan" (36), terug na die verlede: na sy oupa Dirk wat in die vyftigerjare 'n gemeente in Distrik

Ses gehad het, maar nooit "voor 'n stootskraper / soos 'n Beyers Naudé loop lê het" nie, waarop die spreker bely dat ook hy "[…] nooit op die regte oomblik / voor die regte stootskraper / gaan lê" (37) het nie. Hierdie idee oor die verlede se onvermydelike impak op die hede, word reeds voorberei in die motto voor in die bundel: "The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow".

In "Die te groen waatlemoen" (33) bepeins die digter-spreker sy Hugenoot-herkoms en bieg hy oor dié voorsate se vergrype wat soos waatlemoensap aan sy hande kleef, by implikasie slawebloed wat deur geen skulderkenning of tydsverloop afgewas kan word nie, want "[…] daar is geen / vervaldatum vir die sondes van die eeue / se godvreeslike vaders" (41) nie.

In *ek en jy bestaan nie* word die kompleksiteit rondom witheid veelkantig belig, ondermeer in "Tussen my en jou, Tony, en eeue van sneeuwit" (106), "O, die sentimentele roofdiere" (73) en "Van skuld en skaamte" (64). Hierdie vraagstuk bereik 'n hoogtepunt in "Die paneel" (100) wanneer die digter-spreker met sy "hand in die koloniale koekblik betrap" (101) word toe 'n bruin skrywer hom konfronteer omdat hy, as wit digter, as gespreksleier by 'n seminaar oor bruin digters optree. Sy besinning oor hierdie insident omvat die hooftemas van hierdie bundel, naamlik wit skuld en 'n versugting na versoening:

> Is dit simpel dat ek wil jammer sê namens
> ek weet nie wie nie
> kan daar iets meer cringey
> vir 'n woedende jong skrywer wees
> as 'n afgewaterde wit man
> wat in die openbaar
> om die aalmoes van begrip bedel?
>
> Wit trane is net sout
> in ou wonde. (103)

Marais se gedigte wissel tussen sy persoonlike verleentheid oor kolonialisering en apartheid, tot 'n kollektiewe skuldlas daaroor. In "Die 90's" (21–5) beskryf die liriese subjek sy ervaring van ongekende vryheid in Duitsland, maar hierdie vryheid was bloot "[…] 'n simulasie van vryheid", 'n "screen saver" (22) tussen hom en die Suid-Afrikaanse werklikheid, 'n "fancy dress" (23) wat wegval toe hy besef dat hy maar net " […] 'n vlermuis uit die spelonk / van apartheid" (24) was, en dat dit waarop hy eens op 'n tyd trots was, nou 'n verleentheid is. Wanneer hy deur middel van langafstandoproepe met sy ma in verbinding tree, met die telefoon as 'n "naelstring" tussen hulle, kan hy "tussen die reëls" (25) hoor wat sy eintlik wil sê:

> "Daantjie, jy kan maar huis toe kom.
> Die suburbs het 'n sagte plek
> vir mislukte rebelle."

Uiteindelik keer die spreker terug na dit waarvan hy eens op 'n tyd gevlug het: na 'n middelklasbestaan in Stellenbosch se voorstede, vandaar die omslagontwerp deur Anton Kannemeyer. Op die voorplat is 'n serene toneel wat uitstekend korreleer met die volgende gedeelte uit "O, die sentimentele roofdiere" (74):

> Deesdae voel ek in my derms op nagte soos dié
> hoe luuks en sag die tuin om my lê hoe uitspattig
> ons middelklastuinmeubels in die maanskyn skynheilig
> kringetjie hou langs die blinkswart altaar
> van die Weber
> waaruit die reuk van dooie diere naweke krul
> maar die offers
> geen gode meer behaag nie

In kontras met die voorplat, verbeeld die agterplat se vallende figuur die digter-spreker se bestaansangs weens die "koueburgeroorlog" (41) wat om die voorstede woed en sy gesin se vredige bestaan bedreig, sodat die "[…] kollektiewe PTSD koffers altyd gepak altyd gereed [staan] / vir vlug" (86). Hierdie bedreiging word verkonkretiseer in verskeie "verdagte" figure wat telkens in die buurtwaggroep se WhatsApp-boodskappe opduik, wat Marais deur die loop van die bundel in optelverse omskep het.

