LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

'How to Save the World from Aliens, yet Keep Their Infrastructure': Remapping the Alien State in Tade Thompson's Wormwood Trilogy

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Abstract:

This essay examines science fictional engagements with the postcolonial state in Africa. It begins by arguing that the alien, in both the abstract sense of 'the stranger' and the more specific sense of extraterrestrial life, offers an enduring figure in postcolonial writing for representing the historical contradictions and speculative futures of postcolonial sovereignty. Turning then to Tade Thompson's Wormwood Trilogy—*Rosewater* (2016), *The Rosewater Insurrection* (2019a), and *The Rosewater Redemption* (2019b)—it shows how Thompson both literalizes descriptions of the postcolonial state as an 'alien institution' and attempts, in Wole Soyinka's terms, to 'remap' state power. In particular, by fusing the alien body to the state apparatus in the speculative, social democratic 'free state' of Rosewater, Thompson's near-future novels resist projects to 'humanize' or de-alienate postcolonial governance, lingering instead with what Tejumola Olaniyan has recently described as the state's 'possibilities of strangeness.' The essay concludes with a broader reflection on the contemporary 'boom' in African science fiction. Where recent critics have characterized third-generation science fiction as a break with the earlier forms and commitments of postcolonial writing, it argues for an engagement with the generic and political continuities that obtain across postcolonial literary history.

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Introduction

Representations of alien life, as a number of critics have observed, play an important role in the recent 'boom' in African science fiction, propelling international hits such as Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), as well as a range of less prominent texts by Okorafor (2019), Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu (2012), Dilman Dila (2015), and Andrew Dakalira (2015). For third-generation postcolonial writers, the attraction of 'extraterrestriality' (Eshun 2003: 298) would seem to be rooted in its productive ambivalence as both a plot and a literary figure. As John Rieder (2003/2012) argues, Euro-American narratives of extraterrestrial first contact have long mediated representations of the colonial encounter, opening a generic space within which to defamiliarize (and yet often to naturalize) colonial expansion, extraction, and settlement. Postcolonial alien stories— what Rachel Haywood Ferreira (2013: 70) calls narratives of 'second contact'—tend to function, then, as reparative allegories, which 'rewrite, shanghai, and subvert both historical and science fictional accounts of [colonial] contact.' At the same time, 'the alien body' offers an image of 'radical otherness' (Jameson 2005: 140) unyielding to tidy allegorical frameworks. The aliens in *Lagoon*, for instance, may arrive by sea like the colonizers of centuries past, but their meaning is not constrained by the historical symmetry. As one of Okorafor's (2014: 39) extraterrestrial ambassadors announces in an abstract refrain that echoes through the novel, disrupting all claims to semantic fixity: 'We are change.' Transformed into a figure of unsettled alterity, Hugh Charles O'Connell (2016: 294) writes, the alien in this way 'shifts from being the representation of the colonizer to a point of identification for the colonized,' moving from 'the position of technologically-superior oppressor, conqueror, and abductor' to that of 'the perpetual other to Enlightenment conceptions of humanity.' If the alien body holds a mirror to the world in SF in general, and in postcolonial SF in particular, 'the mirror,' as Darko Suvin (1972: 374) wrote nearly fifty years ago, 'is [also] a crucible.'

Extending a rich and ongoing critical conversation about the meanings of extraterrestrial life in African SF, this essay reads Tade Thompson's remarkable Wormwood Trilogy (2016, 2019a, 2019b), alongside an archive of realist fiction, historical writing, and political theory concerned with what Chinua Achebe calls in *No Longer at Ease* (1960/1987: 30) the 'alien institution' of the postcolonial state. At once a 'monstrous' (Táíwò 2017: 66) inheritance from the colonial past and the primary engine of postcolonial development, the state, like the alien body itself, is caught in a crosscurrent of historical inertia and unstable futurity: a site of disillusionment and identification, frustration and enchantment. I argue in the first section that the figure of the 'alien state' functions in two major ways in postcolonial African (and Africanist) writing: first, as a rhetorical register within which to raise questions about the strangeness and exogeny of state institutions; and, second, as platform for proposals to Africanize, humanize, or otherwise de-alienate the state in the long wake of imperial contraction. Turning then to the Wormwood Trilogy, a sprawling story of first contact set in mid-twenty-first-century Nigeria, I examine how the alien encounter allows Thompson to reconstruct or, in Wole Soyinka's (1996) terms, to 'remap' African state power. Refracting the future history of an independent 'free state' through the extraterrestrial invasion plot, Thompson's novels, I argue, are grounded in a

speculative experiment in state-building, offering a kind of Africanfuturist rewriting of Plato's *Republic*, a text that Kaaro, the Trilogy's initial narrator and protagonist, begins reading in the first pages of the first volume (Thompson 2016: 4). Constrained, however, by the apocalyptic horizons of the contemporary Capitalocene, by Nigerian national history, and ultimately by a formal friction within the Trilogy's generic layering, the utopian potential of Thompson's near-future social democratic republic never quite materializes, suggesting more broadly, as Tejumola Olaniyan (2017) has recently argued, that the postcolonial state is best understood as neither a friend nor an enemy but as a stranger: a necessary but necessarily alien presence resistant to projects of worldly domestication.

