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Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines twenty-first-century African science fiction in the context of the history of Afrofuturism. The Pan-African vision of the Black Audio Film Collective, a British group active in the 1980s and 1990s, provides a framework for analyzing contemporary works by artists including Nnedi Okorafor, Tendai Huchu, Wanuri Kahiu, and Wangechi Mutu. The essay argues for the inclusion of African artists in the discourse on Afrofuturism and identifies points of convergence between African and African diasporic futurisms that require, and will reward, further research, such as posthumanism, time travel as resistance, and the philosophy of the remix.

1. DATA THEFT

In the twenty-first century, African science fiction has become visible. While earlier literary works such as Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half* (1977) and Kofi Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988) circulated simply as African literature or perhaps magical realism, contemporary authors and editors are claiming the term "science fiction" (or the more general "speculative fiction") and marketing their works to genre readers.¹ These works have sometimes been described as "Afrofuturism," but there are also concerns that Afrofuturism is specifically American and therefore, as Tade Thompson puts it, "geopolitically inappropriate" as a descriptor of speculative fiction from the African continent.² The idea that Afrofuturism is American derives from etymological history: Mark Dery, an American critic, coined the term in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future," defined it as "African-American" speculative fiction and signification, and interviewed the Americans Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. While "Black to the Future" hints at a wider Afro-diasporic archive, mentioning, for example, the

Jamaican Lee “Scratch” Perry, Dery does not glance toward Africa except as a lost realm, the site of the massive alien abduction of the slave trade.

In the future—that is, in our own time—things are different. Ytasha L. Womack’s 2013 *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, the first comprehensive primer on the subject, treats a number of African artists, including the novelist Nnedi Okorafor and the filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu. These 21st-century artists are absorbed seamlessly into the flow of Afrofuturism as Womack presents it, without a discussion of how their relationship to the African continent, obviously different from that of most artists in the diaspora, informs their engagement with the field. On the one hand, this embrace of black futurists without regard to their position on the planet aligns with Afrofuturism’s emphasis on blackness rather than nationhood and its orientation toward outer space, in which Earth figures as one star among others rather than a map carved up by borders. On the other, the lack of attention to the diverse streams of Afrofuturism threatens not only to obscure possibilities for rich discussions, but to imply a development narrative that assumes there were no African futurists before 2000. Such a narrative runs counter to the philosophy of Afrofuturism, which distrusts models of progress and development, prizing instead time-traveling leaps, sidesteps into alternate universes, and the reanimation of history. In what follows, I trace an alternate history of Afrofuturism, one that explores a Pan-African psychogeography, resists the framing of Africa as a latecomer to science fiction, and attests to the continued relevance of Afrofuturism for both Africa and the diaspora. I proceed not like a development theorist, but like a data thief.

The data thief is the central figure from John Akomfrah and Edward George’s 1996 video essay *The Last Angel of History*. A time-traveling trickster, the data thief leaps through cyberspace seeking signs of collective memory. Akomfrah and George explain in their pre-script for the film, published in the South African magazine *Chimurenga*, “S/he knows the nature of his/her quest: surf the closed rooms of the internet, unlock the vault of racial memory, find the black futurologists and their arcana, interpret them, and bring their visions home...”

Akomfrah and George emphasize access and freedom of movement: “On this future-internet, the space-time continuum has been realigned so that each image holds multiple traces of its past, held forever in a state of suspension.” The suspended, preserved past responds to the data thief’s touch. The recovery of “racial memory,” a painful, at times impossible project in the postcolonial era, becomes almost effortless as the data thief flits through time, gathering sights and sounds from the pyramids of Egypt to the techno-beats of Detroit. “All the data thief has to do is follow the flashpoints, arrive at the locations, and make the connections.” The rhythmic prose of the pre-script, the recurrent images of floating, surfing, and flight, and the data thief’s fluid gender and cyborg consciousness, all underscore the unfettered ease of movement that is the dream and engine of Afrofuturism. There is no division of sight and sound: cyber technology stores both types of information. There is no break in time; all times are available.

The only danger to the data thief is “a virus called History.” The data thief must avoid being infected with this capital-H history, opposing it with lowercase histories drawn from popular forms such as computer games, science fiction, hip-hop, and graffiti art. The depiction of History as a virus mounts a critique of progress, a refusal to accept the dominant narrative of History as a march from

primitive savagery to enlightened civilization in which the black peoples of the world have been left behind. Afrofuturism insists on lowercase histories as a means of unlocking other futures, which are always located, like a secret code, in sounds and images from the past.

The Last Angel of History is the work of the Black Audio Film Collective, which was active between 1983 and 1998. This group's concern with the power of archives, the labor of countermemory, and the envisioning of a viable black future, resonates deeply with some of the key works of science fiction being produced in Africa and the diaspora today. The BAFC was transnational in perspective, founded by artists with strong connections to Africa and the Caribbean: John Akomfrah's background was Ghanaian and Nigerian; Edward George's Dominican; other members of the group had roots in Togo, Trinidad, and Jamaica. Their collective consciousness, writes Kodwo Eshun, was one of "British Afrodiasporic internationalism" ("Drawing the Forms" 75). Produced from within an overarching framework of "transnational post-colonialism," their work addressed global legacies of empire (Enwezor 120). Among these data thieves, the space of Afrofuturism opens up; it becomes impossible to see it as confined to a narrow geographical or historical track. This open space of Afrofuturism suggests several interesting points about black futurisms today and the potential for productive transnational conversations. Such conversations cannot happen, however, unless one recognizes that different voices are speaking, nor can the value of Afrofuturism as an imaginative space be fully understood without attention to the variety of artists it attracts. In what follows, I make some experimental forays into that space, following flash-points, arriving at locations, and making connections, to illuminate a history that neither excludes African science fiction nor ignores its specific contributions.

