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'We stood and watched You, Mama, Crying. Still we didn't listen'

African Speculative Fiction
and the environmental
crisis

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of ten short stories written by contemporary African authors belonging to the genre of speculative fiction. The narratives address the topic of today's environmental crisis by depicting ten utopian or dystopian possible future realms in the near tomorrow. All texts unite the form of short story writing, deriving from the old oral tradition, with the genre of speculative fiction and the themes of the so-called climate fiction, shortened as Cli-Fi. According to Putra, due to its fluidity, it is more accurate to refer to Cli-Fi as a sub-genre sweeping through various categories such as science fiction, romance, and fiction (2016, p. 267).

The thesis begins by providing a literary context on contemporary short story writing by African authors. It continues by giving specific information on African speculative fiction and the categories of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. The sub-genre of climate fiction will also be covered to explain how the central theme of the environmental crisis is portrayed differently in the works. The stories are written by contemporary authors born in Nigeria, Botswana, Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa. Most writers are living abroad due to working or study reasons; therefore, it is necessary to address the issue of Afropolitanism better to understand their narratives and the target of their works. The following chapters are dedicated to the analysis of the ten short stories. The narratives are divided into two groups, according to each author's different interpretation of the possible future for their country and the roles covered by the supernatural and technology.

0.1 Environmental crisis and the supernatural

The first five stories are *Dune Song* by Suyi Davies Okungbowa, *Eclipse our Sins* by Tlotlo Tsamaase, *Xaua-Khoe* by Catherine Shepherd, *Land of Light* by Stephen Embleton and *Snake Blood* by Dilman Dila. In these texts the environmental catastrophe is associated with the invading presence of more-than-human entities. Old traditions still cover a vital role in those futures, proving how rooted and essential they are for the identities of African countries and cultures. The supernatural is represented in numerous manners, starting from Mother Earth, acting as a goddess and punishing humans for the crimes committed against her, and switching to old tribal beliefs like witchcraft. Despite technological innovation, human affection and magical connections cannot be replaced.

In Suyi Davies Okungbowa's *Dune Song*, a young girl tries to escape from a strict community created in the desert after the phenomenon of desertification had spread around the globe. The ecological disaster is associated with whispering dune gods who are believed to punish anyone who might roll the dice of fortune by adventuring in the desert, looking for a brighter future. The fear against these gods is so intense that no adult or child leaving the community is allowed to return in order not to unleash the supernatural punishment of these entities. The story is enticing, and the reader is left questioning the effective existence of these magical gods until the end.

In *Eclipse our Sins* by Tlotlo Tsamaase, Mother Earth is the protagonist of the narrative, seeking revenge for the numerous sins committed against her. She is portrayed as a goddess, and people gather and pray, asking her for mercy and to be spared. The population is falling ill not only when sinning against nature but also when spreading toxic ideologies such as xenophobia and sexist thoughts. The catastrophe is interconnected with the story of a family, where each component gets ill after committing various crimes. Despite the futuristic realm where avant-garde tools like respirators and cooling suits are used, shamans still play a prominent role in representing the last hope for curing ill citizens. The urban setting has devoured the zone of an ancient tribal land, depriving humans of their healthy land and their souls connected to it. Humans are like demons who cannot be exorcised: the only way to save Mother Earth is to expel them from the poisoned globe.

In *Snake Blood* by Dilman Dila, the more-than-human agency is associated with sorceresses and witchcraft. The so-called Great Disaster is explained in detail in the second part of the story, where Goran people were blamed for the calamities befalling humankind. Their avarice caused the wrath of the Creator, who changed the world's climate to punish them. He sent floods, droughts, bushfires, massive waves that wiped out little islands in the oceans and froze their homeland by obliging them to live a perpetual life of wandering without a purpose. The sorceresses are the real holders of power: they banned the use of mobile phones and weapons, including guns and knives. One sorceress also created the so-called Seventh Law, implying that a cheated woman could turn her husband into an animal as a punishment.

In *Xaua-Khoe* by Catherine Shepherd, the utopian future is portrayed as a return to ancient traditions and connection to gods in a sandy environment where lions and leopards still live among men. Community life is central in the story: humans rely on one another to pass on old traditions among generations and have found their way of living in a deserted realm. The

protagonist is a 'serpent boy', Diluea, who received by his grandfather the gift of connecting to the goddess Gauho, who gave birth to his ancestors after the old civilisation destroyed itself with their machines. The disappearance of Selito, a man of the tribe, and the consequent search leads the community to discover some relics of the old words, where men died because they took what they were not allowed to take from nature. The term 'Xaua-Khoe' stands for greed, referring to the old citizens who destroyed the environment due to their implacable avarice.

The title *Land of Light*, the short story by Stephen Embleton, refers to the green energy produced by the Congo river dam enlightening the cities near the bank. Mother Earth has been replaced by Earth 1.0, where the advanced technology permits individuals to talk to uploaded consciousnesses of dead people, despite their souls not being there. Only through the supernatural and traditions represented by the Light Gathering Ceremony can the protagonist speak to the soul of her dead father. Despite technological innovation, a device cannot replace human affection and more-than-human connections.

0.2 Technology in the environmental crisis

The final five stories are *Unexpected Dawn* by Musinguzi Ray Robert, *More Sea than Tar* by Osahon Ize-Iyamu, *What the Dead Man Said* by Chinelo Onwualu, *Tiny Dots* by Tuntufye Simwimba, and *Poison* by Henrietta Rose-Innes. These narratives are connected by both dystopian settings and the prominent use of the latest technology. It is interesting to see how these high-tech gadgets only partly help humankind in tackling those issues arising from a polluted environment. The general feeling is that of a selfish and greedy human race, lost in its past traumas and unable to move towards a brighter future.

In *Unexpected Dawn*, Africa is depicted as a world superpower, the only one globally possessing the commodity water and a secret formula to purify this polluted good. After a nuclear and biological war obliterated most of the world's flora, fauna and marine life, drones control the water source. Without the resources to produce medicine or diagnose disease, the global countries turned to Africa, which possesses the technical know-how and finances to sponsor advanced research. This short story underlines how all the other resources, such as petroleum or gold, are useless in a world lacking the primary source to survive. Despite the water shortage, humans have not learned to be more compassionate, and the secret formula is Africa's most potent weapon to maintain global power.

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In *More Sea than Tar* the polluted water brings sicknesses and diseases and comes through floods and heavy rain. Entire communities live among the garbage and mutated beasts, and recycling becomes the most profitable business for the deranged family portrayed in the narrative. Technology brings the possibility of a brighter future away from this polluted environment, with a dim chance of living underwater in the near tomorrow; simultaneously, it blocks communication and represents a source of isolation for the family components. Their father's greed will lead them to a fatal destiny in these waters.

In *What the Dead Man Said*, the environmental crisis is portrayed through the Catastrophe, the 'fraught that scorched half the world and drowned the rest' (Onwualu, 2019) thirty years before. This phenomenon led to massive migration and the creation of a new sustainable city called New Biafra. The environmental changes are interconnected with a turbulent family past where the protagonist was raped by her uncle, causing dishonour to the whole household. The story is set in modern times during the protagonist's funeral rites of her father, whom she never forgave for what happened thirty years before. A.I. and the new gadgets can temporarily anaesthetise the protagonist's grief; however, they cannot remove the past trauma from her mind.

In the short story *Tiny Dots* by Tuntufye Simwimba, the population is dying from exposure to a hefty dose of ultraviolet radiation from the sun, causing irreversible forms of skin cancer. Its rays are implacable, destroying trees and flowers. The fault of this catastrophe is attributed to the unhealthy Western use of resources in past times; however, the author does not deny attributing part of the responsibility to African countries. The dystopian realm is set in 2519, where technology is highly advanced. Suits to contrast the harmful sun rays and the Paperless Environment, where the Health Environmental Officers shattered all papers to maintain a clean environment are present in the narrative. However, once again, high-tech cannot contrast the devastating effects of climate change in a world where the environmental crisis is associated with isolation and broken social relationships. The ecological disaster unfolds with the protagonist's story and the tricky relationship with his father, who is affected by stage four cancer.

The last short story is *Poison*, written by Henrietta Rose-Innes, and is set in Cape town after a chemical explosion occurred in the city. A chemical explosion is a technological disaster that accidentally releases large amounts of toxins into the environment. The population is evacuating the city to escape the contamination created by chemicals in the air. The

protagonist is paralysed, unable to leave the city, and refuses to receive help to escape the catastrophe. In this post-apocalyptic disaster, where no petrol can be found in the city anymore, electricity is gone, and phones are down, the protagonist faces her mental health disorders.

0.3 Short story writing in contemporary African literature

> Let me tell you more about the voice that my mother gave me. First it was oral. All languages are oral. The literary always mimics the oral. At night and around the fireside, this voice reached me in the form of stories. We were told that stories went away in daytime. Where did they go? We didn't know. Fortunately, they always came back in the night. (Wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 6)

Short stories are a significant genre of literature consisting of a piece of prose fiction that focuses on a narrow segment of experience, attracting the audience's attention (Julien, 1983, p. 149). Although they concentrate on a reduced event, their meaning stretches outside the portrayed experience. The intensity of the descriptions and the great value of the narrative led the critics to compare it to poetry (Balogun, 1991, p. 7). Unlike the European authors, the African narrative is highly rhythmed, deriving from the traditional tales and oral heritage. It applies devices used in oral histories such as repetition, song, refrain, alliteration, and onomatopoeia (Balogun, 1991, p. 32). As in traditional folktales, short stories can be partly or entirely fantastic, influencing the narratives with their more-than-human elements (Balogun, 1991, p. 33).

Due to the numerosity and great variety of African short stories, it is crucial to identify their core themes and how various subjects are analysed through different perspectives. The dominant topics are art, religion, traditional culture, urban life, colonial and postcolonial politics, apartheid, and life ironies (Balogun, 1991, p. 9). The ten selected short stories will explore some of the themes, in particular the traditional culture associated with belief in mystery, witchcraft, and rituals and its contrast with urban life in a postcolonial reality. These subjects underline the importance of the historical context for the African countries and the shared traits of the African personality (Balogun, 1991, p. 24). Short story writing represents a crucial genre for Africa in highlighting the human condition of its citizens and critical

exploration of reality. However, publishing houses prefer to focus on other literary genres that are more profitable (Balogun, 1991, p. 25).

Short story writing requires a high level of competence to use 'common words uncommonly well' (Balogun, 1991, p. 27), employing accurate imaginative diction and condensed syntax. The ten selected narratives are written in English and reflect the peculiar English language spoken and written in African countries, which differs from the idiom used in other anglophone nations. It is particularly significant as it defines the *Africanness* of the African short story in the foreign language. However, especially in Southern Africa's short texts, untranslated indigenous terms are used, including urban colloquialism and slang (Balogun, 1991, p. 30).

Criticism arises when referring to African literature and contemporary African authors' use of English and other European languages. Ngu˜gĩ˜ wa Thiong'o talks about *Europhone African literature* when an African author uses a European tongue for their work (2016, p. 6), a *literary theft* that damaged the indigenous African productions at their core and an outcome of colonialism. However, some contemporary authors write in English because the language is actually their mother tongue. The use of English has also enabled a dialogue between Africans of the continent and the diaspora (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 9).

0.4 African Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction represents one of African literature's most diverse and complex genres. The category has recently acquired new energy, confirmed by the numerous publications of related short stories from various African nations (Woods, 2020, p. 36). Science fiction and fantasy were often perceived as antithetical categories in the past. However, due to their tendency to combine in recent years, the term speculative fiction has become widely used, indicating both non-realist genres at once, including horror (Booker, 2013, p. VII). As Ursula K. Le Guin writes:

> Definitions are for grammar, not literature, I say, and boxes are for bones. But of course fantasy and science fiction are different, just as red and blue are different; they have different frequencies; if you mix them (on paper - I work on paper) you get purple, something else again. (1979, p. 133)

Contemporary speculative fiction is rooted in the epics and myths of antiquity when the population sought supernatural explanations to explain natural phenomena that seemed inexplicable in the observable natural world (Booker, 2013, p. 3). The category's genres, far from being escapist forms allowing readers to evade reality, provide new forms of critical engagement. The public is placed in a world different from its own to examine and critically analyse the differences between the realms, encouraging readers to reevaluate their reality and realise that even the most fundamental things about their world might be different (Booker, 2013, p. 5).

African speculative fiction goes beyond the Western modes of scientific understanding, claiming that 'there is more in life than is apparent to the eye' (Langer, 2013, p. 171). Further criticism explores the confrontation between Western advanced scientific techniques and progress and indigenous ways of knowledge-production and existential questions (Langer, 2011, p. 9). Works belonging to the sub-genre of postcolonial speculative fiction prove that the traditions of those colonised countries are relevant and applicable in the past, present, and future (Langer, 2013, p. 172). This type of fiction, and this worldview in general, retains a substantial hybridising effect on literature.

In current years there has been an outburst in postcolonial speculative fiction. This boom began in the 1980s; however, the increase has turned consistent since the early 2000s. African authors, both within Africa and in the African diaspora, are writing speculative works, engaging with the diaspora, the process of decolonisation, colonialism's sociopolitical and economic aftermaths, and the traumas generated by postcolonial hybridity (Langer, 2013, p. 169), challenging the view of this category as a Western genre (Langer, 2013, p. 172). Numerous literary dystopias result from failing attempts at creating a utopian society following strict governmental rules or other social control. The utopian model originates from a colonial project, directly opposing the variety and hybridity of the multicultural indigenous lands (Langer, 2013, p. 179). Conflicts are prominent in postcolonial environments, arising between colonial history and the actual process of decolonisation, rich and poor, and groups divided by colonialism. Utopianism represents an exclusionary impulse and sometimes a genocidal one (Gordon et al., 2004, p. 205). The urge to cleanse the world of a group of people to improve that realm arises from the same idealism that seeks to cleanse society of evil, drugs, or crime.

0.5 Afropolitanism

The authors of the short stories are all born in African countries, including Nigeria, Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, and Malawi. They are divided between those who completed their education in their motherland and others who moved abroad to finish their studies. After completing their academic career, most of them decided to remain overseas and live in a new country. This move targets mainly anglophones nations: Canada, the United States, and the UK. On the contrary, other writers, such as Tuntufye Simwimba, Musinguzi Ray Robert, and Catherine Shepherd, still live and work in their native countries. All ten authors chose to write their works in English.

Considering the various background of these writers, the question of Afropolitanism must be addressed. Afropolitanism is a twenty-first-century concept (Ibironke, 2021, p. 787). The term arose from the publishing of two core texts by Taiye Selasi and Achille Mbembe. The concept has evolved as a cultural identity in various fields, including fashion and lifestyle, music, literature, art exhibitions, academia, and the media (Ho, 2021, p. 770). It provides new parameters for theorising international and translational African modernity (Ibironke, 2021, p. 787). The core discussions on Afropolitanism regard race and class and could be summed up as black cosmopolitanism. The term is associated with privileges, as only middle-class students can afford to move abroad to continue their academic careers. Afropolitan writers are accused of being consequently too rooted within Western cultural and aesthetic criteria (Ibironke, 2021, p. 785). Afropolitanism is linked with the issue of the African diaspora and globalisation, leading the younger and urban generations towards a plurality of realities. As Mbembe claims, it is necessary to be aware of 'this imbrication of here and elsewhere, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice-versa' (2010, p, 229), reminding us of the importance of the entanglement of Africa with the world in its history. However, not all writers accept the term. It implies, in fact, the question of being 'less African' when living abroad (Ibironke, 2021, p. 787).

Tuntufye Simwimba, Malawian author of the shot story *Tiny Dots*, sums up the condition of various contemporary authors from different African countries:

> I already submitted a story of vampires to the Malawi Writers Union, and they said 'But it is not Malawian stuff.' For me, I have a problem understanding what Malawian stuff is, because a

human is someone raised by various interests. If I'm influenced by the West, it will be reflected in my writing somewhat. I don't think I can limit myself to one experience of my life. (2017)

Western artists are not associated so profoundly with their national identity, whereas African writers are inseparable from their historical blackness. This new condition of African authors abroad implies a dual marginality, both in the new country and the native, and a refusal to define exclusively by birth. The Afropolitan narratives describe characters across generations and spaces, and they belong to second generation writers of the contemporary scene (Ibironke, 2021, p. 790).

0.6 Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism

When discussing speculative fiction written by African authors, it is necessary to mention Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is a multidisciplinary cultural movement based on a special connection between African diaspora people and technology, fantasy, and science fiction. The term was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery, referring to 'speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture' (1994, p. 180). The movement englobes fashion, music, art, film, and even lifestyle. Afrofuturism moves back against the absence of Black people in mainstream science fiction, where the future is portrayed as a white fantasy in which blackness has no entity (Hodapp, 2022, p. 606). The aim is to create a full-colour tomorrow (Lavander III et al., 2020, p. 1), rejoining the African American identity with the *Africanness* of specific ethnicities, cultures, and languages.

Black authors have always employed stories about the future to focus on scientific and social injustices of the past and present that cannot be whitewashed (Lavander III et al., 2020, p. 2). However, in 2019, the Nigerian-American writer of science fiction and fantasy Nnedi Okorafor claimed that she no longer wanted her work to be classified as afrofuturistic, preferring to use the term Africanfuturism. The word Afrofuturism focuses on the Black diaspora and has become a catch-all for Black science fiction in general. However, various categories of Black science fiction are not diasporic but explicitly African. She also argued that the term Afrofuturism had privileged African American issues while marginalising the African ones, and black diasporic futures are often detached from the complexities of African continental life. As she wrote in her blog in 2019,

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Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa… . Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. This is distinctly different from Afrofuturism.

Okorafor claims that 'to be African is to merge technology and magic', involving mythology and magic to find ways in which Africans can overcome alienation and the trauma of colonial exploitation while striving to create a brighter future. Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism texts elevate Black people in aspirational roles by increasing their humanity and promoting inclusivity in a non-racist future environment. The traumatic past is used to shape a better and more self-aware future.

0.7 Climate Fiction

Climate change impacts human lives and health by threatening the needs at the core of the worldwide population – clean air, safe drinking water, salutary food products, and safe shelter. It undermines decades of progress in global health and food safety. The phenomenon is expected to rise drastically in the following decades, affecting the globe and resulting in irreversible events such as droughts, floods, and biodiversity loss, if not consciously and rapidly stemmed (Miraglia et al., 2009, p. 1009).

The seriousness of the deriving environmental crisis has been steadily putting genre fiction into its trajectory, emerging in the 20th century as a dominant theme in literature. Climate change fiction, shortened by the acronym Cli-Fi, represents a core sub-genre that sweeps through various categories such as science fiction, dystopia, fantasy, thriller, romance, and fiction (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 267). Climate change requires individuals' engagement as a political, ethical and psychological issue in works displaying contemporary or near-future settings that might be utopian or dystopian. The theme is complex and slippery, posing not just a literary but an existentialistic human challenge exploring emotional and psychological dilemmas and past traumas. The idea of how we deal with future generations represents a core theme. The environmental crisis is part of an overall collapse, including technological over-reliance, economic instability, and increased social division (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 269).

Scientists and activists agree on the importance of 'humanising' the abstract issue of climate change by employing the topic in art and fiction to reach a larger public (Death, 2022, p. 443). In the narratives, the characters experience the environmental crisis and its political, social, and psychological implications and portray the uncertainties of human life. The aim is to create interest in the topic by emotionally engaging the reader (Death, 2022, p. 445). However, contemporary climate fantasies are dominated by a Eurocentric perspective (Death, 2022, p. 240). Most research about the rise of climate fiction has forgotten African authors, geography, and characters (Trexler, 2015, p. 124). In these narratives, Africa is mainly associated with a forewarning of an apocalypse. Europeans use the continent and its contemporary situation to demonstrate how bad their (European and North America) tomorrow could be (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.7), holding a negative connotation. However, there are numerous texts written by African authors illustrating African perspectives on climate politics and including these imageries into climate fiction could help spatialising and politicising climate change. These texts are mainly associated with Africanfuturism. The continent is rich in cultural diversity; therefore, the theme varies and broadens depending on the country.

0.8 Organisation of the thesis

This final thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one aims to give a general background by providing literary context and further knowledge on specific subjects to better understand the choice of the selected short stories. Starting from an analysis of what contemporary African literature represents today and precisely the significance of short story writing, it continues by informing readers on African speculative fiction, Afropolitanism, and the two currents of Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. The effects of climate change and the consequent environmental crisis link all the stories; therefore, the sub-genre of climate fiction is investigated.

The second and third chapters include five short narratives each. The first five stories focus on the connection between the environmental crisis and the supernatural, and are *Dune Song* by Suyi Davies Okungbowa, *Eclipse our Sins* by Tlotlo Tsamaase, *Xaua-Khoe* by Catherine Shepherd, *Land of Light* by Stephen Embleton and *Snake Blood* by Dilman Dila. The narratives analysed in the third chapter explore the association between technology and environmental disaster: *Unexpected Dawn* by Musinguzi Ray Robert, *More Sea than Tar* by Osahon Ize-Iyamu,

What the Dead Man Said by Chinelo Onwualu, *Tiny Dots* by Tuntufye Simwimba, and *Poison* by Henrietta Rose-Innes. Technology and the supernatural are crucial topics for African speculative fiction. The profound analysis of the narratives underlines the importance of both subjects and their coexistence in most texts.

At the beginning of my research, I included the short story *One Wit' this Place* by Muthi Nhlema in the thesis. However, I later substituted the text with *Snake Blood* by Dilman Dila. The incompatibility arose when I decided to operate the partition between the role of the supernatural and technology. *One wit' this place* belongs to the speculative fiction genre; however, references to more-than-human entities are dim, and the only mention is attributed to the protagonists' 'mind witchery'. The story focuses on the ups and downs of a couple's lives, and the core topic is the environmental crisis. Furthermore, technology is only partly cited but does not cover a determining role in the narrative.

I had a general idea of the main topics I wanted to cover in this last thesis. After an initial brainstorming with Professor Bassi, the most arduous tasks were the research and selection of the narratives and the division into chapters according to peculiar linking features. During the research, I realised that it is not easy to find speculative fiction stories containing climate fiction elements and narrow the selection to African writers. However, after successfully managing the choice of the texts, the most arduous task was the division of such.

As the texts are written by ten African authors, I first thought of operating a division based on their countries of origin: Nigeria, Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, and Malawi. However, I immediately realised that such a categorisation would have been ineffective in identifying the peculiar traits of African speculative and climate fiction. The subject of Afropolitanism led me to think about dividing the narratives into two groups according to the actual residency of the writers, either living in their country or abroad. However, two issues arose: first, the localisation of these authors is often difficult to pinpoint, and again the point of the analysis was ineffective.

I later intended to split the narratives into four chapters, following a division based on the different ecological disasters implied. After an introduction to African speculative fiction and climate fiction, the idea was to create a path leading the reader from the dystopian realms of the first three chapters to the last possible utopian futures in the final one. The first chapter should have explored the consequences of water shortage with the two narratives *Unexpected Dawn* and *Dune Song*. The second section's core topic was flooding, examined

through the three stories *More Sea than Tar*, *What the Dead Man Said*, and *One Wit' this Place*. The third dystopian chapter included the narratives on illnesses and pollution: *Poison*, *Eclipse our Sins*, and *Tiny Dots*. The fourth and last stage should have left the reader with a positive outcome, implying the possibility of a bright utopian future life on Earth: *Xaua-Khoe* and *Land of Light*. However, I soon realised that the division would not have been effective due to the numerosity of chapters. I tried to keep this partition between dystopian and utopian realms, realising later that such a strategy was leading the work in the wrong direction. The nature of the genre implies the existence of a more significant number of dystopian narratives than utopian ones; for this reason, the division between the chapters would have always been imbalanced. Furthermore, I felt that the solution did not highlight the peculiar characteristics of African speculative fiction, focusing primarily on the environmental crisis rather than the characterising traits of the genre.

The solution came when I decided to focus on the core features of African speculative fiction by applying the division mentioned above.

