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THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION (2018) EDITED BY FRANCESCA T. BARBINI

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Tracing the genealogy of African genre writing has become a popular task in recent years. Since the rise in the production of African Science-Fiction (Afro Sci-Fi) and Fantasy novels in the late 2000s, many critics have speculated on the reasons for the evolution of African genre fiction and its subsequent popularity in the global imaginary. Nnedi Okorofor's 2009 conversation with Tchidi Chikere, published as the blogpost "[Is Africa Ready for Science Fiction?](#)," has been crucial in sparking this debate. In answering this question, Chikere argues that Science Fiction has historically fared poorly in Africa; its "themes aren't taken seriously," he responds, because "Africans are bothered about food, roads, electricity, water wars, famine...not spacecrafts and spaceships" (n.p.). Chikere's remarks have since lost much of their purchase. The demand for African genre writing has grown at outstanding speed: in the last ten years alone, publishers, micro-presses, and websites have launched a series of magazines and journals dedicated to publishing speculative fiction from across the African continent. Key among these are South Africa's *Something Wicked*, *Wordsmack*, and the IsiZulu *Kwasukela*, Nigeria's *Omenana*, Kenya's *Jalada*, Ghana's *Afrocyberpunk*, and Zimbabwe's *Storytime*. Such is the rising tide that publishers are finding it difficult to keep apace: according to Mazi Nwonwu, editor of the first issue of *Omenana*, in 2010 the magazine "could barely find 10 people to contribute" but now "there are ... hundreds of writers who will readily try their hand at the genre" (n.p.). Clearly, despite Chikere's comments, the attraction that African writers and readers have to Science Fiction is far from frivolous and looks set to stay that way for some years to come.

The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction (2018) is one of the more recent edited collections to consider this upswing in emergent African genre writing. The collection is edited by Francesca T. Barbini, and comprises five essays by authors Peter J. Maurits, Nick Wood, Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso, Polina Levontin, and Robert S. Malan. At only five chapters, the collection is very slight. It also does not contain an introduction, raising the question as to why the book was published as an edited anthology of essays. This is one of the book's central weaknesses, as the essays neither speak to one another directly nor fully engage with the arguments made in the other chapters. As such, the book lacks the roundtable, collaborative feeling one expects from a robust edited volume. This is perhaps a weakness that could have been rectified by a stronger editorial hand, but I wonder if the chapters would have worked better if they had been published as separate

articles and not as a collected unit. The chapters do manage to cover a lot of ground, however, and Maurits' essay certainly provides future scholars with a valuable and inventive reading on Afro Sci-Fi and genre fiction.

Maurits' essay analyses the origins of Afro Sci-Fi from an historical materialist perspective. This is a refreshing angle, as it departs from the question – so common to this debate – of whether Science Fiction is, in fact, 'new' to the African continent. The trouble with pursuing this line of inquiry, as Maurits – citing Ugandan writer Dilma Dila – points out, is that it implies African writers should be performing a particular kind of literary "Africanness" (2). These connotations can certainly be seen in Chikere's comments, from which it can be inferred that African writing simply serves the function, as Dila puts it, of "tackling the problems of their societies" (1). Maurits suggests displacing this question and its attendant expectations, espousing a world-systems approach instead in order to make sense of Afro Sci-Fi as part of the world-literary canon. To do this, Maurits borrows from Franco Moretti ("Conjectures" 2000), who calls for the adoption of economic models as a means of tracing the development of literary genres because these models allow for the mapping of a 'singular' system that is uniform by unequal. This model, argues Maurits, provides a fruitful scaffolding for analysing Afro Sci-Fi's origins as it illustrates how a genre "emerges for specific historical reasons" and must thus be understood as a function of historical economic operations (2).

Using this approach, Maurits identifies three strong reasons that provide the condition of possibility for Afro Sci-Fi's development. The first of these concerns the African publishing field and the increase in mobile phone ownership after the year 2000, which provided consumers with "off-the-grid" access to the websites, blogs and webzines where African genre narratives were originally published and circulated (23). The second reason Maurits offers is the possibilities presented by the post-colonial context. Many of these narratives perform a certain 'temporal distance' from colonialism because they have emerged so recently and therefore not directly in the aftermath of formal decolonisation and independence. Maurits argues that the time that has passed since independence, coupled with "SF's internal heterogeneity," has allowed African writers to turn to the genre in order to express "a variety of other concerns" such as the global issue of climate change (10-11). Maurits finally reads the 2008 global financial crisis as influencing a turn to utopia in Afro Sci-Fi. This last point is his most interesting and original. By drawing on the optimistic discourses that surrounded Africa in the wake of the global economic collapse, Maurits shows how the utopian turn in African Science Fiction, a feature that is notable in many recently produced African genre narratives, occurred, at least in part, as a result of the optimistic discursive space that was created around the future of the African economy as a result of the breakdown in the international market. This materialist reading allows Maurits to make the claim that Afro Sci-Fi can be considered as a reaction to the dystopian genre – a reading which makes an important contribution to the African speculative literary field (18-22).

