LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Geographies of African Futures

Matthew Eatough

Baruch College, City University of New York

Irikidzayi Manase

University of the Free State

Abstract:
If recent work in African literature is any indication, the future may be a more present concern across the continent than at any point since the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Following the critical and commercial success of Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2011) and South African Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2011), speculative fiction has entrenched itself as one of the most vibrant, innovative, and substantial bodies of work within the wider field of African fiction. The essays contained in this special issue investigate how such works of speculative fiction have become one of the main vehicles for the elaboration of new literary geographies. Faced with the uncertainties of the present neoliberal conjuncture and with emergent challenges to it, works of speculative fiction can construct imaginative templates to serve as cognitive maps for new, potentially more equitable forms of social organization.

Keywords: science fiction; African literature; futurology; strategic planning; infrastructure; alien.

Author contact: matthew.eatough@baruch.cuny.edu; ManaseI@ufs.ac.za

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If recent work in African literature is any indication, the future may be a more present concern across the continent than at any point since the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Following the critical and commercial success of Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2011) and South African Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*

(2011), speculative fiction has entrenched itself as one of the most vibrant, innovative, and substantial bodies of work within the wider field of African fiction. Specialty journals devoted to science fiction and other speculative genres have sprung up across the continent, from the groundbreaking Nigerian magazine *Omenana* (2014-) to the more recent digital venture Comic Republic (2016-). So, too, have a number of notable anthologies, including Ivor Hartmann's three-volume *AfroSF* series (2012-2018), Brittle Paper's *Africanfuturism: An Anthology* (edited by Wolfe Talabi; 2020), and Zelda Knight and Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki's *Dominion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora* (2021). On the big screen, big-budget and independent films have attempted to capture the look and feel of future societies, as seen in such decorated works as Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2010), and Nuotama Frances Bodomo's *Afronauts* (2014). There is now even an annual literary prize, the Nommo Awards, dedicated to recognizing the best in speculative writing by Africans across a range of genres.

Nor are fiction writers alone in their interest in the future. Over the past 30 years, many governments have turned to scenario planning and long-term strategic visions as a means for imagining the future of their countries.[1] This rhetoric of futurity has also been embraced by think tanks and private enterprises, several of which have adopted the name "African Futures" to signal the transformative nature of their services, including the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies (whose African Futures program offers forecasts on everything from demographics and agriculture to "free trade" and infrastructure development) and Jessica Berlin and Babajide Owoyele's African Futures platform (which specializes in connecting entrepreneurs with business and technology infrastructure).[2] On the more cultural end of the spectrum, Germany's cultural outreach organization, the Goethe-Institut, launched its own African Futures project in 2015, an ambitious multi-city festival that aimed to fuse together work from the arts, technology, and critical discourse. Featuring lectures, workshops, fiction, art, and a heavy dose of experimental virtual reality (VR) films,[3] the Futures festival neatly encapsulated how speculation and the speculative have become key terms within the joint fields of literature, business, and governmentality, moving fluidly in and across the discourses associated with these enterprises.

The popularity enjoyed by the discourse of futurity within such diverse industries speaks to a pervasive sense that something transformative is afoot in Africa. And while this brave new world isn't quite present as of yet, it seems that many are eager for it to arrive. Which raises two obvious questions: Why the future? And why now?

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Scholarship on science fiction tends to stress the genre's reliance on a dialectic between the present and an imagined future.[4] On the one hand, science fiction writers are every bit as rooted in their historical moment as any other writer; and for all that their writings purport to be about the future, they cannot help but be inflected by the ideology, political

concerns, and cultural context of the present. A canonical science fiction tale like H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* may be about Eloi and Morlocks, but it is also clearly a story about the polarization of the upper and lower classes in late-nineteenth century Britain (albeit one refracted through Wells's heterodox ideas about Marxism and evolution). The same holds true for everything from Isaac Asimov's Cold War-inflected futurology (a fantasy indebted to contemporary breakthroughs in computing technology and military simulations) to the more recent fiction of Nnedi Okorafor, where current events such as the Arab Janjaweed militia's attacks on black African settlements in the Darfur region of western Sudan are reworked into futuristic settings, as Joseph Kwanya notes in his essay for this issue.