CHAPTER 1

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African Speculative Fiction in contemporary times

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We keep trying to write in a way that the West will understand, but it should be written in a way that an African will understand. If the Western literature was written in a way that Africa should understand, it would have been quite different. It wouldn't have been known for its originality. I think that writing is all about originality and Africans should work toward that. (Ryman, 2017)

1.1 An overview on contemporary African literature and short story writing

1.1.1 On contemporary African literature

The African continent is rich in culture and language varieties. This lavishness is deeply rooted in traditional practices and rituals, kingship, oral literature and dances representing peculiar traits distinguishing its populations from the rest of the world (Montle, 2020, p. 84). When discussing the continent's history, one must consider the significant influence of the colonization by seven Western European countries that began in 1880. With the subsequential Scramble for Africa, Western identities invaded and transformed Africa by imposing a foreign cultural heritage (Montle, 2020, p. 83).

The effects of colonialism can still be traced in contemporary African literature. Criticism arises when referring to African literature and the prominent use of European languages by authors born in African countries. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a famous Kenyan writer, is a longtime advocate for using African languages in African literature (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 5). He first started his career by writing in English. However, after publishing his masterpiece *A Grain of Wheat*, he made significant changes in his life, renouncing Christianity, writing in English, and changing his name from James Ngugi to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Brown, 1979, p. 93). This choice brought the author to write in his native language, Gikuyu. The primary purpose behind these choices is to reject a hierarchy of languages dictated by past imperialism and promote the original identity of tribal cultures and languages (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 11). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* is still relevant today, referring to most African writers deciding to write their works in European languages, especially English, to attract a broader international audience (Ukam, 2018, p. 46). Ngũgĩ distinguishes the African literature written in indigenous languages from the so-called *Europhone* tradition, written by Africans in European idioms (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 6). He believes that a *literary theft* has occurred:

We all are aware of and talk about "identity theft." But what about literary identity theft? Europhone African literature has stolen the identity of African literature; it wears the mask of African literature. It is a good example of literary identity theft, a phenomenon that is now global, a maturation of the colonial. (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 6)

However, exceptions exist, particularly in contemporary times, when English is the mother tongue for some African writers raised by their parents as English-speaking children (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 9). Furthermore, writing in English has permitted a dialogue between Africans of the continent and the diaspora (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 9) in a perspective of Pan-African literary inheritance. Although the use of European languages is still prominent in today's literary African context, a definite shift toward using African idioms has begun. It has been reported that ninety per cent of works written in African idioms have been published since 2000 (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 10). However, African governments and financial institutions, like the World Bank, still promote the dominant use of European languages for education and intellectual works. Even the African literary prizes require their participants to send literary pieces not written in an African language (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 14).

Not all critics agree with wa Thiong'o's thoughts on the so-called European *literary theft*. Biodun Jeyifo, an African literary critic and advocate for social changes (Mugane, 2018, p. 121), inserts English among African languages as being Africa's most widely spoken idiom (Mugane, 2018, p. 122). Furthermore, he claims that all languages are different, and referring to African idioms, 'many are primarily oral with little available in written forms' (Mugane, 2018, p. 122). Therefore, this difficulty leads to the prominent use of the European idiom. He then broadens the discourse from a political point of view, remembering the importance of documents such as the South African constitution and the Arusha Declaration written in English and how they represent a 'linguistic weapon working for Africans on the African continent' (Mugane, 2018, p. 122).

Chinua Achebe, a worldwide recognised Nigerian author, agrees with the importance of adopting foreign languages in African literature. The aim is to solve the issue deriving from the wide variety and complexity of ethnic languages in Africa and to reach a larger audience. According to Achebe, any language can be used to describe the continent's reality and lifestyle and therefore be classified as African literature. He acknowledges the issue arising from

writing in English and French, elite languages that the whole continent's population does not understand. However, those two idioms, especially English, provide an unmissable opportunity to gain further readers worldwide (Ukam, 2018, p. 47). He continues by claiming that an author must feel free to choose the language that suits him best. By doing so, the colonial language can be *africanised* to fit the African environment (Ukam, 2018, p. 50):

> So my answer to the question: Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it as a native speaker? I should say, I hope not…I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe, 1997, p. 347)

Achebe's view unites politics and art: African literature is a powerful act in which the novelist is a teacher who shows how Africans are not culturally inferior and primitive to their Western counterpart (Chapman, 2003, p.6). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe are two of the most famous African writers worldwide, representing a literary elite on a poor continent (Chapman, 2003, p.2). Their work to promote the importance of African literature abroad is highly recognised and rightly praised. However, their works are not only attuned locally but even more to the Literary Critics' expectations of major universities abroad located in Britain and France. Their books are published by multinationals, mainly addressing non-African readers (Chapman, 2003, p.2).

The question of the true identity of contemporary African literature is insidious. However, today's challenge is the inclusion of its oral inheritance as a peculiar past differing from its Western counterpart (Chapman, 2003, p.5). There is a natural urge to reconstruct the damaged African identity at its roots towards a humanism of reconstruction. Michael Chapman, a Professor at the University of Natal, Durban, suggests using the term African Literatures instead of African Literature, reminding us that the continent is heterogenous in language, culture and religion (Chapman, 2003, p. 1).

1.1.2 The art of short story writing

Short story writing represents a long-standing popular genre among African authors deriving from the rich oral tradition. Despite the substantial changes in today's economics and education, ancient oral customs remain a benchmark in the population's daily life. Young people ensure the survival of these oral performances by using new digital media where they are broadcast. Although oral narratives and short stories are strictly related, written literature must not be considered an outgrowth of oral texts (Cosentino, 1981, p. 9). Oral tales are characterised by anonymous authorship and create direct social connections between the artist and the spectators. They belong to the whole community. On the contrary, the short story has a recognised author and is protected by copyright. The form is written, fixed and lasting; however, it can be read differently, either aloud or individually, using various intonations.

The contemporary African generations are studying abroad and learning other narrative traditions, permitting an evolution of the short story form within a changing world. There is a remarkable contrast between the importance attributed to short story writing in Africa, Europe and the United States. Despite the great success registered worldwide, African literary scholars still attribute minor significance to the genre (Balogun, 1991, p. IX). A restricted number of academics have tried to promote the importance of the genre through conferences and journal papers. However, today's scholarship does not broaden beyond a few journal articles, book reviews, and introductions in anthologies. Another major issue arises from the difficulty of publication. Unknown authors write most short stories; therefore, publishers prefer to prioritise other genres as financial success is not guaranteed (Balogun, 1991, p. 4). This also leads to a further problem: only a few critics are experts on the genre. If the situation continues, critical analysis will not be sufficient to guarantee the flourishing of African short story writing. Georg Lukàcs, a great literary historian, firmly believes in the great importance of the category, declaring that:

> It does not claim to shape the whole of social reality, nor even to depict that whole as it appears from the vantage point of a fundamental and topical problem. Its truth rests on the fact that an individual situation – usually an extreme one – is possible in a certain society at a certain level of development, and, just because it is possible, is characteristic of this society and this level. (1972, p. 8)

The variety of African short stories reflects the continent's differences and peculiarities. For instance, the narratives written on the west coast only partly explore the theme of racism; instead, the south gives voice to the painful, inescapable discriminational events (Achebe et al., 1987, Introduction).

However, it is possible to trace common themes belonging to most narratives: art, religion, traditional culture, urban life, colonial and postcolonial politics, apartheid, and the peculiar ironies of life. The first five short stories share the central subject of tradition and culture, including the belief in mystery, ghosts, witchcraft, and rituals. Traditional marriage and family practices about birth, death, reincarnation, and the sociopolitical organisation of society are also relevant. The aim is to preserve the positive aspect of tradition and condemn past discriminatory customs. The final short stories share the theme of technology and the environmental crisis; however, traces of the African tradition can still be found, even to a lesser extent. For instance, in *What the Dead Man Said*, the traditional burying of the protagonists' father is displayed in a futuristic world:

> I looked up and two women I'd never seen before were leaning into the pod, wailing and calling the dead man's name, asking rhetorically why he had left them. I wondered how much of their performance was obscure cultural theatre and how much was genuine grief. Their wailing increased, and I wished I'd been allowed to bring my A.I. That, however, would have been considered an insult to the body, like looking into the eyes of an elder while you were being scolded. I'd forgotten how quickly my people whitewash the truth about our dead. We fear that speaking ill of them will invite death on ourselves as well. (Onwualu, 2019)

Technology is also discussed in relation to urban stories. This category emphasises the negative aspects of the city on its residents and rarely praises successful stories (Balogun, 1991, p. 16). Its aim is moralistic and ethical: the final intent is to warn readers about the dangers behind the city's enchantments. The environment is rich in modern technology such as electricity, neon lights, advertisement billboards, radio, etc. For instance, in the short story *Tiny Dots*, the protagonist's balcony faces a digital billboard:

It was a goliath that stretched long and wide. During the night, It lit the entire street. As the adverts flashed and rotated one after another, there were several shades of colours being thrown on the street and chasing each other about. Delton thought of it as a giant Christmas tree but for me that analogy was weak…That picture fed me hope. In it there was a version of my father I had not seen for a long time. (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1586)

The billboard is a fake representation of his father, looking like a distinct man on the screen but, in reality, suffering from stage four cancer. The theme of colonial and postcolonial reality is accurately reflected in several short stories selected for this thesis. In the narratives, the past usurpative power of Western countries is used as a justification for a wrong administration of contemporary social issues. For instance, in *Unexpected Dawn*, the United African State exploits its political power from water detention. However, to justify the situation, the fault is attributed to the West:

"Four hundred years ago, the Amerikanis were the superpower, with all the means to protect the world and its people. But instead, they destroyed the world. We can never allow them to have such privilege again. It was a mistake for you to think otherwise," the president said gravely. (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1818)

The proper use of words makes the difference in literature. African productions distinguish themselves for their high competence in language use (Balogun, 1991, p. 27) and their terseness. Short narratives are divided between longer texts close to novellas, and shorter works, falling under ten pages. The syntax is condensed, and imagery is highly employed. Grammar is sometimes disregarded for writing: incomplete or even one-word sentences are common. A skilled author introduces the themes and characters in just a few lines, creates a particular setting, and evokes a specific atmosphere (Balogun, 1991, p. 28).
Short story writing has been associated with poetry for its closeness to oral tradition (Balogun, 1991, p. 27) and drama for emphasising actions and dialogues (Balogun, 1991, p. 29).

African authors are particularly appreciated for their imaginative approaches to the use of the English language. They convey a different English, rich in colloquialism and expressions, that is peculiarly adopted in Africa daily. The aim is to describe the African reality at its best; therefore, translated and untranslated words in African languages are inserted into the narratives (Balogun, 1991, p. 30). Various examples of the technique are presented, for

instance, in *Poison* by Henrietta Rose-Innes. The author's use of Afrikaans in the story is prominent. In the following passage, for example, the protagonist meets a *tannie*, which in Afrikaans is a friendly form of address for an older woman:

> Would the old lady even know about the explosion? 'Sorry … tannie?' she tried again. She'd never seriously called anyone 'tannie' before. But it seemed to have some effect: the old lady looked at her with mild curiosity. Small, filmed black eyes, almost no whites visible. A creased face shrunken on to fine bones. An ancient mouse. (Rose-Innes, 2007)

The language implied in African short stories is highly rhythmic, and this poeticness is obtained through repetitions, songs, figures of speech, imagery, and symbolism (Balogun, 1991, p. 31). An excellent example can be traced at the beginning of the short narrative *Eclipse our Sins* by Tlotlo Tsamaase, starting with a chant to Mother Earth to forgive humankind:

> I pray to You, Mother Earth, Mama Earth, Mmê Earth:
> Sun, hide your eye, eclipse your birth from our sins.
> When Climate Change came,
> It tore into Your womb, Mama Earth, sodomized it
> —and we watched. (2019)

African traditional short story writing merits more attention from critics; further consideration must be attributed to regional idiomatic differences and the various folk culture influences (Balogun, 1991, p. 173). Exploring the connections between traditional short story writing in Europe and the impact on African authors is necessary. On the other hand, publishers should reconsider the genuine value of short narratives, which provide great entertainment within a brief time in a busy modern world. Short story reading should also be promoted at school, being an excellent manner to introduce students to prose fiction, especially in the African continent (Balogun, 1991, p. 174).

1.2 African Speculative Fiction

1.2.1 General introduction on Speculative Fiction

One of my central approaches to writing speculative fiction is to take an absurd situation, which we presently feel is normal, and then push it to an even further absurdity. It's only in this light that we can see the reflection of the disturbing state of our present-day affairs. (Powell, 2017)

Speculative fiction has a broad audience and includes a wide range of works on the edge of customary literature (Gill, 2013, p. 71). It mainly consists of the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, non-realistic categories, which obtained tremendous success in the last years (Booker, 2013, p. VII). However, it also includes utopian and dystopian fiction, magic realism, fantastic voyages, ghost stories, and supernatural elements of the Gothic tradition (Gill, 2013, p. 72). Other category listings enclose micro-subjects such as apocalypse and steampunk. The genre is characterised by diversity; therefore, it is impossible to provide a cohesive definition.

Contemporary speculative fiction goes back to the world of epics and mythology when unexplainable phenomena in the earthly world were attributed to more-than-human entities. At the end of the nineteenth century, the monotony of daily chores in the modern capitalist era led to the creation of three founding works of the contemporary genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror, attributed to H. G. Wells, William Morris, and Bram Stoker. The aim is to bring readers toward a higher form of self-consciousness and critical engagement rather than only a form of escapism from a disrupted reality (Booker, 2013, p. 3). According to Suvin, author of the *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, this process also interests the audience from a political point of view, questioning their reality by formulating and imagining possible utopian alternatives (Booker, 2013, p. 5). This idea is linked with Brecht and Bloch's theories of *defamiliarization*, appearing as American Marxist criticism. This association shed light on the genre by providing a vital thrust toward critical consideration of the category.

The British tradition in the field is acclaimed worldwide, dominating the category through the twentieth century (Booker, 2013, p. XV). The English authors Tolkien and Lewis in the 1940s and 1950s tacked the condition of modernity in England and the general feeling associated with the defeat of tradition. Blurred boundaries characterise it among its sub-genres mixing horror, fantasy, and science fiction. Science fiction has recently been widely acclaimed among young and adult readers. The most successful direction is toward dystopian

realms and oppressive future realities that underline the possible consequences of dangerous practices adopted in contemporary times (Booker, 2013, p. XIX), testifying a dark turn in the genre. The ten short stories analysed in this thesis follow this dystopian narrative line. England and the U.S.A. are now united under the heavily globalised economy: their distinction between tradition and modernity has flattened. Recent criticism positively accepts merging the categories under speculative fiction, especially among young-adult productions.

The edges of the sub-genres continuously overlap. However, criticism still arises between authors about their works. Margaret Atwood, one of the most acclaimed writers in the speculative fiction field, refuses to label some of her works as science fiction. She defines speculative fiction stories set on Earth that use elements that already exist in our reality, such as genetic engineering. On the contrary, science fiction englobes improbable scenarios, including time travel and faster-than-light drives. According to Atwood, the difference is remarkable, and speculative fiction should not be used to address non-realistic stories in general. Ursula K. Le Guin, one of the most prominent authors in the field, disagrees with Atwood's opinion. In 2009 she wrote a review of Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, criticising her arbitrary definitions:

> This arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She doesn't want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto. Who can blame her? I feel obliged to respect her wish, although it forces me, too, into a false position. I could talk about her new book more freely, more truly, if I could talk about it as what it is, using the lively vocabulary of modern science-fiction criticism, giving it the praise it deserves as a work of unusual cautionary imagination and satirical invention. As it is, I must restrict myself to the vocabulary and expectations suitable to a realistic novel, even if forced by those limitations into a less favourable stance. (Le Guin, 2009)

After several decades of mixed opinions regarding the two categories of fantasy and horror, a general blurring of the genres and adult and young-adult culture has occurred in the twenty-first century (Booker, 2013, p. 10). Young readers mainly constitute the audience, especially for fantasy; thus, publishers have turned massive productions toward speculative fiction. The genre is today part of contemporary popular culture (Booker, 2013, p. XIV), and the best-

selling *Harry Potter* and the benchmark *Lord of the Rings* exemplify this triumph. Booker claims that this rise in interest in the category is strictly connected to the growing dissatisfaction with the contemporary realm. The aim is to turn toward worlds of magic, opening the door to 'unlimited imaginative possibilities' (Booker, 2009, p. 251).

1.2.2 Race and ethnicity in Science Fiction

Race and ethnicity play a crucial role in the various interconnected issues arising within the science fiction narratives from Africa. Most science fiction authors are white; several works created by African-American writers are not included in the category and are considered part of the so-called African-American literature instead. Most fictional futures are imagined as populated by white citizens (Leonard, 2003, p. 253), and black people are left behind.

Science fiction provides the opportunity of imagining a reality where colour-blindness is the norm in a politically correct and conscious utopic realm (Leonard, 2003, p. 254). Sci-Fi writers from Africa use their imagination to create worlds in which social troubles have either been solved or, on the contrary, degenerated into a nightmarish reality. Nevertheless, the social one is not their sole concern. At times, they seem to write to meet their readers' and publishers' interests while giving voice to their cultural backgrounds and real-life stories (Leonard, 2003, p. 253). Each writer brings their social and environmental concerns to their readers' attention while highlighting peculiar cultural or social aspects. Regarding this last point, race and ethnicity, as anthropological concepts, go far beyond style-related issues. They concern the core of the various African identities developed in the last decades (Leonard, 2003, pp. 254, 258). An example can be traced in Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story *Poison*: the reader cannot overlook the merciless description of the social habits and variety of class distinctions, where even cars and their passengers are a source of debate. Amid the chemical explosion, white people drive passenger cars, and black people walk or take minibus taxis to escape the contamination.

All race and ethnicity-related issues directly relate to developing African science fiction as a specific genre. Since they have spread throughout the Western world, Africans have often been subject to stereotyping and marginalization, even in the present post-colonialist (or neo-colonialist) scenario, feeling alienated. Consequently, the African diaspora once merged with racial tensions and concerns, has become a fertile ground for the science-fictional dystopian genre. Despite its white origins, such a genre has frequently been associated with racism and

colonialism. Contemporary Sci-Fi writing is robust literature of change, where writers of and from a minority are not considered exceptional. It is necessary to give voice to those alienated individuals to turn the point of view on Africans (Leonard, 2003, p. 260).

1.2.3 African Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction, as such, cannot be reduced to a single standardised genre. It encompasses various categories and topics often derived from foreign literature or local mythologies and legends. Understanding speculative fictional literature by African writers often involves combining themes that may relate to the supernatural, futuristic and imaginative realms. Since these subjects have not necessarily been drawn from the Western literary imaginary, it must not consequently be conceived and read as a derivative genre. In most cases, one finds what Jessica Langer has defined as some postcolonial hybridity (Langer, 2013, p. 169), that is why, regardless of the specific themes the short stories here discussed approach, speculative fiction does not constitute a surrogate or a reaction against any given Western literary trend (Langer, 2013, p. 171).

In recent decades, African science fiction has not always been in the limelight, and some critics have detected a negative sign of such a lack of attention. Still, African literature has offered numerous relevant works in the speculative fiction genre. They have played a crucial role in promoting and making local African cultures and realities knowledgeable. Moreover, science fiction has shown an extraordinary potential to free such cultures from all stereotypes concerning the continent and any given misconception or indifference towards its cultural variety (Burnett, 2019, pp. 120-121).

The authors of the ten tales analysed in this work come from six different African countries. Therefore, embracing any given all-encompassing vision of African science fiction is not advisable. However, some general remarks may help focus on those aspects common to all postcolonial contexts. The wide variety of perspectives and voices of each African literature will be fully appreciated only after getting rid of those stereotyped thoughts the Western readers may be inclined to. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink Western literary realism's validity as a dominant literary attitude, which has been acknowledged as the most significant of fictional genres for centuries. Speculative fiction seems to have the force and the momentum to challenge such a negative legacy of the past with its alleged superiority (Burnett 2019, p. 120). In contrast to much of European Literature, 'African works have not been

overwhelmed by realistic trends or other scientific movements arising from widespread scientific debates' (Burnett 2019, p. 120).

Magical realism and fantasy have been among the most relevant genres of last decade's African literature works: the recent explosion in African postcolonial speculative fiction testify to that (Langer, 2013, p. 169). Mythologies and spiritual beliefs cover primary importance in fictional works. Creatures with supernatural powers and places haunted or blessed by non-human presences are deeply rooted in African culture; thus, they tend to pour into literature in mutated, altered or updated shapes and features. Consequently, many writers create alternate worlds in which local and ancient mythologies merge with new and unprecedented social and dystopian realms (Delany, 2012, p. 29). The ten selected short stories for this thesis are highly representative of these features.

In such a frame, speculative fiction seems to be better equipped than any Western realism-oriented literary conception to give shape and represent contemporary reality. The famous literary critic Jameson stated that nowadays, the hyper-technological scenario has much more to do with visionary representations – such as the ones typical of speculative fiction – than with any realistic approach, as 'the representational apparatus of science fiction […] sends back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism (or an exhausted modernism either)' (2005, p. 384). Various examples of magical realism can be traced through Western works of literature as well as African ones. However, African speculative fiction goes way beyond Western realism, as there is much more to it 'than what is apparent to the eye' [cit.]. In this way, emerging African writers may happen to raise a long-term resistance against the Western imperialism and neo-colonialism. However, this might lead to a literary ambition and thirst for independence evolving into hatred against all Western literature, seeing colonialist and discriminating intents everywhere.

Short story writers do not usually aim to propose any holistic theory. They tend to represent worlds risen from sudden intuitions or glimpses of the past and future times (Cosentino, 1981, p. 10), and spiritual and folkloric elements constitute a relevant part of their creative process. In this way, they remind all readers that a whole imaginary world lies behind the fictional surface. On the contrary, the realms described in their tales are often linked to a specific culture which is not to be conceived as a congealed tradition but as a whole galaxy of legends and themes that, once reprocessed, give rise to new meanings and inspirations (Burnett, 2019, p. 122).

Besides the traditional and cultural side, African speculative fiction is rich in themes linked to the continent's postcolonial realities. Criticism and discussion arise between the Western hyper-scientific conceptions and the local African cultural contexts (Langer, 2013, p. 171). Postcolonialism is rich in contrasts and diversities; many African countries are still under the yoke of foreign nations or, in any case, led to conceive the culture and history of the West as dominant and prevalent. Jessica Langer's position towards the same idea of colonialism in science and speculative fiction is relevant. She has argued that colonisation has been spinning around a bipolar process, implying the concepts of civilisation and savagery, past and modernity. In this discourse, the various African subjects have played the role of the retrograde and inadequate (Langer, 2011, p. 171). The Western way of representing Africa often implies a prejudicial conception arising from the exploitative nature of colonisation as a historical process. Each display of science fiction from Africa has thus a chance to challenge the dominant idea of the stranger in a 'strange land' that Europeans have thrust into the colonising cultural framework. In her opinion, science fiction may hybridise and parody the two poles (Langer, 2011, pp. 172). The key to decolonisation is to be found within the psychological way to conceive the African realities, and speculative fiction can support this process.

Most Western dystopian fiction pieces of literature have fed on utopian models as a reversal. This is particularly true in a colonial context, because all colonial projects started as utopian ideas, aiming at imposing a model of civilisation based on Western standards and ideals on Africans. Such models did not consider the variety and hybridity of the multicultural indigenous lands (Langer, 2013, p. 179). The actual process of decolonisation started with the complete failure of all colonising models and projects. Meantime, African speculative fictional literature has offered an alternative and challenging outlet for all those writers inclined to envisage the coming future. These writers have replaced the Western idea of utopia with some fictional realms in which a polyphonic reality has Emerged. If Utopianism is likely to boost oppressive and even genocidal perspectives, speculative fiction has no predetermined utopia for its readers. Rather than that, it aims to give a home to multicultural and racial prospects, where local cultures are harboured and represented, together with the authors' inspirations and visions (Gordon, 2004, p. 205).

