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Through the Looking Glass:

Images of African Futures

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Contents

5 **Editorial**

6 The New Image of Africa in Black Panther
Ainehi Edoro

10 Interview
Moving Past Afrofuturism
Rafeeat Aliyu and Masiyaleti Mbewe

14 Interview
But Africans Don't Do Speculative Fiction!?
Chiagozie Nwonwu

18 How Did the African Future Begin?
Imraan Coovadia

22 Afrofuturism = Radicality
Mawena Yehouessi

29 Interview
Africa and the Fourth Industrial Revolution: The Need for "Creative Destruction" Beyond Technological Change
Rasigan Maharajh

Editorial

The Hollywood action movie Black Panther captured the imagination of audiences around the globe. In several African countries, it quickly became the highest grossing film of all time. The tale is set in Wakanda, a technologically advanced African kingdom that avoided the shackles of colonialism and slavery by isolating itself behind a guise of poverty and deprivation. Although what it presents as "African", in terms of narrative and images, is far from uncontested, the film catapulted Afrofuturism – a discipline or aesthetic that enlists science fiction and technology to imagine black identities and futures unconstrained by past and present circumstances – from the avant-garde circles of artists and intellectuals into the mainstream.

The movie was released into a particularly fraught political moment, as the world witnesses a surge in right-wing extremism in the so-called "democratic" and "developed" North, notably the United States and Europe. This cuts deep to the core of these societies, raising questions about the norms and values that were thought to underpin their democratic order. At the same time, the globally influential entertainment industry faces mounting criticism from within their societies and across the world about the narrow representation of diversity in their productions. Growing numbers of voices protest the distorting effects of racism that people of colour experience in their daily lives, as well as the role of racist narratives and depictions in delineating the realm of imagination. As American screenwriter Ytasha Womack argues, "We have been duped into only believing one narrative about ourselves. And this creates a co-constitutive process in which we imagine a limited sense of possibility and create limited lives in this image." From the 1950s onwards, Afrofuturist ideas have been brought to life, particularly by African-American intellectuals and artists, to break away from these limitations.

In their own context, African intellectuals like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Achille Mbembe call for the "decolonisation" of language and knowledge in order to challenge the single narrative of a continent that languishes on the periphery of cultural production and lags behind global progress in technology. In a similar vein, the Rhodes Must Fall student movement in South Africa demanded the decolonisation of cultural and social spheres along with education and the economy.

Against this background of political and cultural disruption, *Perspectives* approached writers to inquire, speculatively or not so speculatively, into an African future. What inspires our fascination for the future and the futuristic? Is there a convergence or divergence between the futures imagined in Africa and the Afrofuturism emerging from the United States? Can we imagine futures that go beyond redressing past injustices? Is Africa prepared for the technological advancements that are central to both Afrofuturism and the much-touted Fourth Industrial Revolution?

The result is an eclectic mix of contributions and conversations across the arts, culture, philosophy and politics. They offer glimpses of African futures – fantastic, idealistic, or sober, but always self-confident – that place the continent at the centre of a world to come.

Layla Al-Zubaidi
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The New Image of Africa in Black Panther

Ainehi Edoro

Wakanda, the fictional home-country of the superhero Black Panther, might be set in Africa, but the terms of its representation were crafted in Hollywood. The child of Marvel and Disney, birthed by American director Ryan Coogler, is not, strictly speaking, an African project. Yet the movie sparked a special interest across the continent.

The power of the film lies in the completely novel image of Africa it presents to Africans. In other words: there is a good chance that Africa and the rest of the world may not have seen the same movie. Others saw a Marvel Comics blockbuster decked out with all the usual cookie-cutter thrills and frills. Africans saw all of that, and a whole lot more. They saw in Black Panther an "African portrayal from an African perspective", as the actor Danai Gurira (who played Okoye) put it during the Johannesburg press junket.

The Guardian in Nigeria, South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*, and Kenya's *Daily Nation* ran column after column, teasing out the resonances of the film for their readers. Social media was awash with outpourings of support. From sold-out showings in Addis Ababa to multiple-city premieres attended by A-list celebrities, there is no doubt that the movie struck a chord with African viewers. Less than a month after its release, Atiku Abubakar, Nigeria's former vice-president and current presidential aspirant, used it as a campaign platform in an article on Medium titled "Black Panther: A Good Film with Many Lessons for Nigeria".

Utopian Impulse

Wakanda is not the first fictional African world to hit the big screen or circulate globally in popular imagination. However, the movie offers a new way to see Africa on the silver screen and, more broadly, in the world of fiction. Something sets Wakanda apart from, say, Zamunda in Eddie Murphy's Coming to America, Kukuanaland in Ryder Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, or the many other fictional African spaces in the Marvel Comics universe. Zamunda is small, closed-off and timeless in the way Disney castles are – a blown-up miniature of a world trapped in a jewel box. The Africa we find in Kukuanaland, built largely on the racist fantasies of 19th-century England, is incomprehensible.

Wakanda is different, and not only because it is a highly advanced civilisation. Unlike the purely aestheticised Africa of Zamunda, Wakanda is a fantastical African world sprouted from real-world elements of African life. The costumes were inspired by designs and fabrics sourced everywhere on the continent, from Accra to Maasai communities. Parts of Black Panther's score were composed and recorded in Senegal, where Swedish-born Ludwig Göransson collaborated with Senegalese singer and guitarist Baba Maal and other local musicians. Wakandans speak Xhosa, one of the official languages of South Africa. The chief of the Jabari people has a Nigerian accent.

For non-African moviegoers, Wakanda might appear "African" in a broad and, perhaps, clichéd sense. But African viewers are able to see the source material in the fin-

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Wakanda is a fantastical African world sprouted from real-world elements of African life.
© Marvel Studios/ Disney

ished product. Because they know which parts are real, they can better appreciate the futuristic transformation that takes place. In this sense, Wakanda is always slipping into the frame of the real Africa and vice versa. The African viewer can close the gap between fiction and reality and, doing so, set off the utopian impulses in the film.

By "utopian impulse", I mean the aspect of the film that invites the spectator to ask: "What if Wakanda were Africa?" or "How does Wakanda hold a promise of what Africa could become?" One of the most politically resonant moments in the film is the opening sequence. Set in Sambisa Forest, it is built on the kidnap of the Chibok girls by Nigerian extremist organisation Boko Haram, which Nakia (played by Lupita Nyong'o) helps to foil. We can't overestimate how resonant the Sambisa scene was for Nigerian viewers. Watching it, they were able to imagine a world in which the 276 schoolgirls are rescued, a world in which Boko Haram is defeated, a world in which a community is not bereaved of their beloved children, and in which the hashtag #bringbackourgirls is never coined. Such a bone-chilling act of violence against the feminine body would never have taken place if there were a Wakanda and a Nakia to intervene. The utopian impulse in art straddles the distinction between what could have been and what is yet to be. For Nigerians in the audience, and perhaps some of the Chibok family, seeing what "could have been", had Wakanda come to the rescue, raises the possibility of what "might be" in a future, however distant.

The utopian politics of the film rely heavily on Coogler never straying too far from Africa as we know it. But this reliance on the "real" Africa has its problems. The characters of Shuri, Nakia and Okoye are all powerful figures of femininity. But their revolutionary quality as representations of black femininity stands in sharper relief when placed next to the figure of the Chibok girls as femininity-in-crisis. In these moments, the movie seems to exploit the real Africa – or, at least, such images of dysfunction most resonant for Western viewers, in order to provide justification for the utopian Africa the movie desperately needs to render believable. Secondly, placing Wakanda too close to the actual Africa is aesthetically limiting. Science fic-

The utopian politics of the film rely heavily on Coogler never straying too far from Africa as we know it. But this reliance on the "real" Africa has its problems.

Letitia Wright as Shuri in Black Panther.
© Marvel Studios/ Disney

tion is a transformational art. It is fiction as metamorphosis. Space, bodies, objects are remade to conjure the openness and unknowability of the future. If Wakanda – its music, language, markets, etc. – looks too much like the actual Africa, it is because Coogler didn't quite succeed in working out the terms on which Africa could truly inspire a futuristic aesthetics. Then again, art does not have to be perfect. It just has to be revolutionary. Black Panther, for all its representational issues, offers a revolutionary way of telling the African story to a global audience.

Afropolitan Afrofuturism

One of the awe-inspiring attributes of Black Panther is the sheer scale of the production. This was something the continent had never witnessed before on the silver screen. Africa had never before been the central focus of a narrative so epic, featured on screens so large, and watched by such a populous and international community of fans. This was Africa writ large.

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe echoed similar sentiments in a Facebook post, praising the movie as marking "a return to a spectacular scene and a global dimension, which many, since the beginning of the modern era (for us the age of slave trafficking, subjugation and dispersion), have stopped dreaming – the rise of a 'black nation' standing, powerful and singular, within humanity". In Black Panther, the world revolves around the axis of this "black nation". The final scene in the movie is the crux of this dream of which Mbembe speaks: T'Challa, king of Wakanda and Black Panther's real identity, stands before the United Nations, telling a room full of world powers that Wakanda is ready to lead the world to greatness.