Uiteindelik word die idee rondom hierdie boodskappe saamgebind tot die slotgedig, "Die verdagte", waarin wit skuld en bevoorregting nogmaals aan die bod kom wanneer die verdagte beskryf word as "[…] kollaterale skade die byproduk / van 'n geoliede ou [koloniale] masjien […] (114). Boonop is die spreker bewus van die valsheid van hierdie omheinde "sitcom"-wêreldjie (85) waarin "Corporate Ken" en "Boland-Barbie" (84) die septer swaai, waar God sy "[…] speelgoedhuise in sy jaart" (18) vergeet het, en "die uitverkorenes van Geld" (60) se "barbaarse beterweterigheid" (61) teen wil en dank aangehoor moet word.

Die refrein in "Die verdagte" funksioneer as 'n aanklag, as 'n gewete oor erfsondes wat soos 'n bedelaar of sluipslaper, ongevraagd en op 'n onbewaakte oomblik by ons aanmeld. Die boodskap is duidelik: elkeen van ons het 'n aandeel in 'n geskiedenis wat steeds "helder oordag" (105) by ons spook. Meer nog: almal is "verdag", niemand in hierdie land is gevrywaar van armoede nie.

Die bundel se titel is geneem uit die gedig "Cecil, kom in, kom in" (50) se laaste reël. Cecil is 'n bruin,

Oos-Kaapse Mercedes-ingenieur wat die digter-spreker in Duitsland bevriend. Weens rassespanning tussen Cecil en die vyf Xhosas saam met wie hy werk, maak hy hierdie opmerking teenoor die spreker tydens 'n kroegkuier:

> "Jy weet mos –
> swart wit en bruin kan mekaar nie vat nie.
> Ek en jy, ou Danie,
> ek en jy bestaan nie." (53)

Die titel verwys met ander woorde na die feit dat gesellige samesyn tussen verskillende rasse eerder 'n uitsondering as die reël is. Alhoewel dit dus moontlik is dat wit en swart versoen kan raak, word dit verhinder deur 'n hernude vlaag van rassekonflik en onverdraagsaamheid, asook toenemende ekonomiese ongelykheid. Verder impliseer die titel dat middeljarigheid, in 'n wêreld wat behep is met jeugdigheid, 'n mens onsigbaar en irrelevant maak. 'n Eksistensiële krisis kom derhalwe ter sprake, nie net in die algemeen nie, maar ook spesifiek in terme van die spreker wat wonder of hy as wit digter nog bestaansreg het.

Omdat die spreker se dogter van jongs af die vermoë besit om soos 'n kat "deur die dun membraan van die wêreld / agter [hom] te sien" (14), kan hy nie anders nie as om deur haar oë te kyk om dinge in perspektief te sien. Beide sy kinders dwing hom om, ten spyte van al die pessimisme, die wêreld ook in 'n positiewer lig te sien as 'n plek waar die lewe onverstoord voortgaan en hoop moontlik is, sodat hy in 'n "kinderlike gebed" ter wille van hulle vra: "mag die sondes van *hul* vaders vergewe word" (75, my kursivering).

Marais se bundel is deurtrek met intertekstuele verwysings en dit sal 'n interessante studie wees om veral die musiekverwysings daarin na te speur, want dis asof die gedigte vra om met 'n klankbaan op 'n "mixtape" (21) gelees te word—van Lou Reed, Bob Dylan, The Delines, Tom Waits en Cher, tot Leonard Cohen, Johannes Kerkorrel, The National en The Smiths.

Die intertekstualiteit sorg vir 'n digverweefde en gelaagde bundel wat 'n magdom tydperke, motiewe en onderwerpe vervleg, ondermeer die verlies aan geloof en naïwiteit; Afrikanerskap en wit bevoorregting; eksistensiële vrees en verleentheid oor 'n ongunstige geskiedenis; vaderskap in die voorstede; die impak van die verlede op die hede; en moontlike versoening tussen swart en wit.

