Afrofuturist Techno-Futures Reimagined

Magic, Dreams and Boundary-Crossings

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Abstract

In this article we examine Francophone and Anglophone examples of Afrofuturist texts with regard to their representation of technology beyond the Western imaginary. We argue that the novel Ceux qui sortent dans la nuit *(2013) by Cameroonian writer Mutt-Lon and the short story "A Dream of Electric Mothers" by Nigerian writer Wole Talabi draw on specific Afrofuturist models of imagining technology in blurring the boundaries between magic or dreams and technology. In doing so, these texts not only redefine the critical concept of Afrofuturism beyond the dominant US context. They also push the boundaries of much broader concepts like the human, rationality, science and technology and, thus, raise much farther reaching questions. Our arguments draw on the theoretical context of Achille Mbembe's exploration of Afrofuturism and its implications for the concept of the human in his 2014 article "Afrofuturisme et devenir-nègre du monde", in which he suggests that Afrofuturism possesses the critical potential to push beyond the concept of Enlightenment humanism which relies on the Othering of Black people and to imagine futures otherwise. We argue that the texts and films we explore in this article are examples of such boundary-crossings which reimagine techno-futures from an Afrofuturist perspective.*

Keywords

Afrofuturism, technology, magic, knowledge, boundary-crossing, Mbembe, Mutt-Lon, Talabi

Introduction

Wanuri Kaihu's short film *Pumzi* (2009) opens on an image of a future African community dominated by technology, surveillance and control. Citizens must contribute to the sustainability of the underground society by powering the generators on treadmills and exercise bikes and all bodily fluids – including sweat and urine – are meticulously collected and purified. More importantly, community

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members are constantly monitored, and those who dream will be admonished to take dream suppressants to limit their imagination. It is no coincidence that *Pumzi* clashes this vision of exploitative, surveillance-oriented technoculture with the protagonist's dream of a different world symbolized by a growing tree that she plants and nourishes. African and African-diasporic experts of A.I. and other future technologies have frequently warned that an overly narrow focus on data and knowledge from affluent countries in the global north will shape technologies in ways detrimental to African communities (see Marivate 2023, see Gebru et al. 2021), while African countries carry the double burden of cheap resource extraction of rare earths and underpaid labor as well as serving as a dumping ground for global technological waste. Moreover, the rapid global spread of data organized and rearranged by Large Language Models like ChatGPT threatens to further narrow what can be known, said and thought about the world, as proponents of extreme technoculture dream of eugenicist systems and the permanent survival of the richest (see Benjamin 2024, see Gebru and Torres 2024). Such limitations may also extend to literary criticism – especially, as scholars of African science fiction like Moradewun Adejunmobi have pointed out, critical explorations of African visions of potential futures which often struggle with genre limitations, like "the enforcement of a strict separation between works incorporating supernatural or magical elements and those works exploring the outcomes of speculative technologies [which] has a long history in sf studies." (Adejunmobi 2016, 268). Such separations of magical realism and science fiction are especially problematic for African writers whose work is "indebted to indigenous myth and folklore" and whose "speculative worlds are not depicted as incompatible with the technologies of modernity" (Adejunmobi 2016, 267) instead of reiterating such perceived separations.

Francophone literary criticism of Afrofuturism, on the other hand, often elides the question of technology altogether. In both of his essays, *Afrique au futur I & II*, as well as in the thematic issue he devotes to African speculative fiction, Anthony Mangeon does not address the question of technology as such. This aspect remains largely unnoticed, owing in particular to his approach, which is more encyclopedic than analytical. Similarly, the analyses of novels and narratives of African futures gathered in the special issue of *Études littéraires africaines* entitled "Futurs africains" do not engage with the epistemological dimension of technology. Thus, the novels examined by Francesca Cassinadri allow her to employ a conventional notion of technology without compelling her to discuss what technology is and what might be considered as such. In her study, she confines herself to the uses of technology – both good and bad – in epidemic fictions. The entire epistemological discussion is therefore absent.

Nevertheless, incorporating both Anglophone and Francophone domains, Anthony Mangeon and Ninon Chavoz, in their introduction to the aforementioned issue, note a distinction between Anglophone and Francophone productions that deserves attention. According to them, "from Anglophone production (predomi-

nant) to Francophone production (generally more marginal), the dominant themes and obsessions differ according to the contingencies of colonial history" (14). Due to the strong assimilation policy in force in French colonial territories, Francophone production "privileges the theme of inversion and the overturning of worlds, in the wake of the literary and political movement of Négritude and its valorization of formerly despised African cultures" (14). Conversely, "the Anglophone African or African-American world tends to favor plots featuring the arrival of extraterrestrials in Africa, thereby metaphorically replaying colonial conquest or the coming of foreigners traveling in strange vessels and equipped with superior weapons" (14). In this article, we read Anglophone and Francophone texts alongside each other to highlight similarities and differences, but, perhaps even more importantly, to explore ways in which a discussion of Afrofuturist visions across boundaries may highlight underlying epistemological questions which are rarely addressed in critical works focusing predominantly on one context or a specific form of Afrofuturist writing (such as science fiction).

