My Spaceship Leaves At 10:  
Blackness in the Global Future

Senior Thesis

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What difference is there between Utopia and a dream? Just one.

—Jean Pierre Bekolo

We know that we are larger than life. We know that we are larger than Earth. We know we are larger than the cosmos. And that is reflected in our work and in our music.

—Wanuri Kahiu, TedxNairobi

I’ll reprogram your mind / (C’mon get in) / My spaceship leaves at 10

_The Electric Lady_ – Janelle Monáe
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Introduction

Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science fiction are one and the same.

—Kodwo Eshun

We don’t know what will happen, what will be the reaction of the white and Christian Europeans faced with this influx of starving and ignorant Africans. We don’t know if Europe will remain an advanced and united continent or if it will be destroyed.

-Muammar al-Gaddafi, deposed leader of Libya from 1969 - 2011

I suppose I came into Afrofuturism in the usual way – like other Black American kids who ran through old-school science fiction movies, fantasy novels, and new remakes of old television shows, and then eventually came to find the kind of media that offers glimpses of ourselves within the pages. If speculative fiction is a genre that “[has] the capacity to move readers to imagine alternative ways of being alive,” it stands to reason that works of that nature would speak directly to children growing up under structural inequalities that pervaded our economic and social lives. The escapism in imagining alternate ways of living not predicated on present realities opens ground for a potentially limitless freedom of thought. Speculative fiction does not need to bow to racism or any other inequalities that we struggled with in our lives. We

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1 Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” The New Centennial Review 3.2 (2003), 298
could imagine ourselves as superheroes, astronauts, bionic superhumans, or other larger-than-life figures in situations much more exciting than our daily lives. The only problem was that while the genre of sf did not necessitate social hierarchies or racial orders paralleling the present world, depictions of that nature abounded in the theoretical core of many such works.

My younger self was not knowledgeable in racial politics, but I was very aware of the social and economic divides that delineate race relations in the United States. When Janelle Monáe emerged on the American music scene during my teenage years, she was like a bolt of lightning streaking through my notions of science fiction and Black women’s connections to the technological landscape. Suddenly the high-tech future could be a lot less white and much more female; much more identifiable and real. Monáe was to me what the Star Wars original trilogy must have been to a generation of American kids suddenly seeing space travel and NASA on a personal level for the first time. The afro- in Afrofuturism suggests clear links to Africa, but the Afrofuturism I knew was focused on Black Americans like me who had been left out of popular Western speculative fiction.

My main concern in this project is Afrofuturism on the global scale. The violent displacement of African bodies through the Transatlantic Slave Trade created new identities for enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas and other Western countries. But the African people who remained on the continent experienced a different sort of displacement: the violent disruption of life, history, and ideology through colonialism and imperialism. What did the “African consciousness”⁴ make of the histories of invasion and displacement and in what ways did they shape views about the future? Do African artists produce futurist work with

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⁴ While I attempt to avoid generalizations, throughout the paper I will use “Africa,” “African,” and other variations to link countries on the continent. I do this to connect the histories of colonialism and imperialism experienced by different groups in Africa, but also to acknowledge the pan-Africanist language used by many of the artists I research.
similar themes to American Afrofuturist artists? Where do African futurists fit into the grand scheme of the space-minded, futurist philosophies that have proven so powerful to populations looking into the future?

My research ties African artists working with Afrofuturist themes to the more well-known ideas of Afrofuturists in the Americas and particularly the United States. The grand visions of Blackness in a cosmic future are loaded with meanings about exactly what kinds of futures seem possible and for whom. But do Afrofuturism’s American roots connect to futurism in African? Did the historical break between African peoples and the African diaspora elsewhere forever cut off the flow of time; forcing the two lines of visionaries to completely seek their own path? Or are there links from futurist to futurist that may be separated by geography but connect to each other on a higher plane of Blackness, and perhaps the oppressed identity that has become so synonymous with the term? I aim to answer these questions in the following chapters.

Keyterms

Because of the lack of formal classifications used in critiques of speculative fiction, I will define certain key phrases here that may have different implications depending on context. Throughout this project I will be using the term science fiction to describe futuristic works that focus on the technological side of societal advancement; most often linked to the sparkling cities, artificial intelligence, and space colonization that remain ubiquitous specters of the Western science fiction tradition. I will be using speculative fiction (or its abbreviated form, sf) to mean the broader array of science fiction, fantasy, and other fictions preoccupied with imagining futures and alternate presents – whether dystopic in nature, utopic in form, or both. Afrofuturism is a concept coined by Mark Dery, a white American cultural critic interested in the intersections
of race and technology in the 1990s, a decade when anything seemed possible in cyberspace and the answer to the problem of race seemed just around the corner at every turn. I use Dery’s *Afrofuturism* here because it is more than likely the most well-known designation for the literary framework focusing on Black subjectivity. In this context, literature, music, and visual art of the African diaspora in the United States are Afrofuturist works. But the authors’ Blackness is not the only defining factor in the process of locating Afrofuturism – Dery reminds us that this kind of speculative fiction most importantly “treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future.”5 Afrofuturism in its first incarnations had a decidedly science fiction-based aesthetic that continues to the present day. That is not to say that the genre need specifically be science-oriented, but merely that this mode of inquiry remains the most prevalent in discussions of popular Afrofuturism.

In an extension to Dery, I count any speculative fiction Afrofuturist that uses speculative or futuristic themes to locate Black political and cultural concerns, although it remains to be seen whether this can only be from an American lens. Is Afrofuturism open to other nationalities or does it frame a particular regional relation to Western technoculture? While American Afrofuturism typifies the genre, I question whether global location is an imperative barrier in use of the term.

Afro/Futurisms

While considering themes of fantasy and science fiction in Black diasporic life, it is important to note historical conceptions of Blackness in technoculture. Alondra Nelson theorizes

tropes of Black subjectivity within futurist paradigms in her book on Afrofuturism, calling our attention to the assumed incompatibility between technology and racial, socioeconomic, and gender differences. The promise of cyberculture’s riches never materialized for Black Americans – much less other Black diasporic communities – and these themes are invoked again and again in political conversations centered on the digital divide or more explicitly capitalist programming, such as advertisements deploying a dichotomy pitting sub-Saharan Africans against economic and technological development.\textsuperscript{6} The science fiction myth of the race-less utopia may seem an easy fix when presented as a catch-all solution to technological inequalities of access, but that kind of simplification ignores the ideologies upholding racial disparities in the first place.

Blackness in the twenty-first century, while perhaps not the problem, is still an important one for multicultural Western societies pushing buzzwords like “forward-thinking strategies” and “progress”. Black citizens without access to the technological growth their countries promote are cut off from the nation in its rush to the future. Their relevancy remains to suggest that their integration into the nation could only come about through a destruction of racial identity, or that the continuation of the digital divide is a sign that Black citizens are unfit for the future that is coming.

Mark Dery and the three authors that he interviews in \textit{Flame Wars} – Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose and Greg Tate – expound on the idea of Blackness in America being a space of inherent displacement and alienation. Tate theorizes that most of the recurrent themes of alienation in science fiction already exist in the lives of Black Americans, while Dery goes farther in invoking the metaphor by calling African-Americans the “descendants of alien abductees” inhabiting a “sci-fi nightmare” where political force fields inhibit movement, official histories are re-written, and Black bodies in American are forcefully conscripted into the service

of technology for progress through forced labor, medical experimentation, and modern-day police weaponry. Junot Diaz makes the same case for the present day, re-introducing the conversation to a younger generation of Black and brown sci-fi buffs. His 2007 novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao builds on Dery and Tate to again connect post-colonial life in the Americas to the trope of living under siege common to fantasy and speculative fiction. But Diaz does not stop there. He further complicates the framing of Afrofuturist ideology when he adds Dominican religious practices and mythic stories to the alienation narrative. Diaz highlights elements of the fantastic that are all around us in cultural retentions from Africa and indigenous Americans that push the limits of tangible reality and further open space for imagination and alternate epistemological trends not based on mainstream American (read: white) flows of knowledge acquisition and philosophy. Diaz’s Afrofuturism does not even necessarily need to be based in the future – instead he re-conceives histories of mysticism in the present day to create a particular kind of magical realism mixed with speculative themes.

The prefix afro- relates to the African lineage or Black diasporic consciousness Afrofuturist works theorize, but it is necessary here to give an account of the other etymological lineage that the word claims: that of Futurism. Though I will occasionally use the term futurist to describe speculation on future temporalities and progress in Western science fiction terms, the Futurist label comes with its own histories and philosophy. Futurism was an artistic, literary, and theoretical movement begun by the Italian artist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti when he published “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” in 1909. The manifesto appeared in newspapers throughout Europe, most notably on the front page of France’s Le Figaro, and this aesthetic

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7 Dery, 180
8 Junot Diaz, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (Riverhead Books, 2007), 3
would see a surge of popularity throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. Marinetti was fixated on velocity and a desire for Italy to hurtle into the future at top speed while disregarding or violently casting out those elements of society that did not conform to the futurist paradigm. His vision for the future was a purely Italian, white, masculine, hegemonic consolidation of power and scientific advancement. Marinetti uses the metaphor of the racing car numerous times in his founding points for Futurism, relating progress to the products of the Industrial Revolution as well as the Age of Empire:

Why should we look back over our shoulders, when we intend to breach the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent…We intend to glorify war—the only hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for woman.

Early Futurism interacted with race and nation in even less progressive ways. Italy was Marinetti’s chosen nation for a new brand of hegemonic power founded on military might and ideological control. After a string of similar pronouncements following the original manifesto, Marinetti published another manifesto in 1911 in response to the war in Northern Africa. The document wholeheartedly supported the invasion and occupation of what is now Libya, then a province under Turkish sovereignty. “Italian grandeur” would surpass the power of the ancient Romans through a pan-Italianism supported by the national ambition of empire-building in North Africa. Libya stood to be Italy’s entrance into the larger games of conquest played out at the

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11 Ibid., 51
time between other imperial European nations. After similar invasions of Eritrea and Somaliland in the late nineteenth century and a defeat by Ethiopia that re-ignited the scramble for Italian dominance, the war for Libya would symbolize an Italy moving forward without unduly fixating on the past.

In an interesting – but not quite new – turn of events, the image of the speeding car hurtling into the future would not be viable without a dualistic relationship to (North) Africa. The darker underbelly of progress would necessarily share temporality with the gleaming white face that Marinetti so prized. Similar to how the institution of slavery was the foundation for British and American capitalist economic development, colonial subjugation of North and East Africa was vital to show Italy’s power on the international stage. But the Italian narrative for Africa in the early to mid-century would exist only as a tool to be exploited by European powers in a tug-of-war based on military power and political savvy.

The Futurist narrative for Africa and its races shares similarities with the larger nationalistic impetus for Italian colonization in North Africa, with a few notable differences. While Marinetti heartily supports the Libyan War, he leaves room for considerations of Africa not based solely on militarism. In the original Futurist manifesto he references his Sudanese nurse when his car lands in a ditch and he gulps down the “nourishing sludge” of the “fair factory drain” that reminds him of her “sacred black breast.” Art historian Rosalind McKeever notes the allusion to rebirth and the African maternal in this passage, which suggests that Futurist ties to the continent are more complex than just a focus on colonization and racial hierarchy.

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15 F. T. Marinetti “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 50
16 Rosalind McKeever, “Futurism’s African (A)temporalities,” *Carte Italiane* 2.6 (Los Angeles, 2010), 108-110
Early Futurist writers were not using the Hegelian temporality that positions Africa in the far, primordial past. In the introduction to The Philosophy of History Hegel writes that Asia is the beginning of the world with Europe being its ending – Africa is not mentioned except to say that it is “not a historical part of the world; it has no movement of development to exhibit. Historical movement in it… belongs to the Asiatic or European World…” 17

For Hegel, Africa has no past and no future predicated on its own possibilities for advancement. Its location outside of true history means that there can be no futurity ascribed to the continent or its peoples. Futurist works agree on Africa existing outside of European notions of time and development, but also revel in the ahistoricality that the theoretical use of Africa can bring them; developing what McKever calls “Futurist Primitivism.” 18 Within this philosophy, Marinetti’s proposed break with prior history can be set in terms of the future and development, but also through sharing ideas of an African atemporality that frees Futurists from the historical past in much the same way. This broader imagining of Africa in Futurism, while not disregarded as baldly as in The Philosophy of History, still fixated on the continent being a tool for European progress with little hope for its own historical development. Afrofuturism then does not only appropriate the artistic genre of speculative fiction in the Western tradition for its Black/African/diasporic interventions, but also contends with the multiple Futurist narratives elaborated above.

Diasporic Beginnings

The Middle Passage would become a creation myth for generations of African descendants cut off from cultural ties and forcefully shipped to the Americas. The mixing of

18 McKever, 110
ethnicities and active suppression of African social, political, and religious forms – among other practices – necessitated new ways of life for enslaved Africans and generations that followed in the Americas. The editors of *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* write in the book’s introductory remarks that “an African American concept of space had beginnings in the holds of the slave ships during the Middle Passage and appears in different settings,” and they go on to cite ways in which African slaves retained cultural practices out of sight of plantation owners. A new concept of space was learned in the holds of slave ships during the Middle Passage and hinged on cunning artifice that hid a refusal to bow completely to the institution of slavery and the loss of Black humanity that was central to the viability of the slave-holding state. African people from different regions, cultures, and walks of life learned to become small, to freeze their bodies and their minds into the form of submission that ensured survival, while still developing resistance to their new lives that would upset the colonial order. The creation of the African- or Black American is intrinsically about loss of foundational cultural and social support systems and the dire necessity to create new systems for survival in the Americas. The story is overwhelmingly one of triumph in the face of base conditions as well as the destruction of a linear sense of time and connection to older ways of knowing and being.

