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African Science Fiction and the Planning Imagination

Matthew Eatough

This essay examines the recent rise in popularity of science fiction in Africa. I argue that this growth can be traced to key shifts within the logic of structural adjustment programs. Over the last twenty years, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have begun to place a heightened emphasis on "poverty reduction strategies" (or PRSs). These PRSs have taken the two organizations' long-standing commitment to free-market policies and adapted them to the rhetoric of social and economic justice by suggesting that "sustainable" welfare programs can only be constructed through the "long-term" benefits of well-planned "institutions."

As I show, this vision of long-term development has encouraged a move toward fictional forms capable of speaking to elongated temporal scales. Using Nnedi Okorafor's novel Lagoon *as my primary example, I investigate how sci-fi narratives have struggled to represent social agency within the* longue durée *of institutional planning.*

Keywords: science fiction, Nnedi Okorafor, structural adjustment programs, institutionalism, African universities, brain drain

Compared to other types of genre fiction, science fiction has historically fared poorly in Africa. Unlike detective fiction, thrillers, and romances, which have enjoyed significant readerships since at least the 1970s, science fiction never secured a solid foothold in Africa's developing print cultures. Aside from the occasional outlier novel or small fan-fiction magazine,[1] the history of Africa's engagement with science fiction seems to bear out Tchidi Chikere's observation that African audiences aren't "ready [for science fiction] in the pure sense of the word. . . . The themes aren't taken seriously. Science fiction will come here when it is relevant to the people of Africa. Right now, Africans are bothered about issues of bad leadership, the food crisis in East Africa, refugees in the Congo, militants here in Nigeria. Africans are bothered about roads, electricity, water wars, famine, etc., not spacecrafts and spaceships. Only stories that explore these everyday realities are considered relevant to us for now."[2]

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1 Probably the most well-known African sci-fi novel from before 1980 is Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* series (1979–1983). To the best of my knowledge, the oldest science-fiction magazine in Africa is *Probe*, the fanzine of Science Fiction South Africa. Launched in 1969, the magazine consists almost entirely of fan fiction.

2 Tchidi Chikere, quoted in Nnedi Okorafor, "African Science Fiction Is Still Alien," January 15, 2014, http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2014/01/african-science-fiction-is-still-alien.html.

It was thus somewhat of a surprise when a series of African science-fiction narratives exploded onto the international scene in the late 2000s. Beginning with Neill Blomkamp's Oscar-nominated *District 9* (2009), works by African artists won critical acclaim for their edgy, inventive take on science and technology. This new vogue for African science fiction was nowhere more apparent than in the prize industry, where African novels were the recipients of some of the most prestigious awards in the field of science fiction. In 2011, for example, both the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel and the Arthur C. Clarke Award were granted to African texts: the former to Nnedi Okorafor's story about a child of rape who develops magical powers in a post-apocalyptic world filled with ethnic warfare, *Who Fears Death*; and the latter to Lauren Beukes's cyberpunk-inflected *Zoo City*. Similar accolades greeted Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi*, which was screened at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival, and Okorafor's novella *Binti*, the recipient in 2016 of both the Nebula and Hugo Awards for best novella.

As important as these critical and commercial successes were in their own right, the visibility that they have lent to African science fiction has also been instrumental in helping to pave the way for emergent literary institutions. Although African countries still lack the specialized fan culture that has supported science fiction in the United States and elsewhere,[3] there *has* been a concerted push to establish venues for aspiring science-fiction writers to publish their work. Over the last ten years alone, publishers and independent entrepreneurs have launched science-fiction magazines in Nigeria (*Omenana*, 2014) and South Africa (*Something Wicked*, 2006); blogs in Ghana (Jonathan Dotse's *Afrocyberpunk*); and micro-presses in South Africa (Wordsmack) and Zimbabwe (StoryTime).[4] Many of these projects are explicitly geared toward new authors, who are encouraged to submit work "at different levels in the development of their craft."[5] Indeed, most publications stress that science fiction is *so* new to Africa that developing an indigenous sci-fi culture also entails cultivating a new crop of writers. As Mazi Nwonwu notes in his opening editorial in the first issue of *Omenana*, "[w]e could barely find 10 people to contribute to [an] anthology in 2010, [but] there are now hundreds of writers who will readily try their hand at the genre."[6] The challenge, Nwonwu reflects, has thus become to develop "platforms where these stories can be anchored"—that is, platforms where new writers can publish their work in spite of the small market for science fiction, often by taking advantage of the possibilities of digital media.[7]

3 For an account of how fandom supports the science-fiction industry, see Camille Bacon-Smith, *Science Fiction Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

4 Most of these projects take advantage of digital platforms to reach larger audiences than would be possible with print media. For a case study of StoryTime's experimentation with digital circulation, see Tsitsi Jaji, "Can You Hear Africa Roar? StoryTime and the Digital Publishing Innovations of Ivor Hartmann and Emmanuel Sigauke," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 1.1 (2013): 122–39.

5 Ayodele Arigbabu, "Prelude," *LAGOS_2060: Exciting Sci-Fi Stories from Nigeria*, ed. Ayodele Arigbabu (Lagos: Dada, 2013), xi.

6 Mazi Nwonwu, "Speculative Fiction in Nigeria: A New Journey Begins," *Omenana* 1.1 (December 2014): 2. The anthology that Nwonwu is referring to is *LAGOS_2060*, a collection that grew out of a scenario-planning workshop that asked participants to imagine what Lagos would look like in 2060. For more on how the scenario-planning industry has influenced African science fiction, see Matthew Eatough, "Planning the Future: Scenario Planning, Infrastructural Time, and South African Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 61.4 (Winter 2015): 587–611.

7 Of the aforementioned publications, only *Something Wicked* has ever been available in a print version (although this, too, went digital in 2011). StoryTime also publishes some print books—notably its popular

In the following essay, I provide a genealogy of this new African sci-fi culture. What new ways of thinking about social activism, intellectual labor, and structural change, I ask, are reflected in African writers' turn to the science-fiction genre, with its long historical spans and its emphasis on futurity? To what extent do African sci-fi narratives inherit Western science fiction's perspective on science, technology, and history—and to what extent do its unique formal features indicate important breaks with the Western sci-fi tradition? And, finally, what lines of convergence and divergence can we trace between African science fiction and other irrealist genres, such as the fantastic? Are these forms inflected by the same general social conditions and ideological impulses, or does the science-fiction boom represent the dialectical negation of earlier fantastical modes?

To answer these questions, I place African science fiction into dialogue with the development-planning industry. I begin my genealogy by surveying the types of fantastic narrative that emerged out of the realities of World Bank/IMF-led structural adjustment. As I show, African sci-fi narratives adapt the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the fantastic—which earlier writers had used to critique the unreal manifestations of global capitalism—and direct them at the new forms of developmentalist logic that surfaced in the early 2000s. Foremost among these new developments, I argue, was an extension of the economistic notion of "sustainable" growth into areas that had previously been seen as outside its purview—poverty reduction, social justice, and democratic governance. To fit their emphasis on free markets and austerity economics together with more immediately "social" concerns, development planners seized on recent theories of institutionality that stressed institutions' elongated temporal dimension—that is, the nature of the institution as a type of organization that persists over time. Comparing these theories to Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Lagoon*, I examine both how this notion of "institutional" solutions to social problems has altered our perceptions of social action and how sci-fi narratives have used the peculiar formal characteristics of their genre to try and speak to the elongated span of institutional time.