Marais is nie 'n digter wat hom aan bande laat lê deur woordekonomie of 'n gestrooptheid van "less is more" nie, gevolglik raak sommige van hierdie gedigte te uitgesponne, te ooglopend, maar dié beswaar het moontlik te doen met 'n persoonlike voorkeur vir korter, meer afgeronde verse.

ek en jy bestaan nie is 'n goed deurdagte en genuanseerde pleidooi vir medemenslikheid en verdraagsaamheid, wat die leser deur middel van treffende beeldgebruik en skreiende ironie tot nadenke stem. Om hierdie rede is hierdie bundel 'n betekenisvolle bydrae tot Marais se oeuvre én tot die Afrikaanse literatuur.

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Sirkelgang.
Johann Lodewyk Marais.
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Johann Lodewyk Marais se veertiende bundel, *Sirkelgang*, is 'n komplekse, meervoudig gelaagde werk. Die motto-gedig, "Interteks" (9), suggereer die belangrikste bundelkodes en -temas:

> 'n Mens kan nie verhelp om meer te leer
> wanneer jy die aarde in jou hand neem
> en gebuk by die kleisloot 'n vorm,
> oeroud én nuut, te voorskyn wil bring nie.
> Tel dit met eerbied op: Dit is rou klei
> Met miljoene vingerafdrukke op.

Op die voorblad pryk 'n afbeelding van Lynette ten Krooden se olieverfwerk *Greenstone-stratum* uit haar Gaiareeks—'n sirkel. Gaia, die Griekse aardgodin verteenwoordig binne die moderne ekofilosofie die hipotese dat die aarde se biosfeer en geologie één ekosisteem of organisme is wat alle lewe onderhou. Die sirkel word verbind met skepping, eenheid, heelheid, volledigheid, oneindigheid, vernuwing, interverbondenheid, spiritualiteit en die siklus: lewe—dood—wedergeboorte. "Sirkelgang" is, volgens die *Aanlyn HAT*, "beweging wat in homself sluit".

Die sinekdogee "die aarde in jou hand neem" (9) is een van die belangrikste konsepte waarop die bundel berus. Dat die kleine in die grote teenwoordig is en andersom, hou verband met die idee dat die fundamentele boustene van die heelal of van stelsels, soortgelyke organisatoriese beginsels vertoon as die groter strukture wat hulle vorm. Daardeur word die

kompleksiteit van die heelal erken, asook ons onvermoë om dit ten volle te begryp of dit op enkelvoudige wyse te bedink en te verwoord.

Die stylfiguur waarin "rou klei" (9) die aarde en alles wat deel is daarvan verteenwoordig, soos die digter-spreker se "voorouers [wat] steeds ter ruste lê / in bestrede en belaste aarde" ("Die uur", 86), is myns insiens die sterkste koherensiekrag wat die bundel as eenheid saambind. Grond is 'n produk van groeiende, sterwende en ontbindende lewensvorme. Daarin kom geologiese vorme voor wat op hulle beurt lewe onderhou en toestande skep vir lewe. Dit is verteenwoordigend van die aarde self en kom binne 'n veelheid betekenisonderskeidinge dwarsdeur die bundel voor. Die betekenis van gelyktydigheid én siklisiteit staan voorop deurdat die stuk klei "miljoene vingerafdrukke" (9) in sigself bevat, van primitiewe lewe tot die hede.

Die eerste bundelafdeling sluit aan by die motto-gedig deurdat dit aspekte van die paleontologie ontgin. In die aanvangsgedig word die plastiek dinosourus uit 'n "Lucky Packet" en die versteende blaar gejukstaponeer "in die uitstalkas" by die digter-spreker se huis (13). In "Neanderdal" (15) word "stukke been, werktuie / en die oorskiet van hulle binnegoed" tot digterlike stof omskep wat op sy beurt ons voorouer *Homo neanderthalensis*, wat "op die aarde sonder spore verdwyn", nogeens tot lewe opgeroep.

