African Cyborgs: Females and feminists in African science fiction film

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Abstract:

African feminist writers argue that black female bodies should be understood as interactions between materiality and the symbolic constructions of the body embedded within a given culture. They caution that an overemphasis on corporeality and embodiment denies subjectivity to black women. Responding to such concerns, contemporary African cultural and creative practitioners offer alternatives to continuing objectification and bodily stereotyping. In this article, I am particularly interested in the alternative visions of black female bodies presented in African speculative and science fiction film, visions which, I argue, engage colonial histories and local traditions in order to imagine a future inclusive of empowered female protagonists. I explore how the fictional configurations and cyborg imaginations of African sci-fi deconstruct and subvert the fixity, corporeality, fragility and captivity of the black female body. Drawing on African feminism and feminist science fiction in particular, I attempt to construct a theoretical framework through which to approach the representation of female bodies in sci-fi film from Africa. In the work of filmmakers such as Cameroonian Jean-Pierre Bekolo (*Les Saignantes*, 2005 and *Naked Reality*, 2016), Ghanaian filmmaker Frances Bodomo (*Afronauts*, 2014), Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu (*Pumzi*, 2009) and South African filmmakers Michael Matthew (*Sweetheart*, 2010) and Amy van Houten (*Elf*, 2015), we find female-centred fantastical narratives that recast African women as futuristic cyborgs. Reminiscent of Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism of the late 20th century, these filmmakers adapt the genres of fantasy and sci-fi to speculate about alternative African pasts and futures.

Keywords: cyborg, African science fiction film, Donna Haraway, African feminism, Wanuri Kahiu, Frances Bodomo

Introduction: Concerning the female African body

> Even though history has been terribly unkind to the African body, the body was and still is capable of being something quite beautiful, quite sensuous, quite joyous. There is always a memory of the "flesh," of the flesh that was once liberated.
>
> Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (1999, 312)

In Western scholarship approaches to studying cinematic representation of the female body include an established critical framework of psycho-analytical feminist film theory which critiques the phallocentric male gaze. We have to be careful, however, when transposing this approach to other cultural environments. Ella Shohat (2003, 53) warns against universalising the parameters of feminism and using ahistorical psychoanalytic categories which might lead to a discussion of the "female body" and "female spectator" that is not representative of the range of women's experiences, agendas and political visions. African systems of relation, for instance, have an ontology to which psychoanalytic approaches are not necessarily applicable. Nevertheless, as this article argues, there remain productive parallels between the critical strategies employed by feminist theory with a psychoanalytic lineage and calls within African feminisms to transform African women from object to subject within African visual culture.

Susan Suleiman (as quoted in Balsamo 1995, 23) argues that the female body is not an essentially unchanging, "given-in-nature," biological entity, but is rather symbolically constructed within different cultural discourses situated within different historical moments. The body is thus a site of epistemological meaning, and knowledge about the body is intertwined with politics of representation. Similarly, writing of the slave economy and colonisation in Africa, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf stresses that two kinds of bodies were produced: the body of knowledge (the oppressor) and the body of labour (the oppressed). She describes the physical and ontological brutality that transformed

African bodies from liberated to captive within these structures (1999, 311), and identifies a resulting disruption of African kinship systems, which functioned to deny the captive and colonised female a gendered position. Approaching the captive female body as a site of physical and psychological trauma, Bakare-Yusuf asks:

> What of the body that is always under the seduction of death, white racist violence, diseases, perverse heterosexism, pervasive additions and unemployment? I am talking about the body that is marked by racial, sexual and class configurations. It is this body, this fleshy materiality that seems to disappear from much of the current proliferation of discourses on the body. (1999, 313)

Thus, as Suleiman and Bakare-Yusuf make clear, black female bodies should be understood as interactions between materiality and the symbolic constructions of the body embedded within a given culture.

Conversely, Nigerian feminist Obioma Nnaemeka, Nigerian-British writer Amina Mama, and African American writer and social activist bell hooks, each caution that the emphasis on corporeality and embodiment denies subjectivity to black people, particularly women. Responding to such concerns, contemporary African cultural practitioners – writers, filmmakers, visual artists, musicians, photographers – offer alternatives to continuing objectification and bodily stereotyping. In this article I am particularly interested in the alternative visions of black female bodies presented in African speculative and science fiction (sci-fi) film, visions which, I argue, engage colonial history and local traditions in order to imagine a future inclusive of empowered female protagonists. While sci-fi, fantasy and speculative fiction are often considered to be Western genres, in both literature and film we increasingly find African artists who appropriate and reinterpret these genres through futuristic African narratives. In what follows I explore how the fictional configurations and cyborg imaginations of African sci-fi deconstruct and subvert the fixity, corporeality, fragility and captivity of the black

female body. Drawing on African feminism and feminist science fiction in particular, I attempt to construct a theoretical framework through which to approach the representation of female bodies in sci-fi film from the continent. I will start with a brief assessment of the state of sci-fi in African film and literature, followed by a consideration of feminist perspectives within sci-fi, and configurations of the female cyborg body in particular. The final part of the article offers analyses of several female cyborgs in recent African films.

