



# African speculative fiction as Indigenous remembering: Contrasting stories by Jonathan Dotse and Masima Musodza

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How to understand what uniquely African contribution speculative fiction created by African authors makes is a vexed question. Drawing on concepts of the geopolitics of knowledge and locus of enunciation, from the South American tradition of decolonial theory, I argue that the term “Indigenous” must be retained to specify works that speak from epistemic locations within Indigenous African cultures. Such fiction does important remembering work by recovering, renewing, and extending Indigenous knowledge traditions and so claiming the right to imagine futures in Indigenous terms. This remembering is obscured if such fiction is examined in terms such as Afrofuturism, which primarily focuses on race, or Africanfuturism, which focuses on geographical location. Indigenous remembering works from a specific Indigenous locus of enunciation and uses this episteme to explain the present and imagine the future. Such remembering must be distinguished from works that reduce Indigenous knowledge and knowers to tokens of their culture, as the “Other” to Eurocentric knowledge and its claim of universality. I illustrate this distinction by discussing two stories, “The writing in the stars” by Jonathan Dotse and “Herbert wants to return home” by Masima Musodza, showing how Musodza’s story is told from within a specific Indigenous framework, the Shona conception of personhood known in Shona as *hunhu*, whereas Dotse’s tale speaks about Malian astrophysics but from outside it. It is this distinction, a vital colonial difference, that the term Indigenous African speculative fiction aims to capture. **Keywords:** African speculative fiction, Afrofuturism, *hunhu*, relational personhood, epistemic decolonisation.

### Introduction

In this article I consider in what terms speculative fiction (SF) written by African authors can be considered unique. Another way to ask this question is, what particular contributions do these works make that can be distinguished from the imaginative work done by British or Pasifika or African American or any other creators of SF? At the centre of my reflections will be two stories written by African authors, Ghanaian Jonathan Dotse’s “The writing in the stars” and Zimbabwean Masima Musodza’s “Herbert wants to return home”, both published in 2016. Sometimes the question of what defines such SF as African is answered by evasion, and these works simply included under the term Afrofuturism. Ytasha Womack, for example, discusses artists such as Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kihiu alongside African American artists without commenting on their Africanness except to include it in an ongoing tradition of shared imagination. Other scholars are more cautious: Sofia Samatar, for example, critiques such a seamless account, but only on the grounds that “lack of attention to the diverse streams of Afrofuturism threatens [...] to obscure possibilities for rich discussions”; she agrees with Womack that Afrofuturism emphasises “blackness rather than nationhood” and therefore embraces Black Africans into its “planetary” tradition (176). Jenna Hanchey is not so sure that Africanness can be reduced to Blackness, arguing that “diasporic understandings and representations of Blackness function to obscure African continental imaginings” (5). Perhaps most famously, Nnedi Okorafor explicitly rejects Afrofuturism, and coins the term Africanfuturism to refer to fiction that is “specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i1.12727>

DATES:

Submitted: 4 November 2021; Accepted: 11 March 2022; Published: 12 May 2022

view [...] and does not privilege or center the West”.<sup>1</sup> Despite their differences, these treatments of African science fiction (and by extension, the genre of African SF more generally) all struggle with a similar problem, which is an imprecision in the terms they employ to frame the question of Africanness. Womack renders it invisible within Blackness. Samatar makes it a matter of nationhood, “relationship to the African continent” (175), and Hanchey does the same. Okorafor attempts to introduce other determinants besides Blackness and geography, but her language of “culture” and “mythology” risks casting Africa as the West’s Other in the colonial dualisms of science/culture, knowledge/myth, and light/dark.

I wish to suggest that what is missing in these framings, which obscures a vital contribution of the literature they aim to discuss, can be supplied by concepts drawn from decolonial theory. By foregrounding race or geography or culture, the discussions mentioned above ignore *indigeneity*. As I will discuss, the Indigenous artist’s geographical location on the planet matters most essentially not in a political but rather an epistemological sense, because they work from within a non-Eurocentric knowledge system and way of being in the world—a non-Western episteme or “worldsense” (Oyēwūmí 3).<sup>2</sup> The notion of Indigenous Futurisms is offered by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon to refer to science fiction stories that imagine futures by drawing on the various non-Western worldsenses of Indigenous communities, for example North American First Peoples, Pasifika nations, and Australian Aborigines. The stories Dillon classes as Indigenous do engage with race, they do draw on the specific histories of the geographical region in which the Indigenous people live and the land that gives them life—but more important is the terms in which they address these issues, terms drawn from their Indigenous epistememes with their associated ontologies and cosmologies. It is this sense of epistemological distinctness that is missing from the definitions of African SF I discuss above.