A Genealogy of Science Fiction: Development Planning after Structural Adjustment

To fully understand the recent growth of science fiction's popularity in Africa, we need to contextualize this trend within the social, political, and economic changes that have swept the continent in the last thirty-five years. Our story begins in the early 1980s, when, after two decades of growth in both readership and book production, the implementation of structural adjustments programs (or SAPs) caused African book markets to collapse. As the World Bank and IMF pressured governments to reduce their education budgets, and in the midst of widespread inflation brought on by the end of the oil boom and a negative balance of payments, book sales plummeted. By the end of the 1980s, African purchases accounted for only 20 percent of the net sales

AfroSF anthologies—but its regular stories are collected in an annual e-anthology, *African Roar*. It should also be pointed out that the increasing popularity of science fiction among African writers has been greeted by a rising interest in African sci-fi among academics. This interest is perhaps best reflected in recent special issues of *Paradoxa* (2013) and the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* (2016) devoted to this topic.

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for Heinemann's famed African Writers Series—down from 80 percent just ten years before.[8] These dismal figures would eventually lead to the collapse of the African Writers Series, as well as to the cancellation of popular genre fiction series, such as Macmillan's Pacesetters imprint and Spectrum's Sunshine Romances.[9] The local market for African literature would not recover until well into the 2000s, when improving economic conditions and emerging digital platforms helped to make book publishing a viable commercial venture once again.

These changes in African print culture affected not only the volume of texts in circulation, but also their formal properties. As many critics have shown, the African Writers Series, Macmillan's Pacesetter series, and other contemporary publications were characterized by a resolute attachment to realist forms of representation. Owing in large part to the felt need to articulate a shared sense of reality—one that would be immediately accessible to all readers, who were all presumed to be part of a unified national culture—the literature of the decolonization era internalized the realist premise that the world can be described in an objective register, one in which the enumeration of value-free information, usually transmitted by a reliable third-person narrator, would form the foundation for a consensual vision of reality.[10]

As SAPs went into effect in the 1980s, they eroded confidence in the realist consensus that had sustained African literature in the post-independence period. Disillusionment with failed economic policies—including the rejection of the socialist pact that had underwritten the independence movements—combined with unrest over the proliferation of military dictatorships, convinced many writers that the "reality" being promoted by nation-states was not the same "reality" being experienced by their populations. This alienation was reflected in a new brand of literature that was more self-consciously experimental than its predecessors. Novels such as Kojo Laing's *Search Sweet Country* (1986), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), and Mia Couto's *Terra Sonâmbula* (*Sleepwalking Land*, 1992) joined earlier anti-statist fictions from the 1960s and 1970s in challenging the epistemological realism wielded by both the official institutions of the nation-state—schools, the media, and so forth—and by the realist novel. These novels insist that reality can be grounded in principles other than the epistemological realism of the nation-state, whether those principles consist of "an appeal to an ethical universal" (as Kwame Anthony Appiah has suggested), of a defense of the writer's own subjective vision, or of a turn toward alternative sources of cultural knowledge (folklore, oral storytelling, popular performance, etc.).[11]

8 Robert Fraser, *Book History Through Postcolonial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 2008), 182.

9 See Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 26–119. The Macmillan Pacesetter series folded in the early 1990s, while Heinemann's African Writers Series continued on until 2003. In an interesting twist to this tale, Pearson has recently revived the African Writers Series under its own imprint. Like Heinemann's original series, Pearson's relaunched AWS is oriented primarily toward the education market, for which it publishes both reprints of classic AWS titles and new manuscripts.

10 See Susan Andrade, "The Problem of Realism and African Fiction," *Novel* 42.2 (Summer 2009): 183.

11 Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (Winter 1991): 353. Appiah is talking about second-generation novelists of the 1960s, but his theoretical perspective seems to me to also be representative of the 1980s period in which he himself is writing. On the relationship between "irrealist" literature and non-official cultural archives, see the

Among the many forms that this anti-realist impulse could take, perhaps the most important for the SAP period was the fantastic. As Jennifer Wenzel has shown, the fantastical narratives that became popular with Western audiences during these years—usually under the problematic label "magical realism"[12]—were not simply a return to a more "authentic" cultural tradition, as popular accounts often suggest. Rather, the fantastical elements of these fictions were a direct response to the structural contradictions that were being enacted by economic globalization. In the case of Nigeria, for example, the surrealistic fictions produced by Ben Okri—featuring, as Wenzel points out, "Juxtapositions of bombs and bullets, coups and executions, with herbalists and witch-doctors, talking animals and masquerades," all informed by "Yoruba narrative and cosmological traditions"—take place within a society in which the "magical" processes of oil extraction have largely undermined any discernible connection between labor and the creation of wealth.[13] Thus, when Okri describes magical visions of dead palm-wine tapsters who talk to snakes or medicines that spark hallucinogenic nightmares—as he does in his short-story collection *Stars of the Night Curfew*—he is not really taking about the "traditional," precapitalist world that Yoruba folklore sprang from. His true referent is the modern nation of Nigeria, whose primary economic commodity, oil, is being sold on international markets in order to fund various forms of conspicuous spending—expensive infrastructure-building projects, the purchasing of Western consumer goods, and the "lavish parties and mansions that secured social status within a highly volatile prestige economy."[14]

As Wenzel explains, this economic system is "magical" in the sense that wealth seems to appear out of nowhere. The displacement of oil sales onto global markets removes important stages of the economic process from sight, making it appear as if oil is being magically converted into money and commodities without any work on the part of Nigeria's labor force. This is why Okri's stories return over and over to modern capitalist processes—inflation ("the miracle . . . of multiplying currency"), oil drilling ("a weird spewing of oil and animal limbs from the ground"), and modern pharmaceuticals ("the POWER-DRUG" promised to cure "all the ailments . . . and afflictions of the poor"), among others.[15] His experiments with the fantastic are primarily concerned with finding a suitable form for representing a Nigerian economic system that can no longer be contained within the totalizing vision of ethnographic realism. And what makes the fantastic particularly useful for this project is

Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 49–80.

12 I am going to continue to use the term *fantastic* to avoid some of the more problematic connotations associated with *magical realism*. For a perceptive analysis of these debates, see Mariano Siskind, "The Global Life of Genres and the Material Travels of Magical Realism," *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 59–100.

13 Jennifer Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature," *Postcolonial Studies* 9.4 (2006), 456, 458. See also Sarah Lincoln's discussion of Okri, inflation, and petrodollars in " 'Petro-Magic Realism': Ben Okri's Inflationary Modernism," *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism*, eds. Mark Wollager with Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 249–66.

14 Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 39.

15 Ben Okri, *Stars of the Night Curfew* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1988]), 98, 136, 189.

precisely its ability to shatter the placid surface of the realist text by incorporating grotesque imagery that cannot be explained by the local context—just as economic globalization has shattered any idyllic understanding of the nation as a bounded socioeconomic system.

