Africanfuturist Socio-Climatic Imaginaries and Nnedi Okorafor's Wild Necropolitics

Carl Death (iD)

Politics, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK;
carl.death@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract: Dominant and insurgent socio-climatic imaginaries struggle for influence over how the future is envisioned. Africanfuturist imaginaries have huge potential to unsettle racialised and gendered climate narratives. In this article I use Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Who Fears Death* in order to challenge mainstream climate imaginaries and to imagine new forms of being and becoming in the context of climate change. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's concepts of biopolitics and necropolitics, as well as black feminist traditions of imagining new genres of the human, I argue that Okorafor's "wild necropolitics" illuminates how the forces of "wild nature" have become central features of the deployment of the means of destroying life, especially in the context of climate change. By examining the motifs of change, violence, wilderness and narration, I argue that reading and writing different stories about alternative climate futures is essential to the process of finding new ways of being and becoming human.

Keywords: climate fiction, futures, apocalypse, biopolitics, Africanfuturism, imaginaries

Introduction

Imaginaries are explicitly crafted visions that shape how societies plan for the future, understand their present, and rewrite their history. An imaginary is a form of world-creation, the construction of a world-view encompassing narratives, characters, places, practices and technologies. Whilst many sink without trace, the most powerful and influential can restructure dominant ways of narrating the world in the present (Adams et al. 2012; Hammond 2021; Milkoreit 2016, 2017; Nikoleris et al. 2019; Yusoff and Gabrys 2011). In the context of contemporary politics—and particularly raced and gendered forms of climate violence—it is crucial to understand how dominant and insurgent imaginaries struggle for influence.

Contemporary climate imaginaries are largely dominated by Eurocentric perspectives. The failure of global governance to adequately address ecological and climatic challenges highlights the need to "diversify the Anthropocene imagination" (Nikoleris et al. 2019:80), and to interrogate new imaginaries. In this article I explore the potential of "Africanfuturist" socio-climatic imaginaries. The term Africanfuturist was coined by Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor in 2019, situating her work in relation to the literary, aesthetic, and cultural movement of

Afrofuturism (Mbembe 2019:163; Samatar 2017; Womack 2013). For Okorafor (2019), "Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or centre the West".[1] In this article I engage with her 2010 novel *Who Fears Death* in some depth to show how mainstream climate imaginaries can be challenged in significant ways by Africanfuturist fiction, and to contribute to imagining new forms of human being and becoming in the context of climate change and necropolitical capitalism (Mbembe 2019).[2]

Okorafor is a Nigerian-American author of science fiction and fantasy novels and short stories, for adults and children. Her work has been awarded a number of prizes, including the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa (2008), the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel (2011), the Kindred Award (2012), the Nebula Award for Best Novella (2016), and the Hugo Award for Best Novella (2016). In 2017 it was announced that the novel *Who Fears Death* will be made into a TV series by HBO with novelist and *Game of Thrones* producer, George R. R. Martin, as executive producer. Inspired by authors like Octavia Butler, Virginia Hamilton, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ben Okri, Okorafor's work challenges genres as well as easy categorisation (Okorafor 2009). Okorafor's "postcolonial, post-apocalyptic Africa is a messy, often ambiguous place", as Burnett (2015:148) observes, and her lifeworlds are neither "traditional" nor "modern", but are rather intrinsically embedded in what Mbembe (2019:93) terms "planetary entanglements".

I read Okorafor's work as a form of imaginative political theory, a contribution to conversations inspired by other artists/theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Octavia Butler, Achille Mbembe, Donna Haraway, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Alexander Weheliye. The particular contributions of Okorafor's work that I draw out in this article are her imaginative developments of new forms of being and becoming, of new "genres of the human" (Wynter 2003:313), that emerge in the context of futurist socio-climatic imaginaries. The contours of contemporary racialised, gendered, necropolitical carboniferous capitalism are illustrated more fully in novels like *Lagoon* (Okorafor 2014) and *The Book of Phoenix* (Okorafor 2015), but it is in *Who Fears Death* that we can see the fullest and most sustained examination of new modes of being and becoming. What I term Okorafor's "wild necropolitics" shows how the apparently random and chaotic violence of "nature" or "the wilderness" has become a central feature of necropolitics in the context of climate change.

This article situates Okorafor's novels in relation to theoretical literatures and wider Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries. Theoretically, I draw on critical and postcolonial work on necropolitics and biopolitics, before considering the role of science fictional imaginaries in constituting alternative worlds. The specific contributions of Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* to exploring new genres of the human is then set out in four sections exploring four prominent motifs in the novel: change, violence, wilderness, and narration. This is attempted in the spirit of Donna Haraway's (2016:12) injunction that "[i]t matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories".

Necropolitics, Climate Fiction, and Socio-Climatic Imaginaries

Achille Mbembe's (2019:7) diagnosis of the present is that "[n]early everywhere the political order is reconstituting itself as a form of organisation for death". Even liberal democracies, he argues, are increasingly characterised by "separation, hate movements, hostility, and, above all, struggle against an enemy" (Mbembe 2019:42). War, racial hatred, the strengthening of borders and expulsion of enemies, the extreme inequality of contemporary capitalism, and the accelerating violence of runaway climate change produce what he terms an era of necropolitics, which the Covid-19 crisis has merely exacerbated and heightened. He uses the term necropolitics to account for the various ways in which diverse weapons are deployed in the interest of destroying life, and suggests that, "for a large share of humanity, the end of the world has already occurred" (Mbembe 2019:29). This trenchant picture resonates strongly, as we will see below, with the world Okorafor presents in the novel *Who Fears Death*. Like Okorafor, however, Mbembe does not flinch from this portrayal of a world characterised by violence and death, nor does he abandon all hope of a more convivial politics. Rather, he asks: What do human freedom and vulnerability mean in a necropolitical context? What alternative forms of being-in-the-world are possible? Refusing the binary choice between either violence or freedom, Mbembe (2019:92) suggests that "today's form of necropower blurs the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom".