Afrofuturist art and literature pushes against the exclusionary epistemological and critical boundaries imposed on it by global debates and critical systems by imagining various futures from African perspectives. Where European and North-American perspectives imagine African temporalities in very limiting ways, seeing Africa as both ahistorical and futureless and existing predominantly in a narrow present, African thought criticizes such limiting perspectives (see Bidima 1993, 1995; Kavwahirehi 2018). Afrofuturist engagements with futuristic technologies in particular resist these limitations to show ways in which African thinkers, artists and writers already engage with futuristic technologies and how they imagine ways in which these can be projected into the future. Moreover, in doing so they resist a classification as less-than-human which has, as Achille Mbembe argues, been a central tenet of Enlightenment humanism:

> L'afrofuturisme [...] combine science-fiction, techno-culture, réalisme magique et cosmologies non européennes, dans le but d'interroger le passé des peuples dits de couleur et leur condition dans le présent. Ce dernier rejette d'emblée le postulat humaniste dans la mesure où l'humanisme ne peut se constituer que par relégation de quelque autre sujet ou entité (vivante ou inerte) au statut mécanique d'un objet ou d'un accident. [...] L'humanisme occidental serait donc une sorte de caveau hanté par le fantôme de celui que l'on a forcé à partager le destin de l'objet. (Mbembe 2014, 125)

> Afrofuturism [...] combines science-fiction, techno-culture, magical realism and non-European cosmologies with the aim to interrogate the past of *so-called* people of color and their condition in the present. The latter immediately rejects the humanist postulate to the extent that humanism can only ever constitute itself by relegating some other subject or entity (living or inert) to the mechanical status of an object or accident. [...] Western humanism would be, in this sense, a tomb haunted by the ghost of the one that was forced to share the destiny of the object. (Mbembe 2014, 125, *our translation*)

As an epistemological project, Afrofuturism thus explicitly sets forth to dismantle white supremacist, Eurocentric and Enlightenment humanist models of the human that have historically excluded and continue to exclude Black people. But this project is, as Mbembe argues, not limited to theory. On the contrary,

> Prenant appui sur la littérature fantastique, la science-fiction, la technologie, la musique et les arts performatifs, l'afrofuturisme tente de réécrire cette expérience nègre du monde en termes de métamorphoses plus ou moins continues, d'inversions multiples, de plasticité y compris anatomique, de corporéalité au besoin machinique. (Mbembe 2014, 126)

> [b]y recurring to fantastic literature, science fiction, technology, music and performance arts, Afrofuturism attempts to rewrite the Black experience of the world as more or less continuous metamorphoses, multiple inversions, of plasticity including – on anatomical level –, of a corporality – mechanical if necessary." (Mbembe 2014, 126, *our translation*)

By engaging in Afrofuturist artistic and cultural practices, artists, writers and performers may, thus, do more than simply resist stereotypes and categorizations. As Mbembe points out, this radical questioning of the concept of the human would have much farther reaching consequences, as it challenges the underlying tenets of Enlightenment humanism. Most importantly for our argument here, it also necessitates and facilitates a rethinking of related concepts like reason, science and technology, which, at least in Western thought, presuppose an objective, rational subject position postulated by Enlightenment humanism. Mbembe's work, which has not been widely discussed beyond the Francophone context, reaches beyond the boundaries of literary criticism, addressing much farther reaching questions concerning the discursive possibilities of Afrofuturist artists to envision and create African futures otherwise.

In this article we will highlight Francophone and Anglophone examples of Afrofuturist engagements with, and re-imaginings of futuristic technologies in and from Africa which also question and re-envision existing models of Afrofuturist criticism that were developed in Afrodiasporic contexts, predominantly in the US. Such a shift in perspective is not only desirable because it accounts for the existence of multiple different contexts, it is also necessary because it acknowledges radically different ways of thinking about technology from African Afrofuturist perspectives which hark back to pre-colonial conceptualizations and imagine post- and decolonial futures. It is, for instance, not unreasonable to argue that African imaginaries of the future – and particularly those emerging from Francophone Africa – articulate their own conception of technology. A striking instance may be observed in the *Mvett*, the epic tradition of the Beti, Bulu, and Fang peoples of Cameroon, which narrates the perpetual struggle between the Immortals and the Mortals, the latter seeking to appropriate the secret of immortality from the former. In one episode, the initiates of the Tribe of Flames undertake to 'transmute' a newborn – the grandson of the warrior Obame Ndong – into an

'exceptional man.' This initiation, which may be linked to the practice of *blindage* among sub-Saharan peoples, is described as the creation of a hybrid being, both human and iron, through a process evoked but never technically explained. The narrative proclaims:

> Remplacez tous les organes de cet enfant, à l'exception de ses muscles et de sa peau, par du fer. [...] Homme et fer, il fera appel à l'un ou l'autre de ses doubles, selon les circonstances. Oveng Ndoumou Obame [son nom] sera un géant. Il commandera la tribu des Flammes. Il commandera les autres tribus et les autres peuples. Il ne mourra point. (Kesteloot, Dieng 2009, 435-436)

