

“After the End Times”: African Futures and Speculative Fictions

Our current historical moment, as Slavoj Žižek has put it, is one of “apocalyptic time.” We live the “‘time of the end of time,’ the time of emergency, of the ‘state of exception’ when the end is near” (261). In this era of the Anthropocene, the human has literally become a geological force, indisputably transforming the surface, climate, and life forms of the planet. And our impulse to burn fossil fuels, to strip forests is, of course, entangled in our impulse to accumulate capital. Global droughts and ever-common Katrinas are woven in and among the endless cycles of “boom,” “recession,” and “recovery” that govern late capitalism. Indeed, ours is a moment of dual crisis – the crisis of global ecological systems and the ever-impending collapse of capital. That we live on the brink is too clear. What is not, however, is our ability to imagine the moment *after* this dual crisis – after the end times.

Written nearly a century ago, in a radically different moment of social crisis, Ernst Bloch’s *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918) speaks hauntingly to our current impaired vision. “[W]e are located in our own blind spot,” he writes, “in the darkness of the lived moment, whose darkness is ultimately *our own darkness*, being-unfamiliar-to-ourselves, being-enfolded, being-missing” (200). The lived moment blinds us to that which follows, to that which impends. Our knowledge of the future forms of life and dwelling in the post-crisis moment is occluded. The task, possible or not, is to imagine from the brink.

In recent years, African artists have begun to articulate this “moment after,” ushering in a new paradigm in African literature and film that speculates upon post-crisis

African futures. Writers and filmmakers such as Nnedi Okorafor, Efe Okogu, and Wanuri Kahiu have imagined future African topographies – spaces that have felt the fullest effects of climate change, nuclear radiation, and the imbalances of global capitalism. Biopolitics, sovereignty, and the human have all been reconfigured in these imagined African spaces. Politics as we know it has been shattered in these near and distant African futures.

The coupling of Wanuri Kahiu’s short film *Pumzi* (2010) and Efe Okogu’s short story “Proposition 23” (2012) provides a productive point of entry into this emergent field in African cultural production. On first glance, these two works of science fiction reveal drastically different visions of a post-crisis Africa. *Pumzi*, set in a barren East African desert, “35 years after World War III,” depicts an isolated community living in a subterranean structure. “Proposition 23,” in contrast, is set in the 22nd century, in a freezing snow-covered Lagos, the biggest and most polluted city in the world. Beyond these cursory differences, however, lie parallels in figurations of topography, biopower, and human/nonhuman life. Both narratives take place in the wake of nuclear catastrophe, and their landscapes bear the scars of this havoc. Authoritarian power saturates these post-crisis fictions. And both articulate a post-Fanonian revolutionary subject that aims to reconstitute life beyond the coercion of biopower. These two works break through the darkness of our lived moment to imagine African forms of life after the dual crisis of ecology and capital.

At stake in the work of Okogu and Kahiu is a nascent politics and aesthetics of the *African Anthropocene*. A continent that been seized for more than five hundred years by the predatory violence of imperialism, capitalism, and now global warming, must see its way through to the other side of these predations – to the other side of crisis. In the

moment of a dying earth, Okogu and Kahiu are pioneers of an aesthetic move to articulate the ontological paradox that we may soon face: that life may one day exist on an earth that no longer sustains life. The work of Wanuri Kahiu and Efe Okogu forces us to question the possibility of reconstituted life, both human and nonhuman, on a post-crisis African continent.

African topographies

The distinctly African topographies in *Pumzi* and “Proposition 23” are of a dying, if not altogether dead, earth. They are landscapes of inescapable contamination, spaces that will long bear the afterlives of nuclear weapons and reactors. Both narratives depict an earth that is divided between habitable zones, those synthetically-created enclosed spaces that sustain human life, and uninhabitable zones, those formerly “natural” spaces that have been stripped of livability.

This rift between the habitable and uninhabitable is brought to the fore in the visual aesthetics of *Pumzi*. The first image we see in the film is the surface of the isolated subterranean structure against the backdrop of a disfigured earth. Vast patches of white and black, what might be the residue of an explosion or toxic spill, scar the soil that surrounds the structure. We see no life forms in this landscape. In the sweltering desert, we see a decrepit half buried sign that reads, “Caution, Nuclear Radioactive River.” There is absolutely no river to be seen, not even the trace of water. Instead, the sign serves as a marker of the landscape’s mutations, from flowing river to abandoned contaminated stream to scorched toxic sand.

The interior of the underground structure, on the other hand, is clean, self-sustaining, and controlled. The community recycles its bodily fluids, transforming them

into potable water. The structure runs on electricity produced by grim-faced people on treadmills. This is a sterilized space, socially and hygienically, that has closed itself off from the outside world. In Kahi's film, a post-crisis Africa is one that represses the toxicity of the surrounding world and the possibility of life on the outside.