2. BRICOLAGE

The data thieves of the Black Audio Film Collective draw on materials from Ghana and Dominica as well as the US and UK, and their dreamscapes, unidentified narrators, and unearthly synthesizer music extend their archive into the imagined, the not-yet. They also appropriate the work of European theorists such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. Like Onyesonwu, the heroine of Nnedi Okorafor's 2010 novel *Who Fears Death*, they are bricoleurs. "Bricoleur, one who uses all that he has to do what he has to do" says Onyesonwu's teacher: "This is what you must become" (143). *Bricoleur* is of course a stolen word, lifted from *The Savage Mind* by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss draws a distinction between the scientific approach of the engineer—a metaphor for Western thinking—and the makeshift inventiveness of the bricoleur, a sort of tinkerer or jack-of-all-trades, which he uses to represent mythical, "primitive" thought. While the engineer conceives projects and questions the universe, the bricoleur makes use of "whatever is at hand," proceeding in a haphazard fashion and working with second-hand materials, the leftovers of various civilizations (11).

The bricoleur is a data thief. This seemingly random tinkering is nothing less than the reclamation of a buried history. In appropriating the anthropologist's term, Okorafor wrests a certain rogue redemptive potential out of a text intended to confirm and bolster the notion of a "savage mind." This is an Afrofuturistic

project, for Afrofuturism, as seen through the data thief, is always about all times: past, present, and future. The excavation of the past is essential, for it is from those historical fragments that the data thief or bricoleur constructs visions of what is to come. For Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*, the past is crucial: her magical powers grow out of her own painful history, and, in coming to understand them fully, she will shape time. Okorafor's novel both narrates a story of historical recovery through Onyesonwu and performs it through the theft and repurposing of the term "bricoleur." In a time when most recognize that we are all bricoleurs (Derrida 350), *Who Fears Death* reminds us of the racial dimension of Lévi-Strauss's theory and the material conditions of Africans who approach technology from outside the centers of its production.

Afrofuturists prize the histories encoded in the left over, the discarded, the scattered, and the second hand. This attitude is strikingly different from that of the protagonist of Ama Ata Aidoo's 1970 short story "Everything Counts," who expresses frustration with the cast-off goods she sees in Africa, the "[s]econd-hand machinery from someone else's junkyard," "[o]utmoded tractors," and "[d]iscarded aeroplanes" (2). The stance of the bricoleur detaches objects from time, making them available for the creation of new histories. What is "second hand" is still "at hand"—that is, useful. Objects, including intellectual objects like the term *bricolage* itself, are identified not by their origins but by their potential. Bricolage is a time-traveling practice, one that expresses, as Jean Fisher says of the BAFC's films, a temporality that is transgressive rather than progressive (28). This dimension of Afrofuturism characterizes the "B-boy bricolage" of New York artist Rammellzee, whose battery-powered costume *Gasholeer* emits flames, music, and light (Dery 185) and the inventions featured on the AfriGadget website that, the site description explains, show "Africans bending the little they have to their will." These are engagements with technology by those disenfranchised from its forward motion, signals across the digital divide. Whether inspired by necessity or, as with Rammellzee, by the desire to willfully misuse the products of a dominant technoculture, Afrofuturistic bricolage asserts black people's right to use whatever is at hand, to enter the technologically enhanced future through whatever door is closest and to do so without assimilation into a global monoculture.

3. REMIXOLOGY

Bricolage is a form of sampling, a key technique of the BAFC artists, who worked archival photographs and audio tracks into their films. Sound has been a particularly important vehicle for Afrofuturism: as Womack notes, it is "the only future-oriented aesthetic that has such a rich history in music" (56). The electronic jazz of Sun Ra, the "astro-liberation party music" of George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic (63), and the layered dub technique of Lee "Scratch" Perry are touchstones for twentieth-century Afrofuturistic expression in the Americas. The work of these three artists is emblematic of the field in the way it combines the use of technology and images of space travel with an eclectic mythology that draws on African cultural forms, particularly those of ancient Egypt. The technologically advanced future, represented by electronic music, blends seamlessly with the distant past: for George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, funk is not a new musical style but a force as old as the universe. Music critic Scot Hacker explains: "P-funk

seemed to believe that music wasn't so much something that you made with your instruments as it was something that you caught with them, as if funk was out there in the form of an ambient residual energy left over from the big bang" (qtd. in Womack 65). Reaching across space and time in a similar way, Sun Ra named himself after an Egyptian deity and claimed he was from Saturn. In John Coney's 1974 film *Space Is the Place*, which stars Sun Ra, the musician's character travels back in time, seeking to transport African Americans to a peaceful space colony through music. He works, he says, "on the other side of time." Music operates as a mode of transportation in a double sense: both a source of emotional experience and healing and a technology of time travel.