Dillon does not include African authors in her discussion, or even mention them, though she implies a fundamental distinction between African American and Indigenous speculations by referring to Afrofuturism as a separate “field of study” (2). Lou Cornum and Maureen Moynagh explicitly discuss this distinction. They note that Indigenous speculation shares important similarities with Afrofuturism, since both are born from a wish to imagine “how and what might lead beyond the social, cultural, political ills that attend the violent subjection of Indigenous and racialised bodies for whom the legacies of colonialism [...] have been especially destructive” (9). But working within Afrofuturism’s core sensitivity to African American experience as defining of Blackness, Cornum and Moynagh focus on the differences between Indigenous and Black speculation arising from their respective core traumas of “stolen land and stolen labour” (Rifkin qtd in Cornum and Moynagh 9). In their elegant formulation, Black speculation is to Indigenous speculation as “alien abduction” is to “alien invasion” (Cornum and Moynagh 9). These framings are of limited usefulness for thinking about imaginings that emerge from Africa: these speculative creators are both Black, in the sense that their labour was co-opted to build colonial economies often in conditions amounting to slavery, *and* Indigenous, because their lands were taken. My argument below will suggest that the distinction drawn by scholars such as Cornum and Moynagh must be nuanced and the term Indigenous retained as an important conceptual tool for understanding what African SF can uniquely contribute: the preservation of the varied Indigenous knowledges of the African continent and so the reimagining of Indigenous African futures.

To explain this suggestion, I first give an account of this meaning of Indigeneity by discussing the terms geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge proposed by decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo. I then use these terms to more exactly place the particular contribution made by African SF, which is a particular kind of memory work of retrieving Indigenous worldsenses. These worldsenses can then form a foundation for imagining Indigenous futures. I support my argument and demonstrate this kind of memory work by comparing the two recent African SF stories by Dotse and Musodza.

### Epistemic decolonisation

The two parts of Mignolo’s term, “geopolitics” of knowledge and knowing, foreground *geography*, physical location on the globe, and *politics*, the power dynamics between groups and societies. As he explains, to emphasise the geopolitics of all knowing is not the same as acknowledging epistemological relativism, that all knowledge is constructed and so all knowing is situated. Rather, geopolitics bring out that different kinds of knowing are placed in unequal dynamics of power according to geographical origin, and that these dynamics are rooted in the political, material, embodied history of colonisation. As European colonisers moved out across the globe, they took with them not just languages, religions, institutions, armies, industries—they also took a broadly

shared knowledge tradition, “a dominating Eurocentric way of knowing that has its origins in the seventeenth-century Enlightenment” and which is epitomised in the Cartesian-Newtonian model of science (Botha, Griffiths, and Prozesky 56). The political dominance of coloniser societies, asserted through violence, meant that this Eurocentric epistemology took on a similar dominance, until it gained the *appearance* of universal knowledge. What is in fact a local knowledge tradition forgot and concealed its “own geo-historical and bio-graphical locations” and claimed—and still claims—to be *the* way of knowing, universally true for all (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom” 160). Thus, Western Eurocentric knowledges became “science” and “thought”, worthy of being distributed over the globe, while the knowledges of colonised regions became “myth” or “wisdom”, circumscribed to the region in which they arose (Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference” 90). The people of these regions, whatever the diversity of their particular local histories of colonisation by specific colonising nations and their individual struggles for political liberation, thus share what Mignolo calls “the colonial wound”—the fact that they “have been classified as *underdeveloped* economically *and mentally*” (“Epistemic Disobedience” 161, emphasis added). By relegating non-Eurocentric systems of knowledge to inferior status, the wound cuts the knowers in these systems down to sub-human status. Mignolo plays with the slightly different meanings of two Latin terms to capture this ontological difference instantiated by colonisation: “the *anthropos* inhabiting non-European places discovered that s/he had been invented, as *anthropos*, by a locus of enunciations self-defined as *humanitas*” (“Epistemic Disobedience” 161, emphasis in original). The inequality persists beyond political independence in the form of what Annibal Quijano calls “coloniality”, namely the structures, practices, and discourses that privilege Western ways of being and knowing across the domains of modern life from the economy, gender, and sexuality through to subjectivity and knowledge (qtd in Mignolo, “Delinking” 451).

Thinking in terms of geopolitics of knowledge allows the weaknesses of the discussions of African SF with which I opened this paper to appear more clearly. What makes a speaker Indigenous is not the physical place from which s/he speaks, or some phenotypical identity defined in essentialist terms of race or “blood”, but rather her/his geopolitical location in this history of colonisation. It is the *anthropos*, marked by the colonial wound, who speaks as Indigenous—Mignolo calls this the “locus of enunciation”. The settler is one whose “linguistic and cultural homeland is somewhere else, [whose] cultural loyalty is to some other place” (Smith 7) and whose locus of enunciation is still Eurocentric. While all Indigenous peoples share the colonial wound, they have their own epistemes and cosmologies. Each Indigenous locus of enunciation thus rests at the intersection of two trajectories: the experience of having been subjected to colonial domination, which is shared by all Indigenous communities (Smith 7), and also a particular knowledge and system of thought, which is unique to that specific Indigenous community, at its specific geographical location (Nakata *et al.* 125). Thus, acknowledging the geopolitics of knowledge, for Mignolo, is to refuse to let these other systems of thought remain invisible, as we have been habituated into doing by the colonial structures embedded in economic, educational, and academic structures around the world. The conceptual failing of the definitions of African SF discussed above is that they do not grasp this “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality” 451). Okorafor’s language is feeling towards a geo-politics of knowledge, but remains anchored in the colonial dichotomy of Western “knowledge” as opposed to African “mysticism”. Samatar’s argument, though it aims to emphasise diversity among Black artists of different locations, reduces epistemological difference to racial difference, as does Womack’s. All three scholars have a sense of a wounding that strikes at the humanity of the non-White person as *humanitas*, but these are historical wounds other than the trauma of colonisation. Cornum and Moynagh are acutely sensitive of the trauma of the colonial wound, but by treating Black bodies as settler bodies they render the Indigeneity of Black African authors invisible.