Grond en sy talryke metonimiese en metaforiese betekenisse kry gestalte in afdeling II wanneer "grond" uitgebrei word om plek, ruimte, en grondbesit in te sluit. Die sirkelgang van die lewe, soos verteenwoordig deur die familie en familiegeskiedenis as aaneenskakeling van geslagte is vandag ten nouste met grondbesit verbonde. In hierdie afdeling is Marais die geskiedkundige aan die woord en word plekke wat reeds in vorige bundels en in sy nie-fiksie besoek is, herbesoek: die Letsitelevallei in "Coach house" (21), "Platrand" (23, 24), "Warden" (25), "Ladysmith – Harrismith" (30) en die binneland van Afrika ("Reisplan", 36). Oral is daar spore van die digter se persoonlike geskiedenis en diegene wat voorheen daar was:

> **Platrand, Ladysmith**
> Hierdie beskermende hande omsluit
> die beendere wat liddiet en buskruit
> weleer oor hierdie landskap verstrooi het
> en laat rus onder die klap van die kluit. (23)

Hiermee is ons terug by die aanvangsgedig se "rou klei" en die spore van lewe wat daarin verseël is. Grond is hier die metafoor waarin herinneringe bewaar en opgesluit lê en aan die hand waarvan ons as tans lewendes ons identiteit skep. Grond het in hierdie gedig ook die betekenis van beskerming of geborgenheid én van (uiteindelike) rus.

In die derde afdeling van die bundel word plek/ruimte en herinnering met mekaar verweef. In "Kompanjiestuin" (42) is dit skrywers soos Karel Schoeman en die digters van Dertig wat betrek word om hierdie verweefdheid uit te beeld. "Klaarfontein" (43) is een van die teerste liefdesgedigte uit die digter se pen, 'n digter wat meermale oënskynlik objektief by sy stof betrokke is. Die slotreëls lui:

> Maar nou ontmoet ek jou in die vleiland
> langs die rivier, in die koppe en berge –
> vlinderwit tussen vergeet-my-nietjies,
> in papiersonnetjies van sewejaartjies
> in ons geestelike eskarp in die berge
> waar jou sielsteenwoordigheid tuis is.

"Onvoltooid II" (44) is eweneens 'n pragtige liefdesgedig met eggo's van Van Wyk Louw, en in 'n gedig soos "Kroegpraatjies" (41) is Marais die knap verteller wat fassineer en suggereer en die leser met meer vrae as antwoorde laat.

Afdeling IV, getiteld "Siel van die slang" (na aanleiding van E.N. Marais se "Die siel van die mier") reik terug na die digter se vroeër kritiese diere-, insek- en plantstudies. Oeroboros kom wel nie eksplisiet in enige gedig voor nie, maar kan nie buite rekening gelaat word by die interpretasie van gedigte in dié afdeling nie. Wat sterker uit die verf kom, is die skrik en die slang as onheilswese: "ek vlug gillend los uit Pa se hand" ("Gewone luislang", 47) en oor die rinkhals met vermorselde kop (50):

> Wanneer die son sak,
> vaar sy gees glo op
> na die duiwel toe.

In "Pofadder" (52) word die mens se bemoeienis met die koudbloediges beskryf aan die hand van 'n ingewikkelde operasie op 'n pofadder—maar, helaas, om die mens en sy selfsugtige motiewe te dien deur die gifkliere te verwyder.

Een van die ordenende gedigte in die bundel, "Beesmis" (59) in Afdeling V, verwys terug na die motto-gedig deur die uitbeelding van 'n mini-ekosisteem en die sirkelgang van die lewe in/op die grond:

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Hierdie teken van Afrikaners lê
oop en bloot op die grasvlakte en lok
die miskruiers om dieper te grawe,
aandag te gee aan besonderhede
van malse grasse, takke en blare
op dié dag se spyskaart: die voorkeure
van die heersers van die savanne
wat maak en breek, hulle harte uitstort
oor wat eetbaar, geurig en bros is
en uitgewerp word vir een en almal
om weg te dra, te vreet en te verteer
tot alles weer na die aarde terugval.