Frantz Fanon (2001, 2008) wrote in the 1950s of the need for a "new humanism" that would set mankind free and restore human dignity, love, and understanding. This concern with the politics and possibilities of a new humanism is central to black feminist traditions of thought, which have done most to explore these questions precisely because the dominant genre of the human—Man—has always been irreducibly raced and gendered. As Sylvia Wynter (2003:313) puts it:

> This issue is that of the genre of the human, the issue whose target of abolition is the ongoing collective production of our present ethnoclass mode of being human, Man: above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernised (or conversely) global middle classes.

This predominance of a particular conception of human existence, and its constitutive role in carboniferous capitalism, racialised colonialism, patriarchy, and necropower, is why it is necessary to "go about thinking and living enfleshment otherwise so as to usher in different genres of the human" (Weheliye 2014:2; see also Jackson 2020; Mbembe 2019:2). Inspired by Fanon's (2008:180) call to "introduce invention into existence", Wynter asks: "How do we *be*, in Fanonian terms, hybridly human?" (in Wynter and McKittrick 2015:45).

For theorists like Mbembe, Wynter, Weheliye, Jackson, and others, art and the imagination have a crucial role to play. As Wynter argues, humans are a storytelling species: "the human is *homo narrans*", at least since African ancestors scratched an intricate symbol on a piece of ochre in Blombos Cave (Wynter and McKittrick 2015:25, 66). Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020:1) shows that imaginative

work can frequently alter "the meaning and significance of being (human)". Exploring the work of authors like Toni Morrison, Nalo Hopkinson, Audre Lorde, Wangechi Mutu, and Octavia Butler, Jackson (2020:4) explains how such texts can provoke "unruly yet generative conceptions of being". Reading and writing novels is itself a form of theorising about the world, and a way of practising new modes of being and freedom (Ashcroft et al. 2002; Gergan et al. 2020; Haraway 2016:12; Weheliye 2014:16).

I argue that the novels of Nnedi Okorafor can make an important contribution to imagining and practising new genres of the human. This is particularly important for contemporary climate change politics, which reproduces gendered, raced, and classed forms of violence and necropower. There is a rich tradition of studying science fiction novels in critical theory (Haraway 2016; Jameson 2007; Langer 2011; Whyte 2018; Yusoff and Gabrys 2011). On the one hand, there is extensive research on how science fiction texts can reflect and reinforce dominant, imperial discourses and power relations, particularly in terms of voyages of discovery and conquest, and colonial/imperial encounters with the Other (Adejunmobi 2016; Burnett 2015:134; Eatough 2017:242; Langer 2011:3; O'Connell 2016:303; Weldes 2001). On the other hand, science fiction can also play a more critical function of de-familiarising the present and reminding readers that alternative social, economic, and political worlds are possible (Weldes 2001:667). Indeed, for Fredric Jameson (2007:xiv), this "cognitive estrangement" is the quintessential, formal function of science fiction as a genre, irrespective of details of plots or themes (or even the intentions of the author). Science fiction, for Jameson (2007:288), is not really about imagining the future: "Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come". By destabilising the present —or estranging us from it—science fiction shatters the doctrine that "There is No Alternative" (Jameson 2007:231).

This critical, utopian function of science fiction is strongly asserted by Okorafor. She argues that "Science fiction is one of the greatest and most effective forms of political writing. It is all about the question: 'what if?'" (Okorafor 2017). She goes on to argue that whilst mainstream science fiction has often been animated by colonial/imperial, technocratic, and patriarchal impulses, Africanfuturist science fiction/fantasy offers a challenge to the mainstream. "For Africans", she says, "home-grown science fiction can be a will to power" (Okorafor 2017). These contradictory elements can be illustrated with the popular Marvel film *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018). One of the biggest box office and critical successes of 2018, this Afrofuturist film challenges dominant discourses about African weakness, poverty, and marginality in global power relations, whilst also reinforcing a certain brand of liberal internationalism. There is a critique of the inequalities and injustices of American society in the film—reflecting the lineage of the comics from 1960s civil rights and Black Power—but a largely benign portrayal of US foreign policy through the sympathetic character of a CIA agent. The film has been hailed "an iconic cultural moment" for the African American community, whilst also being accused of re-inscribing "colonial tropes" of African tribalism, violence, gender relations, and hierarchy (Karam and Kirby-Hirst 2019; Zeleza 2018). With

prominent *Black Panther* writers including Ta-Nehisi Coates and Okorafor, the film cannot be easily dismissed as simplistic Hollywood fare. Rather *Black Panther* neatly illustrates how the content of cultural texts—the plots or narratives, characters, settings, and so on—can variously challenge or reinforce dominant power relations, whilst the form of science fiction texts can also play a number of radical or conservative functions.

