

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## ‘May the Guest Come’: African Azimuths of Alien Planetfall

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### Abstract:

As early as Lucian’s “True Story” (2nd Century CE) extraterrestrial encounters have regularly gestured toward colonialism with twentieth-century science fiction (sf) often figuring such contact on Earth in incursive terms of “reverse colonialism” (Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, Heinlein’s *The Puppet Masters*, Wyndham’s *The Midwich Cuckoos*, Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*). Entwined, however, with alien motives—the *why*—are parallel colonial presumptions concerning the *where* of such encounters; aliens, surveying the planet, inevitably identify the U.S. or Europe as the pinnacles of ‘civilization’ and the rightful representatives of the planet. As multiple sf critics have suggested, African disinterest with speculative fiction in twentieth century often derived from the genre’s frequent marginalization of the Global South; when non-Europeans appeared at all in pre-New Wave sf, it was often in the form of the aliens themselves. As part of the recent surge of formally sf African texts—which, while beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, has reached new and exciting levels—alternative considerations of alien contact have emerged. What does it mean to relocate the site of alien contact away from the colonial metropolises and does this temper the martial imagination? Focusing on Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* but incorporating the likes of Emmanuel Dongala, Neill Blomkamp, and Dilman Dila, this article considers the spatial and epistemological implications of African extraterrestrial first-contact narratives, highlighting the potential of the speculative to peripheralize Europe by centering Africans as planetary hosts.

**Keywords:** African sf; colonialism; first contact; Afrofuturism; science fiction; aliens.

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‘Europe is no longer the center of gravity of this world.’

- Achille Mbembe

‘Mgeni njoo, mwenyeji apone.’

[‘May the guest come and bring some relief to the host.’]

- Swahili proverb

In John Akomfrah’s Afrofuturist documentary, *The Last Angel of History* (1995), a future ‘data thief’ ‘break[s] into the vault of black culture in search of...the secret of a black technology, a black secret technology.’ Using two gadgets, a black box and a special pair of sunglasses, the data thief homes in on the ‘Mothership Connection,’ which, according to Kodwo Eshun, represents ‘the link between Africa as a lost continent in the past and between Africa as an alien future’ (qtd. in Akomfrah 1995). Through interviews with figures such as Eshun, Greg Tate, Ishmael Reed, George Clinton, Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, D.J. Spooky and others, Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective trace a ‘digital ecosystem’ highlighting black experience and/as science fiction: the sense, as Reed explains during his interview, that ‘we’re like aliens trying to tell our experiences to Earthlings. People don’t believe us.’ Among the most provocative elements in the film is the ambiguity surrounding alien identity: the Mothership as a rhetorical vacillation between past and future, between historically being the alien and being the abducted, between memory and prolepsis—a future hacker investigating the cultural production of our present in its connection to the historical past as an adaptive technology for an even further-situated future.

The colonized/racialized subject standing in for the figure of the alien has already received substantial attention (James (2014 [1990]); Dery 1993; Bould 2007; DeGraw 2007; Kerslake 2007; Rieder 2008; Lavender 2011; Langer 2011), and this study cannot distill or summarize the myriad conclusions of these discussions; but equally valid in these historical formulations is the figure of the colonized not as the alien other but as the *experiencer* of alien invasion, as the hosts to first contact. In this article, I address alien contact narratives in a number of recent Africanfuturist<sup>1</sup> texts with an eye to the manner by which they re-center the alien-as-other figuration—both as colonizing agent and corrupting force but also a space of mixture and hybridity by which the evolutionary process is renegotiated. Like the alien encounter narrative, evolution has frequently been mishandled in the service of racist mythologization, but recent work wrests control of these story arcs and reframes them as spaces of *potential* for the Global South, itself increasingly becoming the ‘epicenter of contemporary global transformations’ (Mbembe 2016: 212).

While early Western travelogues presented an alien, racialized other to tantalize readers—work including Morison’s *Itinerary* (1590-1603), Coryat’s *Crudities* (1611), Tavernier’s *Six Voyages* (1675), de la Condamine’s *Journal de voyage fait a l’Equateur* (1751), and de Bougainville’s *Le voyage autour du monde* (1772)—those on the receiving end of such proto-anthropological projects reflected that alien-ation back onto the voyagers themselves. Texts like Thomas Mafolo’s *Chaka* (1925) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) simultaneously critique the colonial travelogue as an alien(ating) literature and serve as functional alien invasion narratives (de Vita 2018: 159;

Lavender 2019: 187-92). By staging globalization and capitalism, from the slave trade to structural adjustment, as an alienating incursion, such texts resituate the ‘center’ in a historicist sense. After all, home is invaded by others from elsewhere, and when the geography of alien contact occurs in a Nigerian, or Congolese, or Ugandan space, the claim to Earth as home amends Western sf’s tunnel vision privileging First- and Second-World nation states as the inevitable sites of both technoscientific vanguardism and representational authority for the species. Such a reappropriation of a terrestrial Heimat, to borrow Ernest Bloch’s term, appears in one of the first *formally* Africanfuturist sf treatment of extraterrestrial invasion.<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Dongala’s (2017 [1981] satirical ‘Jazz and Palm Wine.’ Dongala’s allegorical text highlights both the alien as a colonial surrogate and the manner by which the ‘black secret technologies’ described by Akomfrah provide postcolonial lines of flight from the recursive weight of imperial histories/presents.