Music is not only a medium for the preservation and transfer of memory; it is also a metaphor for the process. Like the data thief, music travels light, a signal carried in the body. This flexible medium is able to combine material from different eras, so that the rhythms and tonalities of the past carry figurations of the future. In addition, music shares with cyber technology the use of code: knowledge of the code enables computer hacking and data theft, as well as the production of new digital expressions, while music allows discourses of resistance to operate behind a veil. The data thief is both signal and song; the juxtaposition of theft and sound points toward the subversive power of music and the sustaining role it has played in black life, illustrated most strikingly in the coded songs of enslaved Africans. In its ability to encode and transfer cultural knowledge through time and space while evading full regulation by the dominant power, music acts as a proto-Internet, an early World Wide Web. In *The Last Angel of History*, the blues is a technology.

The recombinant processes of music sampling and data theft, with their emphasis on lowercase histories, bricolage, time travel, and subversion, demonstrate a poetics of the fragment. Here the fragment holds possibility: the sign of becoming rather than dissolution. The "willfully damaged signs" of screams and melisma in black music, Paul Gilroy writes, "betray the utopian politics of transfiguration [and] therefore partially transcend modernity" ("It Ain't Where You're From" 134). The secret code of utopian politics resides in the discarded, discovered, and repurposed sign. Afrofuturism can be read as a philosophy of the remix.

The remix is a key concept in Binyavanga Wainaina's lyric essay on the artist Wangechi Mutu, "Wangechi Mutu Wonders Why Butterfly Wings Leave Powder on the Fingers, There Was a Coup Today in Kenya." Published in 2014 as a prelude to the special *Afrofutur(e)s* issue of *Jalada*, a Nairobi-based, Pan-African writers' collective, "Wangechi Mutu" is part biography and part analysis of the artist's fantastical collages. "We are made by our archives," Wainaina begins, laying out the conceptual connection between the biographical statement and Mutu's exuberantly appropriative art. Wainaina's essay builds by splicing Mutu's biography with fragments of history and popular culture. Like a museum index, it is numbered:

16. Idi Amin has taken over Uganda. Wangechi Mutu's father buys a Peugeot 504. Baba Wangechi and her uncles and some aunts love to smoke Rex Cigarettes. All Kenyan beer bottles are stumpy and green. Over beer, adults discuss where they were when Jim Reeves died in a plane crash.

17. *Bonanza* is on television.

18. And *The Man From Atlantis* with Patrick Duffy.

19. *Yellow Submarine*.
20. *Yaliotokea*.
21. *Dunia Wiki hii*.
22. *The Jetsons*. Then *The Flintstones*.
23. Jiggers. Queen cake. Kenya Cookery Book. Beans. Kenyatta.

Wainaina creates a written echo of Mutu's collages through this list, which represents the artist herself as a collage of influences, her childhood a transnational space crisscrossed by local, regional, and global signals. This archive creates a portrait resembling the vibrant posthuman grotesques of Mutu's collage paintings: "31. You are busy planning in your head to be a supermodel Kenyan cowgirl nomad, a four-year-old Afro-girl with tulle claws and steel killing teeth." Wainaina both enacts data theft/bricolage and represents Mutu as an artist formed by a "second hand economy," by images ripped from "Second hand Vogue. Second hand Cosmopolitan. Second hand Ebony magazine..." She is also formed by a seventeen-year "paperless exile" in the United States, during which time she was unable to return to Kenya and realized that "you can remix in exile." "Remix," as Wainaina defines the word in section 119, is a "religious ritual that removes demons of fear and releases imagination." In turning a musical term toward the analysis of visual art in the medium of writing, Wainaina reveals the contours of a broad philosophy of the remix and its role in the formation of African and African diasporic subjectivities.

116. Wangechi Mutu's work makes new things, and remixes. Her work became a middle-passage, never real in America, never real at home. She builds a world to live in that Africans can inhabit. An African global citizen is the inheritor of all archives. She is an early African provoking the season of Afro-futures.

4. ALIEN NATION

Africans, Toni Morrison argues, were the first moderns (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 178). The experience of slavery is a founding trauma, a moment of brutal dislocation in which memory and forgetting become inextricably entangled. Etched deep in the cultural consciousness, continuously revived by the experience of systemic oppression, the trauma can never be forgotten. Moreover, forgetting—the loss of African languages and cultural forms—is a core component of the trauma itself. This forgetting that cannot be forgotten marks the violent break with the past that makes the Africans of the New World the first moderns. Thrust violently from the past into the future, enslaved Africans underwent in the most acute way the quintessential modern experience: alienation.

This is a New World dynamic, but it is inextricable from the history of imperialism. The notion of modernity as trauma operates widely across postcolonial thought, as does the imbrication of memory and forgetting. The predatory imposition of modernity on the African continent during the colonial period persists in the form of failed states, endemic poverty, and continued economic and political invasions by the West. Here, too, forgetting is a feature of the trauma that won't be forgotten: the loss of languages, religions, and practices. A great deal of African literature, speculative or realist, responds to the problem of modernity

as rupture, of what Abiola Irele calls “a discontinuity in forms of life throughout the continent” (ix). This is a double alienation, in which the postcolonial subject is distanced both from a violent, exclusionary Western modernity and a disrupted tradition. The understanding of modernity as disruption and disinheritance is what makes black people the first moderns, in Toni Morrison’s formulation: the experience of “[c]ertain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability” (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 178). Black modernity is characterized by Du Boisian double-consciousness and Richard Wright’s “dreadful objectivity,” which, Gilroy writes, “flows from being both inside and outside the West” (*Small Acts* 121).

