

Special section editorial

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Decolonisation is a group of critical theories aimed at negating colonialism by eradicating its multifaceted effects on the life of the colonised. According to Olufemi Táíwò (2022:xvi), it is an all-encompassing theory that has become a catch-all idea to tackle anything with any, even minor, association with the 'West'. Decolonial scholars such as Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Achille Mbembe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni argue that colonialism did not end with the political independence of colonised nations as the effects have extended beyond independence and have continued to permeate all aspects of the lives of the colonised. The continuing power of colonialism, according to these scholars, is manifested in the coloniality of power, coloniality of being and coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh 2018:10). They advocate for a decolonial turn from the dominant hierarchical, white, male, and Christian supremacy of Western hegemony and universalism to a dynamic pluriversal recognition and acceptance of knowledges from the Global South.

The quest for epistemic freedom and cognitive justice is one of the central tropes of decolonial discourse. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021:882) privileges the 'often-ignored contributions of African intellectuals to the decolonisation of knowledge and politics' by elucidating the multifaceted meanings of decolonising knowledge. He provides a table titled the 'Ten-Ds' of the decolonial turn (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021:884). The decolonial turn entails accommodating different ways of knowing by which diverse people make sense of their worlds and give meaning to their being. Decolonising knowledge in the Global South provides the mental space for people to think freely

Published by



Editorial

Decolonising Speculative Fiction

from their own contexts, retrieve subjugated indigenous knowledges and engage in delinking from the hegemony of Western knowledge systems to craft an alternative future that is informed both by the past and the present. Decolonisation broadens our horizon and allows us inclusively to consider the works of thinkers and writers outside the Euro-American canon.

The decolonisation of literary studies, which provided the impetus for this special issue, is anchored on two premises: the decolonisation of language in African literature and the decolonisation of the English literature syllabus in higher education institutions. Beginning with the first African conference of the African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda in 1962, followed by Obiajunwa Wali's article, 'The dead end of African Literature' (1963), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), the contentious issues of language in African literature has continued to be debated. The central argument, as advocated by Ngũgĩ, who has become the most prominent voice in this debate, is that African literature should be written in African languages. He claims that the very identity of African literature cannot be severed from the language in which it is written and insists that there can be no separation between African literature and African languages. This language question has polarised African writers and critics, resulting in three distinct schools of thought. Scholars and critics like Kole Omotosho, Simon Gikandi and Richard Wafula belong to the first school of thought. Like Ngũgĩ, they argue that African writers should use African languages to produce African literature to avoid the linguistic servitude of perpetuating English above African languages, to foster political empowerment, and promote cultural values. The second school of thought is championed by Chinua Achebe, Abiola Irele, Tanure Ojiade, and Abiodun Jeyifo. These scholars and critics present the view that the use of the English language in African literature is a pragmatic choice that is convenient within the multilingual and multicultural milieu of African societies. They contend that writing in English allows writers to express their Africanness in the global literary space. The third school of thought is made up of critics and writers like Gabriel Okara, Yemi Adebisi, Wisindi Andrew, Yakobo Mutiti and Rocha Chimera, who advocate a middle ground between the first and second schools of thought. In addition to these three perspectives, there are critics and scholars, such as Vakunta and Olufemi Táíwò, who have problematised and interrogated the basis of Ngũgĩ's vehement insistence on the absolute criterion of African languages as the only genuine identifier of decolonised intellectual contribution. They argue that Ngũgĩ turns a blind eye to critical issues of language policy and planning and the practical implementations of the universal use of African languages for African literature. They also, pertinently, question his own continued use of English to write and educate others.

The decolonisation of the English literature syllabus in higher education institutions is best understood against the background of the overseas extensions of the University of London after the Second World War in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone (Ngũgĩ 1986:90). Ngũgĩ explains that the syllabi in these universities were patterned after those of the University of London with only minor variations and no contextual relevance. In literary studies, the syllabus of the English Department was based on the 'Great Tradition' (see Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994)), with the sole focus on the study of Shakespeare, Shelley, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Austen, Dickens, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Keats, Conrad, Hardy, the Brontës and other canonical English writers. This syllabus continued to be taught even after the independence of colonised countries. The centring and the so-called universality of the English canon influenced the first generation of Nigerian poets such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper Clark. Their use of modernist techniques such as fragmentation, allusiveness and obscurity to convey African material drew criticism (Ojaide 1995:6), culminating in Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike's (1984) seminal publication, 'Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature', vilifying Soyinka, Okigbo and Clark as Euro-Modernist and calling for African writers to be agents of change.

Chaka Chaka, Mirriam Lephalala and Nandipha Ngesi (2017:212) cite the 'great Nairobi Literature Debate' as 'the single most momentous and game-changing decolonisation of English literary studies in a Higher Education Institution and by extension of English Literary studies in the higher education sector in general.' The debate, according to Ngũgĩ (1986), started with proposals by James Stewart at the University of Nairobi in 1968. Ngũgĩ and two of his African colleagues (Owuor Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong) then called for the abolition of the English Department, challenging the assumption that Kenya's and Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage should be drowned by English traditions. In a bold move, they called for oral literature to be at the heart of the syllabus.