The concept of the imaginary is useful here to understand how both content and form are interrelated and mobilise the power of a text. Imaginaries are understood as explicitly crafted discursive visions of the world (Bottici 2011; Jessop 2010:345; Levy and Spicer 2013; Milkoreit 2017; Wright et al. 2013). Here I am particularly interested in future imaginaries, as discussed by Jasanoff and Kim (2015:4), who describe sociotechnical imaginaries as "collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology". Despite their focus on "institutionally stabilised" imaginaries, they acknowledge that imaginaries "can originate in the visions of single individuals or small collectives", and that "[m]ultiple imaginaries can coexist within a society in tension" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015:4). The imaginaries studied in this article are less institutionally stabilised (and less obviously desirable) than those Jasanoff and Kim focus on, and suggest a greater diversity of clashing and overlapping imaginaries than is sometimes acknowledged. Imaginaries have the power to defamiliarise dominant elements of the imagined past, present, and future, whilst lending weight to alternative or subjugated elements (Wright et al. 2013). The distinctive function of the imaginary (in contrast to ideologies, master narratives, policy projections, and even discourses) is to emphasise the possibilities for change, for being otherwise (Adams et al. 2012; Hammond 2021; Jasanoff and Kim 2015:20).

Following Manjana Milkoreit (2017:3), in this article the focus is specifically on future socio-climatic imaginaries, which are "informed by beliefs about patterns and pathways of environmental and social change". Novels about climate change are one form of socio-climatic imaginary, and climate fiction now has its own abbreviation ("cli-fi") and canonical texts (Johns-Putra 2016; Streeby 2018; Trexler 2015; Yusoff and Gabrys 2011). Initially the genre was dominated by very realistic and scientifically-driven texts, in which climate scientists argued with each other or policymakers, or protagonists struggled directly with the impacts of climate change (usually floods, but also heat, desertification, food and water shortages, migration, or general social breakdown). The rapid development of the genre in the last decade, however, has led to the production of a wide set of climate imaginaries comprising varied plots, characters, settings, and themes.

These developments have led to a burgeoning of research in cultural studies and literary theory (Chakrabarty 2012; Gergan et al. 2020; Ghosh 2016; Streeby 2018; Trexler 2015; Whyte 2018; Yusoff and Gabrys 2011); however, more politically focused-research has tended to remain dominated by the initial canon of realist texts (e.g. Harris 2017; Milkoreit 2016, 2017; Nikoleris et al. 2019). Much scholarly effort has been expended on showing how cli-fi imaginaries match or reflect dominant policy scenarios. An example of this approach is the work of

Nikoleris et al. (2017:308) who relate "contemporary literary climate change fiction to five scientific scenarios", and use climate science to provide conceptual frameworks for interpreting climate fiction. They acknowledge that whilst the fiction selected in their research is "culturally narrow", there is other climate fiction that "challenges the predominantly Western outlook in the modelling community" (Nikoleris et al. 2017:310). Research in this vein struggles to address more critical questions of the relationship between literary fiction and wider climate discourses and power relations.

It is therefore important to insist on showing how dominant discourses of climate politics can be disrupted and challenged by more radical and counter-cultural imaginaries. Africanfuturist climate fiction can be a fertile challenge to mainstream climate politics and can also contribute to new ways of imagining genres of the human, as will be shown through a discussion of Okorafor's novel *Who Fears Death*.

Africanfuturist Climate Fiction

African authors, settings, and characters have been largely absent from most research (and popular discussion) about the rise of "cli-fi" (e.g. Johns-Putra 2016; Streeby 2018:4–5; Trexler 2015:124–125). Indeed, where "Africa" is explicitly discussed it often seems to represent something specific: a forewarning of apocalypse. Contemporary (and usually homogenised) "Africa" is a coded reference to how bad "our" (i.e. European and North America) future could be, in a gloomy reversal of more optimistic "First in Europe, then elsewhere" discourses about progress and Enlightenment (Chakrabarty 2000:7). As Mbembe (2001:1–2) has famously argued, "Africa" tends to be only understood through a "negative interpretation", and discourse about Africa is always about somewhere else.

Yet, as postcolonial theorists and literary scholars have been pointing out for some time, there are rich if often overlooked archives of African authors, settings, and characters with particularly African perspectives on climate politics (Adejunmobi 2016; Burnett 2015; Mackey 2018; Omelsky 2014; Samatar 2017). Incorporating these imaginaries into the field of cli-fi can make an important contribution to spatialising and politicising climate change. Of course, within the field of African socio-climate imaginaries there is considerable diversity, reflecting a continent of more than a billion people, thousands of languages, and vast social, political, cultural, and literary differences (see Adejunmobi 2016; Eatough 2017; Omelsky 2014; Samatar 2017; Womack 2013). This article cannot do justice to this breadth and diversity. Instead, I will highlight two potential contributions of some Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries—heterotemporality and posthumanism—as a means of situating and contextualising the subsequent more detailed examination of Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*.

The first way in which the wider genre of Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries has diversified mainstream climate fiction is through a challenge to assumptions of a linear relationship between past, present, and future time(s), in which climate change is positioned as a challenge for future (usually global) society (Hugo 2017; Mbembe 2019:28–29; O'Connell 2016; Omelsky 2014; Pahl 2018;

Samatar 2017; Whyte 2018). Examples of Africanfuturist climate fiction that imagine heterotemporal narratives include two films, *Pumzi* and *Crumbs*. *Pumzi* is a short film by Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu (2009) and set in a future techno-authoritarian East Africa after "the water wars", where a museum of historic artefacts provides the impetus for the central character's visions of a better, greener future (Hugo 2017; Omelsky 2014). The feature film *Crumbs* (Llansó 2015) unfolds in a fantastically far-future Ethiopia in which baffling quests take place amidst the plastic detritus of long-gone consumer civilizations. In terms of cli-fi novels, Doris Lessing's two epic stories *Mara and Dann* (Lessing 1999) and *The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog* (Lessing 2006) are survivalist dystopias in which southern African drought and a new European ice age have trapped central and north African societies of the far future into endemic war, migration, and nostalgia for the technological marvels of the distant past. Mike Resnick's novel about the Kikuyu world *Kirinyaga* (Resnick 1998) explores the difficulties of re-establishing traditional and "tribal" modes of life and time in a future context of planetary geoengineering, where the East African past is brought back to life alongside the futuristic present of other multiple worlds. All these novels and films complicate linear assumptions of past, present, and future, as well as liberal myths of progress and technological advance, often imagining multiple coexisting temporalities. At least one of the implications of this heterotemporality for socio-climatic imaginaries are the ways in which these stories remind us that "[t]he end of the world has already happened for some subjects, and it is the prerequisite for the possibility of imagining 'living and breathing again' for others" (Yusoff 2018:12–13; see also Whyte 2018).