This complex alienation has provoked a variety of engagements with dystopian science fiction and the trope of the mutant or alien. Tendai Huchu’s short story “The Sale” portrays a violent alteration of human bodies: the salesman Mr. Munyuki lives in a Harare renamed HaCity and controlled by the US-China conglomerate Chimerica, where he is forced to take testosterone suppressants that make him grow breasts. Mr. Munyuki, who is engaged in selling the monuments of Great Zimbabwe to “Lee Ling Antiquities Enterprises and Debt Recovery,” receives a letter denying his application for parenthood. His enforced sterility forecloses his future while the removal of Great Zimbabwe to China threatens to obliterate his past. For Mr. Munyuki, the only possible victory is a self-destructive one, in which he overcomes the effects of his hormone treatments long enough to throw himself in front of the bulldozers. The story’s anxiety over the loss of masculinity, distilled in the moment when Mr. Munyuki is forced to bend over and receive a testosterone-reducing suppository from a drone, evokes the common description of colonialism as the “rape of Africa,” a violation the text projects into the future. Sterilization, posthumanism as horror, and the use of a queasy homophobia are all common in science fiction; what sets this story apart is the depiction, alongside biological loss, of a cultural loss that has already happened. Mr. Munyuki’s hopeless attempt to interrupt a sale that has already occurred is a failed data theft, his dystopian existence an Afrofuturistic horror show that relocates the more terrifying visions of futuristic fiction in the past and present experiences of African subjects. As Mark Bould asks in the title of his review of two collections of African speculative fiction, Nerine Dorman’s *Terra Incognita* and Dilman Dila’s *A Killing in the Sun*: “If Colonialism Was the Apocalypse, What Comes Next?”

This is a perspective that positions black people as human beings at the mercy of an inhuman technological modernity. In a similar way, artists have reimagined the Middle Passage as a conduit for alien abduction. Octavia Butler’s *Patternmaster* series takes this approach, as does the 2013 film *Twelve Years a Slave*, whose director Steve McQueen says he “always thought of this film as being a science-fiction movie” (Clark, “Alien Abduction”). The trope of aliens who experiment on human beings expresses the lived experience of technology as terror: as Mark Dery writes, African Americans “inhabit a sci-fi nightmare” characterized by experiences that might have come out of a pulp magazine, such as branding, forced sterilization, and the Tuskegee experiment (180). But this is only one way Afrofuturists engage the posthuman. As the category of the human in Western modernity arguably excludes black people at the level of theory, and has certainly done so in practice, Afrofuturism provides imaginative space for thinking that rejects the category altogether. In this mode of posthuman storytelling, the alien represents an expanded rather than lost past and a liberated rather than ruined

future. Afrofuturistic expression in this mode includes Sun Ra's embrace of alien identity and insistence that "Space Is the Place" for black people and Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu's *AfroSF* piece "Masquerade Stories," which links traditional belief systems to the wider cosmos by proposing that Edo masquerades are aliens from outer space. Mutation, too, can be embraced: in their 2002 album *Quest*, the Detroit group Drexciya create a "Black-Atlantean mythology" involving the mutated, water-breathing descendants of drowned slaves (Eshun, "Further Considerations" 300), while Hawa Mire's "Black Woman, Everybody's Healer," published in *Jalada Afrofuture(s)*, depicts a figure named Expectation whose gills allow her to breathe others' "damp emotional air." Expectation's easy movement through an urban environment and her ability to choose different ways of breathing contrast with the fear and constriction experienced by the other characters, who suffer from the expectations placed on the black woman, "everybody's healer," as well as the pain and dangers of a forced migration from Somalia. Expectation embodies her own expectations, not those of others: in Mire's new mythology of African womanhood, it's the mutant who is "finally free."

In Afrofuturistic arts, writes Kodwo Eshun, the alien is an imaginative resource, one that "should be understood not so much as escapism, but rather as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance within the high-pressure zone of perpetual racial hostility" ("Further Considerations" 299). In invoking the posthuman, Afrofuturists both critique the exclusion of black subjects from Western humanism and identify with possibilities outside the human. The alien thus enables time travel that moves in both directions: a fitting response to the entanglement of memory and forgetting. Alienated from enlightenment notions of progress but not from time itself, Afrofuturism expresses a time-traveling, futuristic anti-modernity.

