Gender and Sexuality in African Futurism

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This *Feminist Africa* issue was inspired by my weekly conversations with five African-born graduate students in "Gender & Sexuality in Afro-Futurism", an upper-level course offered by the Department of African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. We began the course by discussing why individuals of African descent have been marginalised in science fiction, a genre of fiction that conceptualises future scientific or technological advances. We observed that while White men have long dominated science fiction, Black people have expanded the boundaries of the genre. For instance, we debated how continental Africans have used Afrofuturism—an interdisciplinary genre and movement that emphasises the cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history to address the developing intersection of cultural expressivities and performances with technology in the African diaspora[1]—to imagine diverse futures and the effects of rapidly changing gender ideals in postcolonial contexts. The conversations continued with a discussion of the naming of "Afrofuturism" as a genre and a dialogue of its relevance to the African continent. While Western-based individuals acknowledge how the exchange of cultures and ideas across the Atlantic has influenced Afrofuturism, many African-based individuals feel that the term "Afrofuturism" does not yet fully address concerns grounded in African indigeneity, experiences, and histories. South African writer Mohale Mashigo expressed this by asserting that "Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa."[2]

In the weeks after this conversation, we surveyed the difference between Afrofuturism and African Futurism, much in the manner that Päivi Väätänen's 2019 work on the subject matter discerns between Afrofuturism and Nigerian American novelist Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturism[3]. This led us to explore alternative terms such as Afri-futurism, African Afro-Futurism[4], and Africanfuturism (one word), a term referenced by Okorafor in a November 2018 twitter post, and again in a 2019 blog post[5]. Inspired by the diverse iterations and definitions of the term, we landed on two separate words, "African Futurism", which I have used as the title for this issue[6]. We defined African Futurism as a genre concerned with the connection between cultural expressivities and performances and technology occurring on

the African continent, and which addresses the history, science, and experiences of people living there. While acknowledging our standpoint and positioning as scholars based in the United States, we identified the primary African Futurist authors and works, including novelists and short story writers (Okorafor's *Binti* series and *Lagoon*; Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* series)[7], filmmakers (Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi;* Frances Bodomo's *Afronaut*; Daniel Obasi's *An Alien in Town* and *Hello, Rain*), digital artists and photographers (Masiyaleti Mbewe; David Alabo; Jacque Njeri; Osborne Macharia; Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, the artist of this issue's cover[8]), and game developers (Andrew Kaggia's *Nairobi Legacy*). This led one graduate student to point out that many of the novels, plays, and films we were reading had female protagonists. The student inquired about the transformative impacts of African Futurism on African women's lives. This is perhaps the central question explored in this issue.

Two related questions were used to guide the contributors' analyses. The first is: how does the African Futurist genre (re)imagine gender norms, sexual identities, and issues of feminism on the continent? The second is: does African Futurism have the transformative power that people on the continent attribute to it, particularly concerning gender norms and relations? Our contributors draw from different disciplines and a wide array of sources to demonstrate how diverse individuals of African descent have used African Futurism as a tool to express and perform varied ideas about gender, sexuality, and feminism in African cultures across time and space. Although this issue focuses on "African Futurism," some contributors preferred to use "Afrofuturism" or another term (i.e., Okorafor's "Africanfuturism"). To preserve the integrity of the work, I did not change which words the authors used. This issue focuses primarily on African Futuristic stories by West African writers. Perhaps, this is because West African writers have dominated the genre, particularly in literature. A future *Feminist Africa* issue on the subject matter might include writers from other regions of Africa such as East and North Africa, illustrating the differing dynamics of issues of gender and sexuality in African Futurism across the continent.

Despite agreeing that "African Futurism" should mostly focus on the African continent, many of the contributors in this issue are aware of the hybridity of the genre and the importance of incorporating diasporic discourses in developing and analysing African Futurism. They emphasise that continental Africans can

never be completely divorced from the ongoing discourses of their counterparts in the diaspora, given their constant exposure to these via the global media. For example, both genres often address issues of gender and sexuality, and mutually operate within heavily patriarchal Black worlds, both in reality and in the fictional worlds they create.