But the existence of cultural retentions and diasporic threads that hold to this day mean that the Middle Passage may not have symbolized a clean break between African past lives and American present and future realities – there is something to the collective terms “global Blackness” or “Black diaspora” that speaks to a shared experience on perhaps a more metaphysical level. Dennis Lee analyzes postcolonial authenticity in writing in an article titled “Writing in Colonial Space,” used as part of an anthology on post-colonial studies. He reflects on

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the alienation that underlies structural theory for postcolonial writers and how that decentered subjectivity forces the writer to ground themselves in inauthenticity and work along those lines.  

20 Thus global Blackness derives from the feeling of “spacelessness” and alienation is the primary foundation for diaspora and diaspora theory. 21 Skin color or kinkiness of hair are not always chief factors concerning Black racial identities on the global scale, and underlying political and cultural constructions of race play heavily into a focus on the sense of unfulfilled homesickness that may not be tied to a tangible place or moment in time. Afrofuturism riffs off of the theme of displacement central to the narrative of Blackness in the United States and, like Lee’s diasporic writers, re-appropriates the outside-looking-in nature of longing – for home, belonging, and secure identity – with new storytelling centered on those emotions.

African Futures

So what of Africa in this diasporic quest for home and the larger Afrofuturist scope? As the Black inhabitants of other continents contend with displacement, can the same themes be located in the ancestral homeland of Blackness? Afrofuturist music theorist Nabeel Zuberi explores the connections between Black communities in the Americas and Africa in an article titled “Is This the Future?: Black Music and Technology Discourse,” remarking that “one of the goals for the descendants of displaced Africans has been the construction of future pasts that link them to others in diasporic time and space.” 22 But while his and other diasporic considerations of Blackness explain the desire – the need – for descendants of enslaved Africans to connect back to African history and present African identities, they do not explain the reasoning for a

21 Ibid.
22 Nabeel Zuberi, “Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse” Science Fiction Studies 34.2 (Jul 2007), 286
connection on the African side. While colonialism and political oppression have been felt by Black diasporic citizens the world over, the effects have not been the same in each region.

Afrofuturist scholar Alondra Nelson examines over-simplistic portrayals of the digital divide in popular racial myths in her introduction to the 2002 issue of Social Text. She founds her critique of the future race-less, place-less “global village” on race being a liability in the present day, but her U.S.-centric approach leaves out other considerations of marginality. She criticizes a South African advertisement depicting a bare-breasted Himba woman from Namibia standing in the desert beside a new style of Land Rover before it speeds off over a dune. Nelson’s problem with the advertisement stems from its metaphor staging the primitive (African) past in direct contrast to the modern (European/Western) future. But she reads the Himba woman through a diasporic lens, remarking that “if the sport-utility vehicle leaves people of African descent literally blowing in the wind, then the information age surely comes on like a tornado.” In this instance Nelson does a disservice to the force of the advertisement’s racial logic – she assumes that the identification that she gives the woman appropriately addresses the context of the clip. Her use of “African descent” to describe the woman is not only unproductive, but almost silly given that the southern African woman is of course of African descent, though not perhaps in the way that Nelson intends the term.

Nelson falls into a trap compressing diasporic encounters with Western notions of objectivity into a singular experience of marginality. Brent Hayes Edwards’s term décalage may be particularly useful here to evaluate the diasporic logic Nelson applies. He suggests that the French word cannot be fully translated into English, but remains useful in complicating

24 In a stunning irony for post-colonial global capital structures, the British Land Rover parent company, Jaguar Land Rover, was bought by Indian corporation Tata Motors in 2008, making the British icon a symbol for the possibility of shifting relationships between former colonies and their past imperial powers. See Vikas Bajaj, “Tata Motors Finds Success in Jaguar Land Rover,” New York Times (2012)
25 Ibid.
assumptions about the static nature of diaspora. Décalage roughly translates to a gap, discrepancy, time-lag, or interval; Edwards uses it to mean the removal of an added prop or wedge, which in diaspora can be unifying philosophies that prop up an artificial state of evenly balanced racial belonging usually mobilized to smooth over the natural inconsistencies and misunderstandings living among and between cultures. Nelson’s reading of the Land Rover advertisement suggests that she is using a diasporic consciousness fully supported by the prop of racial solidarity across varying African diasporic cultures. The Himba woman in the desert may have a completely different relationship to South Africa, multinational corporations like Land Rover, or the digital divide than others “of African descent,” but her particular location in relation to global technoculture is subsumed under a diasporic awareness which abstracts her individuality into a global black uniformity.

Nelson’s critique of the modes of technological disenfranchisement facing Black communities is crucial to understanding the racist ideologies surrounding technology and progress. Her refusal to cater to the rhetoric of difference-blind futurism or the digital divide helps us to remember the contradictions in both claims. But in pushing forward diaspora over regional or national or ethnic specificity she leaves out the Himba woman’s subjectivity and instead uses her as a placeholder for other black identities.

Even Futurist ties to the African diaspora are not necessarily focused on diasporic considerations. Nelson mentions Marinetti in the context of global Afrofuturism, but his references to race are centered on Africa (Libya, his Sudanese nurse) versus Europe. The second epigraph to this chapter is a quote by Muammar al-Gaddafi, the leader of Libya from 1969 to 2011 when he was deposed by revolutionary elements in the country and subsequently killed.

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27 Ibid.
Gaddafi’s Libya, and its present day incarnation, is still dealing with a history of colonialism by Italy and other countries. North Africa’s location in global politics often distances the region from sub-Saharan Africa, but al-Gaddafi’s comments locate him firmly in the African continent. As noted in the quote, Futurism’s backhanded relationship to race is fixed to Africa and not necessarily other Black diasporic regions. African futurist theorists may have a completely different relationship to European futurist philosophies than American theorists.

The crutch of diasporic solidarity can do harm to specific positions in the African diaspora already ignored by Western ideas of technological progress. Considerable work within a diasporic consciousness can be obscured by American Black subjectivity based on American relations to technoculture in Afrofuturism. Theorist Tegan Bristow attempts to more explicitly divorce African futurism from Afrofuturism in a 2013 essay titled “We Want the Funk: What is Afrofuturism to Africa?” She begins with a deliberate separation of the two – her first sentence reads: “Contrary to what the term suggests, the origins of “Afrofuturism” have little to do with being or living in Africa and everything to do with early explorations of cyberculture in the West.” Like Bristow’s piece, my project questions the use of and limits to the term “Afrofuturism” in its iterations across the globe.

In Chapter 1 I explore the American roots of Afrofuturism, including early literature centering Black Americans in present and future technoculture. The focus of Chapter 2 is Wangechi Mutu and Kiluanji Kia Henda; two African artists examining ideas of African futurity and internationality using visual art. In Chapter 3 I examine Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s film Les Saignantes. The film is set in Cameroon in 2025, and Bekolo investigates ideas of futurity, African development, government corruption, female sexuality, traditional religious practices,

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and more with a combination of actors in the government and civil society. Chapter 4 is centered on a short film by Wanuri Kahiu that approaches Afrofuturism from a more modernist angle. Kahiu’s film, set in post-apocalyptic East Africa, navigates race, class, and gender in a new way that asks the audience different questions about African futurity and modernity than more traditional Afrofuturist work.

The next chapters will bridge more of the trans-Atlantic network of Black collectivity that I introduced above. What is the state of current American Afrofuturism? Who are some African Afrofuturist artists? How much does national identity matter in a globalized world? And what are the uses and limits to a global black identity? African diasporic communities everywhere may share exclusion from Western ideals of technological progress, but what of progress in terms of African national development programs? In this paper I explore present-day Afrofuturism in music and the visual arts in the United States and the African continent; specifically African artists with roots in Kenya, Angola, and Cameroon. I aim to discover what futures are imagined within the Black diaspora, whether these conceptions cross diasporic lines, and where the fantastical axes meet, if at all.
Chapter I: Historical U.S. Afrofuturisms

And when the world just treats you wrong / just come with me and I’ll take you home

Many Moons – Janelle Monáe

Space Is the Place

The literature, art, and music termed “Afrofuturist” are as varied as the experiences of Black identity in the United States. But there are some bold frontrunners that come to mind when the genre is mentioned: names like Sun Ra, Octavia Butler or George Clinton and his band Parliament Funkadelic. Sun Ra and George Clinton especially have gained fame producing music dealing with speculative fictions surrounding Black American identity. The two have used funk music and electronic beats to relieve Black Americans of the displacement and unfulfilled citizenship that constrained social life in the 1960s and 1970s up to the present. Parliament Funkadelic, with George Clinton leading, sang in their 1975 album about the “Mothership Connection,” a way to disassociate from the realities of life and blast off to the “home of the extraterrestrial brothers, dealers of funky music, P. Funk.”²⁹ The Mothership symbolized a new beginning and new future for Black Americans chafing under social and economic disenfranchisement. Alien identity opened the possibility for these individuals to belong to something greater than the United States of America; or, if not greater than, at least removed from the country. If home could not be found on Earth it could instead be found in the galactic Mothership and its welcome respite from the world below.

²⁹ Parliament Funkadelic, Mothership Connection, Casablanca Records (1975)
The brand of Afrofuturism espoused by Sun Ra is just as masculinist and extraterrestrial as that of the Parliament. Though he was born in Birmingham, Alabama as Herman ‘Sonny’ Blount, Ra would continually say that he had come from the planet Saturn, and sang about galactic travel and the freeing power of outer space with his band the Arkestra. But the eccentric jazz artist also distributed religious and political broadsheets in Chicago in the 1950s that concentrated on more explicitly racial issues, repeatedly mentioning the injustice of Black men’s lower position in American society along with ways in which Christianity and the Bible were used to keep Black Americans in line. Sun Ra was a force unto himself and many of his thoughts would find their way into the language of the Black Panther Party’s broadsheets as well in the 1970s and into the ‘80s.

In one broadsheet, titled “What America Should Consider,” Sun Ra seems to be channeling Italian Futurist icon F. T. Marinetti when he expounds on the limits of looking to the past for guidance and the importance of “true wisdom” that can push the United States into a better time to come. This falls in line with Marinetti and the early Futurists in their obsession with turning their backs on what they viewed as a softer past and hurtling into the technological future. But the scope of Ra’s space-focused project was far broader than that imagined by Marinetti. The Italian Futurists’ break from the past criticized the softer side of humanity – art, femininity, and even medical practice were obstacles to avoid in Italy’s drive for militaristic conquest and political and social hegemony. Sun Ra’s ambitions were predicated on a similar

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30 Graham Lock, “Right Place, Right Time, Wrong Planet (Chicago Talk Remix),” Traveling the Spaceways: Sun Ra, (Chicago: Whitewalls, Inc.), 2010
32 John Gilmore qtd in John Corbett, “One of Everything: Blount Hermeneutics and the Wisdom of Ra,” The Wisdom of Sun Ra
33 Sun Ra, “What America Should Consider,” The Wisdom of Sun Ra, 65
break with the past, but not at the expense of artistry. He highlights this in different sections of the publication, saying:

The kingdoms of the past fell because they grew too proud and self-satisfied…art and beauty is more pleasing to people than weapons of destruction, the world deserves some beauty and pleasure, it has been bathed in blood too long. All the wars to end war has [sic] brought civilization to the very brink of total destruction.34

Whereas Marinetti’s future was based around war and violent overthrow of former ideologies, wisdom for Sun Ra was an ultimately peaceful quest at odds with the imperialist missions of the United States.

George Clinton and Sun Ra’s efforts to locate Blackness outside of American racial structures are similar to earlier works fixing Afrofuturism within current Earthly paradigms. Lisa Yaszek takes a deeper look at the history of Black American speculative fiction in an article titled “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future.” She reminds the reader that Afrofuturism is a mode and practice of storytelling that is more expansive than it is thought to be and far older than its late 1990s surge of popularity. She explains that the genre has been a coherent narrative tradition in its own right, and traces its scope to stories written in the 19th century up to the early 1900s and to now.35 Issues of race were not as prevalent in early Afrofuturism – mostly because of the disreputable status of science fiction in American culture at the time and its racist overtones – but the technological boom after WWII paved the way for a more serious analysis of the new technocultures that pervaded the world.36

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
Speculative fiction focused on Black American life may not have been popular or given an explicitly cohesive genre name until recently, but artists and authors have produced Afrofuturist work for centuries. Clinton and Ra’s musical works truly do place the Black man in space, as Tegan Bristow notes in the broader context of U.S. Afrofuturisms; similar to other escapist storylines in the genre. Relocating to space means leaving the Black man outside of racist stereotypes and able to live in a new way – one not based on human identity, but rather kinship with beings from other planets. The new utopia preached galactic and racial egalitarianism, but made little mention of female and non-heteronormative Black identities being invited for the ride.

The Present Condition

Bristow’s image of the Black man in space introduces the concept of gender and sexuality to Afrofuturist art and music. There is a noticeable absence of female subjectivity within either Sun Ra or George Clinton’s repertoire, and the lack is even more glaring in the face of the breadth of Afrofuturist work that does take gender into account. Octavia Butler’s books are known for crossing speculative fiction with realist social theory and religious philosophy as well as focusing on the lives of women. Newer artists have also made interventions along those lines to open the genre to a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis of Black American futurity. And one music artist in particular can claim the lineage of Sun Ra and George Clinton using a mix of funk, hip-hop, soul, and other music genres: namely, Janelle Monáe.