Interestingly, though, this attraction to the fantastic never extended into science fiction. Unlike the folklore-inflected fantastic that we find in Laing, Okri, Couto, and other writers of the SAP era, science fiction was too closely associated with American neocolonialism to function as a critique of economic globalization. Even leaving aside the genre's origins in colonial exploration tales,[16] it was hard for African writers to reconcile themselves with the amateur scientism found in science fiction. A case in point is the British-Ghanaian theorist Kodwo Eshun, who bluntly accuses science fiction of being a fictional analogue to the "futures industry"—a collection of development planners that use "mathematical formalizations such as computer simulations, economic projections, weather reports, futures trading, think-tank reports, [and] consultancy reports" to describe Africa as a "zone of absolute apocalypse."[17] Here, Eshun draws a straight line from science fiction's fantasies of the future to the types of expert planning that coincided with structural adjustment. For him, the reality of an externally imposed SAP system has effectively granted Western development planners a monopoly over imagining the future—one that, to use Timothy Mitchell's influential formulation, is solidified by a pseudo-scientific language of expert "planning" that treats African nations as static "objects" waiting to be analyzed by Western technocrats.[18] And insofar as science fiction shares these same formal qualities, it, too, participates in the SAP system. The pseudo-scientific language of the narrative, the projection of the story's events into the distant future, the fetishization of the (male) knowledge worker—all of these characteristics look far too much like the contemporary reality of structural adjustment for Eshun to be at all comfortable with them.

Nor is this connection between expert knowledge work and science fiction a new development. From early on in its history, science fiction has been intimately tied to evolving notions of scientific labor. This symbiotic relationship began in the 1940s when the editor of *Astounding Science-Fiction*, John W. Campbell, revolutionized the field by insisting that prospective authors familiarize themselves with modern science. Campbell's decision helped to enact a shift away from the "scientific romances" of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and toward a more recognizably scientific product.[19] Known as "hard SF," these tales included allusions to current scientific principles and terminology—nuclear physics, cybernetics, information theory, genetic engineering, and many others. But their real breakthrough was in the creation of a "scientific"

16 John Rieder discusses the connection between colonial exploration tales and science fiction in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 1–34.

17 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (Summer 2003): 290, 292.

18 Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 211.

19 Roger Luckhurst provides a good overview of the scientific romance and its differences from classic science fiction in *Science Fiction* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2005), 30–49. For a more detailed history of Campbell's influence on American science fiction, see Mike Ashley, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 107–11.

narrative voice. In the work of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clark, Robert A. Heinlein, and other hard SF writers, fantastical future technologies are presented in the logical language of scientific experimentation and discovery. Even when the end products are clearly fanciful, the narrative voice of these texts insists on what Kathryn Cramer calls "the scientific and technological accuracy arising from the proper attitude."[20] This was a distinct break from the earlier work of Wells, Verne, and earlier pulp stories, which had relied on mad scientists, "Lost Race" tales, and other tropes of Victorian adventure fiction. Where scientific romances were willing to let the reader suspend his or her disbelief, hard SF insisted that narratives should be written within a more realistic language of scientific speculation. We can hear this sentiment echoed years later in Nnedi Okorafor's assertion—correct or not—that "most modern technology was born within the pages of science fiction novels"—the "computer . . . Internet, cell phones, submarines, e-readers, satellites, and robots."[21] Science fiction may not be "science" per se, but according to the hard SF mindset, it *is* a type of theoretical knowledge work with direct affinities to the scientific imagination.

This transition from scientific romance to hard SF was facilitated by the expansion of university education in the postwar United States, which made an amateur knowledge of advanced scientific principles available to the middle-class audience who would constitute science fiction's readers and writers.[22] Indeed, it is not coincidental that science fiction flourished in the same years that the RAND Corporation, the Hudson Institute, and other similar think tanks were developing the forecasting tools that would later shape Eshun's "futures industry." The growth of both science fiction and the futures industry was a byproduct of the massive federal investment in scientific research, much of which took place within laboratories and research centers in US universities. The ambitious engineering projects that emerged from these labs promised technologies whose long-term effects were far from clear—nuclear power plants, synthetic pesticides, powerful supercomputers, and many others. Officially, the task of outlining the possible effects of new technologies fell to think tanks such as the RAND Corporation, whose scenario-based simulations of nuclear warfare spawned an entire cottage industry in the 1960s and 1970s.[23] But less officially, science-fiction writers who had been exposed to recent scientific breakthroughs in their college courses took it upon themselves to formulate their own predications about the future.

It is in this sense that Alvin Toffler is able to speak about science fiction as "a kind of sociology of the future," one whose primary virtue is not in its literary function but in its "value as a mind stretching force for the creation of the habit of anticipation."[24] Toffler's claim is demonstrably false if we characterize science and sociology as

20 Kathryn Cramer, "Hard Science Fiction," *The Cambridge Companion to Science* Fiction, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 189.

21 Nnedi Okorafor, "African Science Fiction Is Still Alien," n.p.

22 For a more detailed history of university expansion in the postwar United States, see Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1–15.

23 A short list of such think-tanks would include the Institute for the Future (founded in 1968), the Hawai'i Research Center for Future Studies (1971), the Tellus Institute (1976), and the National Intelligence Council (1979).

24 Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (London: Pan, 1971), 384.

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formalized academic disciplines. But if we instead think of them as fields of knowledge—ones whose general principles were being relayed to students across the country—then science fiction emerges as a space where amateur scientism collides with advanced university research. Science-fiction writers were usually not "experts" in their chosen fields,[25] but by projecting the effects of current technologies into the distant future, they *were* able to use literature's potential for envisioning new worlds to insert themselves into scientific discourses from which they would otherwise be excluded.[26] Indeed, in the literary world, a bit of distance from expert scientific knowledge could actually be a net positive: if modern scientific discourse was deeply invested in present-day technologies, science-fiction writers could characterize themselves as amateur knowledge workers whose job was to imagine what might come *next*. This is something that fiction is able to do better than science because, as Catherine Gallagher points out, fiction is fundamentally about "plausibility." Fiction is the realm where the "nonreferential . . . could be judged generally true even though all of [its] particulars are merely imaginary"—just as science fiction can be "generally true" in its pseudo-scientific language even though its hypotheses are "merely imaginary."[27]

This connection among science fiction, knowledge work, and the university points us to one of the reasons why science fiction took so long to catch on in Africa. The problem that science fiction posed to African writers was that it grounded in a specific ideological space—the land-grant research university—that was rapidly being undermined by SAPs.[28] As part of their general effort to eliminate "wasteful" spending, in 1986 World Bank officials suggested to a group of African vice-chancellors that they drastically reduce the size of their institutions. According to the World Bank, it would be more cost-effective to simply close African universities and train prospective students overseas, where they would benefit from higher-quality institutions. If African universities *were* to remain open, continued the Bank's representatives, then they should be restructured into technical colleges that would jettison expensive postgraduate programs and redirect funding away from arts and humanities courses.[29] Doing so would not only respond to "labor market demands"—that is, reductions in the number of public service jobs, positions traditionally

25 There are some exceptions to this general rule. Isaac Asimov, for example, was a professor of biochemistry at Boston University.

26 On literature as a type of world-building activity, see Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

27 Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," *The Novel, Volume 1*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 342. Early on, some futurological think tanks recognized the potential that science fiction held for their profession. In 1964, for example, the RAND Corporation employed both Asimov and Clark as consultants for one of its Delphi forecasts.