5. FAITH AND IRREVERENCE

"When I mix folklore with science fiction, people don't know what to do with it," Nnedi Okorafor told Toni Kan in an interview for the *Lagos_2060* anthology (xv). Her comment shows the effects in the literary marketplace of the conception of African modernity as an inherent contradiction. The force of Toni Morrison's claim that Africans are the first moderns comes from the strong association of Africans with backwardness and primitivity, the perception of "African traditions" as conservative and changeless, and the idea that to become modern is to become Western. This conception, as described by Achille Mbembe, locates the (im)possibility of African modernity between emancipation and assimilation:

[A]s a result of the tension inherent in the twin project of emancipation and assimilation, discussion of the possibility of an African modernity was reduced to an endless interrogation of the possibility, for the African subject, of achieving a balance between his/her total identification with "traditional" (in philosophies of authenticity) African life, and his/her merging with, and subsequent loss in, modernity (in the discourse of alienation). (*On the Postcolony* 12)

Afrofuturist art rejects the drama of a paralyzing standoff between tradition and modernity. In the philosophy of the remix, the combination of folklore and science

fiction is perfectly possible; in the poetics of mythmaking, which draws on the past in order to imagine the future, it is necessary.

Viewing tradition and modernity through Afrofuturism raises some interesting questions about magical realism, another time-traveling genre, but one more concerned with bridging the gap between the past and present than with envisioning the future. A central problem in discussions of magical realism is the question of belief. Some critics take faith in supernatural beings and events as a necessary criterion, one that removes magical realist works from the genre of fantasy. Farah Mendlesohn, in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, declines to treat magical realist works out of respect for the living traditions that make magical realism, in her view, more an expression of faith than an act of fantasy (107). Brenda Cooper, in *Magical Realism in West Africa: Seeing with a Third Eye*, takes the opposite view: for her, magical realism is defined by irony, by the distance between the Western-educated author and the folk beliefs represented in the fiction (49). A third critic, Christopher Warnes, seeks a way out of the impasse by proposing two different types of magical realism: the “faith-based” type, which fits Mendlesohn’s idea of the genre, and the “irreverent” type, which is closer to Cooper’s (11–12).³ What is interesting is how closely these two views or two types of magical realism align with the discourses that, according to Mbembe, shackle discussions of African modernity. One claims authenticity by privileging faith, while the other favors distance, irony, irreverence, and alienation. The study of magical realism suggests that it is less a literature of blending past and present, or tradition and modernity, than the creative expression of the break between the two.

Afrofuturism vaults over this gap at the speed of light. Moreover, it is concerned with leaping toward the future as well as the past. For the writers of *Lagos_2060*, “Lagos is the city of the future” (xi): their visions tackle climate change, futuristic wars of secession, economic metamorphoses, technological innovations. This is in contrast to the majority of magical realist texts. For example, in Ben Okri’s *Famished Road* trilogy, which is structured around an *abiku* child who circles ceaselessly from the land of the dead to that of the living and back, the future occupies the same territory as the past. The emphasis is not on change, but on the cycle of a child’s death and rebirth as a figure for the postcolonial interregnum. By contrast, in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, in which an alien ship lands outside Lagos, “Everything is changing” (6). This exuberantly inventive novel, dedicated to “the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria—animals, plant, and spirit,” emphasizes transformation:

Despite the FPSO Mystras’s loading hose leaking crude oil, the ocean water just outside Lagos, Nigeria, is now so clean that a cup of its salty-sweet goodness will heal the worst human illnesses and cause a hundred more illnesses not yet known to humankind. It is more alive than it has been in centuries, and it is teeming with aliens and monsters. (6)

Afrofuturism’s blend of folklore and science fiction is a blend of faith and irreverence. It insists that in order to imagine the future, it is necessary to step out of the deadening dichotomy of authenticity and alienation.

The use of folk beliefs and stories is a distinguishing characteristic of African diasporic science fiction as well. Nalo Hopkinson’s fiction draws on Afro-Caribbean traditions: her novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), for example,

combines the science-fictional setting of a post-apocalyptic Toronto with a story of possession by a duppy, a malevolent spirit. Sun Ra's personal mythology owes as much to African American folkloric traditions as it does to pulp science fiction, incorporating, as John Szwed writes, "the theme of travel, of journey, of exodus, of escape which dominates African American narratives: of people who could fly back to Africa, travel in the spirit, visit or be visited by the dead" (134). An examination of these Afrofuturistic blends of folklore, fantasy, and technology in a global context would make significant contributions to the study of both magical realism and science fiction.

6. DOUBLE-CAPACITY

Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* concerns an archivist named Asha who works at the natural history museum of a dead world. Asha receives a mysterious box of soil in the mail, analyzes it, and discovers that it can support life. Defying the law of her city, she escapes its walls and follows the coordinates written on the box of soil in order to plant a seed. To do so, she combines the technology of her own time (a soil analysis device) with that of the past (a compass she steals from the museum) and the organic material of the past (a dried seed) with that of her own body, which she sacrifices to fertilize the tree. Blending the organic with the technological, hers is a cyborg solution. It also includes a component from outside the material world: the substance of dream. Like Mr. Munyuki in Huchu's "The Sale," Asha lives under constant government surveillance and pharmaceutical control: where Mr. Munyuki takes testosterone suppressants, Asha takes dream suppressants. Yet her dreams break through, interrupting her sleep with visions of a great tree: the one she will eventually die to create. Like Okorafor and others who mix folklore and science fiction, Kahiu mixes cyborg consciousness with metaphysics.

