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REVIEW ARTICLE



Africanfuturist/Afrofuturist dialogues and the limits of representation

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The growing field of African speculative fiction provides a fertile ground for exploring the intersections of culture, identity and futurism through unique African lenses. In this context, the two volumes under review represent significant contributions. Together, these works illuminate the transformative potential of African speculative fiction, though they also highlight gaps in scope and engagement with emerging media. By exploring the contributions and limitations of the two works, this review highlights their pivotal roles in advancing African speculative fiction.

Kimberly Cleveland's text provides an engaging exploration of Africanfuturism as a distinct literary and artistic movement rooted in African perspectives about the future. The book establishes a framework for understanding how Africanfuturist narratives reshape cultural identity within a global context. Divided into six interconnected chapters, the text combines theoretical insights with vivid illustrations of Africanfuturist visions, examples of which are Gerald Machona's (2012) *Nidiri Afronaut* (47) and Andile Dyalvane's (2013) *Docks Table* (91), offering a detailed perspective of African speculative fiction. To this end, Ainehi Edoro-Glines' foreword sets the intellectual tone, particularly when she states, "I have noticed the tendency of scholars to speak of sci-fi as an advanced stage of a literature founded on the archaism of realism" (xi). This adds to the emphasis on the distinction between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism while underlining the importance of grounded African perspectives in futurist narratives.

Cleveland excels in bridging literature, art and performance, demonstrating how Africanfuturism draws from African epistemologies and historical realities to imagine alternative futures. She highlights Africanfuturism's role in decolonising the future by reclaiming Africa's place in futuristic discourses and presenting technology as inseparable from African histories and cultural contexts. Through a variety of examples, from fiction like

Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* to art installations such as Bodys Isek Kingelez's *Ville Fantôme* (73), Cleveland underscores the movement's focus on African agency and innovation.

Her work is complemented by the edited volume *Speculative & Science Fiction*, which compiles critical perspectives on the evolving field of African speculative fiction. It situates the genre within a broader literary and philosophical framework, exploring how African authors use speculative narratives to reimagine futures through postcolonial theory, eco-criticism and literary analysis. The articles in this text are strategically arranged to progress from specific regional and thematic foci to broader conceptual discussions. Janelle Rodriques's article opens the anthology, positioning Lagos as a key site of Africanfuturist invasion in the novels *Lagoon* and *Godhunter*, both literally and metaphorically. The anthology progresses to broader speculative traditions, where Jeffrey G. Dodd explores Southern African near futures through the novels *The Old Drift* and *Triangulum*, while Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso links past and present in Kojo Laing's novel *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. Then Kayode Odumboni shifts focus to the film *Black Panther*, expanding speculative themes beyond literature. Éric Essono Tsimi examines counter-utopias through various speculative texts, followed by Clara Ijeoma Osuji who takes the readers back to Nigeria with her reinterpretation of Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Edgar Fred Nabutanyi then transports the discussion to contemporary Ugandan speculative fiction, questioning its place in the canon. Finally, James Orao's concluding meta-analysis synthesises these discussions, emphasising the genre's evolving and global significance.

Collectively, the articles in this anthology delve into narratives that blend myth with technology, as seen in the analysis of the futuristic world in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* in the article by Janelle Rodriques and broader themes of Black technology in African literature in general. These case studies reveal how African speculative fiction critiques colonial legacies and Mark Dery's inquiry into science fiction as "limited" by his exclusive focus on "African-American writers" (15). The anthology further highlights the genre's integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, offering hybrid forms that subvert Western science fiction conventions. The two books position African speculative fiction not only as a genre of imaginative exploration but also as a potent form of social and political resistance that reshapes global conversations about the future.

Together, these volumes significantly advance the understanding of African speculative fiction as a transformative genre. Despite their shared focus on African agency and speculative creativity, their differing emphases create opportunities for mutual enrichment, particularly in addressing the interdisciplinary and linguistic dimensions of the field. For instance, Cleveland's work comes through in its interdisciplinary approach, exploring Africanfuturism across literature, visual art, film and performance. This expansive lens underscores how speculative fiction extends beyond literary forms into non-literary media, such as installations and performance art. In contrast, the collected volume is primarily text-focused, which leaves a gap in examining the broader artistic ecosystem of African speculative creativity. Thus, Cleveland's insights into interdisciplinary media could complement this collection by offering a fuller picture of the genre's manifestations across varied platforms. Her idea underscores the necessity of a holistic approach in both works. Simultaneously, this interconnectedness emphasises the importance of considering the broader cultural and disciplinary context when exploring African speculative fiction.

Both Cleveland's text and the edited volume by Egbunike and Nwankwo present African speculative fiction as a genre that reclaims and reimagines African futures through culturally grounded, decolonial perspectives. Cleveland, drawing from Okorafor's Africanfuturism, frames it as an intellectual movement rooted in African epistemologies, challenging global discourses and embedding technology within African histories. This aligns with Mbembe's (2001) assertion that African futures must be understood through African histories rather than Western trajectories. While the anthology explores speculative fiction's role in reinterpreting African pasts and futures, its focus on textual narratives leaves a gap in representing the genre's diverse forms.