28 For a more in-depth discussion of how state officials adopted the US land-grant university as a model for Nigeria's education system, see Ogechi E. Anyanwu, *The Politics of Access: University Education and Nation-Building in Nigeria, 1948–2000* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2011), 74–101.

29 Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace: The Dilemmas of Neo-Liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989–2005* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007), 260. There is a certain irony in the fact that the motto of one of the most important African universities in the post-independence years, Makerere University, is "we build for the future." This motto expresses the faith that many independence-era intellectuals placed in the university, but it also hints at the futural logic that would eventually overtake national development schemes.

occupied by graduates from the humanities—but would also shrink the overall size of universities, which, the World Bank insisted, had "exceeded what can currently be justified by economic growth."[30]

None of the assembled vice-chancellors took the World Bank up on its offer to end university education, but the realities of austerity economics by and large produced the same result. Between shrinking budgets and an aid system that granted Western development planners a virtual monopoly in certain fields, many aspiring professionals chose to relocate to better-funded Western universities and to more competitive job markets.[31] Over the next twenty-plus years, the great "brain drain" of African intellectuals would see hundreds of thousands of college graduates emigrate to the United States and western Europe.[32] By 2005, the World Bank would estimate that anywhere from "a quarter to almost a half of the college-educated nationals" of sub-Saharan countries were living abroad.[33] Most of these émigrés had taken advantage of new immigration policies that favored educated STEM workers, and which along with SAPs had helped to consolidate the booming trade in intellectual-property industries in the global north.[34] At the same time, those students and faculty who remained in Africa often found themselves at odds with the new university regime, whose policies had resulted in higher fees and a demonstrably lower-quality level of education. Anti-World Bank/IMF demonstrations became a regular feature on campuses in Nigeria, Kenya, and many other countries, often in conjunction with protests against other forms of austerity. When combined with regular faculty strikes over nonpayment of wages, these demonstrations effectively ground higher education to a halt. University closings became a regular feature of the 1980s and 1990s, with graduation numbers plummeting despite rising enrollments.[35]

It is little wonder, then, that a writer such as Eshun would see science fiction as a form of neocolonialism. Seen from this angle, the pressing question is not "Why did it take so long for science fiction to arrive in Africa?" but rather "What has changed in the last ten years to suddenly make science fiction an attractive genre for African writers?" What shifts in development policy, the global allocation of knowledge work,

30 World Bank, *Educational Policies for Sub-Saharan Africa: Adjustment, Revitalization, and Expansion* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1987), 100.

31 Because the World Bank/IMF aid system was premised on nations overhauling their economic policies, the two organizations would "lend" personnel who were up-to-date on neoliberal orthodoxy. As Mamdani observes, this system pushed out local economists and engineers and replaced them with Western counterparts, essentially giving the World Bank and IMF a protected monopoly in several professional fields. See Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace*, 260.

32 See Silvia Federici, "Globalization and Professionalization in Africa," *Social Text* 79.2 (Summer 2004): 81–99.

33 Celia W. Dugger, quoted in Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace*, 260.

34 For a detailed analysis of how changes in US immigration laws led to the consolidation of STEM workers in the global north, see Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 139–56, and Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 147–79.

35 Federici, "Globalization and Professionalization in Africa," 88, and Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and Ousseina Alidou, *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African Universities* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), 118–24. The university shutdowns sparked by structural adjustment have become a regular topic within present-day African novels (e.g., Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*).

and literature's own world-system have made it possible for a writer like Nnedi Okorafor to charge African writers with the duty to participate in "the creative process of global imagining that advances technology through stories"?[36] Or to develop the small-but-growing sci-fi culture that I described in this essay's first pages?

In part, the recent rise of science fiction speaks to key shifts in the nature of SAPs. Although scholars often talk about the structural adjustment period as if it were a single homogenous program, in reality there have been several distinct stages within the history of SAPs. After the disastrous implementation of economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank and the IMF, in conjunction with the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, began to place a heightened emphasis on what they called "poverty reduction strategies" (PRSs). Admitting that "progress has been less than hoped for" and that "lack of opportunity," "low . . . improvements in health and education," and "low level[s] of security" had in many cases deepened poverty, the World Bank shifted gears.[37] From now on, it stipulated, countries seeking debt relief must first complete Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). These documents outlined how donor recipients would ensure that aid packages would benefit the "long-term" well-being of each nation's poorest citizens,[38] rather than simply pad the coffers of a kleptocratic elite.[39] According to the World Bank, such strategies would form the foundation for the ambitious poverty-fighting objectives that would eventually be codified in the United Nation's 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later reaffirmed in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By building "participatory and public institutions,"[40] African nations would be able to "end poverty and hunger everywhere," establish "peaceful, just and inclusive societies," "protect human rights and promote gender equality," "ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources," and achieve any number of other utopian goals articulated in the United Nations's development agendas.[41]

For our purposes, what is most noteworthy about PRSPs is how they adapted notions of social and economic justice to the logic of structural adjustment by means of a rhetoric of "long-term visions."[42] Unwilling to concede that social welfare programs had played any role in combating poverty, the World Bank hypothesized that post-SAP poverty-reduction schemes had failed because they had focused "largely on public expenditures and . . . spending on social programs [rather] than on infrastructure, rural development, and other areas with poverty reduction potential."[43]

36 Nnedi Okorafor, "African Science Fiction Is Still Alien."

37 The World Bank, *A Sourcebook for Poverty Reduction Strategies: Core Techniques and Cross-Cutting Issues* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004), 2–3.

38 The World Bank, *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative: An Independent Evaluation of the World Bank's Support Through 2003* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004), 20.

39 The irony, of course, is that the PRSP system effectively blamed African countries for the socio-economic inequalities and undemocratic governments that privatization and liberalization had helped to facilitate. For an overview of the debates surrounding PRSPs, see Jeremy Gould, ed., *The New Conditionality: The Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies* (London: Zed, 2005).

40 World Bank, *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative*, 54.

41 United Nations, Division for Sustainable Development, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015), 4.

42 World Bank, *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative*, 14.

43 Ibid., viii.

The problem with such programs, insisted the World Bank, was that they failed to promote the "institutional capacity development" that would make poverty-reduction programs "sustainable."[44] In making this distinction, the organization drew a firm distinction between the immediacy of specific social welfare programs—which were characterized as momentary alleviations of poverty that did nothing to fix the overall system—and the "long-term" benefits of "institutional" reform. Doubling down on the logic of "structural" reform that had underwritten its economic policies, the Bank lauded institutions as mechanisms that could eliminate poverty by transforming the structural conditions that produce economic inequality in the first place. According to this logic, well-designed institutions would organically lead to a more just and equitable distribution of resources, without the need for expensive welfare programs that dealt with the symptoms of poverty rather than its underlying causes. All that was needed was for the countries to properly plan and implement the necessary institutional reforms—a process that the World Bank marketed through its Vision 2020 initiative, in which low-income countries were asked to outline the comprehensive structural changes that would lead to more egalitarian societies.

