

PDF - THREE: GENDERED ECOLOGIES AND BLACK FEMINIST FUTURES IN WANURI KAHIU'S PUMZI, WANGECHI MUTU'S THE END OF EATING EVERYTHING, AND IBI ZOBOI'S "THE FARMING OF GODS" - researchcub.info

This paper addresses how the works of three female authors and artists from various parts of Africa and the Diaspora — Pumzi by Wanuri Kahiu, The End of eating Everything by Wangechi Mutu, and "The Farming of the Gods" by Ibi Zoboi — imagine a black feminist future through ecological imagery. My argument is twofold: first, I take my cue from Mutu's assertion that imaginative forms of world-building must connect systemic corruption to consumptive practices. Second, I claim such Afrofuturist works use geographical spaces marked by ecological abuse (poisonous spores, pustules, desert landscapes), displacement (discarded objects) and violence (human limbs) to negotiate the symbolic and material "marking" of black female bodies. Ultimately, I read these works as meditations on new forms of transnational communities that not only survive but thrive in the 21st century and beyond. 82 Wagadu Volume 18 Winter 2017 © Wagadu 2017 ISSN: 1545-6196

The concept of "Afrofuturism," as it has been conceptualized since the early 1990s by Mark Dery, has come to encapsulate aesthetic works of black cultural production that treat futurist themes concerning Africa and its diaspora. However, little emphasis has been placed on how this ever-evolving genre interconnects gender and ecology. This article addresses how diasporic Kenyan-born filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu's short film, *Pumzi* (2009), Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's provocative digital film installation, *The End of eating Everything* (2013), and Haitian author Ibi Zoboi's short story, "The Farming of the Gods" (2010), imagine Africa's future through a careful examination of traditional images, symbols, and narratives — specifically those relating to ecology.<sup>1</sup> My argument is twofold: first, I take my cue from Kahiu's assertion that we deconstruct the hegemonic discourses surrounding African science fiction or "Afrofuturism" as a purely forward-thinking concept. Second, I claim that the nature-related imagery found in these "Afrofuturist" works illustrate a need for scholars to examine how depictions of the future actively recycle and work through the past — specifically in relation to historical framings of black women's bodies. Ultimately, I demonstrate how *Pumzi*, *The End of eating Everything*, and "The Farming of the Gods," open up new ways of imagining and understanding diasporic identity, historical memory, and gender within an African context. This article puts a short film, a brief digital film installation, and a short story into conversation to illustrate the relationship between gender and ecology within female-authored African and Caribbean science fiction film and fiction. Kenyan-born Wanuri Kahiu and Wangechi Mutu offer an Anglophone African science fiction perspective to the topic of gendered ecologies through the short film *Pumzi* and digital film installation entitled *The End of eating Everything*, respectively. Ibi Zoboi's short story, "The Farming of the Gods," provides a Francophone Caribbean science fiction perspective through her interweaving of traditional Haitian belief systems linked to land and fertility with a dystopian post-Gendered Ecologies and Black Feminist Futures 83 © Wagadu 2017 ISSN: 1545-6196 apocalyptic setting. Like Zoboi's short story, Kahiu's *Pumzi* focuses on the fertilization of land — using specifically the imagery of trees — and metaphorically maps the imagery of fertilization onto black women's bodies. All three of these works also play with the