Contrary to popular opinion, Afrofuturism is not only about producing futures. As the science (fiction) of black world-building, it is just as much about re-imagining the past. Kodwo Eshun, one of Afrofuturism's foremost thinkers, reminds us that Afrofuturism is an attempt at "reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective". This simply means that Afrofuturism is that sweet spot where the difference between remembering the past and dreaming the future breaks down.

Black Panther is set in two parallel histories. One follows the aftermath of Africa's colonisation. This history accounts for the poverty and weakness of the Wakanda that the world knows. But behind this façade of poverty, Wakanda conjures an alternate history in which Africa is the true world power, controlling enormous wealth and weaponry,

effecting peace and security in various parts of the world, while maintaining a stable government at home. Wakanda easily becomes the figure of a utopian imagining of Africa as a world power. It tells us that there is a Wakanda buried somewhere inside the postcolonial wreckage of Africa's many crises. It tells us that what we are today is simply the disguise of an incognito existence. The Africa of now becomes a mask of suffering that is ready to transform into the mask of the superhero at any moment.

But the most significant achievement of the film is to project a world future tethered to the heroism of an African community. In the narrative of blockbuster superhero movies, the survival of the world is always at stake. But what counts as "the world" is always exclusively represented by a Western city. We root for the survival of Gotham, in part, because we feel a bond that lets us imagine that our fate and that of Batman's city are intertwined. In the sci-fi tradition, not all worlds are permitted to represent humanity. Until T'Challa, we could not take for granted the powerful idea of a Xhosa-speaking hero standing between the world and the apocalypse. Africa had not stood as a global surrogate, such that the fate of humanity would rest on the fate of an African hero and his community.

This is why, as Mbembe noted in his Facebook post, Black Panther lies at the intersection of Afropolitanism and Afrofuturism. If we understand Afropolitanism, not in the Taiye Selasi sense of an identitarian mythology of the self, but as a kind of African world order, a way of organising space around Africa as the figure of power, Afrofuturism becomes the aesthetic mode of bringing that world order into being. Afrofuturism projects Africa and blackness as what is at stake for the future. In so doing, it fulfils the Afropolitan desire to make Africa and blackness the axis around which the world and history turn.

But the most significant achievement of the film is to project a world future tethered to the heroism of an African community. In the narrative of blockbuster superhero movies, the survival of the world is always at stake. But what counts as "the world" is always exclusively represented by a Western city.

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Moving Past Afrofuturism

Interview

The international blockbuster Black Panther created a global awareness for the Afrofuturistic. However, a growing number of African creatives are pushing back against the term that was coined in the United States, seeking a more distilled way to describe their speculative work.

Speculative-fiction author Rafeeat Aliyu speaks to writer, photographer and activist Masiyaleti Mbewe about a vision of the African future that Mbewe draws from her life and experiences in various African countries, including Zambia, where she was born, and Namibia, where she is currently based.

Aliyu: What inspires your work?

Mbewe: It comes from the desire to insert myself where, originally, people like me – queer black women – have not been inserted. For the majority of my childhood, I was just reading books with no context to race, gender and whatnot.

When I was 18, I decided I was going to write a novel. I read fantasy novels written predominantly by white women and was like, "Let me do this, too. I can do this." I started writing and I was writing about people that did not even look like me. It was weird, so from that moment onwards, it became about recreating, reshaping, reimagining.

Also, the feeling of remoteness inspires me – feeling alien, feeling placeless – and that's I think where I mostly write from.

What is Afrofuturism to you?

Initially, I and other people I know went around calling ourselves Afrofuturists. We're only now trying to detangle that identity. Over time, I started feeling uncomfortable calling myself an Afrofuturist. There have been criticisms about Afrofuturism and how it was coined by a white man. Even though Africans have been producing speculative content for years, it's like we waited for a white man to just name it. Speaking with my friend, spoken-word performer Philipp Khabo Koepsell, recently, we noticed that the prefix "Afro-" is the label used all the time to describe anything done by black people. Why can't we define things ourselves?

I think we should rather be talking about "pan-African futurism", a term I coined for my exhibition, Afrofuturist Village.

What does your Afrofuturist village look like?

It is a place that is rural and remote, where distinct and strong characters exist. It is removed from the typical futurist imagery of Africans

Rafeeat Aliyu is a writer of weird and speculative African fiction. Her stories have appeared in the *AfroSF* anthology, Expound magazine, Omenana, and Nightmare magazine, among others. She currently lives and works in Abuja, Nigeria.

in space, of technology, etc. We always sit around and talk about these things as if in a bubble. Afrofuturism is a very classed concept. It is for the classed black person who has access to information, myself included. I needed to take all black people along.

The concept behind the exhibition tackles issues of language, gender and identity. For example, I included an excerpt from one of American poet June Jordan's theories on language that asserts that whoever "owns" a language gets to decide how it's used, how it shapes things and how they can "weaponise" it. In response, I invented a language that my characters could use so that they were in full control of their futures.

In the future, when all of us have gone past whatever we're going through right now, the colonial remnants and whatnot, there should be no concept of gender or race. All of these things should be dismantled.

I took pictures in places that I think Afrofuturism needed to be inserted, spaces that are remote but futuristic. As much as we want to say we're going to space, there's spaces on earth, in Namibia, that are out of this world.

Because the exhibition was conceptualised as a village, I also decided to have a traditional healer there. I was exhibiting at the German Goethe Institute in Windhoek and thought it was important to first cleanse the space, as Namibia and Germany have this strained relationship due to the Herero genocide and ongoing conversations about reparations for all of the damage and trauma that was left in its wake.

Tell us more about your idea of "pan-African futurism", or "post-Afrofuturism" as you have called it elsewhere.

Afrofuturism can be very one-dimensional. Globally, the African diaspora is having different experiences, even though we're all black. There's different places where we intersect, but there's still marked differences.

Most of my travels have been around Africa and I've lived in various African countries, so, for me, it's about pan-African futurism. It's based on my experiences in these spaces, based on my exposure to the folklore and mythology of different African spaces and how they've affected my life.

But it goes further: for me, the aesthetics associated with Afrofuturism – black people in space, spacey landscapes – is not enough.

In the future, when all of us have gone past whatever we're going through right now, the colonial remnants and whatnot, there should be no concept of gender or race. All of these things should be dismantled.

Spacey stuff is cool, but I don't have the budget to take photo shoots with that theme. But with my photography, I was able to show there's queerness in the future, and that's what I wanted to talk about the most. Afrofuturism is still very heteronormative, with the exception of a few people. Even if we talk about Black Panther, the patriarchy is there.

For me, a pan-African future is one where everyone is free and equal. The Africa we're living now, for those of us who are black and queer, that's just not happening.

What keeps bringing you back to futurism?

I think I was born into it, if that makes sense. Even if I say I quit, I'm still there. I'm still thinking in those terms. It just never leaves me. It's

Masiyaleti Mbewe is a Zambian Afrofuturist writer, photographer and activist. She was raised in Botswana and is currently based in Namibia. She's a former copywriter currently working as a freelance writer and activist.

injected literally into every single thing that I do. People ask me to do multiple things and it's always there. I try to leave; I try to write in other genres. Even if I write a story about a girl who walks from here to the store, aliens have to be there. It would feel incomplete otherwise. That's how it is, how I'm wired, I don't know how else it could be. If I look back to some of the compositions that I wrote when I was 16 years old, I always made things weird for no reason.

You are a writer and a photographer. How do you choose which medium to tell your story in?

It depends on what the story is. For something like an exhibition, obviously, I can't just write. It depends on what I want to communicate. If it's an extremely visual project, then photography is the way to go, and if it's something descriptive or personal that I'm trying to get across, I'm going to write.

But the two complement each other; it's like part of the same machine. I have to sit down, write, and conceptualise photo shoots. For me, without writing first as a foundation, I won't be able to take photographs and tell a story visually. It would be impossible to translate what I'm thinking and the things I see in my head to something visual.

The exhibition that I had would have made sense as a collection of short stories, but I had an opportunity to work with a lot of great people to create something visual, which is what I did. I utilised different mediums, including film.

How do you come up with your characters? In your stories, they can be quite dark, but in your art, they are colourful. Why the difference?

With my photography, I collaborated with other people. The designer had a different interpretation of Afrofuturism. It was the same with the videographer I worked with, you know: people have different perspectives. Personally, for me, the future is actually bright, as corny as that sounds.

With my writing, it's personal, right. You write sometimes and you don't think anyone is going to read it. Of course, you're going to create characters that are outlandish. It also depends on the story, what characters are needed to make this story work or to make it make sense.

For example, my short story "Alien Control" started with my experiences at Home Affairs. In my passport right now, there's a stamp that says I'm allowed to be in Namibia for a certain period of time, Alien Control Unit, etc. I'm a human being! I'm an African in Africa but I'm considered an alien. I feel very alien. People don't hide how they feel about foreigners. It's not a secret that we are subhuman to some extent, we don't have a lot of rights.