> Replace all the organs of this child – save his muscles and his skin – with iron. [...] Man and iron alike, he shall call upon one or the other of his doubles, according to the circumstances. Oveng Ndoumou Obame [it is the child's name] will be a giant. He will command the Tribe of Flames. He will command the other tribes and all other peoples. He shall never die. (Kesteloot, Dieng 2009, 435–436, *translated by Louis Nana*)

This episode may be read as an early figuration of a technological imaginary that prefigures contemporary transhumanist discourse, where bodily transformation and the fusion of organic and inorganic matter serve as the basis for sovereignty, power, and immortality. What is articulated here can be understood as the creation of a cyborg, a topos well established in the repertoire of science fiction and discussed as a revolutionary and disruptive figure by feminist theory (see Haraway 2000). The presence of such a motif is particularly striking insofar as the *Mvett* – while open to adaptation and transformation over time – bears witness to an imaginary that has emerged independently of Western technological thought. In this sense, it foregrounds an alternative genealogy of the cyborg, linking Afrofuturist futures to Afrofuturist pasts and broadening the critical term "Afrofuturism" to include an as yet rarely discussed historical dimension. Moreover, by addressing the possibility of creating a cyborg figure, this early Afrofuturist text also raises much farther reaching questions about the concept of the human – questions which are echoed by African thinkers like Mbembe, as well as Afrofuturist narratives.

While earlier examples of Afrofuturist literature, music and art exist, the term Afrofuturism as it is used in literary and cultural studies today is usually traced back to an article by US literary critic Mark Dery, "Black to the Future", which was published in 1994. Originally describing literary texts, the critical term has also broadened to encompass other types of cultural production in literature, music, and other media and artforms that imagine futuristic, often technologically enhanced scenarios in which Black people thrive in the future, based on their own ingenuity and inventiveness, but also reaching back towards proto-Afrofuturist work in various genres, including music and speculative fiction. Attempts at shifting the gaze away from the anglophone, frequently US-centric critical discussion include

terminological shifts, for instance the distinction between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism proposed by Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor (in a 2017 TED talk). Okorafor's argument that Afrofuturism produced by the descendants of enslaved people living in the African diaspora was developed based on different premises and addresses different concerns than her own Africanfuturist writing, is certainly a convincing one. Okorafor's further engagement with genre boundaries in the distinction between Africanfuturism (science fiction) and Africanjujuism (fantasy), however, also points towards underlying problems around genre conventions for African contexts and the ways in which Afrofuturist texts can not necessarily be captured with terminologies established for global contexts (see Chukwunonso et al. 2024). As Chukwunonso et al. argue in their discussion of African science fiction and speculative fiction, it is necessary to "expand[...] the 'science' in sf to include Indigenous technologies, including architecture, art, herbal knowledge, language, divination, memory, and narrative." (Chukwunonso et al. 2024, 355) While Chukwunonso et al. aim to "intentionally confuse" genre boundaries, opening science fiction up to include speculative fiction (Chukwunonso et al. 2024, 355), our discussion deliberately moves beyond discussions of genre towards underlying epistemological questions. In this sense, our argument does not necessarily align with the essentialist view that could be perceived in the idea that "to be African is to merge technology and magic" (Okorafor 2016). We not only acknowledge the co-existence of technology and magic, but, furthermore, we argue that what is called magic or – to be specific in our context – witchcraft is, indeed, considered in the narratives to be technology. This, in our view, challenges the very notion of technology in African sf, while the essentialist view would implicitly distinguish "technology" and "magic" as two distinct and different 'entities' – which are also imbued with different amounts of epistemological and political power.

In the two parts of this article we will introduce two major examples – the novel *Ceux qui sortent dans la nuit* (2013) by Cameroonian writer Mutt-Lon, and the short story "A Dream of Electric Mothers" by Nigerian writer Wole Talabi – to discuss specific Afrofuturist conceptualizations of technology that push the boundaries of what is generally included in that term – specifically in contemporary globalized, technocratic cultures. In doing so, we are particularly interested in the critical and imaginative potential of Afrofuturist writing and the ways in which it allows us to question ingrained categorizations, transcend boundaries and imagine futures otherwise.

Witchcraft or Technology: uncertain boundaries in *Ceux qui sortent dans la nuit* (2013) by Mutt-Lon

When discussing Francophone African Afrofuturisms, the question of technology is not the one that first attracts attention. In fact, in its Francophone form, African science fiction is best known for its focus on endogenous knowledge and practices related to the occult. This is the idea expressed by Oulimata Gueye when, speaking of the project of African science fiction, she writes, "the project of the African SF could well be to rehabilitate the dimensions proscribed and made taboo by colonial governments: occult beliefs and knowledge, founding myths and fantastic fables that were believed to be forever lost." (Gueye 2015, 58) Of course, Gueye also mentions the entanglement between digital technologies, ultra-liberal capitalism, and esoteric practices. But what seems to attract the most attention are the esoteric practices.