The Alien State and its Futures

By the 'alien state' I do not mean to extend the roster of pathologies—weakness, fragility, corruption, failure, and so forth—which have proliferated in academic and journalistic discussions of African (but not only African) states since the sovereign debt crises of the 1980s (see Young 2012). Nor do I mean to suggest that the state as such—a set of institutions holding, in the barest, Weberian sense, a monopoly on legitimate violence within a clearly defined territory—was without precedent on the African continent prior to the colonial encounter. Rather, before turning to Thompson's novels, this section examines how the alien, both in the abstract sense of 'the stranger' and in the more specific sense of extraterrestrial life, offers an enduring and multivalent figure for articulating the historical contradictions and speculative futures of postcolonial sovereignty.

These contradictions begin, unavoidably, with the institutionalization of colonial power and the subsequent inheritance of colonial states after formal independence. 'At the very core of' modern colonial state formation during the interwar period, as Crawford Young (1994: 44) describes, 'was [the state's] definition as an alien other': an emergent locus of 'unconditional' (Mbembe 2001: 26) authority over a subject population within a space determined not by the geographical claims of existing communities but the 'exigencies of colonial conquest' (Olaniyan 2000: 269). From its origins, as Claude Ake (1996: 3) writes, the colonial state in Africa was thus doubly characterized by 'its absolutism and its arbitrariness.' On the one hand, colonial states took on massive administrative roles in the production and reproduction of colonial societies, violently rerouting the existing sources of political, economic, and cultural development towards the extractive demands of the world market and the practical necessities of maintaining and expanding colonial order. 'Since the colonial state was called upon by the peculiar circumstances of the colonial situation to carry out so many functions—indeed to do everything—it was all powerful' (2), in theory, at least, if never quite in practice (see Herbst 2000). On the other hand, there was, broadly speaking, no effort by colonial states to translate arbitrary domination into hegemony, much less popular legitimacy for alien rule. As Achille Mbembe (2001) argues, the racialized space between the European and the 'native' made such a project both unnecessary and unfeasible within the colonial imaginary. Managed through various and shifting arrangements of direct repression and indirect power, the 'native,' Mbembe (26, emphasis in original) writes, 'was totally alien' to the colonial state, a *'thing* of power' who could not properly consent to nor, within the racialized juridical apparatus, legally dispute

colonial authority. The colonial state developed—never without resistance and contestation, to be sure—not through the incorporation of rights-bearing citizens but rather through the double alienation of subjects from the state and the state from its subjects.

The event of formal decolonization, whether achieved through a war of national liberation or a negotiated handover of state power, was shadowed by the problem of colonial inheritance—the problem, as Thompson puts it in *The Rosewater Redemption* (2019b: 90), of '[h]ow to save the world from aliens, yet keep their infrastructure.' Postcolonial governments in the late 1950s and 1960s faced a range of formal challenges in their efforts to decolonize the inherited state forms: a color bar formally or informally inscribed in virtually all state institutions from the military to the post office; the near total absence of democratic mechanisms of governance by which to incorporate a newly (if incompletely) enfranchised national community; the attenuated linkages or 'bifurcation' (Mamdadi 1996) between the state's central authority and the country's rural spaces; the extractive and extroverted orientation of a state-led economy; and the specter of 'corruption' or, more precisely, 'a pattern of "surplus absorption" that fostered the conspicuous consumption of urban elites and sub-elites in bureaucratic employment' (Arrighi 2002: 11). In spite of a coordinated effort to ameliorate these structural and acute conditions of colonial alienation, particularly through the deracialization of the civil service (see Mamdani 1996), decolonization and the promise of collective self-determination sharpened a longstanding crisis of legitimacy as 'the people became dissatisfied with the state … in part because it showed itself to be too closely hewed to the monster that the colonial state was' (Táíwò 2017: 65-6). Independence, as Ayi Kwei Armah lamented in 1967, was less about revolutionizing than reforming the colonial state apparatus: replacing the 'white cap [on] the colonial bottle,' but leaving the form itself basically intact. 'The primary aim of post-World War II nationalist agitation,' he writes, 'was not to overturn or to break down this structure, but to push the white occupiers out of their commanding positions and to install Africans in their place' (1967: 26).