I've been through so much, particularly in terms of working in a country where people will blatantly use the fact that you're a foreigner against you. It's every immigrant's story. So the character of the alien who comes through and destroys everything was me. I was actually standing in line at Home Affairs with a friend of mine: that's one of the characters. I overheard some of my peers in primary school talking about *makwerekwere* [derogatory slang for immigrants] and how dirty and disgusting we were: that's one of the other characters, the parents actually.

That's my only point of reference, really, what's happening with me. The story is based on things that happened. You know when you're young and weird stuff happens to you and you don't notice it? Then when you grow up, you're like, "That was weird. I'm going to write about it." A good friend of mine once told me, "If a good idea comes to

Self portrait.
© Masiyaleti Mbewe

you, go." But if a good idea comes to you and you just sit on it, someone else is going to write it. There's a myth, a belief, that says stories travel from writer to writer until they find the correct person to get the story out. I totally believe that because I've sat on stories before and next thing I know someone else has won a short-story prize with a skeleton of the idea that I had.

What's the future for your work and Afrofuturism?

I predict Afrofuturism is going to peak and plummet back into obscurity. When you look at the success of other genres, it's the same. *Twilight* and vampires peaked and plummeted. Harry Potter is a great book, but fantasy novels aren't as popular as that series was.

Fantasy novels were very big for a bit, then they plummeted, because it is a niche market. When the gig is up, the gig will be up. People who are only reading books just to seem cool and be part of the trend will stop reading the books. I'm sure there are thousands of African writers that write speculative fiction but there's only room for ten. That's why it's important for those of us who are about this and who have been about this before it peaked to start thinking of the future. We need to start thinking about pan-African futurism.

On the other hand, if we're being optimistic, Afrofuturism and pan-African futurism will be a completely normal thing and all of us are going to be published and we'll be okay.

But Africans Don't Do Speculative Fiction!?

Interview

While stories about the "fantastic" have a long tradition in oral and written storytelling in Africa, the continent is rarely associated with speculative fiction. This is slowly changing, however. Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor's award-winning books are reaching a mainstream audience. On the continent, several initiatives are working hard to change perceptions. Omenana, a tri-monthly magazine from Nigeria, has been publishing speculative-fiction writers from across Africa and the African diaspora since 2014.

Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu, one of Omenana's founders, spoke to Perspectives about the budding genre and the challenges it faces.

Perspectives: Why do you think that Africa is not generally associated with speculative/science-fiction writing?

Nwonwu: I've had to respond to this very question several times in the past. While I initially always stated that it comes from a feeling of disrespect for the continent that makes people not reckon with Africa, I've come to understand that there is a question of ignorance. People simply don't know much about the genre in the continent.

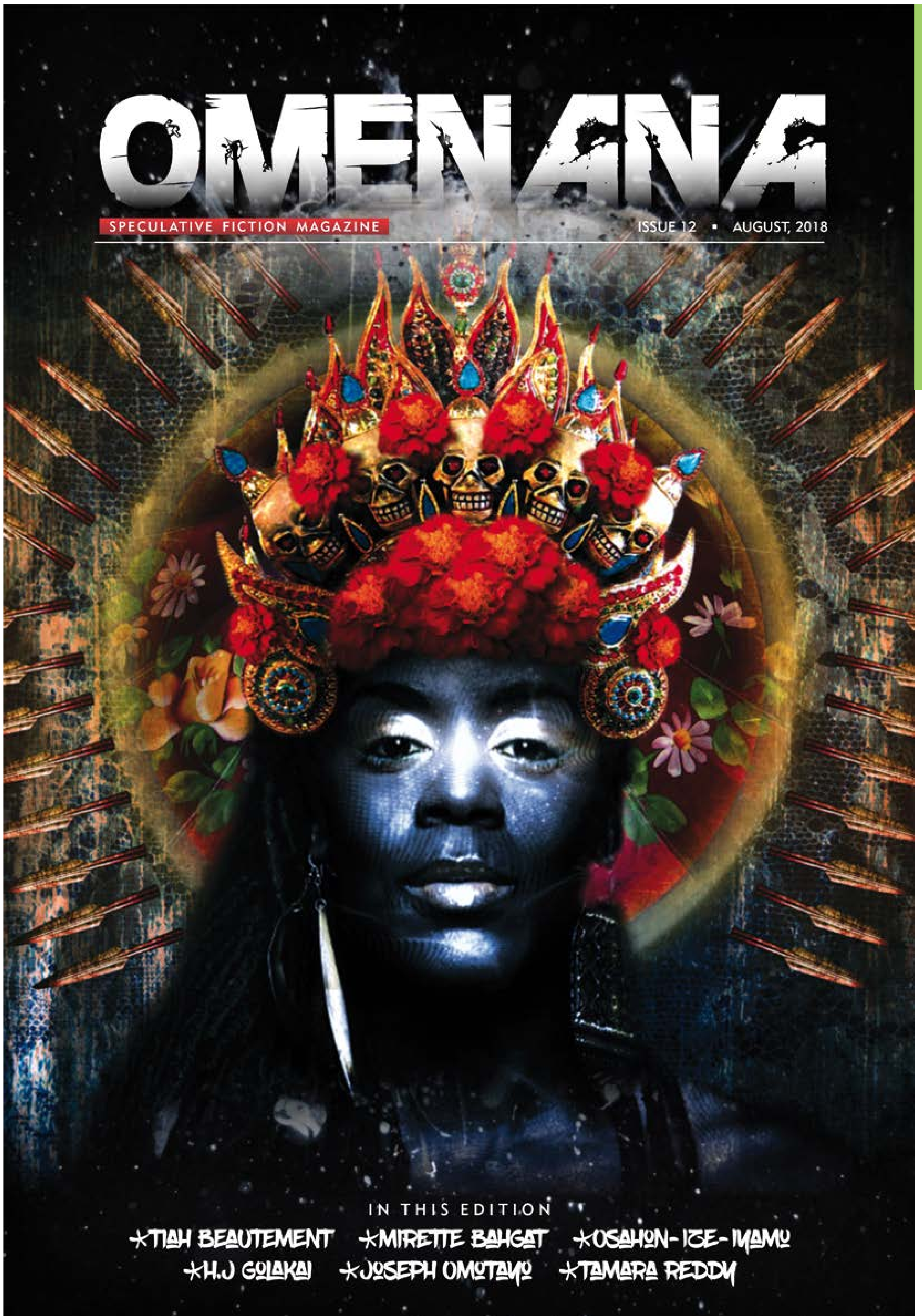
This is not helped by the fact that many writers in the continent tend to look down on the genre. It's like someone, or some people, decided that speculative fiction is the inferior cousin of literary fiction and subconsciously taught enough of those who are involved in creative writing in the continent the same disrespect, so that it is now a culture.

I remember Nnedi Okorafor had to push back when her book *Zarah the Windseeker* was rejected for an African literary award because it is speculative fiction. We've come so far since then, but the reaction to speculative fiction works getting nominated for the Caine Prize also shows that this disrespect endures. I read a Nigerian writer on Facebook dismissing the Caine Prize because of this fact. He thought it has lost prestige because writers of the speculative, who own the fact that they are speculative fiction writers, got the nod.

I use the phrase "own the fact" here because the two stories that earned Elnathan John – who I consider one of the most profound voices of my generation – his Caine nods fall under what Omenana classifies as speculative fiction. BUT, I do agree that classifications are problematic.

So while it is true that many writers here read and write speculative fiction, I get the feeling that the genre isn't respected. To answer the question, the reasons are various, but one is that people do not readily

Chiagozie Nwonwu, who writes under the pen name of Mazi Nwonwu, is a Lagos-based journalist and writer. While journalism and its demands take up much of his time, when he can, Nwonwu writes speculative fiction, which he believes is a vehicle through which he can transport Africa's diverse cultures to the future. His work has appeared in *Lagos 2060* (Nigeria's first science fiction anthology), *AfroSF* (first pan-African science fiction anthology), Sentinel Nigeria, Saraba magazine, and *It Wasn't Exactly Love*, an anthology on sex and sexuality published by Farafina in 2015.



Latest edition of Omenana Magazine.
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identify their work as speculative fiction; another is the need for more light to be thrown on the genre in the continent.

You touched on the issue of definitions. How would you define what's African speculative fiction and what's not?

My definition of speculative fiction is a little broader than what the average writer in Nigeria would allow. If a story has elements of the metaphysical, I will classify it as speculative fiction. If it's set in a future or in a place that isn't here and now, I will classify it as speculative fiction. As such, stories of gods and devils, of extraordinary imagination attempting to answer the question "what if?" fall into this category. What if people have wings? What if gods walk among men? What if I could travel in time? What if I could walk through walls? What if we could live on Mars? What if I could read minds? What if?

How strong is the genre in actual fact? Who are some of its main figures?

The genre is quite strong in the continent, especially in South Africa, where Jungle Jim [a bimonthly pulp-fiction magazine based in Cape Town] holds sway. It's also big in Nigeria, where a vibrant comic-book industry throws up some very interesting characters. Since starting Omenana, we have also encountered people from East Africa.

