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Elżbieta Binczycka-Gacek[1], Dariusz Brzostek[2]

UTOPIAS, POSSIBLE WORLDS, IMAGINARY HISTORIES: (DE)COLONIZING AFRICA IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

Abstract

This article explores the concept of "imaginary history" within speculative fiction narratives, particularly those addressing migration, colonization, and decolonization. These narratives are not merely artistic projections, but function as metaphors for contemporary real-world processes. Drawing on Malcolm Ferdinand's *Decolonial Ecology*, the study uses the philosophical perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt to frame these fictional histories, offering reinterpretation from an African cultural standpoint. The paper delves into the themes of "dwelling", "terrestrial nature", and "colonial inhabitation" to examine the speculative portrayal of potential futures where human and post-human life embarks on cosmic migrations, transforms extraterrestrial environments, and constructs artificial habitats. The paper critically assesses the sustainability of human and non-human life in shifting environments, both natural and artificial, offering a speculative framework for understanding these narratives. It analyzes Cristina de Middel's photobook *The Afronauts*, which envisions an African space program from the 1960s; the exhibition *O Futuro na Lista de Espera*, which showcases both dystopian and hopeful visions of the future; Anthony Joseph's *African Origins of UFOs*; and the works of Polish speculative fiction writer Jacek Dukaj. Through these lenses, the article investigates how migration, survival, and environmental transformation intersect in speculative fiction, proposing a critical perspective on the survival of life in continually evolving landscapes.

Keywords: speculative fiction, decolonial ecology, migration, transformation, Afrofuturism

[1] Jagiellonian University, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1443-2907

[2] Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8094-5159

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we treat the speculative narratives analyzed in the text primarily in the context of imaginary history, which Witold Ostrowski described years ago in genealogical terms as "an essentially modern creation, in that its proper interest lies in the process of history and not in the fictitious incidents it relates" (Ostrowski, 1960, p. 30). In the selected artistic texts, this means, first and foremost, that we will be examining mainly their predictive and/or speculative aspects, extracting from them an image of a future, possible, or alternative history whose artistic vehicle becomes a literary plot or image. Our reflection will focus on selected elements of this imaginary history, related to the processes of migration, colonization, and decolonization, treated both as an object of artistic and predictive speculation and as a metaphor for contemporary, actual social and political processes.

We understand "decolonialism" – both as a research attitude and as a creative or activist strategy – in accordance with the definition that has become established in recent years in relation to museum and curatorial practices, as well as the management of so-called "colonial collections". It refers to a tactic that "focuses on heritage, museums and monuments to disrupt dominant representations and collective memories that silently and relentlessly obscure the enduring effects of colonialism" (De Cesari et al., 2025, p. 4). At its core lies the deconstruction of hegemonic structures of imagination and representation that associate Africanity with such categories as primitivism, exoticism, or immaturity, but also with nature, wildness, spontaneity, and emotionality (Eyssette, 2021). In this framework, the aim of decolonization becomes the "pluralisation of narratives, to better reflect the histories and lived experiences of diverse audiences" (Dixon, 2012, p. 78), while the method takes the form of "a combination of strategic and operational practices" (Dixon, 2012, p. 84). In our own analysis, particular attention is likewise devoted to "how to effectively represent, narrate, and determine values of non-European, racialised cultures" (Tolia-Kelly, 2019, p. 8). We, therefore, seek to free our interpretative perspective from the hegemony of the imperial gaze while simultaneously situating the texts under discussion within both European and extra-European traditions of reflecting on future, history, and utopia.

Following the path suggested by Malcolm Ferdinand, who in his *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* introduced futurological

aspects to reflections on the condition of the natural environment in post-colonial countries and the perspective of its further transformation, offering criticism and reinterpretation of the concepts of Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, we would like to present an in-depth analysis of the possibility of perceiving imaginary history rooted in African culture. Therefore, we will assume the following terms and their cognitive and analytical implications: dwelling (Heidegger), terrestrial nature, system, bodies (Arendt), and colonial inhabitation (Ferdinand). This framework will facilitate a more precise analysis of colonization, decolonization, and migration phenomena. In speculative fiction, these are also understood as abandoning the Earth, cosmic exodus, forming extraterrestrial ecosystems, and, finally, building artificial habitats adjusted for human and post-human dwellers. Therefore, it is viable here to determine the basic definitions of these terms. We consider that: 1. "Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 350); 2. the fact is that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt, 1998, p. 7); 3. colonial inhabitation "refers to a singular conception with regard to the existence of certain human beings on Earth – the colonists – of their relationships with other humans – the non-colonists – as well as their ways of relating to nature and to the non-humans" (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 27); 4. "the human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms" (Arendt, 1998, p. 2); 5. "the Earth is no longer the cradle-home of human beings, but a permanent paradoxical temporary condition, a humanity without a home of their own" (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 81). These initial assumptions, formulated above as the path of our reflection, are clearly based on some specific cognitive and theoretical implications, so it is worth describing at least some of them here in some detail. First and foremost, the stakes in this speculative game invariably turn out to be the "survival" (outlast, Arendt, 7; surviving, Ferdinand, 193): of the world, the Earth, man, or humanity. This survival, moreover, is inevitably linked to the prospect of catastrophe (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 193) and the need to change (transform) the natural environment into an artificial one, or the very essence of man (homo sapiens). The alternative to this transformation can only be forced migration or the "repudiation of Earth" (Arendt, 1998, p. 2), which Hannah Arendt writes about. Starting from the category of the survival of man, or his non-human descendants, in a civilization-transformed natural environment or