This initial crisis of legitimacy was decisive for the African 'literature of disillusionment' (Lazarus 1986: 52) that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. As Tejumola Olaniyan (2017: 5) describes, prominent West African writers including Achebe, Armah, and Soyinka 'raised several questions, especially formal and epistemological, about the nature of the new postcolonial state':

> the strangeness of its structure, the systemic ease with which its rules are disregarded with impunity especially by those who rule, its alien and alienating language, its overtly vulgar class character, its enthronement of money as the solvent of all values (in newly and unevenly monetized societies), its imponderable bureaucracy, its radically different codes of access to personal fulfillment and participation in the public realm. ... The literature, in short, proclaims the illegitimacy of the new state and its authority.

It is worth emphasizing here that first-generation postcolonial writers, working in the 'alien and alienating' languages of colonial rule, often frame these formal and epistemological

questions in terms of an alien encounter. Extending a passage quoted above, for example, Achebe (1960/1987: 30) writes that the late-colonial government of Nigeria 'was "they." It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble.' Reflecting more abstractly on the pitfalls of the colonial bequest in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973/2000: 268), Armah figures the emergence of the postcolonial state in similar terms: 'it was not power over our people we wanted, but the liberation of all of us from alien power; … if we were content, eager, in fact, to move into the seats of alien control ourselves, then we could not be liberators but traitors.' 'Alien,' in both cases, crystalizes the epistemological complex of exogeny, strangeness, vulgarity, and illegitimacy identified by Olaniyan, functioning as a mundane shorthand for the structural protraction of colonial absolutism and arbitrariness beyond what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (qtd. in Lazarus 1987: 55) has called 'flag independence.'

Writing a few decades later, Soyinka both adapts and extends the figure of the alien state in his book of lectures, *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996), giving a specifically extraterrestrial form to Achebe's 'alien institution' and Armah's 'seats of alien control.' 'Under a dictatorship,' Soyinka (1996:139) writes of General Sani Abacha's military regime in Nigeria (1993-98), 'a nation ceases to exist. All that remains is a fiefdom, a planet of slaves regimented by aliens from outer space. The appropriate cinematic equivalent would be those grade B movies about alien body-snatchers.' More than an irreverent aside, Soyinka's reference to 'aliens from outer space' draws on the historical affinity between the alien invasion plot and the colonial encounter, using what Haywood Ferreira (2003) calls a narrative of 'second contact' as an indictment of the postcolonial state under military rule. Insofar as he abrogates the nation's right to collective self-determination, the military dictator would seem to annul the qualified hope of the postcolonial event and return the country to a condition of alien domination. But there is also something derivative, predictable, unimaginative—in a word, 'grade B'—about Abacha in particular, which clarifies Soyinka's cinematic equivalence. Marked by extrajudicial political violence and spectacular corruption (see Apter 2005), Abacha's presidency offered a kind of spiritual sequel to that of his immediate predecessor General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, himself the latest in a line of intermittent military heads of state as Nigeria rocked back and forth 'in a seesaw movement between civilian and military regimes' (Mamdani 1996: 26) beginning with the coup that overthrew the country's First Republic in 1966. Nearly forty years after independence, in the wake of the literature of disillusionment, the figure of the alien state appears, for Soyinka, tragically old-fashioned, one more rerun of a Cold War film about 'alien body-snatchers.'

And yet, extraterrestriality remains for Soyinka and others an important figural element in the ongoing project to decolonize or, more fundamentally, to 'humanize' the state—to 'remap' its institutions, codes, and mechanisms in such a way as to finally abolish the morbid symptoms of colonial alienation. In *The Open Sore*, a 'personal narrative of the Nigerian crisis' that transforms into a broader theoretical engagement with the histories and futures of postcolonial nation-states in general, Soyinka sketches two divergent programs for bringing the alien state down to earth: an instrumentalist project of institutional reform, on the one hand, and a structural project to remake the state itself, on the other.

First, Soyinka offers the familiar pairing of development and democratization as reformist strategies for de-alienating the state. If the project of state-led development has largely failed to realize the global 'convergence' forecast by midcentury political economists, leading instead to a broader 'African crisis' (Arrighi 2002) by the end of the twentieth century, for Soyinka (1996: 111) this is because this project was guided in part by a range of conflicting 'abstractions' derived from 'extraterrestrial perceptions of society.' He mentions, for example, a single-minded fixation among economists and politicians on apparently objective measures of economic growth (like GDP per capita), 'ill-digested notions of Marxist economic centralization' (118), and the dogmatic liberalization schemes attached by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to debt restructuring programs in the 1980s and 1990s. 'Humanity,' Soyinka (1996: 118) insists, however, 'is not abstract' and he argues that the success or failure of the Nigerian state should be measured not by these categories, much less by the pseudoscientific indices of state 'fragility' or 'failure' that gained prominence in same period (see Marx 2008), but rather, following a broader shift toward so-called 'human development' in the 1990s, in terms of the state's capacity to facilitate the provision of tangible human services: healthcare, potable water, food production and distribution, electric power, public transportation, and education. The measure of a functional state, Soyinka (1996: 118) writes, 'can only be addressed on the material plane. The ledger book is where to look, not any mystery text of pious intentions or abstract notions.'