If the topography in *Pumzi* is largely deserted, barren, and hot, the spaces in Okogu's "Proposition 23" are crowded, urban, and freezing cold. The world's fossil fuels have been depleted. Nuclear conflict has presumably caused the city's "everlasting winter." The sky and aerial sprawl have been transformed into a surreal spectacle of light: "Lagos was a patchwork of amber, fluorescence, and neon, as far as the eye could see" (361). Like the habitable and uninhabitable spaces in *Pumzi*, Okogu's landscape is divided into livable and unlivable spaces: "The only habitable zones lie between the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer, nothing beyond but a barren wasteland of subzero temperatures and deadly radiation" (362).

Inside the city, however, cyborgian human life thrives in the face of bare life with the aid of the "neuro." The neuro is an electro-neurological device implanted in the human body. It moves the body on the dance floor, turning dancers into "mere passengers in their own bodies"; it automatically adjusts one's clothing to regulate body temperature; it controls one's sense of taste and smell. In short, the neuro is an artificial intelligence embedded in the body, desensitizing the human to the traumas of a post-crisis world. To live in Okogu's Lagos is to be a mutant. Only a cyborg could flourish in a state of exception.

It is from these questions of (un)livable and (de)sensitized life that the politics of these science fictions emerges. After the fall of the global ecological and capitalist systems, coercive power threatens to control the future of life on the African

continent. It is a control not simply of spatiality or physicality, but a control of human thought and the body's nervous system.

Neuropolitics

Power in these African fictions is all encompassing. Bodies are controlled and disciplined through violent interrogations and exposure to toxic chemicals. Movement is tracked through virtual drones and unique barcodes branded on the body. Futurist, unearthly technologies subjugate the populous in these narratives, numbing the human to the putrefied world.

To be sure, the formations of power in *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23" have an important lineage. Foucault's notion of biopower, as the disciplinary regulatory power over the biological field, could be thought of as the most elemental form of power in these works. Biopower is control over mortality. It is the biological fragmentation of a population, the separation of bodies into groups and subgroups (*Society* 247-265). If biopolitics was the predominant mode of power beginning in 18th century Europe, Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics brings Foucault into the moment of late-modern colonial occupation. Mbembe's formulation remains concerned with the power over life, but the advent of modern technologies allows for vastly expanded regulatory systems of horizontal and vertical surveillance. From helicopters and surveillance drones in the sky to networks of bypasses and underground tunnels on land to monitoring vessels on water, necropower surrounds and encloses. If Mbembe's necropower builds upon Foucault's biopower, the figurations of power in post-crisis African science fiction present a further intensification. Power in *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23" encompasses the bio- and

necropolitical, but futural technologies now enable the control of the body itself, its cognitive and neurological networks, in what might be called the “neuropolitical,”

In *Pumzi*, these formations of power manifest in several ways. The Maitu population is forbidden to leave the underground structure. The governing council tracks bodies with implanted devices. Ubiquitous armed guards enforce the council’s regulatory regime. The neuropolitical becomes evident in the first moments of the film, when we find the protagonist, Asha, sleeping with her head resting on her lab desk. On the computer monitor in front of her, we briefly see a green plant growing in a time-lapse, then we enter Asha’s dream as she gazes at a tree growing in the barren desert. Within seconds, a robotic-sounding female voice repeats the phrase, “Dream detected, take your dream suppressants.” Asha wakes up, scrambling to take her medication. In this brief sequence, some form of invisible or unapparent sensor reads Asha’s thoughts and streams the images of her dream on the monitor. The alarm system triggers, commanding her to consume a medication that will disrupt the chemical balance of her brain, preventing her from dreaming. For reasons not altogether evident, the possibility of life on the outside is considered a threat to the council’s power. The outside must remain a space of unlivable life.

Efe Okogu’s “Proposition 23” is also configured by futural intensifications of power, as well as the bio- and necropolitical. What is most biopolitically resonant in the story is its system of apartheid. Those individuals equipped with a neuro are deemed “citizens,” putatively rights-bearing subjects of the government. The “undead,” on the other hand, are the discarded whom the government has stripped of their neuro because they have supposedly violated the law. Without a neuro, one is “unlinked” from every interface and machine, and expelled from the system of “credit” that operates as a sort of

afterlife of capital. The undead are considered repulsive by citizens, and most “starve or freeze to death in the everlasting winter within days” (359). Much like Foucault’s biopolitical regime, the population is separated between the ones and the others.