1.3 Afropolitanism: the complexities of African identity

It seems that Nigerian writers who make it are from the diaspora. I want to write a book, but I'm scared. Will I be able to publish it? People don't seem to want to read books by Nigerians living in Nigeria. Do I have to travel abroad for people to like my work? If Agary had published the book in the US, Nigerians would have taken an interest in it. (Saro-Wiwa, 2013, p. 90)

1.3.1 Afropolitanism

Afropolitanism, a compound word for Africa and cosmopolitanism, has a heterogeneous origin. The term specifically refers to a mobile lifestyle and the creativity and political attitudes of Afropolitan people. One of the main features of Afropolitanism is an open-minded mindset towards all lifestyles and cultures; thus, Afropolitans seem to belong to several different places without ever forgetting their common African roots (Von Rath, 2020). Many writers of the selected short stories are Afropolitans, meaning they were born on the African continent and later moved abroad for studying or working reasons.

Both writer Taiye Selasi and political theorist Achille Mbembe are associated with the coinage of this neologism (Von Rath, 2020). Selasi's most outstanding work on the topic is *Bye-bye Barbar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?),* a short essay published in 2005 which met immediate success once published on the internet. The writing mainly revolves around the features and lifestyles of the Selasi generation, composed of people of African origins who had the chance to conduct a mobile lifestyle. Selasi goes as far as to discuss the nature of the African diaspora and its critical aspects, which often prevent Afropolitanism from spreading as an innovative mentality among the new generations of Africans around the world (Von Rath, 2020).

Achille Mbembe is another prominent figure in the field. Mbembe's point of view primarily argues for the ability to recognise the values and sensibility of others behind the walls of roots diversities. Mbembe clearly explains his theorisation in one of his most relevant works on the subject:

The awareness of this imbrication of here and elsewhere, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, this relativisation of roots and primary belongings and a way of embracing, fully cognizant of origins, the foreign, the strange and the distant, this capacity to recognise oneself in the face of another and to value the traces of the distant within the proximate, to

domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with all manner of contradictions—it is this cultural

sensibility, historical and aesthetic, that suggests the term Afropolitanism. (2010, p. 229)

In the previous quote, Mbembe refers to today's globalised scenario. Thus, one of his central concepts regards the relativisation of the roots. According to the writer, only such relativisation of everyone's origins seems to have the power to go beyond all visible contradictions. In that way, he shows the reader the new sensibility that should be comprehended and embraced. Additionally, he points to adopting the right mental attitude to fully understand 'the foreign, the strange and the distant' (Mbembe, 2010, p. 229).

However, Afropolitanism has raised several controversies in the last decade. Some authors have not appreciated the priority given to the concept of diaspora within the debate on Afropolitan literature. Rebecca Fasselt, a senior lecturer and expert in the field, outspokenly said that she could not see the point of her forgetting about her origins. She perceives Afropolitanism as the umpteenth social and cultural distinction and category that could be avoided. She also remarked that most Africans who like to define themselves as Afropolitans are the same people who have the chance and the means to travel abroad and thus get highly educated. They represent a privileged class who has found a new definition to appear under new garments in the eyes of the world (Fasselt, 2014, p. 235).

Akin to the one expressed by Fasselt, Chinua Achebe's take on Afropolitanism seems to go to the source of the nomadic collective experience African people went through in the last centuries. Unlike many other African intellectuals, Achebe spent his life in Nigeria, and went through the violent Biafra war. Achebe envisioned the destinies of thousands of African artists and writers travelling abroad, highlighting the difference between a tourist roaming for leisure and those African travellers from poor places who had to struggle to find a home and settle down in any wealthy Western countries:

The list of European and American painters and writers who have left home for some other

country in this century and the one before is very impressive indeed… these children of the West

roamed the world with the confidence of the authority of their homeland behind them… The

experience of a traveler from the world's poor places is very different, whether he is travelling

as a tourist or struggling to settle down as an exile in a wealthy country… Let me just say of such

a traveler that he will not be able to claim a double citizenship like Gertrude Stein when she said: "I am an American and Paris is my hometown". (Achebe, 2000, p. 92-93)

Afropolitanism goes beyond the idea of African identity outside the African continent. It has also represented a further stage to a contemporary definition of African culture within non-African cultural backgrounds and scenarios. Such is the case with the scholar and writer of Sierra Leonese origins, Kadiatu Kanneh, who writes that 'Africa's historical role in the formation of modernity, particularly as a discursive site for ideologies of race, humanity and progress, is one that helped to forge Europe's idea of itself, as well as to lay the foundations of modern Black identities' (Kanneh, 1998, p. 32). Kanneh's attempt liberates all African self-perceptions from their widespread passivity. Such attitude aims at showing the Africans their roles in influencing the development of other continents' public discourse on cultural and ethnic issues.

1.3.2 Afropolitan literature as world literature

As remarked in the previous paragraph, there is no total agreement on Afropolitanism. Some authors and scholars have labelled it a brand-new useless category meant to create further social and cultural discrimination between people who live in Africa and the so-called Afropolitans staying abroad (Fasselt, 2014, p. 235). Afropolitanism goes beyond the African continent from a geographical and ideological point of view, striving for liberation (Hodapp, 2020, p. 5). This idea matches the parallel field of World Literature. David Damrosch, an American literary historian, has defined World Literature as 'all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translations or in their original languages' (Damrosch, 2003, p. 4). In this view, the works which met great success in their homeland are selected and translated to be commerced worldwide. However, as Afropolitanism, this implies an elitarian tendency. Afropolitan literature 'is often born already global, via Western publishers and prize cultures, and gains traction as literature of the continent by achieving outside the continent' (Hodapp, 2020, p. 6). Therefore, several writers and literary theorists do not seem to agree upon the very conceptual core of Afropolitan Literature as World Literature.

James Hodapp, an assistant professor and expert in African Literature, has taken the cue from the already mentioned Noo Saro Wiwa criticism on Afropolitanism. He believes that publishing internationally with Western companies may give a book a much wider circulation.

In contrast, African writers living in Africa are often doomed to a local or, at the most national distribution of their novels. In such a frame, Afropolitan writers have naturally been pointed at as privileged authors rather than cosmopolitan (Hodapp, 2020, pp. 2-3). Grace Musila, a Professor of African Literature at the University of Johannesburg, has even sharpened the very same critique, arguing that 'the Western readers would rather not get weighed down with African particularities when reading their African literature' (Hodapp, 2020, p. 2). Thus, she has coined the term *Africa-Lite*, meaning that such literature usually conveys a stereotypical and pre-packaged idea of Africa (Musila, 2015, p. 110) to foreign readers.

However, Afropolitan Literature has also been identified as a way out from *Afro-pessimism*. *Afro-pessimism* can be defined by the word of Simon Gikandi as 'the belief that the continent [Africa, A/N] and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment and held hostage to corrupt institutions' (2011, p. 9). Gikandi has valued Afropolitanism and its literature as a new perspective on the Africans who live outside Africa, described and perceived for the first time as citizens among the others rather than as charity cases always struggling to make a living. Saro-Wiwa's and Musila's critiques make sense from their perspectives, especially when Musila comes to lament the lack of reference to global mobility African citizens and writers are exposed to (Musila, 2015, p. 110). That is why Hodapp states the necessity of grasping the best from Afropolitanism to raise global mobility and not fall on the traditional Afro-pessimistic attitude (Hodapp, 2020, p. 2).

1.3.3 Eco-Afropolitan literature: toward a world literary space

The cosmopolitan way of being and writing promoted by Afropolitanism has raised a widespread debate among African and non-African theorists and intellectuals. One of the main new directions of Afropolitanism involves an environmental and ethical commitment, which has brought some scholars to envisage a new branch of Afropolitanism called *Eco-Afropolitanism*. The term is widely inspired by sociologist Craig Calhoun's theories and adopted by the scholar Juan Meneses (Meneses, 2020, p. 85). Calhoun points to the different ways of speaking about the environment as a vehicle for renewed cosmopolitanism. In his view, humans may offer different perceptions and ideas about the surrounding environment due to their diversities (Calhoun, 2017, pp. 196–197). Although essentially based on Afropolitanism, *Eco-Afropolitanism* is not confined to a monolithic reflection of the African Diaspora worldwide. Hence, it mainly revolves around the necessity to build a new

environmental sensibility within the general frame of cultural diversity. Therefore, relationships with others may benefit from such attitude by creating dialogues and relations encompassing the African perspectives on the environment (Calhoun, 2017, pp. 196–197).

Simon Gikandi has contributed significantly to the definition of Afropolitanism from an environmental point of view. He explains that what is needed is a cultural attitude that 'embraces movement across time and space as the condition of possibility of an African way of being' (Gikandi, 2011, p. 10). The divergencies might arise from the issue of the lack of mobility. That is why Gikandi does emphasize the possibility of getting out of such an impasse by 'thinking of African identities as both rooted in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them' (Gikandi, 2011, p. 10). The French scholar Pascale Casanova claims that *Eco-Afropolitanism* is a world literary space but, at the same time, not an abstract and theoretical construction. In her view, such a world is substantially 'made up by the lands of literature' (Casanova, 2004, pp. 3-4), signifying that, from an Eco-Afropolitan perspective, the usual difference between fictional and physical reality has no more reason to exist. However, some people living in well-connected areas as highly-educated citizens are provided with broader opportunities than others who still live in remote rural zones and are forced to struggle to make a living (Hodapp, 2020, p. 10). That is one of the reasons why a new environmental sensibility is needed. Juan Meneses believes that only an ecology-based African world sensibility can give voice and relevance to all those realities and identities which have been left under the carpet of the first wave of Afropolitanism (Hodapp, 2020, p. 10).

1.4 Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism

1.4.1 Afrofuturism

I know, Afrofuturism is a broad term. I don't even know what it means, and for that reason, I don't like it. The problem, I think, is in the word 'future'. When they label a work afrofuturistic, they do mean it is about the future of Africa or African people, right? Often portrayed positively. They also mean it's about the present, without all the stereotypes and headline calamities, and that it is about a history, which is nothing like the horribly racist picture colonialists painted…It hurts to daydream of better things. It hurts even more to write about it, for at some point I begin to feel like Afrofuturism is becoming something like a mind-control drug, something like a religion that makes you endure a horrible life with promises of a paradise after death. (Dila, 2018)

The term Afrofuturism was coined for the first time by Mark Dery in an interview dating back to 1993 and published a year later. It was meant to describe the use of speculative tropes by African Americans and other diasporic ethnic groups in various media. Among other things, Dery also remarked that 'African Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees' (Dery, 1994, p. 180). Along the same rhetorical line and with an explicit reference to Dery's definition, Africans have been said to be 'the descendants of victims of an alien invasion' (Burnett, 2019, p. 122).

Since the second half of the 15th century, the relationship between Western colonising invaders and African populations has often been seen as between groups from two different planets, unable to understand one another. Modern-day Africa bears the scars of such invasion: the political geography of the continent has mainly been decided by the invaders. With its boundaries and status, the nation-state form was a stranger to the African mentality and has been imposed as the only possible form of political organisation (Davidson et al., 1990, p. 9). The alienation and marginalisation of African people often concern a large part of Western futuristic fiction, and Africans are often omitted from speculative narratives. Africa calls for attention and reconsideration because of its cultural and geopolitical relevance: a continent with more than fifty countries and 1.1 billion people speaking various languages, covering a crucial role on the world stage.

African speculative fictional works have a lot to say to whoever means to investigate and understand the thoughts and moods of specific African writers as representatives of their own cultures and their way of conceiving the future in the present times. Additionally, the importance of Afrofuturism has been exponentially growing in the last decades. It is no more confined to literature, covering a wide range of emerging and innovative art forms. Apart from fictional literature, one may find creative initiatives inspired by Afrofuturism in artistic domains such as fashion, figurative arts, movies, IT technology and daily habits (Bland, 2015). It has received a significant boost in the past century from the American art scene; its roots are traced back to the early 20th century. One of the first essays in which Afrofuturism comes to be envisaged is *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* by Langston Hughes, described as the 'urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardisation, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible' (Hughes, 2014, pp. 1321).

Culturally speaking, the condition of Black people in the U.S. has always represented an anomaly. The phenomenon of the slave trade has offered more than sparkle to all kinds of science fiction narratives. Black intellectuals and authors set their stories in the future to call their reader's attention to the social injustices and all potential scientific dystopias. Such glimpses of the future are not solely part of some Black identity but are extremely meaningful of a new way to conceive science fiction tout court. Afropolitanism has demonstrated its full potential to become something much greater than a cultural trend spread out from Africa (Lavander et al., 2020, p. 2), redefining the notions and ideas of blackness and being Afropolitan in today's world. It bears the extreme importance of iconography and its impact on people's minds.

The afrofuturist artistic world has various directions, offering inexhaustible sparks to literature theoreticians and scholars. Whenever Sci-fi narratives meet speculative fiction, a world of aesthetic, social and historic implications emerges. Afrocentricity has brought many irreplaceable elements to the table of Afrofuturism, especially with regards 'to magic realism with non-Western beliefs' (Womack, 2013, p. 9). Additionally, what is relevant about Afrofuturism is the way most Afrofuturist writers conceive and represent both time and space. The power of imagination, the ability to create fictional realms that look real to readers, transcends time on several occasions. That is what happens in the ten stories this thesis englobes, bringing the future into existence while recasting it as something which never completely fades but goes through somehow predictable transformations. It is a way to represent the cycles of time (Womack, 2013, 153). Such a concept of time often comes to affect that of space. Alena Rettovà, a scholar and expert in the field of literatures in African languages, claimed that:

> While the future can be seen as one type of possibility and it is indeed the ideal screen to project possibilities and model alternative worlds, it has a different ontological status from the possible. In claiming to be an extension of the extra-textual reality that literature, in one way or another, writes about, it sustains a tighter link to the actual world than genres that project fantasy worlds in outer space or in an abstract imaginary space. (Rettovà, 2017, p. 159)

Although some authors may see all dystopian and futurist tropes as a fictional version of the African Diaspora, others can represent their glimpse of the future without necessarily casting

the spotlight on the racial issue. Lisa Yaszek, for instance, claims that 'Afrofuturism appropriates the narrative techniques of science fiction to put a black face on the future' (Yaszek, 2006, p. 297). The Ghanaian art theorist Kodwo Eshun highlights the less race-centric aspects of Afrofuturistic artistic expressions. Eshun has indeed emphasised the idea of Africans as aliens' abductees or, on the opposite, aliens themselves:

Extraterrestriality becomes a point of transvaluation through which variations over time, understood as forcible mutation, can become a resource for speculation. It should be understood not so much as escapism, but rather as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance within the high-pressure zone of perpetual racial hostility. (Eshun, 2003, p. 299)

Concerning this last point, one should remember that Afrofuturism is not simply a literary trend or school of thought but has found several applications within the aesthetic, philosophical domain. It covers the intersection of the African diaspora with science and technology, thus as the new configuration of African culture with the global scenario. While encompassing various media, artists have found new ways of expression within an Afrofuturistic mindset. In doing so, they have also found new chances to shape their own Afro-diasporic experiences artistically. Afrofuturism encompasses a variety of speculative genres including not only science fiction but also fantasy, alternate history, and magic realism.

Not all historians and scholars agree on the origins of Afrofuturism, especially regarding its relationship with contemporary literary science fiction. American scholar Isiah Lavender III argues that the two genres are to be conceived as separate and distinct. He thus suggests that since the first enslaved people were traded to America, all writings by African authors can be perceived as science fiction; in fact, their sense of dislocation resembles that of a man brought onto another planet. Additionally, he wrote that most of the fictional motifs featured in Afrofuturistic works borrow from Western literary tradition (Lavender III, 2011, p. 38). That is why Lavender comes to introduce the concept of *ethnoscape* as an imaginary space meant to 'fabricate and reconceptualise racial difference, enabling us to unpack sf's racial or ethnic environments and to think about human divergence in social behaviors' (Langer, 2011, p. 159).

1.4.2 Africanfuturism

Africanfuturism encompasses a wide range of disciplines, art and literature, including movies, comics, storytelling, and music, and refers to a way to conceive science and technology within the African culture. The expression was firstly coined in 2019 by Nnedi Okorofora, a Nigerian-American award-winning writer who gave a full definition of the term in her blog:

> Africanfuturism is similar to Afrofuturism in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that 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 center the West.

Okorofora's definition has given rise to several reactions and theories. Her way of conceiving the new wave of African culture as developed within Africanfuturism is entrenched in the African cultural backgrounds of many authors and scholars. The main difference between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism is that Afrofuturism mainly focuses on the African Diaspora towards the Western countries. On the other hand, Africanfuturism is more rooted in the local African cultures and aims at putting them at the centre of the stage. That may happen not only in science fictional works but even in fantasy, alternate history, horror, magic realism and several other artistic or scientific disciplines.

Although Nnedi Okorafor has a straightforward idea of the difference between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, the line between the two is sometimes blurred. On the other hand, Wole Talabi, a Nigerian speculative fiction author, agrees with Okorafor's genre definition. In his *Introduction* to the milestone collection *Africanfuturism, An Anthology* Talabi writes:

> I've read a lot of science fiction. Award-winning epics, sweeping space operas, philosophical considerations of the human condition, wonderful alternate histories, spectacular visions of the future, so many stories that took me to the edge of space, time and imagination, but in most of them, there was hardly a mention of Africa or Africans or even specific African ways of thinking. And when I say 'African', I mean African, not African-American or the larger African diaspora. Not that I want to draw lines and make distinctions, I'd prefer not to, but the lines exist and thus must be acknowledged. (Talabi, 2020, p. 7)

Some readers might classify Africanfuturism as a subset of specific expanded definitions of Afrofuturism. However, there are substantial differences between the two genres. Africanfuturist encourage readers worldwide to actively engage with African traditions of thought, science, philosophy, history, dreams and being. Furthermore, the difference between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism lies in the importance attributed to the African Diaspora. As remarked by Talabi, Africanfuturist writers will not be entirely understood as long as readers do not focus on the way that traditional African mindsets conceive subjects like science, philosophy and history, as well as the world of dreams and self-consciousness. In 2019, Aigner Loren Wilson, a speculative fiction writer and editor, argued that 'most institutions treat Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism like the same thing'. She believes that 'Africanfuturism is centered in and about Africa and their people while Afrofuturism is nothing but science fiction literary subcategory mostly about Black people within the Diaspora' (Wilson, 2021).

1.5 Climate fiction

Climate change is unprecedented and extraordinary, forcing us to rethink our place in the world. At the same time, in looking at its causes and its repercussions, we find old themes. There have always been disasters; there has always been loss; there has always been change. The novels, as all novels must, both grapple with the particulars of their setting and use these particulars to illuminate enduring truths of the human condition. (Tuhus-Dubrow, 2013, p. 59)

1.5.1 Anthropocene fictions

The concept of the Anthropocene has provided a determining boost in the climate change-related literature. The idea of naming the present epoch as such was popularised by the chemist Paul J. Crutzen in 2000. Crutzen believed human behaviours may have affected the earth's atmosphere to the point of ushering in a new geological epoch. The term as such follows the pattern of others referred to geological epochs such as Pleistocene or Holocene. In fact, *Anthropos* means man in Greek, while -cene refers to the Greek adjective *kainos*, whose meaning is new; therefore, the word means new (epoch) of man (Crutzen et al., 2000, pp. 17-18).

The widespread interest in the Anthropocene has deeply affected the literary domain. Adeline Johns-Putra, a scholar and Professor of Literature who has dedicated several papers to the topic, has drawn a link between the Anthropocene-related concern and the new wave of climate change fiction, englobing these fields as a 'category of contemporary literature' (John-Putra, 2016, p. 267). On the other hand, Kubra Baysal, an expert on contemporary ecofiction and Cli-Fi, believes that climate fiction 'is an umbrella term which encompasses Anthropocene fiction' (Baysal, 2021, p. VIII). Anthropocene fiction cannot be assessed and studied as a genre, and its interdisciplinary attitude may also be found in Cli-Fi works. Thus, both Anthropocene and Cli-Fi cannot be restricted to a single domain but call for a holistic environmental approach (Baysal, 2021, p. VIII).

Adam Trexler has methodically studied the Anthropocene-related literary phenomenon in his work *Anthropocene Fictions*. After analysing several famous novels belonging to the category, Trexler affirmed that the last generation's writers on the subject have somehow been forced to adjust to the new scientific language and linguistic conventions. They have been led to do so by the complexity and radicality of the latest social and environmental transformations. Trexler has thus gotten to the core of the Anthropocene Fiction literary features by underlining its hybrid and multi-dimensional nature. According to the expert:

> Anthropocene indicates that atmospheric warming is not merely a theory, but a phenomenon that has already been measured and verified across scientific disciplines and conclusively linked to human emissions of fossil fuels. Thus, Anthropocene productively shifts the emphasis from individual thoughts, beliefs, and choices to a human process that has occurred across distinct social groups, countries, economies, and generations: the wholesale emission of fossil fuels that began in the Victorian period and has intensified through the present day. Both climate change and global warming are easily bracketed as prognostications that might yet be deferred, but the Anthropocene names a world-historical phenomenon that has arrived. (Trexler, 2015, p. 4)

The Anthropocene does not only concern novels and fictional creations: it has given rise to the so-called climate change criticism, which can be treated as a sub-genre on its own. Since climate change is not only a natural phenomenon but a cultural and critical one, it has engaged several scholars of philosophy and semiotics to analyse discourse and meaning in the light of the Anthropocene-related assumptions. Although climate change has been assessed and

studied as a mixture of elements belonging to psychology, sociology and linguistic factors, for obvious reasons, the present paper will primarily focus on its literary importance (Johns-Putra, 2016, p. 275).

The Anthropocene-related studies and literary works feature a particular interest in postcolonial theories and a tendency to re-interpret the continent's past through the lenses of radical politics. According to Carl Death, 'imaginative articulations of the African Anthropocene can play a central role in this task [the spread of a new "decolonised" mentality], particularly because they have been so marginalised in mainstream discussions about climate change and the Anthropocene' (2022, p. 435). It is a theory primarily based on scientific premises and has been particularly significant within African climate change literary fiction.

1.5.2 Climate Fiction in Africa

Floods of water come screaming through, thick and muddy. Outside, each step is a promise of going under, the disappearance of our bodies under muddy reflections. Each step brings back the memory of exploring the shallow far ends of our community three months ago and seeing bloated dead bodies floating in the stagnancy. Each step is running, running while the water draws me back into its thickness, running before we've even started. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

Various institutions and scientists have raised a widespread debate on climate change in the last two decades. According to Death, these issues have been expressed through fictional modes today, and 'the creation of socio-climatic imaginaries in non-fictional media such as journalism and documentaries […] seek to render scientific and political future imaginaries more accessible by using storytelling and narrative devices' (2022, p. 442). Environmental issues have always been crucial for both African intellectuals and society. Apart from stereotypical perceptions of African cultures, all traditional societies have been based on the relationship between human beings and natural surroundings, nurturing a vital connection with animals and plants. Not by chance, in all African creeds, nature is often portrayed as part of human beliefs, and both animals and plants symbolise ancestral meanings associated with their cults (Okuyade, 2013, p. VI).

Such a manner to conceive and envisage all-natural surroundings was disrupted when Christianity and Islam were introduced into African cultures. Besides introducing new beliefs,

the productive European mentality led to a massive exploitation of natural resources, causing widespread and ongoing environmental degradation, in the name of a colonising view. African literature had shown several forms of ecocriticism long before the European or American culture did, being more sensitive to nature and showing a more profound affection for their ancestral roots. Significantly, Africans have never experienced such unreasonable and widespread enthusiasm over the industrial revolution the Europeans were caught in throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. They have been chiefly observing, consuming and being exploited rather than willingly and actively participating in the Western industrial 'evolution' (Okuyade, 2013, p. IX).

In the last decades, Cli-Fi has set forth all sorts of worries and concerns over the climate change transition, not to say about pollution and the depletion areas of Africa have been hit by. Thus, considerable critical attention has confirmed the worth and importance of this new wave of Cli-Fi Literature. Climate change, particularly in literary studies or critical theory, is now being 'heralded as a discrete subfield of literary studies' (Johns-Putra, 2016, pp. 266-267). Such widespread attention and change in sensibility over climate change are not to be confined to the Cli-Fi genre. Adeline John Putra, a Professor of Literature and expert on ecocriticism, pointed out that Cli-Fi, rather than being a well-identified literary genre, may look like a generic fictional attitude that creeps across various and diverse fictional genres (Putra, 2016, p. 267).