In Dongala’s (2017 [1985]) story, aliens land in the Republic of the Congo and are eventually killed by frightened locals. In retaliation, the aliens stage a global invasion provoking an international meeting of Earth’s governments to marshal a response. In a metonymic reduction to fundamental historical-political nature, the U.S. recommends ‘carpet bomb[ing]’ the invaders; the Soviets seek ‘a large-scale land invasion’; the Chinese endorse ‘flood[ing] the Cuvette region with millions of men’; and the Vietnamese counsel ‘guerilla tactics.’ The Apartheid South African agent, unsurprisingly, suggests cordoning off the aliens, beginning with ‘the Blacks, all the Arabs, all the Chinese,’ et cetera (89). It is the Kenyan delegate’s suggestion of sending human elders to meet their alien equivalents which the council ultimately adopts, yet this does not forestall the ‘Great Conquest,’ the tenth-anniversary celebration of which occupies the fifth section of the story, where speeches meekly herald the ‘cultural hybridity’ resulting from the rule of Earth’s ‘illustrious conquerors’ (92). That ‘point zero of colonization’ occurs in ‘the Congolese capital’ highlights the spirit of Akomfrah’s documentary—the staging of colonization as alien invasion, further highlighted by the fact that the aliens dissolve in ecstasy through the influence of black trans-Atlantic ‘secret technologies’: the eponymous palm wine and jazz—and that when the aliens eventually vanish, the white South Africans similarly ‘evaporate,’ indicating that Apartheid, and the colonial models which informed it (see Mamdami 1996; Cooper 2005), represent the apotheosis of alien aggression. As Eshun remarks, following Greg Tate,

All the stories about alien abduction, all the stories about alien spaceships, moving subjects from one planet to another, genetically transforming them...really, all those things that you read about alien abduction and genetic transformation, they already happened. How much more alien do you think it gets than slavery? Than entire mass populations moved and genetically altered? It doesn’t really get more alien than that. (qtd. in Akomfrah 1995)

As he restates it elsewhere, ‘Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science fiction are one and the same’ (Eshun 2003: 298).

It is precisely in this light that European alien-invasion sf, too, figures its subject matter. Texts like H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), John Campbell's 'Who Goes There?' (1938), Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1954), Andrew Card's *Ender's Game* (1985), and TV programs and movies like *V* (1984-1985), *Independence Day* (1996), *The Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), and *The Fifth Wave* (2016) all re-envision colonial contact zones channeling the Manichean formula of conqueror or conquered during which the West briefly (in between book covers or during the period of a film) occupies the vulnerability of its own historical victims. It represents a form of haunting—aliens doing to New York, London, or Paris, what Europe and the U.S. did in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Hawai'i or Tasmania.<sup>3</sup> If technocentric teleology has historically delineated hierarchies of authority, would this not extend to any extraplanetary species sufficiently advanced to travel to Earth? Whether self-consciously performed—as with Wells's invocation of the Tasmanian genocide and his meditation on the Martian's evolutionary status as an advanced model of humankind—or from within the very xenophobic contexts which instigate such extrapolations (as with Nivens and Pournelle's reactionary *A Mote in God's Eye* [1974]), the martial response to alien contact reflects defensive posturing against history's own alien abductors. If the familiar image of the U.F.O. menacing the White House indicates nothing else, it is that the idea of alien visitation educes those gunpowder-laden ships that breached mooring sites like those on the western coast of Africa, and for that reason, will register differently to communities for whom the past is already marked by models of alien apocalypse.<sup>4</sup>

In *Science Fiction and Empire* (2007), Patricia Kerslake opens by assessing the alien as the central trope of the sf imaginary. Focusing on the 'other' as the essential figure of sf, Kerslake highlights the relevance of the figure of the alien to the genre's themes and the way speculative geographies frequently trace over colonial histories of expansion and 'discovery' whose own textual structures informed those later, more extravagant fancies. The alien, however, always requires a double lens: on the one hand, the nature of pure difference demands the impossible task of describing an absence, revealing the human inability to think outside of itself as a reference point and thus the impossibility of effectively 'effing the ineffable' as Gregory Benson (1974) describes it. For Benson, sf undermines the self-validating focus of humanism on reason and progress by, in Saussurian fashion, delimiting the latter to the borders of human language. The true other cannot be portrayed in human terms and its resulting foreignness thereby highlights the limitations of human knowledge. Such meditations motivate texts like Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), the Strugatsky Brothers' *Roadside Picnic* (1972), and Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972), in which characters exhaust their functional capacity to know the alien, leading to questions concerning the objective primacy of reason itself. As Carl Malmgren (1993) explains, '[T]he alien is necessarily characterized by...a surplus of signification, an inadequation between signifier and signified. Such excess is... "beyond words"; all attempts at...direct rendering, inevitably violate the alien's irreducible strangeness...Linguistic formation, it seems, involves some form of xenocide' (29). This echoes what Snaut, in Lem's *Solaris*, communicates to the protagonist, Kelvin: 'We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors' (Lem 1987 [1961]: 72).

This reflectivity leads to the second lens of the alien encounter in the form of the projection of the alienated self—not the ‘other’ but the same, estranged for the purposes of self-analysis or to justify exploitation in the service of ‘civilization’ (as in Crichton’s *Sphere* [1987] in which the passage through the alien involves penetrating the mirrored reflection of oneself). It is in this sense that ‘[r]endering the alien, making the reader experience it, is the crucial contribution of SF’ (Benford 1987: 25), or as Kerslake (2007) puts it, “The use of the Other and the use of the fundamental ability to Other, are methods by which SF has evolved into a legitimate cultural discourse’ (14). These formulations of otherness, both in the historical sense of black experience vis-à-vis modernity but also in terms of Africanfuturist renderings of the alien encounter as alternative possibilities of navigating the speculative imagination, guide my analysis. While the circumstances informing Nnedi Okorafor’s (2009a) assertion that ‘there are few [science fiction] narratives emerging from within or outside the [African] continent’ have rapidly changed, an understandable reluctance to engage with a genre that proselytized African’s ‘otherness’ to those who would never set foot on the continent remains (see also Okorafor 2014a). After all, ‘Why would Africans and African Americans feel inspired to write themselves into a genre of literary speculation about what alien encounters might possibly be like if their literature already imagines sustainable self-reconstruction in the aftermath of attempted annihilation?’ (de Vita 2018: 152); of what value are aliens to the historically alienated? What happens, in other wor(l)ds, when history’s racially formulated “aliens” confront the ‘bug eyed monsters’ of science fiction; when the sites of alien contact cease to depend on western economic hegemony and target African geographies; when African communities and individuals play host to our interstellar visitors and stand ‘at the vanguard of planetary discourse’ (Hugo 2017: 46)?

