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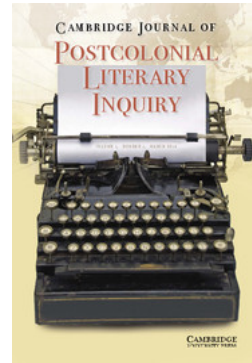Matthew Omelsky (2014). "After the End Times": Postcrisis African Science Fiction . The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 1, pp 33-49 doi:10.1017/pli.2013.2

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"After the End Times": Postcrisis African Science Fiction

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We live in a moment of "apocalyptic time," the "time of the end of time." Ours is a moment of global ecological crisis, of 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. 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 postcrisis African futures. Writers and filmmakers such as Nigeria's Efe Okogu and Kenya's 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 African science fictions. Okogu and Kahiu's futurist aesthetics are specters that loom over our present, calling for a radically reimagined politics of the now.

Keywords: African literature and film, African science fiction, African futures, Cyborgs, Anthropocene studies, Ecocriticism

Our current historical moment, as Slavoj Zizek 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."[1] In this era of the Anthropocene, the human has literally become a geological force, indisputably altering 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, rising sea levels, 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

1 Slavoj Zizek, "Living in the End Times." *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 261. An earlier draft of this essay appeared under the title " 'After the End Times': African Futures and Speculative Fictions" at http://sites.fhi.duke.edu/anthropocene/.

moment, whose darkness is ultimately *our own darkness*, being-unfamiliar-to-ourselves, being-enfolded, being-missing."[2] The lived moment blinds us to that which follows, to that which impends. We are blind to ourselves, to the human that will succeed us. Our knowledge of the future forms of life and dwelling in the postcrisis moment is occluded. Attempting to see through our darkness, how will politics, landscapes, and social spaces be rewritten on a postcrisis planet? What forms will life take, if any, in this unmapped, precarious world? 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 postcrisis 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. In these imagined African spaces, biopolitics, sovereignty, and the human have all been reconfigured. How might these postcrisis speculations allow us to rethink the political, both in our current moment and those of future forms of life on the continent? What might this new "aesthetics of crisis" mean for the intersections of African aesthetics and thought?

To be sure, postcrisis African fiction belongs to the larger emergent field of African science fiction (SF). Neill Blomkamp's 2009 film *District 9* is perhaps the best-known exemplar of African SF in recent years, part of an outpouring of contemporary South African science fiction, including Lauren Beukes's internationally lauded novels *Moxyland* (2008), *Zoo City* (2010), and *The Shining Girls* (2013). South Africa has been the continent's leading producer of speculative fiction for decades, perhaps going as far back as Ferdinand Berthoud's short story "The Man Who Banished Himself," first published in 1924 alongside the work of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard in the American pulp magazine *Weird Tales*.[3] Since the turn of the century, however, the burgeoning production and popularity of science fiction has become a continent-wide phenomenon. The recent anthology *AfroSF* (2013) attests to the geographical breadth of the genre, with contributions from Nigeria, the Gambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, as well as South Africa. *AfroSF* has become a foundational text of African science fiction.[4] It marks the current pulse of the field not only in its transnational composition, but also in its varying subgenres and themes. Its stories range from biopunk to erotica, space travel to horror. African intergalactic travelers terraform planets and move across galaxies. Some of the stories imagine a future Africa where Mandarin is spoken and the Chinese yuan is used. African robots and cyborgs pervade these works. If *AfroSF* and the forthcoming *AfroSF V2* are any indication, there will be a rush of science fiction in the next decade from across the continent.

Yet as promising as this outlook for African science fiction may be, scholarly attention lags behind. A 2009 special issue of the journal *African Identities* on

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2 Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000): 200.
3 Ferdinand Berthoud, "The Man Who Banished Himself," *Weird Tales* 3.1 (1924).
4 Ivor Hartmann, ed. *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (Johannesburg: StoryTime, 2013). See also my review of the anthology in "Brittle Paper: Matthew Omelsky, 'African Science Fiction Makes a Comeback: A Review of AfroSF,'" *Brittle Paper*, June 25, 2013, at http://brittlepaper.com/2013/06/african-science-fiction-comeback-review-afrosf-matt-omelsky/.