Ceux qui sortent dans la nuit is the first novel by Mutt-Lon, the pen name of Cameroonian writer Daniel Alain Nsegbe. The title of the novel refers to sorcerers, designated in the novel by the term *ewusu*, the word for "sorcerer" in Bassa, the language of a people of Cameroon, where the plot takes place. In his novel, Mutt-Lon immerses the reader in a Cameroon shaped by mystery and esotericism. Alain Nsona, devastated by the suspicious death of his sister, joins a secret society: the *ewusus*, initiates capable of leaving their bodies and traveling through time. Guided by the sorcerer Ada and others, whose project is to contribute to the evolution of science by creating a new science, he journeys back to 1705 in search of Jam-Libe, holder of a power of dematerialization. What begins as a quest for vengeance gradually turns into an initiatory journey, confronting him with the tension between modernity and tradition. In the process, the novel explores African memory, occult knowledge, and the quest for identity. There is a depiction of the closeness between the visible and invisible worlds, between African and Western worlds, between the present and the past.

To gain a clearer understanding of the uncertain boundaries between witchcraft and technology in the novel, it is essential to first examine the way in which witchcraft is represented. The anthropological reality on which the novel's narrative rests – the *ewusus* – refers to a phenomenon broadly recognized and/or shared among the majority of sub-Saharan African societies (see Peter Geschiere's and Joseph Tonda's works on the subject). It may thus be argued that the representation of witchcraft in the novel is not limited to a specific community, but can be extended to other Cameroonian groups – primarily those of Bantu origin. Far from being seen as pejorative, the term *ewusu* is presented as the supreme stage of the evolution of the human body and being (Mutt-Lon 2013, 98). In the novel, *ewusu* designates a being who has attained "the ultimate stage in the development of human spiritual and physical capacities" (Mutt-Lon 2013, 98). It is the stage at which "almost everything becomes possible" (Mutt-Lon 2013, 98), where the boundaries of the possible and the visible are transgressed, and where the power

of thought is such that its only limit is another, more mature *ewusu*: "Each idea conceived in the mind of the *ewusu* is almost always accompanied by the simplest means of bringing it to fruition." (Mutt-Lon 2013, 98) In other words, the *ewusu* is not merely a mystical being but as a symbolic construct embodying the culmination of human spiritual and physical potential.

This stage, where the limits of the possible and the visible are transgressed, may be read as an allegory of the performativity of thought itself – an epistemological position in which thinking becomes indistinguishable from doing, and every conception inherently carries within it the means of its realization.

At the beginning of the story, witchcraft is presented without much detachment from the common understanding, which sees it as an esoteric practice feared by the uninitiated. The death of Dodo, Alain Nsona's little sister and the main protagonist, reinforces this idea. The naivety of this ten-year-old character contrasts with the cruelty of the other ewusus, who do not hesitate to execute her to protect their secret (Mutt-Lon 2013, 71). However, as the story progresses, a completely different face of witchcraft is revealed. Through Nsona's encounter with Ada, and especially the "*voyage retour*" project, the narrative takes another direction, one that reveals an epistemological ambition, since the goal of the project is to rewrite the history of the human and fundamental sciences (Mutt-Lon 2013, 134).

In the novel, the artefacts and techniques that may be described as technologies appear archaic – even rudimentary – when compared to their contemporary counterparts. They are associated, on the one hand, with the practical means of travelling into the past, and, on the other, with the technique of dematerialization. The former is illustrated through the preparation and execution of the *voyage retour*, while the latter is embodied in the practice of dematerialization itself. The apparent simplicity and archaism of these artefacts and techniques stand in striking contrast to the complexity of the operations they enable and to the conceptual framework that underlies them. Both dematerialization and the *voyage retour* are situated within a broader project designated as *dégagement matériel*, one of the three principal research axes pursued by the collective of thirteen *ewusus*. This project implicitly invokes two motifs that constitute commonplaces of science fiction: telepathy and teleportation. While these terms are never explicitly employed by the protagonists, the textual descriptions of *dégagement matériel* unmistakably evoke them:

> nous avons élaboré le concept du dégagement matériel, explique Ada à Alain Nsona, qui englobe tous les moyens qui permettent de déplacer un objet sans le toucher. Cette théorie, poursuit-il, vise à permettre aux hommes de se servir de leur seule volonté pour mouvoir n'importe quel objet d'un point à un autre. Pour accomplir une telle performance il faut gérer trois phases: la dématérialisation de l'objet, ensuite son téléguidage jusqu'à destination, enfin la restitution de son apparence normale. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 106)

"We devised the concept of *dégagement matériel*," Ada explains to Alain Nsona, "a principle that encompasses every means of moving an object without physically touching it. This theory," he continues, "seeks to allow human beings to rely solely on the force of their will to transport any object from one place to another. To accomplish such a feat, three stages must be mastered: first, the object's dematerialization; then its remote guidance to the destination; and finally, the recovery of its normal appearance." (Mutt-Lon 2013, 106)

With this evocation, the narrative is inscribed within an intertextual dialogue with established conventions of the science fiction genre. By neither naming the concepts of telepathy and teleportation nor reproducing them in a straightforward manner, the text reconfigures and subtly subverts these tropes, situating them within a distinctly local epistemological framework. This procedure may be interpreted less as a rejection of Western terminology than as an assertion of epistemic autonomy, foregrounding a discourse on science and technology articulated from within its own cultural and conceptual framework.