The decolonisation of literary studies and literature syllabi soon extended to Makerere University in Uganda, the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the University of Ibadan in the 1970s and elsewhere in Africa, opening a flood of African writers in all genres of literature and revolutionising the teaching of literature in post-colonial Africa. In 2017, British newspapers like the *Guardian* and *Evening Standard* reported that Black and Minority Ethnic undergraduates in the department of English at Cambridge University called for decolonising the English literature syllabus. They state in their open letter: 'we believe that for English department to truly boast academically rigorous thought and practice, non-white authors and postcolonial

thought must be incorporated meaningfully into the curriculum'. Lola Olufemi, one of the students, pointedly declares: 'non-white authors must be centred in the same way Shakespeare, Eliot, Swift and Pope are. Their stories, thoughts and accounts should be given serious intellectual and moral weight' (Coulter 2017). Since this call other universities in the United Kingdom, such as the University of Nottingham (Decolonising the curriculum in English Studies) and Keele University (Keele decolonising the curriculum network) have been making efforts to decolonise their English literature syllabus.

The decolonisation of the curriculum has also taken other forms outside English departments. One of its key strands has been the re-centring of indigenous knowledge systems, which has been implemented in numerous disciplines (Anthropology, Health Sciences, History, and Environmental Studies, to name but a few). As decolonial scholarship has proliferated, the academy has realised that changing the races of authors of texts prescribed in English literary syllabi is necessary, but is too moderate an adjustment to accomplish decolonisation. In Walter Dignolo's (2007:449) words: 'Delinking means *to change the terms and not just the content* of the conversation' (emphasis added). It is necessary to investigate the key terms and understandings of academic disciplines so that the principles, and not just the discussions, delink from the dominance of Euro-American epistemological, philosophical, and economic paradigms. For example, the socio-political dominance of white masculinity needs to be undone, not by replacing white men with women of colour, but by a thorough investigation of what we understand by dominance, leadership, and hegemony. This could allow more cooperative models of leadership, such as those in line with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, to replace the current framework of one leader in charge of each endeavour, group, company, or country. Another area where the terms may be changed is the field of indigenous knowledge studies. The criteria for what counts as valid knowledge have been strongly influenced by colonial epistemologies that prescribe rationality, linear and teleological thinking, and measurement as methods of arriving at the truth. Decolonisation entails broadening the discussion about knowledge and knowledge production so that indigenous epistemologies are accepted as valid ways of knowing, not as subservient, primitive, or inferior in any way.

All these strategies, as well as the overall goal of decolonising economies and culture, are relevant to speculative fiction. As Mark Dery (1994), Isiah Lavender III (2011, 2019) and Nnedi Okorafor (2019), among others, have noted, speculative fiction of the twentieth century was dominated by white male writers and tended to feature white male heroes, alienating black and women writers and readers. This trend is slowly changing, with authors such as NK Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor,

Masande Ntshanga and Mohale Mashigo writing works about, and focusing on, black characters. Nevertheless, to repeat Mignolo's injunction, merely changing the race of the author or characters does not, by itself, decolonise speculative fiction. It is necessary to interrogate and revise the genre's founding assumptions. One of these is the Enlightenment idea of a singular hero leading a quest, a righteous war, or any other endeavour. So, as Deirdre C. Byrne points out in her discussion of *Black Panther* in this issue, replacing a white hero with a black one does not make a substantive difference to the discourse. Another area that cries out for change is the representation of knowledge. Since the earliest speculative fiction magazines *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*, first published in the 1920s, which brought the genre to public attention, 'science' has been defined in terms of analytic rationality, problem-solving behaviour, and accurate measurement. Many indigenous knowledge systems, which were suppressed by colonising forces, are based on different ways of perceiving and thinking. As a form of epistemological restitution, Nnedi Okorafor's insistence of 'Africanjujuism' — a uniquely African form of thought — insists on the validity of a non-Western epistemology and thus contributes to decolonising knowledge production. Other non-Euro-American authors of speculative fiction have followed suit: Namwali Serpell's award-winning *The Old Drift* (2019), Masande Ntshanga's *Triangulum* (2020), and Tade Thomson's *Wormwood* trilogy (2017-2019), to name only a few, significantly decolonise knowledge and knowledge production in speculative fiction. For academics and lay people who enjoy speculative fiction, the genre's shift away from models of thought and representation based on Western worldviews are very welcome. This special issue of *Image & Text* is aimed at such people.

