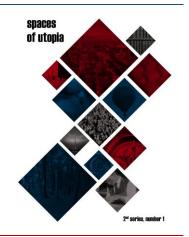# Flipping the script on Africa's Future

In the United States of Africa

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Postcolonial utopian literature is an emerging field of scholarship focusing on utopian and dystopian writing by people who have been affected by the imperial process. As witnessed in the spread of postcolonial studies as a discipline, there has been differential uptake of the "postcolonial" as a defining parameter in various countries and institutions, with France being notably absent from the fold. Outside France, much critical work on the cultural politics and writing from the former French colonies is located in "Francophone" studies rather than postcolonial studies. This article seeks to bridge that divide, contributing a Francophone angle to the debate around what postcolonial utopianism means and how it influences our understanding of the use value of utopia in contemporary globalised societies.

To examine effectively the relationship between Francophone and Anglophone postcolonial utopianism, I will briefly trace their development along parallel paths that lead to the current situation. I will then turn my focus to the African context, providing an overview of contemporary Anglophone and Francophone imaginary representations of Africa's future before taking up the case study of Abdourahman A. Waberi's exemplary critical dystopia,[1] *In the United States of Africa*.[2] In this way, I hope to elucidate not only the principal tropes and strategies employed in a particular postcolonial utopia, but also identify some cultural specificities of Francophone African postcolonial utopian traditions.

It is a problematic task to elaborate an understanding of postcolonial utopianism in literatures in French when there has been little uptake of the term "postcolonial"

either historically or in the current intellectual climate. North American universities led the way in fostering individual researchers in postcolonial studies from all over the world to develop and debate theories and processes for challenging dominant (western) ways of thinking. Australia, New Zealand and India, together with the United Kingdom, Africa and the Middle East have all produced significant contributors to postcolonial studies. Most of the key texts are written in English, although foundational writings on power and violence by Michel Foucault and Franz Fanon came from French intellectual traditions. Apart from the work of a handful of dedicated scholars, including Jean-Marc Moura and Marie-Claude Smouts, postcolonial studies has not been embraced as a discipline in France, and is indeed profoundly refuted as an option in a recent article by Jean-François Bayart (2011). This should not prevent us from thinking about Francophone postcolonial utopias – there are now Francophone postcolonial journals and research networks in the United Kingdom that support this terminology. However, it is important to consider alternative terms when searching for examples of scholarship and literature in non-Anglophone cultural traditions.

Aside from the fundamental disconnect between Francophone and postcolonial terminology, there are two other major reasons why it is very difficult to locate critical work on Francophone postcolonial utopias and futuristic fiction. Firstly, the quantity of utopian and futuristic texts published by non-metropolitan Anglophone authors far outweighs the number of publications in this genre by non-metropolitan Francophone authors. The second reason goes some way to explaining the first. There are significant impediments to the distribution and recognition of Francophone postcolonial writers in France, which is the main Francophone literary marketplace, due to Paris-centric traditions in publishing and prizes. The recent *littérature-monde* movement in France and its accompanying manifesto aim to open up new ways of thinking about French language literatures, attacking the Parisian stronghold that elevates the Nouveau Roman and the psychological novel above writing that is "open to the world" – such as "world literature" – in a traditionalist hierarchy of literary values.[3] Whether or not one espouses these views, it is clear that expectations for non-metropolitan Francophone authors are limited to either picturesque images of exotic landscapes and traditional cultural heritage or narratives that dwell on the misery and horrors of war, female subjugation, AIDS, immigration or other depressing aspects of

France's former colonies.[4] Therefore, those who write about a non-traditional utopia, futuristic themes or science fiction are not necessarily going to be widely read in France, and consequently will probably not find a mainstream French publisher, but may be published in a smaller press. If they are somehow published in French, and in the unlikely event that these books are translated into English, this would probably be done by American academics who publish with small academic presses resulting in expensive editions that end up in university libraries rather than mainstream bookstores. The result, of course, is limited quantity and distribution of Francophone postcolonial utopias in both French and English.

Given these circumstances, it is unremarkable that most of the publications relating to postcolonial utopianism examine Anglophone literatures. Lyman Tower Sargent has been leading the charge, identifying major threads in various "national" literatures, such as the tendency towards dystopian projections prevalent in certain cultures (Australian and South African). His contributions to dictionaries and volumes, including *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds* (Rüsen *et al*, 2005), and his chapter on "Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias" in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Claeys, 2010: 200-222) underscore the urgent need to reconsider the neglected past of postcolonial utopias and their important future in the field of utopian studies.

The fact that one of the world's leading theorists in Postcolonial Studies has turned his attention to utopianism is a telling sign that the field is on the move. Bill Ashcroft is currently Professorial Fellow for an Australia Research Council funded project entitled "Future Thinking: Utopianism in Post-colonial Literatures" which examines the critical function of creative writers in their society's imagination of the future. Ashcroft focuses on the prevalence and power of hope, ideas of liberation, self-determination and future possibility in postcolonial literatures. His recent article, "The Ambiguous Necessity of Utopia: Post-Colonial Literatures and the Persistence of Hope" (2009) privileges Fredric Jameson's notion of utopian ambiguity that keeps hope alive for the possibility of a better world while stubbornly negating the current reality (Jameson, 1971: 110-111). For Ashcroft, this ambiguity is central to developing plurivocal utopian expressions in the postcolonial context:

> The particular ways in which post-colonial writers and thinkers negotiate such ambiguities create a distinct form of cultural and political hope. The forms of utopianism emergent in post-colonial writing – a utopianism almost completely devoid of utopias – gesture toward a resolution of utopian contradictions dialogically (Ashcroft, 2009: 8).