### **‘Dark They Were, And Golden Eyed’: Becoming the Other**

In Ray Bradbury’s ‘Dark They Were and Golden Eyed’ (n.d. [1949]), a family of human colonists on Mars transgress the border of self and other so as to reveal the propensity of these concepts to slip. The Bittering family joins a human settlement nestled in the shadow of ‘Martian hills,’ dotted with empty ‘old cities...lying like children’s delicate bones.’ The father, Harry, regrets the move, deciding that ‘Mars...was meant for Martians’ and that humans didn’t belong, but his family convinces him to stay. Nevertheless, he bemoans that it will be ‘Colonial days all over again’ with ‘a million Earthmen on Mars’ and is concerned by the absence of indigenous Martians (128). He reflects upon how the humans have renamed all the sites on the planet, occasionally with a ‘silent guilt’ (130). When atomic war on Earth destroys the only rocket port, the Bitterings are marooned at the colony. Harry soon discovers that the Martian soil alters plant and animal life, including the colonists, yet none of the others seem interested in leaving or helping his family escape. His family’s complexions grow darker; their eyes turn yellow. Harry initially refuses all local food, but eventually, he is forced to eat the fare to survive—he too changes. Eventually, Harry’s family begins to speak in ancient Martian even though they have never studied it; his son asks to change his name to a Martian one; and before long, they all have Martian names. In the end, Harry and his family join the other colonists in moving to the empty Martian

cities on the hills. Once they arrive, they observe the now-empty human town and their perspective shifts:

Mr. Bittering gazed at the Earth settlement far away in the low valley. "Such odd, ridiculous houses the Earth people built."

"They didn't know any better," his wife mused. "Such ugly people. I'm glad they've gone."

They both looked at each other, startled by all they had just finished saying. They laughed.

"Where did they go," he wondered....

"I don't know," she said. (139)

In Bradbury's story, the gaze is inverted—rather than naming the discovered space and rendering it theirs, the colonists are themselves renamed and absorbed. The story's strength lies in its fundamental ambiguity: does it critique colonial acquisitiveness or restage the fraught dangers of 'going native' in the 'darker' regions of the world? Bradbury reflects the liminality between self and other in terms that both evoke horror and read as utopian. This potential/threat of mixing similarly marks twenty-first century alien-contact narratives from Africa.

Perhaps the most startling image of such a Bradburian transformation involves Wikus Van der Merwe in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2000). In this problematic rendering, the alteration of the white Wikus into the racialized alien 'prawn' engages in a dehumanizing grotesquery, borrowing from the inter-species alterations faced by Seth Brundle in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986). While critically acclaimed and awarded, Blomkamp's big-budget cinematic release has faced justifiable criticism from Nnedi Okorafor (2009b) and others for its clumsy and racist indulgence in Nigerian stereotypes, and Blomkamp's choices are more perplexing given the far more thematically complex treatment of the subject represented in the film's short, low-budget prototype, *Alive in Joburg* (2006).

In its broadest outlines, the six-minute film relates the same basic story as *District 9*. Aliens are marooned over South Africa's largest municipality—in this case multiple vessels rather than the one—and tensions between the South Africans and their unwelcome new neighbors quickly escalate. However, there are several important differences between Blomkamp's original short film and the blockbuster for which he would become best known. The first is that *Alive in Joburg* takes place not in 'the present day' but in 1990 amid the tense transition between Apartheid- and post-Apartheid rule thus intimately highlighting the country's long racial engagement with a politics of otherness (in a way that is curiously marginalized in *District 9*). This historical-political placement clarifies the reading of the alien as representative of the exploited and disenfranchised black South Africans under white minority rule, clarifying the later title's allusions to the forced relocation of Cape Town's District 6 between 1966-1982. An unnamed Boer explains that the 'very conservative' 'white minority' in South Africa has capitalized on locals' fear by forcing the aliens into the *locasi*—the racially separated neighborhoods surrounding urban

centers—in order to exploit the tensions Apartheid was developed to stoke and use the presence of the aliens to offset the flagging political future of white South-African rule.