The first four articles are based on Nnedi Okorafor's work. This is fitting as Okorafor's vociferous championing of what she calls 'Africanfuturism' (to distinguish it from Mark Dery's term, 'Afrofuturism': a subgenre of speculative fiction written by, and largely featuring, people in the African diaspora) has made her a leading figure in the decolonisation of speculative fiction. The works chosen for examination are the *Binti* trilogy (*Binti* 2015, *Binti Home* 2017, and *Binti The Night Masquerade* 2017); *Lagoon* (2014); *Akata Witch* (2011) and *The Book of Phoenix* (2015). In the first article, titled 'Exploring Nnedi Okorafor's decolonial turn in the *Binti Trilogy*', Josephine Olufunmilayo Alexander centres decolonial thinking, Sankofa and Africanfuturism to explore how Okorafor uses settings, characterisation, and ancient African traditional knowledge to achieve a decolonial turn that transforms Western understandings of speculative fiction. Jethro Kayat, Brett Banks and Jean Rossmann's article, titled 'Future frontiers: ontological osmosis and Africanfuturist cyborgs in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*', examines *Lagoon* as a quintessential

Africanfuturist novel, replete with disruptions of traditional science fiction tropes, transcorporeal mutations and indigenous African epistemologies. The authors explore how Okorafor's counter-hegemonic representations of gender and selfhood are intrinsically interwoven into a decolonising literary project of 'ontological osmosis' that transforms superficially 'fixed' markers of difference into permeable thresholds of becoming.

In the article, 'Deliberately derivative: levels of decolonisation in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*', Dorothea Boshoff refutes the idea that the level of correlation between *Akata Witch* and *Harry Potter* might lead to the former being perceived as derivative of a Western literary phenomenon and nothing more than *Harry Potter* in an African setting. She achieves this by exploring how — and more importantly, why — Okorafor makes the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, using the *Harry Potter* universe as the springboard to tap deeply into Nigerian folklore and African indigenous knowledges.

The last article in this special issue's sub-section on Okorafor is Bernice Borain's 'The black female messiah in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*'. Borain, as an etic observer, applies African/Afrofuturist and womanist theory to explicate Okorafor's representation of a paradoxical black female messiah as a beacon and a purifying fire that illuminates the deconstruction of Western hermeneutics and the reconstruction of scripture through an African lens. Borain establishes that Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* performs the work of recovering an occluded history by creatively revisioning theological frameworks.

The articles on Okorafor are followed by three articles on South African speculative fiction. The first, Eugene de Klerk's 'Spectre and speculation: haunting and uncanniness in *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* by Niq Mhlongo', examines Mhlongo's 2018 collection of short stories in the light of Freud's theory of the uncanny, but also with an eye to its decolonial features. These include the meshing of genres — speculative fiction, magic realism, horror, the uncanny, and the ghostly — in a textual version of the cultural hybridity of post-apartheid South African society. De Klerk wonders, throughout the article, how *Soweto, Under the Apricot Tree* can be categorised in terms of genre and concludes that such an enterprise may be misplaced.

Natasha Vallea King's article, 'Whose city? (de)colonising the bodies of speculative fiction in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*', explores the representation of bodies in Beukes's Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning novel. As is now well-known, the premise of *Zoo City* is that people who have been found guilty of a crime are punished by

being magically associated with an animal whose identity reflects the nature of their crime. The novel builds on distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate bodies —a legacy from the apartheid era in South Africa — to create an alternative, not-quite-legal, culturally and ethnically hybrid community of Others. King applies decolonial feminist theory to the ‘aposymbiots’ or ‘zoos’ who live with their magical animal familiars in a reimagined Hillbrow and, in so doing, highlights Beukes’s productive subversion of established norms.

The final article in the South African section of this special issue is Irikidzayi Manase’s ‘The South African human condition in a restructured geo-political future world’, which investigates the little-known field of short stories with a speculative bent in South Africa. *Probe*, the club magazine (or zine) of Science Fiction and Fantasy South Africa, has now appeared three to four times annually for over 50 years, and each issue contains at least three original stories written by South African authors, making a substantial body of short fiction. Manase’s article discusses short stories by Gillian Armstrong, Abigail Godsell, and Sarah Lotz. He identifies them as a significant tendency to decolonise representations of the African continent in speculative writing by writing back to Euro-American perceptions of Africa as ‘dark’, inferior, and populated by ‘primitive’ people. In the hands of at least three short story writers, Africa is centralised and its knowledge production is highly valued.

The special issue concludes with two articles on global speculative fiction: Deirdre C. Byrne’s “‘Give the black girl the remote:’ decolonising and depatriarchalising knowledge and art in *Black Panther* and *Colour Me Melanin*’ and Jeanne-Marie Viljoen’s ‘Being (in)formed by Indigenous voices: first steps to using graphic narratives to decolonise speculative fiction’. Byrne argues that two very different texts — the blockbuster Marvel film, *Black Panther* (2008), and an adult colouring book entitled *Colour Me Melanin* — contain decolonising impulses, but, due possibly to the economic and cultural capital of colonialism, do not go far enough to represent a fully decolonised vision. Viljoen’s article focuses on Inuit graphic fiction, which contains a speculative element, and strongly resists colonial epistemology by insisting on indigenous ways of knowing and making decisions. We conclude the special issue with Viljoen’s article in the hope that readers of *Image & Text* will learn about the range and reach of cultural and epistemological decolonisation, particularly in a genre that has such a wide audience. We are sure you will enjoy the articles in this issue.

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