It's really hard to get to mentioning names because I am sure I will miss out important ones, so I will just say that we at Omenana have been very lucky to have had some of the biggest names of African heritage writing speculative fiction send us their stories. Yes, several were on the Caine shortlist. And, of course, we are happy to have been here for many new writers to send us their stuff.

What do you think inspires African sci-fi writers the most? Is it the fascination with the endless possibilities of the future or simply dissatisfaction with the current realities?

This is a very good question, and also a tough one. To answer, I may have to look to myself and those writers I and my partner have worked with.

The past, the longing for it, especially knowing that it held mysteries that have now been lost to time and colonialism is a heavy influence. As such, you find many writers trying their best to recapture and share the wonder that was the glory days of our ancestors.

The present also acts as a muse, and African writers, just like they do everywhere else, use the stories around them as a mine from which their wild stories sprout.

I see far fewer stories about the endless possibilities that the African future holds, and I think that stems from the shared reality of gloom across African countries. There is too much turmoil in the now, and we mostly don't see anything that hints at a future with possibilities. When we do get stories about the future in Omenana, we are not shocked to see dystopias and future reflections of the discord of the present.

What are, if any, some of the main themes in African sci-fi writing? Do they distinguish the genre in Africa from other places?

I think one thing we've done very well in our sci-fi is to interrogate the human reality. Many of the stories I see deal with interpersonal relationships in a place and time different from the now. You find that our writers still expect us to hold on to what we've come to know as African values of family, respect and obedience. I don't know why writers from the continent, whose people are perhaps the most changed

by colonialism, expect those character traits to endure into the future, but that theme is common enough.

But if you are asking if there is something distinctive about the genre in Africa, I would say that – and the fact that fantasy isn't necessarily considered fiction here. So we do need to come up with better classifications for the genre [laughs].

To what extent do you see a convergence or divergence between the futures imagined on the continent and the "Afrofutures" emerging out of the United States?

I don't really see much of a convergence, other than the fact that Afrofuturism co-opts elements of real and imagined African cultures. I think the US movement was necessitated by a different reality than what is obtainable in much of Africa. Where we can complain about the grave damage European colonialism did to our culture and to our psyche, we can't say we know first-hand, in the main, what it means to exist in a culture where racism is in force – let's strike the South Africans from this statement. What I am trying to say is that our experience is vastly different from what is common to our brothers and sisters in the diaspora.

What we do here isn't Afrofuturism, at least not of the US variant. Our futurism isn't part of a movement, beyond the need to tell stories. Speculative fiction isn't new to us, and our ancestors had stories of interstellar travel before the first white or Arab man came. So we continue with this tradition, because it's what we do.

While there is a political and cultural purpose for Afrofuturism in the United States, here, I think, our writers just want to tell their own stories. Whatever political or cultural leaning comes from those stories is purely coming from the individual writer, rather than a collective wish to influence politics or culture. Maybe one day we will get to the point where a couple of us will decide to use influence as a collective, but now we just try to tell our stories, one word at a time.

How do you see the genre develop, and what's Omenana's role going to be in it?

The development of the genre in Africa is assured. We are seeing more writers embrace the tag "speculative-fiction writer" without shame or attempting to do it as an aside to writing literary fiction. I do hope that we will see more writers do science fiction and perhaps better explore the African mythology.

Also, we have copious amounts of material in our cities. These "urban legends", if you will, need harnessing, and amazing tales could stem from them. Already, we do see great storytelling from such nuggets now and then, and Omenana has published several. We will also be partnering with Narrative Landscapes, a new publishing outfit, to put out a special edition that focuses on urban legends.

I think Omenana's role is already defined. The magazine gives stories of the speculative a home. We hope the writers of the speculative in the continent see Omenana and know that all their story needs to be is *good* and we will run it, and pay for it.

A grant we got from Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America allowed us to increase what we pay for submissions from 3000 naira to 10 000 naira [25 Euros]. We hope we get more of such grants and increase the pay, which will encourage more submissions. We do want the magazine to remain free, because we want everyone to read the stories.

Yeah, we do have great ambitions for the genre and the magazine, and there is just so much we can do, but we hope to keep doing our best. The dream is to be able to just work on Omenana, but what we do at the moment is work to get money to fund it, NGO-ish.

How Did the African Future Begin?

Imraan Coovadia

How did the African future begin? It began with machines and pictures of machines. For most of us, it began in childhood. For me, it began with cartoons and technology magazines, shipped three months late from the United Kingdom in a kind of cargo cult, not to mention the images of living and speaking machines on shows like Battlestar Galactica and Knight Rider that made it onto the government-run television channel.

Television itself made its first appearance in January 1976 with an electronic clock broadcast throughout the country. The single channel had been created against the wishes of former Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Dr Albert Hertzog, who foresaw that "South Africa would have to import films showing race mixing, and advertising would make Africans dissatisfied with their lot". Hertzog, who had been removed from his post some years before, spoke for a grudging Calvinism, but his vision of satisfied Africans was out of date. 1976 was also the year of the Soweto uprising when police fought tens of thousands of schoolchildren.

Coincidence? Simultaneity? You can't understand Afrofuturism without knowing that many futures and many pasts are always together on the continent – gunmen and mechanicals alongside atomic reactors in Zaire, massacres in Nigeria alongside internet whizzkids, colonial police in Johannesburg alongside an electronic clock at a time when nobody I knew had ever seen the mother-of-pearl images generated by a computer. Those virtual letters and shapes, which nobody today could see as remarkable, had an unearthly beauty in 1976.

As the above suggests, the African future has always involved a struggle over machines. In my family's history alone: trams, cryptographic equipment, copying machines.

First, trams and trains. In 1893, as is well known, Gandhi was thrown off a Pietermaritzburg train, despite his first-class ticket, and began a life in politics which would end only with Indian independence. Decades later, Gandhi would come to condemn the railways altogether, but in South Africa he saw that access to modern transportation was essential to equality. At the time, Johannesburg was one of the most advanced cities in the world, thanks to an influx of mining capital, and had created a segregated tram system. Indians could only travel on the tram as the servants of European men.

In 1906, therefore, Gandhi arranged for a relative of mine, a Mr Ebrahim S. Coovadia, treasurer of the British Indian Association, to board an electric tram going from Fordsburg to Market Square. When the tram started moving, Ebrahim stood up, declared that he was no man's servant, and was abruptly removed from the tram as Gandhi had been removed from the train. Gandhi contested the case through the legal system of what was then the government of the Transvaal. He won on a technicality, only to find the regulations reissued in a compliant form. But it was a new kind of politics Gandhi was creating – civil and yet confrontational, personal and yet legalistic – which within a matter of months would become satyagraha, his particular brand of nonviolent resistance.

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From the cover of A Spy in Time.
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Second, cryptographic equipment. In 1988, the African National Congress, banned for three decades while Nelson Mandela was exiled to Robben Island, prepared for a possible insurrection in South Africa. Operation Vula ("Open the road") would see insurgents inside the country communicating on a real-time basis with their commanders in the frontline states. Above all, Vula required secure communications.

Unable or unwilling to rely on the Soviet bloc for equipment, the organisation asked its own inventors to put something together – which meant Tim Jenkin and Ronnie Press in London, who, along with the spy Ronnie Kasrils, experimented with acoustic modems and touch-tone phones. Jenkin, Press and Kasrils first tried to use electronic calculators, encoding messages with a classic one-time pad, as used by spies since the first decade of the twentieth century. They generated sequences of coded information that could be transmitted over pay telephones, although they soon switched to Toshiba laptops for their superior performance.

As far as I have been able to put together, it was a Toshiba T3100, with a strange red screen and a generous allotment of ten megabytes of memory, that a man called Pravin Gordhan – later to be the minister of finance and the face of resistance to Jacob Zuma's corrupt regime – placed on my family's dining-room table in July 1989. Many believed Mandela was soon to be released and yet the endgame was more brutal and frightening than ever.

Operation Vula ("Open the road") would see insurgents inside the country communicating on a real-time basis with their commanders in the frontline states. Above all, Vula required secure communications.

One afternoon, not long after Gordhan's visit, a number of security policemen came to our door. They were looking for documents that spelt out the views of the resistance on the possibilities of a negotiated peace. My father did have the papers but

had my mother throw them through the window into the garden.

Before he left, the captain in charge asked after the point of the laptop. My thirteen-year-old sister, I explained to him dismissively, used the thing for video games. In 1989, a computer was not the first target of an investigation, at least not in South Africa. So the policemen left our house without finding out about Vula and its cryptographic equipment. (A year later, when Vula was discovered after Mandela's release, it almost led to a breakdown in negotiations.)

Finally, photocopying machines. A short time after the police raid, the views of my family took a dark turn when an African National Congress operative, who had been printing illegal pamphlets, fled the country just ahead of another raid. He may have been forewarned by my mother who, as a doctor, treated many Indian policemen in the security apparatus.