The relevance of this first difference becomes increasingly clear in light of the second: the film's reliance on interviews of contemporary black South Africans as a narrative mockumentary frame. While *District 9* retains the documentary-style conceit, it is abandoned once the story turns its attention to Wikus's transition, and in so doing jettisons the compelling element of the interviews in *Alive in Joburg*: that they were initially conducted outside the conceit of an extraterrestrial encounter. To explain, focusing on the black African residents' resentment concerning the newcomers in their midst, one interviewee in *Alive in Joburg* remarks that the aliens 'make people uncomfortable. We don't know what they think, how they think.' An armed vendor wearing a bulletproof vest suggests that he has to 'protect the meat.' 'People can come in here and take the meat,' he explains. (The latter is purposely miscaptioned as 'the Poleepkwa come in here,' the neologism referring to the aliens which the fan-based, online material surrounding the film still uses). Patting his handgun, he continues: 'They are carrying firearms you see.' In another sequence of interviews, a taxi driver gesticulates while complaining that he 'can't sleep at night' due to 'strange sounds hovering above [his] house' and noting that 'They catch free rides on the train, on top of the train. With the electric current you can easily die there but they don't. It's like a normal life for them' (Blomkamp 2006). As Blomkamp explained in an interview, the reason the participants in *Alive in Joburg* appear authentic is that they are: 'I asked [black South Africans] "What do you feel about Zimbabwean Africans living here?" And those answers — they weren't actors, those are real answers' (Woerner 2009). This ironic juxtaposition—the racial xenophobia of Apartheid levied against the spatial xenophobia concerning the permeation of nation-state borders by Zimbabweans fleeing increased persecution by ZANU-PF (following threats to its political hegemony from MDC candidates beginning in 2000)—offered the best of the mirroring potential of sf as an estrangement of the sociopolitical present. The irony marking the racial hostility that motivated the Apartheid system vis-à-vis the hostility by black South Africans against refugees from neighboring countries culminates in the final scene of a bystander watching a march against the 'aliens' pass by and raising a single fist of solidarity. That Blomkamp's original gesture places the social reproduction of colonial attitudes of superiority and difference in relief only to capitulate to and embrace that very racism in its full-form version as *District 9* foregrounds, indeed, an additional irony.

For their part, the aliens in *Alive in Joburg* state that they have 'nothing', that they need electricity and 'running water so that we might hydrate,' and identify that their biology cannot fight off local infections. They echo the visceral needs of refugee populations whose struggle for existence is exacerbated by the hostility of locals who conceive of them as leeching off limited resources: represented in *Alive in Joburg* by the tubes lowered from the alien ships into water- and nuclear plants. The implication of transformation in the context of Blomkamp's original film strikes a more critical, and subtle, tone than that later provided by Van der Merwe in his later role as cinematic protagonist of *District 9*. Through the black South Africans' adoption of dehumanizing language for their post-colonial neighbors, *Alive in Joburg* portrays an alien transmogrification that has led the former victims of Apartheid to adopt the hierarchical perspectives of the white government by

differentiating the self from the 'other' for whom normality is skewed, who bring 'rape and murder,' and whose presence always indicates the material necessity for self-defense. Blomkamp's shorter film exhibits the post-Apartheid black South Africans *becoming* their alien colonizers, the white South Africans, at least in the sense of their own willingness to alienate, to other, their African neighbors.

If this motif of mixing and transformation juxtaposed against colonial histories in *Alive in Joburg* remains largely implied, its role in Dilman Dila's (2014) 'Itande Bridge' takes a more explicit approach that will recur in Okorafor's *Lagoon*. Dila's protagonist, Obil, a professional diver, is caught off guard as he is brushing his teeth by the Ugandan 'Kichwa red,' a "commando unit...famous for the cordon and search operations to root out terrorists' (39-40). Arrested ('He knew the soldiers had come for him' [40]), he is brought to the Itande bridge where he has heard reports that several vehicles plunged into the water. 'It looked,' he thinks, 'like a battlefield' with 'tanks,' 'foxholes,' and 'helicopter gunships' parked nearby (40-41). Threatened at gunpoint by a soldier whose eyes hold a 'glint of murder' (43), he joins two other divers in a search for the vehicles' wreckage. Finding no trace of them, he returns for a second dive during which he ponders the likelihood of escaping alive. 'What,' he wonders, 'if he stumbled onto some military secret, would they not ensure he never tells anyone?' (48). After locating the missing vehicles meticulously parked under water in a spot in which they have no business being, he opts to flee upstream, hoping to steal a boat and escape across Lake Victoria to Tanzania. In the process of his escape, he notices a glint and, with the last glimmering hope of making a discovery that might save his life, he investigates. What he finds is a lair occupied by a creature with large 'yellow eyes,' 'cold and scaly' skin and 'human arms, but with umpteen very long fingers' (51). Captured, he is taken into a dark space filled with the crash survivors and, like them, is genetically mutated. When he awakens from the procedure, he becomes aware of 'the metamorphosis that had occurred to him,' leaving him with the ability to breathe and see underwater and with a dozen webbed toes and feet on each hand (53). An alien consciousness tells him that they are 'inside [his] head and [he is] inside [theirs].' He recalls memories of 'a strange world with a yellow sky, that had no sun, or moon, or land. A water world with only one kind of creature, that looked like a catfish, whose reckless activities had caused apocalyptic evaporation' (53). He sees a cylindrical ship travelling in search of a new home 'with hundreds of eggs waiting to hatch and finding this world...his home' (53-54). As a method of survival, the fish-like aliens need to 'develop an endosymbiotic relationship with the species they found in the new world, especially the dominant species. Humans' (54). Able now to listen in on the soldiers, whom he discovers are searching for him, he hears that the Americans are likely to 'bomb the river.' His sense of self-preservation activated, Obil moves the other mutated alien-human hybrids (the fish-aliens can escape in their ship) to the depths of Lake Victoria until such time as they can 'establish peaceful contact with their new neighbors' (55).