To achieve this humanizing shift in developmental priorities, Soyinka argues, requires a related democratization of a state form infamously plagued by fraud, corruption, and (in another gesture towards SF) the seizure of state power by 'the uniformed mutants who erupt from time to time on our national landscapes' (1996: 141). The annulled national election of 12 June 1993, which resulted in the extension of military rule in Nigeria under Abacha, functions in this way as the book's instigating trauma. 'The hands of the nation clock,' Soyinka (143) writes, 'were stopped on a day that, ironically, recorded its birth. If the nation is to live, its resuscitation must commence where its heart first stopped beating.' To move beyond the interregnum of military rule and material deprivation resulting from the oil crash of the 1980s, which are figured here as a kind of living death for the national organism, requires a patriotic conviction, professed at length by Soyinka himself in this text, in the therapy of democratic transition and the related domestication of the alien state by its human subjects.

Against this instrumentalist model of state domestication, Soyinka juxtaposes more radical efforts to 'physically remap' (1996: 143) African states through projects of 'collective dissociation' (142). In particular, subnational or transnational efforts to violently reconstruct postcolonial states around ethnicity, religion, or other forms of collective affiliation present a revolutionary alternative to the gradualist trajectories of development and democratization, recasting the colonial endowment as fundamentally unreformable. Implicit in such projects—Soyinka mentions Eritrea, Rwanda, and Sudan, although one could offer many other examples—is, in other words, a structural critique of the postcolonial state as an institution incapable of remaking itself through the inherited mechanisms of colonial governance. To decolonize the state, in this sense, is to reconstruct it entirely, either through the development of novel forms of sovereignty or through the

reclamation of indigenous models of governance. As a kind of fragmentary counterpart to the aspirations of Pan-African unity, delinking from the nation-state and starting anew holds out the promise of a 'humanized space of organic development' (133) freed from the exogenous structures of extraterrestrial rule. And yet, as Soyinka emphasizes, programs of collective dissociation are themselves susceptible not only to retributive state violence (to which I will return later in relation to Thompson's rewriting of the Biafran War in the Wormwood Trilogy) but also to the same 'games of power' by which postcolonial states reproduce themselves as structures of alienation: 'dubious claims on resources, … illusions of status conferment from mere spatiality, religious mandate, [or] ethnic purity' (143). The risk, for Soyinka, particularly in state-building projects founded in appeals to religious and ethnic legitimacy, is the substitution of one set of 'extraterrestrial perceptions of society' for another.

To these two horizons of futurity—one that sees the alien state as malfunctioning but ultimately reformable, and another that demands its wholesale reconstruction—Olaniyan adds an important theoretical dimension in his introduction to the recent collection *State and Culture in Postcolonial Africa: Enchantings* (2017). Both perspectives hinge upon a shared story of 'taming' or 'domesticating' the 'alien institution,' of finally recalibrating the state as a de-alienated 'friend' of the people. And, to a certain extent, Olaniyan argues, this shared project of befriending the state has been successful for the vanishingly small slice of the population either occupying positions of power or otherwise able to benefit from the state's patronage networks. For the vast remainder, however, the state remains little more than an abstract locus of arbitrary authority, if not, particularly for those subject to its repressive capacities, an outright 'enemy.' 'This,' Olaniyan (11) writes, 'is a key problem; whether they know it or not, both groups are losers, just unequally.' To realize the postcolonial state's potential as 'the most skillful and intensive articulator of vast resources, differences, and interests over vast territories' (11) requires, then, a different orientation to the state and its futures: not as a potential friend or enemy, but as an 'undomesticatable stranger' (12) resistant to capture by any individual (the military dictator, for instance) or group (ethnic, religious, and so forth). 'Such an attitude,' Olaniyan (12) writes, 'takes state estrangement as neutral normative, and procedurally demands a valiant suspension of our admittedly justified … prior assumptions of state enmity or friendliness in the fulfillment of its obligations and in the staking of claims by citizens.' Just as the alien body undergoes what Kodwo Eshun (2003: 299) calls a 'transvaluation' in postcolonial SF, transforming from a figure of the colonizer to a point of identification for the colonized, so too should the state be subject to a perspectival shift that recognizes what Olaniyan calls 'possibilities of strangeness' for the kinds of developmental and democratizing projects that Soyinka, for example, advocates. Revaluing the postcolonial state clears the way, that is, for a new kind of futurity propelled, not by projects of de-alienation, but rather by the cultivation of alienness as neutrality and objectivity, of detached and (as it were) usefully extraterrestrial sovereignty: 'This is the only kind of state that can manage Africa's constitutive diversity and complexity of needs today' (Olaniyan 2017: 12).