In the work of filmmakers such as Cameroonian Jean-Pierre Bekolo (*Les Saignantes*, 2005 and *Naked Reality*, 2016), Ghanaian filmmaker Frances Bodomo (*Afronauts*, 2014), Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu (*Pumzi*, 2009) and South African filmmakers Michael Matthew (*Sweetheart*, 2010) and Amy van Houten (*Elf*, 2015), we find female-centred fantastical narratives that recast African women as futuristic cyborgs. Reminiscent of Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism of the late 20th century (explored further below), these filmmakers adapt the genres of fantasy and sci-fi to speculate about alternative African pasts and futures that will see transformations in women's relationships with their bodies, and in the relationship between technology and the natural world. Just as these filmmakers reinvent and appropriate the (Western) genre of sci-fi, I use Haraway's cyborg manifesto as a template to be adapted and remodelled for African critical perspectives. Haraway's work is particularly concerned with the material and cultural realities of the female body, while applying a science fictional metaphor to speculate about understandings and configurations of the female body in a present and near-future technologized world. As I later suggest, when viewed from a postcolonial vantage point, Haraway's influential cyborg feminism is thus of particular relevance to considerations of female African bodies in sci-fi.

Science fiction in/on Africa

We generally understand science fiction as a genre of "speculative" fiction, dealing with imaginary and imaginative concepts often related to science and technology. Exploring the consequences and potential of scientific and technological innovations is one purpose of science fiction, and this means that science fiction is often based on writing rationally and realistically about alternative worlds or futures. There is a paradox in this notion of supposedly "realistic science fiction," as Fredric Jameson reminds us that sci-fi's "deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future" (1982, 153). This notion of imagining alternatives not only to the future, but often also to the past, holds particular appeal for African artists, as it presents opportunities to conceptualise narratives where Africans are not perennially on the "wrong" side of history, subjected to the violent exploitation of slavery, colonialism and continuing neo-imperialism. Indeed, there is a rather obvious affinity between sci-fi and colonialism or postcolonialism when we think of the classic sci-fi theme of aliens striving for world domination. Colonialist discourse habitually represented Africa as the alien "other," a trope perpetuated in mainstream media and political discourse.[i] Indeed, many of the writings of early ethnographers and anthropologists about their encounters with exotic "natives" in strange lands could perhaps best be described as speculative. Deploying the genre in an African context then, allows African artists to project alternative pasts, presents, and futures; it allows the imagining of a new space-time radically different from the stereotypical representations of the so-called "Dark Continent," caught in a perpetual cycle of poverty, violence, corruption and disaster.

Historically, there has been a predominance of social realist fiction and film from Africa, and somewhat of a paucity of science fiction as understood in the generic sense. However, the genre grown rapidly over the past decade, particularly in literature. Despite, or perhaps exactly because of, its speculative nature, social conscience is a key part of the genre, as South African sci-fi filmmaker Jenna Bass states:

> Any fantastical or science fiction scenario you see, whether in a film or a book, is always a product of the society the writer has developed in. People's perceptions of the future say a

> lot about the present. That's what makes this such an interesting genre: no matter how crazy science fiction or fantasy films are, they're always saying something.
>
> (as quoted in Kriedemann 2017)

There is, further, an affinity between the speculative imaginings of sci-fi and African ontologies and cosmologies that do not adhere to the empiricist paradigms of the Western enlightenment.. We find examples of this connection in African ontological understandings of astronomy – for example the West African Dogon people claim they are the descendants of an extraterrestrial race from the Sirius star system – and in the creation myths of many African cultures. Indeed, indigenous forms of ritual, myth and orality are an intricate part of African cultures, even if they are not always considered in terms of their global resonances or "futuristic" potential. Sci-fi offers a discursive strategy through which to address the confrontation between past, present and future as well as between western rationality and scientific truth on the one hand, and traditional liminality and ambiguity on the other (Carstens and Roberts 2009, 80). Thus, while (as discussed) sci-fi is generally regarded as a genre having originated in the "western world," we might revise or reimagine that genealogy by proposing that prototypical sci-fi narratives have existed in the (non-linear, cyclical) oral storytelling traditions of African societies for centuries. This hypothesis requires us to adopt quite a broad definition of sci-fi, one that incorporates genres such as fantasy, speculative fiction and magic realism (the work of writers such as Ben Okri and Wole Soyinka, for example), in order to understand science versus fantasy or magic not as antithetical, but as complementary in African societies. Ghanaian sci-fi blogger Jonathan Dotse claims that African storytelling traditions contain the very sort of metaphysical themes that sci-fi is best equipped to address: identity, self and community (2017). There is no shortage of inspiration for sci-fi practitioners within Africa today as the pervasive reach of technological development spreads across the continent, coexisting alongside folklore, myth, tradition and superstition. Carstens and Roberts argue that African sci-fi does not have to confine itself to describing technologically determined and enhanced futures, as generic conventions of the genre would dictate,

but “could also represent the invisible, fantastical, and strangely primitive and anarchic chaotic intensities... of the genre” (2009, 86). Technology, rationality, science, mysticism, religion and spirituality are all bound up in the African context, providing fertile ground for writers, filmmakers and other artists working in this genre.