In her 2012 TEDx Nairobi talk "Afrofuturism and the African," Kahiu describes her desire "to find a place for Afrofuturism in Africa." She begins at Mount Kenya with a Kikuyu origin myth and passes through stories and folk beliefs she received from her mother to the novels of Ben Okri. Okri's work, she says, shows that "We live in a continent that is so closely linked to the spirit world that we use it in a very everyday sort of way." Only after reaching the conclusion that "Afrofuturism has always been part of us" does Kahiu begin to talk about technology, referencing the science of the Dogon of Mali and contemporary innovators like Richard Turere, the thirteen-year-old who invented "lion lights" to protect his family's livestock. Her idea of Afrofuturism emphasizes the spiritual rather than the technological. This spiritual futurity is a way of claiming not just time, but space time: "We know that we are larger than life. We know we are larger than Earth. We know we are larger than the cosmos."

If the Afrofuturist strategy of mixing folklore and science fiction seeks to mend the breach between mythic past and technological present, Kahiu's work and reflections cast this healing impulse into the future. The centrality of the spirit world in her formulation of Afrofuturism is another flash point where African and diasporic imaginings meet. Asha's visions in *Pumzi* are prophetic, showing the tree that will emerge from her body in the future. A future-oriented mysticism has been a key feature of diasporic Afrofuturism as well, from *Space Is the Place* to Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, in which the heroine develops a religion and prophecies

a migration to outer space. The editors of a recent anthology named for Butler, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015), use the term "visionary fiction": "science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds," as distinct from "the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power" (4). The visionary aspect of Afrofuturism highlights the links between science fiction, prophecy, and justice. Art is a vehicle for what Fred Moten calls "double-capacity":

[Y]ou talk about being able to be in two places at the same time, but also to be able to be in two times in the same place. In other words, it's very much bound up with the Jamesian notion of the future in the present—and classically, the prophet has access to both of those. The prophet is the one who tells the brutal truth, who has the capacity to see the absolute brutality of the already-existing and to point it out and to tell that truth, but also to see the other way, to see what it could be. That double-sense, that double-capacity: to see what's right in front of you and to see through that to what's up ahead of you. (131)

"As a storyteller in the tradition of the Agikuyu," says Kahiu, "my job is to be a seer, not just a historian."

7. AFROPOLITANISM

The term "Afropolitanism," Achille Mbembe writes, expresses "a cultural, historical, and aesthetic sensitivity" to the complexities of belonging in Africa and in the world ("Afropolitanism" 28). The term rose to popularity with Taiye Selasi's 2005 essay "Bye-Bye Babar," which describes 21st-century "Afropolitans" as hip, affluent, educated, and on the move: "They (read: we) are the Afropolitans—the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you." Selasi's list of Afropolitan spaces points to the key role that space plays in Afropolitanism and suggests links with Afrofuturism, which incorporates both jazz aesthetics (the lounge) and technology (the lab). As for the law firm, it indicates comfort with and participation in the centers of power.

The Afropolitan experience Selasi describes finds imaginative expression in Deji Bryce Olukotun's 2014 novel *Nigerians in Space*. Olukotun's thriller concerns a secret space program launched in the 1960s that gathered Nigerian scientists from around the world to return to their country and help send a Nigerian astronaut to the moon. *Nigerians in Space* is a fascinating novel to examine through the lens of Afrofuturism, as it combines technology, theft (each Nigerian scientist must steal a key "souvenir"—moon rocks, a photovoltaic formula, etc.—from the Western nation where he or she practices), mystical references to the moon-worshippers of Harran, and music (Olukotun cites the influence sci-fi radio plays on the novel and created a futuristic soundtrack for it). Yet one of the most interesting aspects of the novel is its departure from science fiction. The covert Nigerian space program never gets off the ground. Someone starts killing the scientists before they can reach Nigeria, and most of the book is set in Cape Town, where the last surviving scientist, his son, and the daughter of a South African activist who died aiding the program gather to solve the mystery. *Nigerians in Space* is less about walking on the moon than battling masked gunmen, peddling a newly invented "moonlamp," and smuggling abalone to China. With a plot that hurtles from Houston to Stockholm to

Cape Town to Abuja, this is not a novel about Nigerians in other worlds, but about what it means to be an African in general, and a Nigerian in particular, moving through space in this one.

Olokuton's play with the idea of space reveals a structural similarity between the identity conceptualized by Afropolitanism and the aesthetic field of Afrofuturism. Both are expressions of entitlement. Where Afrofuturism emphasizes time, seeking to rescue the past and envision a future for black people, Afropolitanism emphasizes space by claiming the world for Africans. Like Afrofuturism, Afropolitanism rejects a certain discourse of authenticity in order to create what Simon Gikandi calls "a new phenomenology of Africanness—a way of being African in the world" (9). To be Afropolitan, Gikandi continues, is "to be connected to knowable African communities, nations, and traditions; but it is also to live a life divided across cultures, languages, and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity—to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time" (9). In addition, both Afrofuturism and Afropolitanism express awareness of the power of images and reject a global visual culture saturated with negative representations of blackness. Selasi argues that "[t]he media's portrayals (war, hunger) won't do" and Mbembe posits the rejection of victimhood as a key feature of Afropolitanism (28–29), while in Afrofuturism, Ytasha Womack explains, "Fatalism is not a synonym for blackness" (11). Womack's description of space in Afrofuturism emphasizes a need to *create space* that applies equally to Afropolitanism:

Space is a frequent theme in Afrofuturist art. Whether it's outer space, the cosmos, virtual space, creative space, or physical space, there's this often-understated agreement that to think freely and creatively, particularly as a black person, one has to not just create a work of art, but literally or figuratively create the space to think it up in the first place. The world, it seems, is jam-packed with bought-and-sold rotated images, some as stereotypes and others as counter-images that become stereotypes mounting into watershed debates about "positive" and "negative" images in the media. (142)

Both Afrofuturism and Afropolitanism seek to intervene in the theater of images that has historically fused blackness to savagery, bestiality, and destitution, as part of a project of re-envisioning space and time for black subjects. The Afropolitans, familiar with air travel and unfettered by ties to a particular homeland, anticipate the Afrofuturist archaeologists with their chronometers, black people for whom technology is no longer alien (Eshun, "Further Considerations" 291). Both modes of thought claim a place for black people as natives of modernity, not alien abductees. They claim "life, property, and body" as their own, not "alien things" (Mbembe: "Who is a slave, if not the person who, everywhere and always, possesses life, property, and body as if they were alien things?" [*On the Postcolony* 235]). They claim the whole for a group that has been forced, historically, to make do with scraps. The Afropolitan's home is the globe. The Afrofuturist holds all of time. "In their Age of Total Recall, memory is never lost" (Eshun 287).

The position of entitlement has come in for criticism, especially in the case of Afropolitanism as described by Selasi, with its lounges, labs, and law firms that suggest a blithe disregard for mass poverty and other problems on the African continent. The Afropolitan refusal to be tied down by preconceived notions of what it means to be African represents, to some extent, the economic depredations

of the “brain drain.” The risk may be necessary: it’s possible that Selasi’s bold clearing of space is a fundamental part of inventing a viable 21st-century African identity. The risk may also be smaller than it seems. Olukotun’s novel is not only aware of the problem of brain drain, but built around it: the Nigerian space program is a “brain gain” in which the scientists, hampered by glass ceilings in the racist West and toiling in inferior labs, are only too happy to participate. *Nigerians in Space* portrays a passionate attachment to physical African spaces not only among immigrants, but among their children. This attachment is another flashpoint connecting African and diasporic Afrofuturisms. Without ignoring the science fiction being produced on the continent, visible in the *Lagos_2060* and *Terra Incognita* anthologies and magazines like *Omenana* and *Jalada*, it is important to recognize the large body of “Afropolitan” science fiction, the author biographies linked to London, Edinburgh, Chicago, and elsewhere. As *Nigerians in Space* shows, movement does not necessarily mean forgetting. The dynamics of remembrance and return in African, Afropolitan, and African diasporic science fiction warrants further study.⁴

8. PLANETARITY

This has been a proposal for a history of Afrofuturism unrestricted by a North American origin story, so as to do justice to its Pan-African influences, practices, and claims. I have used the Afrofuturistic method of data theft to perform an Afrofuturistic act: the reinvention of history. For Afrofuturism is always alternate history. In surfing the cyber-storerooms of the past, the data thief is not searching for traces of a “natural” and singular History but for histories that are cultural, unstable, and contingent. To propose an alternate history is to propose that history can be altered, to change directions, to inaugurate an alternate future. This has been the case in the study as well as the arts of Afrofuturism. Mark Dery, John Akomfrah, and Edward George looked back as far as Sun Ra and other artists of the 1970s. Sheree Renee Thomas’s first *Dark Matter* anthology, published in 2001, covers a century. Wanuri Kahiu goes back to Gikuyu and Mumbi—that is, to the dawn of human history. Each engagement with the history of Afrofuturism traces a broader field in time and space. The universe is expanding.

A focus on the past as an instrument for survival in the future distinguishes the futurisms of Africa and the diaspora. These are visions of the future, Alondra Nelson writes, “purposely inflected with tradition” (8). “The field of Afrofuturism,” Kodwo Eshun explains, “does not seek to deny the tradition of counter-memory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective” (“Further Considerations” 289). “It’s that sankofa effect,” says the spoken word artist and musician Khari B., referencing the Asante image of a bird that reaches backward for the egg of the future on her back (qtd. in Womack 160). The sankofa image stands as a striking representation of Afrofuturism’s entanglement of the tenses. And if the symbol evokes temporal loops and connections, its contemporary usage evokes entanglements in space. In Haile Gerima’s 1993 film *Sankofa*, for example, an African American model on a shoot at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana is suddenly transported through space and time to a slave plantation in the Caribbean. The privileged young model’s experiences as a slave endow

her with a new understanding of both her personal history and that of the Cape Coast Castle, which was used to hold captured Africans before their transport to the Americas. Like Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, in which an African American woman travels back through time to experience her ancestors' history, *Sankofa* employs a time travel rooted in the body. The black body is the conductor for time-traveling energy. Moreover, *Sankofa* emphasizes the history of bodies in space by focusing on the slave fort and the protagonist's physical movement to Ghana and metaphysical journey to the West Indies. The narrative of the film demands that the American protagonist recognize and acknowledge these entanglements.