Turning to Thompson's novels, I argue that the Wormwood Trilogy, while engaged with the instrumentalist and structural orientations described by Soyinka, offers a speculative enactment of precisely the 'possibilities of strangeness' that Olaniyan highlights

here, using the alien invasion plot both to literalize a longstanding metaphor in postcolonial writing and to project futures of the state as a productively undomesticatable institution. Specifically, I show how Thompson represents, in meticulous and often mundane detail, a strange alignment of development and extraterretriality within his near-future 'free state' of Rosewater. And yet, if the Trilogy is able to revalue the postcolonial state in its productive otherworldliness, the novels also betray the precariousness of an alien state that both provokes and eludes the utopian imagination.

Remapping the Alien State in the Wormwood Trilogy

Marked by shifting perspectives, disorienting temporal leaps, and an eclectic style that 'pushes the tensile strength of [its] genres' (FitzPatrick 2018), Thompson's Wormwood Trilogy—*Rosewater* (2016), *The Rosewater Insurrection* (2019a), and *The Rosewater Redemption* (2019b)—is impossible to summarize neatly. Very briefly, the narrative follows an alien encounter centered in southwestern Nigeria in the mid-twenty-first century. As the titles of the three novels suggest, most of the action occurs within or in relation to Rosewater, a new city founded in 2055 when a massive alien 'biomass' (called 'Wormwood') emerges from the earth in a rural area roughly halfway between Lagos and Ibadan. Beginning as 'a shanty town of hopefuls' (2016: 9), an increasingly modern city emerges like a 'doughnut' around the alien structure, itself an impenetrable, bioluminescent dome, which 'opens' briefly each year to heal any and all illnesses, including, with grotesque consequences, death itself. By the time of the present narrative thread in *Rosewater*, the city has grown to a population of six million as migrants continue to flow towards the miraculous municipality.

Over the course of the Trilogy, two major conflicts take shape. The first places Rosewater at odds with the Federal Republic of Nigeria (one assumes the contemporary Fourth Republic, established in 1999), which sees the alien as both a threat to national security and a potentially exploitable 'resource' very much like the crude oil and natural gas reserves in the Niger Delta. As Nigeria moves to assert political and economic control over the 'rowdy conurbation' (2019b: 52), the ad hoc local government, led by its charismatic mayor Jack Jacques, insists on Rosewater's autonomy, sparking a brief 'insurrection' in 2067 with clear parallels to the Biafran War. Unlike the breakaway Republic of Biafra, however, Rosewater prevails in the struggle with federal forces after mobilizing the alien as a defensive weapon, thus confirming the city's legal status as a landlocked 'free state' (2019a: 158) within Nigeria. Independence, however, inaugurates a new struggle with the alien species, the Homians, whose biomass gradually comes into focus as merely the first step in a broader and more malevolent planetary colonization scheme. After a tempestuous period of dual power in which Rosewater's leaders share sovereignty over the city-state with a cadre of Homian ambassadors, the interstellar cold war reaches an ambiguous conclusion to which I will return.

While Thompson's fastidiously imagined near-future world opens up a range of interpretive possibilities (see FitzPatrick 2018, 2020), my focus here is on the Trilogy's curious amalgamation of the 'alien body' and the emergent city-state. Developing around the extraterrestrial dome, Rosewater's material infrastructure, its political economy, and its modes of governance are inseparable from the extraterrestrial biomass. And what stands

out immediately about the weird republic is the extent to which it conforms, at least initially, to Soyinka's terrestrializing vision of a state mobilized as an engine of human development and democratization. Due to the yearly openings of the dome, for example, the citizens of Rosewater receive free and universal healthcare delinked from market forces—and from the medical profession altogether—as the 'healing' simply drifts through the air. The alien also generates unlimited and apparently sustainable energy from its throbbing 'ganglia,' which allow for the rapid electrification of a rural zone otherwise cut off from Nigeria's notoriously unreliable power grid after an inverter is invented to harness the alien's power.