Returning to Haraway, there thus seems to be a resonance between cyborg post-humanism and African epistemologies. As described above, it is notable that these latter configurations of the real and the spiritual within African epistemologies exceed post-enlightenment binarisms. Harry Garuba reiterates this understanding, emphasising the cultural practices of assimilation and syncretism whereby various elements of European modernity, such as science and technology, are seamlessly incorporated into traditional African cultures and rituals (2003, 63-64). Within his description of “animist materialism,” Garuba argues for the manifestation of “an *animist unconscious,*” which operates through a process described as a “*continual re-enchantment of the world*” (2003, 265, italics in the original). In African worldviews, Garuba argues, “magical elements of thought” are not rejected or displaced, but assimilated with technological developments, which leads to a process of persistent re-enchantment that sees “the rational and scientific appropriated into the mystical and magical” (2003: 267). Garuba applies an animist belief system, which attributes spiritual meaning to inanimate objects and natural phenomena, as a way of understanding and interpreting material reality within African worldviews. Within this ontology, science and rationality are coterminous with myth, magic or mysticism, resulting in new possibilities of re-imagining the past and present, and prepossessing the future, which is exactly what African sci-fi practitioners are doing. In an age of economic and cultural globalisation, neo-imperialism, failing neoliberal capitalism, and arguments for the Anthropocene as the dominant geopolitical narrative, science fiction offers a way for African cultural practitioners to address and reconfigure notions of science, biopolitics, the environment and the human, as relevant to African experiences of material reality (Omelsky 2014, 33).

Algerian author Mohammed Dib wrote perhaps one of the earliest African sci-fi novels, *Who Remembers the Sea*, in 1962 (published in English in 1985), a sci-fi allegory about Algerian nationalism. Zimbabwean writer Masimba Musodza published the first sci-fi novel in Shona, *MunaHacha Maive Nei?*, in 2012. South African author Lauren Beukes is well-known for *Zoo City* (2010) (for which she won the Arthur C. Clarke Award) a novel set in dystopian Johannesburg where people who have committed a crime are magically attached to an animal. Ugandan writer/filmmaker Dilman Dila's short story collection *A Killing in the Sun* (2014) blends science fictional conjectures and the folktales he grew up with. Ivor W. Hartmann has edited two volumes of African sci-fi short stories and novellas, *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (2013) and *AfroSFv2* (2015), containing contributions from emerging and established writers from across the continent. Nigerian author Nnedi Okorafor won the World Fantasy Award in 2011 with her novel *Who Fears Death?,* a female-centred coming-of-age fantasy set in rural Africa far in the future. It was announced in August 2017 that the novel will be adapted for television by HBO, with *Game of Thrones'* George R. R. Martin as executive producer, a development indicative, perhaps, of the growing world-wide popularity and mainstream acceptance of African sci-fi.[ii]

Cyborgs, robots, gynoids and fembots: Females in sci-fi

Bringing together this article's initial discussion of female African bodies and its second section on African sci-fi, I turn to feminist sci-fi and the idea(l) of the female cyborg in anticipation of the filmic interpretations of this figure in African sci-fi that follows. General assumptions about sci-fi include its exclusively white male appeal, escapist nature, and adherence to a technophile, scientific world view (Merrick 2009, 2). Despite common conceptions of sci-fi as a "geeky," male-dominated genre often myopic in its representations of women and regularly relying on narrative tropes and stereotypes that require the subjugation or subordination of females as social commodities, there is a long and impressive tradition of feminist sci-fi as well as feminist sci-fi criticism, from the novels of Mary Shelley,

Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler, to Joanna Russ, Margaret Atwood and Natalie Alderman more recently, and the scholarship of Donna Haraway, Marleen Barr, Jenny Wolmark, Julie Wosk and many others. We can add here the work of female and feminist African writers such as Lauren Beukes and Nnedi Okorafor, and some of the films discussed later.[iii]