While this abduction scenario partakes of many of traditional Western sf elements, subtleties forestall an easy gloss. While Obil ends with the lament that 'he would never wear his new clothes again, or propose to' his girlfriend, the story suggests this was unlikely to happen anyway. The initial 'alien' abduction, by the neocolonially transformed "Kichwa red," has already begun much of what the second, 'yellow,' alteration finishes. The easy



lethality with which the U.S.-trained soldiers are described suggests that what Obil has discovered represents precisely the kind of ‘government secret’ that would provoke killing him to keep him silent. Additionally, while he has lost certain opportunities, the hive-mind he has joined allows him to ‘[mingle] with the...hundred other memories of loved ones, with a hundred other broken dreams’ (55) returning him to a sense of community absent from the workers’ compound where he lives (39). The invocation of the Americans as the martial influence behind both the activities at the bridge and the planned resolution recalls the ‘colonize-or-be-colonized’ mentality that distinguishes a large strain of the alien-sf imaginary in the West. The story also gestures to the recent rise of an American military presence in Uganda and elsewhere under the guise of AFRICOM’s ‘anti-terrorism’ mission, which had its roots in Uganda in the 1990s with the U.S. supplying military assistance to capture Joseph Kony and ratcheted up after 2008 with AFRICOM’s expanded role on the continent (Demmers and Gould 2018: 372). Similar to how the U.S. trains the Ugandan military while retaining the option of departing whenever they wish—neocolonially altering the local political atmosphere—the catfish-like aliens change the Ugandans captured from the river but can leave at their leisure (in the latter, case, while they await their transformed prodigy’s negotiation of a space for them in Uganda).

In both *Alive in Joburg* and ‘Itande Bridge,’ alien transformation intersects multiple axes, capturing both the invasive presence of the Other and the experience of becoming the Other. In each case, the foundational alienation precedes the arrival of the extraterrestrial—both the Afrikaaner and the American occupy the first-contact position. As Rachel Haywood Ferreira (2013) has argued, ‘stories of first contact’ which emerge from formerly colonized areas ‘might better be described as stories of second contact due to the degree to which the original historical circumstances and the colonial legacy inform content and perspective’ (70). Hugh O’Connell (2016), expanding on Ferreira’s argument, applies it to Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, noting that the novel ‘introduces a certain undecidability that is not only at heart in any utopian revolutionary desire for futurity in which the desired outcomes cannot be guaranteed by the actions taken to achieve them, but perhaps doubly so when that postcolonial vision of futurity is then coded through such a colonially ambivalent figure’ (295). The future, as a space itself ‘colonized’ by the proleptic imagination of sf, stands here as an equally liminal figure for post-colonial science fiction, and in few places is the ‘post-colonial-future-as-alien’ motif more prominent than in *Lagoon*.

### **Place is the Space: Nnedi Okorafor’s Alien Interiors**

Nnedi Okorafor’s (2014b) *Lagoon* follows an alien invasion in Lagos, Nigeria over a period of several days that initiates a political, historical, and spiritual transformation in the city. The novel opens from the perspective of a swordfish on a mission to puncture an oil pipeline in an attempt to chase off its own aliens, ‘burrowing and building creatures from the land’ who leave ‘poison rainbows on the water’s surface’ (3). Following a sonic boom indicating the arrival of extraterrestrial visitors, the harbor begins to detoxify, leaving ‘sweet, clean water’ (5). The aliens approach the local sea life, including the swordfish, ask ‘wonderful questions,’ and offer whatever the organisms desire—many wish to be bigger,

more lethal, including the swordfish who grows to ‘three times her size and weight’ with a sharpened, elongated spear that ‘sings’ as it slices through the water. As the chapter ends, the reader discovers that the water outside Lagos is ‘teeming with aliens and monsters’ (6). It is second contact, then, that marks the abduction of three people—Adaora, Agu, and Anthony—from Bar Beach in Lagos. Taken to the aliens, they return with an ambassador, whom Adaora names Ayodele, as they attempt to reach the Nigerian president so the visitors might negotiate terms to settle in Nigeria and its coastal waters. As the protagonists seek to bring the president together with the alien elders, they discover that each of them has special powers, ones unrelated to the arrival of the aliens but a factor in their being chosen for abduction. Lagos dissolves into chaos as residents turn on the aliens and each other, leading to riots that paralyze the city. The four eventually find the president, but on attempting to return to Lagos, Ayodele is killed by frightened soldiers. She dissolves into a mist which everyone in Lagos breathes in, making them all ‘a little bit...alien’ (268). In the end, the aliens offer their technology in exchange for the right to emigrate to Nigeria, and the president addresses the nation directly, using the aliens’ ability to hijack any screen, calling the arrival of the aliens ‘a historic moment,’ a ‘milestone in our march toward a maturing democracy’ which will lead Nigeria to be ‘powerful again.’ (276). Intermixed with these events are narratives from the perspective of animals and insects and stories of individuals who discover that the ancient spirits and gods of Nigeria have been awakened by the aliens’ sonic arrival: Ijele, the Chief of the Masquerades; Legba, god of the crossroads; Mami Wata, queen of marine witches; the Bone Collector, a hungry spirit of the road; and Udide Okwanka, the spider artist who also narrates the story, all join in the chaos of a city in which “everything is changing” (6). The Earth is not, and never was, home to humans alone.

In ‘African SF and the Planning Imagination,’ Matthew Eatough (2017) analyzes African sf, specifically *Lagoon*, through the lens of structural adjustment models and developmental politics, arguing that ‘African sci-fi narratives adapt the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the fantastic—which earlier writers had used to critique the unreal manifestations of global capitalism—and direct them at the new forms of developmentalist logic that surfaced in the early 2000s’ (239). Eatough places the Campbellian<sup>5</sup> turn towards hard sf in the West—with its amateur sociologies of science—in the context of think tanks like the RAND institute, which were also emerging at that time. The latter helped to centralize developmental economics as a global force through structural adjustment programs and, for Eatough, one can tie the ‘recent rise of science fiction’ in Africa to ‘key shifts in the nature of SAPs’ (246), specifically their transition to poverty-reduction programs beginning in the twenty-first century and developmental models which highlight the ‘long durée’ of transition: the ‘rhetoric of long-term visions’ in which structural reorganization can lead to ‘sustainable’ solutions. Said another way, the failure of SAPs in the 80s and 90s led to a rethinking of developmental models such that nations like Nigeria needed to implant systems which in the far future might eventually provide sustainable infrastructure. In this, we can recognize the ‘imaginary waiting room of history’ that Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) attributes to historicist consciousness. Citing J.S. Mill’s contention in the nineteenth century that Indians and Africans were not yet ready for self-rule, Chakrabarty notes, ‘We were all heading for the same direction...but some were to arrive