Poëtiese besinning oor die voedselketting en die mens se selfsugtige manipulasie daarvan, is die hooftema van Afdeling V. Hier demonstreer die digter sy virtuose omgang met taal as 'n vlymskerp instrument van kritiek teen die mens wat sigself as losstaande van en verhewe bo ander spesies en natuursiklusse beskou. Die ysingwekkende frase "[k]om uit Afrika die grondgedagte / dat alles wat lewe geëet mag word?" (74) in die volgende afdeling, verwoord ook die donker ondertoon van hierdie afdeling waarin "lewende wesens / klaargemaak [word] vir die toestande wat wag" (60): "die flits van 'n lem [...] / voor ons jou dele / vlymskerp opsny" (61). Kronologies en al hoe meer gestroop word dié *unheimliche* reis uitgebeeld totdat in die laaste gedig in hierdie afdeling, "Karkas" (63), nog net die verwerkte snitte beesvleis opgenoem word.

Die voorlaaste afdeling fokus enersyds op die bewaring en andersyds op die vernietiging van die aarde en die mens. Figure soos Mahatma Gandhi (69), Wladimir Poetin (71), Jair Bolsonaro (76) en Greta Thunberg (77) vorm die tema van verskeie gedigte. Teen die grein vra die onthutsende *ars poetica*-gedig "AK-47" (70) dat ons wéér die krag van die poëtiese woord bedink: "Michael Kalashnikov was 'n digter", maar hy het ook 'n "gasgedrewe / aanvalsgeweer bedink [...] lig genoeg vir 'n kind om te kan dra". En die slot:

Maar die skuld vir die bloed wat vergiet is
en 'n klad op nagedagtenis laat:
Kan 'n digter se verse dit uitwis?

Die slotafdeling bevat enkele korter gedigte, onder andere dié haikoe (83) wat die bundeltema netjies opsom:

Die afgesaagde
naboom het in sy spinthout
'n volmaakte ster.

Die slotgedig, "Die uur" (86), 'n pragtige stemmingsvolle vers, sluit eweneens aan by die motto-gedig én by die eerste afdeling deur verwysing na voorvadergrafte en die sirkelgang van tyd.

Oorkoepelend beskou is *Sirkelgang* 'n fyn afgewerkte en deeglik beplande bundel deur 'n meester van die *understatement*, 'n perfeksionis wat sy gedigte tot die been stroop om die essensie bloot te lê—'n vakman wat sowel klassieke as vrye vorme meesterlik beoefen. Johann Lodewyk Marais herbevestig met hierdie bundel sy plek as een van die belangrikste digters in die kanon van die Afrikaanse poësie.

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erf en elders.
Kleinboer.
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In Kleinboer (oftewel Fanie de Villiers) se tweede digbundel, *erf en elders* (2023), word die leser vanaf die openingsgedig uitgenooi om langs die digter-spreker by die braaivleisvuur in sy agtererf in Yeoville te kom sit, waar hy vertel van dinge wat *hier* te vinde is, maar ook *daar*. Met een handgebaar wys hy na sy erf en met 'n ander na alles wat elders is.

Met die parlando as die enigste digvorm wat gebruik word en 'n anekdotiese vertelstyl wat intens persoonlik is, plaas Kleinboer homself in die geselskap van vele ander digters wat primêr van die praatpoësie gebruik maak. Met hierdie publikasie in 2023 is dit egter niks nuut nie en in vergelyking met ander digters wat hierdie digvorm tegnies beter beoefen, inkluis Danie Marais en Loftus Marais, is dit aanvanklik moeilik om hierdie bundel as vernuwend te bestempel.

Die toon wat die bundel handhaaf is nie so melankolies of liries soos dié van Kleinboer se eweknieë nie en nog minder so kreatief, hoewel 'n paar gedigte wel verras. Die onderwerpe wat aangeraak word—grootliks drank, seks en dobbel— word weens die herhaaldelike voorkoms daarvan vinnig holrug gery, maar ook deels omdat dit nie met 'n oortuigende nuuskierigheid aangepak word oor waarom dit so 'n houvas op die digter-spreker het nie.