Figurations of neuropower in “Proposition 23” center on the artificial intelligence of the neuro. The government has ideologically instituted the neuro as a device that equalizes citizens, creating the façade of an egalitarian society. All citizens are provided a minimum of credit that “ensures all basic necessities of life.... There is no hunger, and meds cure all diseases” (387). But this neuro that supposedly sets all citizens equal is also the means by which the government controls and desensitizes the population. According to one undead watching a circle of drummers in a city park: “All but one [drummer] is essentially unconscious, their neuros downloading skills they do not truly possess into their bodies, sending out electric signals and a chemical cocktail coursing through their nervous systems” (368). The neuro also facilitates the government’s memory simulation technology, which forces citizens to dictate their memories involuntarily. The neuro serves as an archive of one’s life, as a sort of ineluctable life-long tracking system of thought.

Power in post-crisis Africa, for Kahi and Okogu, desensitizes the human to what was once called “natural,” or “organic,” life. The sovereign in these fictions disrupts the human’s corporeal and cognitive autonomy. It severs the human from other nonhuman forms of life. This is precisely what the revolutionary subject seeks to reconstitute in these narratives. Human and nonhuman life may be indelibly altered, but life must still be reclaimed.

Revolution and ontology in post-crisis times

Pumzi and “Proposition 23” can both be described as liberatory narratives of post-crisis Africa. In a way, they are both utopian fictions, narratives that gesture toward a future in which the “human” and the “natural” are reconstituted outside the desensitizing control of the sovereign. But these are not utopias that recover a replica of a former life. The revolutionary figures in these works seek to constitute, on their own terms, a new configuration of life, of cyborgs and mutant natural spaces.

Given how distant Kahiu and Okogu’s works feel from our own historical moment, it almost seems surprising how much they resemble the work of the revolutionary thinker Frantz Fanon. Much like Fanon’s account of anticolonial struggle, these are works of subaltern liberation. They depict Manichaeic worlds not altogether unlike Fanon’s colonial world. The bombing of a government building in the first pages of “Proposition 23” is reminiscent of the necessary violence and destruction of the colonial world Fanon speaks of in the first few pages of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Indeed, Fanon’s call to arms saturates these African fictions. Through an expansion of several critical Fanonian terms, the 20th century philosopher can be instrumental to our understanding of what “reconstituted life” might mean for the revolutionary figures in these works.

One of these Fanonian terms is the notion of “land.” In the chapter “On Violence” in *Wretched*, Fanon writes, “For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity” (9). The land, for Fanon, is crucial because of its close connection to the most fundamental social bloc of the struggle: the proletariat. The land sustains life. The land provides the proletariat with a sense of belonging, autonomy, and control. Later,

Fanon explains, “Imperialism...sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds” (181). The land and the mind both have been saturated with the same alienating contaminant. In the anticolonial struggle, to reclaim the dual configuration of land and mind is to reclaim one’s sense of autonomy and belonging.

In *Pumzi*, the connection between mind and land is crucial. The land in the film may not be cultivatable in the same sense as that of Fanon’s peasantry, but Asha certainly feels a sense of belonging and intimacy with the land. When Asha first opens a package containing a rare sample of hydrated soil, she pours it into her hand, inhales its scent, and immediately collapses unconscious, falling into a dream in which she plunges into a deep ocean. When she awakens, she plans her escape to plant a culturally symbolic seed, along with the hydrated soil, in the desert. The hydrated soil and possible life mean a newly structured being-in-the-world for Asha, beyond the coercive power which has held the decayed land captive. 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.

Another crucial set of Fanonian terms pertinent to these African speculative fictions is Fanon’s series of colonial ontologies. Fanon suggests that the colonial context consists of multiple human species: “The ruling species is first and foremost the outsider from elsewhere, different from the indigenous population, ‘the others’” (*Wretched* 5). This “lesser species,” the colonial subject, is dehumanized, “he is reduced to the state of an animal” (*Wretched* 7). Throughout Fanon’s text, the “inhuman” is mentioned in purely pathological, animalistic terms, as an ontology that has been violently imposed by the colonizer. The human, on the other hand, is enlightened, fulfilled, the subject of universal

rights. The transition of the colonized from inhuman subject to liberated figure is a way of “casting off their animal status for a human one” (77).

Fanon’s curious system of stratified ontologies – this discursive parsing of human, inhuman, animal, and species – culminates in what he calls a “new humanity.” With the attainment of national independence comes a new configuration of the human. Although Fanon’s discussion of this “new human” in *Wretched* lacks depth, he does gesture toward this transcendent figure almost a decade earlier in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In this text, the transcendent moment is one of “disalienation,” when the liberated figure extricates itself from the past and refuses to “accept the present as definitive.” The new human manifests in the “effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self.”