The following chapters read weakly in light of Maurits' intervention. Wood's essay traces the swell in Afro Sci-Fi by contrasting the fiction produced during apartheid with the writing of the contemporary, post-apartheid era, illustrating how the country's changing socio-political

contexts have shaped the literary forms employed by South African writers. Wood shows how the new democratic dispensation enabled writers to produce writing that was free of previous “literary constraints” and endowed with a new “creative imagination [that] allows for alternative socio-political realities to be envisaged and striven for” (32, 38). This reading rehashes a familiar corpus of South African literary scholarship that is dedicated to analysing the arch and characteristics of experimental writing in the country since the end of apartheid; Michael Green’s chapter in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2011) provides a particularly adroit summary of the relation between literary forms and their socio-political contexts, albeit with reference to post-apartheid fiction in general and not South African Science Fiction, *per se*. Wood’s focus on short fiction, such as work published in *Jungle Jim* and *Probe*, is refreshing, however, as not much attention has been paid to these magazines in analyses of contemporary South African writing. Wood also usefully questions the assumption that South African speculative fiction is predominately produced by white writers, drawing attention to black writers such as Khaya Maseko, Unathi Magubeni, and Masimba Musodza to rectify the uneven emphasis that has been placed on white genre writing from Southern Africa.

Chukwunonso’s chapter, entitled “The Dangers of Expectation in African Speculative Fiction”, takes up, and elaborates on, Maurits’ argument regarding the influence of developments in publishing on Afro Sci-Fi. Chukwunonso reads the rise of speculative fiction in Africa as both a revolt against the expectation that “protest literature [would be] the default setting for African literature,” and as a response to the Caine Prize, the leading award for African writers of short stories (62). Since its inception in 2000, the Caine Prize has been dogged by controversy for its alleged canonisation of African literature; African writers such as Binyavanga Wainaina and Helon Habila have accused the Caine Prize, for example, of encouraging African writers to pander to a particular western vision of the African world in crisis. Chukwunonso’s argument around the influence of the prize on African writing is more nuanced than this. He claims that the debates surrounding the Caine Prize have birthed productive conversations about the expectations that are placed on African writers, which have in turn created an open space for African writers to produce “exuberant [and] distinctive kinds of stories,” many of which are speculative in nature (67).

Levontin’s chapter focuses on the representation of scientists in Nigerian Science Fiction. This chapter is the most unusual of all the essays, as it takes the form of a qualitative study into the discrepancy between representations of female and male scientists in African genre fiction. Levontin, a scientist herself, employs a number of graphs to graphically record how few female scientists exist in Nigerian writing, a format not commonly used in the study of literature. By taking the form of short paragraphs constructed around recurring representations of scientists in Nigerian Science Fiction, the chapter provides some insights into the attitudes of contemporary Africans towards science. Levontin’s analysis suffers as a result, however, as it is largely descriptive and fails to fully offer an engaged literary interpretation of the texts under scrutiny.

The final essay in the collection returns us once more to South African cultural production. Here Malan investigates how South Africans and Africans have been portrayed in popular entertainment, criticising, in particular, the poor impersonations of South African accents on screen

(I will happily give this one to Malan, as I, too, have yet to encounter a non-South African actor believably pull off a South African accent on screen that does not make me shake my head in shame). Malan celebrates *Black Panther* (2018) and its pioneering representation of "Africans at the forefront of technology" by contrasting this with the films of Neill Blomkamp, predominately *District 9* (2009), which is well-known for its problematic portrayal of Nigerians as cannibalistic criminals (107). Ending the collection with this chapter – the shortest of all the others – creates the impression of an uneven focus on South African writing, a drawback to an anthology that purports to investigate the rise of Fantasy and Science Fiction from the African continent.

This is understandable, perhaps, in light of the prominence of South African narratives in the international marketplace: Lauren Beukes and Henrietta Rose-Innes, for example, have both won awards for their writing, have international book agents, and have had many of their books translated into multiple languages. That being said, I would have liked the focus to be moved from these writers onto lesser-known authors and film-makers, as attention to other African writers, many of whom are writers of colour, is much needed in analyses that look to chart Afro Sci-Fi's evolution. After all, writers from Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Uganda are currently producing inventive genre narratives, as the authors in this collection claim; at the same time, however, the collection fails to fully incorporate these writers into its plotting of Afro Sci-Fi's origins. If nothing else, *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction* manages to reinforce the excitement that has surrounded Afro Sci-Fi, illustrating the prominence of the genre in current and future African literary debates.

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