Die bundel bied 'n soort verslaggewing oor die dinge wat die digter-spreker daagliks besig hou en waaroor hy wonder: seks, geld, drank, braai, familie,

of die gras groener elders is, die stand van Suid-Afrika (beurtkrag, geweld, hoe Johannesburg en sy buurt verander en agteruitgaan), sosiale media, werk, en ook hoe om hierdie kwessies in die poësie vas te vang. Buiten vir enkele uitstaangedigte is daar nimmer 'n uitklophou in terme van hoe hierdie onderwerpe aangepak word. Die byna oneindige herhaling van gedigte wat handel oor drank, seks en dobbel sorg vir eentonigheid terwyl die gedigte wat die skryf van poësie onder die loep neem te blatant is. Die talle gedigte wat handel oor die digter wat besig is om te dig, sorg vir 'n selfbewuste toon wat te voor die hand liggend is. Paradoksaal veroorsaak laasgenoemde dat die trefkrag van 'n fokus op die alledaagse verruil word vir die skep van 'n beeld van die digter wat nie sonder sy vergrype kan dig nie.

Dit is hoe my lewe lyk, sug die digter-spreker: eentonig en herhalend. Tog wanneer die bundel nie soseer op die tegniese meriete van die onderskeidelike gedigte beoordeel word nie, maar in sy geheel, skuil daar wel waarde in hierdie eentonigheid van die bundeltematiek.

In die verlustiging in die alledaagse word dit wat *hier* is—in die digter-spreker se erf—gejukstaponeer met dit wat *elders* is en daarom verkenning noodsaak. Vasgevang in die fisiese, geografiese ruimte van sy erf, sy buurt en sy land, word ruimte 'n fisiese en metaforiese probleem om mee vrede te maak, maar terselfdertyd ook 'n uitdaging. Die vervalle Johannesburg en sy buurt, Yeoville, is tegelyk 'n ruimte waarin hy tuis voel, maar ook een wat hom aanspoor om dit wat elders is letterlik en figuurlik te verken. Dit wat *hier* is sluit die bekende in: Johannesburg; die self se behoeftes en drange; verslawing aan drank, seks en dobbel; die gedig en taal as iets wat aktief bemeester word; verhoudings met steeds lewende familie. Dit wat elders is regverdig verdere ondersoek en sluit ook die vreemde in: die skaamtelose verkenning van die banaliteite wat Johannesburg inhou; wêreldstede wat hy eens besoek het en wens om weer te sien; die buitenste ruimte; die verloop van tyd; die self en die poging tot selfbegrip en selfverbetering, veral omtrent die houvas wat sy verslawings op hom het en die ontvlugting wat dit bied; verlies en die dood; die poësie en taal as iets waarmee hy worstel.

As voorbeeld, word die spanning tussen dit wat deur *erf* gesimboliseer word en dit wat *elders* verteenwoordig, effektief in die gedig "oplossing" (43) uitgebeeld. In die eerste strofe erken die spreker "my lewe is in 'n groef / ek was lanklaas op 'n nuwe plek" en wys uit dat die konstante verandering van die planeet aarde se reis deur die heelal nie tel nie—"ek praat van my groef op hierdie aarde". Eens was bordele 'n "ontvlugting" hiervoor, sê hy, maar nou vind hy dit "futiel". Die uiteindelike oplossing word gevind in die opwinding wat 'n nuwe drankwinkel bring en die besluit om 'n drankie "in my agterplaas […] / onder die ou apiesdoring / op 'n nuwe hemel by die braaivuur" te lig. Die jukstaponering van die spreker—wat in sy eie klein ruimte vasgevang is, met vergrype na seks en drank as oplossing—teenoor 'n byna angstige besef dat hy deel is van iets groter, is 'n vuis wat mik vir die maag.

'n Eindelike uitklophou word egter in "nota aan self" (102) gevind waarin die digter-spreker sy eie poësie kritiseer en daarmee saam ook tong in die kies die poëtiese landskap waarvan hy deel is. Hy tug homself oor die banaliteite waaroor hy dig en noem dat die gedigte wat "na seks en/of alkohol verwys" beter rangskik moet word. Kan dit wees dat die digter-spreker dus eintlik bewus is van die eentonigheid wat weens die konstante herhaling sy bundel oorheers? Hy noem dat hierdie gedigte eerder soos stede moet wees wat "nie dreig om besoedelend / skouers te skuur nie maar deur oop stukke veld / en vredige dorpies geskei word." Die klimaks wat die slotstrofe inhou wys dan op 'n rebelsheid wat hy moontlik met sy poësie wil inneem:

> soms moet jy 'n strykkwartet in franschoek
> se opelug laat speel, fanie, nie altyd net rock-
> rock-rock in beknopte geboue nie.