Ashcroft avoids the trap of binaries, recognising that diversity in creative practices employed by postcolonial writers allows them to forge specific links between past experience and future imaginary in their utopian texts:

> The tension between memory and the future is resolved by their constant and prophetic interaction in the present. And the ambiguous relation between "I" and "We" is resolved in literary approaches to a different form of insurgent, or communal identity, imagined beyond the colonial inheritance of the nation. The utopian function of post-colonial literatures is therefore located in its practice as well as its vision—the practice of confronting and transforming coercive power to produce an imagined future (*idem*, 13).

It is Ralph Prodi's *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia* (2001), that is the foundation stone for this new research field, drawing our attention to the "particular genre that has been neglected in the course of the revision process initiated in literary criticism: the utopian novel and its related literary forms" (Pordzik, 2001: 1). Pordzik contends that postcolonial utopias defy generic and cultural boundaries in ways that break with western utopian traditions to promote "epistemological otherness" (*idem*, 130). The resulting texts resemble globalised heterotopias, transcending national and western models in their fictions of the future. In its emphasis on the "post-western" utopia – going beyond the western traditions – Pordzik's study suggests new ways of reading the contemporised and hybridised postcolonial utopia at the endpoint of the evolutionary process away from the West.

Postcolonial writing on alternative futures therefore allows authors to explore the past, present and future of their communities from a particular postcolonial cross-cultural point of view (*idem*, 156). Far from expressing a utopia that corresponds to traditional ideological norms, including social realism, systemic closure, static political principles, and a belief in reason, technology and social progress, postcolonial utopian texts are more organic in their creativity, seeking a radical otherness in a differentiated evolution of the community. These texts present fictional worlds that place imagination over reason – sometimes resembling magical realism – attesting to a "broader transculturation process within which the different writers can position their own particular views of race, gender, and identity with regard to futurity" (*idem*, 164).

A typical example of this writing, such as Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, would in fact appear dystopian, with a critique of the colonial society, and potentially also paint a negative picture of the post-colonial society that has been installed.

However, after interrogating the status quo, in most cases a glimpse of utopia will sparkle through the gloom to indicate the path towards better transcultural and transnational futures. The tragic proportions of much western dystopian writing are therefore replaced by spaces of hope (*idem*, 130). The "fiction-making" aspect of the utopian novel (as opposed to the socio-political criticism) is integral to this process, as this is the only sphere in which the imaginary of the ideal can be fully extrapolated as an alternative reality.

Pordzik's argument seems to falter slightly when he supports the recognition of a "global culture" that produces "transnational fictions which, although their stress is on difference and diversity, consolidate the multitude of narratives they draw on in a strikingly new and coherent representational contract" (*idem*, 117). The sway towards reducing the specificity of historical experiences and political struggles in postcolonial writing, with an all-embracing sweep across Anglophone literatures demonstrates an underlying tendency to establish more binaries (western imperial/postcolonial), just as the *littérature-monde* movement has done between Francophonie and *littérature-monde*. The aim of this article is to go beyond such binaries to highlight the way in which postcolonial utopias are obliged to cross the colonial-postcolonial divide not only once, but twice. In most utopian theory to date, not only are the generic parameters of utopia based on western traditions, but the conceptual content is also related to western models of order, justice, desire and hope.[5] Part of the project in reconsidering the role of postcolonial utopias must therefore be to unpick the stitches that tie utopia so tightly to western paradigms of form and content, and to understand the diversity of specific traditions that inform their creators, as well as the ways in which they contest the binaries imposed upon them.

Writings on utopias within Francophone discourses are even less abundant than in Anglophone studies. It is true that references to Francophonie and utopia are made in the same breath, such as in Raphaël Confiant's call to action:

> Pour une utopie francophone. Le monde ne va pas sans utopies. C'est là le moteur des énergies intellectuelles. L'utopie francophone doit s'inscrire résolument dans la créolisation et dans la diversalité. [Towards a Francophone utopia. The world doesn't work without utopias. Utopia is the motor of intellectual energies. The Francophone utopia must be resolutely inscribed in creolisation and diversality]. (Confiant, 2004: 251).

And fellow Martinican writers Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau invoke the

need for utopia in their recent address to Barack Obama: "l'utopie est ce qui manque au monde, le seul réalisme capable de dénouer le noeud des impossibles" [utopia is what is lacking in the world, the only reality capable of untying the knot of impossibilities] (Glissant, Chamoiseau, 2009: 35).

Francophonie and utopia are together inspiring a few academic studies, such as a special number of *Alternative francophone: Pour une francophonie en mode mineur* [The Francophone Alternative: Towards a Francophonie in a Minor Key] on Francophonie as utopia,[6] and the 2010 Francophone Postcolonial Studies network conference entitled "Between Utopia and Dystopia: The Afterlives of Empire".[7] However, this work is far from the forensic examination of the Anglophone postcolonial utopias currently being undertaken by Sargent, Ashcroft and Pordzik. It seems more like a merging of the terms Francophonie and utopia to express a metaphorical ideal institutional entity, or sometimes the reverse, a chimera…

Insightful readings of Francophone Caribbean literary texts as utopias do exist, including Saskia Schabio's chapter on Edouard Glissant, "Peripheral Cosmopolitans: Caribbeanness as Transnational Utopia?" (Schabio, 2009), and there are a few other studies of utopianism in the work of individual authors like Patrick Chamoiseau and Gisèle Pineau.[8] But even the dedicated panels and round tables at recent Utopian Studies Society (Europe) and Society of Utopian Studies (North America) conferences have not unearthed hidden scholarship or researchers in the field of Francophone postcolonial utopias. There remains a considerable amount of work to be done on the rich body of postcolonial utopias from African traditions, both in English and in French.