This is why Mignolo distinguishes geopolitics from what he calls body-politics. This body-politics of knowledge refers to the various strands of critical thought in Euro-American tradition, from Marxism to feminism to the Civil Rights movement, that emerged to make visible structures that suppress knowledge-making on the part of bodies not male and white (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience” 174). Yet as Nelson Maldonado-Torres has shown, the colonial difference between European and non-European (colonised) people that rendered the latter sub-human simultaneously rendered them invisible to the emancipatory impulses of critical tradition (“On the Coloniality of Being” 256–7). For this reason, geo-politics must be distinguished from body-politics, though body- and geo-politics together are parallel acts of resistance to the colonial matrix of power. Just as Womanism spoke back to feminism, refusing to let White women speak for Black women’s embodied experience, so geopolitics

speaks back to moves from within Eurocentric knowledge traditions—however well-intentioned, and coming from whichever bodies—to speak for the Indigenous. In focusing only on the body and its Blackness, scholars like Womack and Samatar ignore the geo-political locatedness of Black African bodies as *also Indigenous*. Speaking from an Indigenous locus reveals the world in previously ignored ways, and ignoring this locus cannot reveal the Indigenous epistememes obscured by colonialism.

### Memory work in Indigenous speculative fiction

A vital function of speech from an Indigenous locus is therefore reclamation of Indigenous knowledge traditions undervalued and half-forgotten. This is similar to the underlying impulse of Afrofuturism, which Black British artists John Akomfrah and Edward George in a 1996 video essay *The Last Angel of History* imagine as follows: “S/he knows the nature of his/her quest: surf the closed rooms of the internet, unlock the vault of racial memory, find the black futurologists and their arcana, interpret them, and bring their visions home” (qtd in Samatar 176). “Racial memory” is an Afrofuturist concern, but arguably *Indigenous memory* is the parallel concern of Indigenous SF. Dillon suggests this when she says that the work of Indigenous art, including SF, is “to renew, recover, and extend First Nations people’s voices and traditions” (1–2). Dillon makes the vital point that a remembering that seeks to enshrine the past as unassailable is static and lifeless. The movement of her verbs “renew, recover, and extend” is both *backwards*—the renewing and recovering involved in remembering—and *forwards*—the extending into the future involved in imagining new worlds. Kahi expresses a similar notion in a 2012 TEDx talk in Nairobi, saying “As a storyteller in the tradition of the Agikuyu, my job is to be a seer, not just a historian”. Though Dillon does not use the term, I read this movement of renewing, recovering, and extending as decolonial in its impulse, a particular kind of memory work that reclaims ongoing Indigenous knowledge traditions and actively inserts them into imagined futures, building new possible worlds. This way of remembering does not uncritically revere Indigenous knowledge traditions. Rather, as Taiaiake Alfred (Kanieri’kehaka) puts it, real remembering involves looking “at traditions in a critical way, not trying to take them down, but to test them and to make sure they’re still strong” (qtd in Dillon 3).

The difficulty lies in how to practically do this memory work. Non-Western Indigenous knowledge traditions are not simply available for renewal and integration into contemporary meaning systems. Building on concepts developed by Quijano, Mignolo argues that epistemic disobedience works in two movements, the “analytic” and the “programmatic” (“Delinking” 451–2). The analytic involves exposing and critiquing embedded assumptions about the universality of Western ways of knowing and being, and the programmatic involves “bring[ing] to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (Mignolo, “Delinking” 453).

A challenge to decolonial analysis is that Indigenous knowledge systems, as living systems, are not static. Under colonisation and then coloniality, colonised peoples are not passively subsumed into the colonial order being imposed upon them, but rather over lifetimes and generations negotiate this imposition. They engage in ongoing, pragmatic sense-making that draws on an outsider’s view of this colonial order and also the rationality of traditional modes of knowing (Nakata *et al.* 125). It is not a simple matter, therefore, to decide what counts as ‘authentic’ Indigenous knowledge discourses. A second complicating factor, related to this first, relates to the “programmatic” aim of epistemic disobedience: how to present Indigenous knowledges as at once authentic but also living. Gerald Vizenor warns against Indigenous texts, artefacts, and memories becoming “a mere archive, covering the earth with empty traces of a lost plenitude” (51), which Dillon glosses as “a public memory that exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs” (6) rather than a lived episteme which is used to make meaning in the world and to plan futures. This kind of remembering works not against but with coloniality, because it turns Indigenous meanings into tokens of the culture they come from, classed as the “Other” to Western knowledge and knowers which remain the universal tools for theoretical explanation and for imagining the future. This kind of remembering changes the content of the conversation but leaves the terms firmly Eurocentric. A truer recovery of Indigenous knowledges requires inhabiting these knowledges as the position from which to explain the present, and construct Indigenous futurity. Decolonisation is thus not a choice between “Eurocentrism and fundamentalism” but rather the work of imagining alternative worlds beyond this false dichotomy (Grosfoguel 27). This involves not accepting the assumption that there is only one way of being modern but rather moving into what Enrique Dussel calls “transmodernity”, multiple ways of being modern emerging from multiple epistemic traditions (Grosfoguel 27).