earlier than others.’ It was a ‘recommendation to the colonized to wait,’ the ‘art of waiting’ being tied to the acquisition of historical consciousness (8). Under such a system, Eatough (2017) explains, ‘The planning document thus becomes a sort of fetishistic substitute for social action, the drafting of its speculative “vision” tantamount to the creation of that future’ (248). In Okorafor’s highlighting the value of sf in the ‘creative process of global imagining,’ Eatough sees a ‘characteriz[ation of] science fiction as a type of professional knowledge work, one that is intimately connected to a future-oriented planning’ (249). Eatough highlights Okorafor’s disinclination in the novel to remain focused on issues such as LGBTQI+ rights or political graft beyond mentioning them alongside a nebulous invocation of ‘change’ in comparing her approach to the policy structures of the World Bank or the IMF in which

what we are really witnessing is an allegorical representation of institutional evolution. By speeding up ecological time, Okorafor suggests that institutional reform will be equally cleansing for Nigeria’s social and political environment. And by deflecting her primary symbol for institutional change away from human society, she is able to honor the injunction against equating institutional time with any specific actors or events—just as the World Bank has cautioned governments against relying on short-term social programs. (253)

O’Connell (2016) argues similarly, suggesting that ‘Despite the aliens not presenting themselves as colonizers, the enforced imposition of an outside definition of change and technology remains the...hallmark of neoliberal developmentalism, in which the liberalization of the economy is often accompanied by vast development projects and foreign investment,’ and positing the risk that the subversive potential of Ferreira’s ‘second contact’, vis-à-vis colonialism, threatens to be undercut by the influence of such developmental models in *Lagoon* (299-300).

These analyses of *Lagoon*’s vaguely-promised futures provide much-needed scrutiny surrounding sf’s future-orientation and its historical links to developmentalist logic; however, they also overlook two important features specific to Okorafor’s Africanfuturism: the first is the intersectional play with her self-described ‘Africanjujism’ (Okorafor 2019) that occurs both against and in tandem with the historicist underpinnings of the alien invasion genre; the second is the fundamentally alien activity of *thinking outside capitalism*, a feature which both calls for, and stymies, the speculative capacities of sf.

*Lagoon* frequently highlights the incomprehensibility of aliens opting for Nigeria. ‘If there were aliens,’ Father Oke muses, ‘they certainly wouldn’t come to Nigeria’ (Okorafor 2014b: 46). Adaora’s daughter, Kola, suggests to Ayodele that she ‘might like the United States more....They’ve got more stuff. And if your spaceship is broken, they can probably fix it better’ (68). Femi, a journalist who documents the president’s meeting with the aliens, receives ‘e-mails that accused Nigeria of being too backward, undeserving of an alien visitation’ (286). While Adaora hypothesizes that ‘Ayodele’s people had chosen the city of Lagos’ because ‘[i]f they’d landed in New York, Tokyo, or London, the governments of these places would have quickly swooped in to hide, isolate, and study the aliens’ whereas, in Lagos, ‘there was no such order’ (64), these events occur regardless: the protagonists

hide and isolate Ayodele, and Adaora studies the alien visitor's cells in her lab. Nevertheless, the Lagosians' initial difficulty 'relating to that which does not resemble them' (67) hardly differs much from any other site of contact, rendering Lagos as good a place as any. The sheer eclectic energy of Lagos, throughout the novel, suggests that it would, and should, be of interest to any planetary visitor looking to conform to a new home.

The idea of the visitors adapting to the world they discover rather than seeking to change it represents a key inversion from colonial histories—one can be a guest only if one visits rather than coopting the house and reducing local populations to guests in their own homes. When the aliens emerge from the sea (a motif with a long history in Afro- and Africanfuturist texts), they aim to blend into Lagosian culture. The novel highlights the multiracial and multiethnic realities of contemporary urban Nigeria in noting that '[s]ome of [the aliens] were dressed in various types of traditional garb, some in military attire, some in police uniforms, others in Westernized civilian clothes. Most of them were African, a small few Asian, one white....All of them could pass for Lagosians' (Okorafor 2014b: 116). However, Fisayo balks when she sees '[w]hat looked like a white man dressed as an Igbo man' in a 'woolen chieftancy cap' which she declares 'wrong. Foreign. Alien' (133). Chris remarks of a white alien speaking in fluent Yoruba and wearing an 'expensive-looking white buba and sokoto' that there was 'more to being Yoruba than language and style of dress' (179). Importantly, both these rejections of aliens in Nigerian life come from figures who do not 'welcome the guest,' both having been distinguished by their immediate xenophobia regarding the aliens.

"We come to bring you together and refuel your future," Ayodele said. "Your land is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart....We do not seek your oil or your other resources," she said. "We are here to nurture your world" (Okorafor 2014b: 113). Oil in this context represents a kind of application to the past, a way of fueling society on history. In this case, the history being burned is also that of colonialism and the transitions created by that first alien contact of Europe. In this ecocritical metaphor, the aliens in *Lagoon* identify another fuel, the cultural stories and traditions of Nigeria, with the aliens' arrival forestalling the archival mining of transformed biological matter from the Mesozoic period and replacing it with the awakening of the myths, stories, gods, and spirits that wend through not just Nigeria but neighboring states, ethnic and linguistic histories transgressing the colonial delimitations of the map: a Nigeria fueled by different pasts than those represented by the unearthing of extractable resources like oil, gems, and gold.