Nicholas Brown's study of *Utopian Generations* is the most comprehensive account to date of the intertwined influences of postcolonialism and utopianism in contemporary African writing. His central thesis is that what brings modernism and postcolonial African literature together is their disposition toward Utopia. Embedding the utopian impulse as the centerpiece of his original framework for interpreting world literature results in a new paradigm for considering African postcolonial literatures in particular, and underscores the urgency of thinking about these texts as challenging or projecting the future. Brown examines the future of utopian generations in his final chapter, prefaced by the statement that "perhaps the longing of the texts examined here will turn out to be prophetic after all" (Brown 2005: 34). It is

therefore clear that the futuristic thrust of many African postcolonial literatures is of primordial importance for recasting a broader vision of utopia for the future.

"AFRICA IS THE FUTURE" is a t-shirt campaign initiated in 2004 by Nicolas Premier and Patrick Ayamam to promote new ways of thinking about Africa and its place in the world.[9] But this mantra extends far beyond a t-shirt campaign. It can be applied to new trends in global investments with China's ever-growing interests in Africa, creative projects in music such as "Africa Express" promoting meetings and collaboration between African and British musicians,[10] as well as literary phenomena that attest to Africa's important contribution to new writing in English and French, with writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Marie Ndiaye and Alain Mabanckou. The teleological aspect of the expression may be extrinsic in this instance, but it can also be intrinsic when thinking about goal-oriented African postcolonial utopias.

It seems that in order to present a positive picture of Africa in literature, film or other creative narratives, the future must be evoked, given that contemporary scenarios are overburdened with the difficult social, political, economic and cultural factors at play. Present-day settings for alternative societies tend to fold into dystopia fairly quickly, or present the struggle of a few brave souls against the dystopian society that surrounds them.

The elision of Africa with the futuristic impulse is evident in emerging movements such as Afrofuturism, which proposes an aesthetic that subverts the dominant paradigms dictating the use of technology and science in society. One of the first critics to use the term was Mark Dery in his 1995 essay *Black to the Future*[11] with the following description:

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism.

The opening paragraph of Dery's essay crystallizes the dilemma that we face in trying to impose western generic categories such as "utopia" or "science-fiction" on "non-western" cultural products.[12]

> Hack this: Why do so few African-Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other – the stranger in a strange land – would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists? Yet, to this writer's knowledge, only Samuel R.

Delany, Octavia Butler, Steve Barnes, and Charles Saunders have chose to write within the genre conventions of SF. This is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African-Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees. They inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology, be it branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, or tasers, is too often brought to bear on black bodies.

This leads to the key question:

The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?

The answer is yes, but there is clearly a manipulation of the western models and tropes to make science fiction and futuristic expressions fit the African(-American) way:

African-American culture is Afrofuturist at its heart, literalizing [William] Gibson's cyberpunk axiom, "The street finds its own use for things." With trickster élan, it retrofits, refunctions, and willfully misuses the technocommodities and science fictions generated by a dominant culture that has always been not only white but a wielder, as well, of instrumental technologies.

From the examples provided by Dery and others, it is clear that Afrofuturism is more closely identified with African-American practitioners, rather than Africans living and working in Africa. Furthermore, Dery privileges reference to examples from popular culture (New York graffiti artist and B-boy theoretician   Rammellzee), art (Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings such as Molasses), and music:

Afrofuturism bubbles us from the deepest, darkest wellsprings in the intergalactic big band jazz churned out by Sun Ra's Omniverse Arkestra, in Parliament-Funkadelic's De. Seuss-ian astrofunk, and in dub reggae, especially the bush doctor's brew cooked up by Lee "Scratch" Perry, which, at its eeriest sounds as if it were made out of dark matter and recorded in the crushing gravity field of a black hole ("Angel Gabriel and the Space Boots" is a typical title).

There are nevertheless several examples in English and French of Afrocyberpunk and Afrofuturism in film and literature, coming out of Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon and South Africa, so there is no reason why the ethos of Afrofuturism should not be applicable to African postcolonial literary utopias as well.

Cameroonian filmmaker and writer Jean-Pierre Bekolo Obama taps into this trend in his book *Africa For the Future: Sortir un nouveau monde du cinéma* [Bringing out a new world of cinema] (2009) and futuristic film *Les Saignantes* [The Bloodettes] (2005). The text traces the author's return to his village and reconnection with an old lady whose very existence calls everything about the modern world into question:

Cela faisait des années que personne ne m'avait plus parlé comme cela. Je suis bouleversé, ce n'est pas tant l'histoire que sa manière de l'intégrer dans son récit "épique" y incluant ma vie actuelle, le cosmos, les morts, les vivants, la technologie, une Afrique que je n'ai pas connue, une voix millénaire… Je suis "touché", je me sens bizarre. [It had been years since anybody had spoken to me like that. I'm overcome, it's not so much the story but her way of integrating it into her "epic" tale and including my current life, the cosmos, the dead, the living, technology, an Africa that I didn't know, a millennial voice… I am "touched", I feel bizarre] (Bekolo 2009, 14).

He can only reconcile the two disparate worlds by finding a way to pass on this experience to others: by relating the past, present and future stories intertwined through the images and narratives of cinema.

La question que je pose est comment cette technologie pourrait-elle me permettre de transformer l'expérience du cinéma en celle que j'ai vécue avec la vieille? Le nouveau média me donne-t-il par interactivité ce bras qui me permettrait de renouveler ce geste de salutations avec la vieille? Quelle différence entre l'utopie et le rêve ici? Une seule. La vieille de mon village est à la fois écrivain, actrice, journaliste, philosophe, poète, historienne, scénariste, mère, politique (…).Elle demande de toujours réinventer son discours pour prolonger le rêve. [The question that I ask is how could this technology allow me to transform the cinema experience into what I've just lived with the old lady? Does new media with its interactivity give me that arm which would allow me to renew this gesture of salutations with the old lady? What difference is there between utopia and dream here? Only one. The old lady from my village is writer, actress, journalist, philosopher, poet, historian, scriptwriter, mother, politician (…) She's always asking to reinvent her orations so as to prolong the dream]. (*idem*, 16)

With the technology that is currently available to him, the contemporary filmmaker can still only offer a static, closed representation of the experience – a constructed *utopia*, whereas the old lady can continue to recreate an eternally changing experience, integrating the old and new in a dynamic flow of the traditional *dream*.