Janelle Monáe Robinson, the singer, producer, and overall music maverick, is without doubt the current face of popular American Afrofuturism. Music news site Billboard.com lists that she has sold only 455,000 albums since her debut, but even without superstardom she
remains a recognizable icon. She was signed to Covergirl in 2012 as a celebrity brand ambassador and even before that her ubiquitous black-and-white tuxedos and high pompadour were familiar sights at music industry events and among fans of her fantastical concepts. Her three studio albums – 2007 EP *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, 2010 *The Archandroid*, and 2013 *The Electric Lady* – have continued in the same thematic backdrop, covering the story of Cindi Mayweather, Monáe’s alter-ego cyborg personality. Her Western science fiction future blended with a modern, feminist Afrofuturism introduced me to mainstream Afrofuturism in America as well as possibilities for Black future concepts that focused on more than just racial identities. The year is 2719 starting in *Metropolis*, and technology has reached the heights of the science fiction film dream. In the short film for the song “Many Moons,” an android auction is underway in the city of Metropolis. Cindi Mayweather is the newest class of android, the Alpha Platinum 9000, and the star of the auction. Mayweather/Monáe performs the song with a band to the side of the runway as other android/Monáe alter-egos in various outfits strut down the middle and are bought by spectators. The auction crowd is composed of the city’s mega-rich dandies, crime lords, and the head of the police, and parallels to the slave auction need little elucidation.

The Black female figures that Monáe becomes display themselves on the auction block and are suitably admired, praised, and de-humanized based on their social identity when they are bid on and sold. And to be fair, their identity as androids means that they are not technically human and therefore without the rights guaranteed through the label – there is no concrete de-humanization because there was never humanity to be removed from their identity. The Janelle Monáe-faced androids are the technological masterpieces of a future state in their humanlike

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Janelle Monáe album art:

*Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase),* (2007), above

*The Archandroid,* (2010), right

*The Electric Lady,* (2013), below
appearance but associated inhumanity – technological achievement that finally eclipses the (Black, female) human within a human form.

Monáe has said in interviews that the cyborg motif in her productions stands in for marginalized communities in the present, including women, African-Americans, sexual minorities, immigrants, and other disenfranchised social groups.38 The symbol of Cindi Mayweather therefore fits perfectly into Donna Haraway’s theory of science fiction in her 1991 “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Haraway suggests that women of color and other marginalized members of the populace can be understood as cyborg identities, where in the political myth of Western countries these identities are fusions of outsider subjectivities founded off of their position as Other in the duality of the American self.39 In science fiction, these cyborg identities are re-worked endlessly as possibilities for hybridization across identification categories and therefore act as stand-ins for the Alien.40

Like in many futuristic storylines, Monáe’s Metropolis seems to be a utopia for its human residents of all races and genders. But the conflict arises from a social structure based off of deeper bodily characteristics – the human/android dichotomy. The cyborg figures that would symbolize oppressed identities in a race-less, gender-blind science fiction utopia here embody the very identities that they are usually used to replace. The android personalities in the Metropolis suite of albums are presented as Black women – already a hybrid of female subject and Black – but also already cyborgian, hybridized beings set apart from humanity. Monáe gestures to the quintessential Western science fiction thematic obsession with oppression in her

40 Tegan Bristow, “We Want the Funk: What is Afrofuturism to Africa?” The Shadows Took Shape, (New York: The Studio Museum of Harlem, 2013), 83
use of lower-status android subjects, but their refusal to fit neatly into a race-less, sex-less box reminds the viewer of our own societal inequalities in a more overt way. As Daylanne English reasons, “[Cindi Mayweather] is the mediator between not only androids and humans in Metropolis but also between the future and our own time.”

Monáe does not fit herself within the Afrofuturist label, but her music has provided beneficial additions to the genre. Mayweather the android codes as Black and female even in the androgynous black and white suit that Mayweather/Monáe favors, giving the biologically inhuman form human social baggage from our present history. Sociologist William Tsitsos uses racial transparency theory to critique the difference in use of alien identity for white and non-white musicians. He theorizes that white musicians are more likely to use matching costumes or face-coverings to sustain an alien persona, while non-white artists adopt a more individual identity within the character in order to differentiate themselves from the music styles associated with their racial or ethnic group. In Tsitsos’ reading, the transparency of whiteness aligns any white performing body with subjectivity and inherent individuality while simultaneously objectifying the work and person of non-white performing bodies.

The use of an android persona for a Black artist like Monae would thus be an attempt to neutralize her racialized image and expand her repertoire outside of the limits imposed by such categories. And there may be some truth to the individuality factor, especially considering that the box of acceptable Blackness in popular American music remains a small one. Monae’s science fiction plots and fantastical concepts are decidedly quirky when set against the R&B-pop-gangsta rap combinations that epitomize popular Black American music today. Her styling

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41 Daylanne English and Alvin Kim, “Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monâe’s Neo-Afrofuturism,” American Studies 52.4 (2013), 225
Monáe’s android personalities:

Stills from the *Many Moons* short film.

*Many Moons [Official Short Film]*.  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHgbzNHVg0c  
©Janelle Monáe
could in fact be responding to the closed definition of mainstream Black musical identity in the manner that Tsitsos suggests, or even just expressing artistry without regard for racial distinctions. But there remains a decidedly Black American consciousness throughout Monae’s performative work in the Metropolis suite. Racial awareness is especially rampant in the lyrics to “Many Moons,” when Monae sings of longing for freedom and catalogues stereotypes of Black women in a spoken “Cybernetic Chantdown”: “civil rights, civil war, hood rat, crack whore,” she chants, before “Black girl, bad hair, broad nose, cold stare…creative black, love song, stupid words, erased song…”

Monae’s genre-mixing use of funk, hip-hop, and soul anchors her connection to American music history. She terms her brand of Afrofuturist sound “cybersoul,” what English calls a “complex blend of multiple, often technologically mediated musical genres.” Her work samples jazz of the Sun Ra variety, funk hearkening back to George Clinton, and other forms of the Black American musical tradition like gospel and hip-hop; seamlessly blending historical Black forms into ideas for future sounds. Metropolis, The Archandroid, and The Electric Lady do not shy away from issues of race or gender and in fact embrace representations of difference. Monae actively casts a Black feminist subjectivity into the future landscape of Metropolis. But the androids here are in a position of inferiority that has nothing to do with her race or gender or any combination of human social stigmas. The androids in her three albums, and especially Cindi Mayweather, remind the audience of the perils of a difference-blind approach to future utopia while calling attention to the possibilities for diverse bodies in future technoculture at all.

Janelle Monae walks the line between Alondra Nelson’s theories of Black access to national futurity within Western social ideologies. Her music and music videos present a diverse

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43 English and Kim, 222; Janelle Monáe, “Many Moons,” Metropolis (Bad Boy Records, 2008)
44 English and Kim, 217
45 Monáe’s ties to Atlanta hip-hop duo OutKast in particular calls to mind OutKast’s 1996 futurist album ATLiens.
far future brimming with technological development and wealth. Black citizens of Metropolis are not cut off from state progress and neither is their racial identity destroyed for an impersonal, indifferent multiculturalism. The uncompromising, unquestioning acceptance of racial, gender, and sexual difference in Metropolis is reminiscent of a similar societal reworking in *Pumzi*, an East African film I will examine in Chapter 4. The dystopia of Metropolis does not rely on badly-concealed racial undertones, but instead confronts such stereotypical science fiction configurations head on. Monae opens space for Afrofuturist fiction based less on escapism for Black Americans and more on futurity for cultural retentions. Monae’s Black, feminist, queer future presents us with dystopia that assumes the continuation of social hierarchies, but she also gives us a cyborg hero to rally behind in the never-ending battle. Cindi Mayweather is not just hope for the world of 2719, but also for equality within our own time.

Trans-Atlantic Retentions

Ellen Gallagher is another artist whose works touches on themes of hybridity and subjectivity, but in a more trans-Atlantic context. Gallagher, a mixed-media artist, is American by birth, with ethnic roots in Cape Verde and Ireland. Her transatlantic lineage and use of collage combining strikingly different elements into a single image offers fertile ground for insight on liminal identities. Her 2007 exhibition in the United Kingdom, called *Coral Cities*, uses literal images from the past (newspaper clippings, pictures) to construct collages loaded with meaning.

One of the series exhibited was titled *Watery Ecstatic*, and features a painting paying homage to the Drexciya, the mythical subaquatic offspring of enslaved pregnant women who

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Ellen Gallagher
Coral Cities (Korallstäder), 2007
Private Collection
© Mike Bruce
were thrown overboard by sailors or who threw themselves to drown during the Middle Passage. The painting takes the form of a clipping from Ebony Magazine reworked using ink, watercolor, gold leaf, cut paper, and plasticine. The page features a collection of advertisements and a publicity blurb about “Famous Names In Detroit,” which contains a few lines about the wife of a leading figure in the city. Clippings with the word “brains” are overlaid on advertisements for Broadcast brand canned goods, creating an unpleasant link to cannibalism maybe best associated with Hollywood zombie films. A reclining figure advertising sunglasses is blacked out along with the head of a woman serving a plate of the Broadcast brains. Both women’s eyes are replaced by giant sunglasses and cut-out eyes and numerous large, red, root-like segments of coral slither up the page from all sides. Their resemblance to tentacles furthers the horror motif.

Detroit band Drexciya was the electronic duo that brought the realm of Drexciya to the public consciousness, or as far into the public consciousness as it has come. Songs within their compilations series titled Journey of the Deep Sea Dweller suggest that the superhuman citizens of the Atlantic are not content with their underwater existence or the brutality of the Atlantic Slave Trade that brought them there. The duo’s electronic music styles bring to mind a certain urgency of experience that is not quite cheerful even with the continual use of a fast beat and energetic melody. Journey of the Deep Sea Dweller is especially frenetic and the fourth piece in the series, Journey of the Deep Sea Dweller IV, begins with an audio track that could have been cut straight from a galactic science fiction movie villain’s theme. The composition goes on to offer more details about the Drexiyans through a robotic voice sounding out the words: “This.

48 Ellen Gallagher, Coral Cities, Ink, watercolor, gold leaf, cut paper and plasticine on Ebony Magazine page, (Dublin: The Hugh Lane Gallery, 2007)
Species. Is. Socially. And. Scientifically. Advanced. And. They. Will. Conquer. The. Entire. Universe. The message is clear behind the fast-paced rhythm and digitized sounds: the inhabitants of Drexciya are a product of violence and their eventual return to land can end in peace or violence depending on the whim of the Drexciyans. As the band asks us in the liner notes to their first album *The Quest*, will the Drexciyans “teach us or terrorize us?” And what will the battle look like if the second comes true?

The scene from *Watery Ecstatic* suggests a sea creature takeover in accordance with the narrative backed by Drexciya the band. The Drexciya in the painting are a source of violence set to launch a revolution pushing back against the capitalist machinery that runs the United States. The industrial development of the country, signaled by canned goods and advertisements in this painting, is consumed by the Drexciyan takeover. And perhaps the painting also offers a pushback against the greed at the heart of the slave trade that created the new Americas and laid the foundation for modern United States technology and capitalism. The disaster film motifs of the coral/tentacles and eating brains turn the innocent magazine into a form of resistance.

*Coral Cities* de-constructs the capitalist narrative of progress imagined in advertisements and society blurbs made to inspire envy and prompt consumption. But there is another reading of Gallagher’s use of *Ebony Magazine*. The magazine specifically focuses on Black life in the United States and has done so continuously since its debut in 1945. The distinctly Black character of *Ebony* already claimed space in America for Black life in the country when few other magazines did, but Gallagher’s painting connects Blackness and possibilities for danger. The two visible figures are blackened, which calls to mind the racialized dichotomy of color.

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50 Ibid., “Linear Notes,” *The Quest*, (Submerge, 1997), CD
between white/good and black/evil. Gallagher exaggerates the fear of Black revolution by the (white) American state.

Another piece of Gallagher’s, titled *Drexiety*, uses American stereotypes of Black women to re-cast the Drexiety myth in American terms. The heads of Mammy figures swim around larger, many-limbed figures possibly representing their Drexietyan offspring. The Mammies wear Blackface, complete with big lips, large red kerchiefs and tongues poking out of their mouths. And the Mammies’ eyes are blue, which means that the heads present true Blackface on white bodies standing in for Black women. *Drexiety* focuses on the death of the Black maternal figure, but also suggests that the pregnant women who died in the Middle Passage were already set to die in another way under the weight of the racist society that awaited them in the United States. Drexietyans are products of women discarded by the Western capitalist machinery, but there is freedom to be found in the interstice between Atlantic worlds – safe from colonialism on one side and slavery on the other.