"The Black Imagination and Science Fiction" includes work on African SF, but its emphasis remains largely on science fiction in the African diaspora, where far more critical attention has been directed in the last several decades. The few other recent essays on African SF to appear in journals and edited volumes have primarily focused on the genre's three most internationally recognizable artists: Lauren Beukes, Nnedi Okorafor, and Neill Blomkamp. In short, few scholars have attempted to work through the diversity of African science fiction, linking artists, aesthetics, and social concerns continent-wide.[5] Beyond scholarly forums, African SF has gained a following online, largely in African culture blogs such as *Okayafrica* and *Africa Is a Country*, and the genre has even been featured in several prominent European gallery exhibitions, including at the Arnolfini Centre for Contemporary Art in Bristol, England, the Southbank Centre in London, and the 2013 Milan Design Week. This critical attention on the web and in gallery spaces has remained cursory, however, with much of it merely attempting to appraise the field in broad strokes.[6]

Focusing on postcrisis fictions, the aim here is to move beyond these sweeping assessments, to provide a series of close readings of a particularly prominent subset of African science fiction. African SF may be in its early stages, but it has quickly become a mainstay of African cultural production. It must be taken seriously alongside the now canonical genres of the continent, such as the old guard realism of Chinua Achebe, the experimental cinema of Djibril Diop Mambéty, and the transnational modernism of Chimamanda Adichie and Alain Mabanckou. Examining postcrisis fiction enables us to expand the critical discourse that African SF demands, to begin to work through the genre's figurations of power, ecology, and temporality, and how these operate in contemporary African thought.

The coupling of Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2010) and Efe Okogu's novella "Proposition 23" (2013) provides a productive point of entry into this burgeoning field in African science fiction.[7] On first glance, these two works reveal drastically different visions of a postcrisis 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 twenty-second century, in a freezing snow-covered Lagos, the biggest and most polluted city in the world. Beyond these

5   See Deirdre Byrne's brief 2004 overview of South African science fiction, "Science Fiction in South Africa," *PMLA* 119.3 (2004): 522–525. The following is a sampling of the small though growing body of African science fiction criticism: Andries Visagie, "Global Capitalism and a Dystopian South Africa: *Trenchman* by Eben Venter and *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes," *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative*, ed. Paul Crosthwaite (New York: Routledge, 2011); C. Stobie, "Dystopian Dream from South Africa: Lauren Buekes's *Moxyland* and *Zoo City*," *African Identities* 10.4 (2012): 367–380; De Witt Douglas Kilgore, "Beyond the History We Know: Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Nisi Shawl, and Jarla Tangh Rethink Science Fiction Tradition," *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory*, ed. Marleen Barr (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008); Mocke Jansen van Veuren, "Tooth and Nail: Anxious Bodies in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*," *Critical Arts* 26.4 (2012): 570–586.
6   The following are exemplary of this online and gallery space presence: *Okayafrica*, at www.okayafrica. com/2013/03/19/african-science-fiction-versus-western/; *Africa Is a Country*, at http://africasacountry. com/africa-in-science-fiction/; *Afrocyberpunk*, at www.afrocyberpunk.com/; *Milan Design Week*, at www. afrofuture.it/afrofuture/home; *Arnolfini*, at www.arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/superpower-africa-in-science-fiction.
7   *Pumzi*, DVD, directed by Wanuri Kahiu (Focus Features, 2011); Efe Okogu, "Proposition 23," *AfroSF*, ed. Ivor Hartmann (Johannesburg: StoryTime, 2013).

superficial differences, however, lie parallels in figurations of topography, biopower, and (non)human life. Both narratives take place in the wake of nuclear catastrophe, and their landscapes bear the scars of this havoc. Authoritarian power saturates these postcrisis fictions. And both articulate a post-Fanonian revolutionary subject that aims to reconstitute life beyond the coercion of biopower. These two exemplary works of postcrisis African fiction break through the darkness of our lived moment to imagine African forms of life after the dual crisis of ecology and capital.

In the decade since science fiction began to appear across the continent, this postcrisis subgenre has proven a consistent current. The writer who in many ways opened up the African postcrisis field is Nnedi Okorafor, first with her young adult novel *The Shadow Speaker* (2007), and more recently with her first adult novel *Who Fears Death* (2013). Both of these works are futurist coming-of-age novels set in the barren deserts of post-nuclear-apocalyptic Africa. Although not quite a *postcrisis* story, another important work by Okorafor is "Moom!," which opens the *AfroSF* collection with an innovative take on crude oil pollution and aquatic life forms, set in the waters off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria. Aside from Okorafor's "Moom!" and Efe Okogu's "Proposition 23," there are several other postcrisis and ecocrisis stories in *AfroSF*, including Nick Wood's "Azania," Mia Anderne's "Brandy City," and Martin Stokes's "Claws and Savages." Postcrisis fiction is one of the most diverse, cohesive, and thematically complex subgenres of African science fiction today. Putting Okogu's "Proposition 23" and Kahiu's *Pumzi* in conversation with each other opens us to the range of this subgenre, its far-reaching literary and filmic aesthetics, and its varied politics and representations of social space. Indeed, these two texts reveal just how critical postcrisis fiction is to contemporary African thought and aesthetics.

At stake in the work of Okogu and Kahiu is a nascent politics and aesthetics of the *African* Anthropocene. A continent that has been seized for nearly 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 turn to articulate the ontological paradox that we may soon face: that life may one day exist on an Earth that no longer sustains life. Wanuri Kahiu and Efe Okogu force us to question the possibility of reconstituted life, both human and nonhuman, on a postcrisis African continent.