On the other hand, the projection of one's narrative into an imagined future suggests a transformative break with present conditions—a utopian gesture toward radical difference and social change that offers the chance to think the world anew. After all, the fundamental premise of science fiction is that society might be structured otherwise. New technologies may lead to new forms of social organization, and the world we inhabit today may not—indeed, *will* not—be the one that we inhabit 100, 50, or even 20 years from now. In this sense, while science fiction may not be able to escape from the bounds of our present world, it contains in itself the desire for a new, more equitable society—and the resources with which to do so in fiction, if not in fact.

Such utopian gestures have been felt with particular force in the field of literary geography. In the introduction to their edited collection *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction* (2002), James Kneale and Rob Kitchin advocate for science fiction as a tool 'for thinking about present-day geographies, their construction, reproduction and contingency, and thinking [sic] through how we theorize and comprehend a wide range of concepts such as space, nature, subjectivity and reality' (2002: 9). For the literary geographer, the 'simultaneous difference and similarity' that the science-fictional text expresses vis-à-vis the world of the reader can be 'productive in developing new and imagined "real" geographies, much as the political influence of utopian or dystopian fiction draws its strengths from its movement between the known and the unknown' (10). This is especially the case for those social groups that have historically been excluded from control of the means of representation. As Jeff Vance Martin and Gretchen Sneegas (2020) note, the well-documented worldbuilding dimension of science fiction 'acts as both a site of struggle and a terrain for experimentation with real world possibilities' (16). Texts that outline alternative 'black, feminist, and queer geographies' shape not only our sense of what is imaginable in fiction, but also what we perceive as imaginable in the *real* world (18). 'In this way,' Martin and Sneegas continue, 'worldbuilding acts as a *dialectic*: our lived realities are defined and shaped by representations of speculative futures, even as acts of worldbuilding (re)produce situated, socio-culturally contingent understandings and framings of lived worlds' (16; emphasis in the original).

The attraction that this futural mode of worldbuilding has exerted on many artists, writers, and intellectuals across the African continent is understandable. As Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio (2016) note it in their introduction to the collection *African*

Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility, forecasts about Africa tend to filter their predictions through a well-worn language of 'crisis' and 'catastrophe,' one in which 'regional wars, disease, mismanagement of resources, [and] failed development' occupy a disproportionate amount of attention (5). For Goldstone and Obarrio, as for many of the writers and artists examined in this special issue, creating new representations of the world is perhaps the best way to displace such apocalyptic imagery from considerations of Africa and its possible futures. By imagining new geographies of lived and built spaces—from the often-invisible networks of infrastructural and energy regimes to more conspicuous distributions of wealth, education, and technology within and across local, national, and regional zones—creative writers are able to not only counter such reductive and generalizing portraits of what Africa is, but also to lay the imaginative ground for a nascent Africa 'yet to come' (to adapt AbdouMaliq Simone's ([2004] evocative phrase).

The essays contained in this special issue investigate how speculative fiction has become one of the main vehicles for the elaboration of such new geographies. Writing about the rise of modern logistics, Deborah Cowen (2014) observes that 'changing representations of space' are not simply passive reflections of developments in the external environment, but can also produce their own revolutions in the 'lived relations of space-time' (48). The same could be said for fiction. Faced with the uncertainties of the present neoliberal conjuncture and with emergent challenges to it, works of fiction can construct imaginative templates to serve as cognitive maps for new, potentially more equitable forms of social organization. This is one of the virtues of Tade Thompson's Wormwood trilogy, which, as Peter Ribic explains in his essay for this issue, attempts to redesign the urban landscape of the modern Nigerian cosmopolis in a manner that allows for universal delivery of services to all of its citizens. It is also the virtue of Tony Mochama's *Nairobi: A Night Guide through the City-in-the-Sun*, an adaptation of a newspaper column that Mochama wrote for Kenyan daily *The Standard* which Maureen Amimo reads as an extended exercise in mapping the invisible geographies of Nairobi's marginalized precariat. In these and the other texts discussed in this issue, fiction provides a vehicle for thinking-otherwise, one that can simultaneously displace established consensuses and propose new ones in their place.