Feminist sci-fi centralises the experiences of women and imagines alternatives to existing patriarchies, whether utopian or dystopian. In fact, the disaster or cataclysm that we find in much post-apocalyptic sci-fi, is in feminist sci-fi ascribed to patriarchy – patriarchy itself becomes the catastrophe (Wolmark 1993, 81). Feminist sci-fi reverses the notion of the woman as alien through, for example, the creation of utopian women-only communities in a post-disaster world, thus providing a critique of gender relations. These feminist tales also reimagine the female cyborg, so often the object of male fantasy and desire. Indeed, we find a number of science fictional female robots and cyborgs in film, television, animation, literature, comics, theatre, video games and music. When thinking of these figures in Haraway's terms we find an implicit paradox: the female cyborg as emancipatory figure versus the cyborg as object of, and created by, male desire, a fantasy with origins in the Greek myth of Pygmalion. In her work on female androids and robots, Wosk describes a feminist history that unpacks the strategies utilised by women to appropriate images of artificiality in order to subvert the passive femininity prescribed by patriarchy. Female artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, musicians and other creative practitioners themselves have come to inhabit the mythic role of Pygmalion, creating their own images of artificial and simulated women that subvert female stereotypes and show the slippery and fluid nature of female identity (Wosk 2015, 8).

A few definitions and examples might be useful here. While robots or androids are purely mechanical, though they might be humanlike in appearance and behaviour, cyborgs ("cybernetic organisms") are bionic with both organic and inorganic components, a fusion of human, animal and machine. Robots or androids that are gendered feminine have also been called fembots or gynoids, respectively.

Female-appearing robots are legion in (male-authored) sci-fi, often produced for use as servants or sex slaves, and sometimes as workers, soldiers or assassins. One finds a long tradition of stories (in literature, film and other formats) about the construction of an artificial embodiment of a certain type of ideal woman, and many of the cyborgs, fembots and gynoids of mainstream, masculine sci-fi can be seen as extensions of this theme. The first gynoid we encounter in film is, of course, Maria in Fritz Lang's expressionist silent film *Metropolis* (1927), followed by others such as *The Perfect Woman* (Bernard Knowles, 1949), *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), and more recently, *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015). For the purposes of this article, I do not make a close technical distinction between cyborgs, fembots and gynoids in my analyses, as I am more interested in the symbolic and allegorical meaning of a partially non-biological female, a technologized female body, as depicted in (African) sci-fi, and what these depictions tell us about constructions of gender and the female body.

Haraway's work also helps to extend the allegory of the cyborg as a way to think about our technologically-driven and -infused lives; we are all cyborgs to some extent, and can utilise our cyborg bodies to overcome the limitations of traditional gender roles and expectations. As a metaphor or allegory, cyborgs are the figure of posthuman identity within our postmodern and neocolonial existence (Balsamo 1995, 28). Part of the enigma and allure of the female cyborg for me lies in the paradox of it being both a symbol of patriarchal control – often effectively materially and imaginatively created by male desire – as well as a signifier of freedom from patriarchal constraints. Thus, even if the cyborg is created by man, she can escape male control and become a symbol and force of transgression. While it may be ironic that the futures imagined in sci-fi often rely on antiquated heteronormative gender stereotypes, cyborgs are free (if not entirely distinct) from the limitations of the biological, human female, and the accompanying social expectations and cultural categories. Feminist sci-fi, in African and Euro-American contexts, thus subverts the cyborg of patriarchal myth and endeavours to recreate the cyborg as an emancipatory and emancipated figure.

Haraway's cyborg is "an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" (1991, 149); it is imbued with deliberate ambiguity, anti-essentialism and playfulness, and remains sceptical of binary dualisms such as body/mind, human/machine, nature/technology and male/female. These binaries are also contested and broken down within postcolonial theory and contemporary African philosophy, as in the work of Harry Garuba cited above. Haraway states that the cyborg is a concept of social reality and lived experience as well as of fiction, indicative of her use of the cyborg in a material as well as discursive form. The cyborg identity is hybrid, partial, contradictory and strategic, requiring a non-essentialist view of gender, race and class. Cyborgs are the products of deeply embedded fears and desires within our cultural imaginary; they represent an unfamiliar otherness that challenges the supposed stability of human identity (Balsamo 1995, 32). Cyborg identity is predicated on the transgression of boundaries and the subversion of the familiar. For cyborg feminists, the female body is at the centre of the transformation of the social order. For Haraway, cyborgs are no longer confined to the cultural imagination but "are an elementary aspect of late capitalism" – the cyborg could include industrial slum dwellers, miners, commuters and sweatshop labourers, to users of cellphones (1991: 150). Cyborgs break the boundary between the physical and non-physical, between the past and future, and are as much physical beings as they are "ether, quintessence" (153). The "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (154) – which demonstrates their simultaneous narrative and mythic power that is in turn relevant to African storytellers.