Gallagher’s Drexietyans in *Coral Cities* and *Drexiety* present something of a dystopian Black Atlantis that exchanges a story of violent destruction (the drowned women) for freedom for future generations of Drexietyans. The legend links Drexiety with future temporalities in the present with the possibility of Black resistance to slavery and brutality in lifetimes to come. The piece from *Coral Cities* described above focuses on the militant possibility of the Drexiety as future agents of a revolution -- a possible ‘alien’ invasion based on Earth. The Drexietyans remain stuck in the interstice between the familiar world of Africa and the unknown terror of the Americas in a displacement forced onto them, but generations of Black Americans can
Ellen Gallagher
Drexcya, (1997)

Ellen Gallagher
Drexcya; detail (1997)
appropriate the message into new hope. The inhabitants of this Black Atlantis remain caged in some ways by their watery environment, but can be released through possibilities for vengeance.\(^{51}\)

The world of Drexciya goes even farther in theorizing alien identities in its analogous form of bridging discursive networks – the ocean that hosts the supernatural beings is a physical passage between nations and people as well as a figurative one. The enslaved women and their aquatic descendants may have escaped the slave ship, but they could not return to their ancestral homeland and are in fact forever cut off from Africa and humans in general by the mutations that allow them to breathe and exist underwater.\(^{52}\) And if the more particular details of the stories are true, the fetuses developed these changes in utero, meaning that the original women did not survive like their infants would. There is a certain ironic bleakness to the exile to Drexciya even as its residents offer hope to enslaved people and their descendants looking for reprisal for the atrocities of the Middle Passage and imperialism as well as overarching white supremacy. Mutations may have saved the Drexciyans from death, but the new life offered to these infant children came at a high cost and without even their conscious consent. They were cast adrift from their family ties as surely as the enslaved Africans who reached the other side of the Atlantic and with as little hope for succor.

For theorist Saidiya Hartman, the slave dungeon in Western Africa symbolized not just a tomb for African identity, but also a womb for the birth of Blackness in the modern American context built off of forced diaspora.\(^{53}\) Unprecedented ties bound inhabitants who were “swept into the [slave] trade’s surreal, swirling vortex,” and the process forged new identities onto

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\(^{51}\) Ana Nunes, “Disembodiments: Ellen Gallagher’s Watery Metamorphosis,” 45
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 47-48
\(^{53}\) Hartman, 110-135
enslaved Africans – now enslaved and not necessarily African but “Black.”\textsuperscript{54} The slave ship created the terror and impotence that was necessary to cut familial ties and forge slaves from the people held aboard by transforming African life into capital; symbolizing “a walking compost hideously promising tender cane and silky cotton,” as Aimé Cesaire so baldly states.\textsuperscript{55} As I outlined in my introduction, necessary re-configurations of support systems were created by enslaved people during the Middle Passage and in the Americas that provided for their continuity as human beings and individuals within the de-humanizing institution of American slavery.\textsuperscript{56} Combined with the story of Drexciya, the journey across the Atlantic was a creation myth for more than one branch of lost Africans.

Janelle Monáe and Ellen Gallagher present us with two vastly different Afrofuturisms. While Monáe looks mostly to the future and advanced futurist utopias, Gallagher presents a trans-Atlantic fantasy tale with futurity firmly founded in historical memory. There is a certain melancholy to much of the work discussed above, but both Monáe and Gallagher use their mediums to engage the public in questions about Black identity, belonging, and the capitalist economic system. Afrofuturist texts like these in the United States today encapsulate themes of hope, revenge, progress, and more. The mediums are familiar, but the messages offer new framings of Black American futurist ideology. The Black man in space may try to escape social ills on Earth, but he discounts other considerations. Gender, nation, and memory remain especially relevant for those who are left behind.

Chapter II: The African Future — A Fantastic Journey?

Labels…are necessary evils. They either illuminate or they misname.

-Okwui Enwezor

Africa in Diaspora

I questioned what Afrofuturism means to Africa in the introduction to this project. The formal narrative tradition of Afrofuturism has a decidedly American history that oftentimes does not account for other nationalities. But artists from the African continent are producing speculative works that fit under a broader conception of the term. If Mark Dery’s sense of Afrofuturism is music, art, and literature that focuses on African-American themes and concerns within technoculture, then African speculative fiction does the same – minus the American designation. These Black American authors and artists rail against race-blind Western visions of the future by including African-American subjectivity into narratives of technological progress. Opening space for other African diasporic themes and modes of inquiry does not extend much farther past these targets.

The discursive networks that futurist theorists operate deliver a promise that moves beyond tropes that simplify Black identity into a certain set of experiences. Artists working throughout the diaspora produce work unique to their individual contexts, but there is a level of misrepresentation and essentialism in dominant cultural narratives that their pieces counter in solidarity. Ignoring the regional framework of artists and their work is problematic, but maybe

58 Dery, Flame Wars, 180
just as problematic would be to ignore the global connections felt along racial lines. Beginning in this section I will look to the diasporic homeland of Africa for images of futurity and uses of cyberculture. I will use the next chapters to explore whether there may be room for both African-American and African futurists under the umbrella of Afrofuturism. Here I introduce Kiluanji Kia Henda and Wangechi Mutu, two African visual artists doing work today, and examine their connections to American science fictions, as well as the broader plane of international art.

Wangechi Mutu is an artist who challenges the idea of national identity both geographically and ideologically. Critics attempting to categorize her regional specificities vary in the language used to describe her – at some times “African” or “Kenyan,” at other times “Kenyan-born,” “transnational,” or just “New York-based.” Mutu’s position within African diasporic identity politics questions the rigidity of national ties and, as with other globe-trotting African-born artists, it helps to examine their relationships with the continent versus the countries in which they live presently. That is not to say that any of these categories are wrong when applied to Mutu – she was born in Kenya, attended high school in Wales, and moved to the United States in 1992 before enrolling in university and Masters of Fine Arts programs there. Her status as a transnational transplant is clear, but the classifications ascribed to her by critics speak to the different levels of coherence between her art and the various identities that she carries. Is her work speaking to a U.S. consciousness or a Kenyan one? And where does the larger generalization of African identity fit into the mix? Mutu dances between concrete designations and remains a hybrid between continents and nations as a truly international artist. It is hard to say when a naturalized citizen becomes a true national and my point here is not to

police personal identification. Rather, this examination focuses entirely on outside constructions of identity that revolve around African or African-born artists.

Mutu’s work focuses on hybridization in form like that of Janelle Monae’s work with androids, and in fact Mutu excelled at the subject long before the singer made a stir in the public eye. Mutu’s collages are her most direct symbol of cyborgian theory vis-a-vis Donna Haraway, but her videography and sculpture work also play into similar imaginings. Kristine Stiles analyzes the “visual creolization” in Mutu’s oeuvre, in terms of the artist’s personal history and body of work. She labels Mutu a “trenchant producer of transracial, transsexual, transnational, cosmopolitan, and urban images of heterogeneity in which intersubjectivity is a give and take between singular and plural.” For Stiles, Mutu’s location in the nucleus of subjects and African diasporic regions forces the Western eye to re-work conceptions of postmodern African artists.

Wangechi Mutu herself cannot be easily placed into an either/or dichotomy between African and American/Western. Such narrow imaginings of identity are unproductive in the globalizing world we live in. Kenyans creating art in the present day have access to flows of information and culture from around the world on much the same level as Jamaican or British or American artists. The question then becomes less about concrete identification of the artist and more about the diversity of references that an artist can draw from. I am less interested in how Kenyan versus how American Mutu’s collages are than how they play with various regional elements and experiences. Mutu destabilizes viewers’ investment in these categories of identity and instead focuses attention to the shifting terrain that characterizes the present global art scene.

The International Afrofuturist

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The many trails and flows of diaspora can often be subsumed under the narrative of Black Americans and their experience with the Atlantic Slave Trade. And while this is useful and still relevant in discussions of Black identity, the focus on American subjectivities in analyses of diaspora does a disservice to the wider possibilities open to identities outside of the Americas. Where does the displacement theory of diaspora leave African nationals who experienced slavery and colonialism in a different way? Jemima Pierre explores notions of diaspora founded on Black American subjectivities in a 2009 article examining imaginings of race and slavery in Ghana. She refers to this kind of narrow analysis of diaspora “trans-Africanist logic,” referencing Jennifer Hasty’s use of the term to explain the cultural and racial unity espoused by Black diasporic citizens of Western countries. Hartman and Hasty agree that trans-Africanist logic eclipses Ghanaian subjectivities and pushes forward a Western political imagining of both diaspora and Africa. Ghana – and other African nations – has its own histories with imperial powers like the United States and England that should not be removed from the diasporic context. The same is true in technoculture.

Mutu truly encapsulates the theme of global Black identity. Her work captures subjects such as hybridity, identity, race, gender, feminism, sexuality, and much more. Mutu has an eye for context – Kenyan history makes a showing in her art at well as American, along with numerous other diasporic subjectivities. Wangechi Mutu may be referencing an African storytelling tradition in her series Family Tree, where she reveals a new creation story built off of the literal image of the family tree. Figures named Original sky and Original land produce offspring First hoofed spawn, Second snake spawn, and Prodigal sun daughter; the former two children have partners and children of their own while Prodigal sun daughter sits isolated to the

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far left. But the conception of this genesis tale also plays with cyborgian identity and futurist concepts through the use of collage mixing human and animal biological parts with sections of machinery. Original sky is a combination of shell, a dark torso, vines, cables, a human hand, gloves, gears, a motorcycle, and other parts configured into a humanoid shape. Original land incorporates the face of a white man in colonial dress pasted onto the face of a young Black girl with ears stretched by gold earrings, folds of cloth, large leaves, and broken pieces of glass. A parrot perches on the paternal figure’s head and a string of pearls dangles off of its neck. Though Original sky’s shape is vaguely human, curator Trevor Schoonmaker suspects that the additional resemblance to a mountain alludes to the Kikuyu creation story featuring Mount Kenya as the origin of creation. The elements of Kenyan tradition fuse with technological elements to present multiplicity of subject and form.

At the same time, the amalgamated images seem to problematize Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg that I described in the last chapter while examining Janelle Monae’s android personas. Haraway’s cyborgs are detrimental images that position marginalized identities outside of the experience of unity granted to desirable national subjects like white, middle-class, able-bodied men. But Haraway’s analysis is grounded in external portrayals of marginalized groups at the social and political level. She later goes on to question the idea that a singular identity is preferable at all. She instead asserts that “cyber feminists have to argue that “we” do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole.” The figures in Mutu’s

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63 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Wangechi Mutu

**Original sky, (2012)**
Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University
http://nasher.duke.edu/mutu/art.php

Wangechi Mutu

**Original land, (2012)**
Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University
http://nasher.duke.edu/mutu/art.php
*Family Tree* fit into this version of the cyborg personality. Mutu creates an Afrofuturist narrative that appropriates the multiple identities forced onto those occupying marginal positions in Western technoculture and uses collage form to emphasize the legitimacy of such positions. Her figures are quirky and sometimes unsettling, but their existence centers the hybrid in a way that does not demean or degrade the concept of hybridity. The human origin story turns from heteronormative, white-identified Adam and Eve to the Kenyan, European, mineral, animal, powerful, crude, human, insect, machine mixture of Original sky and Original land along with their children. Mutu’s fantastic is not so fantastical at all at its heart; it is only the substitution of a new viewpoint and a new understanding of the human.

**Pan-African Interventions**

Kiluanji Kia Henda is an Angolan photographer who also explores global ideologies surrounding African identity and progress. Some of his recent work has been especially useful in examining the everyday mythologies that center on the African continent. His 2007 project, called *The Afronauts*, is such an example. The project looks at the space of misunderstanding between the meaning African artists give to their work and the meanings ascribed to those works by outside sources. Henda began this effort after one of his photographic pieces featuring a cross-dressing man in traditional Angolan female dress, “Poderosa de Bom Jesus,” was wildly misinterpreted by Brazilian audiences and appropriated by one Brazilian artist to use as a true testament to African identity.\(^6\) In a logical inversion of critics’ difficulties classifying Wangechi Mutu, the problem is that Kia Henda is and can only be labeled an African artist here. The depth of his photograph is compressed because his identity is such that it supersedes complexities in

\(^6\) Rachel Nelson, “(Mis)seeing in/as Contemporary Art,” *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 33, no. 1 (2013), 38-45
character. Kia Henda the African artist would of course create only the strictest of African art, or what passes for African art in the narrow international (here, Transatlantic/Brazilian) view.

Kia Henda’s series under the Afronauts label makes use of the space of misinterpretation between outside conceptions of Africa and realities on the continent. In Icarus 13: Narratives of Progress from Elsewhere, Kia Henda re-writes conceptions of African regression and stasis by interposing the narrative of an Angolan space journey over images of current and past Luanda, the capital city. Photographs include Icarus 13, an image of the “spaceship;” Building the Spaceship, which shows a construction crew at work on the project, and Astronomy Observatory, which presents a desert building presumably used as the viewing space and tracking center for the journey. Kia Henda chronicles the building of the spacecraft and the subsequent voyage to the sun on a website created for that purpose at otherpossibleworlds.net to commit even more realism to the project. The webpage for Icarus 13 explains the purpose of the mission:

‘Icarus 13’ is a pioneer project in Africa that gives wings to our knowledge, creativity, and imagination by making use of new technologies and the appropriate tools for building a spacecraft…The purpose now [after the NASA Moon landing] would be to apply our knowledge of astronomy and physics to improving the future of our planet. A thorough exploration of the Sun would bring us a better understanding of the inconstant pulse of human beings and the means to better protect the Earth’s ecosystem.

Kia Henda pokes fun at the Western obsession with space travel – the better purpose put to that technology being improving this planet – but does not completely disassociate with the linear narrative of industrial national development. With Icarus 13, the artist forces an imagined pan-African scientific body into the ranks of wealthy countries invested in engineering technology and space exploration. Henda’s Icarus 13 series assumes third-world concession to

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ideologies of Western development based on industrial might and wealth, but, in an equally challenging move, the concept forces those same wealthy powers to contend with the new, advanced African entity.

