

Please cite the Published Version

Germaine Buckley, Chloe and Ilott, S (2017) Feminist Rewritings of the Spiritual and Physical Wilderness of the Bush. *Fantastika*, 1 (2). pp. 32-35. ISSN 2514-8915

Version: Published Version

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FEMINIST REWRITINGS OF THE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL WILDERNESS OF THE BUSH

Chloe Germaine Buckley and Sarah Illott

'Global Fantastika' is an important emergent area of research that rethinks the dominant capitalist imperial politics and Euro-American locations otherwise overrepresented in Fantasy fictions. The Global Fantastika conference in 2016 brought together a host of scholars working in a varied range of fields and disciplines, resulting in an energising dialogue about the role of Fantastika in negotiating pressing global challenges such as ecological crisis, neoliberal globalisation, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. In this editorial, we would like to take the opportunity to think about some of the recurring themes and concerns of the conference, many of which resonate with our keynote address, entitled "Feminist Rewritings of the Spiritual and Physical Wilderness of the Bush."

This keynote engaged with the representation of the African Bush, firstly identifying its construction historically, then considering the work of two contemporary authors – Nigerian American Nnedi Okorafor, and Nigerian British Helen Oyeyemi – who have rewritten the space, and in so doing reclaimed it for a feminist and postcolonial agenda. Historically, the Bush has been synonymous with the threat of capture and enslavement, whilst in contemporary society it has frequently functioned as an ungovernable space in which violence has been inflicted on women – in the form of female genital mutilation and rape – particularly in war-torn areas such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Sudan. Culturally, the threat of violence has led to the Bush being represented as a space of male ritual and adventure, in which men who enter confront the supernatural and have their masculinity tested through a series of trials. This is reflected in much of the early literature by Nigerian authors, including Chinua Achebe, D. O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola. Critical interpretation has dwelt upon the representation of the Bush as a psychological and metaphorical space, but has rarely considered its reimagining as a space of potential resistance in feminist and/or postcolonial literature.

Constructing Fantasy literature as a space of colonial resistance was a concern identified in other papers at the conference. Thomas Brassington referenced Nnedi Okorafor, in addition to Saladin Ahmed, in his paper "Using Massa's Tools: Shapeshifting and the Decolonisation of Fantasy." Brassington suggested that shapeshifting characters in these writers' works function to challenge the Eurocentric and colonialist discourse traditionally symptomatic of the genre, thereby empowering themselves and decolonising the Fantasy genre. Rob O'Connor's paper, "Walking the Streets with a Sloth on Your Back: Notions of 'otherness' in the urban landscapes of Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*" addressed the re-centring of Science Fiction narratives to African cities, Johannesburg and Lagos. This relocation of Dystopian Urban Fiction invites an exploration of otherness, subalternity, and alienation, effectively aligning the concerns of Postcolonial critique and

the Science Fiction genre. In a comparable critical turn, Rebecca Duncan's paper, "Post-apartheid Sensoria: Beyond Imperialist Ecologies in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*" considered the joint forces of colonialism and apartheid evident in the South Africa of Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009). Duncan suggested that the film's horror provides a postcolonial and an ecological critique, revealing the legacy of colonialism and apartheid in present-day South Africa.

Our keynote address discussed the Bush as a liminal space following Victor Turner's anthropological study of tribal societies in central Africa, *On the Edge of the Bush* (1985). We returned to Turner's seminal study, in which he develops the concept of liminality in order to understand the painful ritual processes that produce ambiguous and liminal states of being. Katie Burton's paper, "Why do people go to these places, these places that are not for them?": Negotiating identity and national allegory in Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*," likewise considered the painful dimension of liminality. Burton's reading of Englishness in Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching* (2009) argued that the haunted guesthouse, 29 Barton Road, which sits atop the white cliffs of Dover, constitutes a destructive space for both self and other created in discourses of Englishness. Burton posited that the border spaces of the novel represented characters' own internal negotiations of identity, which in turn allowed for an exploration of the changing state of national identity. Andrew Tate's paper on Young Adult Dystopian Fiction also evoked notions of liminality in its exploration of the violent rites of passages in Apocalyptic novels such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011-2014) and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009-2011). Tate argued that these novels revise the structure of the traditional Bildungsroman by depicting the process whereby the protagonist crosses borders and social boundaries that intensify their heroic status but also make them vulnerable. This reading of Young Adult Fiction resonates with Turner's theorisation of liminality as the ambiguous quality that occurs in the middle stages of rite of passage rituals, when participants have not yet reached the status they will achieve once the ritual is complete, but when they have relinquished the identity they possessed before; this is a state that is both dangerous and liberating. Reflecting Turner's theorisation, these papers illustrate that those midway through the ritual process are outside the laws and hierarchies of their communities, leading to instances of dangerous instability of the self. Such an understanding challenges and undermines the more rigid binary allocations of conventional Fantasy Fiction in which boundaries between Good/Evil, Light/Dark, and Coloniser/Colonised are more neatly divided.