The following page highlights this by indicating that the sonic boom of the ship's landing 'would awaken goddesses, gods, sprits, and ancestors' (Okorafor 2014b: 114). This awakening, I contend, distinguishes *Lagoon* from Okorafor's earlier blending of fantasy and sf, specifically in the structural equivalence she draws between the magical/folkloric and the futuristic. Okorafor consistently replicates the 'futuristic' aliens in the 'traditional' Nigerian entities and vice versa. The 'MOOM' indicating the sonic impact of the ship landing in, then emerging from, the lagoon echoes those made by the gods and spirits that awaken, as when Ijele, after entering the internet café, 'bounced, and as it came down, a drum beat deep like the bottom of the ocean sounded, shaking the husk of the building. GBOOM.' The witness even clarifies that '[i]t was like the sonic booms we'd heard twice

within the last twenty-four hours, except much louder and much closer' (199), the focus on volume and proximity suggesting that the alien imitates the traditional, spiritual object of Nigerian orature rather than the inverse. One sees the same sonic reference in what Anthony calls 'the rhythm,' using it to 'enhance and lace' his performances with 'energy and images' which enthrall his audiences (165), the raw power of which he can also focus into a single large pulse; this he does as a child to protect his household from greedy relatives (164), in front of Adaora's house (187) and again in order to save the president and his entourage from the monsters occupying the waters outside Lagos in which the sound 'MOOOOOOOOOM' affirms the equivalence (246). Likewise, as Anthony sees 'trees grow between the crowds' as he performs (54), Ayodele forms a plantain tree amid the crowd in front of Adaora's house from the bodies of soldiers she has slain (138). Adaora's ability as a 'marine witch' (142) to manipulate water and transform herself is reflected in Ayodele's own ability to shapeshift. Repeatedly, the speculative future reflects the speculative past marking a refusal of sf's developmental impingency: if, as Barbara Christian (1995) has said, black people have always been a 'race for theory,' Okorafor suggests that they have also always been a 'race for sf.' By juxtaposing the figures of Nigerian orature with spaceships and aliens, *Lagoon* highlights sf's endemic status in Africa: it was there in Akara Ogun's voyages into the bush in D.O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1939), in the Palm Wine Tapster's adventures in Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1954) and in the centuries and millennia of oral tales which informed both—the same movement into the spaces of the unknown, the same didactic elements. *Lagoon* refutes the 'progressive' impetus of linear time in lieu of the understanding that, in Faulkner's (2011 [1948]) phrase, 'Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago' (190).

*Lagoon*'s most marked occasion of this is also its central metaphor. As a 419 scammer, nicknamed 'Legba,' runs a con on a white woman in an internet café, an old man enters wearing a 'long black caftan' (Okorafor 2014b: 197). As 'Legba' observes him, the front of the café explodes, and a living Masquerade enters the building.

It was Ijele. The Chief of all Masquerades....Ijele and the man whom I now believed was one of the aliens look[ed] at each other...."Ijele" the man in black said. Ijele bounced, and as it came down, a drum beat deep like the bottom of the ocean sounded....They went into the computer...Ijele became like gas and the man in black became like smoke and, together, they dissolved into the computer. (198-200)

This meeting, in the computer-saturated environment of the café, between the alien and the long-familiar Nigerian folk figure, underlines the intersection of the two; beyond the shared sonic dialect identified earlier, they also shapeshift and clearly recognize one another on sight. That they combine inside the computer operates as the fundamental figure for a Nigerian sf landscape embracing both future and past. Both orature and sf literature combine here in the contemporary digital communicative environment. As the spider-storyteller Udide explains, 'The modern human world is connected like a spider's web...but the story goes deeper. It is in the dirt...in the fond memory of the soily cosmos. It is in the always-mingling past, present, and future....It is in the powerful spirits and

ancestors who dwelled in Lagos....Chance begets change' (193). This is staged in opposition to the 'military men and police' who bear the colonial trace and thus are likened to 'bandits or trolls from *European* fantasy tales' (201, emphasis mine). Placing the aliens and Ijele into contact, as watched by a namesake to Legba, god of the crossroads and linguist to the gods, embodies this intersectional transition, the offer of new horizons for sf in an African context.

As Eatough rightfully argues, SAP programs have emphasized 'development' and 'progress' as models requiring 'growing past' precolonial models of belief and political organization. For Chakrabarty (2000), this has always represented a flaw in colonial historicity. Even as a paternal West dictated that 'Indians and Africans were *not yet* civilized enough to rule themselves' (8), the native always occupied two, seemingly exclusive, positions: 'One is the peasant who has to be educated into the citizen and who therefore belongs to the time of historicism; the other is the peasant who, despite his lack of formal education, is already a citizen' (10), not an 'anachronism' but 'a fundamental part of the modernity that colonial rule brought into Africa' (13). Central to colonials' 'prepolitical' nature, according to Chakrabarty, was their 'emphasis on kinship, gods, and the so-called supernatural' (10). For western historians, such beliefs were 'symptomatic of a consciousness that had not quite come to terms with the secular-institutional logic of the political' (12). But, as Chakrabarty notes, such beliefs were not limited to rural communities but thrived even in urban, bourgeois spaces. Part of the act of 'provincializing Europe,' decentering or challenging its monolithic control over historical discourse, is to accept that 'the gods and agents inhabiting practices of so-called "superstition" have never died anywhere,' that they are 'coeval with the human' and that 'the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits' (16).