The catch, though, was that the effect of these institutional reforms would be felt only in the distant future. Both the IMF and the World Bank are vague about what exactly such "institutions" look like—their descriptions of institutions tend to mix broad generalizations about democracy, broad participation, and anti-corruption with appeals to local ownership—but they do agree on one thing: "Improvements in the quality of policies and institutions require time."[45] In this, both organizations are following a tradition in economics and political science that defines institutions by their elongated temporal span. James March and John Olson, for example, speak of institutions as "relatively enduring collection[s] of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of the turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances."[46] In other words, what makes an institution an institution is precisely its stability over time. In contrast to individual policies and programs, which are implemented by specific individuals for specific periods of time, institutions are practices that extend *beyond* the present moment. What an institution does in the future is the same as what it has done in the past, and this consistency lends its actions an aura of "sustainability." The institution is not subject to the volatilities of the present day, and for this reason it can extend its benefits far into the future—by promising, for instance, that the correct democratic institutions will ensure that the poor have access to much-needed social services in the years to come.

Unfortunately for African countries, the presumed *absence* of such institutions in the present suggested that nations would have to wait years for any benefits

44 Ibid., 31.

45 Ibid., 35.

46 James March and John Olsen, quoted in Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 58. The most substantive introduction to the theory of institutional history is Orfeo Fioretos, Tulia G. Falleti, and Adam Sheingate, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Historical Institutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). My thanks to Robert Higney for this source, as well as for introducing me to the field of institutionalism.

to materialize. This situation has led to a curious blend of action and passivity. On the one hand, African governments have been incorporated more directly into the planning process than in the past, as they have been given a chance to write their own "long-term visions" as a gesture toward democratic "ownership" of their own institutions.[47] On the other hand, though, the World Bank's institutionalist focus has seemly evacuated the agency of those same governments. After all, if what is *really* important is the future evolution of sustainable institutions, then all that any single person can do is help "adjust" his or her country's institutions, and then wait. The planning document thus becomes a sort of fetishistic substitute for social action, the drafting of its speculative "vision" tantamount to the creation of that future. A prime example of this can be found in Nigeria's ambitious 2009 plan, *Nigeria Vision 20:2020*, which stresses how its "authentic blueprint" will enable the "Nigerian people . . . to transform the lives of the average Nigerian."[48] Here, the plan itself becomes the vehicle of social action, as indicated by how quickly the text generalizes its drafters—"1,000 of the nation's leading professionals and thinkers"—into a voice for the entirety of the "Nigerian people."[49] Yet because the promised changes will occur only far into the future, the only place where we can see the effects of institutional reform *is in the document itself*: its "vision" of a "large, strong, diversified, sustainable and competitive economy" that guarantees "a high standard of living and quality of life to its citizens" emerges as the sole imaginary space where this utopian dream is currently possible.[50]

On first glance, this system would seem to restrict social agency to the World Bank, the IMF, and its allies in national governments. But the PRSP initiative was also central in establishing a broader social imaginary linking social justice to the *longue durée*. In doing so, it not only valorized the labor of its own planners, but also cleared a space for other competing visions of the future.

Social Agency in the *Longue Durée*: Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

In this sense, we could see the recent science-fiction boom as an attempt to grapple with social issues on the elongated timescale demanded by PRSPs. Indeed, if the fantastic provided a vehicle through which earlier writers were able to visualize the contradictions of structural adjustment, then the turn to science fiction entails an opening up of this fantastic—and the structural contradictions that go with it—onto the future. Where the fantastic of a Ben Okri highlighted the disjunction between local populations and the global forces shaping their world, science fiction provides a way of

47 World Bank, *The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative*, vii. Despite the rhetoric of local ownership, many PRSPs were drawn up by expatriates who had worked at one time or another for the World Bank or the IMF. For example, Nigeria's post-2003 development strategy, entitled NEEDS (National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy), was written by Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a former managing director of the World Bank. Okonjo-Iweala's account of the writing of this development plan can be found in *Reforming the Unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

48 National Planning Commission, *Nigeria Vision 20:2020* (Abuja: Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2009), 9. Similar "vision" strategies were completed by Tanzania (*Tanzania 2025*), Mozambique (*Agenda 2025*), and South Africa (*Vision 2025*), among many others.

49 Ibid., 9.

50 Ibid., 9.

mapping similar disjunctions between the present and the future onto the *longue durée* of institutional change.

A perfect example of this engagement can be found in the work of the Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor. As the daughter of two Nigerian immigrants, Okorafor is very much a product of the intellectual diaspora that took place after SAPs went into effect. Trained at the University of Illinois, Michigan State University, and the University of Illinois–Chicago, Okorafor has written eloquently about the alienation she experienced on first encountering American science fiction: "what distanced me . . . was feeling that I was not part of the stories; I didn't exist in them. I suspect the same can be said for many African writers who might consider writing science fiction."[51] Yet unlike Chikere and Eshun, she has repeatedly insisted that science fiction can nevertheless be a valuable genre for African fiction. In a blog post that should strike us as remarkably similar in language to the planning documents we just examined, Okorafor argues that African writers *must* take up science fiction. Otherwise, they are at risk of remaining "absent from the creative process of global imagining that advances technology through stories."[52] Here, we see Okorafor characterizing science fiction as a type of professional knowledge work, one that is intimately connected to a future-oriented planning (or what she calls an "imagining that advances"). Moreover, the brunt of her argument does not fall solely on the advancement of technology in and of itself, but on how the "imagining" of this technology can be used "to redress political and social issues."[53] Such a view echoes the prevailing sense among development planners that institutional reforms need to be more responsive to social justice issues. At the same time, it places Okorafor within a budding crop of sci-fi writers who have taken an active interest in social issues (e.g., Nola Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, and China Miéville).

Okorafor engages most explicitly with the logic of development planning in her 2014 novel, *Lagoon*. A story about an alien civilization that lands in Lagos, Okorafor's novel is perhaps most noteworthy for how it subordinates plot, characterization, and descriptive detail to its vision of future institutional change. Compared to Okorafor's other adult fictions,[54] which delight in the thick descriptions of alien cultures that science fiction borrows from anthropology,[55] *Lagoon* devotes little time to sketching out either the physiology or the culture of the aliens' ambassador, Ayodele. Outside of certain broad references to ecological balance and the aliens' collective sense of self, we learn almost nothing about their biological makeup, their social structure, or their motivations. Nor does the novel place a high emphasis on action. After an initial contact scene in which three human characters are summoned to Lagos's Bar Beach and then abducted by the unnamed aliens, the narrative contains only the most barebones,

51 Okorafor, "African Science Fiction Is Still Alien."

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Okorafor began her writing career as an author of young-adult fiction. Though she is perhaps more well-known among scholars for her adult fiction, her early YA novels *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *The Shadow Speaker* were both well received by critics.