Postcolonial Imaginations

What makes the Afronauts series so ambitious is Kia Henda’s focus on interpreting actual structures and events to fit the series imagery. The image of the spaceship rises above a large plain and the narrow metallic spire jaggedly points towards the sky. The Astronomy Observatory stands as a dusty, flat-topped dome in the center of another dry field. The colossal dome of the Observatory roof covers enormous ribbing that surrounds the outside of the building, arching to the ground like the back of a new class of Star Wars drone. But the two constructions are decidedly less majestic in their original forms – the spaceship is actually an unfinished mausoleum begun by Russia during the Cold War where the first president of independent Angola, Agostinho Neto, lies buried; and the Observatory is a vacant film theater, also left unfinished in the wake of decolonization. An image titled The Astronauts Return features an unexplained metal disk sitting in an abandoned lot in the middle of the city, possibly a satellite TV receiver. The disk in its role as a landed section of the spaceship conveys to the audience the successful return of the explorers.

There is nothing particularly significant about the disk and its nondescript location, but Kia Henda’s magic lies in the prospect of seeing something fantastic in the everyday. The photographs of the construction, expedition, and return of the solar Afrronauts mark a departure from the fatalistic lens fixed on African technological advancement by outside political powers.

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68 Nelson, 43
Kiluanji Kia Henda
*The Spaceship Icarus 13, (2007)*
Galleria Fonti, Naples and Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon

Kiluanji Kia Henda
*Astronomy Observatory, (2007)*
Galleria Fonti, Naples and Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon

Kiluanji Kia Henda
*The Spaceship Returns, (2007)*
Galleria Fonti, Naples and Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon
Kia Henda reinvents African futurity on the global sphere. The Icarus 13 venture sets the stage for a speculative leap that thrusts the continent out of its economic and social dilemmas. Kia Henda “mis-sees,” or re-appropriates the space between image and reality to push the bounds of international images of African progress, or lack thereof, to which many are still resigned.69

The space mission pushes forward purely Angolan (and African) technological development by using structures left over from its colonization and engaging them in drastically different ways. The goal of the mission is to “conquer space for the first time in African history,” by heading towards the sun for an expedition exploring the largest star in our galaxy.70 The name ‘Icarus 13’ already calls to mind the failure of Icarus of Greek mythology and his disastrous flight too close to the sun. But Kia Henda seems to be seizing on exactly that, as though to say that it will be Africans who succeed where the ancient Greeks – a large part of the foundation of Western culture – failed. By reaching the sun, the space journey of Icarus 13 surpasses even modern Western technology, though in a somewhat absurd fashion. Kia Henda could have chosen any planet or asteroid for the destination of his African space voyage and other locations may have served him better if he was solely focused on plausibility. Using the sun is an extravagant move that makes fun of its own distant dreaming as much as it forcibly contests stereotypes of African development. The misrepresentation does not take itself so seriously because the point of the work is much larger than the details found there.

Kia Henda uses images from yesterday and today to trick the viewer into a future technological landscape where African astronauts conquer space in the same way as the United States and The Soviet Union. And Angola’s relationship to both superpowers deepens Henda’s use of a space journey narrative. Angola’s decolonization movement was violent and protracted

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69 Ibid.
70 Kia Henda, “Icarus”
with disparate groups opposing the Portuguese and Dutch imperialist empires. And in the decades after decolonization, Angola became a hotspot for ideological proxy wars between the Soviet Union and the United States. Neo-colonialist mindsets prevailed in strategies used by the two powers to fight for dominance in the war between democracy and communism on the one hand, and technological might on the other. Henda’s Afronaut exhibition cuts through the Cold War noise by creating space for Angola in the space race. Through the journey of *Icarus 13*, Henda brings Angolan subjectivity back to the front in this network of global power politics.

Henda adds to images of present Angolan with the narrative of the journey, and also re-writes temporalities with timelines coinciding instead of connecting in a linear fashion. Africa is pushed out of history once again, but this time in order to re-appropriate the constraining, morbid narrative of the continent’s past stasis, present decline, and future death. The usual tropes are discarded in Kia Henda’s vision for internal African conceptions of who and what the people will be and are currently. Icarus 13’s willful historical fallacies pose fundamental questions about the problematic elements found in representations of Africa: Why does the image of an Angolan space journey shock the viewer so intensely? And aside from monetary concerns, what beliefs about African potential have cast such doubt on the possibility of technological and scientific innovation emerging from the continent? Various imperialist and colonial powers established a long-standing and effective narrative of African stagnation rife with falsehoods about the land, people, and overall failures associated with both. Kia Henda does not only push back against these themes with his Afronaut movement; he completely subsumes them in favor of his own considerations. In the end the fiction he creates is nothing as extreme as the hostile ones that have come before.

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72 See Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 14-15
Wangechi Mutu and Kiluanji Kia Henda maneuver skillfully within the international art arena, at times wading through simplistic labeling and the broad generalizations that can come from an “African” designation. While both are African-born artists, the term has connotations increasingly at odds with technology and national development programs in the style of Western countries. But Mutu seems to revel in the space opened for her work outside of the African/American dichotomy and creates collage scenes that focus on hybridity and disparate elements not necessarily coming together so much as coexisting in time and space. Kia Henda’s fictional narrative of African space exploration questions not only Africa’s place in global technological development, but also pan-African identity in the face of national ties and the merging of ethnic and regional histories into a singular African positionality.

Globalization and its ensuing information and migratory flows are not one way but circuitous. The narrative of unconnected villages on the African continent with little knowledge of the digital world is unfounded and laughable in the present day. Artists involved in the speculative landscape push back against the same Western sf themes and ideologies as American Afrofuturists. Futurist art from African artists may be based in a distinctly regional worldview and pre-colonial history, but the same holds true for American artists. Speculative fiction can create alternate storylines centered on racial experience in either context.
Chapter III: The New Art of Daily Life

We shouldn’t just be making movies we should be changing reality.

- Jean Pierre Bekolo73

What myths do we tell ourselves about national progress? The goal of the national project is continuation of the nation-state, of course, but national futurity means different things to different sectors of society. Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s 2006 science fiction film Les Saignantes troubles ideas of the Cameroonian national project by complicating established ideas of Cameroonian political authority, sexuality, gender, and development. Government leaders and civil society members seem to have competing impressions of national progress in the film, with notable effects on the country’s possibilities for survival as a whole. In the film, Bekolo suggests that Cameroon’s progress is not a focused effort, but instead pits groups against one another both within the country and in the broader international view. The competition grows fierce as the stakes rise further, and in the end a true national cause may be further away than ever.

Les Saignantes follows two young women, Majolie and Chouchou, through an eventful night in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, in the near future. “We were already in 2025 and nothing much had changed,” intones the character Majolie in the voiceover that begins the film.74 Les Saignantes was released in 2006, which makes the setting of the story exactly twenty years after the moment in which Bekolo was making the film. But Bekolo does not give Les

74 Les Saignantes, dir. Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Perf. Aele Ado, Dorylia Calmel, and Emile Abossolo M’bo, Quartier Mozart Films, 2005
Saignantes the conventional science fiction aesthetic that he could have with its future setting. Instead of soaring skyscrapers and images of technological development, a sluggish haze seems to hang over the city as well as the small group of its residents that we are introduced to. This miasma suspends the city in a pessimistic stupor throughout the introduction and much of the middle of the story. The near future, Bekolo seems to be saying, will not be the glittering metropolis of the Western science fiction tradition. The economic and social development that heralds movement towards a utopian society will never materialize in 2025 Yaoundé without fundamental shifts in the particular post-colonial mindset at work in present-day, 2005 Cameroon.

Political Currents

To understand the present moment that heralds Bekolo’s 2025 Yaoundé, it is important to understand the colonial and post-colonial history of Cameroon. The area that is now known as the Republic of Cameroon was first colonized by Germany, with political authority granted to a colonial administration under the larger German empire. After the German defeat in World War II, the area became a League of Nations mandate territory and later a United Nations trust, with British administration occurring in smaller areas in the north and west and French administration in larger tracts of the territory. The British zone achieved independence in 1960 before joining with French Cameroun to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961. It was in this moment, just after independence, that the political traditions of the new state would solidify. After winning power from André-Marie Mbida, the first independent prime minister of the Republic, President Ahmadou Ahidjo would go on to lead the country from independence to

1982, when he resigned after twenty-two years in power.\textsuperscript{76} Then Vice President Paul Biya succeeded Ahidjo as president in the same year and continues to serve as president of the country today.

Consolidation of political power in the hands of a few has been a central tenet of Cameroonian governance since colonial rule and has continued into post-colonial administration and the present. The political excesses of the colonial period in Africa have been well documented, and much of the same holds true for German Kamerun as well as its British and French incarnations. But with independence came similar heavy-handed policy aiming for wealth acquisition for government elites at the expense of civil society and the majority of the populace, only this time with Black, African leaders instead of white Europeans.\textsuperscript{77} Joseph Takougang studies the new democratic movement in Cameroon in his 2003 article “Nationalism, Democratisation, and Political Opportunism in Cameroon.” He cites an earlier book of his that calls the present political moment “Africa’s second independence” and describes the work that is being done to replace dictators and corruption in countries around the continent.\textsuperscript{78}

Authority in the Republic of Cameroon has been consolidated in the hands of a few for its entire existence and younger generations have begun to oppose the repression of free political expression. The aim of his article, Takougang writes, is to “show how political leaders in Cameroon exploited events during the struggle for independence and the current democratisation process primarily for their own political gain rather than for the political benefit or economic welfare of the people they claimed to be representing,” and he illustrates the breadth and depth of

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 8; Joseph Takougang, “Nationalism, Democratisation, and Political Opportunism in Cameroon,” \textit{Journal of Contemporary African Studies} 21, no. 33, (2003), 437
\textsuperscript{77} Chiabi 214-217; Delancey and Delancey 9-10
\textsuperscript{78} Takougang 427
corruption and political authoritarianism in the country’s history. The continued fact of Paul Biya’s thirty-three year presidency years after Takougang’s predictions contradicts democratization efforts and the possibility of legitimizing true democratic statehood.

Jean-Pierre Bekolo came of age in the midst of the Biya presidency and his cinematography reflects his complex relationship with Cameroon and its political history. *Les Saignantes* opens with blocky letters on what looks like a billboard screen, a kind of cinematic intertext ushering viewers into the story with a pointed inquiry: “Comment faire un film d’anticipation dans un pays qui n’a pas d’avenir?” translated; “How do you make a science fiction film in a country that has no future?” This question forms the central difficulty hovering over all events that occur in *Les Saignantes*. It is possible to interpret the query in an international framework, namely in regards to portrayals of African national identities and status on the global stage. In that case the message is that of reclamation: how exactly does the subject matter when it is all already meaningless, subsumed under the flood of other stories that have already exhausted the international public’s regard for the country of Cameroon as well as the African continent?

Breaking Myth

Matthew Omelsky focuses on this kind of reading in his article on Bekolo’s use of hybridity and its connections to Donna Haraway’s theory on cyborg identities. Omelsky considers the film to be a radical break in decolonizing thought; subverting “*all* hegemonic forms

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79 Ibid., 441
80 *Les Saignantes*
Jean-Pierre Bekolo

Film Poster, Les Saignantes (2006)
of thought and discourse, whether they originate in America, Europe, or the postcolony itself.”

Omelsky’s analysis considers the hyperbole used by Bekolo to be a way to deconstruct ideas on literal and figurative African darkness, corruption, and instability coming from groups within the country along with foreign interests.

Bekolo’s vision does in many ways confirm stigmas attached to African cities mired in their supposed iniquity. Corrupt officials, cannibalism, sex work, murder, violent magic, and other such acts seem to speak directly to the notions of Africa as a dark continent, filled with violence and indecency. In a few scenes the characters eat worm-like insects and the meaning of this act remains unclear, though it seems as though Bekolo is either highlighting the traditional practice – in some regions of Cameroon – of eating insects versus modern city living, or the characters’ poverty and desperation. But instead of challenging these essentialist portrayals of African life, Bekolo dives straight into the fray.

All public officials portrayed in the film display excessive greed: whether for power, money, or, most noticeably, sex. The opening scene begins with Majolie in bed with the SGCC, or General Secretary of the Civil Cabinet, an actual branch within the government of the Republic of Cameroon. When the SGCC dies from unexpected heart failure in her bed, Majolie turns to Chouchou for help and reveals that he had promised her stake in a new construction project in return for sex. The women dispose of the body to throw off suspicion before realizing their mistake and reassembling it for the SGCC’s wake, a high-profile event that brings them closer to other important government members and the possibility of more powerful connections. The death of a high-ranking official does not stop the intrigue that flows through Yaoundé and in fact only heightens the stakes for the public figures and ambitious women who surround them.

82 Ibid.
But while Omelsky gives attention to the subversive power of the film’s satire, he may not give enough room to the variants of truth within the excess. Jean-Pierre Bekolo has given a fair amount of space to issues of Cameroonian governance in his films. His latest film, *Le President* (2013), holds the subtitle “How do you know when it is time to leave?” and depicts the disappearance of a fictional president who has been in power for forty-two years. The film was banned in Cameroon because of its implicit critique of Paul Biya’s long term and its activist rhetoric, but Bekolo then released it through a video-on-demand service in order to distribute in the country.\(^3\)

Considering what we know of the director’s politics, there is room to accommodate the film’s obvious political commentary in this analysis as well as its hyperbole. Bekolo may be disclaiming essentialist portrayals of African greed and immorality, but he does not dispense with political factors so easily. The intertexts provide a running commentary that speaks directly to viewers and reestablishes a thread of reality to the action. Most of the intertexts are non-diegetic reminders of the theoretical stigmas attached to African speculative fiction. The next texts are spaced at intervals and read: “How can you make an action film in a country where acting is subversive?” “How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party?” “How can you film a love story where love is impossible?” and “How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden?” The texts play into the overblown narrative that Bekolo capitalizes on, but there is still a mark of truth running through the words that resists an attempt to capture them fully within the film’s hyperbole. The last appears as the last screen of the film and ushers in the credits, asking: “How can you watch a film like this and do nothing

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This last intertext is a more direct call to action. Instead of marking stigmas to detach from ideologies of African cinema, it presents an answer to the questions posed in the last five, even if it is in somewhat vague terms.