In perhaps one of the most famous passages of the manifesto Haraway states that "[t]here is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women…. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism" (1991, 155). Haraway thus rejects the notion of a "global sisterhood," and proposes affinity, not identity, as a form of coalition, in order to account for the

differences between us. This approach has been termed an "oppositional consciousness" or a "methodology of the oppressed" by Chicana feminist scholar Chela Sandoval (2000), where women of colour have a chance to build an affinity without replicating the imperialising, totalising and essentialising subjects of previous feminist movements. Indeed, one of Haraway's aims is to challenge "versions of Euro-American feminist humanism in their devastating assumptions of master narratives deeply indebted to racism and colonialism" (Haraway 1991, 1). In this light, there are affinities between the female African cyborg I am interested in here and Haraway's cyborg feminism. Haraway wants this cyborg feminism to be more effective than earlier hegemonic, white feminisms by listening to and accommodating specific cultural, historical and political positionings without giving up on the search for useful and productive connections. One could find a relationship between the cyborg and the marginalised or subaltern, as the latter might resist by defining a form of oppositional consciousness and praxis. Sandoval (in Wolmark 1992, 248) reminds us that labourers already know "the pain of the union of machine and bodily tissue, the robotic conditions under which the notion of human agency must take on new meanings." On this account, the colonised and marginalised *already* possess the cyborg skills required for survival under techno-human conditions of domination and oppression. One of the techniques Sandoval identifies with a methodology of the oppressed is "meta-ideologising" (2000, 2) – the appropriation of dominant ideological forms in order to transform their meanings into a new, imposed and revolutionary concept. This tactic, we could argue, is adopted by feminist and African cultural practitioners when subverting the image of the cyborg of white, masculinist science fiction.

The female cyborg in African film

Linking to the theme of this issue, we could ask whether it might be obsolete to talk about "the body" within sci-fi, as bodily and material limitations can supposedly be overcome within the virtual reality of cyberspace. Indeed, one of the most often-repeated claims about virtual reality is that it provides

the technological means to construct identities and realities free from our "real," physical, bodily identities (Balsamo, 1995, 116). However, from a feminist perspective it is clear, since the doomed techno-determinism and optimism of the 1980s and 1990s, that the repression of the material body presupposed a gender-free utopia without difference, domination or discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality or class. Balsamo (1995) argues that we should think of the body and embodiment not as a product, but rather as a process, with the important question being whether new technologies will be used to tell new stories, or to primarily retell old stories – "stories that reproduce, in high-tech guise, traditional narratives about the gendered, race-marked body" (132**).** My interest, then, is in how the female cyborg can participate in the making of new stories, as a hybrid, emancipatory, progressive and transgressive figure. I am interested in cinematic narratives that present the female African cyborg as agent of her own life and body, as main protagonist in her own narrative. While Haraway established the metaphor of the cyborg as a feminist tool in thinking about identity, being and embodiment in a technologized world, her definition needs to be revisited in order to apply within African contexts. The films I discuss below give some indications of how this could be done.

Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005), translated as "The Bloodettes," is arguably one of the continent's first sci-fi films, promoted as such at the time of its release. The film is set in the Cameroonian capital of Yaoundé in 2025 and centres around two female protagonists, Majolie and Chouchou, who are prostitutes using their beauty and sexuality to manipulate and trick the powerful and corrupt male elite of Cameroon. Stylistically, the film has been called an experimental sci-fi/action/horror hybrid; it is set entirely at night and features jolting edits and slow-motion sequences. Thematically, it addresses the social crises of political corruption, class and gender struggles that Bekolo has said Cameroon in particular and Africa in general, suffers from.

In the film's narrative and protagonists' performances, Bekolo references the history and traditions of the Beti, an ethnic group in Cameroon and in the central African region. Bekolo himself is from the

Beti tribe, which has been subjected to the fantastical fabrications of early anthropologists. Paul Belloni Du Chaillu, a 19th century French-American traveller and anthropologist, met the Beti people in 1856 and published a memoir about them. The memoir details his arrival on the Atlantic coast, and his being told by local people about the cannibalistic Beti people. He saw skulls and bones near their settlement – later understood to be those of their ancestors, enacting remembrance and religious reverence for their dead - and immediately took this as proof of cannibalism (Shoup, 2011). Bekolo likely parodies this early example of exploitative, erroneous anthropology in presenting Majolie and Chouchou partly as futuristic vampiric figures (also indicated in the film's title). Further reference to the traditions of the Beti people entails a secret society of women called *mevungo* – an ancient tradition that includes rites and rituals focusing on female power and fertility. The tradition is appropriated by Bekolo, and although it is not presented or explained overtly, the two young women engage in rites reminiscent of the *mevungo* practices, including the consumption of a liquid substance, trance-like dances and sexual acts.