Nevertheless, the agent left a good deal of material behind, including a secondhand photocopying machine. The unit's serial number was followed back to a tiny organisation, the Community Research Unit, dependent on Scandinavian funds, which tracked the fate of the thousands of children taken into police detention. My father, a paediatrician, was the head of the

EXTRACT FROM *A SPY IN TIME*

No man or woman could truly prophesy the future, as it turned out, no more than any living being or machine could truly foretell the past. But with a pang in my heart, I predicted that S Natanson stood no chance against our Soledad. Under the town of Kitwe in his copper mine laboratory, S Natanson might have heard that a woman who claimed to be his wife had been pleading with the United Nations to take action. He might even have connected her mission with the back-to-front tracks of certain particle trails in his detectors. But he could not be prepared for Soledad, or for the possibility that the doctrines he drew up ever so carefully to prevent the ex-ploitation of time and history would in turn force the redemption of mankind at the hands of our machines.

Did I have a choice to obey? Could I disobey a holograph with the stamp of reality? Could I choose to refuse my part any more than the machines which had not been touched by my father's magic? Everything had been prepared so this moment would come to pass, the future bending back to the past in the blaze of the supernova. The machines had done their duty and were silent, their thoughts indiscernible from the light patterns on their heads. They had sent the proof of my action back and, under their own constitution, according to their development, they could never lie. But they could deceive. The Gods gave us dreams to lead us astray. There was also a point to letting sleeping dogs lie. Maybe we could even allow their unchangeable sufferings, their unalterable Holocausts, to glorify their memory.

Everybody seemed to need my consent for the show to proceed. So I couldn't have been more surprised when Dr Muller took a radiation pistol and placed it against my shoulder. I knew I was safe from his gun because I was alive on the hologram, a necessary cog in the machine devised by the machines who were disallowed by their programming from taking certain steps against the purity of time. I looked into Keswyn Muller's bone-white face, with his wide-set grey eyes and a sprinkling of freckles, and I couldn't find the poisoner there who had mocked and murdered us in Santa Teresa. I couldn't find an enemy. I couldn't find the heart of darkness – only a man, like the machines, who had followed each step of his own logic to a place beyond the range of the heart.

Muller shot me and I was sent violently backwards against the wall. He came after me, holding his pistol in front of him, and started to pull me into the corridor. There was no pain at first, only shock and dislocation and then the invidious odour of burnt meat. None of it belonged to me but to the situation.

I didn't faint, although I expected to. I was dragged by the arm along the corridor and into the control room where Muller deposited me in front of the console. The others were arguing with him, but at first I was too confused to decipher a word. I couldn't breathe for the shock. None of them paid attention to my condition. It was as if a murder had been committed and I was the murder victim, watching as people went on with their business.

organisation, a fact that led the police to believe he was also the head of a clandestine cell. (In fact, one of the employees of the unit had given the photocopying machine to the operative without my father's knowledge.)

In December 1989, as part of the intensification of violence as negotiations approached, the security police put a limpet mine on the front door of my family home. They had wanted to place it on the back of the house, which would have been entirely destroyed, but had been discouraged by my sister's dog, a mere toy Pomeranian. The mine went off in the early hours of the morning and destroyed the entire facade of the building but did not hurt anybody.

For many years afterwards, my mother would wake up in the middle of the night and find that the electronic clock in her bedroom read 3:02, the exact minute of the explosion.

More recently, the ultimate machine has arrived on our continent: the smartphone. Through its tiny five-centimetre window we can look and see an Afrofuture that is personal, weightless, ever-changing and, with any luck, as devoid of the tragic sense as smartphones everywhere else on the planet.

Shanumi Six took charge of the situation.

'Keswyn, you have never been an easy person to co-operate with. You are a creature of your time. You burn coldly all the time, as if your state of mind is a secret, and then you lash out. Our plan is coming to fruition after centuries and it depends, as we have always known, on the consent of this young man with whom I have a long acquaintance. How do you expect me to salvage it?'

'He was not prepared to play his part. You heard him. He was delaying us out of hand.'

'I am afraid to say that you are a fool. He has no choice but to play his part. None of us can do what he has been sent to do. You have seen and I have seen and he has seen the outcome. The writing has been on the wall all along. All you have done, with your rash action, is make sure that more people will die today than was strictly necessary.'

Muller was unrepentant. 'Whatever number die, that will be the quantity that is strictly necessary.'

Muller had turned to face the corridor where the restrictionists had begun to establish themselves, in preparation for their testimony of the redemption, when Shanumi Six took hold of him and broke his neck. He fell, as if he had been suspended by a string, letting his pistol clatter across the floor.

My arm was singing with pain. I called to Shanumi Six, trying to retain my presence of mind.

'No more need to kill. If you can have my question answered, Shanumi, I will play my part in your pantomime. I will push the levers you need to be pushed in the order you have seen me do it. I don't expect you to honour my free will the way my father honoured it in his machines.'

'I always knew you would see reason, Eleven. What do you need me to do? Anything. I will do anything today, wrestle with the infinite.'

I raised my arm with difficulty and pointed at the restrictionists. Their leader, his grey hair combed neatly to the shoulders, was listening intently. Their recording devices were entering the room and taking up stations around us.

'Ask them, Shanumi, why the machines would choose you and me. They know our future. Why would an agent from the ranks of the machines send you a souvenir of today, of your supposed redemption day, and set your conspiracy in motion? The machines were programmed to protect our best interests. Don't you think they knew you were the one person at the Agency who collected souvenirs, a harmless violation of protocol? Why did they choose me? Ask them why the two of us were the weakest links and what they are going to do about it. Ask them if it is in any way consistent with restrictionism to have the machines put them permanently out of existence and how their philosophy is going to come back from that?'

Imraan Coovadia's A Spy in Time was published in 2018 by Umuzi. *All rights reserved.*

Afrofuturism = Radicality

Mawena Yehouessi

For some time now, I've been trying to find new forms to address Afrofuturism. Making a factual introduction doesn't interest me anymore, and I believe Wikipedia does it better. Coming from the academic world, while developing a curatorial and artistic practice, I am now trying to find more dynamic ways to intertwine the concepts, poetry and images of Afrofuturism, wandering from reflection to emotion and vice versa. In this way, the following text could be described as an experiment. Its structure isn't very linear and the content is definitely "to be continued", discussed, if not disputed.

Afrofuturism acts as a prism or lens for me, through which I can always shift my perspective of the world. A world that has been so far explored and exploited according to a single direction: that of rationality, humanism and progress. In contrast to this, Afrofuturism deploys an endless variation of times, spaces, metaphors and beings, never to be concluded, resumed, harvested or consumed.

Why?

Because rationality, humanism and progress are racially biased. They rest on ideological patterns and lead to economic systems, political actions and cultural organisations where black people (and other minorities[1]) remain relegated to the subaltern roles of the worker, the user and the prey. Yet aren't they the foundations of capitalism, and aren't we forever doomed within a capitalistic world? Well, this is one (Afro-)pessimistic way of seeing things. And I believe it is exactly what is expected of us: to give up, mope around, make do.

Mark Fisher describes capitalist realism as the "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it"[2]. He continues, "Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action."

In the same vein, Steven Shaviro writes, "We live in a world in which we have been told, again and again, that There Is No Alternative. The harsh demands of the 'just-in-time' marketplace have drained us of all hope and all belief. Living in an endless Eternal Now, we no longer seem able to imagine a future that might be different from the present." And even Mark Dery – who coined the word Afrofuturism – says "our inability to conceive of the future in any other than dystopian terms is one sign that we're moribund as a culture"[3]. He would later add that "[o]ne of the most useful services Afrofuturism performs is pointing out the debt our Visions of Things to Come owe to all that has been"[4].

As I said, Afrofuturism is a prism. It won't offer any definite solution, but it will stir you to put things into perspective and to recover never-ending potentialities. In a space and time where our collective unconscious – mindset, behaviour and creativeness included – is framed and pre-patterned, not to say paralysed, by the status quo, Afrofuturism is a radical state of resistance that stands for chaos and plasticity.

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-16°42'58,017", Coordinates Series #2, M.Y (aka Mawena Yehouessi), digital collage, Chrom-Luxe dye-sublimation, 2018. This series of 4 was produced as part of a reflection on the concept of chrono-politics; first presented for the exhibition "A Debt of Time" at Konsthall C (Stockholm), August-October 2018.

Black Imagination and the Collective

I first discovered Afrofuturism through Google Images. Portraits mainly. Of Sun Ra, but also a multitude of characters, each of them unique and familiar at the same time. Familiar, because they would be common images I had seen before in magazines, books and TV-porn. Yet unique, because dark-skinned personas were suddenly set in landscapes and situations I had forgotten or never even imagined they could adorn.