Applying the Fiction

Bekolo reflects on the use of technology and futurism in his specific context as a filmmaker in a 2008 essay titled “Welcome to Applied Fiction.” After a conversation with an old woman in his home village, he is struck by her inclusion of his life in the epic history of the village and the relating cosmos. He calls his own storytelling as a filmmaker into question when pitted against the universe that the old woman has given him, and finds himself deficient in some way that his status as “an adept in the Occidental world” cannot fill. Bekolo aspires to storytelling that compels action in the way that the woman inspires him or even how a computer advertisement persuades consumers to buy new products. He calls his new thought project “Applied Fiction” and proposes the use of imagination to fill in the gaps between conceived myths and reality. He attempts to “make cinema in reality” through this project by creating new forms of media that better bridge the gap and produce a space where creators and audiences can “live our brave, new invented story.”

Bekolo protests the binaries of tradition versus development and corporal versus technological by introducing us to the digital world again, through the viewpoint of the old woman living in Bekolo’s home village. “My old woman,” as he fondly calls her, helps him to find the humanity that exists inside the digital. Because of her distance to technoculture, the old

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84 Les Saignantes
86 Ibid., 112
87 Omelsky, 9
woman’s ideas for and about cyber technology remain close to her low-tech daily life. She may not understand exactly how a television works or much about film industries, but this means that she takes a much more holistic view of technology in life. Her life is not separate from new technologies because she does not acknowledge or completely understand medias not focused on interpersonal interactions – everything ties back into tangible humanity and the history of the village.

Bekolo’s old woman is a nurturing figure for Bekolo in his growth as a film director. Her firm stance on humanity in technoculture forces Bekolo to rethink his connections to the digital landscape as a film director. He realizes that he would like to make more productive media that connects to viewers on a visceral level. “When my old woman tells me her stories she does so to draw me into the universe,” Bekolo asserts, “[and] when the media, at its most corrupt, tells me stories, it is done to push me away from the universe.”88 His dream is to get back to the old woman’s version of storytelling and farther from stories created purely for the sake of entertainment or profit. Bekolo’s old woman galvanizes him to tell stories that inspire.

Akinwumi Adesokan investigates Bekolo’s investment in political engagement in his cinematic work in a 2011 book on the aesthetics of postcolonial African artists. Adesokan evaluates Bekolo’s filmic oeuvre in terms of political engagement versus film as commercial product for popular consumption and finds his style to be somewhere between the two, especially in his 1996 film Aristotle’s Plot (Le Complot d’Aristote).89 The political nature of early post-colonial African film did not allow for entertainment to be valued over socio-political thought in cinematic works, meaning that Bekolo’s turn to the use of cinema to induce action has

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88 Jean-Piere Bekolo and Simon Burt, “Applied Fiction,” 113
a long history on the continent. His addition of aesthetic cinematic forms in *Les Saignantes* (the future setting, science fiction/horror film stylizations, non-linear temporality, etc.) does not take away from the messages that he conveys but instead couches theory in less formal discourse that may be more accessible to a larger group of viewers.

Applying the fiction in *Les Saignantes* may require satires as an aesthetic practice that both deconstructs the negativity of ideologies surrounding African postcolonial governance and critiques the realities of political power in Cameroon at the same time. The corruption in the movie reveals itself layer by layer with a full force impact every time. The majority of characters display their greed and/or self-absorption in different ways – for Majolie and Chouchou, by using the body of the SGCC for gain; for the government officials, by using their state-given authority to gain wealth and power. The only characters possibly dedicated to the entire state are one lone policeman investigating the death of the SGCC and a group of old women connected to the mystical force of Mevoungou, a traditional practice that German missionaries attempted to end in colonial times. Meanwhile the soundtrack cycles through two major background themes, one of which is a slow, hair-raising electronic beat overlaid with an echoing voice that further emphasizes the sinister, disjointed quality of the night’s events.

The intertexts add to the stagnant atmosphere by their rhetorical fixation on the impossibility of action in a situation like the one in the film. The repetition of “How can you…” assumes the adverse position of impotence, especially in this type of format that pre-conditions the viewer to failure through our inability to directly answer such on-screen questions. The story is only twenty years in the future and even so we are given a sense of ideas of the incompatibility of African life and futurity. The environment and tone seems to be centering on stagnation as a

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theme that is less of a fiercely destructive power and more of a resolute force that slowly acts to cripple Cameroonian society and arrest development for the common good.

Signifying Difference

Bekolo does not leave Yaoundé to fester in silence. Majolie and Chouchou are young, beautiful women determined to come out on top through increasingly daring behavior. They reveal their anxiety while planning how to get rid of the body of the SGCC and during their ensuing encounters with the dutiful police officer, but the two remain confident through most of the events of the night. The women confront corrupt officials in ways that expose the governmental system’s failings and ultimately use their position in society and the literal power of their femininity to neutralize the Secretary of State – and with him the authority of the government – in one blow.

Majolie and Chouchou become a sort of superhero duo, fighting state-authorized crime with the powers granted them through Mevoungou, a female-centered ritual tradition used by a secret society in Cameroon before colonization. The magic was not widely recognized – the society only functioned within the Beti ethnic group before German missionaries abolished most of their rituals – and Bekolo does not attempt to explain the process scientifically or in any particular way. A secretive group of old women seems to hold the secrets to the ritual and shadow Majolie and Chouchou using telepathy and teleportation. The group attempts to guide the younger women and teach them the ways of Mevoungou, but they continually oppose the interference. Mevoungou in Les Saignantes simmers in the women’s bodies and is released in

92 Ibid., 167
small amounts through an intricate, synchronized dance. The magic only seizes them completely at particularly intense moments, like when Majolie is in bed with the SGCC in the first scene.

The mysterious magic of Mevoungou exists outside of the influence of men, and even more so outside the state and its male-dominated institutions. Its emphasis on the clitoris as an object of power further suggests strength and influence that cannot be controlled by the state and which does not require the presence of men in any actual way. In direct contrast to theories of women’s position as maternal figures, Majolie and Chouchou actively seek their own pleasures outside of heteronormative family structures. The corrupt state is symbolized in male officials, while the only true savior figures are female sex workers. Anne McClintock examines ways in which nationalism is gendered in an article titled “No Longer in a Future Heaven.” She mentions Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias’s list of five ways that women have been implicated in nationalism, and though the first three deal with connections to nurturing and reproduction, the last two are particularly relevant here: women serving “as symbolic signifiers of national difference” and “as active participants in national struggles.” Majolie and Chouchou’s positions in society, as women and as sex workers, signal difference and disconnect from the mythical pure Cameroonian state. The state officials disrespect the two not because they are morally corrupt – moral corruption being a particular characteristic of this state apparatus – but because they symbolize the underbelly of the nation that is most often ignored or discounted in the larger framework of nation building.

But the two women are – ironically – the vanguard for Bekolo’s revolution. Their active participation in the national struggle starts off centered in self-interest, but becomes more than just about their experiences. Majolie and Chouchou instigate the final battle with the Secretary of

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State after he pushes another woman down in his car and attempts to sexually assault her. It is clear that the two do not act solely because of the other woman’s victimization because this comes after they had already planned to have revenge against the man, but the sequence of events suggests that the Secretary’s defeat has everything to do with feminine strength being used against the tainted, masculine power of the state. Even their names are synonymous with girlish femininity – Majolie translates to “my pretty” and Chouchou is a nickname meaning something like “pet.” Mevoungou is not a neutral power and the women do not treat it like a positive force, but it does give the women who serve it some control in the midst of the forces pushing against them. “Mevoungou was a serious thing,” Majolie narrates over flashbacks and flash-forwards showing their combat in the final battle and eventual victory; “a thing that would either destroy us or the country.”

At this point in the film Majolie and Chouchou seem to be the closest thing to champions that Yaoundé has. Flawed though they are, they are the only counterpoints against government excess and complete exploitation of the populace, and in some ways it may be better for the country to be destroyed and rebuilt again rather than continue down this line. The true power of Mevoungou appears when the two are pitted against the Secretary of State in the climactic struggle. Their physical blows do nothing against the stronger, larger Secretary of State until they perform the dance to mobilize Mevoungou fully. The buildup for the final strike gathers the force of Mevoungou through twisting, swirling movements that are orgasmic in their intensity and culminate in one definitive blast of energy that completely defeats their opponent. The two channel their identities into literal force and find power in the old, the feminine, and tradition when other outlets have failed both them and the nation.

94 Les Saignantes
So who stands out as the actual Bloodletters (*saignantes*) when all is said and done? Majolie and Chouchou are clearly the designated bearers of the title as opportunistic women, but they are not the only vampires draining the country’s resources. Almost all of the government officials are corrupt in one way or another – through money, sex, or power – although the three are used almost interchangeably. Chouchou and Majolie aren’t just two women who are used or being used – the lines are much less clear than that – and they aren’t exactly the faultless, heroic underdogs to root for in Bekolo’s imagining. The plot subtly asks the audience questions about the foundation of state power and mindless acceptance of authority. Loyalties are not definite in a world where morality is a luxury for the lower classes.

The state of legal affairs is so bleak that the only upstanding, judicial force in the film is the police officer, a devoted detective who encounters the women on their way to dispose of the body of the SGCC and follows the narrative to its conclusion by staying in the shadows and observing the night’s events. The officer eventually catches up with the women after they have defeated the Secretary of State and demands answers for their activities during the past several hours. He begins his tirade by reminding them of their duties to the country and the ways that they disregard state authority: “This country must become a model,” he insists, “with institutions that everyone respects!” Majolie scoffs at his interpretation of events. She asks him what exactly he has done for the country, while she was paying “with [her] body and [her] ass!” After the women use Mevoungou one final time to escape him, the officer returns to the station, gives the chief inspector his gun, and departs for good. In the end the officer loses hope in the face of such impotence on the part of the same institutions he had upheld so firmly. He cannot continue to stand back and watch the country be bled dry from every side.

95 Ibid.
Les Saignantes is in many ways the precursor to Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s theory of Applied Fiction. He writes a dystopic future and takes an ethical stance on government and societal dysfunction using elements of fantasy and science fiction, but with such satirical elements that it remains unclear how much is hyperbole versus real critique of the axes of state power. Les Saignantes may be an erotic, mystical horror film, but its lessons register on this plane as well. During a web interview, Bekolo explains that “the whole idea of science fiction here is to speculate and…to make a cautionary tale.” This suggests that the emphasis on overplayed stigmas does not completely hide the more allegorical elements of the story.

It is possible that the film’s absurdity in its presentation of state officials is Bekolo mocking Cameroonian national authority in an undeniable challenge. If so, the possibility is then that Cameroon may become the Cameroon of the film in twenty years if the country does not reform present power structures and social imbalances. Bekolo’s cautionary tale is a rebellious call to the youth and discontent sections of the populace that reject the current cycles of greed and development that plague Cameroon. It is not just international narratives about African pathology that he fights against, but also Cameroonian reality and the complicity of the nation in its demonstration of active mismanagement.

Les Saignantes stands in the interval before Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s turn towards a heavier political activist scope for his films. Elements of magical realism and glimpses of advanced technologies mix with the encroaching darkness and menacing atmosphere to form a striated mood at times both unfulfilling and hopeful. Viewers are left with a final scene depicting Majolie and Chouchou walking through a neighborhood with the woman they saved from the Secretary.

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97 Omelsky, 10
of State, laughing and dancing as an upbeat melody casts a much more promising atmosphere over the gathering. Even the narration turns reassuring for the final remarks: “And in 2025 there was no place for despair. We had to move on, that’s all. The country could not continue like that, without a future. It had to change.”

It is significant that the denouement does not offer alternatives for change from the characters themselves. The women’s lightheartedness comes after the defeat of state authority, but no real answers are given for the larger theme of national futurity except for the remark on change. The three sectors of Yaoundé society in Les Saignantes – the women working for personal gain and nationalist reform, the state symbolized by unscrupulous officials, and the larger society as a whole – are not working together for a tangible project of national futurity. And in fact their own claims to the future state actively block the other actors’ assertions of their own interests. Bekolo leaves viewers with a last, pointed query through the final intertextual line: “How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after?” The words hover on the screen in a black billboard hanging over a line of old cars in a dilapidated city lot. The moral of Bekolo’s allegorical tale is clear: it is up to viewers to answer the call, with hope that the momentum will be enough to move Cameroon toward a different state in 2025.

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98 Les Saignantes
99 Ibid.
Chapter IV: The Maitu Seed – Re-birth in Dystopia

Afrofuturism is…what Blackness looks like in the future, real or imagined.

—Wanuri Kahiu

Wanuri Kahiu’s science fiction film *Pumzi* addresses a different kind of African science fiction future than *Les Saignantes* or Henda’s Afronauts. *Pumzi* is not fixed on inequalities of race, gender, or nationality. The film calls to mind the Western tradition of futurist speculative films focused on climate change more than anything else. *Pumzi*’s dystopia does include considerations of state fears based around reproduction, African nationalism, and the power of civil society, but these elements are subtly woven into the plot. The film symbolizes an adapted Afrofuturism that does not fear race or gender, but also does not give viewers the representational clues found in films like *Les Saignantes* with more overtly political themes.