The second way in which the wider genre of Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries has diversified mainstream climate fiction is through a challenge to humanist assumptions about the (always-already raced and gendered) human-nature-thing schema (Jackson 2020:15; Mbembe 2019:107–108; Weheliye 2014:136). An excellent example here is Lauren Beukes' (2010) novel *Zoo City*, set in a near-future nightmarish Johannesburg where criminals are accompanied by animal familiars, bound together in a form of psychological symbiosis, possibly as a result of extreme forms of pollution and climatic change (Eatough 2017; Ericson 2018). The mutability of human and non-human life under new environmental conditions is also a pervasive theme of Lessing's novels: "Everything changed: rivers moved, disappeared, ran again; trees died—the hills were full of dry forests—and insects, even scorpions, changed their natures" (Lessing 1999:67). More-than-human ecologies take centre stage in Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), which opens with a chapter written from the perspective of a swordfish and closes with a valediction from Udide Okwanka, a spider god from Igbo folklore. The story concerns the arrival of shape-shifting aliens in Lagos, where they interact with various non-human and mythical entities, including the Bone Collector, a road monster who angrily consumes humans and vehicles. The aliens ultimately transform the human population of Lagos in profound, revolutionary ways (Mackey 2018; O'Connell 2016:309–310). In this respect the novel echoes Mbembe's (2019:13) observation that "[b]eing human no longer determines the limits of those occupying the world" (see also Chakrabarty 2012; Haraway 2016).

These brief snapshots from the wider universe of Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries suggest ways in which the genre can contribute to the radicalisation of mainstream climate change politics. The remainder of the article turns to a closer examination of how Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* can illuminate new genres of the human in the context of necropolitical carboniferous capitalism, through the motifs of change, violence, wilderness, and narration.

Climate Change and Radical Transformation in Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

Okorafor's work is particularly significant in terms of the production and contestation of climate imaginaries because of the prominence of themes of power, violence, race, gender, colonialism, and ecology. *Who Fears Death* is not obviously climate fiction in the same way as, for example, Ian McEwan's *Solar* or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy (Nikoleris et al. 2019), but by taking a broader view of climate fiction as going beyond work which focuses on the relationship between climate scientists and policymakers, it is clear that the politics of necropolitical carboniferous capitalism provide both a crucial context for Okorafor's novels as well as prominent themes which shape the narrative (Jue 2017; Pahl 2018). My argument here is that we can read Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* as an articulation of new ways of being and becoming human in the context of the "wild necropolitics" of climatic apocalypse. What I term here wild necropolitics is an attempt to capture the ways in which, under conditions of climate change, the forces of "wild nature"—wind, water, fire, and earth—become central features of the deployment of the means of destroying life, in ways which often appear more random and chaotic than the calculated necropolitical violence of the concentration camp or police state. Importantly, in Okorafor's account, the violence of destruction is also inherent to the emergence of new forms of being and becoming.

Change is at the heart of Okorafor's fiction. Both *Who Fears Death* and its prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, are radical and revolutionary mythic tales in which the world is turned upside down. Her stories are an insistence that radical change and recreation is needed at the levels of ideologies, discourses, and social relations, especially in terms of gender and race, much as Fanon (2001:142) argued that for true decolonisation, "everything must be started again from scratch". Okorafor does not, of course, provide a map or theory for how such change should take place, and the wave of revolutionary change that sweeps across the end of *Who Fears Death* is essentially mystical in character. I suggest, rather, that this book should be read as a mythic tale that insists on the central and fundamental importance of radical change. Indeed, the central character of *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu (Onye) is an *Eshu*, a shape-shifter, whose "very *essence* was change and defiance" (Okorafor 2018:383). The first third of the book is entitled "Becoming", and on the first page Onye tells us that, at the ceremony for her Papa's death, "I became a different creature that day, not so human" (Okorafor 2018:3). If we read her character as a glimpse of the "new genres of the human" that Wynter (2003) calls for, then this is a mode of being which foregrounds

fleshy mutability, psychological transformation, and shifting gendered and racialised identities.

In terms of the plot, Onye is a dangerous, troubled, counter-cultural heroine; an *Ewu*, or mixed-race child born of wartime rape, in a world torn between racialised conflict between the Okeke and Nuru, legitimised through a scriptural Great Book. She is on a journey of self-discovery as well as (eventually) a wider political quest to kill her father and end the genocide. Her rewriting of the Great Book at the climax of *Who Fears Death* leads to waves of change rippling out and altering the past, present, and future. "What I can tell you is that the book and all that it touched and then all that touched what it touched and so on, everything in that small sandstone hut began to shift. Not to the wilderness, that wouldn't have scared me. Someplace else. I dare say a pocket in time, a slit in time and space" (Okorafor 2018:378). The final passages of the text suggest a new past and present is coming into being, one where men and women, and Nuru, Okeke, and *Ewu*, live convivially alongside each other (Okorafor 2018:386; see also Burnett 2015; O'Connell 2016).