Financed by an influx of foreign capital, particularly from Russia and China (the two competing superpowers left when the United States 'goes dark' after the alien arrives), the local government supplements the productive force of the alien biomass through a series of ambitious infrastructure projects aiming, as the mayor puts it, to 'bring modernity and prosperity to every citizen of Rosewater' (2019a: 143). In less than a decade, the city introduces a reliable and seemingly free public transportation system, digital and physical networks for electric vehicles, universal access to potable water, and modern sewerage, a final triumph Thompson underscores repeatedly throughout the texts. Against this material background, the city is characterized by an expanding, rights-based inclusion of citizens into Rosewater's nascent civil society. Even after the war with Nigeria, for instance, the free state maintains a policy of open borders for all who enter 'in good faith' (2019b 78). A site of multiethnic and multiracial immigration, Rosewater becomes, as well, an important refuge for LGBTQ Nigerians when the local government, in contravention of federal law, abolishes 'any previous prohibition of same-sex marriage and adoption, homosexual acts, transvestism, fertility treatment and others not mentioned' (78). The novels, in turn, register the city's intensifying democratic plurality at a formal level. Narrated initially by Kaaro, a part-time government agent with unique access to the alien's cyberspace-like 'xenosphere,' *The Rosewater Insurrection* and *The Rosewater Redemption* become increasingly kaleidoscopic, shifting voices and narrative loci with each of Thompson's brief chapters.

Beginning with the large-scale decommodification of basic needs, the coextension of the alien body and the local state apparatus would seem, paradoxically, to humanize the latter, offering Rosewater's citizens the improved standard of living and social democratic expansion forecast but largely unrealized by the various and competing 'developmental futurisms' (Eshun 2003: 292) of the twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. In the context of other recent African fictions of extraterrestrial invasion, one of the remarkable things about Thompson's Trilogy is that it imagines this society in meticulous detail. As Matthew Eatough (2017) has argued, Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) similarly uses the alien body to project a state-led developmentalist future for Nigeria. Okorafor's vision of alien-inspired 'change,' however, remains largely abstract, ultimately utilizing the figure of the alien to 'condense a series of vague, unnamed structural processes into a single allegorical image' (Eatough 2017: 252), itself open to ideological appropriation by, for instance, the austerity regimes enjoined by the World Bank and IMF. By contrast, Wormwood works as the narrative impetus for imagining the lived actualization of a fully articulated developmentalist state, which, for Thompson—as for Soyinka, who is referenced

throughout the novels—is characterized not by the 'generalized notion of institutional reform' (251), but rather by the immediate and tangible provision of '*Human Services*' (Thompson 2019b: 233): health care, energy, water, food, transportation. Blessed by the miraculous biosphere, the city-state realizes, albeit briefly and on a small scale, Soyinka's instrumentalist vision of an 'alien institution' finally domesticated by and for its citizens.

Even so, as Hugh Charles O'Connell (2020) rightly warns, it would be a mistake to read Thompson's Trilogy as an unambiguously utopian state-building exercise. Thompson's projection of African near-futurity, O'Connell argues, remains self-consciously constrained by the apocalyptic horizons of climate change and capitalist globalization, which shade and complicate Rosewater's experiment in human development. We learn, for example, that Nigeria is shielded by a continent-wide wall of trees planted by the African Union in the early twenty-first century to delay the inevitable southward encroachment of the Sahara Desert, that the '[d]escent of the jet stream due to global warming raises the possibility of regular snow storms in the sub-Saharan regions' (2019a: 26), and that the Gulf of Guinea has become a war zone as corporations and nation-states compete to corner the West African market in desalinated water. Under these conditions, Rosewater can never be more than a fragile oasis amidst the slow violence of the Capitalocene, which remains firmly entrenched on a global scale in Thompson's novels, intruding from the background of the narrative as the insuperable limit of utopian projection. '[W]restl[ing] with futurity at a time when so many potential futures seem to be annulled,' Thompson's is a vision of futurity without deliverance, a form of 'utopicity without utopianism' (O'Connell 2020: 109).

As a state-building project, Rosewater is also constrained by a series of historical absences and eruptions that constrict the emancipatory potential of the alien's presence. As Thompson (2019b: 65) narrates, 'one of the problems of Rosewater has been a lack of history. It has no age. It is new. There are no tales of plucky escaped slaves or invading Arabs. No old art, or monasteries, or Portuguese missions.' Emerging out of Nigeria's tangled pasts, the city-state seems, nevertheless, partially untethered from historical memory, registering as history only the immediate past of alien's arrival and the city's rapid development from what Abdoumaliq Simone (2016) calls a 'rough town' of 'lean-tos and wooden shacks' (Thompson 2016: 83) to the 'City of the Future' (Thompson 2019a: 90), as Rosewater brands itself for the international tourist market. But national history is not so easily displaced, and Thompson enumerates the historical wreckage—what he calls as 'the detritus of the nation's communal consciousness'—that propels and undergirds the city's experiment in state remapping:

> The blood and sweat of slaves in a stew of their own anguish at being removed from their motherland, the guilt of slavers, the prolonged pain of colonization, the riots, the CIA interference, the civil war, the genocide of Igbos, the tribal pogroms, the terrorism, the killing of innocents, the bloody coups, the rampant avarice, the oil, the dark blood of the country, the rapes, the exodus of the educated class… (2016: 225).