Although Cleveland defines Africanfuturism in intellectual terms, the edited text conveys a broader yet implicit understanding of the genre through its themes. It presents the genre as a tool for envisioning alternative realities, blending myth, technology and cultural narratives within a postcolonial and decolonial framework, thus subverting Western conventions. Unfortunately, the framing of African speculative fiction primarily as a challenge to Western norms narrows its definition and risks reducing it to a reactionary genre rather than recognising its independent and self-defined creative potential. While it undeniably contests dominant paradigms, it also establishes its own innovative frameworks. This may explain Cleveland's emphasis on African epistemologies as central to speculative creativity.

Both texts assume restrictive approaches to defining African speculative fiction, potentially overlooking how Indigenous knowledge systems do more than supplement the genre. This gap in their analyses overlooks the unique ways in which Indigenous knowledge systems do not merely supplement but rather fundamentally reconfigure speculative narratives, offering alternative modes of storytelling, world-building and conceptualising the future. In this sense, the texts risk reinforcing a narrow view of the genre that does not fully accommodate its interdisciplinary and multimodal nature. Thus, their analytical frameworks present certain limitations that shape the way the genre is conceptualised. By not fully addressing its interdisciplinary and multimodal nature, their frameworks may inadvertently narrow the genre's scope.

Added to this, an overemphasis on literary forms is also evident in both texts, particularly in the edited collection, which primarily examines textual narratives and excludes significant contributions from other media, such as visual art, performance, gaming and digital storytelling. This restrictiveness limits the volume's ability to capture the full diversity of African speculative fiction, particularly its linguistic, regional and media-based variations, as well as its diasporic and interdisciplinary dimensions. Given the increasingly multimedia-orientated form of African speculative fiction, such textual concentration not only restricts interactions with contemporary diverse creative expressions but also ignores how Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism interact across several platforms and aesthetic traditions. The exclusion of these components results in an inadequate view of the genre's growth, particularly in terms of the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions and digital advancements. It also fails to account for the increasing prominence of Afrofuturism, which may lead to first-time audiences developing a skewed understanding of it. Both texts definitely call for an expansion of their analytical scope to a more interdisciplinary and multimodal approach.

Furthermore, even though the two texts highlight the importance of African agency and the role of speculative fiction in reclaiming narratives, they fall short in addressing

the full breadth of African speculative fiction. For instance, Cleveland's emphasis on African epistemologies and the connection to Afrofuturism is valuable in grounding the genre in African histories, but this focus may unintentionally narrow African speculative fiction to primarily Anglophone traditions. While the anthology edited by Egbunike and Nwankwo at least acknowledges this limitation, Cleveland's critique of inclusivity seems to overlook the significance of engaging with Lusophone African literary traditions, which are crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of African speculative fiction. That is not to say that she ignores Francophone works completely, because she includes a fair representation of illustrated pieces of Francophone background. However, other literary genres in Africa and its diaspora do not receive the same level of attention. This goes to show that a framework that does not fully address Africanfuturism's/Afrofuturism's transnational elements risks perpetuating false distinctions between African speculative fiction and its diasporic equivalents. This constraint may mask the genre's contribution to undermining dominant epistemologies and expressing new forms of futurity.

The curated volume, on the other hand, promises to include some engagement with Francophone literature. It is disappointing, then, that only Tsimi's article specifically addresses this area, and the limited scope of his sample texts cannot fairly represent the breadth of Francophone literature, making the generalisations in the conclusion of his essay somewhat questionable. The limited focus on Francophone works reflects another broad issue in the volume: the overwhelming emphasis on Anglophone texts. Such a focus not only limits the diversity of voices represented but also excludes significant regional and linguistic variations that enrich African speculative thought. In view of this, expanding the linguistic and regional scope to include contributions from various African diasporas and Indigenous knowledge systems across different languages and cultural contexts would provide a fuller, more nuanced exploration of African speculative fiction. Such an approach would better illuminate its potential for decolonial and futuristic thinking. To enhance both books' inclusivity and depth, future works could prioritise a more balanced representation of African speculative fiction across linguistic and regional divides.

Finally, while Cleveland explores visual and performance art, neither of the two texts fully addresses emerging media and digital storytelling. These platforms are increasingly central to Afrofuturism. The absence of such detailed analysis overlooks significant cultural productions that are redefining African speculative narratives in the digital age. An engagement with such platforms in Cleveland's work and the edited volume would have reflected the evolution of the genre and aligned more with the interdisciplinary focus both books advocate.

The interplay of Kimberly Cleveland's *Africanfuturism: African Imaginings of Other Times, Spaces, and Worlds* and *Speculative & Science Fiction: African Literature Today* 39 offers rich and thought-provoking insights into the evolving landscape of African speculative fiction. While these works highlight the genre's power to reimagine African futures through literature, film and art, they also expose key areas for further exploration, particularly in linguistic diversity and emerging media. Addressing these gaps could deepen our understanding of how African speculative creativity continues to challenge global paradigms, offering transformative possibilities for the reimagining of African pasts, presents and futures in an interconnected world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Josephine Delali Ofei is a PhD fellow and a member of the MERLIT research team at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium. Her main interest is in African literature. Josephine currently focuses on heroes in 21st century Afrofuturist mediascapes from the global south. Her work explores the intersections of meritocratic thought, mobility, and identity in African narrative spaces.

Reference

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