It is difficult from within our colonised academic minds to appreciate how richly and profoundly the most basic and apparently *natural* epistemological categories of Western tradition can be challenged through epistemic disobedience. As Achilles Mbembe argues, this Western tradition is so pervasive that its hegemonic interpretive frames are difficult to think outside of (Mbembe n. p.). The main part of my argument will explore African communitarian conceptions of the person, as epitomised in the Shona conception of *hunhu*, in some length. As I will show, in this conception human personhood is not understood as in the Western philosophical tradition as an inherent and stable essence as individual subject, but rather as a fluid identity constituted by relations to human and non-human others, the full potential of which is only achieved over time. As I will suggest, it is exciting to consider how far-reaching the effects on law, education, economic production, family life, such an alternative understanding of humanness would be, if put at the heart of a programmatic decolonial movement. The future constructed along these lines would be imagined in Indigenous Shona terms. It would be one transmodern future among a constellation of such modernities moving into the future. Examples such as this one show why Mignolo says that we have to change not merely the content of the conversation but the terms in which the conversation is held (“Epistemic Disobedience” 162).

Changing the terms in this way is what I suggest African SF does, drawing on African Indigenous world-senses. Understanding African SF in this way avoids reducing Africanness to a symbol for something else or reducing geo-politics to body-politics. In the remaining sections of my argument, I will explore two stories that engage with epistemological decolonisation, although in very different ways, to illustrate the distinction I make between Indigenous remembering that is living and working towards ensuring Indigenous futures, as opposed to remembering that remains empty scaffolding. Both are African-centred in Okorafor’s sense, being rooted in Africa and centring the points of view of people living in African communities. I suggest, however, that something vital is missed if we class them simplistically as equivalent examples of African SF. The first, “The writing in the stars” by Dotse, is a science fiction tale set in the future, and describes the rediscovery of an ancient supercomputer created in pre-colonial Mali, which far exceeds the computing capacity of any colonial technology. The story explicitly imagines lost African knowledge displacing Eurocentric science, yet I suggest that it does not succeed in making this Africanness anything more than a token. In contrast is the second story “Herbert wants to return home”, a comic vampire tale by Musodza which engages with the contemporary phenomenon of mass economic migration. By tracing the presence in the story of the Shona conception of personhood, known as *hunhu* in Shona, I show how “Herbert wants to return home”, though it makes no explicit claims about rediscovering lost Indigenous knowledge, is in fact a living act of remembering because it invokes a local epistemology to make sense of a contemporary global problem, and in this way carries the Shona world-sense into the future.

### **Remembering knowledge in “The writing in the stars”**

Dotse is a Ghanaian speculative-fiction author, hypermedia artist, and futurist. His story “The writing in the stars” was first published in 2015 in *Lusaka Punk and Other Stories*, a collection which emerged from a Caine Prize writing workshop held in Ghana that year. The story runs on two parallel plot lines that take place 400 years apart. The first plot concerns a mysterious figure known only as the Guardian, who with his small band of followers witnesses the fall of a city—presumably Timbuktu—around 1630, and dies to preserve a mysterious secret. The second plot tells of a young archaeologist called Sara, on the way to her second PhD at the University of Timbuktu in 2036, who follows the clues left by the Guardian all the way to the Aïr mountains in northern Niger, and unlocks the secret he left there so long ago. In this second plot, a 16<sup>th</sup> century text written in an indecipherable code has been found buried in the walls of a shrine in Timbuktu. With the help of an old Malian Muslim woman, Mrs Touré, whose family is descended from the Guardian, Sara (whose research field is archaeolinguistics) realises that the key to deciphering its code is the triangulation of three Southern hemisphere constellations with a fixed point on earth, the point she locates in the Aïr mountains. The triangulation completed, her friend, a young hacker named Farouk, is able to decipher the text using a hacked network of supercomputers. The story ends as the words of the book scroll across Sara’s computer screen:

In this Sacred Book lie the Greatest Treasures of Humankind,  
The History and Philosophy of the Architects of Civilization,  
Of the Builders of Pyramids and the Readers of the Heavens,  
The Hidden Keys to Infinite Power in the Light of the Eternal Ones,  
The Rightful Legacy of All Children of the Sun.  
These are the Archives of the Guardians of the Empire,  
Keepers of the Lost Knowledge of the Ancients,  
The Ones who Write Secrets in the Stars ...