One of the reasons why fictional texts are able to reimagine geography in this manner is because of their unique approach to space. Various scholars, such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and David Harvey, have contributed to the valorization of space in the study of literature and the development of literary geographies (see Tally 2017: 1-2). While the connection between the works of these scholars to the development of the field of literary geography has been the subject of contestation and revision (see Hones 2018; Tally 2020), the literary and cultural geographic concepts that these and others have developed have enabled scholars to analyze the textualities of different settings/places and times (a process notably facilitated through the Bakhtinian notion of the "chronotope"), or to discern clear and unthought-of linkages between spaces both lived and imagined (in what Foucault calls "heterotopias").

In the case of speculative fiction, the imaginative reconstructions and reorderings of space found in such work—and the temporalities that they inhabit—are constitutive of what we term literary geographic futurist fiction. As a genre, speculative fiction is explicitly concerned with alternative, graphic, and futurist geographies—that is, with those real and metaphoric maps of the world that exceed the normative cartographies of the postcolonial nation-state and of contemporary neoliberal globalization. The setting of such stories—their built, lived, and "known" nodes—describe emergent geographic imaginaries from which other perspectives and relationships can be construed. In the case of the texts examined in this special issue, the geographical imaginaries of the lived and built spaces, places, characters, and temporalities that make textual geographies may be those of the nation (say, Zambia or Egypt) or the city (Nairobi, Lagos, or Cairo). But regardless of the precise scale at which the narrative action take places, all of the texts analyzed here model new ways of seeing that mediate new literary and geographic senses of societal engagement. Even a site as intimately associated with the developmentalist postcolonial state as the hydroelectric dam—long an overdetermined signifier of modernity for postcolonial nations—can, in the right hands, tease out complex understandings about the nation, its infrastructure, and the significance of these technologies in imagining alternative technological, environmental, and developmental futures for the nation, as Mwaka Siluonde explains in her piece on Namwali Serpell's representation of the Kariba Dam in her novel *The Old Drift*.

What is perhaps most notable about such revisionary accounts of infrastructure is how they reimagine the relational linkages in the geography of texts. Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopia postulates that the linkages between spaces can be redrawn through counter-histories of those spaces, while Lefebvre's (1991) theory of relational spaces gestures towards an understanding of the interconnectedness between the lived, the material, and the imagined. The notion of the relational as an analytical tool in unpacking literary geographies is also highlighted by scholars such as Sheila Hones (2008) and Jon Anderson and Angharad Saunders (2015). We take from Hones's argument the idea that a text has complex spatial linkages and elicits multiple readings, an insight that the articles in this issue use to map multiple engagements with literary representations of infrastructure, with characters, and with geographical nodes and spaces and their interconnections. The articles in this issue thus articulate readings of familiar spaces that decenter established geographies and produce new, futurist ones in their place.

Doing so entails highlighting the entangled nature of the textual plots—that is, the way in which their geographies and narratives are multiple and constantly reforming. Thus, the various relations between literature and places/worlds should be viewed as phenomena 'that issue from the lived to the imagined world, and the imagined to the lived world, and [that] circulate and transform one another' (Anderson and Saunders 2015: 117). The articles presented here trace this dialectic between lived and imagined worlds as a way of stressing the dialogic nature and agency of the literary geographic text (Brosseau 2017), the narrative patterns they imprint, and the alternative and interconnected worlds they reflect. It is only once human and technological interactions are viewed *otherwise* in this manner

that Africanfuturist geographies emerge out of the vivid travels and experiences that attend everyday encounters with the built and lived spaces of the African continent.