Bekolo treats the question of Africa's future from many different angles in this book – linguistic, aesthetic, technological, cinematographic, economic, American, European, interplanetary, educational and ecological. In a powerful chapter towards the end, "La répétition du futur" [Rehearsal for the Future], he contests the western perspective on Africa as a primitive, passéist cradle of human civilization. Like the Afrofuturists and the t-shirt campaigners, he sees the need to recast Africa as the future:

S'il ne fait aucun doute pour personne que l'Afrique c'est le passé, les origines de l'humanité… l'idée du futur semble incompatible avec l'Afrique. Ainsi chaque fois qu'on parle de l'Afrique c'est pour évoquer son passé, ses traditions, ses cultures, ou alors son présent avec ses conflits, ses misères, sa corruption et ses dictatures, mais jamais l'Afrique ne symbolise l'avenir. [If there's no doubt in anyone's mind that Africa is the past, the origins of humanity… the idea of the future seems incompatible with Africa. And so every time someone speaks about Africa it's to evoke her past, her traditions, her cultures or else her present with its conflicts, misfortunes, corruption and dictatorships, but never the Africa that symbolizes the future.] (*idem*, 140)

The vision that Bekolo presents for future Africa is based on the model of a school, drawing heavily on utopian tropes of education, work, community, equality and order across all sectors of society, but the underpinning element of Bekolo's utopia is the force of dynamic futurism:

> Une répétition du futur s'imposerait donc dans toutes les sphères de la société autour d'une structure incontournable, l'école. Il s'agit d'envisager une société où tout est école. Une école ouverte installée au coeur de chaque communauté où tous sont à la fois enseignants et élèves, parents, enfants, actifs, retraités, paysans, citadins, diaspora, étrangers, locaux… Une école où tout est savoir, à commencer par les connaissances dont nous avons besoin pour améliorer notre vie quotidienne, santé, hygiène, alimentation, habitat, traditions, apprentissages, transport, administration, droit, technologies quotidiennes… Une école qui "construit" de manière permanente une culture de l'anticipation, de la prevention, de la speculation et de l'organisation pour tous au sein de chaque communauté. Une tâche dans laquelle tous seraient impliqués non pas comme dans le cadre d'un "emploi" mais plutôt dans le cadre d'un "travail" comme travaillent toutes les mères de famille dans leurs foyers. [A rehearsal for the future would therefore impress itself in all spheres of society, based around one inescapable structure: the school. It's about envisaging a society where everything is part of the school. An open school set up in the heart of every community where everyone is teacher and student, parents, children, active people, retirees, peasants, citydwellers, diasporas, foreigners, locals… A school where everything is knowledge, from the skills that we need to improve our daily life, health, hygiene, nutrition, housing, traditions, apprenticeships, transport, administration, law, everyday technologies… A school that "constructs" on an ongoing basis a culture of anticipation, prevention, speculation and organization for all within each community. A task that would involve everyone not as a "job" but more like "work" as housewives and mothers work.] (*idem*, 141)

While not as clearly articulated as the future utopia of Africa in his book, the brave new world that Bekolo presents in his futuristic film *Les Saignantes* does provide scope for hope, especially for African women. Set in Yaoundé in 2025, the two female prostitute-protagonists are strong and sexy and have access to supernatural powers to combat the corrupt political elite who are the main clients for their favours. When one of these political leaders (the SGGC) dies in the middle of a sexual act, the women are left with a body to get rid of and it ends up being consumed as meat. It is a stylish sci-fi erotic thriller that has a political message as well as a philosophical undercurrent traversing the narrative, brought to the fore with inter-titles such as "Yaoundé 2025 and nothing much had changed."

Les Saignantes is one of a clutch of recent science-fiction films from Africa that are slowly making some impact on the otherwise sparsely populated territory of black science fiction cinema. Another Francophone African example is Beninese actor and filmmaker Sylvestre Amoussou's *Africa Paradis* (2007). Set in 2033, this film draws on established utopian tropes of pan-Africanism and inversion that we will also observe in Waberi's *In the United States of Africa*. It shows how the alternative reality of the United States of Africa has made it just as hegemonic, unjust and corrupt as the

United States of America (and by extension the entire western world) is perceived to be. The film presents the plight of two "third world" French nationals (Olivier, an engineer and Pauline, a schoolteacher) trying to get a visa to leave their miserable existence to start a new life in Africa. Unsuccessful in their visa applications, they go to a people smuggler and end up getting caught and incarcerated in a transit camp for deportation. Olivier escapes and Pauline starts working as a maid for an African Deputy sympathetic to the idea of increasing European immigration to Africa. She begins a relationship with him and then runs into Olivier who is now an illegal alien and has been keeping a low profile. Pauline decides to stay with the African Deputy and marry him while Olivier is deported. The narrative is familiar but the script has been flipped in the future according to Amoussou.[13]

The Anglophone African arena has produced two highly publicised science fiction films in recent years. Kenya's first foray into science fiction cinema, *Pumzi* (2009), is a short film (20 minutes) written and directed by Wanuri Kahui. Her film is set in the near future, 35 years after the "water wars" have torn the world apart. Nature is extinct – the film's byline is "The outside is dead". The central figure, Asha, is a museum curator in one of the contained communities set up by the Maitu Council in East Africa. She receives a mysterious box in the mail containing soil, and when she plants an old seed in it, the seed germinates instantly. Asha breaks out of the community to plant the seedling despite the efforts of the controlling Council, and sees for herself what Nature has become.