“The writing in the stars” clearly aims to heal the colonial wound by rewriting the colonial narrative of Africa as the dark continent, lost to ignorance and irrationality until the arrival of White European civilisers. Though the story draws strongly on recognisable genres from Western popular culture, including detective and adventure narratives such as the Indiana Jones films, all the main agents in the story—the Guardian and his men, Sara, and those who assist her on her quest—are African, and not White.<sup>3</sup> The idea of ancient African cultures possessing advanced astronomical knowledge is similar to the so-called Sirius Mystery, the belief that the Dogon people in southern Mali knew of the existence of Sirius B, a star invisible to the naked eye, centuries before it was ‘discovered’ by Western science.<sup>4</sup> Africa is explicitly made the site where not myth or folklore is produced, but rather the most important and powerful knowledge that has ever emerged in human culture. It is not Western science and logico-rational thinking that explains reality most fully, and offers humanity “infinite power”, but rather knowledge embedded in a non-Western episteme. Geopolitics is placed front-and-centre when the superiority of these African thinkers to colonial modernity is emphasised explicitly: Sara marvels at the “knowledge [...] possessed by scholars whose intelligence had somehow outpaced modern civilization for centuries”. The story tries to make a strong claim for the superiority of African epistemic traditions in their ability to explain reality. Significantly, Dotse locates *humanness*, full *humanitas*, in Africa—the Guardians have an advanced sense of representing not just their own people but “all of humankind”, and then in a shared human nature, since the knowledge in the book is “the rightful legacy of all children of the sun”—which I take to mean, everyone who lives on earth.

Making this kind of explicit claim, however, does not guarantee epistemological decolonisation in the sense I develop above; it can remain the “exterior scaffolding” Dillon decries. Much of the story remains at the analytic stage, detecting and critiquing the structures of epistemic coloniality. There is a world-class, technologically sophisticated university in Timbuktu in Dotse’s 2036, but its structures of authority and funding are shown as depressingly familiar to those of us working in 2022. The story rightly suggests that these structures impede the kind of knowledge production and rediscovery needed for decolonisation, by setting Sara and Farouk over against the institution and its hierarchies. PhD student and hacker together succeed in decoding the mysterious book by working behind the backs of the authorities who control knowledge—the funders, the (male) university professors, and the digital infrastructures owned and controlled by colonial academic institutions. The story gains most of its narrative impetus from this plot. The character of Farouk, however, remains trapped in the clichés of hacker figures from pop culture, being young, male, and living untidily in a dark room strewn with tech while making sexually suggestive jokes to Sara. So while the implied ending of the story aims to expand our ability to imagine and so open the way for wider traditions of knowledge, the means of getting to this end remains within mainstream SF culture. The terms of the conversation have not been changed.

The story also remains trapped within Western episteme in other ways. The Guardian leaves the clue to the code in the “family crest” of his descendants, three mysterious symbols drawn within a circle, which Mrs Touré helps Sara decipher. The old woman says to her, “I never had the opportunity to go beyond secondary school, but even I can tell you what they are. That’s the problem with the youth of today: too much knowledge, not enough education. Why, can’t you see? The answer is obvious. It is written quite plainly in the stars”. On the face of it this is direct epistemic disobedience, contrasting real “education” in knowledge that matters with the “knowledge” gained through Western education and Western-style research. However, this too remains “exterior scaffolding”. Suddenly understanding that the symbols are not letters but constellations, Sara walks home; she looks up and “trace[s] the outlines of the three symbols in the stars above. Orion. Phoenix. Kranich. Three constellations, all visible above the Sahara” (“Writing in the stars”). The names she knows the constellations by are Western; Orion is ancient, described in Greco-Roman texts, but “Phoenix” and “Kranich” (German for Grus, the Crane) were only conceived of in the 16th century by Dutch astronomers. Cultures all over the world have named the stars,

grouping them differently into constellations meaningful within their own cosmologies and mythologies; it is highly unlikely that the constellations of Malian tradition should be the same as those of European tradition, or that they should be converted into the same shapes when drawn on a page. The story makes these Western symbols into universal signs divorced from cultural context, and Sara remains *anthropos* relying on terms created by *humanitas* to explain her reality.

Similarly, the story never escapes from the symbols and imagined trajectories of the current global information economy. Exactly what the knowledge of the ancients is remains murky, and all the story says is that “the Guardians had harnessed the forces of the entire universe to create a colossal machine, the greatest supercomputer in existence”. How the stars can be “technology” is not clear, and the reader never learns what this “supercomputer” is able to do. Also, the recourse to the language of digital technology tames the potential for epistemic disobedience at the story’s heart, and returns it firmly to the ratiocinative techno-bound logic of the information economy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the story is not clear on what constitutes *African* traditional knowledge. The great libraries of Timbuktu were Islamic, and Dotse is true to this historical fact, making the book that Sara finds composed in Arabic (though the encryption uses letter-like symbols based on star constellations). Dotse tries to include both traditions in the names of the Guardian’s men, one of whom has the local Malian name “Keita” and the other a Muslim name “Ibrahim”. So is the infinitely powerful knowledge found in the book African, or rather part of the Islamic intellectual tradition? Like Christianity, Islam came from the Middle East and was brought into Africa by missionaries, conquerors, and settlers. Though Dotse definitely destabilises the universalising claims of Western epistemic tradition, he does not yet explore indigenous African ways of thinking and explaining the world. I now move to contrast his story with another which performs decolonial work at a more profound level.

### **Indigenous remembering in “Herbert wants to return home”**

“Herbert wants to return home” was originally written in Shona, and translated into English by Musodza. Both versions of the story appeared in the *Manchester Review*’s special edition on African SF. The story is narrated in the first person, in the form of a series of diary entries by Mr Tobias Mutsepeshi who runs a nightclub on the outskirts of Harare. The plot revolves around the death of Tobias’s cousin Herbert, who went to England as an economic migrant. When Herbert’s body is returned to Zimbabwe, he is buried with the ceremonies proper for a man without children. Within a few weeks, however, he is discovered to have fathered an illegitimate daughter, now a teenager, who with her mother approaches the family and asks to be accepted as Herbert’s daughter. She requests the family to perform a *kurova guva*, the ceremony that will welcome Herbert to his ancestral lands as a *mudzimu*, or ancestor, to which his status as a father of children gives him the right. A problem appears, however: Tobias is visited in his office by a policeman accompanied by an Eastern Orthodox priest, who tell him that on holiday in Romania Herbert was bitten by a vampire, and instead of resting peacefully in his grave is actually walking the streets of his hometown in search of victims.