One of the productive contradictions of these novels is that even as the alien body opens the possibility of displacing this traumatic 'detritus' by realizing a quasi-utopian free state seemingly better suited than the Nigerian nation-state to promoting human flourishing, Rosewater can never quite realize the promise of pure futurity. National history tends, rather, to reappear in these texts, always with a SF-inflected difference, as a kind of violent reflux that distorts the Trilogy's exercise in humanization.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the speculative 'insurrection' of 2067, which rewrites, exactly one century later, the Biafran War (1967-1970). After the Nigerian government attempts to assassinate Jack Jacques and replace him with a leader more amenable to the federal state's extractive demands, Rosewater declares unilateral independence in a statement that echoes Emeka Ojukwu's *Ahiara Declaration* of 1969 while respecting the relative 'privilege' (Thompson 2019a: 158) of Rosewater in relation to the Republic of Biafra. The federal government responds by blockading the city, commencing an aerial bombardment of the civilian population, and instigating a campaign of terror following 'the CIA destabilization manual' (2019b: 200). 'Try to reflect,' the Nigerian president suggests to the mayor as casualties mount within the city, 'on what happened to the last group who tried to become autonomous from Nigeria' (2019a: 104).

Winning its independence with the assistance of the newly weaponized alien biomass, which here again takes on the statist function of a military apparatus, Rosewater seems in some sense to fulfill in the twenty-first century the abortive state-building project of the Republic of Biafra. Although not framed in terms of the ethnic secession—indeed, Thompson's multicultural free state would seem largely free of ethnic conflict—the city-state embodies, nevertheless, the 'positive commitment to build a healthy, dynamic and progressive state' (Ojukwu 1969: 7) loosed from both the dictates of a distant federal government and 'economic exploitation by alien commercial firms' (9). As the mayor says: 'We have an opportunity here. This is a new society, a new beginning' (2019a: 11). At the same time, however, the acute violence of the insurrection, with which Thompson lingers throughout the second volume, returns the reader to 'the detritus of the nation's communal consciousness' described in the list above: civil war, genocide, rape, pogroms, terrorism, the killing of innocents. The effect here is to draw the City of the Future back towards precisely the traumatic national past with which it seeks to break, and thus to reframe Thompson's vision of near-futurity as a kind of historical recursivity routed back to the twentieth century just as it projects forward towards a 'new beginning' in the twenty-first. The temporal horizon of Thompson's experiment, in other words, is not quite the uncontaminated *novum* of radical historical otherness but a futurity marked by a residual historical inertia. Like the so-called 'reanimates' of Rosewater—the dead human beings brought back to life by the biomass's miraculous healing only to rehearse the banal routines of their previous lives—the narrative of what Soyinka calls 'collective dissociation' tends to fall unconsciously into the habitual grooves of historical repetition.

The most important barrier to Thompson's near-future experiment in state building, however, appears to be genre itself. As *The Rosewater Redemption* moves towards an inevitable confrontation between humanity and the extraterrestrial species, the Trilogy confronts the formal problem of unraveling the alien invasion plot while preserving its state-building experiment: the problem, once again, of '[h]ow to save the world from aliens,

yet keep their infrastructure' (Thompson 2019b: 90). The initial solution to this problem is a form of interstellar hybridity. The Homians, we learn, are no longer really a species at all, but the digitized personalities of an extinct alien race persisting after an ecological catastrophe on their home world through the supplements of advanced biotechnology. In search not only of a new planet but also of new host organisms in which to implant their computerized personae, the Homanians reach a deal with the local government. The reanimates, who emerge in the Trilogy as kind of abject surplus population and a perennial problem for the city's leaders, will be delivered to alien scientists for Homanian implantation. In exchange, life in the free state will proceed largely as before, as Rosewater's citizens are transformed in death into a hybridized alien-human life form. This trial period of multispecies coexistence, however, comes to an abrupt end when the Trilogy's protagonists, seeing the alien's endgame of total planetary assimilation, unite in a program of anticolonial violence, resulting in the re-extinction of the Homanian species, the disappearance of free state's constitutive alien presence, and, ultimately, the disintegration of Rosewater itself, which is promptly reincorporated into Nigeria as a 'no-man's-land' of '[h]ellish carnivores, hybrid creatures that defy description, sentient greenslime, and chemical contamination at every turn' (365).

The ephemerality of Rosewater, which exists as a city in Thompson's future history for only about thirteen years and as a free state for less than two, would seem to undermine the developmental futurism described above, revealing the *telos* of African social democracy as itself a fragile condition whose achievement in no way guarantees persistence. The problem of Rosewater is somewhat different, then, from the 'temporariness' Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio (2016) describe as a barrier to projections of African futurity. In Thompson's novels, it is not (or not only) that 'ostensibly temporary states become permanently stabilized and/or institutionalized, whether by default or by design,' including, for example, '[h]umanitarianism, aid, disaster assistance, population control, [and] public health interventions' (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016: 14). Rather—like the three republics displaced by military coups preceding the contemporary Nigerian state formation—an ostensibly durable institutional structure becomes, in spite of its achievements, provisional and impermanent, and is, in turn, reabsorbed as so much Benjaminian wreckage in the chronicle of national history.