55 For example, Okorafor's earlier novel *Who Fears Death* resembles Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in its in-depth description of certain cultural rituals, such as the account of female circumcision that occupies the novel's early chapters. See Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* (New York: DAW, 2011), 32–51. On science fiction's debt to anthropology, see Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, 1–34.

formulaic plot. The three abductees—Adaora, a marine biologist; Agu, a soldier in the Nigerian army; and Anthony, a Ghanaian hip-hop artist—reveal to one another that they possess a number of mysterious, supernatural powers. They are then tasked by the aliens with bringing Ayodele to meet Nigeria's president. A chaotic car ride to the airport, an even more chaotic boat trip to the aliens' ship, and the characters' mission is accomplished in fairly short order. Instead of the dramatic action that we are led to expect from the novel's initial framing as a sort of adventure tale, *Lagoon* ends on a note of ambiguity: the aliens announce "We are change," but the narrative does not proceed far enough into the future to let us in on what this "change" will be.[56]

Part of the reason why Okorafor minimizes the importance of dramatic action in her novel has to do with her understanding of social change. Much like the World Bank documents that I examined in the previous section of this essay, Okorafor sees social agency as something that is dispersed in both time and space. This enlarged sense of agency is reflected in the novel's formal structure, which frequently breaks away from its three main characters so as to provide a more kaleidoscopic panorama of Lagosian life. Every chapter or two, Okorafor inserts a short vignette that refracts the aliens' arrival through the consciousness of various peripheral characters: evangelical ministers, abusive husbands, 419 scammers, LGBT activists, and even local wildlife. These vignettes vary in length and in narrative importance: some are one-off snapshots that provide a fleeting glimpse into a particular facet of Lagosian society, while others return several times to the same characters—only to be abruptly discarded later in the narrative. For instance, one brief chapter alights on a 419 scammer, alias "Legba," who watches as Ijele, the Igbo "Chief of All Masquerades," crawls into a computer screen along with one of the alien visitors.[57] Another series of vignettes focuses on an LGBT group known as the "Black Nexus," who see the aliens' arrival as their chance to come out of the closet. In contrast to the Legba subplot, however, this narrative arc is spread out over several chapters, and its characters seem to be more essential to the novel's action—until Okorafor unexpectedly abandons them as well, about halfway through the narrative.

Taken in their totality, these vignettes serve as Okorafor's method for confronting the types of social problems that PRSPs sought to alleviate. Each vignette calls the reader's attention to a particular social issue for which there seems to be no immediate solution—at least, not in the characters' contemporary reality. Okorafor establishes this pattern early on in her narrative, when her first shifts in perspective away from the Adaora/Agu/Anthony trio are to Adaora's husband, Chris, and his religious adviser, Father Oke. Chris has joined Father Oke's evangelical church after a near-death experience, and Okorafor uses Chris's conversations with Father Oke to stress the dangers of religious fundamentalism—chief among which, in Okorafor's eyes, is its propensity to prey off of pervasive feelings of injured masculinity. Father Oke is presented as a corrupt clergyman who cares only for wealth and power: he exploits his parishioners' anxieties about their shrinking authority over their wives and children in order to extract both money and unthinking obedience from them. When Chris tells Father Oke about how Adaora demonstrated supernatural powers when he tried to hit her earlier that day, pinning him to the floor with an invisible force field, Father Oke

56 Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (New York: Saga, 2014), 39, 278.
57 Ibid., 198.

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assures him that Adaora was able to overpower him only because "women are . . . weak vessels" whose only strength comes from immoral "witchcraft."[58] And just in case the reader has not grasped the connection between religious fundamentalism and the reassertion of patriarchal authority, Father Oke blames Adaora's "witchcraft" on her education ("What did you expect when you married a woman ocean biologist?") and promises to help Chris get "back in control of his life and his wife" by "witch slapping" Adaora—a controversial rite practiced by certain evangelical sects in Nigeria, in which a preacher vows to cleanse "evil" from a community by enacting ritualized violence against a scapegoated woman—to wit, by slapping her.[59]

From a formalist perspective, what is interesting about this narrative structure is how it simulates the long duration of institutional change within a compressed time frame. Rather than flesh out this narrative through the techniques of social realism—in which we might expect Okorafor to sketch out the root causes of fundamentalism, detail its scope, and diagnose the possibilities for individual and collective action—*Lagoon* treats these vignettes as static representations of social problems. After describing the dangers of religious fundamentalism, Okorafor abruptly cuts off Father Oke's storyline without offering a narrative resolution. The same approach is taken to LGBT rights, 419 scams, corruption in the military, and all of the other social problems that the novel introduces: after a brief snapshot that frames each issue, Okorafor shifts her attention away from these subplots, as if to suggest that none of Nigeria's problems can be solved through immediate and direct action. By the end of the novel, almost all of the narrative's subplots have been discarded—and, with them, all references to domestic abuse, religious fundamentalism, LGBT rights, 419 scams, and any other concrete social issue.

In their place, the narrative offers a more generalized notion of institutional reform. The closer we come to the "change" promised by the alien visitors, the more the novel shifts its focus onto Nigeria's president. After the president is cured of a mysterious illness by the aliens,[60] he takes to the airwaves to proclaim Nigeria's rebirth through institutional reform. In a speech broadcast to every electronic device in the country, the president tells his constituents that the aliens' "new technologies" and "fresh ideas" will put an end to "Nigeria's soul-crushing corruption" and bring about "a maturing democracy."[61] It is only *after* the president has trumpeted these institutional reforms that he finally turns to anything resembling social issues, and even then his language is couched in vague allusions to the "social programs" that

58 Ibid., 35.

59 Ibid., 33–34, 45. The practice of witch-slapping garnered widespread attention in 2011 when David Oyedepo, one of Nigeria's wealthiest evangelists, was filmed slapping a young girl. The video made national and international headlines, and eventually led to a lawsuit against Oyedepo and his church. Okorafor scatters a number of direct references to this video throughout her novel. Like Oyedepo, Father Oke decides to film his witch-slapping ceremony; and Father Oke slaps one alleged "witch" for uttering the same words that set Oyedepo off: "I'm a winch [witch] . . . for Jesus." See Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 59.

60 Okorafor obliquely associates this "illness" with Nigeria's oil economy. When we first meet the president, he is off receiving treatment in Saudi Arabia. His eventual return to Nigeria is framed as a moralized turn away from a Saudilike petroeconomy. Thus, in his speech to the nation the president insists that "Oil could no longer be Nigeria's top commodity. It could no longer be a commodity at all." See Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 272.

61 Ibid., 274, 276.

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"we will set up" in "the coming months."[62] No mention is made of LGBT rights, protections for women, checks to be placed on Nigeria's powerful evangelical churches, environmental regulations, or antipoverty programs. It is simply assumed that these details will be tackled once the proper "trained officials" are in place—once, that is, the institutions have been created.[63]

Okorafor's rhetoric is clearly reminiscent of the language used by the World Bank and the IMF, which similarly locates social change in institutions rather than in any form of imminent social action. And herein lies the efficacy of the science-fiction genre to her project. Unlike realist fiction or the fantastic, which are more invested in immediacy than in the distant future—just think of the emphasis that the classical realist novel places on description or of how the fantastic relies on visual spectacles to develop its social critique[64]—science fiction is a narrative form expressly designed to capture the *longue durée* of institutional change. As Fredric Jameson has shown, science fiction frequently uses images of alien civilizations as a means for representing just this type of gradual historical change. In Jameson's canonical reading, the alien body's radical foreignness serves as a cipher for precisely those future historical events that are unknowable from our present standpoint. And by bringing us, as readers, face-to-face with that foreignness, the alien body offers a condensation of long-reaching historical processes that exceed any individual human life span—the biological evolution of the species, the development of new modes of production, and changing social structures.[65]

In the case of *Lagoon*, these unknowable events are the growth of institutions themselves—which, in keeping with the World Bank and IMF's definition, are treated as nothing more than coagulations of time. By juxtaposing the "change" that the aliens herald with the institutionalist rhetoric of developmentalist economics, Okorafor condenses a series of vague, unnamed structural processes into a single allegorical image. And in doing so, she is able to visualize deep historical currents that are ordinarily distinguished by their *inability* to be reduced to any single person, action, or time period. Okorafor drives home this very point by ending the president's speech with a utopian vision of ecological harmony: ". . . the land would be pure and palm nuts, cocoa, and other crops would grow as they never had before. Extinct creatures would return and new ones would appear. . . . The change will be both gradual and swift."[66] This sudden transition away from democratic institutions and toward the natural world provides Okorafor with a clichéd symbol of deep time. Ever since James Hutton first coined the phrase "deep time," it has been a concept that has been

62 Ibid., 278. As Hugh Charles O'Connell points out, these "alien" ideas can easily be seen as analogues to the "benevolent neoimperialism of neoliberalism wrought by the IMF and World Bank." As O'Connell explains, both World Bank/IMF developmentalism and *Lagoon*'s alien contact narrative represent change as coming from some "outside [. . .] context." See O'Connell, " 'We are Change': The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafo's *Lagoon*," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (September 2016): 299.