Situating Postcrisis Fiction

Postcrisis African science fiction, like much contemporary film and literature, has emerged since the turn of the century in response to worldwide ecological crisis. Heeding this crisis, the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen has argued that since the industrial revolution the Earth has transitioned from the epoch of the Holocene into that of the Anthropocene. The human lies at the center of this shift in geological time. We now dominate "biological, chemical, and geological processes on Earth." Largely through our incessant burning of fossil fuels in the last century and a half, we have caused global temperatures and sea levels to rise, threatening food supplies around the world, not to mention the lives of millions living in coastal areas. Air and water pollution have marred densely populated areas. Humans have caused innumerable

species to become extinct, and in turn have genetically engineered many others into existence. The Anthropcene marks the dissolution of the human-nature divide. For Crutzen and the environmental journalist Christian Schwägerl, "It's we who decide what nature is and what it will be."[8]

Importantly, this shift in geological thinking has made waves among scholars in the humanities, serving as a catalyst for new ways of imagining temporality, geopolitics, and social life. Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" is perhaps the most canonical of the growing body of anthropocenic social theory to date. For Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene necessitates what he calls "species thinking," a temporal perspective that conceives of the human as one of innumerable species on the planet, all sharing a deep history that reaches back thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of years. Chakrabarty espouses a new form of universalism organized around this unifying, nonessentialist notion of species. Instead of the dialectic of historical movement that produces Hegel's universal, species thinking establishes a figure of the universal "that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe."[9]

Although Chakrabarty has looked to notions of temporality to work through our anthropocenic moment, others have placed more emphasis on the social and the political. Ursula Heise, for instance, has established the term *ecocosmopolitanism* in an attempt to traverse regional and national ecological concerns. Heise envisions "planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds," which would attend to the different forms of environmentalism throughout the world yet simultaneously articulate a broader sense of a "global biosphere."[10] Rob Nixon makes a similar gesture toward the transnational in his treatise *Slow Violence*, but from a postcolonial studies perspective. Nixon puts forward the idea of a global ecological sphere of concern focused on the populations of the "global South"—what he calls the "environmentalism of the poor"—while taking care to attend to the particular ecological discourses and predations present throughout the postcolonial world.[11]

Not only has the Anthropocene indelibly marked social theory, it has also, of course, greatly influenced global aesthetics. World science fiction is arguably the genre that best speaks to our anthropocenic moment with its representations of (post) apocalypse and ecological crisis. Postcrisis African SF finds close relations, to be sure, in European and American apocalyptic SF beginning in the 1950s and the SF narratives of ecological collapse that emerged in the 1970s. The nuclear fallout narrative commenced in earnest in the early years of the Cold War, with iconic SF works such as Ray Bradbury's short fiction collection *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), Judith Merril's suburban postapocalyptic novel *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950), and Nevil Shute's *On*

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8   Paul Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl, "Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos," *Yale Environment 360*, January 24, 2011, at http://e360.yale.edu/feature/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos/2363/. See also Will Steffen et al, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 369.1938 (2011): 842-867.
9   Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197–222.
10   Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008): 58–63.
11   Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011): 1–44.

the Beach (1957). In this body of mid-century work, threats of radiation poisoning, unlivable contaminated spaces, and entire human and animal populations killed in nuclear catastrophe bear striking resemblances to postcrisis African SF in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, with the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the founding of several prominent environmental activist organizations in the 1960s, science fiction began to explore ecological devastation beyond the nuclear fallout narrative. Pertinent to postcrisis African SF are works from the 1960s and 1970s onward that depict overcrowded spaces, extreme resource scarcity, different forms of pollution, and even plant life extinction, such as John Brunner's novel *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) and Douglas Trumbull's film *Silent Running* (1972).

Kahiu and Okogu are both imbedded in these lineages of Euro-American science fiction, but importantly, they take many canonical SF tropes and suit them to the particularities of their African spaces. *Pumzi*, as a narrative that effectively seeks to denaturalize the back-to-nature fantasy, is part of a network of similar speculative fictions, including Octavia Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (1987–1989), Ursula Le Guin's *Paradises Lost* (2002), and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The desire to plant a seed in the supposedly unlivable contaminated desert in *Pumzi* recalls Butler's *Lilith's Brood*, in which an extraterrestrial species saves the last humans on Earth soon after nuclear apocalypse, alters their genetic code, and sends them back to live on a newly reconstituted Earth. Furthermore, the aesthetics of the form-fitting body suits and spaceship-like structure in *Pumzi* are reminiscent of the later instantiations of Gene Roddenbury's *Star Trek* television series (*The Next Generation* [1987–1993], *Deep Space Nine* [1993–1998]). Likewise, as perhaps the first ever published work of African cyberpunk, Okogu's "Proposition 23" is greatly indebted to William Gibson, most ostensibly in the interplay of the body's nervous system, the networks of power, and the virtual interface we find in Gibson's iconic *Neuromancer* (1984). Okogu's novella also finds parallels in Paulo Bacigalupi's 2009 biopunk novel *The Windup Girl*, particularly in its dystopic urban setting, scarcity of fossil fuels, and futurist effects of climate change.