At the same time, the collapse of Rosewater and the social democratic future it would seem to inaugurate brings us back around to Olaniyan's argument about the postcolonial state as a necessary and necessarily alien institution. As I have argued, the generic platform of the extraterrestrial invasion paradoxically holds open the speculative space within which the Trilogy realizes, if only temporarily, an authentically humanized state. Fused to the alien body, Rosewater seizes upon what Olaniyan calls the 'possibilities of strangeness' and gives them mundane expression in a republic characterized by the universal provision of 'human services' undergirded by democratic expansion. To bring the alien invasion plot to its violent conclusion, however, effectively nullifies the experiment in state construction. When this alien platform disappears, this speculative space shrinks to nothing, or rather to 'one giant biohazard sign' (Thompson 2019b: 365) on national maps. Thompson's novels facilitate, then, a usefully dialectical orientation that refuses the sure-sighted recognition of

the postcolonial state as either a friend or an enemy. Only as a stranger, as an alien, the Wormwood Trilogy suggests, can the postcolonial state finally be brought down to earth.

Conclusion

There is a tendency in recent scholarship to treat the 'boom' in African SF as a rupture within postcolonial literary history—as a break with its familiar publishing models, its generalized investment in social realism, and, most importantly in this context, its reputed fixation on the nation-state as the preeminent vehicle of postcolonial futurity. Unlike their literary predecessors, third-generation postcolonial writers seem to locate African futures above, below, or in the interstices of state power: in the cosmopolitan networks of the late capitalist world-system, in the continent's emergent megacities (Lagos, Kinshasa-Brazzaville, Johannesburg, Nairobi), which 'exceed the administrative purview of any given state' (Marx 2017: 409), and in the informal economies and improvised social systems that sustain these 'rowdy conurbation[s]' (Thompson 2019b: 52). Buoyed by a longer history of postnational theory, contemporary African SF appears to confirm forecasts of an intensifying erosion of the nation-state by the tides of globalization.

As I have argued here, however, the state persists in contemporary African SF as an important catalyst for postcolonial writing. Thompson's novels both literalize a longstanding critique of colonial and postcolonial alienation and use the 'free state' of Rosewater to project an ambivalent future of Nigerian sovereignty. In this sense, the Wormwood Trilogy is extraordinary, but not unique. Blomkamp's *District 9*, for example, uses the alien invasion plot to reflect upon the unreconciled legacies of the Apartheid state, positioning the extraterrestrial 'prawns' and, in a racist reversal, expatriate Nigerians, as fundamentally 'alien to the civic and political order of Johannesburg and South Africa' (Quayson 2009). Written in part as a response to Blomkamp's film, Okorafor's *Lagoon* is more optimistic about reforming the alien state through democratized development, concluding with a speech from Nigeria's president in which he celebrates the arrival of technologically advanced extraterrestrials in Lagos as 'an important milestone in our march toward a maturing democracy' (2014: 276). These and other alien texts are part of a broader field of Afro- and Africanfuturist representations of reimagined African state forms: from the harmonious ethno-federalism of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) and the state as a post-apocalyptic resource manager in Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2009), to the realization of a Pan-African government in Abdourahman A. Waberi's alternative history *In the United States of Africa* (2006) and the Keynesian futurism of Deji Bryce Olukotun's space race novels *Nigerians in Space* (2014) and *After the Flare* (2017). Whether one likes it or not, African SF has an enduring 'stake in the state's future' (Marx 2008: 597).

From a critical perspective, coming to terms with this stake in the state demands not only an emphasis on breaks and ruptures, emergences and arrivals, but also on the political and aesthetic continuities that obtain across postcolonial literary history. This means, first of all, rehabilitating neglected traditions of speculative writing on the continent so as to 'resist the framing of Africa as a latecomer to science fiction' (Samatar 2017: 176). As Thompson (2018) writes in a recent article entitled, 'Please Stop Talking About The "Rise" of African Science Fiction,' 'Africans have been writing science fiction since at least the

1920s, and have produced bodies of work in literature and sequential art to the present day. … African science fiction is not rising. It is here.' Engaging this history of state futurism, however, will also require a broader reengagement with and defamiliarization of postcolonial writing in general, where traces of SF, however fragmentary and fugitive, can and will be found. It is time for African literary studies not only to inquire into the lineages of the present 'boom,' but also to ask, in Jane Bryce's (2009: 3) terms: 'have we been reading African [SF] all along without knowing it?.'

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