Tobias does not at first follow the priest’s veiled hints, since he is not that familiar with Western pop culture depictions of vampires, and Herbert is very clearly a Western vampire: he bears two small bite-marks on his neck, fears crucifixes, and can no longer stand sunlight or human food. He stands outside doorways pleading to be let in. Gradually Tobias understands: if Herbert is *invited in* by the *kurova guva* ceremony, he will be able to “return home” to his ancestral lands and start a new dynasty of African vampires. The story ends with Tobias facing this dilemma: his brother has an undeniable right to be invited to become a *mudzimu*. At the same time, however, in the words of Fr Antonescu the priest, “If you call him into your homestead, you will have summoned a monster from the spirit world! Your home will be the seat of an evil yet unknown in this land”. Tobias’s tone is jovial, and the story is often very funny. Unlike “The writing in the stars”, it makes no *explicit* claims about the power of indigenous epistemologies to explain the world. However, “Herbert wants to return home” is a more successful act of decolonial memory because this indigenous episteme is not an exterior scaffold or decoration, but rather the core of Herbert’s story which, despite the story’s comic tone, is actually tragic.

As the story’s title suggests, this tragedy is one of displacement and alienation. The context is the phenomenon of mass economic and refugee migration that has become a characteristic of globalising 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity. As an outgrowth of colonial history, modernity is for indigenous people a disinheriting, because it is a rupture of indigenous forms of life without the substitution of a meaningful alternative. Samatar calls this “a double

alienation, in which the postcolonial subject is distanced both from a violent, exclusionary Western modernity and a disrupted tradition” (181). What Samatar calls “tradition” I have argued above actually encompasses a complete worldsense, with its epistemology, ontology, and cosmology. Musodza uses Herbert’s double encounter with foreignness, first his move to the UK and then his ghoulish transformation into a vampire, to figure this double alienation. Herbert is exiled from his indigenous place in his search for the ‘good life’ promised by capitalist modernity, when he moves to the UK for better career prospects. But once he is there, alienated from his home and family networks, his opportunities and choices are so foreign to those at home that they are not recognised as legitimate. When Herbert is buried according to custom, with a rat in his grave to symbolise his (apparent) failure to father children, Tobias explains, “He left no woman; Delia [his English partner], never having been formally introduced, did not count. She wouldn’t have ever been introduced anyway, for Delia was older than Herbert” (“Herbert wants to return home”). In building a life that conforms with Western modernity, Herbert experiences a deeper alienation, losing his place in the Shona community and its worldsense, and the right to return as a *mudzimu*. The urgency of his desire to “return home” is his need to belong again, in Indigenous terms. So Tobias gradually works out that it is Herbert who leaks to the newspapers that the supposed daughter of a prominent Harare businessman is actually his daughter, because siring children is a prerequisite for the status of ancestor. It is Herbert who orders this child and her mother, whom he has transformed into vampires like him, to request the *kurova guva*. But Herbert’s tragedy is that even if he is welcomed as a *mudzimu*, he returns as a monster. His transformation into a vampire, and very recognisably a vampire in the Western literary and pop culture tradition, represents an alienation that cannot be overcome. Tobias writes indignantly in his diary, with a tone of pompous judgement, “But this is not how one returns home, a monster, a vampire! Is this what the elders meant when they said that the young people who had gone abroad returned home no longer human?” His words explicitly link the vampire taint with the alienated subject created by coloniality and migration. Why such a person is described as “no longer human” can only be understood, however, in terms of the indigenous Shona conception of humanness and human relationships.

The elders’ words reflect an understanding of humanness enacted throughout the text, a profoundly relational ontology which in Shona is known as *hunhu*. This term is closely related to the more well-known *ubuntu*, which comes from Zulu and related Nguni languages. The *hunhu* understanding of humanness as essentially *relational* is expressed in the well-known phrase by Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti, “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am” (109). It has been suggested that a similar conception of humanness is present in cultures throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Coetzee 48; Kaphagawani 337–8), although Kwasi Wiredu’s warning against easy assumptions of “continent-wide generalizations” must not be forgotten (23). Drawing on accounts of scholars who have studied African traditions of relational ontology from loci of enunciation at various degrees of closeness to indigenous Shona culture, two important features of humanness as it is understood in *hunhu* can be distinguished. These two strands provide the logic of Musodza’s story, and are explored below.