As related as Kahiu and Okogu's works may be to European and American speculative fiction, however, they are clearly African texts. These works are not innovative in the broader science fiction context. They recycle many of the existing tropes and conventions of Euro-American SF and insert them into distinctly African cultural geographies. Yet it is also the implicit weight of (post)colonial history, violence, and exploitation beneath the surface of *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23"—that which occurs prior to the text—that makes the idea of a postcrisis African science fiction so fraught and compelling. The African continent was ravaged long before the first palpable effects of climate change were felt—a fact that inflects Okogu and Kahiu's works with a profoundly different historical weight compared to most other postcrisis science fiction. This particular *avant-texte* as well as the cultural geography of these works make these science fictions critically important as *African* texts. Moreover, for the first time in the history of the African humanities, there are writers and filmmakers from the continent who are just as indebted to William Gibson, Octavia Butler, and *Star Trek* as they are to Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, and Ousmane Sembène. African aesthetics is now more mutant and more global than ever, poised to move into radically new speculative and imaginative terrain.

To imagine a postapocalyptic future is nothing new, but until now no African writer or filmmaker has ever imagined an African postapocalyptic future. Yet as James Berger explains in *After the End*, what ought to concern us is not apocalypse itself: "It is about aftermaths and remainders, about how to imagine what happens after an event conceived of as final."[12] As we unpack *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23," we must not lose sight of the remainders of toxicity, of life forms, of violence, and of colonial and postcolonial history. The event of nuclear fallout has taken place at an indeterminate moment prior to each text. We see subtle signs and scars of this cataclysm. These signs and scars must be brought to the fore. The remainders of culture, landscape, and history will reveal to us the possibility of life in Africa after the end times.

African Topographies

Pumzi and "Proposition 23" are both grounded in an explicitly African space and time. Prior to the first image, *Pumzi* opens with a black screen and two lines of white text that configure the film's geopolitics and temporality: "Maitu Community, East African Territory. 35 years after World War III—'The Water War.'" The text places us in East Africa, in a paradoxically indeterminate historical moment—at a precise time following a war with which we are unfamiliar. The film then shifts to close up shots of plants and embalmed creatures in large glass jars, inside a laboratory in a sprawling spaceship-like structure. The camera pauses on what seems to be a desiccated plant suspended inside a glass jar, with a label detailing its name and etymology: "MAITU (Mother) Seed. Kikuyu Language. 1. Noun—Mother. Origin: Kikuyu Language from MAA (Truth) and ITU (Ours). OUR TRUTH." The brief reference to indigenous language further entrenches us in East Africa and the familiar cultural lineages of the Kikuyu ethnic group, yet the images of unearthly specimens intimate a profoundly reconfigured continent. The familiar and the unfamiliar blur as the film opens, rupturing the idea of Africa we know in the twenty-first century.

"Proposition 23" is similarly marked by familiar geographic and cultural signposts that blur into the unfamiliar. Okogu's Lagos includes recognizable spaces, such as Victoria Island and the Ajegunle district, as well as streets and locations bearing the names of prominent cultural figures, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa Avenue and Soyinka Square. To be sure, however, this is where our Lagosian familiarity ends. Although these identifiable names may ground us in a recognizable African geography, the thousand-story skyscrapers, the ubiquitous "flycrafts" darting in the air, and the Internet-like "interface" that all "citizens" access freely with their cyborgian bodies fracture our sense of familiar space. Furthermore, unlike *Pumzi*, "Proposition 23" has a determinate date, the year 2161. "Two hundred years had passed since Yuri Gagarin first went up into space," the narrator notes, marking the temporality of the narrative with a historical reference to the first human to travel in outer space in 1961. The precision of the story's temporal setting does not relieve us of our sense of unfamiliarity, however. Both Okogu and Kahiu merge familiar cultural and geographic

12   James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999): xii.

figurations with radically futural elements, creating restructured social geographies that retain traces of the recognizable.

These distinctly African topographies in *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23" are of a dying, if not altogether dead, Earth. They are landscapes of inescapable nuclear contamination, spaces that will long bear the afterlives of nuclear weapons and reactors. Both narratives, in very different ways, depict an Earth divided between habitable and uninhabitable zones. The habitable zones are those synthetically created enclosed spaces that sustain human life in biological laboratories, electro-neural interfaces, and algorithm super systems. The uninhabitable are those "natural" spaces, constituting the majority of the Earth's surface, that have been stripped of livability; they are the ubiquitous Chernobyls and Fukushimas, where only the most hardened of life forms persist.