It is striking, however, that the forms of change in the book are individual and social. Beings change their form or develop over time, social relations shift, and history is rewritten. In contrast, environmental and climatic change are notably absent from *Who Fears Death*. This is not a story about familiar cli-fi tropes: the encroachment of the desert, or water shortages, or oppressive heat. These are problems that social relations and technology have apparently "solved", it seems. Despite this, I argue that Okorafor's work—and worlds—are a vital element of a wider, postcolonial body of climate fiction. This is more obvious in a petro-fiction like *Lagoon*, where the utopian conclusion of the novel sees the ailing Nigerian president revived to health and vigour by the aliens, and he is inspired by the offer of their new technology to assemble an elite team of advisors to lead Nigeria and the region into a revolutionary new era of rapid change and technological, alien-fuelled, progress. This is nothing less than "the potential birthing of a new world order" (Hugo 2017:48) of post-oil civilization, a socio-climatic imaginary in which the "solution" to carboniferous capitalism is an opening to the radical Other.

In *Who Fears Death*, the wider context of climate apocalypse is present: in references to caves full of decrepit computers from a dying civilization of "mad scientists", "old devices of a doomed people" (Okorafor 2018:329, 334–337). Some of these technologies remain: water capture stations, laser knives which can cut cleanly and cauterise wounds, and solar powered technology, including maps. This wider climate change context is made much more visible in the prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, which shows how "the wildest, darkest, rabid scientific sorcery" (Okorafor 2015:170) of 21st century corporate American imperialism led to climate change, injustice, slavery, violence, and genocide. It is set in a Manhattan of palm trees and mangoes, which is largely under water. Vines grow on the skyscrapers to keep the air breathable, and scientific research is focused on "methods of dealing with climate change and buoy technology for floating towns and cities" (Okorafor 2015:98). Yet, behind "the good intentions and amazing science, however, was abomination. Weapons, the quest for immortality, how far

we could go ... The foundation of all the towers was always always always corrupt, driven by a lusty greed" (Okorafor 2015:98). As in *Lagoon*, there are frequent references to the curse of fossil fuels: "The smell of exhaust filled the car. I hated that smell. It was the smell of self-inflicted death" (Okorafor 2015:77).

Whilst climate change is a distant background to *Who Fears Death*, the novel does end on a strikingly familiar environmental note. It concludes with Onye heading for a world away from the Nuru and Okeke, a lush green forest beyond the desert revealed by her mother. She believes that, "if a forest, a true vast forest, still existed someplace, even if it was very far away, then all would not end badly" (Okorafor 2018:286–287; see further discussion in Dowdall 2013:186; Pahl 2018:217). This suggestion of a better future represented by a green forest risks sounding a slightly false note, in a novel that has generally portrayed the desert as a space of safety, beauty, and solidarity. It is a powerful cross-cultural image, however.[3] It can also be read not as an alternative to the desert world but as a reminder that multiple worlds exist in parallel, that diverse ecosystems are an element of the diversity of life, and that environmental change is just as possible as social, political, and discursive change. Change is therefore the first dominant motif of *Who Fears Death*.

Wild Necropolitics and the Violence of Birth and Death

The second dominant motif is violence. The optimistic final note does not lessen the insistency with which the book repeatedly asks the question, who lives and who dies? The violence of birth and death, genocide and the apocalypse, are never far from the surface of the story, and Onye is rarely slow to take action. She is perpetually angry; her mother believes her baby was "shrieking even before it came out" (Okorafor 2018:24). There is no side-stepping the fact this is a violent tale, full of horrific crimes committed against apparent innocents. Onye is a product of this violence, but she also perpetrates it on others, seemingly fulfilling her society's prejudices about the *Ewu*.[4] Her training in magic gives her power over life, flesh, and the elements, which she deploys both to rewrite ancient ethnic/racial hatreds and bring down a warlord, but also to wreak vengeance on bystanders and those who fail to intervene. She recognises that she has "a demon buried under my skin since my conception. A gift from my father, from his corrupted genetics. The potential and taste for amazing cruelty" (Okorafor 2018:151). Her absence of pity—even for the wives and children of her enemies—is repeatedly stressed and is integral to what we might describe as wild necropolitics (Okorafor 2018:164, 240).[5]

The plot is predicated on two forms of violence: the rape of Onye's mother, Najeeba, by her biological father, the warlord Daib, and the wider genocide of the Okeke by the Nuru.[6] The violence of patriarchy also runs throughout the book, as female characters are slighted, denied, scorned, beaten, cut, silenced, and raped because of their gender (Dowdall 2013:180). The violence of patriarchy is met with a violent response: the book opens with the death of Onye's adopted father; she attacks her father-teacher, Aro, and forcefully rejects his misogyny; Onye makes the town of Jwahir watch and experience her memory of

her mother's rape; Binta murders her abusive father; and the central narrative is Onye's quest to kill her biological father, Daib. Onye eventually spares him, and he survives the book, crippled and in pain, to be "dealt with in his own time" (Okorafor 2018:369). Patriarchy and patricide provide the context and the impetus to most of the violence in the story.