They would be Maasais sitting on the moon and Mami Wata in a swimming pool, Dahomey Amazons riding on Saturn's rings. They would be lascars and *banlieusards* in conversation with 3D creatures. They would be a Pharaon saying these words to a bunch of hip kids from the 1970s:

> I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as a reality; I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are. Myths. I came from a dream that the black man dreamed a long time ago. I'm actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors.[5]

Afrofuturism is crazy. *Louzy*. Jazzy. Amazing. Some true Mumbo Jumbo, *à la santé*, here's to the old man! It is his revenge in the shape of an amethyst.

Yet again, don't get me wrong. Afrofuturism does have to do with blackness (even before Africanness). But it goes beyond, into darkness, teaming up all those who are ready to bail out on humanity.

Don't get me wrong. Afrofuturism isn't just utopian or dystopian but heterotopian. Crazy, *louzy*, jazzy doesn't mean naively positive but optimistic indeed. Because I believe optimism is a trigger. Perhaps you might say that fear and despair are triggers as well, but those need an external agent to activate them against you. Optimism is about you and only you. Not as a capitalistic individual, but as the singular element of a collective, a gang, a troop, a family or a tribe: a community you choose to care for.

Because, yes, Afrofuturism is about a whole community from outer space. Not a given community based on historically *obvious* factors, but a bunch of people you truly chose to share something in common. No outcasts but *legit* outsiders.

Yet again, don't get me wrong. Afrofuturism does have to do with blackness (even before Africanness[6]). But it goes beyond, into darkness, teaming up all those who are ready to bail out on humanity; not in the name of progress, equality or the future, but for transitivity, heterogeneity and the haunting ghosts of the Maroons of the past…

Drawn by the late-1950s' space race, Sun Ra envisioned a new ground for him and his black fellows. Instead of exhausting their minds, bodies and souls within a country that regarded their lives and expectations as irrelevant, they would hack it over, pre-enact rather than re-enact, distort and interfere with it. He would re-form himself as the Saturnian preacher arising from the eponymous Egyptian god of the sun; his Arkestra would become a space-ark, appointed to lead his companions towards a renewed Earth and to restart history.

That would be a radical change of strategy. The goal wasn't to survive anymore but to live an otherly kind of life. Because I do agree with Christelle Oyiri when she says "you cannot be free if you ask for it"[7]. Afrofuturism was always about more than *subverting* the norms; it bluntly stopped giving them any kind of consideration.

Let me give you an example. Because of his biological condition of cryptorchidism (undescended testes), Sun Ra did not conform to conventional expectations of male sex. Taking this as an advantage, according to a self-inscribed system of values, he turned himself into an angel on a mission to *re-enchant* the world.

In the same way, he prompted metaphors that would later become essential to highlighting the dynamic distinctiveness of black people. Instead of a negative historical position of stigma, blackness could be, from now on, positively performed. The uprooting of the African-American people, descendants of the slaves, could be "regenerated" in a way, it could be given back some *design*[8] potential by considering them from their Egyptian alien ascendancy.

47°34′01″N,7°34′59″E, Coordinates Series #3, M.Y (aka Mawena Yehouessi), digital collage, ChromLuxe dye-sublimation, 2018. This series of 4 was produced as part of a reflection on the concept of chrono-politics; first presented for the exhibition "A Debt of Time" at Konsthall C (Stockholm), August-October 2018.

According to Belgian storyteller-of-music Pierre Deruisseau, Sun Ra and his Arkestra recorded over 120 discs from the late 1950s to the early '90s and performed all across the US, in several European countries, Nigeria, Egypt, and even Japan. Above all, he created El Saturn Research in 1957, one of the first independent music labels, let alone one created by a black musician. Sun Ra was then able to compose, record and release what he wanted, when he wanted, gaining an unparalleled freedom of action. "I had to have something, and that something was creating something that nobody owned but us," he would say[9].

From him, I learned that "radicality", used here as a synonym for eccentricity, didn't necessarily mean to be cut off from the world or live in a cave. It was a methodology for opening up new times and spaces to heal, rest and feast, in order to recover strength and the collective wisdom to hack into and multiply the cracks in the System. To reject centrality and kindle as many hearthstones[10] as we may need to *consume* Baldwin's forecast of the fire next time.[11]

Proposing an Afrofuturistic vision of the world is a matter of thinking critically about long-term developments, debates and efforts to create wider inclusive politics.

Politics of the Underground

Afrofuturism is and has always been political. Aesthetically and philosophically complex, it is a space for collective awareness, experimentation and social justice.

Proposing an Afrofuturistic vision of the world is a matter of thinking critically about long-term developments, debates and efforts to create wider inclusive politics. And if black people are to be leading it, it is because *true disruption can only sprout from the margins*. Indeed, who better to deploy alternatives than those who are constrained to negotiate with the structures that oppress them?

And yes, Afrofuturism deals with what seem to be elsewhere realities (or as Jonathan Dotse[12] puts it, "elsewhen"). However, isn't what we commonly call dystopia already the daily burden of many people: food poisoning, coastal erosion, human trafficking, and so on and so forth? While capitalist hopelessness strives to manipulate our inventiveness, making us believe we lack strength, support and imagination, Afrofuturism is about interfering with the daily, and experimenting with potential options of living differently.

Mixing quotes from Cherie Ann Turpin[13], Deirdre Lynn Hollman[14], Tim Stüttgen[15] and Ytasha L. Womack[16]:

> "Afrofuturism positions the master narrative about the past, present, and future into one of instability and uncertainty ... to develop a discursive strategy that complicates and disrupts those narratives and myths that depend on a singularity of timelines or more importantly, identity politics." (Turpin) | At the "crossing of intersectionality and heterogeneity" (Stüttgen), Afrofuturism "is an affirmative aesthetic and philosophical position that questions how will we survive in the future, not if we will" (Hollman). | As a transitive and transgressive praxis, it deals with "racism and mass media images [in an otherworldly way] to show the development of more and more complex spaces, main characters and representational constellations, including black revolutionary women (with guns) and also queer subtexts." (Stüttgen)

Thus, because it brings tools to hack historical portraitures and stories as well as contemporary tech and tools for situations to come, I believe Afrofuturism provides a new form of radical ethics.

It does not focus only on effects, but also the contexts and forces at stake. It develops a wider view of the structures of power, how they may evolve, and *who* will be left behind. Because it is anchored in contemporary observation of stifling norms, orders and institutions *as well as* past, traditional and subjective features, it allows us to subvert the very idea of "future". Because the future isn't ahead: it is above, below and aside us.

The Afrofuturist timeline is not linear. Its expansion is multidirectional, enabling times and narratives to simultaneously co-exist, letting us, as individuals and collectives, develop our singular forms of resistance for now, to heal the past, to shape the future, or all at once.

The Looking Glass of the Mainstream

Here, I'd like to quote Marie-José Mondzain[17] on "radicality":

> I wish to return to the term 'radicality' its virulent beauty and its political energy. Today, everything is done to identify it to the most murderous gestures and the most enslaved opinions … Radicality, on the contrary, appeals to the courage of constructive rupture and to the most creative imagination. The confusion between transformative radicalism and extremism is the worst venom [we ingest] day after day. [Radicality] is completely the opposite: an inventive and generous freedom. It opens the doors of indeterminacy, of possibilities, and thus welcomes all that happens, and all those willing to join, as a gift that increases our resources and our power to act.

Let's now take a moment to talk about what might have been the widest worldwide "introduction" to Afrofuturism: Black Panther. However, it is not a movie about radicality.[18] In my opinion, it might be its utmost counterexample and thus cannot be labelled Afrofuturist. As Ashley Clark[19] says, Afrofuturism is "not something that can be co-opted at the moment".

By switching roles of gender and race (instead of inventing others), and never questioning the very structure, criteria and origins of these roles, Black Panther appears a hollow attempt to sheath the inventiveness of black imagination. To rationalise its protean uniqueness into one that could be analysed, compared, integrated and capitalised. It is about imagining the future with more black people being part of it. *But what kind of future exactly? And what does "being part of it" mean?*

Yet again, the question is how to reconcile an otherworldly and radical way of addressing the world with a day-by-day context of aggression. What is the point of imagining alternative models if you cannot apply them to a global scale?

I actually don't believe in any global-scale goal anymore. I'd rather extend my energies toward local, mobile and emotionally connected constellations of people. Hence, it isn't a matter of channels but rather of scale. Films[20], contemporary arts and fashion[21], music[22], technologies and politics[23] are all *biased* means and industries, yet to be infiltrated and possibly hacked.

To wrap up: standing somewhere between performativity and faith, Afrofuturism is a praxis and a magical formula, a hashtag, a meme and an egregore, expanding beyond any static definition.

And again, communities. Not eternal categories of beings and social bonds, but temporary designs and performativity. I believe in attempts and mistakes and "*entre-soi*" ["among-ourselves"]. Not to exclude, but to preserve. And never based on a definite way and static rules, but following intuition and care. I believe that Afrofuturism is about being open to *anyone* – not trusting, loving and evolving with *everyone*. And seeking for a larger audience shouldn't mean smoothing-over and standardising.