This rift between the habitable and uninhabitable is brought to the fore in the visual aesthetics of *Pumzi*. The film's first image is the surface of the isolated underground 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. Halfway through the film, when the protagonist, Asha, escapes the structure in search of life forms on the outside, we observe the surface of the Earth more closely. We see no life in this desiccated landscape. Detritus from the underground community covers the Earth near the pressurized tube that ejects trash. During her journey, Asha encounters a decrepit half-buried sign that reads, "Caution, Nuclear Radioactive River." There is absolutely no river to be seen, not even a trace of water. Instead, the sign serves as a reminder 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. The inhabitants all wear similar body suits of form-fitting black and gray fabrics. This is a sterilized space, socially and hygienically, that has closed itself off from the outside world. The Maitu community has deliberately drawn a line between the outside and the inside, the habitable and the uninhabitable. In Kahiu's film, a postcrisis Africa is one that represses the toxicity of the surrounding world and the possibility of life on the outside.

If the topography of *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 "ever-lasting winter," bringing snow and snowmobiles to a city that once sweltered under the sun. The sky and aerial sprawl have been transformed in this future African megacity: "Lagos was a patchwork of amber, fluorescence, and neon, as far as the eye could see. Everywhere, towers thrust themselves into the blank sky like Promethean weapons robbing the sky of fire…. The pale moon was a faint and blurred smudge."[13] 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

13 Okogu, "Proposition 23," 361.

temperatures and deadly radiation."[14] Just beyond the city limits are spaces where the elderly and unwanted are rumored to be sent to work in the mines "until they [drop] dead from exhaustion and radiation poisoning."[15] The uninhabitable zones are toxic, barren spaces where both the Earth and society's undesirables are abandoned.

Inside the city, however, cyborgian human life thrives with the aid of the "neuro." A neuro is an electro-neurological device implanted in the human body. 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 that numbs the human to the traumas of a postcrisis world. To live in Okogu's Lagos is to be a mutant. Only a cyborg could flourish on an Earth that no longer sustains life.[16]

The topography of "Proposition 23" also extends to its virtual landscape. Sayoma, a programmer-turned-revolutionary, literally surfs the interface with her neuro: "The node of information that I traversed was a subtly shifting landscape of data. I floated then dived into the code, merging with various streams of consciousness…. The interface can be anything you want it to be, most viz it as a hyper-real version of the world. They see servers as buildings, the more data, the larger the building. Information flows as traffic."[17] The neuro creates an alter-universe, an entirely different space removed from the polluted skies, the freezing temperatures, and the poisonous radiation. It allows one to be dead to a world that has died.

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, but a control of human thought and the body's nervous system.

Neuropolitics

Power in these postcrisis African fictions is all encompassing. Bodies are controlled and disciplined through violent interrogations and exposure to toxic chemicals. Movement is tracked through virtual intelligence drones and unique barcodes branded on the body. Futurist, unearthly technologies subjugate the populous in these narratives. Coercive power in "Proposition 23" and *Pumzi* seeks to anesthetize the human to the decayed world, to suppress all desire to find life beyond the sterile insulated communities.

To be sure, the power formations in these two works have a conspicuous lineage. Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, as the disciplinary regulatory power over the

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14 Ibid., 362.
15 Ibid., 365.
16 Throughout this essay I use the term *cyborg* as Donna Haraway most rudimentarily defines it in her "Cyborg Manifesto": "Creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted." See Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149–181. Although the figure of the cyborg is pertinent to Kahiu and Okogu's works, Haraway's broader marxist-feminist cyborg theory is less apt. For an extended examination of African cyborgian theory, see Matthew Omelsky, "Jean-Pierre Bekolo's African Cyborgian Thought," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 31 (2012): 6–21.
17 Okogu, "Proposition 23," 356.

biological field, can be considered the most elemental form of power in both *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23." Biopower is control over mortality, "making live and letting die." It is the biological fragmentation of a population, the separation of bodies into groups and subgroups.[18] If biopolitics was the predominant mode of power beginning in eighteenth-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 control of bodies and the power over life, but the advent of modern technologies allows for vastly expanded regulatory systems. For Mbembe, the Israeli occupation of Palestine exemplifies the necropolitical with its system of horizontal and vertical surveillance. From helicopters and aerial drones in the sky to networks of bridges, bypasses, and underground tunnels on land to monitoring vessels on water, necropower surrounds and encloses. The sites of violence proliferate. Necropolitics accounts for the new weapons and technologies that enable the creation of what Mbembe calls "death-worlds": "New and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead.*"[19] Necropolitics is the contemporary intensification of biopolitics, the power over life that modern warfare makes possible.