*Pumzi* was written and directed by Wanuri Kahiu, a Kenyan filmmaker whose previous feature film chronicles fictitious events surrounding the bombing of an embassy in Nairobi in 1998. That drama, titled *From a Whisper*, has a subject matter vastly different from *Pumzi*, which is set in an East African commune -- called the Maitu Community -- in the distant future. The Maitu Community lives within the East African Territory when the events of the film take place, thirty-five years after an unspecified World War III. The community name and time already call to mind a future in peril, only thirty-five years removed from a global conflict, and this small mental image of the setting is the first shown to the viewer. Words are boldly typed

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Wanuri Kahiu
Stills from opening scenes of *Pumzi*.

Inspired Minority Pictures, 2009
out across a black screen to the sound of computer static – “Maitu Community, East African Territory, 35 Years after World War III – ‘The Water War.”

Already the film reminds us of technological, cybernetic development in this future through the use of the mechanized type as well as the existence of African life in a future landscape. And it is not just ideas about African life that dominate this first image, but African survival and persistence in the face of unknown threats. ‘The Water War’ as it is called, has concluded, and Pumzi offers a glimpse into the continuation of humanity in its aftermath.

The opening scene continues to illustrate technological progress through coded messages about the present moment and its links to the past that is possibly our near future. The film begins with a presentation of the quintessential sci-fi setting: The top of the Maitu compound rises from the desert like a spaceship, centered on a pock-marked, spherical building with four long, rectangular wings extending to a square perimeter wall naturally cut out of a rock outcropping. The shiny silver of the buildings reflect the harsh desert glare. Inside, fragments of history pepper the room in which we meet the protagonist. The viewer will later learn that it serves as the Virtual Natural History Museum and houses specimens from the far and recent past, such as preserved sea creatures and animal skeletons. Newspapers hanging on the walls depict the histories of the time leading up to the third World War: one paper proclaims the truth of the greenhouse effect and its transformation of the environment, while another headline announces a “Whole day journey in search of water” with an image of two men gaunt from malnutrition drinking from a ceramic mug.

The latter image is eerily reminiscent of pamphlets used today by Western aid organizations to encourage donations for starving African populations – the man not holding the

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103 Ibid.
mug even gazes mournfully at the camera as his ribs poke through his naked chest. But the image does not resonate on the same scale when put into the context of the film. *Pumzi* is an East African film written and directed by a Kenyan filmmaker who does not let the old ghosts of economic dependence and paternalistic aid missions rest easily. Kahiu sets the men into a specifically Black African framework that does not explicitly call to mind African anxiety for survival pitted against Western affluence. The Water War seemingly wreaked havoc on all societies and in this context, in this moment, the history of the conflict is an East African history based on East African stories while viewers are given almost no information on the outside. In this way the two men depicted in the newspaper clipping do not necessarily further the wider stigma attached to African misery, but remain firmly within the scope of a diegetic history that does not malign or disguise their pain for a neo-colonialist cause.

The film’s dystopic nature is quickly revealed. The protagonist, Asha, sleeps with her head pillowed on a desk in the Virtual Natural History Museum in her first appearance, surrounded by the specimens and newspaper clippings arranged neatly around her. She is dreaming of a large tree rising from the desert in front of her, cutting through the horizon. Dream Asha gasps and smiles on noticing the tree and reaches her hand towards it. She smiles brighter as the image moves closer, straining towards it before awakening to a computer voice alerting her to the fact that she is dreaming and advising her to take her dream suppressants. Asha takes the pill before striding out of the room for more water, and in the main area of the commune her reality unfolds. Her work in the museum may keep her secluded from the hustle and bustle of the community, but she is clearly no different from the other residents who occupy the space.

Almost everyone in the compound wears the same metallic, greyish-brown jumpsuits with a black over-vest and waist bag, and all heads are shaved. Behind a corner filled with men
exercising on stationary equipment is a screen flashing with the words “Maitu Community. 100% Self Power Generation. 0% Pollution” and a loudspeaker heard throughout the main area proclaims slogans like “Do Your Part,” “Recycling Liquid Means a Fair Share for All of Us,” and “Kinetic Energy: 0% Pollution, 100% Self-Sustainable. Be a Self-Power Generator.”

Judging from the harsh landscape surrounding the community and the rigid nature of life within, the post-war world has become something of a utopia of efficiency driven by scarcity of vital resources. The community leans towards extreme socialism in its focus on pragmatism and the uniformity of its inhabitants underscores both the resource shortage and the determination for survival that Maitu hinges on. The almost fanatical reminders of order and duty reify the necessity of the structure – the opposite of everyone doing their part and receiving a fair share, of course, being the breakdown of what civilization is left in their world.

But even the Socialist bent does not give the Maitu community a fully horizontal social structure. Most men and women wear the jumpsuits described above, but the men exercising on machines in a corner of the hall are stripped down to an undershirt and black tights or shorts and a gaunt woman with paler skin in the bathroom wears only the undershirt and pants. The woman’s eyes are bruised and downcast as she wipes the bathroom mirrors and avoids Asha’s gaze. There is clearly a kind of social hierarchy at work here, possibly based on skin color seeing as the cleaning woman is the only person shown in the Maitu Community to have lighter skin as well as the only person to be of a lower status. And the jumpsuits are almost certainly not used solely for function’s sake. The ubiquitous uniforms also signal belonging and a sense of community greater than even that compelled by the gates protecting the residents from the deadly world outside.

104 Ibid.
The cleaning woman’s lack of uniform marks her as an outsider within the society even while she remains a part of the community by virtue of her living within the walls. When Asha leaves some of her water supply in a container in the bathroom for the woman, she may be doing a simple kindness for kindness’ sake, but she also signals an even sharper divide between herself and the cleaner – their worth to the community is measured in the amount of liquid allotted them. In a commune that arose from the Water War intact and holds onto stability through rigid structure, the question of water is a vitally important one. Asha giving the cleaner water demonstrates that she has the stirrings of an internal conflict pitted against the order of the community, or at least feels an emotional tug at the display of her privilege. Asha struggles with the rigidity of their social organization but has to know that the same structures keep them alive within the walls.

*Pumzi*’s plot is typical for post-apocalyptic science fiction films, but notable differences do stand out. The rigid social structure, world in peril, unsmiling residents, and rebellious young protagonist are common elements of the genre. But *Pumzi* does not necessarily spring from the long line of popular imagined dystopias set in the United States or England (like those mentioned above) or even those depicting global tragedies that give a slightly broader focus to international themes. The East African Territory is all that we know of the world and the Maitu Community supposedly all that survives in the present. The usual American military holdout or council of world leaders fighting collapse is absent from the film and while the exact results of WWIII remain unclear, Kahiu gives no consideration to Western nations or other nations at all within the scope of the post-war future.

*Pumzi* assures an African future not predicated on colonization or state weaknesses arising from that time, and instead spotlights strict management and unyielding dedication to the
common cause. Sara Ahmed focuses on this kind of political futurity in her book on futures; remarking that in the logic of futurism, political hope serves as a kind of power for those who can claim it whereas the opposite is also true – negativity is then located in those who cannot inherit the future.\textsuperscript{105} The dearth of utopic futuristic stories set in Africa or even optimism directed at an African future as a concept (much less a multitude of positive African futures) suggests negativity ascribed to the idea of African survival at all. Wanuri Kahiu’s vision of a singular future based solely on the continuation of an East African society opposes this trend in a productive way. The fate of the world hangs in the balance in this post-apocalyptic moment, but human survival, and hope for an end to the desolation, resides in the hands of Africans and in particular a young African woman.

The survey of the Natural History Museum in the initial scene highlights a seed contained in a jar among other long-dead flora and fauna, seemingly wasting away like the other objects. Its plaque, however, says that it is named the Maitu Seed and explains its linguistic heritage and formation. MAITU, meaning “mother” in the Kikuyu language, comes from the words MAA (truth) and ITU (ours): Our Truth.\textsuperscript{106} The name Maitu does not just signal the importance of a single seed for a civilization living under extreme drought, but also the importance of the community that hosts it. The Maitu Community is in truth the mother community because there remain no others to distinguish it. As far as can be known, the community is the new origin of humanity and all else arises from and through the society contained in their walls. While this fact gives a greater urgency to the mission of the Maitu, it also imagines an ideological rebirth away from stigmas attached to African development.

\textsuperscript{105} Sara Ahmed, \textit{The Promise of Happiness}, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 161
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Pumzi}
That is not to say that futurity in an African context can only be imagined when all other continents have vanished, but perhaps rather that futurity here comes from East Africa because the people who built the Maitu Community were the only population who rose to the challenge and devised ways to outlast what could have been the complete end of humanity and the world. No one is absolutely certain of what lies beyond the desert that surrounds their encampment or even if there is an end to it. If prior contact with outside groups occurred before the present moment, it does not now, and the message to residents is clear: there is no outside, do not imagine an outside, do not dream of something more, and we will continue to survive together in the ways that we have been.

As the events of the story unfold, more details emerge on the organization of the new state. The government council in the Maitu Community is composed of three women wearing the same grey-brown jumpsuits as the others, with their rank evident in their lack of shaved heads. Their hair is swept back from their faces in strict configurations of buns or braids, but the allowance of hair at all clarifies pertinent details about power in the community. The uniformity of residents in the Maitu Community ensures group cohesion and adherence to the values of the larger whole, namely water (and general resource) preservation and social stability. The cleaner’s lack of full uniform and lesser water supply speaks to her lower status in the community. On the other extreme, the council’s addition of hair signifies their authority – they are not flouting group cohesion but instead powerful enough to be above the smaller details. Viewers are witness to a display of their power when they confront Asha about her curiosity for the possibility of life outside.

When Asha discovers a package mailed to her contains viable soil, she plants a seed in it (possibly the community’s last), and applies for an exit visa to find a more permanent place for it
to grow. The council speaks to her by hologram message, reminding her that her job is to
catalogue and display items and not to determine extra information. They deny her visa and turn
to go. But Asha protests that the seed is alive and scans her hand to transmit her dream of the tree
to the three women. In the end her belief is not enough – one council member reminds her to take
her dream suppressants and when her immediate boss comes back on the line she tells Asha that
she must leave the museum because she is “compromised by [her] ailment.”

The council’s unrestricted control further reminds the audience that the fair, equal society
which keeps order in Pumzi has a hostile underside. What complicates the matter is the unknown
reasoning behind the austerity measures. Maitu the utopia does preserve its inhabitants and
manage water and resources for the good of the whole. And dream suppressants may not have
sprung from the desire to crush hope, but instead to focus residents on reality to oppose worry
and excess negativity over the current state of affairs as well as to keep morale at a consistent
level.

But these benefits come at the expense of individual freedom and a diversity of ideas that
could help the community grow. Asha’s dreams are described as attacks and ailments that
compromise her position in society. And after the council denies her exit visa and pronounces
her unfit for working in the museum, a squad of men enters and begins smashing through the
objects on display. A few drag her from the room, remove her over-vest, and place her on an
electricity-generating exercise bike that will be her new station in the colony. The sudden
violence towards Asha and the Virtual Natural History Museum reinforces a less encouraging
interpretation of the council’s power and its excesses. “The outside is dead,” one of the members
tells her before they send in the guards to destroy the room.  

\[107\] Ibid.  
\[108\] Ibid.
true form in this moment – it is a totalitarian state intent on order by any means possible. The
council cedes all confidence Asha had in their authority in the moment when the museum is
destroyed and she escapes the community very soon after.

The destruction of the museum evokes Marinetti’s Futurism once again. The tenth point
of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” proclaims that “we intend to destroy museums,
libraries, academies of every sort, and to fight against moralism, feminism, and every utilitarian
or opportunistic cowardice.”109 Marinetti then elaborates on his distaste for museums later in the
text:

    Museums: cemeteries! Identical, really, in the horrible promiscuity of so many bodies
    scarcely known to one another. Museums: public dormitories in which someone is put to
    sleep forever alongside others he hated or didn’t know! Museums: slaughterhouses for
    painters and sculptors who go on thrashing each other with blows of line and color along
    the disputed walls!110

The dystopic nature of Pumzi is based around the totalitarian power of the community governing
structure. But the Council makes many of the mistakes that the Futurists do – they are firm in
their ideologies and violent in their methods, center group continuity over personal wellbeing,
and cast out elements of society that do not fit into their worldview. Museums are repositories of
history and the Council cannot allow them to remain when the knowledge contained within them
may have a destabilizing effect on the community.

East African Futures

109 Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 51
110 Ibid., 52
But where does this kind of dystopia fit into East African ideas surrounding future possibilities? Though there is much to be said for globalization of media and internationalization of art forms, *Pumzi*’s foundation seems to be a strictly regional one. Wanuri Kahiu grew up in Kenya before attending university in the United Kingdom and pursuing a degree in directing in graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles. She drew influence from the canon of Western science fiction films for *Pumzi*’s sets, but associates the process with traditional African art styles and takes care to acknowledge that link: “we already have a tradition of tapestries and functional art and things like that, that loan a backdrop for films,” she says in a 2010 interview.\(^\text{111}\) Her educational background may be Western, but her focus constantly returns to African storytelling practices and modes of inquiry.