The widespread concern over the climatic crisis has given rise to several dystopian narratives rather than reassuring glimpses of a future in which humanity returns to a sustainable environmental condition. In such a perspective, made of deserted landscape and lethal ultraviolet radiations, the reader may find several themes coming from the post- (and anti-) colonialist mentality and a new sensibility that conceives today's technology as unbearable and environmentally unfriendly (Langer, 2013, p. 171). Natural disasters and catastrophes are not portrayed exclusively in biological terms, as it often happens in Western literature. What must be remembered is that Cli-Fi is strictly interconnected with other genres; therefore, the narratives associate the environmental crisis with social and cultural degradation. Most of the story stories analysed in this thesis portray dystopian futures, which is typical of the genre. The environmental crisis leads to an apocalyptic future rather than a utopic regenerating reality. The ten stories cover the themes of desertification, pollution, flooding, apocalyptic storms, and diseases, all elements belonging to the Cli-Fi category. These

environmental disasters are described as tremendous realities where for the first time, human beings seem to take second place in front of the urges of nature.

CHAPTER 2

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More-than-human agency and environmental change

2.1 Introducing the first five short stories

The new wave of African science and speculative fiction literature covers a broad multiplicity of subgenres and themes. This second chapter contains an analysis of the first five stories; besides the first half of the ten selected narratives, the authors' personalities and careers will be briefly introduced.

Suyi Davies Okungbowa, whose real name is Osasuyi Okungbowa, is the writer of *Dune Song*. He was born in 1989 in Benin City, South of Nigeria, and graduated from the University of Benin, obtaining a Bachelor's in Civil Engineering in 2011. Once fulfilled his studies, he moved to Tucson, Arizona, to attend a Creative Writing MFA (Civilian Reader, 2019). Today Okungbowa is a fantasy, science fiction and speculative writer. One of his most known works is *The Nameless Republic*, a fantasy trilogy. Under the pen name Suyi Davies, he has authored some young readers' novels. He is also an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Ottawa. He has spent his last ten years between the US and Canada and can thus be defined as an Afropolitan writer and citizen. His works reflect the cultures of Western Africa and Nigerian beliefs and lore; such is the case with the short story *Dune Song*, which will be retraced in the next paragraph.

The second short story is *Eclipse our Sins* by Tlotlo Tsamaase, a Motswana writer born in 1989. She is widely known as a speculative fiction author, awarded numerous literary prizes, such as the Bessie Head Award and the Nommo Award. Her debut novel, *The Womb City* (2013), identified as a dystopian piece of literature, was highly praised and appreciated by readers (Tsamaase, n.d.). The writer has never left her country to settle down abroad. *Eclipse our Sins* is one of her most representative short stories, exploring the climate crisis and the widespread anxiety towards the future of Africa and humanity.

Dilman Dila is the author of *Snake Blood*; he was born in Tororo, Uganda, in 1977. Besides writing short stories and novels, he is also a filmmaker and a social activist. His movie *The Felistas Fable* (2013) won several awards at the Uganda Film Festival in 2014, and his first short film, *What Happened in Room 13*, has been watched by millions of viewers on YouTube (Dila,

n.d.). *Snake Blood* was evidently influenced by Dila's cinematic passion, and a product of his full maturity writing.

The fourth text is *Xaua-Khoe* by Catherine Shepherd. Shepherd was born in South Africa and graduated from Rhodes University in 1992. One of her greatest inspirations has been the South African author Rachel Zadok, author of the best-seller novel *Sister-Sister* (Kwela Books, 2013) (Shepherd, n.d.). *Xaua-Khoe* is highly representative of her writing style; besides the climatic concern, she aims to depict a future in which community life is at the centre of the stage.

The fifth short story is *Land of Light* by Stephen Embleton. The author was born and raised in KwaZulu-Natal, not far from the Eastern Coast of South Africa. He migrated from his hometown to Great Britain several years ago and presently lives in Oxford, where he collaborates with the African Studies Centre at Oxford University. Besides being a writer, he has also worked as a graphic designer, creative director and filmmaker. His first story, *The Short Story is Dead, Long Live the Short Story!*, was published in 2015 in *Imagine Africa 500*, while his debut novel, *Soul Searching*, was printed in September 2020 in the UK and US. Embleton has also contributed to several literary initiatives to promote African Speculative Fiction; he is the editor of *The James Currey Anthology 2022* (Embleton, n.d.).

Okungbowa, Tsamaase, Dila, Shepherd and Embleton attribute great importance to their fictional works' more-than-human elements. The five tales share a variety of supernatural forces and characters, frequently taking the main stage, threatening or rescuing each story's human characters.

2.1.1 Suyi Davies Okungbowa's *Dune Song*

Dune Song by Suyi Davies Okungbowa was first published in Apex Magazine, issue 120, on 7th May 2019. Apex is an online journal of fantastical fiction which publishes Sci-Fi short tales written by authors worldwide. The story was inserted in a special issue dedicated to Afrofuturistic short pieces of speculative literature.

Dune Song is a peculiar narrative featuring an overall lyrical tone and often sounding like poetry in prose. Thus, the whole text is structured on concise paragraphs whose tone is evocative and untied from specific historical contingencies. Such is the case with the opening sentence, which reads: 'do not go to the Dunes, the Chief says to Isiuwa. You'd do well not to awaken the wrath of the whistling gods' (Okungbowa, 2019). Isiuwa exists in the real world: it

is a small village with a vibrant study centre in the Nigerian district of Edo. The term adopts different meanings in the text, indicating the settlement or the entire community and the prominent culture attached to it. The protagonist is Nata, a young girl. The story revolves around her attempt to leave the community of Isiuwa to go out into the wild and barren territory dominated by the dunes. Nata already tried to escape once but got caught and nearly killed by the evil hand of the enigmatic character, the Chief. However, she is determined to set off again. She hates Isiuwa, her hometown. According to the Chief, the village is doomed, and anyone attempting to escape will dangerously wake up the gods' anger and die. Nata does not believe such warnings: her mother, who disappeared in the dunes, taught her that there is liberty and justice beyond the fences.

What makes the tale captivating is that the dunes are not inert bunches of sand; instead, they constantly whisper and whistle. The story is interconnected with the Nigerian belief in natural elements and creatures as animated by non-human agencies. However, such forces hide a psychological implication in the text:

Isiuwa hummed and nodded and praised the Chief for his wisdom, forethought, and benevolence. And this was how Nata knew Mam was right after all: that the gods that did exist were not beneath the dunes at all, but words planted in the mind. This was how she knew she was going to leave again. (Okungbowa, 2019)

The story can be read on many levels through and over such metaphorical hints. From a social and political point of view, it alludes to the constant limitation of freedom the population has been subjected to, especially in colonial times. Not by chance, in Isiuwa, two different classes of people live together, the ones who are and those who are not permitted to go beyond 'the bamboo fence' (Okungbowa, 2019). Such a situation is justified for safety purposes. However, the privileged ones are allowed to step over the fence and are the only ones who seem to know what lies in the desert. Such limitations are frequently enshrouded in religious motivations, but most of the people of Isiuwa do not believe in such explanations as provided by the Chief.

Another remarkable aspect of the community of Isiuwa is that it is not treated like a neighbourhood made of independent individuals. Okungbowa writes of it in the third person, as if it were a single character, or one may rather say a 'collectivist society' (Sutherland, 2020):

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it 'moves like a buzz, like sandflies in formation. The market is a manifestation of this, laid out in wide corridors of bamboo and cloth, a neat crisscross of pathways. Bodies scuttle along, dressed in cloth wrapped to battle every iteration of dust-laden wind' (Okungbowa, 2019). The whole story can also be read on a psychological and personal level. Nata lost her mother; she left Isiuwa long in the past, when Nata was just a child. Therefore, Nata's attempt to cross the dune territory is also an attempt to reach her mother. Sometimes Nata seems to be a reincarnation of her mother, at least in the eyes of Isiuwa, 'a mad woman like Nata's Mam, talking about getting away somewhere else. Isiuwa says the Chief was right to let Isiuwa offer her to the gods beneath the dunes, to the breath of their wrath' (Okungbowa, 2019).

Considering what has been retraced this far, it may seem that Nata is alone in her defiance of Isiuwa's authorities. Instead, she has an ally joining her all through the venture, the Chief's only son, Tasé. Like Nata, he is also motherless and decides to join forces with her to leave Isiuwa and find his mum. The end of the story sees Nata and Tasé engaging in a long and excruciating run through the desert while the dunes whistle, and a raging sandstorm prevent them from clearly seeing where they are going. The Chief looks for his child and calls him back from an undetermined distance. This final stage is open to several interpretations. Presumably, Tasè manages to reach Nata, and together they rise in the whirlwind, reaching their mothers. However, it is not sure whether Tasè reached Nata in time before the whirlwind raised her. In the second option, Nata finally finds her mother, although their meeting is somehow magical:

> It feels like ages, like a faraway thing, when a sandy hand grasps hers. She pulls–to herself, to the Mams who dared to leave before, to the future, to power. They rise, together. She knows it together because she knows the weight of defiance. She offers herself to the wind and they slip, slip, losing all sense of time and space. They become nothing and everything, and all is possible in the breath of the gods, a breath that is now theirs to breathe. Wherever it would take them, they do not know, but at least one thing is sure: that their tongues and their bodies hearts will belong to them. (Okungbowa, 2019)

Nata and Tasé have not simply embarked on an uneasy journey. The whistle of the dunes can be deadly to their ears and their entire bodies since they have been warned by the Chief more than once before setting off. However, such deadly dunes are to be seen from various

perspectives. They do not only represent harm, aggression and death. Deep in their supernatural powers and presence, Okungbowa seems to see a return to an idyllic past. Nata does not surrender to fear before the raging sandstorm: 'she called it the whirlwind of liberation, of return to a time when even though her tongue was just as tied, her body just as controlled, it was at least hers. It did not belong to Isiuwa'. (Okungbowa, 2019). *Dune Song* hints at forces, emotions and impulses in an out-of-time dimension. To such extent, relations between people, things and supernatural forces occur outside any specific historical references, setting the story beyond the usual coordinates of afrofuturistic narratives.

2.1.2 Tlotlo Tsamaase's *Eclipse our Sins*

Tlotlo Tsamaase's short story *Eclipse our Sins* was first released in Clarkesworld Magazine, Issue 159, in 2020. As in Okungbowa's *Dune Song*, the story's protagonist is a young girl, and people address her as *sisi* or *nana*. The story is told in first person by her. The term *sisi* derives from sister and may be found in akin forms such as *sussie* or *suster*. It might be either a synonym for woman or indicate a beautiful, loyal and funny female who can be mean at times (Dictionary Unit for South African English, 2015). As for *nana*, such a name is widespread in several countries of Central and Southern Africa. It is often used as an affectionate term to indicate grandmothers. However, many girls come to be called by this name in loving memory of the child's parents' parents (Glosbe, n.d.). The narrative opens with a severe illness that strikes Nana's mother. A shaman has been summoned to cure her, but ineffectively. A heated exchange follows between her and the shaman himself, who, besides his powers, cannot save the dying woman:

> Mama is in death throes with an immense force we can't see, but we can see the slashes it leaves on her arms, back, and legs. It wants to silence her. But her voice has been to God and back, nothing can stand in its way. Even the shaman takes his shit and leaves, his shame tucked in between his legs... "I'm not God." The shaman struggles with me by the doorway. "You can't force me to be God." (Tsamaase, 2019)

In the future imagined by Tsamaase, the Earth has been so polluted by human beings that it is now seeking revenge against them. The short story portrays the planet and natural elements as living, animated beings. Most humans are affected by a respiratory illness similar to

pneumonia, and they can breathe only with respirators and by assuming medicines. In this story, Mother Earth comes to be conceived as a treacherous force which may also recur into retaliation and violence to avenge any suffered injury or offence. The focus is on humans, who are to be attributed for their apocalyptic damage to nature and the surrounding ecosystem (Middleton, 2020).

The short tale begins with an invocation to 'Mother Earth, Mama Earth, Mmê Earth', which is bound to be left unanswered for long because of 'the disconnect that humans have created between themselves and the environment' (Tsamaase, 2019). The connection between human souls and the Earth is relevant in the Motswana culture. In Tsamaase's narrative, the relationship between Nana's mum, Mother Earth and the shaman himself is complex. In this culture, there stands a strong bond between human souls and the earth, and the shamans are responsible for setting a harmonious balance between the two. Motswana shamans are known in the Tswana language as *saan*, meaning bushmen. Such shamanic conception and the connection between land and soul can be constantly found at the core of Tsamaase's short tale. Yet the relation between Nana and her mother is not an easy one. She is not keen and enthusiast about Nana's bond to the earth. She 'wasn't a believer, but she survived on her beliefs for a while. "Nana, I will only believe what I see", Mama used to whisper as she kneaded bread, "therefore all these superstitions are just make-belief hallucinogenic kak that people like to eat. to eat". Kak; crap, shit' (Tsamaase, 2019).

Like Okungbowa's *Dune Song*, *Eclipse our Sins* alternates narrative parts with poetical and evocative passages. However, their aims are different. In *Dune Song* Nata roughly what to expect anytime she hints at a chance to walk across the dunes and find a world of justice and liberty. On the other hand, Nana is not attempting to escape her birthplace but searching for the reason behind her mother and family's sickness. However, the fact that Mother Earth is seeking revenge gradually becomes apparent, and Nana seems to be aware of this in the end. She is forced to realize that 'there are secrets in our family. Terrible secrets that lie on our skin like rash' (Tsamaase, 2019). Nana will melt into her beloved Mother Earth at the end, and in the final lines, promises of rebirth are blurred:

> Our heartbeats were cataclysmic, a big bang, giving birth to pandora-things. Every creation gives birth to chaos as well—we know this now and we will be reborn.
>
> And that Woman, soft rivers run in her throat, volcanoes thunder in her voice

She is lady,

She is monster,

She is Sun,

Hide your eye,

Eclipse your birth,

Sea-rise will be our baptism

We will be reborn. (Tsamaase, 2019)

Tsamaase's story forecasts an eerie future with upcoming social diseases and ecological crises. However, no one should surrender to any discouragement and continue pursuing justice and equality (Middleton, 2020). Her narrative manifests the new generation's claim to a renewed environmental sensibility and awareness.

2.1.3 Dilman Dila's *Snake Blood*

Dilman Dila's short story *Snake Blood* was first published in the African Sci-Fi anthology *Imagine Africa 500* in 2015. Dila himself has expressed the concept behind the tale in an interview for *Strange Horizons*, an online weekly magazine on speculative fiction:

> I was thinking that the modern world has distanced itself from magic. In the past there used to be a lot of miracles. You see in the Bible. I ask myself why we don't have that anymore. I was thinking that if society collapses—in the story it's because of climate change—there will be an aftermath. It might be a mix of technology and magic. (Dila, 2018)

The events and deeds narrated in *Snake Blood* take place after a major disaster revolutionised humans' habits and the political and social balance in an imaginary Uganda-based kingdom set in a wide area around the existing city of Kango. The whole plot revolved around a magic and mighty sword whose former name was *Anyimber*, later renamed Snake Blood. The main characters are Adrova and Anya, and the two are engaged in a passionate and heart-breaking adulterous relationship. Adrova has a wife called Eperitu, living far away from the kingdom. He cheats on Eperitu despite knowing she may take revenge by casting a curse on him in the name of the so-called Seventh Law, a tribal rule according to which every man must be faithful to his spouse. With the help of a sorcerer, she may even turn Adrova into an animal. However, Eperitu is not Adrova's only concern. The mighty sword of his late commander, Kito, has been

taken by his enemies. Together with Kito, Adrova 'had raised an army of five thousand' (Dila, 2015, p. 400), set to fight against their long-time foes, the people ruled by the evil king Goran. Goran's population are responsible for the destruction which has struck the earth since:

> …their greed led to wars and slavery, and their arrogance following great achievements in science and technology made them disrespect the Creator, who in anger changed the climate of the world. He sent floods, droughts, bushfires, huge waves that wiped out little island in the oceans. (Dila, 2015, p. 563)

After such cataclysms, those who survived became nomadic and violent outcasts and were nicknamed *Wazunguka*, an ancient Chwezi word signifying those who wander without purpose.

Most of the story revolves around Adrova and Anya and their attempt to regain control over the mighty sword, which is now kept in Goran's palace. The magical object was once in the hands of Kito, who knew the password needed for its powers to come forth. Kito shared the secret key with Adrova, but the sword went lost when he died. The commander died the day he reached the so-called Mountains of the Moon to assume possession of a *nagamani*. *Nagamani* is a nearly untranslatable word and refers to the gem of serpents or snake-stone, an animal bone or stone used in ancient medicine for snake bites in Africa, South America, India and Asia (Madaki et al., 2005). In Dila's tale, the word *nagamani* seems to hint at the serpent's skull. However, the reptile Kito fights is notable, and is called *Oya*, a spirit snake living on the Mountains of the Moon for ages:

> He went up the mountains searching for Oya, and returned with the snake's head. It was the size of a goat. He had killed it with *Anyimber*. Its blood stained the blade, and that increased the powers of the sword, so much that it became a super-weapon. A single man could use it to defeat a thousand warriors. The blade got a new name, *Snake Blood*. (Dila, 2015, p. 405)

The story is rich in supernatural-related climaxes. Kito has increased the sword's power by killing the ancient snake Oya and taking possession of its *nagamani*, giving him even more power. However, something went wrong during the combat, and 'Kito was fatally wounded from his fight with Oya. He died before he could reach his territory. With his death, his territory

disintegrated and his army scattered' (Dila, 2015, p. 407), and the sword was brought to Kango city. Adrova is conscious of the importance of bringing back the missing mighty sword. When Eperitu, Adrova's wife, discovers his adulterous affair with Anya, the protagonist decides to kill his wife. However, this is not the only motivation leading him to such a decision; in fact, Anya 'would make a better queen [than Eperitu who] preferred to be a mother and a housewife […] and had no passion for adventures, no ambition for a career' (Dila, 2015, p. 425). In the meantime, he is also being pressed by Anya who does not want to be concubine anymore and want Adrova for herself only. Adrova has the chance to kill his wife several times, yet he does not dare to accomplish the deed.

The day comes when Adrova sneaks into the royal palace to get Snake Blood back. He has a detailed plan; helped by his best friend, Bateng, he manages to enter the palace secretly. He steps into the room where the sword is guarded; however, king Goran unexpectedly arrives with the kidnapped Eperitu and Anya. Eperitu has been ordered to curse Adrova and turn him into an animal, while Anya is kept under the threat of a guard ready to kill her at the king's command. However, Adrova managed to grasp the sword, and he is ready to whisper the magic password to unleash its secret powers:

> He looked into Anya's eyes. He did not see any fear. Only defiance. The guard raised his sword. He was about 12 paces away. Adrova lunged. The power of the sword made Adrova fly over the table. The guard's sword swished down to chop Anya's head, but instead it struck Snake Blood and broke into several pieces. Adrova hacked off his head. It fell on the table. (Dila, 2015, p. 607)

In the end, both Epirutu and Goran are killed. Adrova returns to his *kikosi* and acknowledges Bateng and his family's death, killed by the hand of Goran. Adrova's final resolution is to avenge his death. In *Snake Blood*, readers may find many cinematic elements. As already mentioned, Dila is both a writer and a movie director. Thus, it is no surprise that several passages resemble part of a film script. Descriptions such as 'the moon swam in her pupils. Her lips were red, as though painted on her pot black face. Her clothing, made of rabbit skin sparkled with silver beads' (Dila, 2015, p. 324) portray Dila's directory accuracy and his attention to visual details. Alongside Dila's visual accuracy, another fascinating aspect of the tale is the mixture of climatic dystopia and Ugandan tribal beliefs in supernatural forces and sorcery. Most of the story is haunted by eerie legends, while the climatic cataclysm is narrated

in legendary terms. That is the case with the ancestral roots of the *Wazunguka* people, outcasts who, after causing irreparable environmental damages, have lived for long as nomadic castoffs, cursed and hated by the world. All the reader is told is that, in a time far back in the past, the *Wazunguka* took possession of the sword. However, Goran's people cannot avail themselves of the power of Snake Blood since they do not know the password.

Another critical element inside the story is Adrova and Eperitu's marriage. Despite Eperitu still loving Adrova, she cannot forgive him because he has transgressed the Seventh Law, which forbids any husband to disrespect or dishonour his spouse. That is why Eperitu has been given the power to curse him and even turn him into an animal. Sorcery, in this case, seems to have a specific legal and penalty-bound mission which may relate to Ugandan tribal principles and values. In this regard, the crushing love between Adrova and Anya hints at the difference between love sanctioned by laws and social rules and the passionate feeling that disregards all social conventions and formalities. However, Adrova and Anya's love does not lack some unsaid calculations: Adrova has chosen Anya because he thinks she will be a better queen than Eperitu. The essential supernatural element within the story is the sword. Snake Blood is associated with the blood of a reptile bound to give even more power and strength to the object. However, Kito does not simply kill the serpent; he himself gets killed while killing. Kito's backstory has been designed to empower Adrova as the justice-doer, and several Sci-Fi narratives present this same pattern. He eventually becomes the avenger who first acts and fights to do justice after his commander and friend has been robbed of his sword soon after death, and in the end, he decides to wage war against Goran to avenge his best friend, Bateng.

2.1.4 Catherine Shepherd's *Xaua-Khoe*

As Dila's tale *Snake Blood*, *Xaua-Khoe* by Catherine Shepherd was selected to be published in the *Imagine Africa 500 anthology*. *Xaua-Khoe* is set in a post-apocalyptic future where traces of old and past civilizations are found. The story's main character is Diluea, nick-named 'serpent boy' by his best friend, Piau. Diluea has been gifted with an uncommon skill to understand the nature signs spread by the goddess revered by his tribe, 'Gauho, the great mother' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 1996):

I pray to Gauho, the least I can do to express our gratitude for Her assistance. A thread of energy sheds itself lightly from my skin and dances up towards my ancestors. It cannot be seen by the

naked eye, but I feel the connecting patterns growing stronger. Each time I commune with Her more of my essence is released, gradually freeing my spirit until, like my grandfather, I too will pass into Her waiting arms. A small price to pay for a Goddess' protection. (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2096)

The story begins with Diluea and Piau swimming lightheartedly through the water of a crag by the sea. Although they do not know that a scary adventure awaits them, Diluea is haunted by a clear omen that 'something is going on' as 'he can feel it in his bones' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2091). Once they return to their village, they acknowledge that Selito, a man of their community, is missing. After hunting, his mates gathered back, but no one could tell where he was. Being the 'serpent boy', the protagonist is asked to visualize where Selito might be. After drinking a special potion, Diluea has an omen and sees the missing man in the shadow of a goat and a fiery dragon next to it. The vision is clear to the ancestors and refers to a territory where traces of the old world are found, a 'place of poisoned water' where 'dark liquid seeps from the ground' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2076). The reference of the author to the Great Goat might hint at Project Isabela, an environmental restoration project in the Galápagos Islands of Ecuador, where 150,000 goats alone were eradicated to prevent the extinction of the Galápagos tortoise in 1997 (Cox, 2018). The name might also refer to the character of Great Goat, a human wearing the head of a large goat in the Japanese manga *Berserk* (Berserk Wiki, n.d.).