Set in what is now the near future, the film features ubiquitous technology, mobile phones, machines and other markers of (post)modernity. While Majolie and Chouchou are not literal, physical cyborgs, they are transgressive, subversive and mysterious women whose bodies and behaviours are constructed from ritual, tradition and technology. Matthew Omelsky (2012) has called Bekolo's vision "African cyborgian thought," arguing that *Les Saignantes* has much in common with Haraway's notion of the cyborg, but reconfigured for African spaces. Haraway's cyborg breaks away from rigid binaries and dualisms as we have seen, and Bekolo also envisions an alternative to origin myths of wholeness: *Les Saignantes* presents a world in which technology and machines are deployed by oppositional subjects in order to deconstruct patriarchy and hegemony. Thus, Haraway and Bekolo both cast women as "radical cyborgian subjects who undermine organic notions of femininity, the female body, and masculinist power structures" (Omelsky 2012, 9).

In *Naked Reality* (2016), Bekolo's second sci-fi feature, the call to reinterpret tradition in present and future worlds is also present. Made on a low budget with a minimalist set and cast, the film was shot almost entirely in an empty white room in black and white, animated with projections, reflections and superimposed screens. This is not only a technical necessity and stylistic choice, but also a new way of filmmaking where Bekolo presents his story almost as a blank canvas (vis-à-vis the title of the film), inviting other artists to interact with the concept. He calls the film "an interactive work of art" and describes it, on the film's website, as follows:

> *Naked Reality* is a new science-fiction interactive and collaborative cinema concept where we make feature films with a story as usual but take out certain aspects like sets, music, dialogues, costumes… and other artists, filmmakers, writers are invited to join the filling process of the missing elements, creating a body of work around the film…. Naked Reality Cinema is the cinema of the future. (Bekolo, 2016)

The main character is a beautiful woman, Wanita, in search of her real identity. This is in essence a spiritual coming-of-age narrative and journey of discovery. Wanita lives 150 years in the future when the human race is plagued by a terrible virus – "bad luck." Wanita's world is pervaded by technology and markers of a technologised and digitised future, including futuristic urban architecture, communication and transport technologies and dress. But the protagonist is caught between past, present and future, between tradition and modernity, and initially her response to this identity quest is a rejection of her African identity. Wanita wants to be someone else: she discards her African name and rejects her mother's prayers to the ancestors; she is also obsessed with her physical appearance which plays out as she superficially scrutinises and critiques her reflection at several instances on a large screen. Experimental, non-linear and fragmented in its narrative and style, there are cuts to Wanita's interaction with a male poet, for whom she serves as a muse. As he literally writes on her half-naked body, marking it with ink, he reflects in voiceover: "To write on this body. Our future. To write about our past. To write about our present." This female body is, thus, literally and symbolically

represented as a site on which to inscribe the past, present and future. Wanita as a futuristic cyborg becomes an allegory for the survival of her people.

The film's action is interspersed with text on the screen and we learn that 150 years in the future there will be energy shortages, signalling environmental catastrophe, a common trope in dystopian sci-fi. The disease of bad luck is inscribed in one's DNA, but it is a disease that can be prevented and cured by connecting to the past. The narrative envisions an entirely urbanised future world, Africa as one enormous sprawling megalopolis, and environmental disasters such as tsunamis and floods originating from hurricanes formed in the Sahara Desert. The notion of an African Anthropocene, and a closely connected environmentally and economically globalised world with transformed geopolitical relations, is thus presented. Africans, as the carriers of the "bad luck" DNA, are victims of their place of birth, but their postcolonial marginalisation will not persist. The film thus makes a statement about the future of Africa through a reconsideration of past traditions, which is also the case in *Les Saignantes*. Both films feature a futuristic female character who becomes a carrier of memory, and who transforms this past, in order to forge a collective African identity that can shift the continent from a marginal to central position and propel it into the future. Wanita's spiritual journey and search for belonging is further threatened by an imposter, a woman attempting to steal her identity, who turns out to be Wanita's dream: a self-imagined alter ego who prompts her to grapple with what is "real."

While Wanita is objectified in her role as muse, a canvas to be written on literally and metaphorically, she eventually breaks free from the poet, escaping across a large empty sound stage. Wanita is then forced to choose between continuing in her old life and fulfilling her mission to bring peace. Her choice to embrace her "true" identity requires her to be purged of the toxins of modern life, from the pollution of "television, books, computers, magazines, movies, internet, advertising, food, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs" – an indictment, perhaps, of neoliberal capitalism that has destroyed her spirituality.

She meets her ancestor, a figure called Madiba ("father"), who informs her that she is the chosen one and warns her: "Until the you that you are is the you that you want to be, you are in no position to receive your mission."