### Personhood in “Herbert wants to return home”

The first strand of the *hunhu* conception is that a human person is “an extended self”, in the sense of “an individual who recognises the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realises, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual’s own standing as a person” (Menkiti 324). As Azille Coetzee explains, in dominant Western conceptions the identity of persons and of concepts and things generally is understood in terms of sameness, the relation of the thing to itself, which remains constant. The opposite of sameness is difference. The human person pre-exists any relationship with others as a complete, autonomous, and fully coherent entity. In contrast, in the *hunhu* understanding, “subjects, concepts and things are not understood in terms of sameness with a unitary ideal, but constituted in a fluid network of relations with all other subjects, concepts and things” (Coetzee 47). People, things, and concepts are not fixed, and stable identities understood in opposition with other people, things, and concepts, but rather in relation to them. Difference is therefore not the opposite of identity, but rather its heart. In this conception, it makes no sense to say, “I am”, but rather we have to say “I am what, where, with whom” (Wiredu 416). *Hunhu* is thus an ontological claim. In the *hunhu* conception, the existence of others is a necessary part of the structure of the self (Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* 14). To reduce community to an aggregate of individuals, as mainstream Western philosophy does, results in the individual’s “becoming alienated from his or her humanness” (Murungi 523).



The second main thread of *hunhu*'s conceptualisation of the human person arises from the first. Since relationships with other selves and the environment in which one lives is an essential structure of the self, human personhood with its distinctive capacities emerges from and through relationships with other humans in a lived context. The defining capacity of human beings is thus ethical, the capacity to have empathy with others because they are constitutive of oneself, because their well-being and dignity is one's own (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuvaza 8), and to apply one's abilities in ways considered socially appropriate for the good of all. Additionally, moral principles are not understood as in many Western traditions as principles that emanate from the autonomous rational mind, but rather emerge through interactions between embodied, located human beings (Coetzee 50). D. A. Masolo says moral and customary teaching emphasises that "no good society can come about without the efforts of every member of society. Similarly, no society can engender for its members a sense of safety and humane conditions of life unless everyone contributes to making them possible". Growing up means learning that one "cannot live in society and be indifferent" (Masolo, "Western and African Communitarianism: A Comparison" 495).

Personhood is thus a journey or development in time. One grows into full personhood by being socialised within one's community into how to fulfil the inborn capacity to take on responsibility within this community. The "cultivation of the person" takes place through each individual's life journey, as he/she passes through the various stages of maturation marked by customs and rituals in which the young person is educated in the morals and values "which sustain the social order" (Masolo, "Western" 191–2). To be a human person is therefore to be "a moral being or bearer of norms", and personhood is a life-long project, in which there are no short cuts (Menkiti 326). Young people are lacking in moral perception, and so tend towards self-centredness. They have not learned enough to understand the depth of interdependence between people in the community, an understanding that comes with life experience. In Ifeanyi Menkiti's elegant formulation, personhood, "in taking place in time, demands that time be considered relevant to the in-gathering of the excellences of the person as one ages" (325). Rather than being stable, a person's humanness changes, moving from the stage of childhood with its undeveloped promise, through various stages of puberty and initiation, into adulthood with its stages of marriage, parenthood, and contribution to communal life, then to old age as an elder, and after that to the status of ancestor. Wiredu explains clearly that an ancestor is not a spirit, because in African metaphysics the dualism found in Western traditions between materiality/spirituality or body/mind does not exist (416). Any attempt to separate physical and spiritual things into rigidly separate categories is nonsensical. Another dualism, between supernatural and natural, therefore also makes no sense. The ancestors are persons on their continuing journey who occupy a parallel existence, as real and physical as the world in which their living descendants move, and who form part of the same community (Menkiti 327). The relational identity of the person thus includes relationships with those who have died and those who have not been born (Murungi 525). As well as not being supernatural, the ancestors are also not immortal; rather, once their memory fades among their descendants they fall out of the "ongoing community of reciprocal obligations" (Menkiti 328) that constitutes personhood. Because personhood is a something that is achieved, it can also fail to be achieved.

Given this conception of humanness, it makes sense why the elders that Tobias quotes can say that a migrant who adapts to contemporary life in Europe, with its individualism and cosmopolitanism, is "no longer human". Herbert's story, significantly, is told from within Zimbabwe, in the voices of those who have never left the home community, and Herbert himself is silent throughout the text. Within this home community, the relational texture of Shona identity appears in regular use of kinship terms in the text, such as "*Sekuru*", meaning maternal uncle, "*Baba vaYemurai*", meaning "father of Yemurai", or "*Mainini*", meaning "little mother" (wife of younger brother). Tobias struggles to name his relationship to Herbert in English terms, and ends up calling him "my brother, my uncle's son". He even calls the waitresses at Tobias's club *varoora*, meaning "daughters-in-law". These terms are not remarked on because they are so natural; in his English translation of the story Musodza has to provide footnotes explaining them. In leaving Zimbabwe Herbert is distanced from this network. The word "home" in the title is glossed: "kumusha in ChiShona and ekhaya in SiNdebele [sic] refers to the family seat" ("Herbert wants to return home"), revealing that what Herbert longs for is not so much his nuclear family or the familiarity of his childhood home, but rather his place within this extended family structure. The point is that his loss of this place is not simply a cause of personal unhappiness or loneliness for Herbert. What Herbert risks is failing to achieve personhood.