Selito has not been found or seen as the night falls, and Diluea sets off for his sleeping place. On his way home, he passes past Slaith's refuge, a woman he used to spend time with. He sees carvings above her door and remembers that she used to tell him that those depicted there are angels and that her ancestors used those pictures as lucky charms:

A large oval door looms before her domain, surreal with eerie carvings of winged humans above the door post. During the nights we shared together, she would tell me that they were beings called angels and that her ancestors used them as lucky charms. I remember her holding me while she murmured of those ghosts, her pale skin reflected in the orange flames. (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2064)

When the sun rises, Diluea joins the hunting group again to search for Selito across the land. As they reach the Great Goat, Palitei, Selito's son, turns reckless and runs searching for his

father. Suddenly, a sand hole swallows Palitei and widens to include the rest of the group and Diluea, falling into an undefinable dark subterranean passage. At the end of the tunnel, Palitei sees a human silhouette lying in a corner and realizes it is his dead father. Selito has a deep wound in his leg and jugular, he does not move, and when Diluea puts his head on his chest, he cannot hear a heartbeat (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2098). Fortunately, Borgie has a solar lantern with him and turns it on. The lantern light spreads out only to show them that snakes of all sizes surround them:

> Brown-looking snakes with curved heads protrude inwards as far as we can see into the cavern. They are wrapped around wheels that look like those that belonged to the chariots from the dead world, like those in the etchings in the library…Borgie strides forward between the beams until he reaches one of the strange tools. It is shaped partly like a crescent moon. He strikes it with his fist. The pendulum of Borgie's light swings this way and that. Flakes of rust fall away as a hollow clang echoes through the body of the snake. (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2108)

After the great shock of what they have witnessed, a revelatory conversation follows. Talking to the group, one of the elders claims that 'all of [them] must never forget what [they] saw down in that dark pit. The dead and their machines took something from deep within the earth that was not theirs for the taking' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2119). Abe is here referring to the old civilization that dug deep underground to withdraw some mysterious substance, probably petrol. After that, the group starts discussing the origin of evil throughout their lands and the meaning of the term *Xaua-Khoe*, which is also the short story's title. According to one of the hunters, Abe, 'it is a concept in the old language that means the opposite of love. I worry that if I utter the demon's philosophy it will bite once more with poison, its teeth marks have long been forgotten by our people' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2127). Borgie finally clarifies the term to Diluea: 'it means greed' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2129). *Xaua-Khoe* seems to be the same force leading men to destroy their environment. From such destruction, 'mutated fire-spitting creatures' emerged (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2133). The tale ends in a sun-setting scene. Many things are left untold, and the reader is left questioning the effective death of Selito and the traumatic past left behind by the old civilization.

2.1.5 Stephen Embleton's *Land of Light*

Stephen Embleton's short story *Land of Light* was published in the *Imagine Africa 500 anthology*, e.dited by Billy Kahora. The narrative leads the readers into philosophical issues related to the life-death passage seen through Central African Congolese eyes. The relation with the ancestors is among the primary focuses of the tale, an aspect of great importance within the culture of Congo and most countries of Central and Southern Africa.

The plot is linear and revolves around a long-protracted phone dialogue between Paula, the story's protagonist, and her father. She is travelling on a train across the Congo River, heading to a famous and meaningful ceremony, *Kosanga*, held by the Congo banks. The event provides the unique possibility of getting in contact with one's ancestors. The whole ceremony is strongly linked to the power of the Congo River itself, 'the mass of energy generated by the metric tons of water pulsing through that vein, that African heart, lighting and nurturing the towns and cities along his banks, creating the Land of Light' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2332). However, far from a lyrical and stereotypical image of the passed-overs, Paula's ancestors are portrayed with realistic features in the short narrative. An example is provided during the video-call talk when Paula acknowledges from her dad that her grandmother, Mama Koko, 'was physically and verbally abused by her husband' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2408). As her husband was coming closer to death, she confessed to him:

> "I have nursed you with all the disgust and loathing I could muster. With every glass of water, handful of pills and supportive arms, I have nursed my hatred into your body, into your skin like a sticky balm of bitterness. I have consciously imparted that bitterness on to you. I have made every moment a moment of transferral. I now no longer hold any of that resentment. It is in you now, fully, killing you, choking." (Embleton, 2015, p. 2417)

Paula gets slightly confused over her father's revelations, and she eventually asks him what the purpose of connecting with such ancestors is. Nevertheless, her father infuses her words with courage and wisdom, claiming that 'who they are when they are alive is not who they really are. Their soul is who they are. The real world is who they think they need to be' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2426). The tale's second half mainly revolves around Paula and her relationship with her father. She is very attached to him, yet while talking on her machine – as the video phone is defined at the story's beginning – she does not get into real contact with

him. That is when Embleton's story turns quite intriguing and mysterious. In the very last paragraph of the story, the reader acknowledges that Paula's dad does not physically exist, being nothing but 'an uploaded consciousness in a database' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2457). Paula's father is as dead as her other ancestors, and the one she has been talking to is his doppelganger created by some futuristic technology.

Embleton's tale prompts readers to question their relationship with the visual and digital screen-based reality. Are people online nothing but uploaded consciousness in a database? Such questions curiously merge with the Congolese culture, its bond with the ancestors, and the contact that can be made with them. Such is one of the most widely known aspects of Central Africa's supernatural beliefs, especially concerning the long-stretched Congo basin area. The Congo River (also known as Zaire River) has a length of about 4700 km and flows through three countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo and Angola. In Embleton's story, people deem the river with sacredness and significance as if it were a connection between the world of the living and the one of the dead. However, the supernatural goes hand in hand with ecology and nature as a source of energy. Paula and her dad have a marked sensitivity concerning the river's benefits for anyone near its banks. Such sensitivity seems to have spread from a collective awareness which has been passed onto them from their ancestors since:

> Like many living here, her family was part of this land, this watery place. She couldn't remember how far back her family went, no one could. As far as they were concerned they had emerged from the land like the waters reverberating through her now. They had learned to use the waters, over time, and to harness its power. (Embleton, 2015, p. 2363)

However, when reading the story, one should remember the political issues still permeating the zone around the Congo River. The short narrative imagines a utopian reality where the Grand Inga Dam project has been completed, providing Africa with significant income (International Rivers, n.d.). In Embleton's story, the benefits of successfully realising the undertaking, which would be the world's largest station, would help to smooth the tension between the two cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville. Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo, face each other, divided by the Congo river, and are only a few kilometres apart. The two cities represent

the third largest urban agglomeration on the African continent; however, their rivalry, started in colonial times by France and Belgium, continues today (Burke, 2017). Embleton's narrative envisages a bright future where the power of nature helps overcome the ancient discords between the countries for the sake of their population.

2.2 Supernatural entities

Most of the five stories analysed are set in post-catastrophic scenarios where people suffer the consequences of significant climate-related disasters. This fatal setting promotes a renewed approach to tradition, perceived as a secure shelter from the uncertain future. The tales are clustered with signs and symbols hinting at ancestral old beliefs and legends, and the cultural and symbolic richness they come to nurture gives readers a chance to delve into what has been defined as more-than-human entanglements. As mentioned priorly, Sci-Fi and Cli-Fi literature cannot be based exclusively on scientific matters, and they also need a specific cultural background and roots to feed on (Bristow, 2020). A kaleidoscope of supernatural and legendary characters and tales is at the core of all African cultures and lore.

In *Dune Song* by Suyi D. Okungbowa, the dunes come to be portrayed as 'whistling gods' (Okungbowa, 2019), whose deafening hiss may even cause death. Such an image perfectly merges with the Central African animist sensitivity, which conceives all forms and beings as harbouring a soul or spirit. The desert dunes, especially when hit by the most violent sandstorms, sound like a crowd of hissing and yelling giants. Scientifically that is known as the 'singing sand' effect: when billions and billions of sand grains come to crumble down the slopes of a desert dune, they happen to sound like a deafening hiss echoing for miles and miles (Fischer, 2012). However, Okungbowa does not refer to any peculiar scientific discovery. The whole story thus revolves around a rich symbolical core. The desert, with its roaring and hissing sands, may symbolize a territory where a rite of passage takes place, leading Nata and her young friend to face their childish fears and finally become adults and free individuals. Furthermore, as the main characters search for their lost mothers, the passage through the desert may even signify a search for lost roots, which are to be found in 'the whirlwind of liberation' (Okungbowa, 2019). The escape across the desert may be read as a return to a better past which needs some supernatural elements to become real and effective.

In *Eclipse our Sins*, by Tlotlo Tsamaase, the figure of the shaman emerges as a character who tries to help and heal ill citizens. As in many other cultures, the personality is not simply

a doctor or physicist; his rituals and powerful expressions are meant to find a connection to the land and soul of people to relieve illnesses and pain. In fact, the protagonist claims that 'in our tribal land, the human soul is tied to the land; what hurts the land hurts the soul' (Tsamaase, 2019). In most African cultures, human souls are conceived as belonging to the earth. Such connections result in souls being of the exact nature of land, trees and other living creatures, and this is what prominently emerges from the narrative. Unfortunately, the shaman's efforts to cure people will not be enough for the protagonist's mother and relatives to recover and avoid death. The reader is left questioning whether the failure in recovery might depend on their scepticism. It may be the case with Nana's mother, who 'wasn't a believer' and 'only believes what she sees' (Tsamaase, 2019). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sci-Fi has often gone as far as delving into a world of epics and mythology to explain earthly phenomena and attributing the cause to supernatural entities (Booker, 2013, p. 5). That is what happens with African speculative fiction, too. In the case of Tlotlo Tsamaase, readers come across a serpent, a symbol deeply rooted within the Motswana culture, seen as a deity or at least as the incarnation of a god.

In *Xaua-Khoe*, the snakes are hinted at only to characterize the protagonist's personality and the pitfalls of the undergrounds; yet they do not ever take the main stage. In the narration, the author attributes great importance to Diluea, the 'snake boy', and the supernatural is represented by his vital connection with Gauho, the protecting goddess of his community. This supernatural entity incarnated by a woman is what the old, deranged civilization was lacking. There is also an ancient mother in the tribe, recalling the figure of shamans of the tradition, who 'sits cross-legged at the entrance, her milky eyes following all who walk in and out' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2011).

The serpent covers a prominent role in *Snake Blood* instead. The magic sword the whole tale revolves around owes its name right to Oya, the ancient snake spirit killed by the former commander of Adrova's army. In such a context, the sword is treated like a living being and unleashes its powers only once told a specific password. *Snake Blood* entails a rich blend of Sci-Fi and Ugandan lore and mythology. Dila sets the story in a far-in-time-future, highlighting the authenticity and resistance of specific tropes and characters. In his case, we do not find a shaman as in Okungbowa's, but a sorceress who plays a moral role since Adrova is kept under the threat of being cast a spell for cheating on his wife, Eperitu. The so-called Seventh Law is markedly prominent throughout the tale, and marital fidelity is crucial in Ugandan society.

In *Land of Light* by Stephen Embleton the reader may find an unequivocal bond between narrative and cultural background. Paula, the protagonist, travels on board a plane to reach the Land of Light, to attend a ceremony in which Congolese people open a multidimensional gate to get in contact with their passed-overs. The supernatural aspect emerges wherein Paula's father emphasizes the importance of such an event. He also reminds her that whether their ancestors had been good or bad fellows during their lifetime is irrelevant: what matters is what and where they are at present. In such a context, the Congo river assumes great importance. In fact, besides being a physical river, the never-ceasing stream of its water seems to symbolize the connection between the two worlds, the here-now world and the afterlife, while also being an image of the continuity of life all through the different dimensions.

2.3 Environmental disasters

Science fiction writers often create worlds in which social and environmental troubles turn into nightmarish dystopian realities (Leonard, 2003, p. 253). The ten authors' final aim is not simply to expose any climate or environment-related emergency but to bring their cultural and scientific points of view to the main stage. Therefore, any issue cannot be interpreted as apart from their cultural and mostly ethnic concern since the two of them seem to go ahead side by side (Leonard, 2003, pp. 254-58).

Colonialism and Neo-colonialism in the African continent had an undeniable substantial adverse environmental impact. Science Fiction as a literary genre thus constitutes a medium to express the violence and the effects of such cultural and historical collision. However, the five stories provide readers with a different point of view, where European invasions are not the sole responsible for environmental disasters of the land. The authors of the five narratives often hint at or relate some primordial transgressions committed by their ancestors; such is the case with Catherine Shepherd's tale, whose title *Xaua-Khoe* 'means greed' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2129). Diluea's predecessors had been so greedy that they awakened 'mutated fire-spitting creatures' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2133) from the underground. The narrative mentions a last desperate attempt made by 'groups of people from the old times who tried to save nature' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2134). The quote seems an omen hinting at the degenerative situation we are facing today in our society. Akin to Shepherd's, in Dilman Dila's tale Goran people are blamed for the calamities leading to the environmental catastrophe named Great Disaster:

Their greed led to wars and slavery, and their arrogance following great achievements in science and technology made them disrespect the Creator, who in anger changed the climate of the world. He sent floods, droughts, bushfires, huge waves that wiped out little islands in the oceans. He particularly punished Goran's people by freezing their homeland in the northern hemisphere, making it uninhabitable. They became nomadic outcasts. (Dila, 2015, p. 564).

Once again, when the equilibrium with nature is lost, the environmental scenario rebels against humankind. In the same terms, Tlotlo Tsamaase exposes the climatic damages through a succession of heartfelt songs embedded throughout the tale. Because of such harms, 'reality has evolved to punish us' (Tsamaase, 2019). The Earth is seen as a powerful living being, and the protagonist refers to it as 'Mother Earth, Mama Earth, Mmê Earth' (Tsamaase, 2019). The focus is on the planet, an organism suffering a series of injuries, sounding like a fragile, harmed and afflicted human. There is a dependency relationship between the abused Earth and the tales' seriously ill characters. The sins committed by humans are linked to respiratory diseases that even shamans cannot heal:

Warning! Replace your respirator immediately. I need to change it. Warning! Pollutants rife in the air, in the city: carbon emission, racism, oil spills, sexism, deforestation, misogynism, xenophobia, murder . . . I'm not the only one screaming in our neighborhood tonight. Someone is dying because of a simple skull-escaped thought, and as they exhale their smog-breath into the air it contaminates us all. We hurt the earth, and so shall we hurt each other. (Tsamaase, 2019)

The narrative shows an unwelcoming Earth, portraying a dystopian reality for human inhabitants: 'the sun is menstruating, smearing a rosy tinge across the bleak industrial skyline. It has teeth. Teeth to catch. Teeth of metal and jagged glass. Nothing homelike about this city' (Tsamaase, 2019).

In *Dune Song* the environmental catastrophe is associated with widespread desertification, and 'quenching thirst' is the main priority in the fenced village: 'the sun is out and warm, not hot because Isiuwa isn't really in a desert; or at least, not like the deserts the Elders speak of when they tell us about the world before it was all dunes (Okungbowa, 2019). However, the dunes and the deities buried under the perennial desert sands turn out to be less forbidding

than the lifestyle imposed in Isiuwa. The desertification is curiously not attributed to the effects of the climate crisis but to the gods in the dunes. In this way, the Chief manages to keep the community under control by spreading fear of the external environment:

> Nata blamed Mam in the beginning, believing it was her fault, that she could've just stopped arguing with the Elders, telling them that there were no whistling gods, that the civilization under the sand was just swallowed by an extreme ecological disaster. She insisted there were thriving civilizations out there and she was going to find them, that the whirlwind of time would take her there. She insisted she had seen it for herself. (Okungbowa, 2019)

In the last short story, *Land of Light*, Stephen Embleton depicts nature as a living, sensitive being. That is the case with the Congo River, whom Paula's father somehow reveres as a deity. In this utopian future, humanity has finally acknowledged the importance of preserving the Earth and 'learned to leave it alone' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2356). Paula's father often goes as far as to depict the river and the territory in philosophical terms:

> 'Our continent is the original Earth. We are Earth 1.0. Everything is a derivative of this land. Everything came from here. We never left our roots. We may have strayed, but we remained with our roots. We were the lacerated continent. We were the amputated continent. But we healed. We healed ourselves.' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2447)

This final quote may hint at a deranged environmental past and a colonial division leading to the previously mentioned disputes between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo.

2.4 Language

In the 19th century, colonising policies pushed towards imposing a linguistic hierarchy where tribal idioms had to be used in informal conversations. In contrast, colonising languages became prevalent in schools and offices (wa Thiong'o et al., 2016, p. 11). Many writers gave up to using foreign idioms for their works, such as English or French. By doing so, part of the African literary world aimed at *decolonising* its mind through the refusal of the most potent foreign instrument, that is to say, the language itself. However, many authors still write in

English and French. In a globalised context, these two languages have permitted many contemporary African writers to acquire a broader readership worldwide and profit from higher incomes. The five tales by Okungbowa, Tsamaase, Shepherd, Embleton and Dila are products of authors raised in a bilingual environment, being confident with the use of both English and terms and tropes from their local cultures and idioms. Despite all stories being written in English, the reader can identify numerous expressions written in local languages or dialects. In the following lines, these keywords will be analysed.

In *Dune Song* the community where the main protagonist lives invented its idiom, referred to as the Isiuwa's language. Tasé himself, the chief's only child, was instructed and educated in this tongue: 'he did a lot of spend time with the Elders, mostly to learn to scribble the shapes that represented Isiuwa's language and their sounds, but he barely ever spent time with the sentry group or the courtyard troupe. Every other time, he was alone, practicing' (Okungbowa, 2019). However, in this case, the language is only mentioned and not further examined. Presumably, the elders and the chiefs used it as a traditional code to preserve the knowledge that the population must not learn. The whole story is characterised by haunting secrecy: the community is based on respect towards the authority and the borders they have been imposed, thus never questioning the rules they are expected to follow.

In *Eclipse our Sins*, traces of the local Motswana idiom are found. The protagonist is called *Fong-kong* human by the shaman. *Fong-kong* is an offensive term used to identify Chinese merchants trading across Southern Africa. The word is used as an insult, hinting at those people who are believed to be poor. Curiously enough, *Fong-Kong* is a Chinese phrase signifying Made in China. All over Southern Africa, it is widely and ironically referred to as whatever is believed to be poor quality, including humans. Most of the five tales are clustered with words coming from family-related terminology. That is the case with Tsamaase, too; in her story, her sick uncle is called *malome* (Tsamaase, 2019). The word derives from the Bantu-ethinic idiomatic roots *maadumé* meaning maternal uncle.

In *Xaua-Khoe*, the short story title is a South-African word signifying greed. South Africa is rich in dialects and idioms, spoken all along the coast and inland. However, in Shepherd's tale, the word *Xaua-Khoe* is linked to an old world, and the expression belongs to a not well-identified ancestral tribe; even Diluea, the protagonist, does not seem to know its exact meaning.

Land of Light is set in Congo, precisely above and across the Congo river. The colonising language of Congo is French; however, it is the homeland of many other idioms such as Swahili, Luba-Kasai, Kongo, and Lingala. Paula and her father are literate in Lingala, spoken all through the Western side of the country from the Isiro area down to Kinshasa (Mufwene, 2008). Lingala words and forms traced in the text are *tata* (Father), by which Paula addresses her dad, *mbote mwana*, meaning Hello child, and *mwana mwasi*, which is Lingala for daughter.

As previously underlined, several family-related words and phrases can be found in the narratives. Dilman Dila's tale contains several Ugandan words and phrases that take on great importance throughout the text. Bantu is one of the main languages spoken, and it is also used in Uganda, especially in the south; on the contrary, in the north, Sudanic, Nilotic and Kuliak are still in usage. Dila may be referring to the northern area of Uganda, especially the Kango city outskirts, a town on the Ugandan-Congolese borderline. *Juju* is a commonly used term, even by Europeans, to refer to African rituals and beliefs. It may also refer to apotropaic objects or instruments played in Nigeria and Cameroon. The term often indicates the continent's religious creeds (Mockler-Ferryman, 1898, p. 392), and in the short story, the word refers to the sorceress' rituals meant to forbid using bast-off devices.

The narrative also contains vocabulary borrowed from other languages. It is the case, for instance, of the term *nagamani*, used by Dila to indicate the diamond embedded in the snake spirit and coming from the Indian tradition. Bones and stones taken out from serpents are believed to hold miraculous power in sub-Saharan Africa and India. Not by chance, in Hindi *nagamani* is a girl's name too, meaning gem of serpents. Another relevant Bantu word included in *Snake Blood* is *Wazunguka*. *Wasungu* is the plural form of the noun *mzungu*, and both in Bantu and Swahili languages indicate a white man or European. However, in Swahili, *zunguka* means to go around, to circle, to surround or even to wander all about. When referring to the Goran people, Dila writes that 'they were called, *Wazunguka*, an ancient Chwezi word that meant those who wander without purpose. Seeing Goran confirmed to Adrova the rumors that King Miseni had allowed the *Wazunguka* to establish a village in his kingdom' (2015, p. 566).

In Dila's narrative, many references to the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom are made. The kingdom exists and is found in the West of Uganda. Dila's characters also mention *Chwezi* people, a half-legendary dynasty dating back to the 15th century. However, it takes work to draw a line between the historical and the mythological when it comes to the Kitara-Kingdom (Buchanan,

1974, p. 527). Dila's tale indeed benefits from such mystery. He often hints and takes inspiration from *Chwezi* people and their beliefs in magical and mighty swords. Such is the case with *Anyimber*, meaning the future is good in Chwezi, which, as already mentioned, was the name of the *Snake Blood* sword before Kito got killed in his last enterprise.

2.5 Community life

The first five stories underline the importance of community life. The society is tribal: people in charge, rulers and chiefs are elders, holders of past secrets that they will not share with the population. In *Dune Song*, for instance, the past knowledge is not accessible to the villagers: 'only they, the Chief and their novitiates, are allowed access' (Okungbowa, 2019). The relations of power imply an imbalanced situation which is arduous to manage and is a common condition in our societies today. However, some of these tales do not surrender to any dualistic perspective; instead, they depict complex situations in which most things happen because of inexorable necessity. In *Dune Song* the chief of the whole community is not a dull administrator. As a child, he was forced to represent the future of his tribe, facing the fact that 'the strength of community and order would be the sole decider for survival.' (Okungbowa, 2019). Nata struggles to go beyond the borders to find his mother back. However, the whole community know some ground-shaking event happened sometime in the past when the deities came to be buried under the desert sands. Their fears are not simply superstitious, and they accept the idea of being imposed on a social order to have a future guaranteed.

The communities represented in the five narratives are portrayed as collectives of living beings. The tribe is not simply a social group made of distinct individuals, more akin to the Western concept of individuality. However, conceiving one's living place and community can assume positive or negative features. It is depicted with extreme negative features in *Eclipse our Sins*, where 'the city has teeth, and it devours the land with its politics and materialistic gluttony' (Tsamaase, 2019). Community life also englobes religion, and is aligned with the dystopian setting. The short story genre is strictly linked to the oral tradition. In *Xaua-Khoe*, one finds an indubitable sign of such a relation. Most oral stories may hint at pieces of knowledge belonging to the ancient civilisation, which is now quite challenging to decipher:

We walk together down the path toward the central chamber of catacombs that house the
libraries and relics from the dead world – vast tracts of information about the civilisation that

ate itself, which no one living can decipher. All we have are the stories passed down from the mouths of our elders, and many words have been lost. (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2027)

Sometimes the tales reference specific tribal identities. It is the case, for instance, with the *Bakòko*, a Bantu ethnic group based in Cameroon, or even with the 'ancient mothers of the tribe' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2011). In some areas of South Africa, older women used to be tribe chiefs, which happens regardless of democratic conventions or procedures (Bell, 2010).

As to the ancestral origins of these tribal groups, they often depict their appearance upon the earth as a prodigy of nature. In *Land of Light*, Paula's lineage dates back to a legendary past in which 'they had emerged from the land like the waters reverberating through her now' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2362). The process is connected with their ancestors, who are felt and conceived as living beings. Paula's father underlines the distance between the Western materialistic way of life and their own; in fact, he claims that Western citizens 'are what they are' with 'nobody looking over your shoulder, no ancestors to answer to. But feeling what it feels like to be alone' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2394). Summoning ceremonies, like the one in Embleton's story, may turn into a link between different areas and may even quench inter-tribal conflicts. That is what happens between Brazzaville and Kinshasa, two rival cities – one belonging to the Congo Republic and the other to the Democratic Republic of Congo – that come to meet along the Congo banks when celebrating the traditional gathering.

In *Snake Blood*, specific references to the community hierarchy are made. An example can be traced in Adrova's 'hair, plaited into a single horn, [which] identified him as the leader of this kikosi' (Dila, 2015, p. 322), traditions which are undeniably different from the ones commonly accepted in the Western world. In the case of Dilman Dila's tale, the *Chwezi* people are often mentioned in the plot. The main towns and areas traditionally occupied by the *Chwezi* tribes are Bigo, Mubende, Munsa, Kibengo and Bugoma, in the West of Uganda. In particular, Mubende has been revered as a religious centre by them. Within such tribes, whose existence has been proven to date back to the 14th century, a class distinction between cultivators and shepherds existed. As late as the 15th or 16th century, they were invaded by Luo and Hima rulers and gradually lost sovereignty over their territories. Archaeological evidence shows that the *Chwezi* people were dedicated to shamanic practices, which could even turn into possession cults (Britannica online encyclopaedia, n.d.).