Another manner in which our paper reflected others' concerns with the radical politics of Global Fantastika was in the subversion of gendered norms. Ritual processes described in Turner's work on liminality are male dominated. Indeed, our paper considered the way that the Bush space in African Fiction has long been dominated by male protagonists and writers. We were interested in the ways Feminist writers, such as Oyeyemi and Okorafor, repurpose these spaces to tell new and vital stories that address the ongoing oppression of women. Hanan Alazaz's paper on the gendered werewolf of Arabia similarly considered feminist interventions in male-dominated spaces. Alazaz explored depictions of the female werewolves in Arabic Fiction, who roam the deserts of Arabia looking for men to devour. Alazaz argued that these narratives often invert gender structures of heteronormative discourse through the production of a 'monstrous feminine,' which turns against its

own abjection within and against the patriarchal discourse that has produced it.

We argued that Okorafor and Oyeyemi's fiction offered a feminist revisioning of traditionally male-dominated fictional spaces. Yet neither writer flinches from tackling the material and social conditions which continue to produce actual violence against women. Various papers at the conference revealed the way that Global Fantastika returns again and again to the very real inequities that exist in real physical and social spaces. Nedine Moonsamy's paper, "Women in the Writing of Nnedi Okorafor and Lauren Beukes: Animism and African Feminism" explored how Okorafor and Beukes's female protagonists are affected by and negotiate the conditions of globalisation and transnational consumerism. For Moonsamy, Okorafor and Beukes explore the possibilities of animism to resist the social and material imperatives of global consumerism, reenchanted the present for a feminist project. Hollie Johnson also considered very pressing material conditions in her paper, "Borders under Siege: Ecological Dystopia and Cyborg Insurrections in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*." She argued that *The Windup Girl* (2009) responds to the need to 'think globally' in response to looming environmental crisis. This is a novel that confronts the geopolitics of global capitalism in an attempt to reveal the interwoven social, cultural, economic, and ecological networks at play.

Our keynote address reflected the feelings of many of the delegates present: that the various genres of Fantastika represent important avenues both for expressing resistance to colonial rule and its legacies, and for imagining new futures that are not realisable in Realist Fiction. Furthermore, in re-centring the Fantasy narrative in the global south, the fiction explored at this conference challenges imperial ideologies that have long-dominated the Western Fantasy canon. Delegates revealed the variety of ways that Global Fantastika challenges the imperialist tropes of Fantasy Fiction – such as racialized othering and alienation, and the colonisation and exploitation of land and resources through reversals or re-imaginings, or simply by demonstrating the material and epistemic violence enacted on formerly colonised peoples. The recent upsurge in Speculative Fiction by black African-Heritage novelists – of which Oyeyemi and Okorafor are at the forefront – calls for a shift in the discursive and critical field to account for the new people and places erstwhile rarely represented in the genre, standing as testament to the importance of Global Fantastika as a field of study.

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Chloé Germaine Buckley is a Senior Lecturer in Literature and Film at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She writes about and teaches children's literature and culture. Her publications include articles on children's Gothic, Weird fiction, witches and the postcolonial Gothic. She is co-editor of the edited collection, *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches on Helen Oyeyemi* (Sussex Academic Press, 2017) with Sarah Ilott and author of *Twenty-First-Century Children's Gothic* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

Sarah Ilott is a Lecturer in Literature and Film at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK Her main

research and teaching interests are in postcolonial literature and genre fiction. She has published a monograph, *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries* (Palgrave, 2015), a collection edited with Chloe Buckley, *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi* (Sussex Academic Press, 2017), and multiple journal articles and book chapters.