Niyi Akinmolayan's "Nollywood"[14] film *Kajola* was released in 2010, following much hype around its budget[15] and excited anticipation about the country's first CGI film.[16] In the year 2059, after a second civil war, Nigeria emerges as a totalitarian state with dramatic differences between living conditions in derelict mainland Lagos as compared to the Island, where the mega-rich and powerful reside. "Kajola" is the Yoruba word for commonwealth, the name given to the rebels' plot to take over mainland Lagos and rebuild it to the standard of the Island. The government's corruption and lies baffle even the police chief who is supposed to enforce their will. The official synopsis ends with the phrase "TOMORROW IS TODAY". Naturally enough, there was resistance to the subversive message that blatantly accuses Nigeria's current ruling class of exploitation and corruption. Unsurprisingly, *Kajola* was pulled from all of the major cinemas within days of its premiere, and has never

really been given much of a season in Nigeria. However, reactions of those who *have* managed to see the film are incredibly damning, citing appalling production, poor acting and disjointed narration. Even the CGI is disappointing.[17]

Kajola is not the only one of these films that has been slammed by critics and the public. Both *Les Saignantes* and *Africa Paradis* have received mitigated responses and have certainly not enjoyed financial success or even cult status. On the other hand, *Pumzi* was shown at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and has been better received, perhaps due to its environmental message and less ambitious technical production. Kahiu is apparently considering expanding *Pumzi* to feature length.

Various interviews, blogs and websites go some way towards explaining these discouraging reactions, contextualising the popular debate on African science fiction cinema, and asking questions like "Is Africa ready for science fiction?" and "Should Africans do science fiction?". Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu's e-interview with Nollywood director Tchidi Chikere reveals a pessimistic perspective for African postcolonial futuristic film:

> Science fiction films from the West are failures here. Even Star Wars! 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 food, roads, electricity, water wars, famine, etc, not spacecrafts and spaceships. Only stories that explore these everyday realities are considered relevant to us for now.[18]

And the documentary by Franco Sacchi, *This is Nollywood* (2007), contains an interview with famous Nollywood director Chico Ejiro who states that Nigerians do not make SF films.[19]

There are signs, however, that African science fiction's ship may be on the cinematic horizon. Since the South African science fiction thriller *District 9* (2009) was nominated for multiple Academy Awards, and earned US$37 million in its opening weekend, several other science fiction films have been slated for production. Nnedi Okorafor's award winning novel *Who Fears Death* (2010) has been optioned for a film by Kisha Cameron-Dingle, to be directed by Wanuri Kahiu, and is being described as "Lord of the Rings in Africa". Cameron-Dingle is also developing *Tok Tokkie*, a futuristic Cape Town ghost thriller written by Jenna Bass. The 2011 Arthur C. Clarke Award winning novel *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes set in an alternative cyberpunk Johannesburg of the future has also been picked up for production by Helena Spring. Watch this space…

Given the dearth of films produced in this category until very recently, it is understandable that there is very little research available on this area. Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008) provides fascinating insights on token figures, racial paranoia, and exotic otherness through studying representations of blackness in mainstream science fiction cinema, contributing to understanding why there may be resistance to black investment in this filmic genre that does not immediately offer a positive space for development of African stories. The special issue of *African Identities* (May 2009) on "The Genre of Science Fiction and the Black Imagination", edited by Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman, offers a thorough scan of black Anglophone science fiction, dating from W.E.B. Dubois to Nalo Hopkinson and beyond, but there is only one article on film and nothing on Francophone African science fiction writing.

Futuristic Francophone literature from Africa may not have such a long or rich heritage as its Anglophone cousin, but one of the first African post-colonial novels to be widely distributed and read in French was in fact a critical dystopia by Ahmadou Kourouma: *Les Soleils des indépendances* [The Suns of Independence] (1968). This award-winning novel is set in the future in a fictitious country, the Côte d'Ebènes (Ebony Coast), parodying Kourouma's homeland of the Ivory Coast. The essence of the novel is the tragic demise of the utopian dream of independence through decolonization into a dystopian nightmare of degradation and ruin. The main character, Fama, is a Malinké prince who is the last of his line, and condemned to poverty and dispossession. Although he finds brief happiness after seeking out his roots and reconnecting with his cultural heritage, he is eventually arrested for apparently plotting to assassinate the President and dies in the arms of his wife without producing any heirs to the lineage. Another example comes from Senegalese writer, director, producer and political activist Ousmane Sembène, who made ten films and wrote ten novels, including *Le Dernier de l'empire* [The Last of the Empire] (1981), set in Senegal about 20 years after Independence (1960). It provides a scathing critique of Léopold Senghor, so-called Senegalese democracy, Negritude and neo-colonialism. It is similar in tone to Kourouma's dystopian future, with equally evident allegories of current or recent politicians and their mismanagement of the decolonization process and the shift in power. Both texts focus on single African

nations and their predicament – they are not pan-African, nor do they envisage a more positive or unified future for Africa.

As the title suggests, the pan-African movement comes into play in Abdourahman A. Waberi's much more recent novel, *In the United States of Africa*, (2006). The concept of the United States of Africa is not new. It was championed by Marcus Garvey, the African American activist, publisher, journalist, founder of the Black Star Line and Back-to-Africa movement in is 1924 poem that begins: "Hail! United States of Africa-free!" and has persisted throughout the twentieth century with various attempts to take action through the Pan-Africanist movement, especially the Fifth Congress in Manchester in 1945 with W.E.B. Du Bois and Patrice Lumumba, and then the Organisation of African Unity was founded by Kwame Nkrumah and Haile Selassie, the forerunner to the African Union. In theory it would now unite 53 countries, over 1 billion people, speaking 2000 languages. Muammar Gaddafi brought the idea back to the table in 2007 and again in 2009 when he presided at the meeting of the African Union in Ethiopia. The African Union aims to build a united and integrated Africa by 2025. The United States of Africa has also been the subject of a BBC award winning play entitled *Eternal, Forever* by John Rugoiyo Gichuki, in 2006. It is set in 2410, and based on the premise that in the next 400 years, Africa could surpass its rivals and become the dominant global power. Although we have a similar scenario to the one that Waberi paints in his novel – published in the same year, Rugoiyo Gichuki's play does not really incorporate the paradigm of inversion that we see as a main feature of Waberi's work.