Afrofuturistic and African Futuristic works highlight divergent experiences of people of African descent. For example, *Black Panther*, the immensely popular 2018 Afrofuturistic film, explores themes of cultural identity and race mostly anchored to Black *American* experiences and histories, whereas Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*, an African Futurist film that imagines a dystopian future in East Africa where water shortage and resources have devastated the world, visualises *African* topographies. I suggest that you begin your journey through this issue by reading Arit Oku's work, "Africanfuturism and the Reframing of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor", which analyses two works by Nnedi Okorafor using a gender lens: *Mother of Invention*, a short story about a pregnant woman whose artificial-intelligence-powered smart home acts as a midwife when she goes into labour during a pollen storm in a future Nigeria, and *Binti*, in which a young African girl leaves her home to attend the most prestigious intergalactic university and gets caught in the crossfire of a longstanding war between humans and an alien race. Oku's article outlines the main difference between Okorafor's Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism, illustrating the differences and tensions but also similarities between Western- and African-rooted conceptualisations of the future, of time. Oku's analysis illustrates powerfully that indeed, African Futurism *is* for Africans living in Africa and highlights its myriad interpretations and manifestations across spatial and temporal settings.

Overall, the contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* emphasise an African continental focus and diverse portrayals of gender, sexuality, and feminism in the African Futurism genre, complicating understandings of African women and men, past and present, fictional and real. For example, creators of African Futurism emphasise conceptions of technology, time, and space, which are not always linear or two-dimensional like Western concepts. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi's short story, "Land of My Dreams" illustrates the overlaying nature of time and geographies, blurring the fictional and the real. Rather than theorise what African Futurism *is*, the author *does* African Futurism, both in crafting the

plot and determining a methodological approach to the story. The work is tinged with the heavy mood of dystopic futures—an undesirable world—particularly for women and young girls living in Cameroon, a west-central African country currently embroiled in civil war. The story changes in time and perspectives, carrying readers through overlaying zones of time and space, mapping a visual road through the lives of the key characters.

Delali Kumavie's essay, "Haunted Airports and Sexual Anxieties in Nana Nyarko Boateng's 'Swallowing Ice'" also exemplifies the overlapping conceptualisation of time within African settings that typifies African Futurist imagination. Kumavie's work beckons readers to re-examine the airport as a key space where varied ideas about the nation's future and its cultural values, such as sexual norms and identities, take flight both in the literary work and in the real world of contemporary Ghana. Craftily weaving literature and history, Kumavie uses Boateng's short story about a young woman journalist's anxiety over her queerness, expressed in her sexual intimacies with a cat and in her (fake) newspaper stories about a lesbian couple kissing at Ghana's main international airport, to connect literature, history, and debates about national culture and sexual identities in Ghana, past and present—with the airport as a space in which desires about the nation's future play out.

Minna Salami's Standpoint, "The Liquid Space where African Feminism and African Futurism Meet", like Nfah-Abbenyi's short story and Kumavie's feature, emphasises issues of time. Salami points out that the history of Africa's timeline is conventionally divided by Western notions of time. But, she argues, time in Africa is fluid, overlapping. This disruption of time in African societies illustrates a complex African form and experience of time that African philosophers have long discussed.[9] Salami also points to other signposts of time apart from the precolonial/colonial/postcolonial divide that have defined African history. One of these signposts—in her words, "liquid space"—is fluid and buoyant and is the space, the time, where African Futurism and African Feminism meet and intersect. As she contends, this space is where future changes can be imagined and discussed, drawing from both the past and present, from African feminist activist ideals, and from the diverse expressions of technologies, science, and creativity that underpin the African Futurist genre. Salami further proposes *how* changes can be made, maintaining that ideas do not have to stay

in this "liquid space", forever enmeshed in the webs of imagination. Indeed, this space, this time, can be a powerful tool to make systemic changes. Thus, the intersection of African Futurism and African Feminism can foster changes, the creativity of imagined changes trickling from the "liquid space", splashing colours of both conventional and unconventional forms of political and social activism.

The contributors in this issue extend their analysis of nonlinear time in African Futuristic works to endeavour to forge analytical bridges between literature and real life. For instance, Kwame Otu's work, "When the Lagoons Remember: An Afroqueer Futurist Reading of 'Blue Ecologies of Agitation'", uses the key case studies of the real-life Korle Lagoon in Ghana and the fictional lagoon in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, a novel that describes aliens arriving in Lagos, Nigeria and the journeys of the humans to prevent mass extinction by the aliens. It makes an analytical bridge between literature and real-life events, highlighting larger issues of ecological and environmental changes in Africa—a key theme in African Futurism. Otu examines how ecologies of real-life lagoons are toxic zones because of electronic waste (e-waste) dumping sites—spaces that individuals must contend with and navigate daily. Otu's analysis extends the use of "queer" beyond sexual identities, applying it to non-normative circumstances and existences. The metaphor of the lagoon becomes a way to examine issues of ecological and environmental changes in Africa. Otu conjoins the real-life and fictional lagoons as non-normative sites in that they are utilized for both extraction and deposit, literally and figuratively. By "queering" lagoons, Otu elucidates the difficult situations of the residents and the site itself, illuminating perilous ecological and environmental changes in Africa. The format of Otu's essay, like Nfah-Abbenyi's short story, engages readers to convey the *sense* that time and geographies are not linear. The story changes in time and perspectives, carrying the reader through overlapping time and spaces, from fictional lagoons to real ones, not always clear which is which, as the devasting impact of the environmental crisis rings alarmingly in both spaces.