Discussing technology and the future in the novel is not limited to technical questions on what technology looks like, how it is described in the novel. It also raises epistemic questions on what we even mean when we talk about technology in that context. Thus, addressing technology in Mutt-Lon's novel actually means placing the question of technology within the broader context of the debate on science and rationality. What is science? What is scientific and what is not? What is rational and what is not? These questions are all the more relevant given that the knowledge of colonized peoples was reduced to superstition, magic, or witchcraft. In the novel, these two questions become intertwined.

The central question of the second part of the novel can thus be formulated as follows: what is science, really? The novel clearly carries an epistemological ambition, which lies not only in presenting ancestral African knowledge, but also in questioning the relationship to such knowledge – particularly its secrecy and the difficulty of transmitting it beyond the restricted frameworks of initiation. Indeed, the process of the *voyage retour* is clearly explained in the novel, although the specific herbs for the departure and return are not disclosed. What stands out initially, and reveals this epistemological ambition, is that witchcraft, as a form of endogenous knowledge, is placed within a scientific genealogy that puts it on equal footing with any other science and grants it the same legitimacy as Western knowledge, which is recognized as rational.

Ada and his group belong to what could be called progressive *ewusus*. His dream is to use *ewusu* knowledge for the common good of all peoples:

Je ne cesse en effet d'imaginer un monde où ces forces qui nous animent, nous autres *ewusus*, pourraient enfin être utiles à tous les peuples du monde. C'est pourquoi je prône l'intrusion des *ewusus* dans le mouvement scientifique et la recherche fondamentale. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 102).

I cannot help but imagine a world in which these forces that animate us, we *ewusus*, might at last be of use to all the peoples of the earth. That is why I advocate the intrusion of the *ewusus* into the scientific movement and into fundamental research. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 102)

The character does not merely express this as a wish, but establishes a connection between certain scientific discoveries and African witchcraft. The mobile phone, for example, which allows people to connect across the globe via invisible magnetic waves, would appear, Ada argues, as witchcraft to his late grandfather (Mutt-Lon 2013, 102). His conviction is expressed in terms that link technology and witchcraft:

Je soutiens qu'à l'origine de ces trouvailles baptisées scientifiques se cache une suite de démarches pour le moins occultes [...] Moi je veux bien croire qu'un type se soit levé un beau matin et ait eu l'intuition qu'on pouvait véhiculer des paroles dans un câble ou dans l'air et surtout qu'il ait fabriqué un appareil pour le prouver, mais personne ne réussira jamais à me faire accepter qu'un tel type était un homme normal. Qu'il n'était pas dans son pays un *ewusu*, en tout cas quelqu'un qui avait comme nous autres la faculté d'allier la pensée au pouvoir. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 103-104)

I contend that at the origin of those discoveries so hastily baptized as scientific there lurks a chain of procedures that are nothing short of occult [...]. I can well imagine a man awakening one morning with the sudden intuition that words might travel through a wire or through the air, and even contriving an instrument to prove it. But no argument will ever convince me that such a man was ordinary. That he was not, in his own country, an *ewusu* – or at least one endowed, as we are, with the faculty of fusing thought with power. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 103–104)

In his words, the character in Mutt-Lon's novel does not attempt to diminish the value or importance of Graham Bell's invention (the telephone), nor Heinrich Hertz's discovery of radio waves in 1888. Rather, he offers another interpretation by comparing them to a form of knowledge that is little known or unknown to the general public. What is highlighted here is the difference in perspective. By adopting the viewpoint of his ancestral knowledge, he sees Bell and Hertz's discoveries as the product of a form of witchcraft. What is considered scientific is, from his perspective, a form of witchcraft. Conversely, witchcraft, in his eyes, is a form of science.

Pour tout dire, je ne vois pas quelle différence il y a entre promener la parole de câble en câble et se promener soi-même d'arbre en arbre. Nous sommes là en face de deux phénomènes relevant du paranormal, et ce n'est pas parce que les uns ont pu traduire leur sorcellerie en équations mathématiques que les autres qui ne l'ont pas encore fait ne sont pas crédibles. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 104)

> To be perfectly honest, I fail to see any real difference between carrying words from cable to cable and carrying oneself from tree to tree. In both cases, we are confronted with phenomena that belong to the realm of the paranormal. And it is not because some have managed to translate their sorcery into mathematical equations that others, who have not yet done so, should be deemed any less credible. (Mutt-Lon 2013, 104)

This analogy between witchcraft and science echoes Arthur C. Clarke's third law on science and technology, which states that: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." (Clarke 1973, 21 fn 1).

In the novel, the capacities of the *ewusus* are framed not as superstition but as an alternative epistemology with its own methods, procedures, and channels of transmission. On the one hand, by depicting the *ewusus* as holders of both theoretical and practical knowledge – mediated through initiation, ritual, and bodily discipline – the text destabilizes the binary between science and belief. On the other hand, throughout the novel, witchcraft is presented as another form of technological knowledge – ignored, hidden, but having the same value as Western knowledge. Indeed, the protagonists' project is none other than to make the knowledge and technology of the *ewusus* accessible to the world of the uninitiated (see Mutt-Lon 2013, 104). The challenge the novel poses, therefore, is that of the limits of the notion of technology. It depicts the African relationship to technology (see Mutt-Lon 2013, 205) and shows ways in which the representation of hidden knowledge helps to rethink this relationship, while also allowing for a reconsideration of the form and essence of technology. The novel thus invites reflection on the relationship between technology and magic that move beyond the limitations of genre conventions and into the realm of epistemology.