The technique of reversal, inverting the accepted prism through which the world is viewed, is the strategy favoured by Waberi. It is characteristic of both utopian fiction – especially eighteenth century examples such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Voltaire's *Candide* – and African American abolitionist discourses, such as those pronounced by David Walker and Reverend Henry Highland Garnet on Africa as a "land of light" with the "brightest of futures", whereas Europe was a "land of darkness". Reversal therefore has a double relevance and reference in Waberi's utopian novel that depicts a futuristic world in which Africa is the centre of enlightenment and North America and Europe are wastelands of primitivism, misery, war and suffering. Imaginary precedents for this inverted paradigm can be seen in Jean Renoir's obscure 1927 short film *Charleston Parade* in which an African

explorer arrives in Paris in 2028 to find it derelict and inhabited by a primitive Charleston dancer and an ape, as well as Amoussou's *Africa Paradis*.

In *In the United States of Africa*, Waberi combines pan-Africanism and inversion to produce his alternative future for Africa and the world, but it is not the land of light his precursors desired. Instead, this critical dystopia uses the projected image of Africa's future to provide a challenging yet humorous satire of the current world order that places Africa well below Europe and North America on the scale of political, economic and cultural development. Reversing the hierarchy, Waberi describes Africa's world domination, her exploitation of migrants from the poorer war-torn nations of Europe and the US, and the ethos and infrastructure that allows Africa to maintain a hold over her own peoples as well as those who might question her integrity from the outside. The sustained and detailed descriptions of the history and achievements of the United States of Africa and the protagonist's various voyages through Africa and the degraded slums of Paris demonstrate how discourses shaped by power are perpetuated and how art, literature and love may reduce the racial, religious and regional divides of the world.

The protagonist has two names – Maya and Malaïka – to emphasise the split identity that she must negotiate as an immigrant from the poorest and most violent regions of France – Normandy – having been at war with Brittany for centuries. At a young age, she is taken from her homeland by a compassionate African doctor on a humanitarian mission to live in Asmara, the capital of the United States of Africa. She is adopted into the doctor's wealthy, cultivated yet tragic family – the childless "mother" is suffering from a terminal disease – that nurtures her artistic talent and her confidence to make her way in the world, despite her disadvantage as a white migrant. Maya-Malaïka's fictional trajectory and experience echoes that of many real African migrants to Europe, though the familial and social support that she enjoys in Asmara removes many impediments to success and protects her from much of the racism and prejudice that most migrants suffer. Waberi himself has known a similar line of flight. He left his birthplace of Djibouti City in 1985 at the age of 20 to study English literature in France, subsequently working as an English teacher in Caen (Normandy) while writing short stories, poetry, and a successful first novel in 1997, *Balbola*. His career has been a slow-burner, his ten books and various other publications garnering

literary prizes and fellowships, as well as a conference in his honour in Barcelona in 2010. But his path has certainly not been as smooth as Maya-Malaïka's.

Set in an indeterminate future, the novel is structured by four journeys that represent the protagonist's itinerary through exile and immigration ("Voyage to Asmara, the Federal Capital"), artistic practice ("Voyage to the Heart of the Studio"), roots ("Voyage to Paris"[20]) and belonging ("Return to Asmara"). In this way, Waberi underscores the significance of travelling as a reflection of the centre-periphery dichotomy, emphasizing its influence through inversion. As Aedín ní Loingsigh points out, although political and economic circumstances present the world as divided, literature and art have the power to challenge the geopolitical barriers by circulating beyond borders (ní Loingsigh, 2011: 79). It is also important to note that the travel narrative allows the novel to transcend the misery narrative, opening up a space for humour and parody, as we also see in writings by Alain Mabanckou and Marie Ndiaye.

"Return" is word used not for Maya-Malaïka's trip to France to see her birth mother, but more revealingly, for the final journey back to her adopted homeland. The possibility of electing one's own "home" is stated from the beginning of Waberi's novel: "Le lieu de naissance n'est qu'un accident; la vraie patrie, on se la choisit avec son corps et son coeur." (Waberi, 2006: 25) [One's place of birth is only an accident; you choose your true homeland with your body and your heart.] (Waberi, 2009: 10). There are many reasons why the protagonist assumes an African identity, rather than a European one.

Firstly, there is deliberate dissimulation of Maya-Malaïka's origins until almost halfway through the novel. Although we might suspect it earlier, we don't even know that she is white until a beggar whispers to Mariette, the Norman newspaper vendor:

> Elle sort d'où cette fille, elle n'est pas comme les autres? Elle a la teinte pâle du calcaire. (Waberi, 2006: 121) [Where's that girl from? She ain't like the other ones. Her skin's white like limestone.] (Waberi, 2009: 60)

We learn later that Maya-Malaïka's own awakening to her difference comes abruptly during childhood games with neighbours and cousins, inspiring a creative impulse born of rage at this injustice and sense of alienation:

> Tu avais une peau couleur de lait. Une pâleur d'albinos. Cette évidence, tu te l'étais cachée longtemps à toi-même (…) Un nouvel alphabet s'est fait jour devant tes yeux cet après-midi là où tu as découvert ta différence. Tu as jeté sur le papier tes premiers mots (…) Tu seras désormais brûlée par le mystère des origines, la lente montée de ton corps équivoque, l'approche presque tactile de la mort. Tu te sentit aussitôt étrangère à toi-même. (Waberi,

2006: 164) [Your skin was white as milk. Pale as an albino. You had hidden this obvious fact from yourself for a long time (…) A new alphabet dawned before your eyes that afternoon, when you discovered your difference. You set your first words to paper (…) From now on you will be burned by the mystery of your origins, the slow growth of your troubling body, the almost tactile approach of death. You immediately felt estranged from yourself.] (Waberi, 2009: 84-85)

It is through literature and art that Maya-Malaïka manages to overcome estrangement, using her powers of perception and sensitivity to otherness to enrich her creative expressions, all the while benefiting from belonging to the dominant cultural paradigm. This is Waberi's most positive message in the novel, fulfilling the ideal that cultural contributions can come from any individual, regardless of race, but it is nevertheless clear that cultural authority is needed for success. It must also be a second reason for aligning herself both physically and psychologically with an African cultural powerbase.

A third justification for Maya-Malaïka's rejection of her European origins is the fact that she has no access to any linguistic or cultural heritage from Normandy or France, reminding us of the "Stolen Generations" of indigenous Australians who were removed from their roots and people by government and church authorities wishing to give them a better life. Unlike many of these victims of estrangement from kin and country, Maya-Malaïka is not interested in learning the language or understanding her past, and has no intention of returning to France once her pilgrimage is completed and her guilt is appeased by paying off a young man, Titus, to watch over her mother. She can't reconnect and she doesn't want to anyway.

What does this example of successful migrant integration tell us about Waberi's vision of Africa's future? Is Maya-Malaïka's story a recipe for hope in the real world, and if so, for whom? Perhaps it is for the narrow tranche of Africans who adopt or are adopted into European culture. But what about the masses of migrants, like the Swiss refugee Yacouba the carpenter, whose fatal plight opens the novel, are either abandoned to exploitation or investigated endlessly? The first chapter of *In the United States of Africa* is a tirade against the flow of migrants into Africa:

Vous n'êtes pas sans ignorer que nos médias remettent en selle les stéréotypes les plus méprisants et les plus odieux qui remontent au moins à Mathusouleyman! Ainsi, les nouveau migrants propagent leur natalité galopante, leur suie millénaire, leur manque d'ambition, leurs religions rétrogrades comme le protestantisme, le judaïsme ou le catholicisme, leur machisme ancestral, leurs maladies endémiques. En un mot, ils introduisent le tiers-monde directement dans l'anus des Etats-Unis d'Afrique. (Waberi, 2006: 20) [Surely you are aware that our media have been digging up their most scornful, odious stereotypes again, which go back at least as far as Methusuleiman! Like, the new migrants propagate their soaring birth rate, their centuries-old soot, their lack of ambition, their ancestral machismo, their

> reactionary religions like Protestantism, Judaism, or Catholicism, their endemic diseases. In short, they are introducing the Third World right up the anus of the United States of Africa.] (Waberi, 2009: 8)

It is an ambiguous situation, with the fictitious United States of Africa seeming as irresponsible and inegalitarian as its real "Euramerican" counterparts. Through the reversal of fortunes, Waberi uses the dystopian narrative of an unenlightened alternative future to criticize both the status quo and any new world order based on the same principles.

However, as Lyman Tower Sargent, Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan, and others have defined it, the critical dystopia is not devoid of hope for the future, providing pathways to a better way of being in the world through exemplary positive figures or situations.[21] Evidently Maya-Malaïka's success story in literature, art and love represents the optimistic utopian enclave in this dystopia, but there is inherent hope in so much of the narrative, if we strip back the inversion to its inspirational essence. Revealing examples of these foundational sources of African wisdom and talent thread through the novel as intertextual references, from Bob Marley's "Wake up and live", to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Césaire and Marvin Gaye. There are also integrated sites of homage, such as the "Frantz Fanon Institute of Blida" or the "Avenue Ray-Charles".[22] All of these identifiable references point to Waberi's recognition that the emancipatory acts and writings by black cultural leaders have shaped Africa's present. But had their talents been channelled by the dominant global order of the United States of Africa, can we really imagine that Bob Marley might have written the same protest songs or that Frantz Fanon would have come to prominence in his defence of the "wretched of the earth"? Would Nelson Mandela be President of the most powerful country in the world, as Waberi would have it?

Whether or not these references amount to an "effect of reality" as theorised by Barthes (1968: 84-89), they certainly add to the abundant and clever detail that makes us laugh at the United States of Africa, and the United States of America at the same time. Equally amusing are the "imaginary zones of identification" (Moura, 2010: 33), which align the new African hegemony with well-known western consumer brands, such as McDiop burgers, Hadji-Das icecream and sleekly styled Nka furniture for every household. Finding the humour in this dystopian future also opens up spaces of hope that elevate the author's satirical wit over grim predictions of suffering and exploitation.

From where else does hope spring? Aedín ní Loingsigh argues that travel, or mobility, is part of the fluid process of defining the future in Waberi's novel, even though it is only available to a privileged few:

> (…) the challenge for African writers is to remain aware of this privilege, to continue to relativise its significance in relation to other forms of mobility, and to determine whether the concerns, hopes and fears of the global world correspond to the local worlds they leave behind (ní Loingsigh, 2011: 86-7).