Ghanaian-born director Frances Bodomo's *Afronauts* (2014) is a sci-fi short set in the past, (re)telling an alternative history to the1960s Zambian space programme. The film takes place in 1969 on the day of the Apollo launch. The (real) Zambian space programme was the brainchild of Edward Makuka Nkoloso, a WWII veteran and school teacher who founded the Zambian National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy (Serpell 2017). He conscripted 12 astronauts for Zambia's participation in the Space Race to the moon, including Matha Mwambwa, a 17-year-old girl who becomes the film'sprotagonist To train the astronauts, Nkoloso set up a makeshift facility on an abandoned farm near Lusaka. Nkoloso had ambitions to send an evangelist mission to Mars, in order to bring Christianity to the "primitive Martians" (Serpell 2017). His plans were later referred to by Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's first president, as "not a real thing … more for fun than anything else," and Bodomo reimagines this curious piece of national history in her atmospheric, black-and-white short. The technology is rudimentary and make-shift with the rocket being powered by urine-fuelled generators. It launches Matha into the sky, but we are left to infer that the mission is unsuccessful.

In the film, Zambians become the would-be colonisers, drawing on the Cold War narrative of nation-building, with the Space Race, of course, being a central element of the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. Afro/astronaut Matha, played by the African-American albino model Diandra Forrest, is fetishized by the male astronauts around her, and is compelled to mythologise and martyr herself in a suicide mission to the moon. Her aunt, the only other female character in the film, treats Matha (unlike the men) as a person with agency, and ultimately it is Matha herself who decides that she wants to fulfil her mission despite the protestations of the aunt/mother figure (Afful, 2016). Bodomo has described the film as a "migrant story on a super-planetary level" (quoted in Afful, 2016),

with the protagonist sacrificing herself in order to create a new myth for her people, an alternative to the grand metanarratives of history. Thus, like the other African sci-fi narratives of interest here, we find a reinterpretation of the past in order to create a different future. The character of Matha – whose non-normative albino beauty adds to her otherworldliness – creates a cyborgian migration myth through her tragic but triumphant demise in a narrative that entails a nostalgic look at the past, propelled into a future when Africa is fully present in a technologised world.

Similarly, Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu's widely acclaimed short film *Pumzi* (2009) features a central female protagonist, but it is set in a post-apocalyptic future shortly after an environmental disaster. As such, the narrative recycles a common sci-fi trope but inserts it into an African cultural geography (Omelsky 2014, 38). The film is set in a barren East African desert, "35 years after World War III – The Water War," the viewer is informed at the beginning of the film, and it depicts an isolated community living in an underground structure. The earth's resources have been depleted with no signs of life above ground and the members of the underground community generate energy and conserve water by recycling and purifying bodily fluids. The main character, Asha, a curator of a natural history museum, receives a soil sample with a high water content that shows signs of supporting life. The authoritarian government – which monitors people's dreams in a dystopian nightmare of biopolitical control – demands that she destroy it, but she escapes the confinement of her subterranean world in order to plant the soil sample outside, thus creating new life. Importantly, the glass jar with the soil sample contains a label detailing it as "maitu seed," with "maitu" meaning "mother" in Kikuyu, invoking the notion of Mother Earth.

Womack (2013) describes Afrofuturism as a home for the divine feminism principle, "a Mother Earth ideal that values nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition, and healing as partners to technology, science, and achievement" (103). Indeed, *Pumzi* seems to draw on ecofeminism, in its denouncement of a capitalist, paternalistic society that has led to a harmful separation between

nature and culture. However, the female cyborg of a (re)imagined future urges us to deconstruct the wholesome and virtuous myth of the female, a myth which must be reshaped in the world of the post-human Anthropocene. A scene in which Asha wrings out her clothes in order to capture her sweat, a life-giving force, begins this feminist deconstruction in its depiction of the leaky, imperfect female body, with this action becoming a symbolic signifier of the "excessive" female body. It is exactly this "excess" that gives life, albeit through a hybridised, technologised, even mutant, cyborg body. Like *Afronauts*, the final scene of the film – showing Asha lying on the parched earth next to the plant, shielding it from the sun – suggest a myth-making self-sacrifice for the sake of the future. The film prompts us to consider the possibility of reconstituted life, both human and nonhuman, on a post-apocalyptic or post-crisis African continent (Omelsky 2014, 36). As the film draws to a close and the camera pans out, we see a massive tree growing in time-lapse in the very spot where Asha's body rests.

Sweetheart (2010) a South African short directed by Michael Matthew, provides a direct example of a female cyborg, through a protagonist who turns out to be a gynoid. Shot in black and white, it merges past and future through its setting in a post-apocalyptic 1950s Cape Town, in a retro-futuristic landscape at the height of the Cold War. A young housewife, Sweetheart, cooks breakfast for her husband and two sons in a typical farmhouse kitchen on a remote, rural farm. The husband and sons set off after breakfast but never return to the house, and the first half of the film follows Sweetheart as she continues her everyday chores. After aimlessly waiting for their return, she eventually sets off to the city to find her family, encountering several strange and lonely characters along the way who react robotically and seem to be stuck in a time warp. Eventually Sweetheart reaches the abandoned streets of Cape Town and meets a character who reveals to her her true nature and identity, enabling her to break free from her aimless searching. She is not a mother or a wife but in fact a programmed android. As the film ends with the two characters on a hill overlooking Cape Town with strange alien-like creatures drifting in the sky, it compels the viewer to contemplate the nature of human identity

and what it means to be perceived as human, male or female. Female identity in particular, is represented as fluid, ambiguous and not biologically inscribed, as the protagonist breaks free from a prescribed gender role, while simultaneously being unable to escape a future that would see a fusion of human and machine.