The final confrontation with Daib has cataclysmic consequences, however. Onye's partner and lover Mwita is killed in the struggle, and Onye responds by making herself pregnant. Through her shape-shifting powers over the flesh she brings Mwita's sperm, still inside her, to her egg. "At the moment of conception a giant shock wave blasted from me, a shock wave like the one so long ago during my father's burial ceremony. It blew out the walls around me and the ceiling above me" (Okorafor 2018:368). The explosion almost kills the weakened Daib, but the consequences are awful. "Every single male human in the central town of Durfa capable of impregnating a woman was dead. My actions had killed them" (Okorafor 2018:370). Much like her father, Onye reflects, "*We both leave bodies in our wake. Fields of bodies*" (Okorafor 2018:370). Moreover, simultaneously all the women in the area are made pregnant. The awesome, terrible symbolism of childbearing as an act of war/apocalypse mirrors, of course, her own brutal conception. In the acknowledgements Okorafor references an article about "weaponised rape" in Sudan in 2004 as creating "the passageway through which Onyesonwu slipped into my world" (Okorafor 2018:389). For Okorafor's wild necropolitics the power to make life and give death are tightly interconnected, and the genocidal conclusion of the story is one in which "there is no reconciliation of differences and dialogue or forgiveness" (Hoydis 2017:193).

This wild necropolitics is further elaborated in the prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, where the wider context of colonial violence is made more visible; what Mbembe (2006:150) refers to as that "original wound … [the] encounter between Africa and the West that is lived as a rape". *The Book of Phoenix* is a revenge fantasy that ends in apocalypse. The terrible, terrifying central character, Phoenix, ultimately decides to "[k]ill everything. Everything should die. Let it all start from the beginning" (Okorafor 2015:199). There is no pity or remorse as she becomes a sun come down to earth to raze American civilization, only an incandescent irony. Phoenix observes that her method of destruction is akin to scorched earth military tactics. "Scorched earth is heartless, it's violent, it's merciless, and it usually involves fire" (Okorafor 2015:218). It is forbidden by the Geneva Convention, and only the USA and Israel have not ratified it. "In this way," Phoenix concludes, in the midst of her final act of immolation, "I am very American" (Okorafor 2015:218).[7]

Okorafor's wild necropolitics insists that the question of who must live and who must die, the questions of violence, are not to be side-stepped. Who are the racialised Others of the climate apocalypse, and how can these exclusions be overcome? How does life become governable, and what new populations are brought into being? Bio- and geo-engineers are engaged in transforming species, environments, and ecologies in adaptation for climates to come. This is the heart of what Mbembe (2019:14) refers to as biopolitics: "power over the living—or again, the capacity to voluntarily alter the human species—the absolute form of power". In

this light, and in the shadow of Fanon, we might conclude with Okorafor and Mbembe that the struggle for climate justice and the decolonisation of carboniferous capitalism can "hardly forgo the use of violence" (Mbembe 2019:6). The lesson Burnett (2015:139) draws from Okorafor is that, "for Africa to become genuinely postcolonial, we must realise, some sort of apocalypse is necessary, destroying the institutional power structures that presently make neocolonialism so persistent and difficult to undermine". The most pressing question then becomes: "How can the world be re-created in the wake of the world's destruction?" (Mbembe 2019:29).

The More-Than-Human Wilderness

In answering this question Okorafor challenges the ontologies of our socio-climatic imaginaries, foregrounding the motif of human/nonhuman wilderness. *Who Fears Death* repeatedly disrupts the binaries of human and nonhuman, subject and object, nature and civilization, good and evil, ally and enemy. Two forms of wild(er)ness are crucial to Okorafor's *wild* necropolitics. The first is the spirit world, the *wilderness*, which Onye can enter and pass through as her training in the Mystic Points progresses. There are blue spirit trees that try to strangle her, and the baleful red eye of her rapist biological father, Daib, watches her and plots her destruction. As Onye grows in strength and power her ability to enter and draw on the wilderness improves, using it to shape-shift, travel, become ignorable, and heal or destroy. Yet the unstable, volatile foundations of human subjectivity are increasingly evident to Onye: "To remain a vulture too long always left me feeling detached from what I could only define as being a human … There is always a price for changing" (Okorafor 2018:82). She is visited by a masquerade—an African mythic, folkloric *thing* of great power and danger—and is transformed: "I had one foot in the spirit world and the other in the physical world. Absurd. I was part blue energy and part physical body. Half alive and half something else" (Okorafor 2018:279; see also Okorafor 2009:282).

The second form of wild(er)ness in *Who Fears Death* is the desert. This is not the desert of most mainstream cli-fi imaginaries, however. Okorafor's desert is a sanctuary from the dangers of the towns and villages. Before she is born, Onye's mother talks to her foetus: "'The human world is harsh', Najeeba said. 'But the desert is lovely. Alusi, *nmuo*, all spirits can live here in peace'" (Okorafor 2018:24). The desert is full of life and Onye is at home there; this is not a story about thirst, hunger, or oppressive heat. Instead, the desert is a place of beauty, friendship, and travelling companions. Onye's singing brings desert owls to their camp. Camels play an important role in the narrative, and are recurring symbols of compassion, intelligence, and bravery (Okorafor 2018:218–220). A magic dust storm is a refuge for the Red People, the Vah, who help Onye to pass a major test as well as saving her life when she is cursed by her biological father.

As the assistance of the Vah implies, Onye is not a solitary heroine who overcomes the odds alone. Whilst *Who Fears Death* does at times risk suggesting a messianic politics of awaiting the chosen one to rewrite history, the reader is continually reminded of her dependence on others and the complex web of socio-

natural relations which produce and sustain her. Even her most individualised and heroic abilities—her demonic powers to change shape, travel in the wilderness, and heal or destroy—involve her drawing strength from the emotions of those around her, as well as the landscape of the desert. At crucial moments Onye changes into other creatures—most frequently a vulture, or a *Kponyungo* dragon—in order to survive.