Kleinboer is duidelik nie een vir die liriese gedig nie en dalk ook nie vir 'n meer afgeronde gedig nie. Die bundel poog eerder om met die alledaagse te stoei soos wat die digter-spreker met die poësie stoei om die alledaagse te verhewe. Die een is 'n spieëlbeeld vir die ander. Die digter-spreker kan net die rykdom van sy braaivleisvuur en drankie onder sy ou apiesdoringboom waardeer omdat hy ten volle bewus is dat hy nooit sy eie erf en alles daarin sal verower nie—nog minder dit wat elders is. Die vergryp aan drank, seks en dobbel is maar een manier om hiermee saam te leef. Om daaroor te dig, is 'n ander.

As Kleinboer homself met hierdie bundel wil vestig as 'n Afrikaanse Charles Bukowski, wat die alledaagse en die spannende verhouding tussen verslawing en ontvlugting met fyner nuanse en tegniese bemeestering verken, slaag hy ongelukkig nie daarin nie. Hoewel die bundel met die eerste oogopslag niks besonders is nie, bied dit in sy geheel perspektief op wat dit is om 'n gevangene van plek te wees, maar ook wat dit verg om in die eentonigheid van die alledaagse potensiële

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ontvlugting en verkenning raak te sien. Hierdie moontlikhede tart jou om die bundel weer te lees.

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Laatnageilande.
Marlise Joubert.
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Laatnageilande is Marlise Joubert se elfde digbundel. Benewens digkuns is Joubert bekend vir haar talryke oeuvre met gepubliseerde radiodramas, romanse, en kinderboeke. Volgens haar webtuiste, *Ateljee.co.za*, is sy ook bekend vir haar waterverfskilderye wat 'n intieme perspektief lewer met verskeie stillewes, landskappe en portrette. In 'n onderhoud met Nini Bennet-Moll verduidelik Joubert dat gedigte vir haar hoofsaaklik "iets [is] om gedagtes te orden en ervarings te verwoord". Sy sê dat sy "baie assosiatief en organies" werk en beide Van Zyl en Taljard beaam die nostalgiese, melankoliese en persoonlike aard van haar poësie. *Laatnageilande* is geen uitsondering nie.

Daar is, benewens die individuele temas wat in elk van die sewe afdelings voorkom, 'n oorkoepelende tegniek wat temas en styl verbind. Hierdie tegniek herinner aan Bibi Slippers se *Fotostaatmasjien* en *Soekenjin:* die tegniek van collage en pastiche. Dié tegnieke, wat dikwels eerder in die visuele kuns gebruik word, maar nou oorgedra word na die poësie, is subtiel en uiters toepaslik in *laatnageilande.* Terwyl 'n collage 'n kunswerk is waar verskillende uitknipsels saamgeplak word om 'n nuwe kunswerk te skep, is pastiche spesifiek die nabootsing van kunswerke. Die twee tegnieke verskil, maar word in *laatnageilande* op 'n interessante wyse verweef en saam benut.

Die eerste leidraad dat die tegniek van collage in Joubert se digbundel voorkom, is met die voorblad van *laatnageilande.* Die voorblad is Jean Dryer se kunswerk *Resettle 1* wat deel vorm van sy uitstalling *burnt white / brandwit.* Die collage beeld 'n gesiglose figuur in 'n trourok uit wat lyk asof dit uit herwinde plastieksakke bestaan. Die wit is in duidelike kontras met die swart agtergrond, en die figuur se ledemate bestaan uit dié van 'n ander foto wat op die agtergrond geplaas is. Benewens die voorblad, word die digbundel in sewe afdelings verdeel waarvan elk voorgestel word met 'n aanhaling uit werke van ander digters, soos Abdellatif Laâbi (53), Sylvia Plath (73) en Breyten Breytenbach (111). Hierdie intertekste verbind die individuele afdelingtemas met die temas van ander digters, en dra by tot die assosiatiewe, persoonlike aard van Joubert se bundel.