Novels and short stories also explore diverse Africa-focused topics through gendered lenses, as illustrated in Minna Salami's and Kwame Otu's analyses. Jenna Hanchey and Godfried Asante's collaborative contribution, "'How to Save the World From Aliens, Yet Keep Their Infrastructure': Repurposing the 'Master's

House' in *The Wormwood Trilogy*" examines issues of gender, and, like Arit Oku's analysis, illustrates the blurred and overlapping boundaries and similarities between Afrofuturism and iterations of African Futurism. Hanchey's and Asante's work uses the figure of Oyin Da, one of the central characters in Tade Thompson's *The Wormwood Trilogy*—a tale about an invasion of a giant alien lifeform known as Wormwood in a future Nigeria—as a case study to examine this difference through gendered lenses. The authors assert that iterations of African Futurism are not completely devoid of Western methodological approaches and theories, but that they do, and perhaps *should* employ and repurpose global Western methodological approaches and theories as well as local African ones. Hanchey and Asante draw examples from *The Rosewater Redemption*, the third book in the trilogy, to highlight how Thompson's use of the protagonist, Oyin Da, reveals key issues about gender and sexuality in African contexts. Their examination includes how African Futurist writers use queer and feminist epistemologies to (re)shape and repurpose Western colonial structures—the "Master's House", as they phrase it—for decolonial means. Like Otu, Hanchey and Asante extend the meaning of "queer" beyond sexual identity, describing postcolonial Africa as queer in the colonial patriarchal structures, and that indigenous life has blended inextricably and made it impossible to disentangle diverse cultural and political influences.

In a similar but slightly different fashion from Hanchey and Asante's analyses, Kelsey McFaul re-examines African literary works in her essay, "'One Foot on the Other Side': an Africanfuturist Reading of Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018)". Two texts are at the centre of McFaul's analysis—Okojie's *Butterfly Fish*, a story about a woman who explores her African cultural heritage in Nigeria after her mother's sudden death, and Emezi's *Freshwater*, a novel that dissects the many selves and identities, including Igbo spirits, of its Nigerian protagonist. McFaul maintains that re-examining African literature typically not labelled as science fiction or futurism opens new and different viewpoints about how African authors and their literary texts have grappled with diverse issues, including gender, sexuality, mental health, and relationships with the ecosystem. Thus, the connection with past African Futurist novels provides a new route that yields exciting insights.

Besides literature, this issue features articulations of African Futurism in imagery. Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga provided the cover painting, which is part of his 2016 series, "Mangbetu". The series explores issues of colonialism, traditions, and the impact of globalisation on the Mangbetu people who inhabit his home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The figures' bodies and attire visually reflect the dissonance of despair and hope splashed in vibrant colours. They wear bright traditional attire and have artificially elongated heads, in keeping with a Mangbetu practice maintained until the mid-20th century. The imagination of the skin as circuit boards presents a strong commentary about the preservation of culture and the future impact of technology and environmental crisis in the DRC. The title of the issue's cover painting, "Lost", seems to emphasise the uncertain future of Ilunga's home country. Yet, the traditional attire—adorned on a female figure—appears to be a message of hope, at least to this editor.

Photos by Zambian queer African Futurist writer, photographer, and activist Masiyaleti Mbewe's *The Afrofuturist Village* exhibition also exemplify the visual imagination of African Futurism. Through photography and video, the exhibit explores what life might look like under African Futurism envisioning and shows how the genre might actively change and imagine new realities and new ways of living in Southern Africa (see photos on pages 108-113 in this *Feminist Africa* issue).

The role of photography is also evident in Luam Kidane's review of *Spirit Desire: Resistance, Imagination and Sacred Memories in Haitian Vodoun* by Nigerian activist, blogger, and author Sokari Ekine. Writing under the title "'Liberation is Necessarily an Act of Culture': A Review of *Spirit Desire*", Kidane reminds us it is vital that the African Futurist genre stay in conversation with the diaspora. *Spirit Desire* is a photo book that examines how vodoun, a religion, has been a tool of resistance, decolonisation, and the fostering of community in Haiti. The work seeks to debunk negative portrayals of vodoun through powerful, mostly black-and-white images of African diasporic spiritual expressions, exploring the interconnectedness of disparate conceptions of time: spiritual power and agency drawn from the past, present, and future; spatial settings and states of being; the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible; and the diverse cultural connections of vodoun, including to Africa.