2.6 Animals, produce, and vegetation

The five tales show a disruption in the relationship with nature and its balance and harmony. The irreversible condition of today's environmental disaster must be firmly attributed to human activities. Soils, forests, and the underground of several areas in Africa and elsewhere have been massively exploited in the last two centuries. The latest technologies have permitted humans to take advantage of nature at an unprecedented rate and pace. In such a scenario, animals and vegetation are portrayed as helpless victims. However, these tales suggest they are not as doomed as they may appear. In the short narratives, the appearance of wild creatures is linked to symbolic meanings and purposes.

In *Dune Song*, Nata and her Mam are forced to live as outcasts at the edge of town 'where scorpions abound and only those deemed unworthy were offered land to build shelter' (Okungbowa, 2019). However, in the eye of a contemporary reader, these stories may sound idyllic. This might happen when references to animals of the old world are made: for instance, with the camel, which is used as a means of transport in the desert. The dystopian world lacks timber and food in a land surrounded by the desert, and people feed on roasted termites (Okungbowa, 2019).

In Tlotlo Tsamaase's short story, the environmental disaster is entirely attributed to human actions. The setting is highly unwholesome, and most birds have passed over and become rare in the city (Tsamaase, 2020). However, the crisis is not the only worrying issue within the dystopia. Their diet includes traditional dishes, drinks, and gene-hacked vegetables. The protagonist's uncle constantly drinks *chibuku*, a drink made of sorghum, similar to ale. People also eat *magwinya*, sweets similar to doughnuts, famous in Botswana and South Africa.

In *Xaua-Khoe*, animals are highly symbolic. The more the characters step downwards into the underground, the more they realise it has become a home to reptiles and even dragons. However, these creatures were awakened by the greed of past generations. A whole kaleidoscope of harmful bugs and bloodthirsty creatures wander in the desert (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2068). Something peculiar to Shepherd's tale is the hallucinogenic potion the protagonist drinks, referred to as earth potion, which helps him open his mind's eye to guess where the lost Selito eventually hides. The shamanic potion is meant to empower Diluea's mental and intuitive skills. Shepherd's tale is not set in a society in which the supernatural plays a prominent role and where the front doors of many houses are still carved with pictures of angels meant to keep evil away.

In *Snake Blood*, animals are strictly related to the sorceress's power: 'If Eperitu knew about Anya, she could dream up any punishment for Adrova. She could turn him into an animal' (Dila, 2015, p. 356). As to the food, Adrova and Anya's tribe feed on grilled rabbits, and even their clothes are made of rabbit skin (Dila, 2015, p. 324). Moreover, in Dila's fictional society, herbal remedies are widely known and used, including natural juices, to tackle headaches and migraines (Dila, 2015, p. 413).

Most of these tales are characterised by unwelcoming environments. On the contrary, in *Land of Light*, nature is as verdant as it may be, inhabited by forest canopies and one of the longest and widest rivers of the world streaming through:

> The monorail snaked upriver through the thick teak forest canopy and occasionally out into the daylight... For the first time since leaving the plane at Muanda Airport, now 130 kilometres behind her, she was able to take in the view of the vast body of water stretching out 50 metres below. It always took a moment to realise she was not looking at a lake or a separation of continents, but rather the second- largest river in the world. (Embleton, 2015, p. 2329)

2.7 The agency of place

The agency of place in the first five stories is expressed through environmental dystopia. The Earth can communicate with humans, and its actions resemble that of an ancient god. In *Dune Song*, the wind whistle is associated with the wrath of unknown supernatural entities. The singing of the dunes terrifies Isiuwa's citizens: it is 'the only sound to plant tears in their chest that does not come from a living being' (Okungbowa, 2019). The previous claim underlines the sense of human powerlessness in facing such a magical and obscure force. Nata's mum disagrees with the negative connotation attributed to the whirlwind; according to the woman, acting like a magical gate, it can take people to a dimension not affected by desertification, a journey through time and space. The words of Nata's mum enhance the idea of belonging to a broader universe connected and governed by inexplicable forces by telling her daughter, 'You, alone, are a god. You are a dune too, and the dune will not swallow itself. Don't let Isiuwa tell you otherwise' (Okungbowa, 2019). The city of Isiuwa is also central to the story. The territory has a soul and strong will to help the Chief preserve the desert community. The citizens are merged with the city, and when referring to Isiuwa, the reader cannot understand whether the author is talking about the community living there or its physical territory. The

inertness of human decisions is underlined in the story's conclusion when Nata is absorbed in the whirlwind. Nata welcomes the climatic phenomenon as a 'liberation' and a 'return to a time when even though her tongue was just as tied, her body just as controlled, it was at least hers. It did not belong to Isiuwa' (Okungbowa, 2019). In the story, the Chief plays on the agency of place to maintain a state of fear among citizens so that the community might not rebel against the government.

Eclipse our Sins begins with the protagonist's mother 'in death throes with an immense force [they] can't see, but [they] can see the slashes it leaves on her arms, back, and legs. It wants to silence her. But her voice has been to God and back, nothing can stand in its way' (Tsamaase, 2019). The agency is Mother Earth herself, a mighty force that does not leave any possibility for humans to escape her impetuous will. The story is permeated in references to this non-human agent, unstoppable and unforeseeable in her decisions. Mother Earth speaks to her inhabitants by spreading omens in the air, such as 'to live is evil' or 'if your land dies, you die' (Tsamaase, 2019). Expulsing the poisonous human race from the globe is the ultimate surviving technique adopted by the Earth, which cannot commit suicide. Death happens peculiarly, simulating childbirth. Instead of giving life to a new creature, humans give birth to their death. Citizens lack free will: Mama Earth, God, and the Universe act as supreme forces, to whom no evil secret can be hidden.

In *Xaua-Khoe*, the Earth rebelled against the polluting ancient civilization, as they 'took something from deep within the earth that was not theirs' (Shepherd, 2015). It is, once again, connected with the figure of a goddess. However, it is not the goddess, but this mystic force rousing from the Earth herself to determine the extinction of the previous human generation. The new generation understood the importance of preserving the environment and relied on non-human agents to guide their daily lives.

In *Land of Light*, the sound of the Grand Inga represents the agency of nature. The river is highly expressive and provides precious lessons to the territory's inhabitants, who have learned the importance of preserving nature and living alongside it. When Paula is on the train leading her to the Light Gathering Ceremony and crossing the Grand Inga territories, she feels the monorail vibrating, as 'the force of the Congo's waters was pushing against her. "You must feel me. You must experience your journey. The Congo is not a quick ride from A to B," it seemed to say' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2334). There is a unique and impalpable connection between the river and its inhabitants. Through the agency of the place, the author introduces

a postcolonial remark: the inhabitants 'learned a long time ago that it was futile to try and keep the river to [themselves]. [They] learned that it crosses borders no matter who thinks they own it. You cannot grab it with your hands and say 'this is mine'' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2376).

In *Snake Blood*, the non-human agency is linked to the namesake sword and the juju used by the sorceress, but the territory appears as a passive background where the story is set.

2.8 Technology

The speculative short story genre is strictly concerned with technology and technological advancement. However, such a relationship may become ambiguous at times. Technology negatively affects the environment, and the latest inventions still need to be proven to have a low environmental impact. In African Sci-Fi, future societies and civilisations are frequently depicted as either ecology-unfriendly settings or affected by the trauma of a past environmental catastrophe (Balogun, 1991, p. 16). However, technology plays a significant role in the Sci-Fi and speculative genres. It is associated with the latest devices and can interfere with natural biology to the point of hacking genes and DNA.

Among our authors, Tsamaase is mainly concerned with a specific dystopian technocratic perspective. She envisaged a future of induced respiratory illness clustered with respirators, cooling suits, masks and air purifiers (Tsamaase, 2019, p. 1). Her tale dates back to the end of 2019, meaning it was written shortly before the coronavirus pandemic outbreak. However, pulmonary complications had already been associated with polluted air, especially in industrialised areas, long before 2020. The whole story is rife with manipulative systems to keep the population under surveillance. The so-called *time-hole* was inserted in the human brain, a glowing device to keep everyone connected, 'the hour hanging fruitlessly on the limb of the only technology that connects [them]' (Tsamaase, 2019). Nevertheless, the machine also traces all the actions and venues visited by the owner. Citizens are also in contact with another device called *dial-thought* which may look similar to a mobile phone. In *Eclipse our Sins*, communication systems are powered by people's souls' energy to the point of exhausting and draining them. Soul energy is also curiously used for powering public street lighting. In the narrative, there is no substantial effort to improve society's general degradation. The experiments conducted through the narrative lead to a final aim: to create a more resilient body for the upper-class citizens, able to cope with a gradually more unwholesome

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atmosphere. Thus, the authorities are engaged in manipulating humans, their bodies and souls in order to fulfil the sinister plan. However, in such a scenario, humans have not lost their sensitivity and capacity to understand the abuse committed against them. Post-traumatic anxiety and depression are widespread across the city (Tsamaase, 2019).

The five short stories show different layers of engagement with the topic of technology. In *Dune Song*, rather than drawing from the most sinister of technological perspectives, Davies Suyi Okungbowa goes deep into the mythology of its land. However, *Dune Song* demonstrates that technology and body manipulation are only some of the ways to keep a whole population under control. Fear is a perfect means for such purpose, too; it is proved by the kind of social order and secrecy imposed on the city Nata lives. In Shepherd's *Xaua-Khoe*, wind turbines are described as belonging to the natural environment, 'giant metal flowers with petals like blades that turn slowly in the wind…Clean power that came too late' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2074). In the tale, the sensation is that technology led to the ultimate destruction of the previous generation: 'the dead and their machines took something from deep within the earth that was not theirs for the taking' (Shepherd, 2015, p. 2119). Renewable energies and nature-friendly transport appear along the five stories; solar lanterns in *Xaua-Khoe* and a monorail transport system in *Land of Light*. In his *Land of Light*, Embleton mentions a non-fictional project called The Grand Inga Dam, a plan proposed in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The idea is to build up seven hydroelectric power stations along the Inga Falls (Ilunga, 2020). In Embleton's story, characters are said to use a *table surface*, a curious technological device meant to communicate with their dead ancestors, as Paula does with her father (Embleton, 2015, p. 2428).

In conclusion, *Snake Blood*'s readers may have a reason to suppose that technology is not always harmful. The 'hand-held gadgets to communicate instantly across great distances' was 'banned by the sorcerers' on the claim that they would contribute to the Great Disaster (Dila, 2015, p. 373); however, this would have probably helped the continuation of a healthy relationship between Adrova and Epirutu: 'with such a gadget, he would have been able to see her face and hear her voice even though she was 1,000 miles away...They devised another way of communication. Messenger doves. But love could not flourish across distances when he could not hear, or touch, or see her' (Dila, 2015, p. 376). Dila's tale unites technology and magical forces. For instance, solar chargers are in use, but Adrova needs a password to unleash the full power of his sword (Dila, 2015, p. 399).

CHAPTER 3

<div style="text-align:center">**Technology and environmental dystopia**</div>

3.1 Introducing the last five short stories

The final five stories are written by Musinguzi Ray Robert, Osahon Ize-Iyamu, Chinelo Onwualu, Tuntufye Simwimba and Henrietta Rose-Innes. Musinguzi Ray Robert is a Ugandan author living in the country, near Lake George, on the borders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He studied abroad and holds an MBA from Cambridge University College. Besides being a fiction and poetry writer, Ray Robert works as a teacher and researcher in local history. He has written extensively about the Kitara empire, an ancestral connection he shares with the Batoro tribe; the kingdom is also mentioned in Dila's narrative. In 2013 three of his works were published in the anthology *Black Communion*. After *Unexpected Dawn*, he wrote two other stories that recalled the same dystopian reality: *There Will Be No Warning* and *Ageless Being*. Thanks to the Rwenzori Reads Initiative started in Kasese, he promotes the importance of reading among the children of his city (Ryman, 2018).

Osahon Ize-Iyamu is a Nigerian author. His works were published in Fiyah, Clarkesworld, and The Dark, major speculative fiction online magazines (Strange Horizons, n.d.). As a student, he attended the Alpha Young Writers Workshop in Pittsburg, a prestigious opportunity for any young writer interested in science fiction, fantasy, and horror. He also joined the International Writing Program Summer Institute pre-program in Iowa, where authors from different countries bring international literature into a creative writing class (IWP, n.d.). Ize-Iyamu is a speculative fiction author; his most relevant works include *More Sea than Tar, To Look Forward, Flotsam River, Say it Low then Loud*, and *Forwarded as Received* (Ize-Iyamu, n.d.). *More Sea than Tar* reflects his writing style and is set a dystopian future where severe pollution is deadly to the community.

Chinelo Onwualu is a speculative fiction author and editor born in Nigeria. Her works were published in major online magazines specialised in the genre: Strange Horizons, Uncanny Magazine, and Slate Magazine. She is the co-founder of Omenana Magazine, an online resource publishing stories written by authors from Africa and the African diaspora (Omenana, n.d.). She was a finalist for the 2021 Ignyte Award and was nominated for the Nommo and British Science Fiction Awards. The short narrative *What the Dead Man Said* received great

success and praise from critics. The text was picked by the Washington Post in 2019 as one of the Best science fiction and fantasy books. Furthermore, the online science fiction and fantasy magazine Tor.com included the narrative in a list of African authors' five post-A apocalyptic and dystopian stories (Donald, 2020).

Tuntufye Simwimba is a Malawian author of speculative fiction and a law student. His career started as a teenager when he won the Malawi PEN competition. He wrote that his mother and father belong to different ethnic groups, so he has been exposed to many languages since childhood, becoming fluent in none of them. However, his years in school helped him master the English language he now uses for writing (Ryman, 2017). His work *Tiny Dots* has been included in the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology. The text emphasises the importance of human emotions despite all the changes that might occur in the future.

The last author is Henrietta Rose-Innes, a South African novelist and short-story writer. Her works include the novels *Shark's Egg* (2000), *The Rock Alphabet* (2004), *Nineveh* (2011), which has been translated into French and Spanish, and *Green Lion* (2015). In 2010 she published a collection of short stories called *Homing*, and other award-winning narratives have appeared in international publications. She was awarded the 2008 Caine Prize for African writing with *Poison*. Despite holding residencies worldwide, she lives in Cape Town while terminating a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia (Riach, 2018).

The five stories share dystopian futures threatened by major ecological disasters in a world governed by technology. Despite the apocalyptic destinies, human emotions and family issues permeate the next generation's lives, demonstrating how any high-tech device cannot replace real connections. Furthermore, the narratives suggest that advanced technology cannot stop the inevitable consequences of environmental disasters.

3.1.1 Musinguzi Ray Robert's *Unexpected Dawn*

Unexpected Dawn was first published in 2015 in the anthology *Imagine Africa 500*, edited by Billy Kahora. Musinguzi Ray Robert explains his intentions in an interview with Geoff Ryman for the online magazine Strange Horizons:

> I wanted to imagine Africa the same way the world views the USA, the super power. I suppose if African states come together, unite, they would be very powerful. But it's not easy— something has to happen. Then I imagined that the white man's obsession with exploration and

conquest and bombs would one day be his downfall. So I imagined a nuclear holocaust in the Americas that would destroy the people and the environment. Africa was not involved and so survives. (Ray Robert, 2015)

The dystopian future portrays a destroyed world after the outburst of World War Eight. Afrika emerges as a superpower possessing the only drinking water source in the world and the technical know-how and finances to fund medical research:

> The UAS possessed the only clean water in the world. It had been her source of power for centuries now. It was the bargaining chip he had had over the Westlands and Middleastlands. The Arabs were the first to realise that the only way to survive was to cede all power to the UAS. The UAS held the only hope of life for billions of the world's habitants who depended on Hisa, the earth's sole source of fresh water. Their governments, their armies, their oil and all their other resources were useless without the assured supply of water. (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1675)

Apart from the Hisa source, the biological and nuclear holocaust contaminated Afrika's waters, causing the extinction of most animal species. After years of research, scientists developed a cure to finally decontaminate the good. Despite all countries being dependent on the United African States, not all agreed on their detention of power. The Texans, in particular, challenged the UAS supremacy and sent an agent of the secret organ, Dr Winterhouse, to steal the secret formula to decontaminate polluted waters. It is interesting how the power of UAS primarily derives from the detention of water and not from technological supremacy. However, the future is not bright for Afrika too:

> Panacea12 was a classified magical decontaminator formula developed by a team of radiologists and radiobiologists at the DCA two years ago. They knew that the supply of safe water from Hisa would one day become insufficient for Afrika and the ever-increasing demand of the outside world. It was unthinkable what would happen if the source suddenly dried up. (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1739)

The water source of Hisa caused the Ninth World War: in 2420, the Britons, supported by the Westlands and Eurasialands nations, declared war on the UAS. However, after seven years, the clash was won by the Afrikans due to their military superiority. The attempt of the Texans

was ineffective, too. Thanks to their high-tech protection tools, including drones and supersonic aircraft, the UAS president manages to keep the secret formula safe and to fool the Texan secret agent, who was helped by the dissenter chief commander of the UAS, Mr William. The story ends with the president explaining his reasons to Mr William before leading him to the Pit as a punishment:

> "Four hundred years ago, the Amerikanis were the superpower, with all the means to protect the world and its people. But instead, they destroyed the world. We can never allow them to have such privilege again. It was a mistake for you to think otherwise," the president said gravely. (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1818)

The story ends on a mysterious and mythological note, as Mr William is conducted to the Pit, 'where a terrifying creature from the deep ocean was bred by the military' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1722). The future portrayed by Ray Robert is permeated by the use of the latest technological tools. However, the issue of power detention remains the same even in future realms. Humans result as a greedy race, unable to move toward a sense of global community to help one another, even when the situation is turned, and the West is the poor and suffering territory. The UAS president could save the lives of many citizens abroad but instead decides that detenting power is more important than human wellbeing. During the story, the president of the UAS acknowledges that Mr Winterhouse had a partner in crime, who probably was the true detector of the missing formula, and was travelling on a supersonic passenger aircraft to Lilongwe. A dialogue follows between the president and Mr William:

> "Then bring the damned plane down."
> "The king of the Zulu is onboard sir."
> "I don't care if my fucking grandmother is on that plane," the usually composed president erupted. "Bring it down!" (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1758)

Despite the union of all African nations into the UAS, a renovated sense of community is absent. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice how the acronym UAS recalls that of the USA. Even in this story, the tragic situation cannot be entirely attributed to the West. The UAS

emerges as a voracious superpower, unable to change the game and behaving as the usurping colonies did with the African territory.

3.1.2 Osahon Ize-Iyamu's *More Sea than Tar*

More Sea than Tar is an ecodystopian speculative short story written by Osahon Ize-Iyamu and published on Reckoning 3 in June 2019. The narrative is interconnected with the possibility of Lagos going underwater by 2050 (Courtois, 2021, p. 4) and directly addresses the actual environmental crisis. The protagonist is Uti, living with his family in a flooded city. The story is presumably set in Nigeria due to peculiar references, for instance, to the use of Pidgin and the Ogbono soup. The environment is highly polluted, and citizens live among tons of garbage disseminated in the contaminated waters. Animals are highly afflicted by the circumstances and merge with the catastrophe:

> I spot a crocodile dancing in the depths, its shadow eventually rising from the surface of the water, covered in greasy film and toxic waste. Rubbish that has . . . congealed and grafted to the animal's skin—oh my goodness—like an infection sewn and healed onto the body. Like an operation done to make all living things abominations. It passes by me with what looks like hunger in its eyes, and I know that somebody is going to die today. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

The lives of these communities have adapted to the dystopian realm and tried to make the most out of the situation. People are fishing for poisonous and mutated animals and earning money by selling garbage. In this unfriendly environment, familiar dynamics are challenging. Uti's father has been outclassed in the usual hierarchy by his son, Joseph, and his mom, who are the ones to have a job and earn money. Therefore, to restore his pride, he pushes the two sons to join him for an adventure and look for a job outside their safe community. The mother disagrees with the project; however, she does not seem strong enough to oppose her husband's decisions. The first excursion is emblematic:

> Joseph shakes his head, then tugs my arm. "We should probably go back. I'm doing pretty well with this online business of mine, and we can just keep receiving our packages and paying our bills and—" "And I'm doing nothing!" my father screams. The canoe falls out of his hands, its full weight going into mine. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

The environmental catastrophe largely affects Uti's mood, depriving him of his energy and vitality. He is obsessed with death and enjoys watching 'horror movies where people just keep getting eaten by sharks and animals' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). On the contrary, his brother dreams of a better world with a project of 'a life underwater, free of pollution - very far away from here' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). Despite all the dangers, Uti sees this new job as a possibility to escape his toxic thoughts.

The day after, they venture into a new journey, looking for animal food different from the vegan diet they are forced to. After a woman tries to sell them contaminated fish, they meet Mr Abalaka and Mrs Eneyo, two wealthy trash sellers. Uti's father decides to follow them: after discovering whom they work for, an older woman, he makes arrangements with her, stealing part of their job and income. This sly move is fatal. Ultimately, the two employees kill the older woman and wait for Uti and his relatives to arrive with the trash. Uti's father is killed with a spear, and Joseph is shot in the head, but miraculously Uti stabs a spoon into Mr Abalaka's eye and manages to escape:

> I jump into the water and start swimming away. I swim so hard in all the mutation and infection, all the things that have tried to drown me, all the things that have tried to kill me. I can't breathe right. I can't live right. My brother and father, gone into the water. But I can't drown. I can't fall, I can't stop myself escaping. Because I need to get back to my community, I need to tell my mother about Joseph's dreams of underwater living, about his hopeful future that better come quickly because I'm done waiting. I'm alone in this vast, polluted space, but I know which direction to go in. I'll find my way home. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

In the end, Uti seems enlightened by sparkles of hope for a better future and finally overcomes the depressing state that paralysed him throughout the story. The environment described by the author has been deeply affected by the Anthropocene, meaning that human activity has majorly contributed to the creation of the dystopian realm (Courtois, 2019, p. 4). The wretched house where Uti and his family live reflects the tragic situation of the outside city, mirroring the collective (Courtois, 2019, p. 7):

> I shrug. The rain outside makes my body run cold; I can actually hear the floods swishing all around us through our thin walls. Thin enough for the ceiling to give out above where I stand, water splashing through. It soaks me so much that my clothes are see-through, stuck on me

while my teeth chatter...when I look at all the holes in the house where the water comes through, I think that everything is falling apart, and I don't have an answer for that. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

The family lives in a better community than the one his father wants to explore: they 'do recycling and environmental sanitation every Saturday' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). However, the feeling of belonging to a community is lacking. People seem confined in their homes, inexorably divided by the massive quantity of trash flooding around them and poisoned water. Uti's father's project attempts to return to a better past, where citizens actively participate in their society. The division is also felt between Uti and his family and is enhanced by technology. In the text, the latest discoveries play a double role: they might help be more resilient, as with Joseph and the possibility of a life underwater, or might contribute to its users' solitude, as what happens between Uti and his mother:

I hate the way I'm thinking so I shut my laptop to try and force myself to engage. I sneak into Mum's room but she's too engrossed in a stuttering program about unhappy marriages. She doesn't turn my way, her headphones blocking me out. I close the door. I don't actually need to deal with that. I know I'm supposed to be there for my parents, but I can't. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

The citizens appear abandoned to themselves, victims of what they have caused, unable to believe in any mystic force to help them survive.