It is easy to read the story as a critique of Western individualism; Herbert is after all infected with distinctly Western vampirism and now he is a monster who belongs neither in Europe nor in his own home. However, the story's epigraph turns the critique inwards, onto his Shona home community. The epigraph comes from a 1902 short story by British author W. W. Jacobs, "The Monkey's Paw": "It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. 'I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door.' 'For God's sake, don't let it in,' cried the old man trembling. 'You're afraid of your own son,' she cried, struggling". In Jacobs's story, the middleclass White family—father, mother, and son—are given a dried monkey's paw by a British Army officer, who got it from a "fakir" in India. The paw is said to be enchanted and grants its owner three wishes, with the accompanying curse that hellish consequences will follow because the wisher has tempted fate. Sceptical of such magic, Mr White wishes modestly for £200 to pay off his mortgage—and he gets it the next day, as an insurance pay-out for the sudden death of his son in an accident at the factory where he works. The despairing parents use the second wish to bring their son back, but he returns as a reanimated corpse dragging his mutilated body along the road from the cemetery. In the scene quoted in Musodza's epigraph, the son is knocking at his parents' door. Their only option is to use the third wish to send him back in his grave. Musodza's use of the epigraph, and of the son's name—Herbert—for his character, turns the mother's desperate cry back onto Tobias and his community: they are afraid of their own son, who has been transformed into a monster through no fault of his own. Throughout the text Tobias simultaneously invokes the gospel of economic opportunity and the superiority of Westernised consumer lifestyles, which is the discourse that prompted Herbert's migration in the first place, and judges Herbert for succumbing to foreign British culture with its different way of being human. The epitaph convicts Tobias of failing to appreciate the trauma of migration, the difficulties of Herbert's struggle to reconcile the needs and expectations of life drawn from his home culture with the realities of life in a Western society. The horror of Herbert's monstrosity becomes a challenge to contemporary Shona ways of knowing, implying how inescapable the complex negotiation between ongoing indigenous traditions of *hunhu* and the multiple influences of global Westernised coloniality is. Such negotiations are the basis on which a Shona transmodernity would be built.

In this reading, Herbert's desire to complete his journey of personhood by performing the correct rituals and taking his place as a *mudzimu* is a decolonial move, a desire to revivify a dying Indigenous worldsense. Tobias reveals that the family has not practiced *kurova guva* for more than a generation, so Herbert is actually more in touch with this part of his *hunhu* identity than the family who judge him. The challenge to Tobias and the Shona community is to decide what it means to be an African, descendant of your ancestors, when you live in a postcolony in an increasingly global world. This reading of the story emphasises the otherness of Herbert's vampirism as unthought possibility rather than as horror; what will the ongoing negotiation of decoloniality look like, recovering and extending Indigenous knowledges, to use Dillon's terms, but in the context of a globalised world? What sense can be made of a Nosferatu *mudzimu*? Musodza does not have answers, but his funny and shocking vampire story raises the question from within a *hunhu* understanding of personhood, and places its logic at the story's core. The story, then, is an example of what Dillon would call "renew[ing], recover[ing] and extend[ing]" (1) this Shona episteme's possibilities for imagining a new transmodernity, testing it to "make sure it's still strong" (3).

## Conclusion

As discussed above, the movement of epistemological decolonisation is double: first analytic and then programmatic. This second movement, though more difficult to achieve than critiquing Western thought and its multifarious presences in the world, is arguably more necessary in the task of imagining decolonial futures (Nakata *et al.* 5). Subsuming African SF under the umbrella of Afrofuturism obscures the work being done by stories such as "Herbert wants to return home" because it acknowledges race but ignores coloniality. In contrast, the term Indigenous SF, applied to stories by African authors, recognises their epistemological *difference*. This recognition of difference is not the same as "celebrating diversity", an apparently liberal move that actually leaves the Western as the central norm and the Indigenous as the various "Others" to this norm, to be controlled and contained by being understood and located within the categories of the Eurocentric episteme (Martin and Pirbhaillich 368). The epistemological difference requires a reader such as myself, a White English-speaking South African who has to research the Shona notion of *hunhu* and work to grasp, albeit dimly, the nature of Herbert's situation, to contend with the incommensurability (Tuck and Yang 28) of the story's worldsensences and my own. To subsume this incommensurability into racial difference, as Womack does, or reduce a worldsense to a 'culture'

or 'mythology', as Okorafor does, is to risk turning Africa into at best a backdrop and at worst a symbol, a shell to be filled out from the inside by the desires and dreams of those living outside of it. Such ignoring of the geopolitics of knowledge denies the longevity, flexibility, and explanatory power of African epistemes such as that of the Shona in their ability to perform a remembering of the past that grapples with contemporary problems and so sustains the possibility of Indigenous futures. It is this kind of remembering that I suggest is better captured in the term Indigenous African SF.

#### Notes

1. See similar debates in Bould's "Africa Sf: Introduction" and Adejunmobi's "Introduction: African Science Fiction".
2. As is widespread practice, I capitalise the word "Indigenous" throughout my paper; the word "Western" I capitalise when it refers to the people in the Euro-American colonial centres or their activities and epistemologies.
3. Sara's race is never described, but towards the end of the story she thinks about the ancient Malians as "our ancestors", which suggests she comes from West Africa.
4. This notion originated with the work of Belgian anthropologist Griaule in the 1930s and 1940s. An account of his work, and the conspiracy theories that have arisen around it, can be found in Van Beek's "Haunting Griaule: Experiences from the Restudy of the Dogon".

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