Shifting human relationships are also used to illustrate the ambiguity and hybridity of Okorafor's wild necropolitics. Onye's closest companion, and a key counter-point to her anger and passion, is Mwita. He is also *Ewu* and together they are two outcasts who establish a bond of love and strength. In contrast to Onye, Mwita is born from (forbidden) love between a Nuru and Okeke, and he provides her with support, advice, and healing. He pleads with her to show restraint and compassion: "Just because we hurt doesn't mean others should!" (Okorafor 2018:152). He tells his own story: of the death of his parents and his exile and time as a child soldier with sadistic rebel Okekes. "'It is not as simple as you think', he said. 'There is sickness on both sides. Be careful. Your father sees things in black and white, too. The Okeke bad, Nuru good'" (Okorafor 2018:153; see also Burnett 2015:145). He gives his life for her fighting Daib at the end, but it is the hope of seeing him again that drives Onye to rewrite her own ending. She heads for a distant green forest beyond the desert, to where she believes Mwita is waiting for her and her unborn child.

Crucial allies in Onye's journey are her female friends: Luyu, Diti, and Binta. They are bound together after undergoing a painful circumcision rite-of-passage, and despite tensions they are essential in helping Onye become her destiny. Binta is killed by an angry mob in the town of Papa Shee, prefiguring Onye's own death. Luyu remains faithful and gives her life in order to gain Onye enough time to rewrite the Great Book. These four strong female friends are the energetic, feminist heart of the book, counterbalancing the mostly male sorcerers whose gnomic wisdom (more-or-less) guides her along the journey.

There are constant surprises, unexpected allies, and friends who disappoint. The enemy of Part I, the sorcerer Aro, becomes her trusted teacher in Part II, and the sole witness to her burial in Part III. In contrast, her childhood friend Diti abandons Onye and leaves her after months of travel together. In the final tumultuous climax Onye is aided by Okeke rebels, a Nuru boatman, and the Nuru typist who has been recording Onye's story in her prison cell. These repeated assertions of moral ambiguity in the final pages remind the reader that this is not a straightforward tale of good and evil, belying simplistic dismissals of the fantasy genre. We can read this as an insistence that, in the context of wild necropolitics, being and becoming are mutable, unstable, and hybrid; in Mbembe's (2019:164) terms there are "more or less continuous metamorphoses … multiple inversions, of plasticity, including anatomical, and of corporeality". The violence of Okorafor's wild necropolitics is also the violence of birth, growth, and change, which cannot be simplified into the categories of good and evil. Another world is possible, new genres of the human can emerge, but Okorafor forces us to ask: who (and what) will live and who (and what) will die in the process?

Narrating New Genres of the Human

Ultimately, this is brought together in terms of Okorafor's emphasis on the power of those who tell and retell, write and rewrite stories. The seizing of narration, the fourth key motif of the novel, is also a way of exercising agency within the necropolitics of climate change. A concern with the power of words and symbols, writing and song, runs through much of Okorafor's fiction (Hoydis 2017; O'Connell 2016:298; Pahl 2018). *Who Fears Death* is a story ostensibly told by Onye to an unnamed Nuru recorder of her words, in a place, we eventually learn, "that used to be part of the Kingdom of Sudan" (Okorafor 2018:381). In the course of her adventures she comes to realise that the conflict between the Okeke and Nuru is legitimised through ancient "truths" codified in the Great Book (Okorafor 2018:92; see also Burnett 2015:142). However, there is a prophecy that a tall Nuru man with a long beard will rewrite the Great Book, and "[w]hen he comes, there will be good change for Nuru and Okeke" (Okorafor 2018:94).

Onye, however, has her doubts about the Great Book. Neither she nor her mother are believers in the goddess, Ani, whose deeds the Great Book celebrates. Her doubt turns out to be well-placed as the prophecy proves to be incorrect. It is actually Onye who is destined to rewrite the Great Book; none of the (male) established sorcerers and seers could believe that an *Ewu* woman would be an instrument of fate.[8] Future prophecies and past histories—indeed all forms of the written word—are unstable and unreliable in Okorafor's universe of books within books.

For Burnett (2015:146), the written word "has a hybrid identity" for Okorafor: it is both "the product and tool of the colonial oppressors and a potentially revolutionary tool in the postcolonial struggle against them". This is especially pronounced as the novel moves towards its ambiguous ending, where Onye eventually "rewrites" the Great Book through song, fusing African oral traditions with the religion of the Book (Dowdall 2013:184; Pahl 2018). Onye retells the act of rewriting through song to the typist recording her story. "My hand grew hot and I saw the symbols on my right hand split. The duplicates dribbled down onto the book where they settled between the other symbols into a script I still couldn't read. I could feel the book sucking from me, as a child does from its mother's breast" (Okorafor 2018:376–377). This "rewriting" means that, as Onye says, "The curse of the Okeke has been lifted. It never existed, *sha*" (Okorafor 2018:378). The power to rewrite history, it will turn out, is the power to reshape the present and the future.

There is a double rewriting going on here, though, as no sooner has Okorafor finished Onye's tale then she rewrites it, explicitly disrupting and twisting the linear structure of the novel itself. The epilogue is not the end, nor is Onye's predestined death the last word. The last chapter is entitled "Chapter 1: Rewritten" (Okorafor 2018:384) and it provides a twin ending. Rather than be taken from the cell to her death, she changes into a mythical creature, a fire-spitting *Kponyungo*, immolates her captors, and "blew into the sky like a shooting star, ready to return home" (Okorafor 2018:385). Perhaps, her mentor reflects, "she'd want to *live* in the very world she helped to remake?" (Okorafor 2018:383).