Elf (Amy Van Houten, 2015), another South African film, is an experimental sci-fi short telling a gentle, sensual story from a queer feminist perspective. The titular character, Elf, is an android/cyborg whose experience of the world is limited to what she can see. The other female character in the film, Neo, is a human who engages with the world in a multi-sensory way, via touch, sound and vision. While the differences between the two characters possibly point to the limitations of artificial life, they also critique western empiricist privileging of sight over other senses. Elf, unable to experience the world as Neo does, resorts to electrocuting herself in order to trigger an emotional response. As in much sci-fi, the film thus engages intertextually with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (whose monster was animated with electricity), Philip K. Dick's electric dreams, as well as, of course, *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, 1999) through Neo's naming. In her "electric dream," Elf fantasises about growing old, being in an intimate relationship with Neo, and becoming human. The interracial lesbian relationship at the heart of the film is significant in a country where interracial queer relationships have historically signified a double-discrimination and conservative stigma. While the cyborg character of Elf prompts us to think of gender and sexual identity as fluid (as *Sweetheart* does), and to imagine how a digitally or mechanically created being could be free from gender stereotypes and prejudice, the film also wants us to consider the "benefits" of being human, and what we will forsake and sacrifice in a world overtaken by technology.

Coda

The films discussed in this article present a future Africa populated by (post)humans whose existence has become intertwined with technology, particularly in the figure of the female cyborg, and as such they help us the rethink Africa's presence within a neoliberal world order. The films also invoke narratives of the past and African histories, folklore and traditions, simultaneously projecting a vision of African societies into the future, while still providing a social critique of the present (as most sci-fi does). In each film, too, new myths are created through representations of female African cyborg bodies, and further – to return to the words quoted at the beginning of this article – these futuristic and speculative narratives can also be seen to reclaim what Bakare-Yusuf understands as a sense of beauty, sensuality and joy. As African histories are reconsidered, revised and rewritten in cyborg fictions, a "memory of the 'flesh'" is invoked, even if the material body has been irrevocably transformed through science and technology, and the biopolitical institutions within which these operate. It is this embodied social and cultural memory that provides the starting point, in the films considered here, for inscribing new narratives *of* the present and *for* the future. As Haraway's cyborg politics warns us: the effect of this inscription should not be to essentialise, but should instead enable new configurations of being female, and being African. Even as the figure of the marginalised, cyborgian subject summons Bakare-Yusuf's sense of liberating fleshly memory, then, she is also at the same time capable of subsuming, transgressing and subverting dominant ideology and hegemonies.

Malini Johar Schueller (2009) has critiqued Haraway's "need to locate a homogenized, non-Western Other onto which fantasies can be projected, precisely in order to subvert the hierarchies of Western metaphysics," as "overdetermined" and "neo-colonial" (68). While her critique is a useful and important warning against white and Eurocentric intellectual hegemony, Haraway's cyborg manifesto, does seem to have been prophetic in its vision and remains continuously useful in urging us to think beyond the constricting binaries of human/machine, modern/traditional, past/future and even male/female. The figure of the female African cyborg helps us to reconsider existence and identity in a radically different way by creating new origin myths and new African feminist epistemologies.

Monolithic thinking is broken down through narratives of the plural and multiple manifestations of female embodiment and identity. Prescribed normative gender roles, such as associations of African femininity with motherhood, heterosexuality, marriage and domesticity, are deconstructed. In the world of the cyborg, the flesh-and-blood, organic body is not the determining factor of individual or social identity. It becomes a representational site on which difference and identity can be inscribed in multiple ways. The cyborg allegory becomes a technological narrative through which to reimagine the future.

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Endnotes

[i] Several studies have explored this parallel between historical and science-fictional 'alien' encounters, one of the most comprehensive being John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008).

[ii] For fuller histories of African sci-fi, scholars and cultural critics including Mark Bould (markbould.com/2015/02/05/african-science-fiction-101/), Geoff Ryman and Jonathan Dotse (www.afrocyberpunk.com) have documented the rise of African sci-fi in literature and film. The African Speculative Fiction Society (http://www.africansfs.com/) is a professional body of African writers, editors, publishers and creative artists in science fiction, fantasy and speculative fiction, and their website contains probably the most comprehensive and up-to-date database of African science fiction and related genres.

[iii] I am drawing, necessarily, mostly on Euro-American feminist sci-fi scholars here, because a theoretical framework of African feminist sci-fi does not yet exist and is, in fact, exactly what I am trying to introduce in this article.