The Liquid Space where African Feminism and African Futurism Meet

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Abstract

African feminist traditions are marked by resistance to the status quo. African futurism typically focuses on imagining potential transformations. The merging of the two fields of thought is both urgent and generative.

We are already in the future. I am writing these words in a moment that is my present but will be the past as you read these same words in the future.

We do not approach futurism with this panoramic mindset. Rather, we endow futurism with a certainty whereby the present is hyperreal, and the future exists in a fabulist realm where things will be more magical tomorrow. This approach is a danger for Africa and its descendants.

We compartmentalise lived experience into the past, present, and future, but just as this text complicates the straightforwardness of such a fragmented sense of time, so, too, do all material and abstract realities flow in and out of one another. Rather than being linear, the passage of time is like the course of a river that swells and curves, forwards, downwards, yonder, and sideways, in response to circumstances within and beyond its streams.

When we break up time, we also split our experience of it, which is how history is typically understood in Westernised thought. Consequently, when it comes to African history, conventional scholarship fragments time into precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods corresponding with the past, present, and future. In return, these splits prompt us to think of time as producing solid entities and notions such as nation-states, ethnic groups, independence, and decolonisation within predetermined periods and political eras. Futurism then becomes about projecting an era yet ahead, a "post"-postcolonial or even a *trans*colonial Africa.

But Africans especially ought to know that time is more disobedient than that. Precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa share more in common than such neatly organised periods suggest. Colonialism is not the defining story of

Africa that it is made to seem. Rather, to stay with the metaphor, the era of colonialism is like a dam that has restricted the stream of African ways from flowing smoothly along the course of time. Yet, while a dam may divert water from flowing, it does not stop it. Streams of water keep moving into one another and into lakes, lagoons, and deltas. So, too, do African ways and modes of being entangle, despite the event of colonialism.

There are other signposts, other defining moments along the river of African history. One of those points of reference is the liquid space where African feminism and African futurism meet. I'm referring to this confluence as a *liquid* space to reflect that it is a place of uncertainty. Like water, it has no shape. It connotes a moving spatiality in which there is room to evoke beauty – fluidity, harmony, softness. But water bodies also reflect the things that we associate with destructive power: global economics, conflict, and exploitation. The intersection of African feminism and African futurism reflects a spacetime of both resistance and hope.

Colonialism is a significant rupture in the fabric of African life, beyond doubt, but it *is* a signpost in the course of time, rather than the journey itself. As Ali Mazrui (2010) writes in *The Guardian*, "One of the many devastating consequences of colonialism, in its imposition of one mode of thought and way of life, attempting to destroy all others, is that it shallows our imaginations, too closely confining them to present, near-recent, experience."

All of this matters because how an event is periodised shapes how it is analysed. Colonialism forces people who have experienced colonisation to imagine their social and cultural trajectories from the event of occupation. Consequently, they come to see freedom as synonymous with freedom from Western dominance. And this in return––in a world where Western dominance is ubiquitous––nurtures a mindset of escapism and self-deception.

One hundred years from now, in 2121, will the legacies of slavery and colonialism still impact Africa negatively? Will patriarchy still have a damning effect on African women's lives? The answer is yes, they will. The impact of patriarchy, slavery, and colonialism can never be anything but negative. But the more we identify and engage with other signposts that mark the passage of time, the more events that evoke progressive transformation and imagination will also stand out along the socio-historical journey.

Imagination, it is worth noting, is neither positive nor negative. Imagination can be used to construct progressive change, or it can be used to design weapons and kidnap schoolgirls through terror attacks. Imagination requires the company of something more––compassion, love, awareness––to be elevating.