Okorafor's explicitly political context leads Eatough (2017) to identify her as among a 'budding crop of sci-fi writers who have taken an active interest in social issues' among whom he also counts Nalo Hopkinson and China Miéville, but this seems to suggest that, historically, sf writers did not take an active interest in social issues: a claim difficult to maintain even before the New Wave turn of the 1960s. Rather, the alien metaphor in Okorafor's novel confronts the developmentalist paradoxes that Eatough identifies. If we accept the suggestion, often attributed to Jameson (2006), that it is 'easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism,' then formulating the speculative what-ifs surrounding such a future would be effing the ineffable indeed. In *Lagoon*, Okorafor highlights the alien aporia par excellence, located at the heart of the very historicist models from which the evolutionary and competition-based structures of the genre emerge: *that to imagine a post-capitalist world without simultaneously referencing capitalism* (and thus tying oneself to it dialectically by denying it) is, by the twenty-first century, the literary equivalent of Kelvin's identification with the Solarian 'ocean.' Even Marxism, the most successful political-economic alternative to Capitalism, remains bound to the very historicist-evolutionary models that Chakrabarty assigns to Fabian's denial of coevalness: 'the historicism that allowed Marx to say that the "country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future"' (Chakrabarty 2000: 7). Rather than reproducing developmentalist logic, Okorafor presents it as the essential barrier forestalling the utopian alterity of a world bereft of late-stage capital.

What would it mean, after all, for a visiting species not to wish to absorb a nation's resources, to in fact 'refuel' it: removing the very access to resource expropriation. It is difficult to realistically imagine an end to oil drilling, for example, so long as reserves remain, but sf exists to provide these very 'what ifs.' What if Nigeria could no longer serve as a waystation for global petroleum interests because the ocean itself was poisonous and, besides, a forty-foot swordfish sinks any vessel attempting to build or operate a rig? What if this happened globally? As O'Connell (2016) notes, 'merely representing the alien encounter as a mediated desire for such a radical utopian event confronts the inevitability of and lack of alternatives to the global capitalist world-system from an Afro-utopian perspective' (295). The end of *Lagoon* reveals this aporetic scenario, but the aftereffect of that speculative operation is not its story—its story involves the aforementioned intersection of sf and the fantastic acting 'like a double exposed photo' (Okorafor 2014b: 204), overlaying and echoing itself, the possibilities for reimagining pasts at the same time as one imagines the future: a literary reimagining of sf as a 'place of mixing' (7) within an African context.

### Axis Mundi: De/Re-centering Touchdown

'Others have already sent their messages out into space. It's dangerous if extraterrestrials only hear their voices. We should speak up as well. Only then will they get a complete picture of human society.'

- Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem* (trans. Ken Liu)

My title adopts the azimuth as a potent metaphor for the act of provincializing Europe in the context of African sf. An azimuth calculates the angle between an observer and a celestial object relational to true north. In this context, the empirical angle of vision changes dependent on the spectator. Okorafor provides such a metaphor in the competing interpretations of Fisayo and the small boy as they see Ayodele emerge from the ocean and abduct the protagonists. While both the boy and Fisayo think 'smoke' when they see the alien, their interpretation of what follows differs. The boy thinks of 'Mami Wata' (an African-derived entity) and sees Anthony's release of the bat he has rescued as 'a black bird' which 'caught itself and flew into the night,' the whole indicating to him that 'things were about to change' and that he 'liked this idea very much.' Fisayo, by contrast, sees Ayodele as 'the devil' (a western-derived entity) and the bat as 'something black and evil...like a poison.' For her, it is the end of the world (Okorafor 2014b: 13-14): one event, two perspectives. Traditionally the celestial object of the U.F.O. has been interpreted from the perspectival position of the former First- and Second Worlds, but the alien-contact narratives by Dongala, Blomkamp, Dila, and Okorafor discussed here offer an alternative point of reference for celestial objects.

As Chakrabarty (2000) explains, 'Europe appears different when seen from within the experiences of colonization or inferiorization in specific parts of the world' (16), and so too must the alien. This is where the concept of the azimuth, as the angle of vision, comes to play an important role in peripheralizing the alien invasion—*Lagoon* is an African

angle of vision on a particular sf concept; but more so, it is a Nigerian angle, and, even more, a Lagosian angle. In this fashion, the reaction of Lagos's metropolitan protagonists provides an alternative perspective to that of a future OmuHimba in *Binti* (2015), which will have a separate perspective than Ugandan protagonists whose initial abductors are their own U.S.-trained military, and all of these will differ from a post-Apartheid commentary on intra-African emigration. In this sense the azimuths of alien planetfall require not merely a resituating of the terrestrial observer as she sites the celestial object from Europe or the U.S. to the continent of Africa but her situation within those nations and the histories between and within which the formulation of the other is always changing. In all of these cases, after all, this '[is]n't the first invasion' (Okorafor 2014b: 144).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Africanfuturism' was coined by Nnedi Okorafor to distinguish work from and about the African continent from broader trends of diasporic Afrofuturism. (Okorafor 2019).

<sup>2</sup> As noted, various authors have applied an sf reading of "alien invasion" to earlier African texts including *Things Fall Apart* (the latter as early as Abner Nyamende (1987); more recently, see Okorafor (2014c) and Lavender (2015, 2019)), but Dongala's treatment is among the first that *explicitly* frames its content as sf.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the history of such literary "reverse colonial" victim narratives, see Higgins (2021).

<sup>4</sup> See Moore (2018), Burnett (2015), and Taylor-Sanchez (2021) for recent discussions along these lines..

<sup>5</sup> John C. Campbell was the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* (later *Analog*) from 1939 until his death in 1971. His influence on the pulp genre is widely considered to have led to what has later been called the "Golden Age" of pulp science fiction (Carter 1977; James 1995).

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