If Mbembe's necropower builds upon Foucault's biopower, the figurations of power in postcrisis African science fiction present a further intensification. Although power in these works remains preoccupied with the control of mortality and the fragmentation of populations, power now extends to the control of memory and thought. In Okogu and Kahiu's works, the circuits of the human brain are altered and observed by the sovereign. Medications alter the chemicals of the brain to repress thought patterns and behavior. Artificial intelligence devices implanted in the brain numb the human to social inequality and the decayed surrounding world. Vast virtual interfaces, or "neural networks," emulate and anticipate brain functioning, incarcerating people in surreal cyber worlds. 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*, biopower and necropower pervade. The Maitu community population is forbidden to leave the underground structure. When Asha discovers a soil sample with abnormally high water content, she requests an "exit visa" to plant the Maitu seed on the outside. The governing council promptly refuses to grant the visa, demanding that she confiscate the sample: "That's impossible, get rid of it," the council says. "The outside is dead." Furthermore, early in the film, as Asha refills her water bottle, a security guard digitally scans a barcode that has been branded on her wrist. The governing council tracks bodies in the community, keeping tabs on their movement. Ubiquitous armed guards enforce the authoritarian council's regulatory regime.

The neuropolitical in *Pumzi* becomes apparent in the film's initial moments, when we find Asha sleeping with her head resting on her lab desk. On the monitor in front of her, we briefly see a green plant growing in a time-lapse, then we enter Asha's

18   Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76* (New York: Picador, 2003): 247–265.
19   Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 40.

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," with the same phrase flashing as text on her computer monitor. Asha wakes up, scrambling to consume a pill from a bottle whose label reads, "Dream Suppressants: take 1 tablet immediately after an attack." In this brief sequence, some form of invisible or unapparent sensor reads Asha's mind and streams the images of her dream on the monitor. The alarm system triggers, commanding her to consume a mediation that will disrupt the chemical balance of her brain, preventing her from dreaming. In the film, dreaming is associated with the outside world, and the possibility of life on the outside. 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. The council does not simply rely on tracking devices and armed guards to control the population. They control by monitoring and manipulating cognitive processes, detecting any insurrectionary behavior as quickly as a thought or image comes to one's mind. But, it seems, cognitive tracking in the film is dependent on the subject's proximity to mind-reading technologies. When Asha is not at her lab desk, the council cannot monitor her cognition.

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 novella is its system of apartheid. Those individuals equipped with a neuro are deemed "citizens," putatively rights-bearing subjects of the government who are guaranteed "happiness" as long as they follow the regulations put forward in the constitutional document called "The Book." The "undead," on the other hand, are those whom the government has stripped of their neuro because they have supposedly violated The Book. Without a neuro, one is "unlinked" from every interface and device, and from the system of "credit" that operates as a sort of afterlife of capital. They are discarded to fend for themselves in a society that has become dependent on the neuro to live and think. The undead are considered repulsive by citizens, and most "starve or freeze to death in the everlasting winter within days."[20] When the undead initiate a violent revolution against the government, many are tortured, interrogated, and indiscriminately killed. 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 the basic necessities of life…. There is no hunger, and meds cure all diseases."[21] With the neuro, all citizens have free access to the virtual interface, the "shared meta-sphere of instantly available information." This neuro that supposedly sets all citizens equal, however, is also the means by which the government controls and desensitizes the population. Avatars and cyber drones traffic the interface, tracing citizens' online activity via the neuro. The neuro modifies the structure of the body's nervous system, altering the way citizens think, perceive, and act. According to one undead watching a circle of citizen drummers in a city

20 Okogu, "Proposition 23," 359.
21 Ibid., 387.

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."[22] The neuro also facilitates the government's memory simulation technology, which forces citizens to dictate their memories involuntarily. As such, the neuro serves as an archive of one's life, as a sort of ineluctable life-long tracking system of thought.

Power in "Proposition 23" and *Pumzi* encompasses the biopolitical, the necro-political, and what I am calling the neuropolitical. Populations are fragmented, enclosed, and tracked. The sovereign in each instance uses futural intensifications of power to manipulate and dull cognition. Power in postcrisis Africa, for Kahiu and Okogu, desensitizes the human to what was once called "natural," or "organic," life. Nature and the human may be indelibly altered, but the revolutionaries in these science fictions stake their claim to these mutated forms. Violence and revolution ensue in postcrisis times.

Revolution and Ontology in Postcrisis Times

Pumzi and "Proposition 23" can both be described as liberatory narratives of postcrisis Africa. Their protagonists seek to evade the desensitizing control of the sovereign. They attempt to reclaim what they once understood to be human and nature. Indeed, both works can be read as a sustained lament of what formerly constituted the "human" and the "natural." Yet they can also be read as utopian fictions, as narratives that gesture toward a future in which these former constructs are reconstituted. In the violent and polluted worlds of *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23," however, the possibility of recovering these prior figurations is decidedly bleak. It seems clear from these narratives that the human will remain a cyborg—an amalgam of human, animal, and machine. Any attempt to return to a sort of originary humanness is futile. Nature is so badly damaged, so toxic in these fictions, that it will not be able to sustain any form of life for many years, if ever. Yet if this is so evident, for what are these revolutionaries fighting? If life is so clearly unrecoverable, why do they attempt to recover it? Indeed, their utopia of reconstituted life is not one that recovers a replica of a former life. They endeavor to constitute a new life, a cyborgian life, filled with cyborg trees and cyborg humans, free of all-invasive neuropower. These figures seek the freedom to structure their cyborgian lives and natural spaces on their own terms.