63 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 277.

64 On the realist novel and description, see Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 15–26. On the connection between visual spectacles and certain modes of the fantastic, see Apter, *The Pan-African Nation*, 121–66.

65 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Essays* (New York: Verso, 2005), 119–41.

66 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 278.

identified primarily with evolutionary and ecological processes, from Darwin's theories about natural selection to present-day analyses of the "slow violence" inflicted by industrial pollution.[67] Here, however, the image of ecological harmony is folded into a longer discourse on institutional reform and future social programs, so that the reader is left with the understanding that what we are *really* witnessing is an allegorical representation of institutional evolution. By speeding up ecological time, Okorafor suggests that institutional reform will be equally cleansing for Nigeria's social and political environment. And by deflecting her primary symbol for institutional change away from human society, she is able to honor the injunction against equating institutional time with any specific actors or events—just as the World Bank has cautioned governments against relying on short-term social programs.

To be fair, Okorafor is not advocating for the same type of social passivity that the World Bank and the IMF are. If anything, *Lagoon* seeks to collapse the future back into the present through its formal properties. After all, one of the primary goals that science fiction tries to achieve is to make the future present. By summoning up images of a hypothetical future, sci-fi narratives project radical change into tomorrow, but they *also* bring that future into existence in the present moment of the reading act. Readers are provided with a glimpse into a utopian "now" that is not our world, but is given shape and substance in the pages before us. And insofar as this world is given a concrete existence in our own, present-day reality, it is ready at hand in a way that the World Bank's long-term visions simply are not.

Lagoon negotiates this Janus-faced temporality by hinting that the "gradual and swift" transformations that the Nigerian president alludes to may have been at work for far longer than anyone initially realizes. In one of the more bizarre developments in the novel, Adaora, Anthony, and Agu suddenly reveal that they have always possessed what the reader has been led to assume were alien-granted powers. As the three characters describe their childhood discovery of their powers, Adaora reflects that "maybe it's always been there. Beneath the surface."[68] The pop Freudianism contained in these lines becomes a prominent motif in the novel's final pages, as Ayodele repeatedly reiterates that humans "need help not only on the outside but also within."[69] And although such refrains clearly echo a certain language of self-help that has become prevalent under neoliberalism, they also situate the beginning of institutional reform in the *past*, buried within the collective unconscious of the Nigerian people. In doing so, Okorafor is able to move the impending transformation to a just, equitable society nearer to the present day: because the long time span needed for institutional growth has been displaced backward into the past, the notion of a "gradual and swift" change is no longer a paradox. Rather, it is the logical articulation of a process that has been simmering "beneath the surface" for years, and now promises to erupt onto the scene, seemingly from out of nowhere—like a spaceship full of aliens.

If this is the same general logic that underwrites PRSPs, it is also a variant of that logic that refuses to wait and watch. Although *Lagoon*'s narrative is bound by the

67 On the "slow violence" of environmental pollution, see Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
68 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 258.
69 Ibid., 268.

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injunction to imagine institutional change as a deep-historical process, the novel also searches to find ways of instantiating those transformations in the present day. For now, such immediate revolutions seem to be imaginable only through certain species of narrative—in science fiction's elongated temporal frame or in the projective rhetoric of planning. But *Lagoon* at least holds out hope that we might discover new methods—and new imaginaries—for envisioning social change.

Conclusion: Science Fiction as Afropolitan World-System

Does this mean that Okorafor is simply a type of amateur development planner—eager to initiate a social revolution in the present, but bound by a temporal imaginary dictated by PRSPs? Yes and no. It's important to note that development planners do not have a monopoly over the language of structural change. Many left-wing activists would agree that reform needs to take place on an institutional level. If anything, the general drift of radical critical theory over the last fifty years has been to emphasize forms of structural violence over overt displays of discrimination. Dependency theory, critical race theory, postcolonialism, feminism, and ecocriticism—to name just a few—have all stressed the limitations that systems place on individual action, as well as the need for a more widespread transformation of discourse, ideology, and institutions. In Frantz Fanon's famous words, it is only once such "a fundamental redistribution of relations between men" has taken place that "a new humanism . . . which embodies the actual aspirations of the people" can come into existence.[70]

But *Lagoon*'s fixation on the long-term growth of institutions *does* place its faith in the same class of intellectual workers lauded by the development-planning industry. By privileging the revolutionary power of "ideas," "technology," and "programs," Okorafor's novel tacitly agrees with one of the fundamental premises of the PRSP system—namely, that socioeconomic development will be presided over by a benevolent class of (Western-)educated planners.[71] We see this predilection in full force during the president's speech to the Nigerian public. As he strives to sell the public on his vision of institutional reform, the president trumpets the "expert" authorities who will oversee this transition: "He mentioned Adaora, the marine biologist, who would serve as his scientific exper . . . [He] spoke of two soldiers [Agu and one of his compatriots, Hassam] . . . These were the trained officials he was appointing to take the lead in keeping everyone safe."[72] Significantly, the president does not think "the world needed to know *what* he planned to do, he just needed to do it."[73] This is because mass political action is largely irrelevant in a world in which intellectual labor power is conceived of as the driving force of history. From the perspective of World Bank–style institutionalism, agency lies in the hands of the technocratic planners who draft "long-term visions," whether these are the "1,000 professionals" who assembled the *Nigeria Vision 20:2020* document or the "trained

70 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), 178–79.

71 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 276, 278.

72 Ibid., 277.

73 Ibid., 277. The president is attributing these thoughts to Anthony, the Ghanaian rapper. But his words are more telling about his own views than they are about Anthony's.

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officials" and "experts" of Okorafor's novel. These are the workers who are able to put their education to use by constructing elaborate visions of future societies, and these are the workers whose imaginings of the future are accorded a weight far beyond those of the rest of the population.