The narrator's cynical approach to transcribing travel might raise questions about its importance to the protagonist, but that does not necessarily mean that all travels (or utopias) are illusory. Maya-Malaïka hesitates to follow Titus into the smells of garlic and the promise of "mummy" and the resultant musings unveil the fate of those who overdo the travel and do not claim a country, nor find a utopia:

> Ce n'est pas loin, te dit-il. Une bonne affaire nous attend au coin de la rue. Tu ne sais comment prendre ce mot "affaire", très élastique sous toutes les latitudes mais tu n'a pas de temps à perdre pour les élucubrations, tu n'es ni touriste, ni ethnologue, encore moins un de ces écrivains qu'on dit voyageurs et qui sillonnent la planète en quête d'utopies, d'oasis célestes et d'histoires à dérober. Ils ont, quant à eux, déjà sanglé leurs bagages, contourné l'horizon, repris la route. Plus tard, ils casseront des verges sur le dos des sédentaires et des prédicateurs de tout poil. Ils n'ont pas de pays. Ils n'ont que des mots, des territoires et des hommes à chérir en traversant ces mêmes territoires. (Waberi, 2006: 220) [It's not far, he tells you. Around the corner there's a good deal, just waiting for us. You're not sure how to take the expression "good deal." It can expand and contract, depending on the latitudes. But you don't have time to waste in senseless imaginings; you're neither a tourist nor an ethnologist, still less one of those so-called travel writers who traipse all over the planet in search of utopias, heavenly oases, and stories to steal. As for them, they have already packed their bags, gone round the horizon; they're back on the road. Later, they'll break rods on the backs of sedentary people and preachers of all shapes and sizes. They have no country. They care only about words, territories, and men as they travel through these same territories.] (Waberi, 2009: 115)

The fact that Waberi has cast Africa's future in this reverse mould, activating alternate histories, such as the Ethiopian invasion of the Balkans, and establishing harmony across African languages, cultures and politics, unified in the Washington-styled east coast capital of Asmara, means that there is hope for Africa. His diagnosis for the future is not promising if western models of efficiency, capitalism and hierarchy are maintained, but by criticising them in this fictional dystopia, the author implicitly suggests that we must look to other "non-western" models to imagine a better future for anyone, not just Africa. And with the recurrent references to black leaders of the past, present and future, it is clear that we should look more closely at their messages for making a better world.

In this way, Waberi's novel *In the United States of Africa* informs our thinking about Francophone African futuristic utopias and by extension, about postcolonial

utopian literature in general. Imaginary Africa's only hope for salvation is new cultural and artistic inspiration from her migrant populations who can also remind Africans of the need for love and compassion. Surely then, the utopian genre must be regenerated by postcolonial authors and cultural practitioners who can remind the west of its own responsibilities to hope and dream of a bright new tomorrow.

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Notes

[1] Consensus around the notion of critical dystopia is lacking, but the meaning I attribute to the term here follows Lyman Tower Sargent's definition in "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited": "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than con temporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the Utopian genre" (1994: 9). Tom Moylan's assessment of critical utopias in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* also informs my reflections, as "a space for a new form of political opposition, one fundamentally based in difference and multiplicity but now wisely and cannily organized in a fully democratic alliance politics that can talk back in a larger though diverse collective voice and not only critique the present system but also begin to find ways to transform it that go beyond the limitations of both the radical micropolitics and the compromised centrist 'solutions' of the 1990s" (2000: 190).

[2] A note on translation in this article: I will refer to *In the United States of Africa* using the English title, but will provide quotes from the original French novel, *Aux Etats-Unis d'Afrique*, as well as the published English translation. Other texts quoted in French do not exist in English translation, and therefore I have translated them myself.

[3] The manifesto entitled "Pour une littérature-monde en français" was published in *Le Monde des livres* on 19th March 2007 and can be read in French at http://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/spip.php?article1574 (accessed 21 January 2012), and in English: "Toward a 'World-Literature' in French", translated by Daniel Simon in *World Literature Today*, March-April, 2009, 54-56.

[4] *Vide infra* the passage quoted from Bekolo, 2009: 140, on this subject.

[5] I have questioned the exclusive western heritage of utopia at length in an essay "'Non-Western' Utopian Traditions" (Dutton, 2010: 223-258).

[6] http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/af/issue/view/457, Accessed 24 January 2012.

[7] Conference information and program: http://www.sfps.ac.uk/conferencestudy-days/annual-conference-2010/, Accessed 24 January 2012.

[8] See for example Poiana 2008, and Thomas 2008.

[9] See http://www.africaisthefuture.com/, Accessed 26 January 2012.

[10] See http://www.africaexpress.co.uk/, Accessed 26 January 2012.

[11] All references are to the online version of the essay http://web.archive.org/web/19991023003219/http://www.levity.com/markdery/black.html, Accessed 20 January 2012.

[12] For a more in depth discussion of this dilemma, see my chapter on "'Non-Western' Utopian Traditions" (Dutton, 2010: 223-258).

[13] See also Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's article "Cognition's Warp: African films on near-future risk" (2009) for a postcolonial reading of *Les Saignantes* and *Africa Paradis*.

[14] Nollywood is Nigeria's burgeoning film industry that, like Bollywood, is creating its own industry marketplace away from Hollywood

[15] It was the most expensive film ever produced in Nigeria (130 million naira).

[16] CGI: Computer Generated Images

¹⁷ http://www.radiopalmwine.com/cinemas-pull-the-plug-on-the-movie-kajola/, Accessed 28 January 2012.

¹⁸ http://www.nigeriafilms.com/content.asp?contentid=5651&ContentTypeID=20, Accessed 28 January 2012.

¹⁹ Cited in Osinubi, 2009: 273.

²⁰ The title of this chapter in the French text is "Voyage au cœur de Paris" [Voyage to the Heart of Paris], echoing the previous chapter title and intimating an emotional attachment to Paris, the protagonist's absent mother.

²¹ For further information on critical dystopias, see Sargent 1994, and Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 1-12.

²² In this dystopian inversion, there are no more women hailed for their contributions to knowledge, society, or culture than there are in today's real world.