This instability and unreliability of the written word, and the power of the story-teller/author/narrator, is further emphasised in the prequel to *Who Fears Death*. *The Book of Phoenix* tells the back-story, centring on another terrible heroine, Phoenix, who is born in a scientific laboratory in New York amidst rapacious racialised capitalism and climate chaos.[9] She escapes and journeys to self-knowledge and, ultimately, the destruction of modern civilisation in a climatic apocalypse. Her story is saved and taken to Africa by her friend, Saeed, who walks across the dried-up oceans. A recording is discovered 200 years later by Sunuteel, an elderly man, out in the desert (Okorafor 2015:1). He listens to Phoenix's story, then twists it into the legend of the Okeke and Nuru which structures the genocide of *Who Fears Death*. "The old African man took the bones, blood, and quivering flesh of Phoenix's book, digested its marrow, and defecated a tale of his own. Then he and his oracle of a wife spread this shit far and wide. And their Great Book deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again. But that is another story" (Okorafor 2015:232).

In the context of the histories and counter-histories of slavery and genocide, colonialism and racial capitalism, the question of who is able and permitted to write and tell these stories is a crucial one (Haraway 2016; Wynter and McKittrick 2015; Yusoff 2018). Reading Okorafor's wild necropolitics as an exploration of new modes of being and becoming human suggests that rewriting the "Great Books" and socio-climatic imaginaries of the present is a central challenge in order to avoid being haunted by our own "ghosts of the future" (Okorafor 2018:187). The power to rewrite the story, Okorafor tells us, is a vital, primary attribute of the new humans we must become.

Conclusion

Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries have rarely been prominent, or even particularly visible, in mainstream climate change politics. Given the context of necropolitical carboniferous capitalism, there is much to gain from a more detailed and sustained engagement with the ways in which Africanfuturist authors have imagined climate-changed futures. This is particularly clear in the work of Nnedi Okorafor, whose novel *Who Fears Death* powerfully illuminates alternative "genres of the human" and ways of being and becoming that may help to suggest better—or at least different—forms of life for all (Wynter 2003).

In this article I have argued that Okorafor's work emphasises the importance of motifs of change, violence, wilderness, and narration. This "wild necropolitics" is many worlds away from the sanguine liberal narratives of technological optimism and Green New Deals that dominate Western socio-climatic imaginaries. Okorafor provides a powerful and salutary reminder that violence and suffering underpin human existence, and that new forms of world-imagining and world-making cannot sidestep the biopolitics and necropolitics of life and death (Mbembe 2019:141; Weheliye 2014:2). Even if the alternative ending of *Who Fears Death* appears to inject a note of hope, it is inescapably predicated on a violent apocalypse of pain and suffering. The final lines of the novel remain firmly focused on

the baying Nuru mob, "all of them screaming, yelling, shouting, laughing, glaring … waiting to wet their tongues with Onyesonwu's blood" (Okorafor 2018:386).

Whilst the violence and pain of life and death are inescapable, Okorafor does insist that the wider socio-political context can be otherwise. There are multiple worlds, space-times, and ways of being. Likewise, Mbembe (2019:3) asks whether we can "found a relation with others based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?". Inspired by Fanon, Mbembe (2019:5) suggests this relation can be sought through therapy, through "a colossal working on oneself, with new experiences of the body, of movement, of being-together", and through "language and perception". It is clear that words and stories have power; as Fanon (2008:9) noted, "[m]astery of language affords remarkable power". One of Okorafor's characters tells us that "[w]ords are powerful when chosen well and hurled with precision" (Okorafor 2015:201), and this is echoed by Mbembe: "In the era of the Earth, we will effectively require a language that constantly bores, perforates, and digs like a gimlet, that *knows how to become a projectile*, a sort of full absolute, of will that ceaselessly gnaws at the real. Its function will not only be to force the locks but also to save life from the disaster lying in wait" (2019:189, emphasis added). Reading and writing different stories about alternative climate futures is an essential element of the political challenge of finding new ways of being and becoming human in the context of climate change.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

[1] Both Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism draw from genres of African and Afro-American myths and folklore, music and visual art, oral culture, and science fiction and fantasy. Themes of identity, temporality, technology, art, ecology, and magic are prominent (see Samatar 2017; Weheliye 2014:136; Womack 2013).

[2] *Who Fears Death* was first published in 2010, although page numbers in this article are taken from the 2018 edition.

[3] The film *Pumzi* also ends with a shot of a vast forest and the sound of rain (Kahiu 2009).

[4] Najeeba tells Onye her history. "'Born of pain', she said. 'People believe the *Ewu*-born eventually become violent. They think that an act of violence can only beget more violence. I know this isn't true, as you should'" (Okorafor 2018:31).

[5] This recalls Fanon (2001:159): "No one has clean hands; there are no innocents and no onlookers. We all have dirty hands … Every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor".

[6] In Mbembe's (2019:68) terms, Daib stands for a figure "of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalised instrumentalisation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations … these figures constitute the nomos of the political space in which we continue to live".

[7] There is a further irony here, illuminated by Mbembe's (2019:165–166) description of African slaves as "ambulant suns … real human fossils [that] continued to serve as coal for producing energy" well after the industrial revolution. In this light, the destruction of New

York by a sun come to earth, driven by a descendent of African slaves, contains a clear message about the terminal contradictions of carboniferous capitalism.

[8] Other elements of the Great Book are reminiscent of well-known African folktales, such as the story of the Palm Wine Drunkard, retold on the penultimate page of *Who Fears Death* (Okorafor 2018:385).

[9] This backstory is hinted at by Okorafor in parts of *Who Fears Death*, such as where she describes the legends of the Great Book that the Okeke were once a great civilization, who "created and used and changed and altered and spread and consumed and multiplied … They were everywhere … They bent and twisted Ani's sand, water, sky, and air, took her creatures and changed them" (Okorafor 2018:92; see also Okorafor 2018:337).

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