theme of mothering and motherhood by using a black female body to create new metaphorical landscapes that enrich and enliven dying worlds. My decision to analyze these three works stems from the lack of scholarship on Kahiu, Mutu, and Zobi despite their notable contributions to the field of Afrofuturism as well as black feminist art in general. More specifically, while Mutu and Kahiu are more widely recognized in popular culture as up-and-coming artists and filmmakers from the African Diaspora, Zobi – a Haitian author – is rarely mentioned in scholarship or popular culture. Despite her lack of renown, Zobi's perspective is unique in the sense that she interweaves the post-apocalyptic with the historic. For instance, in a blog post, Zobi mentioned that her short story, "The Farming of the Gods," was a response to the devastating earthquake that devastated Haiti on January 12, 2010. Similarly, Mutu has described her work as responding to various ecological disasters and humankind's general disrespect for the preservation of the planet. In her numerous interviews, Kahiu also discusses how her films interconnect with ecology and the notion of a post-apocalyptic or science fiction world by claiming that Afrocentric perspectives have always used speculation and science to critique societal ills. In an interview with Oulimata Gueye held during the exhibition "Si ce monde vous déplaît," Kahiu asserts that she was told by her director to label her 2009 short film, *Pumzi*, as either science fiction or fantasy since Western audiences separate the genres. While Kahiu ultimately decided to tell – and sell – her story as "Science Fiction," the experience prompted her to argue that I think science fiction has been a genre in Africa that has been used a lot for a long period of time – way before I was even born... If we think of science fiction as something that is 84 Wagadu Volume 18 Winter 2017 © Wagadu 2017 ISSN: 1545-6196 fictitiously science or speculative fiction within a story then we've always used it. Because we've used Botany; we've used Etymology; the idea of the study of animals to tell stories or the idea of insects to tell stories or the idea of natural sciences using trees – that's all science fiction. (Gueye, 2009) Kahiu's argument leads to additional questions concerning the relevance of the term "Africanfuturism" as a purely futuristic or forward-thinking concept. Her focus on the interconnections between the science fiction genre and ecology specifically the significance of ecological imagery within African stories demonstrates how this genre reinvents nature-based symbols and narratives. In fact, I assert that the primary aim of Africanfuturism is not only to project black bodies and subjectivities into "futuristic" geographies although that is an important aspect of the genre but also to reimagine and work through historical memory. Intermingling temporalities like "present," "past," and "future" not only deconstructs strict Western epistemological readings of time in respect to both Africa and blackness, but also provides a more nuanced interpretation of Africanfuturism as a whole. In *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011), Jessica Langer usefully frames the tension between Western scientific discourse's reliance on ideas of technological and cultural "progress" and indigenous modes of knowledge production (p. 9). This tension, which Langer rightly argues is at the heart of postcolonial criticism, is also integral to the Africanfuturist movement. She explains this tension thus: Works of postcolonial speculative fiction function above all as vehement denials of the colonial claim that indigenous, colonized and postcolonial scientific literacies exist in the past and have no

place in the future. They are not the ways of strangers, but of essential participants in traditional, diasporic and world communities. Their traditions and ways of knowing are relevant, applicable, necessary. They belong to the past, Gendered Ecologies and Black Feminist Futures 85 © Wagadu 2017 ISSN: 1545-6196 but also to the present, and to the future. (p. 152) Within Langer's framing of postcolonial speculative fiction, imaginative stories rework existing epistemologies that metaphorically and materially displace black bodies. Furthermore, these stories create a space for black writers, artists, and filmmakers to participate in the production and re-envisioning of history in its past, present, and future manifestations. Within the context of my focal works, Kahiu, Mutu, and Zobo envision Afrofuturist stories as the result of authorial imagination rather than a rigid adherence to genre. Moreover, they conceptualize their stories as an interweaving of influences from the "Afro" world that complicate a fixed, Eurocentric idea of "futurism." These stories also explore humankind's relationship to the earth insofar as humans play a significant role in creating and maintaining responsible ecological practices due to a heightened recognition of their dependency on the natural environment. Within the context of these focal works, humankind's interconnectedness with the environment feeds directly into various theoretical and activist-related concepts. As discussed below, while many eco-focused theories neglect to consider the layers of racial, sexual, and class-based oppression faced by many women of color, an idea of gendered ecologies – whether that be labeled as African ecological activism or even ecowomanism – prioritizes race, gender, and environmentalism. In order to fully analyze the interconnections between gender and ecology in this article, I contextualize the debate surrounding specific corollaries of ecocriticism – between ecofeminism and ecowomanism, respectively.<sup>2</sup> While ecowomanism is most widely recognized as stemming from Afrocentric thought and black feminism in general, many women of color choose to self-identify as environmentalists and/or activists rather than align themselves with "ecofeminism" – a primarily white feminist movement that has historically appropriated the voices and experiences of women of color. To preface why I employ the term "gendered ecologies" rather than an eco-focused scholarly term, it is useful to provide a brief overview of ecofeminism and its discontents.

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