Contemporary black speculative narratives make similar demands. Nnedi Okorafor's fantasy *Zahrah the Windseeker*, for example, draws on myths of people who could fly in both African American and Igbo traditions. The films of Kibwe Tavares include both *Robots of Brixton* (2011), a science-fictional reimagining of the Brixton riots, and *Jonah* (2013), a fantastical critique of the tourist industry in Tanzania. The notion of a Pan-African mode of futurism and speculation would go further in addressing the works of these artists than an approach limited by geopolitical borders. Yet there is a legitimate hesitation on the part of artists who consider their work African science fiction to embrace the idea of Afrofuturism: the fear of a loss of cultural and historical specificity, or, as Tade Thompson puts it, "the erasure of the African for the African-American when the history is being told." This is a fear of intellectual and aesthetic colonization by the West and the type of leveling globalization Paul Gilroy describes using science-fictional imagery: the "great danger in humanity's being recast as a legion of clones" (*Postcolonial Melancholia* 62). Yet Gilroy offers an alternative way of regarding large-scale social phenomena. He prefers the term "planetarity" to globalization because it "suggests both contingency and movement" and "specifies a smaller scale than the global, which transmits all the triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals" (xv). Gayatri Spivak makes a similar move, using planetarity as a way of returning small-scale lived experience to the domain of large-scale thinking:

The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. (72)

Spivak's use of "planet" links the "inhabited" and experienced human context with the alterity of a nonhuman system. The planet stands in contrast to the globe in that it is experienced through the senses, physically inhabited; yet because each body experiences only a part of the planet, the world as planet resists being known and captured in the way we map the globe. Planetarity indicates an emphasis on local ways of imagining and navigating world space. It offers an approach to the departures and returns of Gerima's *Sankofa* that resists "erasing the African" and insists that a lived space such as the Cape Coast Castle is irreducible to a dot on a map. The notion of planetarity invokes Planet Earth in a way that suits discussions of science fiction; it may also serve as a way of conceptualizing the Pan-African flows and loops of Afrofuturism not as a form of US imperial domination but as a "[c]osmopolitan solidarity from below and afar" (Gilroy, *Postcolonial* 80).

In 2012, Wangechi Mutu created a solo exhibition with the Kiswahili title *Nitarudi/Ninarudi*, translated in the description as "I plan to return/I am

returning.” The title draws Mutu’s mixed-media mutants, always on the verge of becoming plant, animal, human, machine, or other, into a transformative instant of time travel. To plan to return is to return. *Nitarudi/Ninarudi* is Afrofuturism in two words, combining wordplay, timeplay, emphasis on the power of intention, and the promise of a future event (*Nitarudi*) that reveals itself as a present action (*Ninarudi*) embedded in the past. Striking the grammatical marker of the future (*ta*) and replacing it with that of the present (*na*) portrays the dream of the future as a gesture with real consequences for the present. That the substance of this gesture is a return to the past fills the future/present with history and with memory. “*Nitarudi/Ninarudi* expresses the complexity of longing for a place that is alive in the memory in a very different way than in the physical reality,” the press release for Mutu’s exhibition explains, “a place as evasive and fleeting as the identities one negotiates when they are relocated, bringing into play issues of transformation, translation, and even personal survival.” As we have seen, Afrofuturistic arts depict different forms of dislocation, from the mass abduction of the slave trade, to the alienation of Huchu’s Mr. Munyuki as he watches the removal of Great Zimbabwe, to Wangechi Mutu’s “paperless exile.” Afrofuturism seeks to return, to reclaim history as a necessary part of becoming. It recognizes that *even the dead* are not safe (Benjamin 255), that they are, as the BAFC film *Handsworth Songs* puts it, “companions in struggle.” The word “Afrofuturism” may have been coined in the United States; it may also have found its most succinct and elegant expression in an African language, a language that is itself hybrid, contested, and loaded with the contrary histories of the Arab slave trade, postcolonial nationalism, and African socialism. *Nitarudi/Ninarudi* is creative morphology: the grammatical shift of *ta/na* and the structural transformations of Mutu’s strange organisms depict return as metamorphosis, asking what will be. It is only one example of what the study, theory, and practice of Afrofuturism stand to gain from a planetary perspective.

NOTES

1. Examples include the fiction of Nnedi Okorafor, Dilman Dila, and Deji Bryce Olukotun; the anthologies *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (2013), *Lagos_2060: Exciting Sci-Fi Stories from Nigeria* (2013), and *Terra Incognita: Now Short Speculative Stories from Africa* (2015); special science fiction issues of the magazines *Chimurenga* (2008) and *Jalada* (2014); and *Omenana*, a science fiction magazine launched in 2014. Artists working in a futuristic mode outside literature include the filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu, the visual artist Wangechi Mutu, and the musician Spoek Mathambo.

2. Thompson, a speculative fiction writer and blogger, made this comment and others cited in this article on the public Facebook page African Fantasy Reading Group on July 23, 2015.

3. Warnes does not stress ironic distance from tradition; in his view, irreverent magical realism critiques Western truth claims. However, his description of a genre that argues for “the contingency of all representation” (16) opens the door to Cooper’s idea of magical realism as a skeptical mode.

4. The expansion of African identity proposed by Afropolitanism raises the perennial question of who is African, implying another question: who can write Afrofuturism? While Afrofuturism is strongly associated with blackness, a recent article on Afrofuturism in Africa by Panashe Chigumadzi includes the white South African writer Lauren Beukes, suggesting that a global perspective may put pressure on the concept of Afrofuturism, demanding reevaluation and perhaps even redefinition.

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