Going Deeper into Darkness

To wrap up: standing somewhere between performativity and faith, Afrofuturism is a praxis and a magical formula, a hashtag, a meme and an egregore, expanding beyond any static definition. It is radical because it is intricate, collective and prismatic, paradoxical and polysemic, brave and sustaining. It is irreducible, intransigent and unsolvable. And I hope I have failed to define it, because I would rather have you try it, an intuitive collusion that will keep mutating until you realise you own its definition already: you are still alive.

Endnotes

1 Following Achille Mbembe's lecture (in *Politiques de l'inimitié* [*Politics of enmity*], La Découverte, 2016), this downgrading of a certain category of people, first historically expressed against black people, has now evolved to include new types of subalterns. Adding to the "surface Negro", meaning a person with dark skin and African ancestry, the "in-depth Negro" from now on includes a more complex array of people the System feeds on, while continuously despising and trying to unman (because of their faiths, genders, disabilities, etc.).
2 *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009.
3 Mark Dery, Salon (to Howard Rheingold), May 8, 1996.
4 Mark Dery, Black(s) to the Future (to Mawena Yehouessi), July 11, 2015.
5 Quoting Sun Ra, from *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra and John Coney, 1974.
6 Another thought of mine: http://blackstothefuture.com/en/afrofuturism-the-afro-complex-2/.
7 AKA Crystallmess: https://soundcloud.com/crystallmess.
8 "Design" here is to be taken conceptually as the capacity to manipulate and inform one's environment, from artefacts to cities, from technical functions to social behaviours, from drafting to programming, etc. Like so, I'd like to make a comment on some words: metaphor, myth and lineage. Metaphors are tropes, coding tools of the language, leading us to appropriate the world a certain way. They are effective strategies for learning and the development of social values. It isn't just about story-telling and day-dreaming our lives. It means reconfiguring the invisible frames of our habits and beliefs. It goes the same for myth. Cosmogonies are what eventually lead us to develop science and try to better understand our world. Religions are the first political system to organise our societies as they grew bigger, from clans to civilisations. History is nothing but a new way of calling for and constructing the ideological foundations of a society. As for lineage, I believe that shifting from the idea of a descendancy (a "descent") to that of an ascendancy (a "rise") when addressing black history helps to acknowledge the bias of thinking language and history as a single and impartial *telling*.
9 John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, Da Capo Press, 1998.
10 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Verso, 1998.
11 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Dial Press, 1963.
12 https://www.plurality-university.org/team/jonathan-dotse/.
13 *Strategic Disruptions: Black Feminism, Intersectionality, and Afrofuturism*: https://www.academia.edu/16199640/Strategic_Disruptions_Black_Feminism_Intersectionality_and_Afrofuturism.
14 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/octavia-e-butlers-kindred-is-now-a-graphic-novel_us_586b91 46e4b014e7c72ee3e4?guccounter=1.
15 I*n a Qu*a*re Time and Place: Post-Slavery Temporalities, Blaxploitation, and Sun Ra's Afrofuturism Between Intersectionality and Heterogeneity*, Anagram Books, 2014.
16 https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/interview-with-ytasha-womack-on-afrofuturism-and-the-world-of- black-sci-fi-and-fantasy.
17 *Confiscation: Des mots des images et du temps* (*Confiscation: Of words, of images and of time*), Les Liens Qui Libèrent, 2017.
18 By the way, did any of you realize how Black Panther proposes a state model based on the extraction of resources (vibranium)? Wakanda's strength, and what ultimately legitimates its integration in the UN Assembly, is essentially the richness of its soils. Even beyond the obvious irony of promoting the ongoing logic of predation of African raw materials, the utmost achievement of this so-called "emancipated" land is finally to be "accepted" by Western organisations (not to mention movie's tendentious last line, spoken by a representative of these very organisations, about what "a bunch of farmers" could offer to the world).
19 https://mediadiversified.org/2014/11/14/inside-afrofuturism-this-movement-is-not-for-co-opting/.
20 Ephraim Asili, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Black Audio Film Collective, Adebukola Buki Bodunrin, Ja'Tovia Gary, Cédric Ido, Khalil Joseph, Wanuri Kahiu, Miguel Llansó, Terence Nance, C. J. Obasi, The Otolith group, Phantom Productions ....
21 Laurence Airline, Ndoho Ange, Louis-Philippe de Gagoue, Ieluhee, Artsi Ifrach, Maria Jahnkoy, Selly Raby Kane, Kendario La'Pierre, Fallon Mayanja, Emo de Medeiros, Josèfa Ntjam, Nicolas Pirus, Tabita Rezaire, Kengné Teguia, Eden Tinto-Collins, Lina Iris Viktor, Elete Wright, Stef Yamb, Daniela Yohannes ... .
22 Sun Ra, George Clinton and Lee « Scratch » Perry of course, but also Cybotron, Derrick May, Jeff Mills, Tricky, Flying Lotus, Erykah Badu, Afrika Bambaataa, Shabazz Palace, Franck Biyong, Spoek Mathambo, Laura Mvula, Onoe Caponoe, Princess Nokia, Ibaaku, TiDUS, Witch Prophet, Sassy Black, and so on so forth.
23 AFROTOPIA, The Afrofuturist Affair, AfroCyberPunk Interactive, A'Part, Black(s) to the Future, The Center for Afrofuturist Studies, The Experimental Station, NMT, The Studio Museum.

Africa and the Fourth Industrial Revolution:
The Need for "Creative Destruction" Beyond Technological Change

Rasigan Maharajh

Interview

The idea of a Fourth Industrial Revolution has captured the imagination of many in Africa and around the globe. Media headlines point out both the potential and the risk associated with advanced technologies for the continent.

Perspectives spoke to Rasigan Maharajh to make sense of it all while keeping in touch with questions of democracy, social justice and sustainable development.

What is the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution all about?

In 1926, Nikolai Dmitriyevich Kondratiev was the first to describe long waves of depressions and recoveries within capitalist business cycles. These hypothesised cycle-like phenomena became popularly known as "Kondratiev waves" following the promotion of the idea by economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1939. Schumpeter would also establish the idea of "creative destruction", which occurs when innovation deconstructs long-standing economic structures and frees resources to be deployed elsewhere.

Building on this school of thought, later scholars have conceptualised at least five techno-economic paradigms since the mid-18th century: (1) the steam engine (1780–1830); (2) railways and steel (1830–1880); (3) electricity and chemicals (1880–1930); (4) automobiles and petrochemicals (1930–1970); (5) information and communications technologies (1970–2010). More recently, John Mathews, an honorary professor at Macquarie University, proposed the emergence of a sixth Kondratieff Wave, beginning in 2010, which was being driven by the technology surge associated with renewable energies. Based on such complex systemic and structural technological change that has creatively destroyed hitherto established forms of social, political and economic organisation and established subsequent successor regimes and infrastructures, the idea of a so-called "Fourth Industrial Revolution" – as promoted by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and its founder Klaus Martin Schwab – does appear to be weakly composed from stylised facts and popular generalisations. Whilst such a perspective may be relevant when looking down at the world from the heights of Davos, it does not coincide with perspectives of the global South and the global experiences of world systems.

In the WEF's conceptualisation, the First Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) ushered in mechanisation of production; the Second Industrial Revolution (1870–1914) established mass production; the Third Industrial Revolution (1960–continuing) formed around com-

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puter and digital technologies; whilst the Fourth Industrial Revolution began at the turn of this century and builds on the digital revolution. It brings a much more ubiquitous and mobile internet, smaller and more powerful sensors that have become cheaper, and artificial intelligence and machine learning. Such a rendition eschews the processes of mercantilism, slavery, colonisation, and the struggles for national liberation fought against imperial metropoles that entangle the countries that constitute the global South.

Schwab and the WEF were not the first to talk about a Fourth Industrial Revolution, though.

History is replete with variously proclamations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Albert Carr is recognised as having introduced the phrase as a way to explain the inclusion of modern communications within industrial processes in the 1940s. In 1956, Arnold Marshall Rose, with ample prescience, professed that "a number of technologists and economists have predicted that we are on the verge of a series of radical changes in industrial technology which will revolutionize productive processes. The consequences, in terms of human relations and social institutions, of such a revolution are certain to be enormous". Rose, however, was careful to warn that "[p]redictions in this area have to be tentative and subject to constant modification, since they are not based on careful measurement of experimentally controlled observations, but (1) on analysis of social changes following previous technological innovations, and (2) on our general knowledge of the structure and dynamics of contemporary society". This warning seems to be lost on the latter-day evangelists of the Fourth Industrial Revolution hyperbole.

Whilst the framing and numbering may be trivial, the push and exuberance of technology tends to find many supporters, especially amongst the transnational global elite. Elizabeth Garbee, from the Centre of Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University, represents a more sceptical view. Garbee notes that Schwab's framing represents "a meaningless phrase" used largely by government and industry professionals, and asserts that "each time, the framing of 'the next best thing' in technological development as a 'fourth Industrial Revolution' has failed to garner any sort of economic, social, or political capital, despite continued attempts to make it fit that mould". The coming decades of human technological innovation represent a social and political problem, not just a technological one, and demand expertise in finding social and political solutions, not just "vapid pontifications of professors and economists", as Garbee puts it.