Buiten vir die collagetegniek om afdelingtemas aan te meld deur die gebruik van interteks, het verskeie gedigte in die bundel ook hierdie assosiatiewe aard. Daar is tye waar daar direkte aanhalings uit ander digters se werke aangehaal word, maar dit is ook merkbaar dat daar dikwels 'n ritme, styl en woordkeuse benut word wat nabootsend is en dus die idee van 'n pastiche tegniek na vore bring. Ek dink spesifiek aan die gedig "Boom" (106) wat sterk ooreenkomste het met Ingrid Jonker se "Bitterbessie dagbreek" en die gedig "Niks om te verhaal nie" (60) wat ooreenkom met Koos du Plessis se "Skielik is jy vry".

As daar een gedig is wat uitgesonder kan word vir hierdie twee tegnieke, is dit "blue moon" (35) wat met die titel verwys na die liedjie met dieselfde titel deur Frank Sinatra. Die gedig open met "laatnag hang die sterre/ soos lemoene in die hemelboom". Terwyl die digter verwys na Sinatra met die titel, word die ritme, woordassosiasies en styl van Breyten Breytenbach in hierdie versreëls toegepas. Daar word sodoende 'n samekoms van die collage- en pastichetegniek voorgesit.

Hoewel die digbundel ook 'n sterk humoristiese aanslag het, is hierdie gebruik van pastiche nie in die vorm van 'n parodie nie. Wat die collage- en pastichetegniek suksesvol maak, eerder as net 'n uitgeknipte samevoeging of parodie van ander mense se werke, is dat dit bydra tot die oorkoepelende tema van die digter-spreker wat probeer sin maak van haar laatjare. Die kwessies van vrouwees: hetsy in die rol van moeder, ouma, of huweliksmaat, sowel as die aktuele kwessies soos klimaatsverandering, die Covid19-pandemie, wêreldoorloë soos dié in Oekraïne, en eindelik ook geweld teen vroue en kinders, kan slegs verwoord en besin word met behulp van die werke van ander. In teenstelling met die titel *laatnageilande*, wat insinueer dat die digter-spreker alleen skryf, vind sy samesyn en berusting in die wêreld van digkuns as geheel deur die werke van ander.

Laatnageilande open met die gedig in vrye vers "ek was haar woorde" (10). Die slotstrofes getuig dat hierdie digbundel Joubert se tematiek en assosiatiewe, organiese poësie gaan voortsit. In hierdie openingsgedig word die bundel gepersonifieer. Die digbundel self begin praat as die "ek" wat "haar", die digter, se "laatnageiland

[…] uitspelstrand [en] segging" wil wees. Die gedig dra by tot idee dat daar sin gevind en gemaak kan word in kuns: hetsy in dié van ander, of in die uiters persoonlike proses van die skep van eie digkuns.

Laastens is dit belangrik om klem te lê op die digter se gebruik van humor in die bundel. Dit word aangewend as 'n tegniek om lig en pouse te bring tussen die gedigte wat stadiger en swaarder is, veral waar daar oor aktuele kwessies gepraat word. In die gedig "handsak" (84) word die spreker se handsak vergelyk met 'n "skrotum en vergunning / asook die vrugbare uterus vir 'n gesin / om te voed, te klee, die toekoms in te stuur", en in "eens was sy 'n eier" (36) word die veroudering van die spreker vergelyk met die lewenssiklus van 'n hoender wat "byna […] kentucky" word.

Die humor, soos die gebruik van pastiche en collage, is die tegniek waarmee Joubert uiteindelik haar gedagtes orden en haar help om haar ervarings te verwoord. *Laatnageilande* is besonder deurdink en van die voorblad tot op die laaste woord beplan, tot só 'n mate dat die leeservaring soortgelyk is aan dié van 'n eenheidsbundel met 'n sterk narratiewe lyn.

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