Questioning the human and human questioning in times of A.I.: Wole Talabi's "A Dream of Electric Mothers" (2023)

Clarke's third law suggests that advanced technologies are indistinguishable from magic, but the texts we discuss in this chapter go even further to suggest that magic and technology are not, in fact, entirely separable concepts in African contexts which combine Afrofuturist configurations of past, present and future. In his short story "A Dream of Electric Mothers" Nigerian author Wole Talabi critically undermines a specific understanding of artificial intelligence by imagining a near-future African society which relies on A.I. to provide counsel in the making of political decisions. While the story was written towards the beginning of the recent A.I. hype, its Afrofuturist vision nevertheless already taps into a sense of urgency that resonates with concerns and anxieties around the possibilities of achieving general artificial intelligence and, thus, a capacity of judgment that resembles that of human beings. Moreover, by discussing these questions from an Afrofuturist perspective, the short story challenges the exclusionary tenden-

cies of Anglo-European algorithms and datasets which cannot account for African specificities. The narrative traces a connection between A.I. and dreaming or even individual dreams – a move which ultimately helps to reintroduce an aspect of humanity into the rationalized technological discourse around the systemic employment of A.I. in political and social contexts.

One of the main differences between cyberpunk or science fiction, which also focus on projecting technological developments into the future, on the one hand and Afrofuturism on the other hand, lies in the ways in which Afrofuturist texts like Talabi's short story construct cyberspace as a communal project rooted in tradition – either in the ways in which it can be entered or in which it can be traversed and manipulated. In the Afrofuturist world of the story, the consultation of ancestral voices and the structure of government combine progressive forms of technology with traditional spiritual cultural elements. While the story's protagonist has a background in military engineering and the government facility runs several stories deep with high-speed elevators connecting the floors, the immersion in the dream counsel is supervised by a spiritual leader, who guides the participants' experiences. These narrative choices around the presentation of technology as intricately interwoven with ritual and tradition seem deliberate, as the story's introductory paragraph already blurs the boundaries between technology and magic in the cultural understanding of the process of consulting the data server that is known as the dream-counsel of "electric mothers":

> The dream-counsel consultation ceremony was usually a somewhat elaborate half-day affair, with a Chief Babaláwo being called in from the Ile-Ifẹ Technology Center of Excellence a day before to run diagnostics, read the Odù, dine with the Oyo Mesi and remind us of our history and culture before we link our brains with that of our electric mother. Officially, the ceremony is performed to maintain transparency, to formally ensure that the public knows when this collective resource is being used. But everyone knows that the primary reason the ceremony was devised and is still performed is to maintain a sense of continuity of tradition because some of our people still believe that any contact with the ancestors should be mediated by a Babaláwo. Even though they know that the electric mother isn't really the essence of our ancestors in the classical sense of the term, and that nothing more than an encrypted lifedock connection to the secure national memory data server and induced REM sleep are necessary to establish contact. (Talabi 2023, 117)

The description evokes the necessity to maintain a specific ritual form to commune with the ancestors while simultaneously questioning the possibilities of the A.I. to establish such a connection. While the process is still thought of as "contact with the ancestors" by some, the narrative also explains that the instance being consulted is actually a "national memory data server" which, presumably, contains the ancestors' memories. The narrator's own skepticism plays a role here as she clearly does not count herself among "some of our people" who "still believe" that magical mediation is necessary to establish a connection with the ancestors. In

this, the story raises important questions around technological and traditional conceptualizations of collective memory by subversively blurring the boundaries between human and non-human others while still resisting the celebratory stance towards specific technological advances that is a core element of technoculture as well as science fiction from the global north.

Talabi's story "A Dream of Electric Mothers" is set in a fictional West-African state modeled on Nigeria that shares a border with the equally fictional (but historically accurate) kingdom of Dahomey. A.I. has an influential role in government, as state officials seek the "dream counsel" of "our electric mothers" before making important decisions about the future of the country (Talabi 2023, 117). Created by the now deceased female scientist, Iya Ajimobi, the dream-counsel seemingly consists of the voices of the ancestors, whose memories have been fused together, forming an entity that speaks in unison and whose verdicts are usually taken as final and inevitable. This construction suggests an analogy to Large Language Models emulating human speech with the help of algorithms, especially in its tendency towards mainstreaming the ancestor's voices into a common utterance (a move which the story later calls into question). The narrator, a government official who has never encountered the dream-counsel firsthand at the beginning of the story, is eager to do so, but at the same time aware of its odd side effects: "I have read classified reports of others who [...] thought they heard the voice in their heads or relived experiences from the consultation long after they were disengaged from the server." (Talabi 2023, 118-9) While the counsel is introduced as a regular means of achieving political guidance, the narrator's ambiguous stance also creates a sense of unease and foreboding early in the story. This is further underlined when the protagonist's own agenda in wanting to consult the dream counsel becomes clear. Instead of seeking clarification on the matter under discussion – the border conflict with Dahomey – she is pursuing her own goal of hijacking the dream-counsel immersion to speak to her deceased mother. Contrary to her initially detached and rational approach, the protagonist takes recourse to a ritualistic practice in calling on the inventor of the "dream-counsel" by "using her oríkì, her traditional praise greeting" – a strategy which is ultimately successful (Talabi 2023, 130).