Since late 2019, I have thought more about African Futurism, and the topic matter has infused many aspects of my thinking, including my aesthetics and fashion choices. I thought about it when the COVID-19 pandemic took over our lives and travel restrictions limited our movements. Unable to visit family in Cameroon, I found myself more on WhatsApp, a popular messaging application among individuals with family and friends abroad. I thought about the genre in relation to the news out of Cameroon, where COVID-19 has impacted the lives of many, including my family. I watched burials in Cameroon live on the messaging application, witnessing longstanding traditions about how Cameroonians bury the dead. Friends and family also shared news about new life and births, traditional recipes for health and wellness, unsolicited advice related to expected gender norms, updates from the villages and urban spaces, and videos with accompanying sounds celebrating our culinary culture; the sounds of Cameroon intermixed with technologies, old and new, overlapping worlds. The digital and the real-life collided in a brilliant mix of the past, present, and future in Africa and the diaspora, shaping my viewpoints and experiences of time and geographies, of the lived experiences of African Futurism.

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Endnotes

1. See here for definitions of Afrofuturism: Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180; Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrance Hills Books, 2013), 9. Well-known explorers of Afrofuturism include scholars (e.g., Mark Dery, who coined the term in 1993, Ytasha Womack, and Reynaldo Anderson), novelists, and short

story writers (e.g., Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany and Nalo Hopkinson) and singers (e.g., Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe).

2. Mohale Mashigo, "'Afrofuturism is not for Africans Living in Africa'—an Essay by Mohale Mashigo, Excerpted from her New Collection of Short Stories, *Intruders*," *The Johannesburg Review of Books* October 1, 2019. Available at https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/10/01/afrofuturism-is-not-for-africans-living-in-africa-an-essay-by-mohale-mashigo-excerpted-from-her-new-collection-of-short-stories-intruders/
3. Päivi Väätänen, "Afro-Versus Africanfuturism in Nnedi Okorafor's 'The Magical Negro' and 'Mother of Invention'", *Vector* 289 (2019). Available at https://vector-bsfa.com/2019/10/13/afro-versus-african-futurism-in-nnedi-okorafors-the-magical-negro-and-mother-of-invention/
4. See the definition for "African Afro-Futurism" here: Gavin Steingo, "African Afro-futurism: Allegories and Speculations," *Current Musicology* 99–100 (Spring 2017): 45-75. Some practitioners of Afrofuturism prefer the "Afri-futurism" spelling to "Afrofuturism", such as Duane Deterville, an artist, writer, and scholar of visual culture. See more here: "Duane Deterville Presents 'Afrifuturism,'" Black Unity Center, San Francisco State University, October 18, 2017. Available at https://africana.sfsu.edu/news-announce/duane-deterville-presents-afrifuturism
5. Nnedi Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined", *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog* 2019, available at http://nnedi.blogspot.com/
6. We are not the first to employ the use of "African Futurism". See the following examples where scholars also use the term: Jane Bryce, "African Futurism: Speculative Fictions and 'Rewriting the Great Book'", *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 1 (2019): 1-19; Carolyn M. Rouse, "African Futurism: Dreaming in Real Time", *Proceedings of the African Futures Conference* 1 issue 1 (June 2016): 16-26. Accessed May 3, 2021. Available at https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/j.2573-508X.2016.tb00018.x; Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, "Afro-Mythology and African Futurism: The Politics of Imagining and Methodologies for Contemporary Creative Research Practices", *Paradoxa* 25 (2013): 113-130.
7. See additional examples of literary works within the genre: Wole Talabi, ed. *AfricanFuturism: An Anthology* (Brittle Paper, 2020). Available at

http://brittlepaper.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Africanfuturism-An-Anthology-edited-by-Wole-Talabi.pdf; and Ainehi Edoro-Glines, founder and editor in chief of *Brittle Paper*, provides a list of new African sci-fi and fantasy novels for Goodreads, a website that recommends books: Cybil, "75 New and Upcoming Sci-Fi and Fantasy from African Authors", *Goodreads* July 7, 2021. Available at https://www.goodreads.com/blog/show/2130-75-new-and-upcoming-sci-fi-and-fantasy-from-african-authors

8. See information about his work here: Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, October Gallery, https://octobergallery.co.uk/artists/kamuanga
9. See for example, philosopher John Mbiti's thoughts on African concepts of time and orientation in his ground-breaking book, *African Religions & Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

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