With *Pumzi* Kahiu uses storytelling both to put Africa on the map for future mythologies and to caution against certain trends from the present. She works to use Afrofuturism as a vehicle for a social imaginary that can reach large audiences without being offensive or too philosophically heavy.\(^\text{112}\) Tegan Bristow explores similar trends in Afrofuturism in an article from 2013. She reflects on Donna Haraway’s work in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” again describing the continual hybridization that the female and/or racial other character undergoes in science fiction and cyberculture in the postwar West.\(^\text{113}\) Bristow believes that *Pumzi* offers a critique of the focus given to alienation and hybridity when speaking about African cyberculture and says that it offers instead “a story of rebellion in the face of a too rigid and spiritually poor vision of the future.”\(^\text{114}\) Asha’s individuality and quest for a solution to the dry climate pushes past the

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\(^\text{112}\) Kahiu, “Afrofuturism and the African”
\(^\text{113}\) Bristow, “We Want the Funk,” 83
\(^\text{114}\) Ibid.
perceived limits on African fantasy and heroism and she eventually gives herself wholly to her belief.

The fantasy of a ruthless, totalitarian state is not new to post-apocalyptic fiction, but it is especially compelling coming from Kahiu’s Kenyan origins. If Bristow is correct and *Pumzi*’s reworking gives centrality to East African individuality and familiar life, then the message that Kahiu sends does not indicate positivity attached to state structure. And maybe that is exactly the point. Kenya has had a mixed history of dictator-like heads of state even after decolonization, with most if not all leaders having enjoyed almost complete authority and influence.

After formal colonization by the British Empire in the late 19th century, the traditional Kenyan government formation was kept somewhat intact, with chieftains and precolonial ruling elites either imposed or manipulated into working under the colonial state.  

115 Independence in 1964, while symbolically momentous, did not advance the Kenyan national cause as meaningfully as hoped. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of newly independent Kenya, led the country from 1964 until his death in 1978. His successor, Daniel arap Moi, was the Vice President during Kenyatta’s tenure and continued his predecessor’s consolidation of state power in the office of the president and the KANU political party. By 2002 and twenty plus years of ostensibly democratic elections but little change, the public had had enough. The elections that year were said to be Kenya’s first genuinely democratic elections, remaining relatively peaceful up to and even after polling and the official party change Mwai Kibaki swept the election and overturned KANU dominance with his new National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) party.  

116 But the years after Kibaki’s win saw a return to the power hungry government institutions and

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arbitrary state authority. The 2007 elections were won again by Kibaki and followed by waves of violence and revolt taken to new heights.

The Kenya that Kahiu grew up in was a country going through its own problems of leadership and social configurations. The Maitu Community’s way of governance may be in reaction to the vulnerabilities of the post-WWIII world, but the postcolonial Kenyan government was coming out of its own social and economic crisis – namely, that of decades of colonization. And *Pumzi* occurs thirty-five years after the water war, which is close to the amount of time Kenya had existed as a formally-decolonized state in 2009 when the film was made. The Kenyan government chose democratic rule under restrictions from the agreement that ceded control of the region from the British Empire and Kenyatta and his successors did little to change the nation into a full democracy in the time after independence.

In contrast, the Maitu Community can be assumed to have built their compound either during or in the aftermath of WWIII. In any case, the strictures placed on the community leaders had to do with resource control and survival as a greater whole, and the socialist-type governing structure was chosen to achieve both. It is ironic that Kahiu pits the Kenyan authoritarian democracy against an East African authoritarian socialism, because African nations’ Cold War choice between democracy and Communism remains relevant in the discourse on African nationalism and pan-Africanist philosophy from the first decolonization measures up to the present. It may be that Kahiu is offering the option of African socialism to counterbalance reality in a futurist social experiment that was never expected to succeed. As Tegan Bristow noted above, *Pumzi* delivers a future that is too regulated and emotionally bereft to survive completely intact. The state in its present incarnation could never have authorized Asha leaving the

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117 Ibid., 245-268; Mutua 91-94
118 Bristow, “We Want the Funk,” 83
compound and her defiance was a necessary act to remind the council, and the community as a whole, of the humanity they have lost with their security measures. In the same way, *Pumzi’s* concentration on rebellion against totalitarian rule implies a critique of African democratic corruptions without offering an easy second option. The realistic answer may be somewhere in the middle of both ways of governance, or a mixture of the two, or even a new leadership organization that does not insist on the dichotomy between first-world and second-world notions of equality.

Whatever the possibilities for good government in our world or the future, political dissent opens doors to new ideas and perhaps a better outcome for all. When Asha escapes with the help of the cleaner that she shared water with earlier, she breathes life into the bleak wilderness that the world has become. She walks for hours with the sun beating down on her scarf-wrapped head and slowly grows more tired while she directs her steps to the place marked by the coordinates on the mysterious package containing the soil. She is flagging after some time and preserves most of her water supply for the plant carried in her waist bag, but as she draws closer to the coordinates she spies the tree from her dream over the next sand dune and gleefully sprints towards it. Asha’s dream seems to be coming true before she looks down at the bark under her hands and notices how dry and cracked it has become. She spins around, seeing more and more lifeless stumps and the remains of a small forest. Finally she walks a bit away from the stump of the larger tree and drops to her knees, sobbing faintly but digging in the sand with her hands. She plants her tiny, budding tree and splashes the last of her water over it before using her scarf to wipe the sweat from her body and add it to her seedling.

The final scene ends with Asha lying on her side, curled around the baby tree and shading it with her body as she grows weaker. Though her demise is imminent, and has been ever since
she left the compound, Asha pursues her goal to the very end. Her last act is one of selfless creation at the literal expense of her life while her body continues to nourish her creation even in death. Asha becomes a mother figure that surpasses even the Maitu Community in its focus on sustaining life. Asha goes one step further than the community by searching for an answer to the bigger question of survival on a human level as opposed to the machine existence that occurs within the walls of the compound.

Asha’s sacrifice may not have saved Earth or even made progress in actively political terms, but her actions carry meaning stronger than their ultimate outcome. She martyred herself for her dream of a better existence than the one directed by a robotic social structure with capricious leaders. It is not far-fetched to say that remaining in the Maitu Community would have destroyed the one chance for her tree. And the commune would most likely have eventually fallen to ruin when water resources dried up for good, not to mention the adverse effects of the buildup of incredible emotional stress most likely suffered by the residents living as members of the last holdout on the planet attempting to stall complete collapse. Dream suppressants can only do so much to dissuade rebellion and Asha is proof of fissures in the societal order. The common cause of group survival cannot glue all elements of a society together under rigid controls like those used by the council.

Wanuri Kahiu’s ideological interventions are tied together in Pumzi’s bleakly inspiring perspective. The generation of Kenyan youth that Kahiu is part of is one that can only be tired of being sidelined – both from international successes and free political involvement in their home countries. Pumzi offers a dystopia that counts on a certain brand of pessimism for realism, but the message of hope comes across even so. The true failing in life, the narrative seems to say, is inaction. Kahiu pushes effective change on a grassroots level and individual optimism at the
forefront. But above all her message of hope is not predicated on the possibility of failure, but the evident nature of African futurity as a concept in itself. Like Bekolo, she seems to be asserting that an African future exists, and it is up to present-day dreamers to make sure that nations arrive there intact.
Conclusion

The question turns back to Afrofuturism. But my real focus has always been on the act of naming and the various inconsistencies that lie in the naming of the term. The spotlight shines on the use of labeling and the historical connections inherent to the etymological process. Perhaps Afrofuturism claims the *afro-* label in ways reminiscent of *African-American* or *Afro-Brazilian* or *second generation British of African descent*. The *afro-* is always hyphenated, actually or implicitly; always derived, always attempting to claim a space in the continually new land to which it travelled or was brought. Africa in the *afro-* appears in retentions, maybe in biological characteristics like facial features, and of course in the sense of dislocation and separation from the nation in the face of official citizenship and perhaps roots going back generations. But though the *afro-* here registers communal history and shared cultural imaginings, it is not Africa in the present tense. *Afro-*centric materials attempt to close the distance between present realities assumed to be separated from the cultural history of the African continent and histories of the African continent. *Afro-*diasporic cultures have landed on distant shores and now struggle for recognition by larger social and political bodies. The *afro-* here is the diasporic child adrift from its origins but nostalgic for a largely fictitious memory of familial unity.

Afrofuturism under this lens critiques the West from a racial viewpoint that is still located within Western subjectivities. Black American futurists may use modes of inquiry and ideas of progress opposed to the hardline techno-sphere of American science fiction and speculative fiction, but their relationship to that sphere is an intimate one. While not allowed full American identity by dominating white supremacist structures, hyphenated political identifications like “African-American” can claim some degree of access to the national framework.
Deirdre C. Byrne critiques Fritz Lang’s 1926 film *Metropolis* using spatial metaphor, and analysis of class and gender divisions within the social structure of the film’s eponymous city. She agrees with Ursula K. Le Guin’s analysis of the “incredibly regressive and unimaginative” viewpoint of Western speculative fiction in its tradition of objectification of “the social Alien.”¹¹⁹ In contrast, Janelle Monáe’s *Metropolis* suite of albums works the social alien from Lang’s *Metropolis* into the spotlight. Her android personalities focus the viewer’s attention on the marginalized other within the futurist city as well as in our own time. Monáe’s Metropolis struggles against societal inequalities that metaphorically equate to present-day disenfranchised groups – in the singer’s words this includes the gay community, the black community, women, and immigrants.¹²⁰ Her American identity is a mix of social alienations stemming from her position within some of these groups. But even if Monáe does not rest easily within the American political fantasy, her location within U. S. culture pre-positions her to receive some share of the ideological profits of Western civilization.

Though both Black Americans and Africans have been kept from Western technoculture to varying extents, Afrofuturists cannot claim the same links to their respective nations. Most of the futurists that I examined in the preceding chapters have touched on governance and nation in different ways. Janelle Monáe and Ellen Gallagher challenge the notion of Black nationalism in the United States by looking at ways in which state ideologies position social aliens: within the reach of the state but not necessarily an accepted part of the imagined nation. For Jean-Pierre Bekolo, the state is not a viable entity. It is instead an institution to work around for citizens intent on revolutionary action for progress. And Wanuri Kahiu straddles the line in *Pumzi*,

¹¹⁹ qtd. in Deirdre C. Byrne, “The Top, the Bottom and the Middle: Space, Class and Gender in Metropolis,” *Literator: Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies* 24, no. 3 (2003), 7-8
neither denying the productivity of a totalitarian state in moments of crisis, nor offering a feasible alternative.

A further effect of an American-centric reading of Afrofuturism is that it neglects African participation in Afrofuturism. African futurist artists had already taken up the challenge presented by Alondra Nelson in her Afrofuturist theorizing and continue to create from their social and historical locations in the diaspora – as they have been doing for centuries. Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s film Les Saignantes and Wanuri Kahiu’s Pumzi both touch upon gender, issues of political governance, and activism in Africa, but Bekolo seems to be creating his newest films out of a particularly Cameroonian political and social context while Kahiu takes care to highlight East Africa and Kikuyu language within the dystopia of her film. And Kahiu and Wangechi Mutu, though both born in Kenya and from the Kikuyu ethnic group, use different modes of examining alternate temporalities even aside from their distinctive mediums. Ties can be drawn between these works and Afrofuturist works from other regions – there is something particularly compelling about sub- or super-human political identities within Kahiu and Mutu’s work contrasted to Janelle Monáe’s androids – but such ties do not eclipse the singularity of each artist’s work.

The Global Afrofuturist

Overarching labels are useful ways to signal similarity and thematic comparability. But maybe the _afro-_ used in early definitions of Afrofuturism has run its course in new diasporic trends. Mark Bould speaks to the heterogeneous nature of sf in a guidebook he authored on the topic of global science fiction. He argues for more critical specificity in engagement with the
genre that can oppose the homogenizing tendencies of habitual genre making. And looking back at Wangechi Mutu’s *Family Tree*, the artist offers a new *afro-* situated in a paradigm where unified global Blackness remains a relevant subject, but not the only configuration of Black racial subjectivities. If creation myths can be reworked to include Afro-diasporic frames of reference that combine an African presence with other themes (Western and other), then future mythologies can do the same. The realities of modern economic systems, migration flows, and cyberculture networks opened the world to globalization circuits that affect present cultures and their accompanying music, literature, and visual art. Like the Black diaspora outside of Africa, Afrofuturism is founded on spacelessness and a longing for home: in technoculture, futurist storylines, and scientific advancement as well as in Western science fiction.

Afrofuturism can stand to open itself to difference within its borders while still maintaining its usefulness. Science fiction storylines abound in Black American life from the slave trade to the present. But the African communities left behind bore witness to similar ruptures brought on by colonialism and its aftermath. And even before that, traditional storytelling practices in Africa, South America, The Caribbean, and North America were rife with mysticism and alternate temporalities as tied into Afrofuturism as Black experience under colonialism and into the present. There is productive possibility in Afrofuturism for a more sustained commitment to limiting presumed homogeneity and affirming the disparate collectivity of work that lies within its bounds.

The African diaspora has produced amazing work devoted to Black technoculture and notions of future for centuries. I show only a few examples of artists currently working, but there are many more Afro-diasporic visual artists, authors, music artists, and filmmakers who continue to transcend the present in new and fascinating ways. Outer space, the future, alternate timelines,

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and other speculations set the scene for limitless considerations of not just cosmic Black identity, but also Black identity within more Earthly bounds. Afrofuturism heralds future possibilities – the specific destination is up to those of us living in the now.
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