The story weaves together the personal and the political, advanced A.I. technology and ancestral magic, in a manner that goes beyond the protagonist's wish to find closure concerning her mother's untimely self-inflicted death and her own lingering emotional distress. One of the ways in which it does so is indicated by the title and, more specifically, the use of the term "dream" for a process which is predominantly a use of elaborate technology – or artificial intelligence. This distinction is underlined when the protagonist is surprised by the way the dream counsel sounds:

> I'd read it in some of the reports, but I am still surprised that the electric mother converses more like an A.I. than an actual person. I suppose I have been anthropomorphizing her for

so long that I started to expect a more conversational human response. It's easy to trick your mind into things. (Talabi 2023, 127)

By using the term "dream counsel" for advanced technology and then drawing attention to the ways in which the inaccuracy of the term grates on the protagonists' understanding of it, Talabi's story subverts expectations around the use of language concerning A.I. and other futuristic technologies, but, more importantly, the story also blurs the boundaries between advanced technology and ancestral magic. This not only sets the story in a specific cultural context, it also draws attention to the inaccuracy and inadequate usability of many technological terms in cultural contexts that have not had a say in their design and development. Moreover, by interweaving the concepts of advanced technology and ancestral wisdom the story blurs the boundaries between these conceptualizations and undermines the dominant understanding of technology rooted in Western rational thought.

The necessity for cultural accuracy is further underlined by the use of the term "mothers" instead of "ancestor" or perhaps the more accurate "common memory" in the conceptualization of the dream counsel, as the term invokes specific personal associations as well as the sense of an essentially matriarchal society that seems to run counter to the ultimately paternalistic dominance of the institution. The importance of these associations becomes clear, when the official answer given by the dream counsel contrasts with much more nuanced advice that the protagonist manages to get from the isolated voice of her own mother.

The dream counsel's answer to the question of how the country should act in the matter of the border conflict is both strategic and impersonal, suggesting a preemptive strategy of invasion:

Military confrontation with Dahomey is inevitable. Projections indicate that the probability of war increases with time. Projections also indicate that the probability of a successful invasion will also decrease with time. The best course of action is to invade now and take control while our chance of success is highest. (Talabi 2023, 128)

The protagonist initially attempts to argue with the dream counsel, pointing out that "to initiate a war would go against the [...] policy of continental integration and cooperation [...], violate the will of the people in the territory and cost many of our people's lives." (Talabi 2023, 128) But the counsel remains adamant that invasion is the best way to "maximize the probability of the republic's life quality index remaining above eighty-three percent over the next one thousand years". (Talabi 2023, 129) There is a subtle distinction here, between the lives of people who will be lost in the impending war and the "life quality index" that is to be maintained generations far in the future, indicating that the A.I. – in spite of being called a dream counsel – is ultimately making its decisions based on utilitarian mathematical calculations without taking into account the meaning

of individual human lives. As Gebru and Torres argue, this is a common position among proponents of artificial general intelligence, which is usually summarized as "longtermism" and "effective altruism" – terms which form part of a broader technosolutionist mindset that the authors describe as the "TESCREAL bundle" (Gebru and Torres 2024), a common combination of beliefs among leading technosolutionists in Silicon Valley. As Gebru and Torres, but also Benjamin and others have argued, the TESCREAL mindset is eugenicist, racist and exclusionary against other marginalized groups like people with mental and physical disabilities and poor people. By evoking these exclusionary tenets the story juxtaposes different models of A.I. – a generalized and a localized one, as the counsel's utilitarian advice is countermanded by the narrator's attempt to contact her own mother's isolated voice. She achieves this, not through a particular technological feat, but by chanting in Yoruba, reminding the creator of the counsel "of who she is and who I am" (Talabi 2023, 130). This reconstruction of a specific line of individual ancestry in an otherwise unified chorus of voices allows the narrator to receive personal advice that influences her understanding of the dream counsel's previous decision. Her mother – with the help of the counsel's creator – does not directly contradict the common verdict, but instead reminds the narrator of her strength, her individual abilities, and her own human fears and insecurities. The individual ancestral advice is not given in a straightforward, unified manner but through personal memories and reflections and the story draws attention to the value of this advice by highlighting it as "*Exactly what you needed to hear.*" (Talabi 2023, 136) Instead of following the counsel's advice of going to war, the protagonist's individual experience leads to an ambiguous, open answer, which undermines the usual purpose of the dream counsel to reach a unified position. Instead of relying on the static, preserved voices of the past, the advice the protagonist gets from her mother guides her to suggest an open-ended discussion in the government to potentially resolve the conflict without having to go to the extreme of a preemptive invasion.