3.1.3 Chinelo Onwualu's *What the Dead Man Said*

Chinelo Onwualu's short story *What the Dead Man Said* was first published online on Future Tense Fiction in August 2019. The narrative was selected to address the issue of immigration and family secrets in a future shaped by technology, science, and environmental matters. Future Tense Fiction is a publication of short stories in collaboration with Future Tense and ASU's Center for Science and the Imagination. The protagonist is Azuka, a woman who has returned to her native city, Onitsha, for her father's funeral. Onitsha is a city of New Biafra, a state born after the Catastrophe:

It could be argued that without the Catastrophe, that fraught period between the 2020s and the 2060s that scorched half the world and drowned the rest, New Biafra could never have been born. At the turn of the 22nd century, as people all over were still fleeing inland to escape the rising seas, a group of Igbo separatists took the opportunity to declare their independence from the crumbling colonial creation of Nigeria. The new state called for the return of all its children in diaspora, and my grandparents—engineers eking out a living on the shores of Old New York— were among the thousands who moved to regional cities like Onitsha, Nnewi, Awka, and Aba to answer the call. (Onwualu, 2019)

The Republic of Biafra was a partially recognised nation that declared independence from Nigeria in 1967. The Republic is set in the territory of the ancient Igbo tribe and existed until 1970. The secession caused the Nigerian Civil War, also called Nigerian-Biafran War, won in 1970 by Nigeria after bringing Biafran to massive starvation and causing the death of more than one million people (Giusti, 2021). In 2022, many Southeastern citizens belonging to the Igbo tribe are still pushing for Biafra secession, guided by the IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra). IPOB is a nationalist separatist group founded in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu, a British Nigerian political activist. Kanu was first arrested in Lagos in 2015 for treason; he was released in April 2017 on bail due to health issues. However, in June 2021, he was re-arrested in Kenya and brought to Nigeria by security services. In 2022 major pushing was done to release the leader, supported by the United Nations. In October, he was freed of all terrorism charges; however, he is still in custody today for security and public interest (Agwaibor, 2022).

The Igbo are now located in Igboland, also known as Southeastern Nigeria. The text contains numerous references to the tribe and its language and Tkaronto, the indigenous name of Canada, where the protagonist lives. The narrative merges the use of the latest technologies with Nigerians' traditional beliefs and rites. The protagonist was raped as a child by her uncle, and this situation brought significant changes in her family's life:

When my uncle was arrested, they led him out of the compound in chains to show how serious his crime was. My family—once one of the most prominent in the city—was quietly ostracised. Most of my friends stopped coming over. When relatives and agemates stopped by, it was only to whisper at the door or drop off food and drinks. No one wanted to stay and visit. My own education effectively ended—my uncle had been my teacher, after all. It broke Mama and Papa—my grandparents—to lose one of their sons like that. My grandmother fell ill soon after

and my grandfather withdrew to care for her. As for my father? Well … he disappeared too, in his own way. (Onwualu, 2019)

The return to Onitsha brings back terrible memories to Azuka. However, the story does not focus on the rape or what happened that day. The protagonist's grief derives from her father's behaviour after the deed: he stopped talking and could not even look at her (Onwualu, 2019). Even when she moved to Tkaronto with her mother, he barely called them. The grief is enhanced when Azuka meets a woman of her exact age at his funeral, crying and telling her how much her father helped her in the past:

"You know, after I was raped 10 years ago, nobody wanted to help me." I stiffened, tightening my hands into fists in my pockets. "Not my family, not the government, nobody. Only your father. He brought me into this house and allowed me to stay here for free until I found a place. He even paid for my marriage and my son's apprenticeship. Me and my wife, we're just so grateful to him." (Onwualu, 2019)

When Azuka faces suffering, she switches on her A.I. to find relief. However, human emotions cannot be replaced despite technological innovations. Her father, in the shape of a spirit, hunts her through her staying in Onitsha, asking for forgiveness. Traditional rites enrich the narrative, especially the burial rites thoroughly described in the text:

This was the night of mourning and I wished I was somewhere, anywhere, else. But as my father's only biological child, I had to stay by his body and receive mourners until dawn. Then, a government representative would show up to sound an ogene and officially alert the neighborhood of the death. The body would then be interred with its own tree in the front compound. (Onwualu, 2019)

The structure of communities has changed over time: due to falling birth rates, they are not connected by blood relations but by personality and interests. Children are rarely seen in the streets, and the Western world relies on Africa for its progeny. Azuka cannot have sexual intercourse after what happened thirty years before and therefore have children. The Nigerian culture attributes great importance to giving birth and keeping the family's name alive over the centuries. When the protagonist meets her auntie Chio, she tries to convince her to have

a kid, claiming that 'to have a child is to have treasure' (Onwualu, 2019). Despite her father's redemption attempts, Azuka does not forgive him, leaving the town before the end of the burial rites. The story starts and ends with a violent storm, a climatic condition characterising New Biafra and its cities. This certainty of a crumbling world ultimately 'relieved [her], in an odd way' (Onwualu, 2019).

3.1.4 Tuntufye Simwimba's *Tiny Dots*

Tuntufye Simwimba's *Tiny Dots* was first published in the anthology *Imagine Africa 500*. The author explains the intentions behind the writing in an interview for Strange Horizons:

> "For me, I was trying to avoid being too technical about technological advancements. I wanted to portray that while things might be different, the next five hundred years emotions will remain the same, yeah? So that's why, in a world where global warming has intensified and the ozone layer has depleted you find that there's still the estranged relationship between a father and his son on which the story is centred, so it's more of provoking those feelings." (Ryman, 2017)

The story is set in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. In this dystopian future, people are 'dying from an exposure of a large dose of ultraviolet radiation from the sun' (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1551). The title refers to the cancer cases appearing on the television map as red dots. Luke is the story's protagonist; he is a second-year nursing student living with his alcoholic boyfriend, Delton. In the interview with Geoff Ryman from Strange Horizons, Simwimba claims that he explicitly wanted to explore the theme of homosexuality. The idea came after chatting with a friend who believed that discrimination would continue in Malawi even in the future times (Ryman, 2017). On the contrary, for the protagonist 'the thought that only half a millennium ago people of my sexual orientation were discriminated against was almost laughable' (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1601).

The protagonist works for the Skin Cancer Inquisition Center, a call center to help citizens understand if they might be affected by cancer. In the last story's line, Luke receives a call from his father with stage four cancer:

> It was a man's voice. It was rough, low and almost inaudible, possible cured by tobacco or diminished by illness. A song, which I could not identify, was playing in the background. Though,

I could easily tell that it was an old song, possibly from an artist long forgotten. It was good music and I could almost feel the caller nodding his head as the music played. There was something in that man's voice. (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1651)

He recognises his father in the man speaking on the phone. The relationship between him and his parent lies at the story's core, together with the problematic affinity he lives with his boyfriend. Luke moved out of his father's home, as the older man did not want to reveal his illness to the son. The protagonist is reminded of him every time he sees the billboard in front of his house, displaying his parent, a famous vet, warning of dogs' coming extinction. Delton behaves in the same manner as Luke's dad. Instead of trying to solve the problems he encounters, he gives up and becomes an alcoholic. He was a writer, but his book got confiscated after the use of paper was banned. He did not follow Luke's advice of transferring the book to an Advanced Computer System, and when the text was destroyed, he started drinking heavily. The situation worsened when his mother died of cancer. Luke seems stuck in problematic relationships, unable to find positive influences and companions throughout his life.

Human lives are interconnected with the dystopian climatic concern. As in Tlotlo Tsamaase's story, the Earth seems to reject humans, who have contributed to its destruction. The sun is a deadly force that even technology cannot arrest. Despite the use of suits to walk outdoors, people are getting sick and dying of melanoma. The government cannot find a long-term solution, and citizens are abandoned to a tragic fate. The fault of this environmental disaster is majorly attributed to the West. However, the protagonist's view is different, bringing back Africa to the spotlight:

Like last time, the convention was going to end with African leaders blaming western countries for contributing largely in emitting carbon dioxide in the air. In my considered view, that was rubbish, for Africans had been setting bush fires long before industries came in. Fire was actually first discovered in Africa, I argued, by one of those intelligent primates. And of late, Africa too had industrialised, contributing to the global mess. (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1636)

The future narrated by Simwimba is an uncertain realm where, despite technological innovations, humans are abandoned to themselves, lacking any creed in gods or trust in their government.

3.1.5 Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Poison*

Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story *Poison* won the 2008 Caine Prize for African Writing and the 2007 South African PEN Literary Award. It is part of a collection of short narratives called *Homing*, published in 2010. The story is set in Cape Town, where a massive chemical explosion and the consequential toxic clouds cause the evacuation of the city. The protagonist is Lynn, a young girl who struggles to leave the place. The whole narration develops around the various reactions that such an emergency triggers in human beings. The situation paralyses Lynn, who needs time to acknowledge the catastrophe and the urge of escaping the polluted city as soon as possible:

> She herself had left it terribly late, despite all the warnings. It was typical; she struggled to get things together. The first night she'd got drunk with friends. They'd sat up late, rapt in front of the TV, watching the unfolding news. The second night, she'd done the same, by herself. On the morning of this the third day, she'd woken up with a burning in the back of her throat so horrible that she understood it was no hangover, and that she had to move. By then, everybody she knew had already left. (Rose-Innes, 2007)

The escape is made in groups: the *gaardjie*, an Afrikaans word for taxi guard, wait for the taxis to be crammed with passengers before departing. There is a shortage of petrol, as everyone is leaving. There are 'red and yellow flags' (Rose-Innes, 2007) at the station: this is presumably a reference to the oil crisis of 1973 when red, yellow or green flags were displayed to signal the availability or lack of petrol (National Museum of American History, n.d.). The escape mimics the colonial division: 'people were growing fractious, splitting into tribes' (Rose-Innes, 2007). The contamination hits white and black individuals differently: while on black citizens, the grime from the chemical explosion is not visually striking, 'on the white people it showed up worse' (Rose-Innes, 2007). Sometimes, the groups separated to take different directions:

What she'd thought was a group had been split: part of the white family was left behind on the tar, revealing itself as a young couple with a single toddler, and one of the sweaty car-pushers was on board. The blue-overalled guy was up front, next to Adil. How wrong she'd been, then, in her reading of alliances. Perhaps she might have scored a berth, if she'd pushed. (Rose-Innes, 2007)

Lynn has several opportunities to escape the city, but she appears reluctant to take any definitive decision. She continuously postpones the departure by claiming that 'the police' or 'rescue services will come' (Rose-Innes, 2007), but she only finds excuses to collapse with her city. The situation changes when the protagonist meets an older lady sitting in a car's backseat at the petrol station, waiting for her grandson to pick her up. In meeting the woman, Lynn senses' her heaviness return' (Rose-Innes, 2007), as she feels responsible for the old auntie. Up to that moment, the young girl had passively waited for rescue services to come, sipping her coke and voraciously eating crisps, not intending to leave. In an interview with Geoff Ryman in 2017, Rose-Innes claims that 'that garage where [Lynn] ends up is exactly on the limit of the familiar world and she can't quite bring herself to step on either side of that line'.

However, she decides to leave with the woman; when she starts the car, she suddenly feels oppressed. She exits the vehicle and has a short walk when the lady's grandson suddenly arrives and leaves with her car and his grandmom. The story ends with Lynn waiting for the rescue services to come, unwilling to face the catastrophic reality:

And when this was all over, she was definitely going to go on a proper detox. Give up all junk food, alcohol. Some time soon. Lynn snapped open a packet of salt-'n'-vinegar chips. Behind her, the last of the sunset lingered, poison violet and puce, but she didn't turn to look. She wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veld. If she closed her eyes, she might hear a frog, just one, starting its evening song beyond the fence. (Rose-Innes, 2007)

The final reference to the *veld* gives a pastoral tone to the story's ending, together with the frog songs. The *veld* is a characteristic vast open rural landscape in South Africa; the word derives from Afrikaans and means field. The reference to the fence might also be linked to a colonial past. The idyllic future might portray a coexistence between black and white citizens, who will live together in peace 'beyond the fence'. This story differs from the previous ones

for the lack of high-tech gadgets; however, a chemical explosion is a technological and biological hazard severely affecting the environment and human beings.

3.2 Technology

Technology plays a significant role in the five stories. Humans are to be attributed the major faults in the environmental catastrophe; they cannot avoid the forthcoming apocalyptic fate despite their inventions and latest high-tech gadgets. Their tools help them survive in the present time, but the Earth is crumbling under their feet. Human connections and empathy do not benefit from this latest innovation but isolate and complicate relationships.

Unexpected Dawn contains vast references to gadgets used to protect the *Hisa* source and the secret formula from the rest of the world. High-tech weapons are developed to safeguard Afrika's primary source of power: an example is the *Elgonaut*, 'the latest breed in drone technology', 'capable of selecting targets and fire without approval of a human, in addition to indefinite flight due to being solar-powered' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1665). Ten drones protect the *Hisa* source, and the pipeline is built in a manner that would survive a powerful enemy attack. Aircrafts are another gem of UAS' production: the *ZeusTwo*, a supersonic vehicle 'capable of speed twice that of sound' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1756), where the American spy and the king of Zulu are on board, directed to Lilongwe. Three *Grim Reapers* will then bring the plane down; they are drones' with a 2,000 kilogram payload, solar-electric powered and with unlimited flight' and 'capable of jamming the engines of aircrafts thousands of kilometres away' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1756). Technology is also associated with World War Eight: it was a nuclear and biological battle that destroyed most countries' flora and fauna. To sum up, the main purpose is to preserve Afrika's power at all costs. UAS emerges as a greedy union, unwilling to help other countries in need with their medical know-how and high-tech machines. This subversion of power leads the reader to draw further considerations on our reality.

In *More Sea than Tar*, technology symbolises a promise of a better future; however, in the time of the narration lived by Uti and his family, it isolates people and complicates relationships. A promise of living underwater boosts Joseph's mood:

I read the brochures and blueprints on his desk. "Underwater living facilities? Oxygen suits? Enhanced deep sea living experience? Decontamination pods?"

He smiles at me and his eyes catch the light. He looks so like our father that I want to listen to what he has to say, because he's never looked this passionate about anything.

"We're looking at a hopeful future," he says. "Better opportunities, a higher standard of living; a life underwater, free of pollution—very far away from here." (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

However, Uti does not believe his brother; he thinks that 'hope is never now' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). Uti's family can survive thanks to the internet, as Joseph graduated in I.T. and has an online business. On the contrary, his father's hope relies on earning money to buy a brand-new boat to collect and sell garbage. Technology harms Uti by enhancing his sense of fear and isolation. He watches horror movies about people drowning and 'getting eaten by sharks and animals' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019) and plays chess online. However, he realises this behaviour is detrimental. On the other hand, when he tries to converse with his mother, he is blocked out by her use of technology: she has her headphones on, watches a programme about unhappy marriages, and does not even turn to talk to her son.

What the Dead Man Said is set in a futuristic world where artificial intelligence is installed in human bodies. A.I. helps them in their everyday tasks: it communicates the arrival of a bus, switches the use of language from one country to another, and generally monitors the body's activity. The protagonist turns to A.I. when feeling particularly anxious or uncomfortable. When assisting her father's burial rites, for instance, she claims that as '[the older women's] wailing increased, I wished I'd been allowed to bring my A.I.' (Onwualu, 2019). Later in the text, she meets her father's ghost, who tries to reconcile with her before ultimately passing by. The situation is stressful, so:

I turned on my A.I. It synced with the implant at the base of my skull that monitored my neural and physical activity. Reading my increased agitation, it cued the soothing whale songs that worked best to bring my signals within normal range. I leaned back against the tree and closed my eyes as the sounds poured into my aural inputs, imagining what those long-extinct creatures might have looked like. (Onwualu, 2019)

In this future realm, solar power is the primary source of energy, and it makes automated minibus run, is used in roadways, and is even employed in houses with solar cells. In Dila's *Snake Blood*, the author claims that the love between Epirutu and Adrova would probably

have survived if the two could see or talk to each other via phone. However, in Onwualu's narrative, despite the video calls, Azuka feels distant from her father, who 'always seemed too tired or too busy to talk properly' (Onwualu, 2019). The issue of the falling birth rate is addressed with fertility treatments, which are sponsored in holographic advertisements throughout the city. Technology is, in this case, merged with tradition; however, the custom has adapted to modern times. The advertisement shows a woman who, despite having no husband, is merrily received by the household:

> She was surrounded by celebrating family members, but she stopped before a regal older couple to whom she presented the child. The old man took the child with a benevolent smile, while the woman stretched her hand toward the young mother, who was now kneeling before them, in a benediction. (Onwualu, 2019)

In *Tiny Dots*, technology has an ambivalent role. For Delton, it represents the beginning of his depression, as with the Paperless Environment act, he loses the manuscript he had heartfully written. Luke insisted 'that he dictated the book to the Advanced Computer System – ACS', but his boyfriend refused, as 'he wanted to feel the words taking shape under his fingers' (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1609). However, technology does not have an entirely negative connotation in the narrative. Without high-tech suits, people would not be able to walk outdoors without being dangerously exposed to the ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Luke knows this is only a temporary solution to protect citizens; the reality is that climate change is gradually making the Earth inhabitable for them.

Unlike the previous short stories, *Poison* does not contain specific references to high-tech gadgets. The narrative focuses on the major technological disaster caused by a chemical explosion, which threatens human lives. The text addresses human beings as the primary source to be accounted for the environmental disaster, focusing on the power of emotions in such an emergency.

3.3 Environmental disasters

Environmental catastrophe accompanies the protagonists' crumbling relationships and vulnerability in these dystopian futures. The Anthropocene has shaped the world, but its avarice has gradually transformed the Earth into an unwelcoming place.

Unexpected Dawn emphasises the concept that, without water, life on Earth would not be possible. Ray Robert highlights the issue by writing that 'their governments, their armies, their oil and all their other resources were useless without the assured supply of water' (2015). This story can be read as a warning for the contemporary reader, who gives for granted the availability of natural goods necessary for human life on the planet. The ultimate technological war has caused more major environmental disasters than the previous ones. The wealthiest countries' flora, fauna, and marine life were eradicated, resulting in uncultivable territories and polluted waters, making these countries dependent on UAS. However, Afrika's environment has also irreparably changed: the River Nile' dried up two-and-half centuries ago', and the water from *Hisa* 'would one day become insufficent'; the source might even 'suddenly dry up' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1739).

Water is also central to the short story *More Sea than Tar*. In this case, rising tides, represented as a perpetual and deadly force, obliged citizens to radical changes in their daily lives:

> ...sooner or later, we're all going to fall, because we can only stand so tall before we're sinking: to our legs, to our knees, to our torsos, to our heads. Till there's nothing left and we breathe in particle dust and water that draws too much like ogbono soup. Water that's mixed with the leaves and the soil and the garbage I didn't throw away properly. Water that isn't water. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

Water detains a rushing power resembling the actions of a living being: it 'screams' and 'all [it] wants to do is rise' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). The community where Uti, his father, and Joseph venture is polluted to such a point that water is black, and 'people splash in [it] as they swim through the filth and garbage, covered in boils and scars, disease and infection' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). However, this deadly sea is contradictory, as it brings the ultimate sparks of salvation for human beings: the possibility of living underwater in a safe environment. In his paper, Courtois claims that the reader might identify with the above sentence, 'I didn't throw away properly'. Using the first person singular, the author reduces the distance between Uti and the reader, highlighting the individual responsibility in the situation (Courtois, 2021, p. 10).

In *What the Dead Man Said*, violent storms afflict Igboland: 'angry thunderclouds that blot out the sun, taking you from noon to evening in an instant, then the water that comes down

like fury—like the sky itself wants to hurt you' (Onwualu, 2019). Once again, rising seas have profoundly impacted the lives of the worldwide population and permitted Igbo separatists to found New Biafra. The environmental disaster allowed for a new green society by covering 80 per cent of the territory with forests and consequently implementing wildlife. However, the dark side of this utopian project was the need for an increasing number of citizens to maintain it neat. The storm opens and closes the short narrative and permits Azuka's departure incognito. As in Tsamaase's *Eclipse our Sins*, the ecosystem mimics the actions of a human being: expressions like 'the sky wept' or 'wants to hurt you' testify to the theory.

In *Tiny Dots*, the harmful natural element is the sun: its ultraviolet rays cause stage four cancer, the harshest advanced melanoma. Sun rays make life on Earth untenantable for humans and all living beings. In front of the protagonist's apartment is a broad digital billboard displaying an ad with his father, a famous city vet. However, at the foot of this signboard:

> Once there was a beautiful lot of flowers that bloomed into many colours. Since the weather started to change and the heat became too much for their survival, they withered away and died. The trees up the hill to the left, whose peek was the only spot I could see of it from this end, were gradually getting to the same fate. (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1624)

Gradual steps are taken to reduce men's impact in the environmental crisis. An example can be traced in the Paperless Environment concept, to zero the cutting of trees to produce paper. Luke is discouraged by the government, which, by providing incomprehensible explanations to its citizens, takes time to find a long-term solution. At the same time, 'a part of [him] questioned the life styles of [his] ancestors - with their inattention to the environment they were committing murders from their graves' (Simwimba, 2015, p. 1616).

In *Poison*, the 'oil cloud [hanging] over Cape Town' (Rose-Innes, 2007) emphasises the division between tribes, a contemporary issue in South Africa. The cloud 'was so black, so large. Even as they watched, it boiled up taller and taller into the sky, a plume twice as high as the mountain, leaning towards them like an evil genie' (Rose-Innes, 2007). The contamination is highly visual in the short story: Rose-Innes emphasises the contrast between the whiteness of Afrikaans skin and the black grime from the explosion. The chemical catastrophe gradually infects Lynn. Despite her passive behaviour, she must escape as soon as possible, as contamination has already started:

In the basin mirror, Lynn's face was startlingly grimed. Her choppy dark hair was greasy, her eyes as pink as if she'd been weeping. Contamination. Sitting on the black plastic toilet seat, she felt the poisons gush out of her. She wiped her face with paper and looked closely at the black specks smeared on to the tissue. Her skin was oozing it. She held the wadded paper to her nose. A faint coppery smell. What was this shit? The explosion had been at a chemical plant, but which chemical? She couldn't remember what they'd said on the news. (Rose-Innes, 2007)

Despite other unmistakable signs, such as the 'awful odour' of the sudden rain, smelling like 'burnt plastic with a metallic bite, and a whiff of sourness like rotten meat in it, too', Lynn decides to wait for rescues passively, in this end-of-the-world reality.

3.4 Language

The texts are rich in references to idioms used by local tribes and merged with terms belonging to technology. In *Unexpected Dawn* drones and weapons are called with futuristic words such as *Elgonauts* and *ZeusTwo*. References to contemporary culture are also made with the high-tech helicopter *Night Vulture* and the weapon *Grip Reaper*. The name *Night Vulture* might refer to the 1983 animated American TV series *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*. The programme belongs to military science fiction and was launched by Hasbro alongside the *Marvel Comics series* (Lammle, 2015). The character of the *Night Vulture* is that of a deadly mighty soldier (Joepedia, 2013) and is in line with the lethal purposes of the aircraft used in Ray Robert's text. The *Grip Reaper* is the imagined personification of death and usually depicted as a skeleton holding a scythe. Even in this case, the association with the weapon is glaring. The secret formula for decontaminating waters is called *Panacea12*. The term panacea derives from the namesake Greek goddess of universal remedy and health and is still used to indicate a solution for all difficulties or diseases (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The source of purified water called *Hisa* presumably hints at the Muslim name meaning long-lasting (NamesFolder, n.d.).

Technical language is also implied in the narrative *Tiny Dots*. The farraginous explanations provided by the governor of Lilongwe Province irritate Luke. The ultimate aim of the discourse was to gain time while searching for long-term solutions to tackle the disease instead of informing the citizens of what was happening.

More Sea than Tar, What the Dead Man Said, and *Poison* contain numerous references to several idioms of Nigeria and South Africa. The first two narratives are set in Nigeria, where the Yoruba language is spoken. It is mainly used by the ethnic group Yoruba in West Africa and primarily in Southwestern and Central Nigeria. The language is utilized by about 50 million citizens and is the most widely spoken African idiom abroad (Heine et al., 2000, p. 292). In *More Sea than Tar*, it is employed by the elder woman providing the job to Uti's father, 'each word thick and vicious like a curse' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). However, the woman selling contaminated fish at the market speaks Nigerian Pidgin. It is an English-based creole language spoken as a lingua franca in the country and used as a second idiom by half the population (Faraclas, 1996, Introduction). Despite its general use, it has not been granted official status. Examples in the text can be traced in the question 'Wetin you get?', meaning 'What have you got?', or *yama-yama*, a Pidgin term for disgusting. It is interesting how Uti's community disapproves the use of Nigerian Pidgin, being 'generally frowned upon' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). In Nigeria, the situation is similar: Pidgin is used in informal conversations, whereas English is employed in politics, education, science, and media (Agbo et al., 2020).