The essays in this special issue take up science fiction as a particularly rich genre for investigating how fiction can produce such new geographies and alternative worlds. Many of the following essays focus in particular on how science fiction's imagining of new technologies can be used to chart the close connection between material infrastructure and the cartographies that it imposes on citizens' lives. In his contribution to the issue, 'The (Infra)Structural Limits and Utopian Horizons of *Lagos_2060*'s Africanfuturism,' Hugh Charles O'Connell examines how the science fiction anthology *Lagos_2060* (edited by Ayodele Arigbabu) uses fantastic depictions of new energy sources and fictionalized versions of present-day real-estate development projects—most notably the Eko Atlantic City project in Lagos—to reflect on Nigeria's place in the present-day capitalist world-system. As O'Connell notes, the stories contained in the anthology attempt to 'decenter the global north and recenter Lagos as the center of innovation,' partially by granting Lagos independent statehood and partially through the invention of new technologies for cold fusion and solar power. And yet, the dystopian nature of many of these tales suggest that the ideology of infrastructural development may itself be a false hope tied to capitalist notions of progress—a point that Mwaka Siluonde also makes in her essay, 'Infrastructural Crisis and Apocalypse in Serpell's *The Old Drift*.' As Siluonde notes, the meaning of development is a constantly shifting affair in Serpell's novel. New technological breakthroughs in the world of the novel keep changing the nature of what counts as 'development,' thereby rendering modernity as an object that is always just out-of-reach for Serpell's Zambian protagonists.

If infrastructure monumentalizes certain ways of seeing and navigating the world, repurposing the built environment for new functions offers one possible avenue for the creation of emergent geographies. This is the subject of Dominic Davies's and Maureen Amimo's essays, which each in their own way seek to document alternative uses of urban infrastructures and the futural orientations that such repurposings produce. In 'Contingent Futures and the Time of Crisis: Ganzeer's Narrative Art,' Davies explores the work of the Egyptian street artist and graphic novelist Ganzeer. Ganzeer's drawings during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Davies notes, took place at a time when (illegal) graffiti had transformed 'the visible infrastructure of the city into instantly "readable" streams of political messages,' a phenomenon that Ganzeer exploited by crafting simplified images 'legible to international readers,' thereby 'linking together different viewers at multiple scales.' Such 'contingent' forms, as Davies explains, join together audiences at different geographical and temporal scales to collectively bear witness to a moment of rupture that 'dislodges an authoritarian status quo, in the interests of building new revolutionary futures.' Amimo likewise stresses how contingent acts can generate counter-imaginaries of the city in 'An Afrofuturistic Reading of Nairobi in Tony Mochama's *Nairobi: A Night Guide through the City-in-the-Sun*.' Here, it is the improvisational renovation of older infrastructures in Nairobi that enables 'resilience and sustenance in the face of failures by the government.' Using Mochama's 'night guide' as her model, Amimo shows individual

citizens constructing night clubs out of failed funeral parlors, coffee houses out of former clubs, and books of out serialized newspaper columns. These creative appropriations bear testament to a shifting, ground-level geography that cannot be captured by the birds-eye perspective of modernist urban planning—one whose future, Amimo emphasizes, is radically and constitutively open.