This outcome has a number of important implications in the light of Afrofuturist theorization and the connection between A.I. and dreams, technology and metaphysics. On the one hand, the move away from the unified voice of the dream counsel and towards the individual voices of the protagonist's mother and the creator of the A.I. suggests a possibility of dissent that is not so much directed against the idea of following ancestral voices than against the idea of setting their technologically codified, unified opinion – and, thus, solutions devised in the colonial past and using the colonizers' technological interventions – in stone as the only possible solution for the future. By not dismissing the function of the dream counsel altogether but rather insisting on considering it alongside the voices of the current generation, the story rejects the solution of blindly following a generalizing A.I. tool in favor of a more balanced approach that uses the outcome of a consulting A.I. to drive discussion among humans. In this, the story presents a balanced Afrofuturist approach that brings a localized tradition into the future

but also leaves room for new developments, dissenting opinions and community discussion. It is in this sense that the story functions as an intervention into the current A.I. hype and as a critique of its extreme proponents, as it reintroduces a human element into a discourse that is otherwise focused on effectiveness, technological globalization and the mainstreaming of ideas. While the story experiments with new technological possibilities, it also suggests that A.I. lacks the human ability to change, which is introduced through individual dreams and cultural values that form part of a specific, localized tradition. In questioning what is introduced as a technological solution to problems of governance, the story not only functions as a reminder of the value of careful and deliberate judgment, it also positions itself within an Afrofuturist discussion of techno-futures in African contexts and from African perspectives.

Conclusion

We began this article with the example of *Pumzi* and the protagonist's dream of a future that unites human and non-human elements. Francois Knoetze's short film series *Core Dump* (2018-19) – especially the installments set in Dakar and Kinshasa – addresses similar questions in a collage of historical images and sound bites that connect the historical human- and non-human binary of Enlightenment philosophy with the introduction of technology. The protagonist of *Core Dump – Dakar*, a TV repair man who suffers an accident while repairing a television set, decides to "repair" himself by turning himself into a cyborg of human flesh, computer parts and coded DNA. By adopting the position of the cyborg and aligning himself with the machines, the film's protagonist proclaims an Afrofuturist vision in which "African culture alone has preserved the mystic warmth of a life that could still revive the world that has died of machines and cannons." (Knoetze 2018) In juxtaposing the pressing problems of resource extraction, waste disposal and political exploitation as a constant stream of images, the film highlights the cyborg body as a theoretical model, which, similar to Mbembe's position cited above, challenges the idea of the human as explicitly exclusionary towards Black people. As the film's voice-over argues, "[o]ur goal is to intervene in the imperial system that makes waste of people, that extracts blood, consumes dreams and excretes misery." (Knoetze 2018) Multi-medial art projects, like Knoetze's film series can carry this project from the Afrofuturist present into the future, but they also draw attention to the limitations of critical discourses around Afrofrofuturist art and literature. In moving the discussion away from questions of genre and towards the underlying epistemological discourses addressed in Mbembe's discussion of Afrofuturism as a critical project that questions the tenets of Enlightenment humanism, we have attempted to draw attention to the boundary-crossing possibilities of Afrofuturism – especially as we see this as a possibility to set Anglophone and Francophone texts in dialogue with each other.

The narratives and films that we have discussed in this chapter connect past, present and future, tradition and innovation, global and local, technology and magic, dissolving binary structures and challenging seemingly well-established boundaries by introducing specific, localized Afrofuturist perspectives. Mutt-Lon's novel *Ceux qui sortent dans la nuit* introduces magic as technology and technology as magic. Wole Talabi's short story "A Dream of Electric Mothers" blends the boundaries of A.I. and ancestral voices, highlighting the necessity to not only consider mainstreamed, globalized data, but also listen to individual, localized voices in matters of life and death, or risk losing what is left of our humanity. Both narrative approaches ask important questions, which are, however, left open for the reader to puzzle out.

- What, in fact, does it mean to dissolve the boundary between technology and magic in the sense suggested by Clarke's third law and beyond?
- How might it be possible to navigate in a context in which the boundaries between magic and technology have been blurred?

In introducing these open questions, we are fully aware that such a challenging of boundaries comes with heavy consequences and responsibilities – not least the necessity to base our own scientific inquiry on the unstable ground of a thoroughly shaken concept of rationality, science and, to an extent, technology. We do, however, think that asking these questions is not only fruitful but eminently necessary, so as not to fall into the trap of subscribing unquestioningly to very specific models and conceptualizations of techno-futures that have their roots in the exclusionary tenets of Enlightenment humanism or the techno-solutionist visions of the future manifested in the TESCREAL bundle and its visions of a world dominated by AI overlords. On the contrary, we understand the texts that we have discussed in this chapter as warnings of stumbling unquestioningly and without further thought into an over-technologized future dominated and controlled by unified voices and devoid of individual or social ethical boundaries. By raising important questions around the exclusionary tendencies of concepts like the human, technology, rationality and objectivity that have served as a means of oppression in the past, Afrofuturist writers, film-makers and artists instead challenge us to rethink the ways in which past present and future are entangled in Afrofuturist thought and artistic practices and provide us with the means to open the future to Afrofuturist dreams, goals and ideas.

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