In *What the Dead Man Said*, as Azuka passes from Nigeria to New Biafra, the language switches automatically to Igbo. Igbo is primarily spoken in Southeastern Nigeria by the namesake tribe. It is one of the national languages of Nigeria and used by about 30 million citizens. The idiom is taught in Eastern Nigeria schools; however, English represents the primary literary language of the nation. Igbo is not widely read and written and often substituted by Nigerian Pidgin in urban areas (MustGo.com, n.d.). The narrative is set between Nigeria and Canada in a dystopian geography shaped by the environmental crisis. The text includes numerous words belonging to the language spoken by the Anishinaabe, a community of indigenous people in the Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States (Johnston, 1990, p. 15). They share common cultural traits and still exist today. The words mentioned are *Tkaronto*, indicating the city of Toronto, and *Turtle Island*, addressing North America.

Henrietta Rose-Innes is South-African, where eleven languages are official. Among these, English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, are employed in the text. The narrative is written in English; however, the author added numerous words in Afrikaans along the text. The elder woman Lynn encounters in the petrol station only understands Afrikaans, and the protagonist refers to her as *tannie*, meaning auntie. She tells the woman that *gif* is in the air, a word to indicate poison. The narrative opens with groups of people trying to escape the polluted city as soon

as possible. As private cars are running out of petrol, people meet at the gasoline station to unite in groups and use taxis to abandon the zone. The taxi service is peculiar in South Africa, and it might be difficult for a reader to understand who a *gaardjie* is. *Gaardjie* is an Afrikaans word for taxi guard and is a person who shouts the destination location out the taxi front window, helps the taxi driver collecting the fares from passengers and filling all car seats. Taxis are minibuses frequently used in Cape Town, where the story is set. The vans host up to ten passengers; however, people usually cram into the vehicle, and sometimes up to twenty people are squeezed in (Expat Arrivals, 2015). The vehicles are the symbol of class division in the country: they are mostly used by lower classes' commuters, whereas wealthy citizens drive their own private car. The minivans are usually dangerously overloaded, and taxi drivers might be rude and frequently disregard the road rules. Since 1987, the market is unregulated, leading to taxi wars fought between rival taxi drivers' associations (Dugard, 2001, p. 4).

3.5 Community life

Community life's organization is diverse in the five stories. In *Unexpected Dawn* and *More Sea than Tar*, the environmental crisis negatively affects the connection between people, bringing major divisions between the Earth's inhabitants. In the first narrative, UAS supremacy contributes to the bursting of wars for water purposes. World geography has changed with the creation of new alliances, such as Australasia, the Westlands, the Eurasialands, and the Middleeastlands. Life in the UAS follows a military organization, as the primary purpose is the protection of Afrika's waters and secret formula. Despite society's strictness, family connections are still vital in the story; to convince the commander to hand him the secret formula, Mr Williams kidnaps his wife and two children.

More Sea than Tar begins with Uti's father asking his family for an 'adventure out on the open sea', as they 'can't live this way', isolated by everyone (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). They already explored the 'shallow far ends of [their] community three months ago' and found 'bloated dead bodies floating in the stagnancy', an apocalyptic vision provided by the floods (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). The community where Uti and his family live is relatively safe, as there are no mutated deadly beasts, such as crocodiles, swimming in the waters. Communication also works well regarding package deliveries, internet connection, and calling relatives. However, it lacks the vibrant human connections provided by outdoor activities, where people can meet and chat,

such as the market. As Uti and his relatives venture outside their zone, they immediately encounter the feelings that they are missing:

> This new community is smelly yet vibrant, loud and exciting. It's what I've never seen before: vendors carrying goods on their heads with water up to their chests, chasing boats. Garbage floating around in neat little piles—some people managing to rest on top of them, the world's pollution the newest source of transportation. People breezing by on larger vehicles than ours while afrobeats, loud and violently Nigerian, play in the background. People jumping into the water with ropes tied around their waists, latched to their boats as they repeatedly bring up trash. People splash in the water as they swim through the filth and garbage, covered in boils and scars, disease and infection. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

However, this territory soon reveals insidious creatures, such as deadly crocodiles, and fierce competition among citizens, ultimately resulting in Uti's father and Joseph's death. According to the scholar Cédric Courtois, these two communities recall specific zones of Lagos: the wealthy Victoria Island and the slum of Makoko. In Makoko the lagoon hosts a third of the area's citizens living in habitats built on stilts, and fishing represents the primary source of income (Courtois, 2021, p. 4).

Family issues link *More Sea than Tar* with the short stories *What the Dead Man Said* and *Tiny Dots*. In Ize-Iyamu's narrative, the crumbling relationships resemble the outdoor reality falling apart with the floods. In *What the Dead Man Said*, Azuka returns to Onitsha for her father's funeral. She and her mother left before the protagonist could be mature enough to be 'tied down by the weight of its social obligations' (Onwualu, 2019), breaking the family circle through trauma. Its agemates, on the contrary, feel the burden of family indebtedness and are obliged to work many hours to keep the parental businesses alive. It results in a birth rate fall, as citizens lack time to look after children. Passing through her native city's streets, Azuka notices some kids walking by. Children are even rarer in the Western world, where she lives:

> Crossing from Main Market, with its workshops and retail outlets, into the quiet residential lanes of American Quarters, I spied children in neat uniforms walking hand-in-hand to their various apprenticeships. Children were rare enough in Tkaronto, and those few who could afford to give birth preferred to cluster in tower communities that would protect their precious progeny from

the vicissitudes of life. Apart from major celebrations like Emancipation Day, seeing children in public was unheard of. (Onwualu, 2019)

As births diminished over time, the structure of the community's life also adapts:

Traditionally, the oldest members of the family would occupy the bungalow while their children and extended family members crammed into the two warrens of flats. If we'd restricted the apartments to blood family only, as some still did, those buildings would have stood empty. These days relatives were defined less by who'd slept with whom, and more by whose interests and personalities meshed best. I recalled the boisterous couples and polycules who'd lived in the building when I was young—all of them my cousins and uncles and aunties even though we had only marginal blood relationships to each other. (Onwualu, 2019)

Tiny Dots and *Poison* are not set in a tribal reality but resemble a contemporary society. In Simwimba's narrative, the governor does not provide satisfactory answers to its citizens, who refer to the call centre to receive clear instructions on how to behave. They seem abandoned to themselves, lacking the sense of security provided by a united community. The same happens in *Poison*, where Cape Town appears as a territory split in tribal differences. The petrol station marks the 'limit of the zone of contamination' but simultaneously represents a melting pot between blacks and whites. In an interview for BBC news in 2008, Rose-Innes claimed that Poison describes a 'breakdown of traditional social divisions and social groupings' as 'Cape Town is an extremely diverse population with a lot of different communities historically that don't always interact with each other' (Rose-Innes, 2008). The description provided by the author hints at a division between the petrol attendants, taxi passengers, and *gaardjie*, presumably black or coloured, and the Afrikaans family and Lynn herself, who are likely white (Akpome, 2018, p. 101). Lynn's decision to remain at the petrol station might depict a resistance to abandoning the old social privileges of white citizens (Akpome, 2018, p. 102).

3.6 Animals, produce, and vegetation

As for human beings, animals are affected by the dystopian realm they inhabit. In *Unexpected Dawn* and *More Sea than Tar*, these creatures transform into scary mutated beasts. In Ray

Robert's narrative, the Texan infiltrator is menaced to be brought to the Leocrocs Pit if not confessing his intentions:

> He knew of the legendary pit where a terrifying creature from the deep ocean was bred by the military. The creature was scaly like a reptile, possessed a maned head and grew wings in adulthood. It was the most frightening creature known to man. For a long time people believed this creature descended from the now extinct crocodile. But recently archeologists had discovered fossils in the Great Rift Valley of a big cat that roamed the savannah plains of Afrika about four hundred years prior. They believed that this creature evolved from this cat. It was said that the bravest of men lost their minds at the mere thought of being lowered into the pit. (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1725)

The existence of the mysterious beast is almost mythological, and the reader has no certainty of its effective reality. On the contrary, in *More Sea than Tar*, the presence of mutated creatures in the city waters is consolidated and a direct consequence of the environmental disaster. The crocodile is an emblematic and recurring animal in the story and portrays the merging of nature with human waste. It represents an omen of death, and Uti is nearly killed when trying to capture it with his father:

> The crocodile jumps aboard, snapping and angry, and almost submerges our boat. The wire trap pokes into its skin as it roars, its breath disgusting, its large teeth reaching for me. Large pieces of glass stab into the beast's head and broken cans stick out of its body like piercings. Nylon bags are draped over this creature that is trying to eat me, and I scream and scream. I feel like my heart has stopped. Memories of my hollow existence overwhelm me as I wait for the moment I have been dreading. Death is coming. (Ize-Iyamu, 2019)

The other animals are not dispensed by the effects of environmental pollution, being 'merged with glass and plastic, mosquitos breeding, insects mutated by industrial waste and chemical reactions' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). Consequently, animal food is contaminated, too. Tired of their obliged vegan lifestyle, Uti's father tries to buy some fish at the new community market. However, they soon realise that the product is contaminated, as the catfish they asked for is of 'an unhealthy brown colour', 'covered in a sticky slime', with 'greenish-black dots inside its mouth' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019).

In *What the Dead Man Said* and *Poison*, birds animate the story. However, they have different functions in the narratives. In Onwualu's text the chirp of these animals helps the protagonist to relax from the tension of meeting her father's ghost. Another sound used for this purpose is that of whales, extinct animals in Azuka's reality, that she can recall by using A.I. On the contrary, in *Poison*, birds emphasize the seriousness of the chemical explosions, flying away from the highly contaminated sky above the mountains:

> As she watched, a deep rose-coloured occlusion extended towards her, pulling a wash of darkness across the sky. A strange horizontal rain came with it, and reflexively she ducked and put her hands to her hair. But the droplets were too big and distinct, and she realised that they were in fact birds, thousands of birds, sprinting away from the mountain. They flew above her and around her ears: swift starlings, labouring geese. Some small rapid birds were tossed up against the sky, smuts from a burning book. As they passed overhead, for the first time Lynn was filled with fear. (Rose-Innes, 2007)

Birds represent an omen of death. When wandering purposelessly through the street, Lynn will also encounter five small dead bodies of volatiles, signalling the upcoming lethal contamination.

Animal extinctions is covered prominently in *Unexpected Dawn* and *Tiny Dots*. In the first narrative, the flora and fauna of the world were annihilated by a nuclear and biological war, partly affecting Afrika with significant radiations. The UAS doctors managed to develop a cure to tackle the issue; however:

> The vaccine did not work on animals. The wild became a stinking field of dead animals poisoned by the contaminated environment. Zoologists had embarked on emergency plan to save as many animals and birds from extinction by constructing special antitoxic zoos in Kinshasa and Cairo. (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1731)

In *Tiny Dots*, the sun rays make the Earth gradually unhabitable for all living forms, including animals and vegetation. The upcoming extinction of dogs is displayed on a digital billboard and announced by Luke's father, a famous city vet, and goes along with the irreversible extinction of humans.

Food provision is also central to the stories. In *Unexpected Dawn* and *More Sea than Tar*, the environmental crisis has brought crucial food insecurity. In Ize-Iyamu's narrative, a vegan lifestyle was necessarily adopted after the increasing transport costs of animal products. However, the diet recalls the typical veggies consumed by the Nigerians, such as yams, cassava, and garden eggs. The Ogbono soup is also mentioned, proving the permeation of the text within the Nigerian culture. Similar traits are identified in *What the Dead Man Said*, where Auntie Chio welcomes the funeral hosts with kola nuts and palm wine, goods belonging to the Nigerian tradition. When arriving in Onitsha, Azuka smells the flavour of Aba rice and goat stew in a landscape characterised by neem trees. The sound of the ogene, a large metal bell typically used in the Igbo music (Nzewi, 2000, p. 25), and udu, an instrument made of clay played by Igbo women for ceremonial uses (Alexander Akorlie, 2005, p. 81), enrich the description of the father's burial rites.

In *Poison*, Lynn letargically waits for rescues eating crisps and drinking Coke. The petrol station unites cultures and tastes of different ethnic groups.

3.7 The agency of place

In the last five short stories, the agency of place is expressed through the environmental crisis and linked to human emotions. In *More Sea than Tar*, the non-human agency governs the city and its inhabitants. The reality, narrated through Uti's eyes, portrays a situation where citizens are not 'in control of [their] bodies' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). Their daily nature is shaped by water and floods, which invade the urban territory by 'screaming through, thick and muddy' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). Uti acknowledges the presence of a non-human force that goes beyond the rational earthly view of life; when referring to the dystopian situation, he claims that 'everything is falling apart, and I don't have an answer for that' (Ize-Iyamu, 2019). The water recalls human traits in its impervious actions. When Uti says, 'all [it] wants to do is rise', the element appears to have a conscience on its own, able to elaborate thoughts and commands. The verb 'scream', used to address the coming of floods and their sound, recalls a typical human feature. At the same time, individuals merge with animals in this dystopian setting. When the protagonist sees citizens swimming in the contaminated waters '[decomposing] dead machines by taking them to bits, leaving the useless parts for the earth', he compares them to vultures. Uti feels lost in the story, governed by a mystical force, unable to live his life as a protagonist, and this is the main reason he decides to support his father's fatal adventure.

In *What the Dead Man Said*, the agency of place is linked to the storms afflicting Onitsha. Even in this narrative, environmental catastrophe is intertwined with human emotions and free will. When Azuka arrives in New Biafra, she is welcomed by a violent storm, typical of the zone. She describes it as a 'raw power' with 'angry thunderclouds' and 'water that comes down like a fury - like the sky itself wants to hurt you' (Onwualu, 2019). Despite the storm being a non-human agent, it is described by the author as an angry individual. Toward the end of the story, another storm occurs, allowing Azuka to leave her father's burial rites incognito. In this situation, Onwualu operates a role switch between humans and the climatic circumstance. The author portrays the funeral's attendees as 'a flood of mourners [steaming] out from the gate, breaking up into little rivulets of people eager to leave before the rain started' (Onwualu, 2019). As soon as Azuka reaches the bus shelter, 'the sky opened up and wept' (Onwualu, 2019): weeping is a distinguishing human trait differentiating us from other living beings.

In *Poison*, the verb 'to bleed' describes the dirty rain and the skylight, contributing to an apocalyptic portrayal of the setting. However, as in *Tiny Dots* and *Unexpected Dawn*, the fault for the unreversible environmental disaster is entirely attributed to humankind. The presence of a mystical force contributing to the detrimental situation is missing, and human actions define the current disaster. In *Tiny Dots*, for instance, Luke blames the ancestors and their inattention to preserve the environment. In *Unexpected Dawn*, the greedy UAS's chief interest is power detention despite having the key to decontaminating waters worldwide. The environment has no power or free will; it passively represents the theatre of human self-destruction.

3.8 Supernatural entities

Among the five narratives, *What the Dead Man Said* references the supernatural most. The story centres around the controversial relationship between Azuka and her dead father. He communicates in the shape of a ghost, searching for his daughter's forgiveness before ultimately passing by. The traditional Nigerian burial rites awaken the spirit: the purpose is to accompany the defunct to the afterworld. The funeral is permeated with superstitious actions done by the attendees to keep evil spirits away from present times: an example can be traced in the government representatives, who 'joked nervously with each other, as if their laughter would somehow keep the shadow of death from falling on them too' (Onwualu, 2019). The father's figure is complex and contradictory: he is portrayed negatively by Azuka but at the

same time positively by the woman he rescued years ago. However, according to Nigerian lore, nothing wrong about a dead man can be mentioned, as this would 'invite death on ourselves as well' (Onwualu, 2019). As in *Land of Light*, great relevance is attributed to the spirits of the ancestors. It is Azuka's auntie Chio who directs the funeral:

> Earlier, she'd welcomed the community into the home as tradition dictated, presenting kola nuts and palm wine as an offering to the household gods. Another of my elder aunts—I forget how we're related—led the prayers, pouring libation to beckon the ancestral spirits into our home and escort my father's spirit to the land of the dead. (Onwualu, 2019)

As in Embleton's story, Azuka's father claims death changes people. However, while in *Land of Light*, Paula does not doubt her father's words, in Onwualu's story Azuka does not believe her dad and thinks that it is his selfishness asking for ultimate desperate redemption.

In *Unexpected Dawn*, the mysterious Leocrocs pit represents the story's supernatural element. When the Texan secret agent is menaced to be sent into the pit, 'beneath his shirt, a cold sweat began to form' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1721). The 'legendary pit' scares men for its mysteriousness. The mythological figure 'bred by the military' 'was scaly like a reptile, possessed a maned head and grew wings in adulthood' (Ray Robert, 2015, p. 1722), presumably a crossbreed between a crocodile and a leopard.

On the contrary, *Poison, Tiny Dots*, and *More Sea than Tar* are set in a world where technology has annihilated any possible belief in an afterlife realm. The stories are rooted in the tragic reality where the consequences of the environmental crisis are advanced and irreversible.

CONCLUSION

The ten short stories contain major themes peculiar to the African speculative fiction genre and Africanfuturism. The first five narratives are permeated with the invading presence of non-human agencies, represented as an ancestral connection with nature and mythology. The non-human entities do not entirely forecast apocalyptic scenarios in this second chapter. Traditions are milestones which help confront the uncertain forthcoming future, and the scenario turns apocalyptic whenever old customs are challenged and usurped by the Anthropocene. It is also interesting to notice how the supernatural is associated with women in the first four stories of Okungbowa, Tsamaase, Dila, and Shepherd. In *Dune Song*, fear is the dominant emotion among Isiuwa's inhabitants. The Chief can keep social order through the legend of mighty dunes whispering to death whoever might venture into the desert. However, Nata's attempt to escape is fostered by the desire to find her mother, who presumably incarnates the whirlwind that will absorb the protagonist at the end of the tale. It is also interesting to underline how Nata's mom and the Chief's wife, who both escaped in the desert and never came back, are addressed as 'mad women' (Okungbowa, 2019) in Isiuwa. In *Eclipse Our Sins*, trauma is the primary element uniting Mother Earth and its dystopian inhabitants. The depressed citizens continue polluting Earth, generating never-ending mutual anxiety and pain. Mother Earth is a ruthless character, feeling human emotions as her nasty inhabitants. The entity of the punishment augments according to the gravity of the deed committed. In *Snake Blood*, love leads the actions of the story's characters. Despite Adrova being the Chief of his tribe, his life might end with a few words pronounced by his betrayed wife, Epirutu. The non-human agency is associated with women, particularly with the power of sorceresses and the seventh law. In *Xaua-Khoe*, the goddess Gauho is the prominent figure in the creation of the new environment after the destruction operated by humankind. Diluea, the 'snake boy', is guided by the village's ancient mother of his tribe, who acts as a reference point for the community. *Land of Light* is the only narrative in the thesis portraying a utopian realm. This bright future results from the Anthropocene taking a step back from nature: humankind learned that 'you cannot grab it with your hands and say 'this is mine' (Embleton, 2015, p. 2376). A harmonic relationship of mutual respect for the environment leads citizens toward a healthy and conscious perspective.

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The third and final chapter of the thesis explores the relationship between technology and the environment in an apocalyptic future where the climate catastrophe mirrors the characters' crumbling social relationships. They emerge as individuals who face a more profound sense of loss and anxiety when not belonging to a safety net represented by the community and its culture. Technology worsens the situation, isolating even more people and family members and fostering a general sense of greed and disorientation. A fatal feeling of end-of-the-world characterises the last five stories. In *Unexpected Dawn*, the water shortage is a significant issue for humankind, as, without water, life would not be possible for any living form on Earth. In *More Sea Than Tar*, the reader looks at reality through Uti's depressed eyes, and a persistent feeling of upcoming death permeates the story. In *What the Dead Man Said*, Azuka is relieved that her 'city, like the rest of the world, was disintegrating' (Onwualu, 2019). In *Tiny Dots*, the reader feels that days are numbered for humans on Earth, and this is testified by the government, which cannot find long-term cures to tackle the spreading of stage four cancer. In *Poison*, the apocalyptic image of an empty city and the upcoming contamination from an oily cloud hanging over Cape Town forecasts a dystopian future of solitude and abandonment for the city.

The ten stories have been divided into two chapters to facilitate their analysis and underline further common traits. However, most of them contain references to non-human agencies or technology, proving that these are two significant themes of the African Speculative Fiction genre. Okorafor's claim that 'to be African is to merge technology and magic' perfectly sums up the stories' subject matters. The remarkable success witnessed in these last years by the speculative fiction genre and the sub-genre of Cli-Fi demonstrates the increasing interest in reading and informing oneself on the possible futures for the planet. The ten stories might be a thrust for readers to adopt conscious choices in the present for a better future. For instance, water shortage is already impacting contemporary societies and will gradually dictate massive lifestyle changes. However, the ten author's purpose is to underline how the environmental crisis cannot only be attributed to the destructive actions of humankind or exclusively the Western world. This idea leaves African countries behind, resulting in passive characters and victims from an environmental point of view and a global political context. In order to create significant changes in their daily life, one must feel personally responsible for the upcoming catastrophic environmental situation, as it is not a local but a global issue.

The ten short stories prove the enormous potential of discussing contemporary issues by employing literature, specifically the speculative fiction genre. As Ursula K. Le Guin claimed, the category is broad and rich in nuances; its fluidity renders it particularly unique and enticing. The issues and themes in the stories match the current environmental crisis, where human actions play a significant role in the Earth's future and human survival. The current climatic concerns can be addressed more lightheartedly when referring to a future realm, as readers might perceive it as favourably uncertain. Furthermore, through literature, catastrophic scientific forecasts can more easily arouse readers' empathy worldwide. The short story form represents a strategic tool to involve a more significant number of readers due to the shortness of the texts. Despite being quick to read, each of the ten narratives is rich in nuances and peculiarities mirroring the writers' background and culture. Language plays a strategic role in the texts: the writers' unique skills in evoking apocalyptic and uncanny settings confirm what Balogun said about the need to use 'common words uncommonly well' (Balogun, 1991, p. 27). At the same time, each narrative is enriched by the peculiar use of terms in various African languages, changing according to the country considered, for instance, Igbo and Yoruba for Nigeria. These pieces of prose fiction allow the reader to comprehend better the complex reality they live in by offering various points of view differing from one country to another. The thesis aims to provide a different perspective from the Western reality, focusing on Africa and its writers to forecast a future for their countries. Today's discussion on climate change's apocalyptic consequences concentrates mainly on the Western world, leaving Africa behind. The same happens for the short story genre and African literature in general: African countries are given less prominence abroad than other wealthier governments. The analysis lead readers to understand that differences occur not only between Africa and the rest of the world but also among African countries. It is necessary to undermine the Western view of Africa as a whole and focus instead on the peculiarities and richness of each country promoted by the authors.

African speculative fiction addresses the African diaspora and the traumas generated by postcolonial hybridity (Langer, 2013, p. 169). Therefore, the theme of Afropolitanism is important to better understanding the ten authors' stylistic choices, as most have either studied or lived abroad. Afropolitanism implies the sensation of belonging to the motherland but simultaneously being considered an outsider by its citizens. Afropolitan writers are perceived as privileged, writing about their native country despite most times not living there.

However, as Simwimba claims, an individual 'is someone raised by various interests' (Ryman, 2017). The subject has been earning great success lately and represents an excellent possibility for African authors to increase their worldwide readership. An example can be traced to the award-winning novel *Americanah*, written by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The book highlights the conflicting relationship between the Afro-American group, considered by Africans as the enslaved people deported centuries before by their motherland, and the Afropolitans, privileged Africans incarnating their continent's culture abroad. However, despite being Nigerian and moving abroad in her twenties, the protagonist will feel estranged and considered as such by the other citizens when moving back to Lagos. The same happens in the short story *What the Dead Man Said*: despite moving to Tkaronto as a child after being raped by her uncle, Azuka feels 'that [she] left New Biafra before [she] could take up [her] true purpose. That [her] life in Tkaronto was a shadow of what it could be' (Onwualu, 2019). These narratives represent a rich tool for international readers, illuminating specific African situations and underlining the sense of displacement one feels when moving abroad, often unwillingly, especially at a young age. Ultimately individuals feel they neither belong to the country they have moved to nor to their distant native motherland.

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