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 Manichaean worlds not altogether unlike Fanon's colonial world. The bombing of a government building that kills thousands of officials in the first pages of "Proposition 23" is reminiscent of the necessary violence and destruction of the colonial world that Fanon describes in the first pages of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). After the bombing, Nakaya, the undead revolutionary leader of "Proposition 23," screams into the lens of a news

22 Ibid., 368.

camera: "Citizens beware, the undead shall rise."[23] Fanon's call to arms saturates these postcrisis fictions.

Given this close intellectual proximity, it seems pertinent to ask how we might imagine a Fanonian politics of postcrisis Africa. Can revolution in these science fictions be considered reconfigurations of Fanonian thought? Through an expansion of several critical Fanonian terms, the twentieth-century philosopher can indeed help illuminate what "reconstituted life" might mean for the revolutionary figures in these works. One of these 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."[24] The land, for Fanon, is crucial because of its close connection to the most fundamental social bloc of the struggle: the proletariat. The land is integral to the proletariat's being-in-the-world. It is central to the production of sustenance, culture, and social history. To cultivate the land, to dwell on the land, gives the proletariat a sense of autonomy and belonging. Fanon's conception of land is particularly apt to our postcrisis fictions because of his characterization of the symbiotic relationship between the colonized proletariat and the soil on which she lives. The land flourishes when the proletariat flourishes; the one decays when the other decays. As in *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23," Fanon's colonial landscape consists of an oppressive occupying power that threatens this symbiotic relationship. Later in the text, Fanon directly links the land to the affect and thought of the colonized: "Imperialism … sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds."[25] Here, joined together, the land and the mind are occupied by the same alienating contaminant. In Fanon's account of the anticolonial struggle, to reclaim the dual configuration of land and mind is to reclaim not only one's sense of belonging to the terrain and to social space, but also one's cognitive and cultural autonomy.

In *Pumzi*, Kahiu seems to literalize Fanon's land-mind symbiotic relationship, creating a direct physiological connection between the two. When Asha first opens the package containing the hydrated soil sample, she pours it into her hand, deeply inhales its scent, and immediately collapses unconscious, falling into a dream where she plunges into a deep ocean. The smell of the soil in her hand alters the functioning of her brain. The scent triggers an affective shift that produces a series of unconscious images. Asha wakes up determined to plant the Maitu seed along with the hydrated soil in the desert. The soil and the tree she imagines hold the possibility of new life on the outside, a newly structured being-in-the-world beyond the coercive power that has held the decayed land captive. Asha seeks a sense of intimacy and belonging to the soil and surrounding world not altogether unlike that of Fanon's revolutionary peasantry. The occupation of the land in *Pumzi* resembles Fanon's occupying settler-colonist who ruptures the peasant's symbiosis with the land. In Kahiu's film, however, the land is occupied at once by the authoritarian regime that denies her access *and* by the nuclear waste that will remain in the soil for decades, if not centuries. Asha's escape to

23 Ibid., 376.
24 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. R. Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004): 9.
25 Ibid., 181.

the outside and her vision of the Maitu tree growing in the toxic desert mark the beginning of the "rooting out" that Fanon speaks of in *Wretched*. Of course, the Maitu tree 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.

Fanon's series of colonial ontologies brings another set of terms pertinent to these science fictions. 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.'"[26] This "lesser species," the colonial subject, is dehumanized, "reduced to the state of an animal."[27] Throughout *Wretched*, Fanon mentions the "inhuman" 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 human is the ontology that one strives to attain. The transition of the colonized from inhuman subject to liberated figure is a way of "casting off their animal status for a human one."[28]

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 in *Wretched* of this "new human" lacks depth, he does move 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."[29] This "thrownness beyond" toward a new ontology in the wake of struggle is critically pertinent to our postcrisis African fictions.

The figures in *Pumzi* and "Proposition 23" may be cyborgs, but the progression of ontology is intriguingly similar to Fanon's colonial sequence of ontology. Prior to the subaltern revolution in each text—the revolution of the undead in Okogu, Asha's escape in Kahiu—the "species" division is of the human and the inhuman, the conquering species and the lesser species. Asha is caged as a subhuman in the Maitu community's futural Manichaean system. The citizens in Okogu's novella refer to the undead as an "unclean," 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. As the camera pans out, a massive tree grows in a time-lapse in the very spot where Asha's body rests. The implication is that Asha's care for the plant, her bodily fluids, and perhaps even her

26 Ibid., 5.
27 Ibid., 7.
28 Ibid., 77.
29 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967): 223–232.

body itself have allowed the tree to grow in the nuclear toxic desert. This is the moment of Fanonian transcendence, the threshold toward a new form of being. The postrevolutionary new ontology at the end of *Pumzi* is one in which human and nonhuman merge to form mutant life. Plant life, human life, and toxic life blur into a beastly multispecies ontology. This confluence marks the moment of disalienation for Asha, when she steps beyond the overdeterminations of the present. Like Fanon's new human, Kahiu's film articulates a sense of being "thrown beyond" toward a new and precarious ontology.