This is why engaging with this latest proclamation of an industrial revolution matters. Recognising the material conditions of the majority of the world's peoples and the combined and uneven development of capitalism within world-systems forces us to be sceptical about the present technological optimism that often exaggerates the potential for some simply implemented technology to redress material deprivations and inequalities or the spectre of an impending ecological catastrophe.

How is Africa prepared for the next industrial revolution?

According to the International Energy Agency, approximately 14 percent of the world's population (estimated at 1.1 billion people) do not have access to electricity and more than 95 percent of those living without electricity are in countries in sub-Saharan Africa and develop-

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ing Asia. Whilst development in Asia has accelerated in recent decades, Africa's rate of economic growth progresses off a very low base. It is thus clear that the global South in general, and Africa in particular, has not benefited from the third techno-economic paradigm, which was enabled by the availability of modern electricity. It is therefore imperative that the peoples of Africa hold their governments accountable for the state of relative underdevelopment and seek accelerated ways to redress the mal-distribution of scientific and technological infrastructure necessary for the continent to catch up with the means available to those in the global North.

Africa has a huge advantage in not needing to replicate failed mega-generation projects that are resource-intensive, corruption-prone and ecologically disastrous. Rather, renewables should be mobilised and utilised closer to consumption, thereby eliminating further carbon emissions. Technological competences are therefore paramount, but need to be carefully operationalised within socially determined parameters, and, most critically, within planetary boundaries.

Against this backdrop, is the new industrial revolution not rather likely to cement the continent's position on the margins of the global economy?

The preeminent physicist of our generation, Stephen Hawking, responded to a question on the future of work and jobs by recognising that, "if machines produce everything we need, the outcome will depend on how things are distributed. Everyone can enjoy a life of luxurious leisure if the machine-produced wealth is shared, or most people can end up miserably poor if the machine-owners successfully lobby against wealth redistribution. So far, the trend seems to be toward the second option, with technology driving ever-increasing inequality".

Building on this perspective, I would add that the current world system, hegemonised as neoliberal financialised capitalism, remains responsible for the exploitation, expropriation and exclusion of Africa, such that it is relegated to the margins of the global economy. Schwab,

amongst others, also acknowledges that the next industrial revolution may cause major relocation of production back to the global North as automation and intellectual property replace cheap labour as the main driver of business competitiveness.

Thus, governments in the global South need to start emphasising science, technology and innovation policies in their long-term growth strategies. Home-grown innovation and development can be realistically financed through halting illicit financial outflows and curbing the excesses of capitalist accumulation through mis-invoicing and tax-avoidance schemes. Africa needs more thorough processes of "creative destruction", which, rather than merely just inducing technological changes, also ensure the removal of anachronistic (post- and neo-colonial) institutional forms that retard development and can produce real material improvements while living within ecological limitations.

What's the potential then for the new Industrial Revolution to lead to just transitions?

The technological capacities and capabilities of the new Industrial Revolution hold huge potential to redress some of the existing negative human conditions, but only to the extent of amelioration. Radical transformations are necessary if a just transition is to be possible. This requires the inclusion of all the peoples of the continent in a democratic engagement that seeks endogenous development rather than merely shackling into global value chains and production networks.

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Younger generations of Africans could be considered the motive force for ensuring transformation. It is therefore critical that young Africans are not excluded from realising a just transition by ensuring that they have access to education and training systems that build their capacities and enable their capability formation. These systems need to be retained as public goods and not further privatised as the state continues to be hollowed out. Elite capture needs to be confronted and the democracy defended against further predation from the transnationals and their local comprador vendors and franchisees.

But democracy is under increasing pressure on the continent and worldwide. What opportunities does the new industrial revolution carry for politics and societal relations?

Democracy requires serious efforts towards building capable and enduring institutions. These need to be better integrated with traditional and indigenous knowledge systems whilst keeping up-to-date with the emergent new tools and processes embedded in the new industrial revolution, such as the internet of things, big data and ubiquitous broadband connectivity.

Illiberal regimes and other non-democratic forms of governance, which thrive on secrecy and the lack of transparency, are becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain in the face of a global knowledge commons. Rolling back the advances of the post-truth era of "alternative facts" requires even more open systems of innovation, technical capacities, technological capabilities and scientific competences.

Ultimately, changes in labour processes will affect the political economy, as relations of production are contested and wages

Leap into Faith.
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no longer compensate productive labour. Under the rubric of such dynamics, more research on alternative forms of organisation and experiments in transformation are sorely required. Radical democracies could transcend the stagnant liberalism and its status as the executive committee of the capitalist class. Post-capitalism is emerging, but, as famously expressed by Antonio Gramsci, "[t]he crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". Our contemporary conjuncture represents such an interregnum and the possibilities of progressive change. Barbarism is the lurking alternative within an ecological catastrophe.

What do Africa and its people have to offer to the new Industrial Revolution? Is home-grown innovation happening in Africa?

Africa is the current home of nearly 17 percent of the world's population, nine of the 14 global terrestrial biomes, and six climatic zones. Within the territory is a range of progressive initiatives that have domestic and regional constituencies. Numerous efforts to link the generation of knowledge with socially useful production holds much of the promise for a better life for all Africans. Homegrown innovation from Africa, as the cradle of humankind, has enabled the widespread dispersal of us all as a species-being, through the diffusion of technological know-how emanating from creativity and curiosity.

In our contemporary conjuncture, the relegation of Africa as a territory of exclusion and marginalisation has certainly reduced Africa's propensity to contribute to the global knowledge commons. Global commodity chains, global value chains, and global production networks largely operate within an international division of labour governed by transnational corporations, multilateral institutions, and the military might of the more advanced and mature core capitalist countries. This gives rise to an apparent tendency to discount or reject

"new or improved products or processes (or combinations thereof) that differ significantly from previous products or processes and that had been made available to potential users or brought into use" – or "innovation", as defined by the OECD – emanating from Africa.

Notwithstanding such prejudice and difficulties, initiatives for innovation abound across the continent, such as the Makerspace movement, science and technology incubators, and innovation hubs set up at the interface between the post-school education-and-training system and communities and enterprises.

In its 2018 edition of the Innovation Prize for Africa, the African Innovation Foundation recognised ten major examples, including: two molecular tests for the rapid, accurate and effective detection and load quantification of tuberculosis and hepatitis C (Morocco); eNose sensor for tea processing (Uganda), which supplements current tea-processing procedures using low-power sensor devices to determine optimum levels of tea fermentation; Mobile Shiriki Network (Rwanda), a smart solar kiosk powered by strong solar panels and equipped with large capacity batteries, internet-of-things sensors and a custom-designed router, which offers device charging, virtual top-ups and low-cost connectivity; and Waxy II technology (Tanzania), which recycles and transforms post-consumer waste plastic into durable and environmentally friendly plastic lumber, using a chemical-free and energy-conserving technology for building, construction and furniture production.

The systematic destruction of indigenous knowledge demands redress, opening the possibility of co-constructing a harmonious relationship with nature, bound together in solidarity and cooperation, for a shared moderate prosperity for all.

Clearly, Africa lacks neither the creativity nor the capacity for innovation. The building of enduring institutions and capabilities, however, requires more attention to the political economy and the reproduction of combined yet uneven development. Efforts towards decolonialised curricula, sustainable development, and the defence of democratic advances offer the peoples of Africa a wider canvas upon which to inscribe a real new dawn, one which redresses the "premature de-industrialisation" of most of the continent's economies.

Initiatives that revitalise civil society also hold much promise. Africans Rising, for example, is a pan-African movement of people and organisations working for peace, justice and dignity. It emerged from a bottom-up series of on- and off-line consultations and dialogues between and amongst social and social-justice movements, NGOs, intellectuals, artists, sportspeople, cultural activists and others, across the six regions of the African Union and the inter-state efforts towards transcontinental integration.

All these progressive ideals, however, remain moot if economic orthodoxies, neoliberalism and corrupt governance retain the inordinate power they now exercise over society.

The systematic destruction of indigenous knowledge demands redress, opening the possibility of co-constructing a harmonious relationship with nature, bound together in solidarity and cooperation, for a shared moderate prosperity for all. The young people of Africa are building the road whilst they walk. We should all be supportive and ensure intergenerational empowerment for creatively destroying the constraints of post- and neo-colonial Africa, and for midwifing the birth of really new Africa that works for all its peoples.

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About the Cover Artist

Cyrus Kabiru was born in 1984 in Nairobi, Kenya, where he currently lives and works. He is a self-taught sculptor, who has exhibited frequently both internationally and on the African continent. Kabiru sees his work as a call to innovation, which was highlighted in his 2015 solo exhibition, C-Stunners and Black Mamba, at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa.

His work is included in numerous public and private collections, including: the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA) permanent collection in Cape Town, South Africa; the Studio Museum in Harlem permanent collection, in New York City, USA; the Lemaître Collection, in Paris, France; and Kuona Trust in Nairobi, Kenya, amongst others.