This confidence in technical expertise articulates one of the dominant fantasies of post-SAP fiction, and of African science fiction in particular. As intellectual labor has come to be increasingly located outside of the continent—in northern universities, medical centers, and boardrooms—many writers have struggled to imagine how this new global class might be harnessed to the project of national development. For Okorafor, as for many other African sci-fi writers, the most popular solution to this puzzle has been to fantasize about a repatriation of intellectual labor. Thus, in *Lagoon* Okorafor makes it a point to stress that Adaora "taught for some years at the University of California Santa Barbara" before opting "to return home."[74] This "return home" is remarkably similar to plotlines found in a wide range of contemporary African fiction, including Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, Deji Bryce Olukotun's sci-fi thriller *Nigerians in Space*, and Okorafor's own novella *Binti*. In each of these texts, protagonists leave their home countries to study abroad, only to decide that their new skills are best put to use in their native lands. The ensuing "brain gain"—to use Olukotun's playful term for this phenomenon—incorporates the human capital embodied in this global "Afropolitan" class back into the African nation-state.[75] And yet, in this post-SAP world, it seems as if such an intellectual elite can be produced only through a systolic-diastolic motion: first, an outward dispersion into the northern bastions of higher learning; next, a heroic return from "exile," but one that does not fully efface the transnational identity of the Afropolitan intellectual.

The popularity of this trope leads me to two final observations about African science fiction. First, I think that it is important that we recognize the tight overlap between African science fiction's fantasy of intellectual repatriation and sci-fi writers' own institutional location. The human capital that sci-fi writers valorize as *the* essential infrastructure for institutional growth and national development is, in a very real sense, the same capital that they and their readers possess. One need only glance at the many magazines, micro-presses, and anthologies dedicated to African science fiction to see how much this is the case. Almost all such publications are *digital* in nature, which speaks not only to the technophilia of the science fiction genre, but also to the genre's reliance on a transnational community of educated, professional readers—one that can be reached more easily through digital platforms than through local book markets. Even more telling, a sizable number of the writers publishing on these platforms are members of the selfsame "Afropolitan" class that Okorafor, Adichie, and Olukotun feature in their fictions. Okorafor and Olukotun, for example, both grew up in the United States and

74 Ibid., 64–65.

75 Deji Bryce Olukotun, *Nigerians in Space* (Los Angeles, CA: Ricochet, 2014), 26. I am, of course, using the term *Afropolitan* in the popular sense described by Taiye Selasi: "We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world . . . [a] scattered tribe of pharmacists, physicists, physicians, (and the odd polygamist) [who have] set up camp around the globe." Selasi, too, connects this "Afropolitan" class to the intellectual diaspora that "left Africa in pursuit of higher education and happiness abroad." See Selasi, "Bye Bye Babar," *The LIP*, March 3, 2005.

undertook graduate work in US universities (the University of Illinois–Chicago and Stanford, respectively). Similarly, many of the amateur authors featured in *LAGOS_2060*, *AfroSF*, and *Omenana* are educated professionals—doctors, architects, management consultants, and so on. All of these particularities point to African science fiction's tendency to bypass national audiences in favor of a broader Afropolitan readership—one that has been routed through global institutions of higher learning and one whose members have more in common with one another than they do with their fellow nationals.

My second observation has to do with the politics of genre. If, as I have argued, African science fiction has predicated its vision of institutional growth on the "expert" knowledge of Afropolitan intellectuals, the transnational nature of this class has also enabled sci-fi narratives to sidestep the normative politics of much prize-winning African fiction—the most notable being the liberal perspective championed by the *Bildungsroman* genre. In his compelling account of postcolonial fiction, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, Joseph Slaughter associates the *Bildungsroman* form with "a larger discourse of development that is imagined to be governed by natural laws and that is historically bound to the modern institutions and technics of state legitimacy."[76] For Slaughter, the widespread popularity of the *Bildungsroman* form has narrowed the politics of African fiction into a classically liberal form: the nation-state becomes enshrined as the foundation for personal "development," and the state's legitimacy is in turn buttressed by a public sphere of rational discourse. Because of this ideological move, such novels tend to conceive of political action in a classically liberal set of terms—individual and group rights, inclusion within the state hierarchy, and, of course, personal freedom.

Yet it is this very national public sphere—and the political positions that go along with it—that African science fiction manages to evade. By grounding themselves in a transnational community of readers, African sci-fi novels place themselves at a certain remove from the authorizing institutions of the nation-state. No longer beholden to liberal narratives of national-personal development, these texts become permeable to the radical politics that have often found a ready home in the sci-fi genre—for example, in the libertarianism of a Robert A. Heinlein, the democratic socialism of a Kim Stanley Robinson, the anarchism of an Ursula K. LeGuin, and in the emerging LGBT and alt-right voices that have dominated the field in recent years.[77] All of these writers have found science fiction's vaunted subcultural community to be more welcoming to radical politics than mainstream middlebrow fiction. The small, niche audience formed by its consumers—whether these are the self-proclaimed "geeks" of US fandom or the Afropolitan readers of African science fiction—has allowed writers to cultivate readers who define themselves by their social, political, and aesthetic *distance* from mainstream culture. And in the vision of long-term change that is so

76 Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 93.

77 I am thinking in particular of the recent controversies over the Hugo Awards. In 2016, a vocal alt-right fan group, the so-called "Rabid Puppies," led by men's activist Vox Day, attempted to prevent women and nonwhite writers from being nominated by stuffing the ballot box. This initiative was presented as a reaction against the large number of recent victories by nonwhite, women, and LGBT authors.

essential to sci-fi novels, these writers can imagine a world in which their political beliefs have finally been realized—in libertarian utopias of heroic individualism, in post-capitalist societies of actually existing socialism, and even in the grandiose plans of World Bank policy papers.

We can see this transnational scope in any number of recent sci-fi novels. Take Olukotun's *Nigerians in Space*, which uses the conceit of a secret space program to imagine the repatriation of intellectual labor in Nigeria. A multigenerational narrative that spans the United States, France, Switzerland, and South Africa, *Nigerians in Space* rigorously keeps its characters outside of the Nigerian nation—in part, because this allows Olukotun to distance them from the military dictatorship that controlled Nigeria between 1993 and 1998. (The novel's early action focuses on the collapse of the fictionalized space program in 1993, when General Sani Abacha overthrew Ernest Shonekan's civilian government, and then jumps ahead to the present day.) Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* takes a similar approach when it encodes recent debates about South African crime into a sci-fi register, using the "zoos" of the title—humans who have been bonded to animal familiars as a punishment for their crimes—to explore how nations deprive criminals of basic infrastructural support systems.[78] Even Beukes's *Moxyland* (2008), which is less self-consciously global than these other novels, seems to recognize the political potential of transnational subcultures. The hackers, activists, and government agents who populate *Moxyland* live almost entirely in immersive Internet-gaming worlds, which Beukes portrays as open to two competing long-term visions for society: the total victory of consumer culture and the radical separatism of anticorporate activists.

What this means is that the politics of African science fiction is radically uncertain. On the one hand, the genre's transnational scope has opened it to the neoliberal rhetoric of World Bank–IMF development planning, with its privileging of global economic forces over national sovereignty. On the other hand, that very same transnationalism can also provide a setting for discussions that are regularly foreclosed from the field of national politics, such as the status of LGBT rights, the need for environmental protection, and secular critiques of religious fundamentalism. What needs to be stressed is that neither of these options is a foregone conclusion. African science fiction's investment in the long-term growth of institutions can and does enable different types of thinking, even as these ideas remain rooted in the intellectual capital of an Afropolitan elite. What is most exciting about this genre—new as it is—is to see where these thoughts will take us.

78 See Eatough, "Planning the Future," for a more extended account of Beukes's treatment of planning and infrastructure.

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