Indeed, Fanon's postrevolutionary new human is an elusive figure, one that threatens to vanish as it moves into the liberated future. In a series of notes written in 1960 during a reconnaissance mission near the Algerian-Malian border, Fanon offered sobering thoughts on Africa's precarious future: "In a short time this continent will be liberated. For my part, the deeper I enter into the cultures and the political circles the surer I am that the great danger that threatens Africa is the absence of ideology."[30] Of course, Fanon did not mean that there was absolutely no ideology on the continent. He meant that he did not see the necessary ideology that would allow newly independent African states to form strong nations and to establish a sense of unity with other African nations. Instead, Fanon saw political instability and inexperience, neglect of public investment, greed among the middle classes, and continued economic dependence on former colonial powers. The ideology of chauvinism and avarice had to be stripped away. Only a shift in consciousness would bring unity and stability.

The closing sequence in Efe Okogu's "Proposition 23" provides an intriguing speculative reformulation of Fanon's focus on ideology in the postrevolutionary moment. Throughout the novella, pseudocapitalist ideology permeates the lives of all citizens. Ubiquitous televisions and video billboards invasively sync to individuals via their neuros, forcing upon them personalized advertisements and manipulative political rhetoric cleverly called "Bush-speak." The novella's trio of undead revolutionaries aims to break down this repressive ideological system that has seeped into the "collective unconsciousness of the masses." When the three discover the government's plan to grant unchecked power to corporations and corporate artificial intelligence drones, they plan to set off a "neuro bomb" in the government's central intelligence facility, effectively destroying the entire neuro system with which the government controls society. They plan to build life anew: "Our blasted flesh and spilled blood will be the fertile soil from which a new world will arise, one in which every child is born free, lives in peace and dies, never once having known hunger, disease, prejudice or fear."[31] As in *Pumzi*, the desire to reconstitute the symbiosis of land and life, blood and soil, emerges in this revolutionary moment. Okogu's revolutionaries trigger the neuro bomb in the final line of the text, effectively destroying the repressive ideological system at the press of a button. This focus at the end of the novella on the systems of thought controlled by the neuro shares much with Fanon's emphasis on ideology in the postrevolutionary moment. Indeed, this ending point in "Proposition 23" is the exact moment about which Fanon writes in his 1960

30 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. H. Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967): 186.
31 Okogu, "Proposition 23," 401.

reconnaissance notes: the threshold between revolution and its aftermath, the point at which we can begin to imagine the moment after. Like Fanon, Okogu's revolutionaries understand that the parasitic ideology of the old regime must be torn away. Social consciousness must be rebuilt. For Fanon, this ideological destruction and recon-struction is painstaking work that must seep through all strata of social life over the course of years and generations. Okogu's futural account, on the other hand, begins with the flip of a switch, with the unplugging of the neurological network that controls social thought. Okogu's aftermath is no less precarious, however. Okogu's post-revolutionary account establishes a seemingly unprecedented blank ideological slate, upon which these revolutionaries must construct a system of thought that allows for life to flourish.

Okogu and Kahiu's texts tell us that not only must we reimagine ontology after the revolution; we must also conceive of life itself in a radically different way. The "new human" emerges only from a restructured consciousness. The newly entangled matrix of human and machine, the natural and the toxic that we find at the close of *Pumzi* can exist only when the old repressive ideology has been dismantled. Revolution in postcrisis times means stripping oneself of the constraints of neuro-power and sedimented ideology in order to redefine the human and the human's being-in-the-world. The new human comes with no guarantees for Okogu and Kahiu, however. Precarious life does not end after revolution.

African Futures Now

Looking back on Bloch's notion of the blind spot of our lived moment, in light of these postcrisis 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."[32] 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 thought. It engenders a new politics of our historical moment.

In other words, these African science fictions are specters of possible futures that loom over our present. 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.

32 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2007): 286–289.

They open us to the possibility of interspecies life, that multiple species may one day constitute what it means to be human. They remind us that social change comes only after a radical shift in social consciousness.

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. Certainly, anthropocenic climate change encompasses the entire planet, but these works open us to the particular predations to future life on the continent. They are ultimately texts through which we read the dual crisis of ecology and capital in contemporary Africa. 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 Democratic Republic of the Congo. The grim isolation of *Pumzi*'s Maitu community also reminds us of the rapacious imbalances of global capitalism today, as well as those spaces that have been abandoned under insurmountable debt. The aesthetics of this emerging field of postcrisis 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.