Part of the virtue of science fiction for performing these dislocations of established cartographies is its well-known penchant for estrangement. Nowhere is this clearer than in the genre's frequent recourse to the alien contact narrative—a trope that both Ian P. MacDonald and Peter Ribic explore in their contributions to this issue. In "'May the Guest Come": African Azimuths of Alien Planetfall,' MacDonald traces a genealogy of Africanfuturist appropriations of the alien contact narrative. Beginning with the Congolese author Emmanuel Dongala's 1983 short story 'Jazz and Palm Wine,' and continuing through the work of the South African Neil Blomkamp's 2009 film *District 9*, the Ugandan Dilman Dila's 2014 story 'Itande Bridge,' and Nnedi Okorafor's 2014 novel *Lagoon*, the alien contact narrative, in MacDonald's account, serves as a way for authors to register both 'the horror of the Other's presence and simultaneously the state of becoming an Other.' MacDonald equates this knot with a foundational paradox of radical politics: that to imagine a post-capitalist world is also, in some respects, to refer back to the very capitalist world that one seeks to negate. One potential solution to this impasse is to try imagining a non-capitalist alien Other that would arrive as "guest," not as conqueror (as Nnedi Okorafor attempts in her novel *Lagoon*). Another is to treat alien otherness as a situated paradox that one tries to inhabit as best one can. This is the approach that Ribic identifies in Tade Thompson's Wormwood trilogy, an alien-invasion tale set in a futuristic mid-twenty-first century Nigeria. In "'How to Save the World from Aliens, Yet Keep Their Infrastructure": Remapping the Alien State in Tade Thompson's Wormwood Trilogy,' Ribic shows how Thompson's novels engage with a long history of referring to the postcolonial state as an 'alien' imposition on African communities. Placing Thompson into conversation with Wole Soyinka and other first- and second-generation African writers, Ribic argues that the Wormwood trilogy is torn between two contradictory affects: on the one hand, the desire to reform the postcolonial state into a more equitable institution, a fantasy that Thompson's novels realize by imaging an alien biomass capable of providing universal health care and limitless food, water, and transportation; and on the other hand, a pessimistic belief that the postcolonial state is too 'alien' to ever serve the needs of Nigerians. Ribic reads the end of Thompson's series, which sees the seemingly-benevolent alien Homanians initiate a full-scale invasion of Earth, as not simply an admission of the postcolonial state's limitations, but as instead making a case for continuing to view the state as neither friend nor enemy, but as a sort of resident alien.

Finally, Joseph Kwana's essay, 'Counterfactual Mythmaking in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* and *Who Fears Death*,' leads us to what might be the inevitable rejoinder to the inextricable embedding of African peoples into the tainted forms of global capitalism and the postcolonial nation-state: If reform is impossible, then why not tear down everything and begin anew? Examining Okorafor's duology of novels about a post-

apocalyptic world that has been shattered twice—first by Phoenix, when she explodes and overheats the world; and later by Onyesonwu when she kills every adult man in Durfa—Kwana treats Okorafor's fiction as a exercise in "counterfactual" thinking. By imagining a world that is otherwise than the one we inhabit, Okorafor is able to reflect on what would have to change in order rectify what she views as the world's primary ills—ethnic violence, the patriarchal control of women, and the US dominance of finance, science, and intellectual property.

Taken together, these essays chart the various ways in which science fiction and other future-oriented genres have begun to map out what we might call an African literary geography of the future. And while this geography, which is generated in futurist and speculative literary texts, is by no means a finished project, the vibrant state of Africanfuturistic writing from across the continent suggests that it will continue to evolve as an exciting and compelling site of inquiry.

Notes

[1] For more on strategic visions, see O'Connell's and Amimo's contributions to this special issue.

[2] See the programs' respective websites, https://futures.issafrica.org and https://www.african-futures.com.

[3] For more on the Goethe-Institut's African Futures project, see the Institut's retrospective of the project's various events, *African Futures: Thinking About the Future Through Word and Image* (edited by Lien Heidenreich-Seleme and Sean O'Toole). For a detailed account of the programming involving VR, see Jessica Dickson, 'Making Virtual Reality Film: An Untimely View of Film Futures from (South) Africa'.

[4] Some of the more notable explorations of this dialectic include Darko Suvin (1979), *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, and Fredric Jameson (2007), *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*.

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