Disavowing the overdeterminations of the past, recovering the self, the new human emerges from a sense of thrownness toward a contingent ontology, one that lies beyond the limits of what we know ontology to be: “I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it” (223-232). This “thrownness beyond” toward a new ontology in the wake of struggle is critically pertinent to our post-crisis African fictions.

The figures in *Pumzi* and “Proposition 23” may be cyborgs, but their progression of ontology is intriguingly akin to Fanon’s colonial stratification of being. Prior to the subaltern revolution in each text – revolution of the undead in Okogu, Asha’s escape in Kahiu – the “species” division is that of the conquering species and the lesser species. Asha is caged as a subhuman in the Maitu subterranean community. The citizens in Okogu’s short story treat the undead as a beastly lesser species. In the wake of revolution, after Asha has escaped the underground structure, she plants the seed, gives it her last drops of water, and squeezes the sweat from her clothes over the plant to give it life. *Pumzi* presents a distinctly cyborgian interspecies configuration of the new human. The

film concludes ambiguously with Asha lying down dehydrated next to the planted seed, shading the plant under the sweltering sun with her scarf. A massive tree then grows in a time-lapse in the very spot where her body rests. The implication is that Asha's care for the plant, her bodily fluids, and perhaps even her body itself, have allowed the tree grow in the nuclear toxic desert. The post-revolutionary new ontology at the end of *Pumzi* is one in which human and nonhuman merge to form mutant life. Like Fanon's new human, Kahiu's film articulates a sense of being that is "thrown beyond" toward a new and precarious ontology.

For Wanuri Kahiu and Efe Okogu, revolution in post-crisis Africa enables the construction of a newly entangled matrix of human and machine, the natural and the toxic. The revolution means stripping oneself of the constraints of necropower and neuropower in order to redefine the human and the human's being-in-the-world. This new life is not a determinate one, however. It is the beginning of a precarious, contingent life one never knew possible.

African futures now

Looking back on Bloch's notion of the blind spot of our lived moment, in light of these post-crisis African speculations, perhaps we need to rethink this blind spot not simply as our inability to see beyond the present, but as an opportunity to reimagine our present world via the future. This is the turn Fredric Jameson makes in *Archaeologies of the Future*, when he writes that the "mock futures [of science fiction] serve the...function of transforming our present into the determinate past of something yet to come." Regardless of whether the imaginary future world is depicted as utopian or dystopian, science fiction, he says, "enacts and enables a structurally unique 'method' for

apprehending the present as history.” Whereas Fanon views history as stifling for revolution, Jameson’s sleight of temporal logic establishes a malleable present. Imagining a present-as-past through the optic of the future opens us to the possibility of a restructured present and a shift in its normative modes of social consciousness. It engenders a new politics of our historical moment (286-289).

In other words, these African science fictions are specters of possible futures that loom over our present. Yes, Kahiu and Okogu’s short works may be utopian visions of a future African liberation, but this optimism matters less than the ways in which these texts speak to our current moment. In our decaying world, we must consider the cyborgian configurations of the human that will allow us to persist through these times of crisis. Kahiu and Okogu reveal to us that the technology that makes us cyborgs may very well be the same technology that shapes formations of power and oppression. They open us to the possibility of interspecies life, that multiple species may one day constitute what it means to be human.

It is in this mode of temporal thinking, this way of imaging our present as past, that *Pumzi* and “Proposition 23” are, above all, articulations of the *African Anthropocene*. They are ultimately texts through which we read the dual crisis of ecology and capital today. The toxic and barren landscapes in these works must force us to reexamine the ongoing crises of petroleum dumping in the Niger Delta, severe drought in the horn, and deforestation in the DRC. The grim isolation of *Pumzi*’s Maitu community also reminds us of the predatory imbalances of global capitalism today, and those spaces that have been abandoned under insurmountable debt. The aesthetics of this emerging field of post-crisis African science fiction is inseparable from the politics of our current moment. Through the aesthetics of the future we must reimagine the politics of the now.

WORKS CITED

- Bloch, Ernst. 1918. *The Spirit of Utopia*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. Print.
- Fanon, Franz. 1952. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C. L. Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Print.
- , 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future*. New York: Verso, 2007. Print.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*. 15.1 (2003): 11-40. Print.
- Okogu, Efe. "Proposition 23," *AfroSF*. Ed. Ivor Hartmann. Los Angeles: StoryTime, 2013. Print.
- Pumzi*. Dir. Wanuri Kahiu. Focus Features, 2011. DVD.
- Zizek, Slavoj. "Living in the End Times." *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 243-264. Print.