That is the type of imaginative transformation of African societies that feminists have been conjuring. It leads me to wonder: what would our African women ancestors say about African futurism? What would women like Adelaide Casely-Hayford, the Ghanaian feminist and educator; or Wangari Maathai, Kenyan ecofeminist and Nobel laureate; or Nana Yaa Asantewa, Ghanaian chief of army; or Winnie Madikizela Mandela, South African anti-apartheid activist and politician; or Queen Nzinga of Angola; or Sophie Bosede Oluwole, Nigerian feminist philosopher; or Yvonne Vera, the Zimbabwean feminist writer, have to tell us about the role of the future?

My hunch is that they would convey seriousness on the matter. The situation of women means that the future is more important than most people imagine. While Euro-patriarchal knowledge, which is thought that is biased both by Eurocentrism and patriarchy (Salami, 2020), claims to know objective, "solid" truths about the world, including the future, African women ancestors would approach the future with a sensibility that also knows "poetic" truths about the world and the future. They would resist being waylaid by cool trends, the aesthetics of outer space, fetishizing speculation, hi-tech gadgets and fantasy, and other patterns of our times that encourage us toward an individualist escapism, which Africans cannot afford to uncritically indulge in. I believe that they would say the same thing they said about African pasts: namely that society needs to be transformed; patriarchy needs to go; exploitation needs to end; the marginalisation of women must stop.

If the past decade was one of cataclysmic change with an even more dramatic pandemic ending scene, we have only experienced the tip of the iceberg of a world in flux. The near future will be marked by even more rapid transformation than humanity has ever known. Globally, we are grappling with enormous social, ecological, technological, and biological harms. It is likely that by 2030, artificial intelligence, robotics, and blockchain technologies will have made global society even more unrecognisable than the coronavirus pandemic has. The budding nanotechnological revolution—a technology that enables the manipulation of

matter at atomic level–– poses a threat to our planet. Detrimental social ills such as sexism, racism, and classism are not only still prevalent; they are exacerbated by authoritarianism and corruption. Poverty and hunger are increasing, and Africa, with its compromised position in the global order, is especially vulnerable to these tidal restructurings. While development in the West is relatively linear, Africa has societies that are feudal, agricultural, sultanate, etc., alongside effervescent modern cities and democracies. In addition, each society is enmeshed in a global network that exploits Africa and a patriarchal hierarchy that suppresses women.

As we brace ourselves for deep shifts – Information Age to Knowledge Age; modernity to postmodernity; human to transhuman; Holocene to Anthropocene – alongside unfolding crises in the continent: the expanding of militants in the Sahel and post-pandemic recessions, all while endangering the nonhuman natural world and the species it inhabits (including humans), we need to recall that future society is going to come from today's society. If we insist on freedom today, then we will find our way there. I am reminded of another feminist ancestor, Nigerian scholar Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's (1974) poem where she says, "Dance with us a dance of the future/They will not let us sit in peace".

Insisting on freedom means not letting the future "sit in peace". This is why feminists are always killjoys. I don't mean that we refrain from being joyous and hopeful about the future. But we should also be disruptive already in the future sense. As I work in the social sciences, my bias leads me to say that a key way of disrupting means deep and radical communication. There is a need for robust public discussion. Whether it is events, educational programmes, festivals, think tanks, books or journals, there is a need to revivify discussion about what we want in our present and future. Otherwise, if we are not speaking to each other across the divided boundaries that are set up by gender, ethnicity, and class, how can we foster a future that benefits Africans? African feminism helps us to foster critical discussion on these pressing topics. These conversations, therefore, need to include everyone, not only the young on whom futurist conversations tend to focus, but also the elders, children, and refugees. What can someone who has lived on African soil for 80 years say about the future? After all, we are in some ways living in the spacetime that represented their future decades ago. What can someone who has had to leave their home say about this? And what might a five-year-old say about African futurism and feminism? We only have one Africa. We are all responsible for it in different ways.

At the moment, the future of the African continent looks like a fire. It will take a wet and fluid place where thought leads to discussion, and where discussion leads to awareness, to quench the flames. This place is the liquid space where African feminism and African futurism meet. The future needs African feminist opposition to the patriarchal status quo, but, as I said at the start of this standpoint, we are already in the future.

References

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