in an artificial ecosystem constructed from scratch, we can, in turn, raise questions about the possible evolutionary paths of man as a species in interaction with this changing environment, or the deliberate modifications of individual human entities adapting them to function in artificial habitats and/or terraformed worlds. This, in turn, brings us to the question of the possible death of humanity or the annihilation of man (as a species) resulting from irreversible environmental degradation or the destruction of the Earth and the need to migrate and abandon the home world. In this context, it is once again worth recalling Heidegger's recognition of the problem of "annihilation" (*die Vernichtung*), bearing in mind that the German philosopher associated it not so much with death and destruction (of which there are invariably remnants or traces), but with a situation in which: "The human is annihilated", meaning: the essence of humanity is annihilated (Heidegger, 2010, p. 13). In such a situation, after a catastrophe or radical change of the environment, no traces of man (of what is human) remain in the environment, or what remains is no longer (and never will be) human. Another important consequence of the research perspective adopted here will be to see settlement, colonization, survival, and migration in terms of the inevitable tensions and relations between the individual and the collective, and the private and the public, and – thus – also to apprehend the Earth as the common. For it must be remembered that, even in the terms adopted by Heidegger: "Mortals dwell in so far as they save the earth" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 352), this is much more than "boundless spoliation" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 352). Let us point out here that, according to Arendt, the individual, private, and intimate (i.e., hidden) sphere includes everything that pertains to "bodily functions" and "all activities serving the subsistence of the individual and the survival of the species" (Arendt, 1998, p. 72). In contrast, labor, and – therefore – the actions of the body and their effects, already have a public nature (Arendt, 1998, p. 112), belonging to the common "the only one we feel need not be hidden" (Arendt, 1998, p. 111). However, what happens when, as a result of forced migration or adaptation to a drastically transformed (un)natural environment, man is confronted with the need to modify everything that defines the conditions of his earthly existence, everything that defines his being? As a result of a change in the environment or a change of the environment as such, is there, or is there not, a process in which the bodily functions – as the most common to the species and at the same time the most private and intimate – become the object of public reflection and

social (re)construction, and – therefore – also of work? At the most basic (biological, organic) level, all bodily functions are shared (and in this sense, they are public, shared by the collective), as we all breathe, eat, and excrete. Their evolutionary change or technological replacement concerns the very essence of what it means to be human, as it relates to our species. At the same time, however, human beings' adaptation to a new environment, to an artificial habitat, to a world after an ecological catastrophe, requires an unquestionable intervention, namely a reconstruction of bodily functions, which become the object of design and production as an inalienable element of the new common world and its inhabitants, thus losing the private and intimate character that characterized them when they were merely "natural".

It is, therefore, worth recalling what Arendt saw as a possible reason for such a radical transformation of the *conditio humana*: "The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the Earth to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the Earth offers him" (Arendt, 1998, p. 10). At the same time, however, the philosopher stipulates that: "Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the Earth would still be human; but the only statement we could make regarding their 'nature' is that they still are conditioned beings, even though their condition is now self-made to a considerable extent" (Arendt, 1998, p. 10). We can, therefore, pose further and more detailed questions: How profound must the changes in the environment be, or how radical the modification of the bodily functions, for us to be able to speak of man's actual rejection of his "terrestrial condition" (terrestrial by the condition of being alive, Arendt, 1998, p. 263) and the destruction of man's very being, if the annihilation does not even leave a trace of him, as his place is ultimately taken by someone else whom we can no longer describe as man? We believe that adopting such a theoretical framework for our reflections will make it possible to grasp the peculiarity of *these topoi* of speculative literature exploring imaginary histories such as migration, colonization, or ecological catastrophe in the context of such philosophical notions as dwelling, terrestrial nature, and annihilation. As Hannah Arendt wrote years ago: "Buried in the highly non-respectable literature of science fiction (to which, unfortunately, nobody yet has paid the attention it deserves as a vehicle of mass sentiments and mass desires)" (Arendt, 1998, p. 2).

ANALYSES

In its concept, *The Afronauts* by Cristina de Middel, published as a photobook in 2012, refers directly to Zambia's space exploration project initiated in 1960, the first of its kind in an African state. Its initiator was Edward Mukuka Nkoloso, "who claimed the goings-on interfered with his space program to beat the U.S. and the Soviet Union to the moon" (*Zambia*, 1964). While the project itself effectively ended at the stage of selecting and training astronaut candidates, it was a clear ideological statement by an African country on the development of space technology and the colonization of our solar system. De Middel's book is speculative in nature, bringing together a number of images depicting African astronauts (Afronauts) and "documenting" their actions during training and/or space conquest. The author herself shared her intentions using the following description: "I realised it was way more fun and effective to describe the relationship between Africa and the Western world using this story, rather than drought and wars. I was trying to say: what's wrong with Africans trying to go to the moon?" (Kurland, 2017, p. 34). She summed up the theme of her work in one short sentence: "It's about misrepresentation" (Kurland, 2017, p. 34).

In *The Afronauts*, the work can be interpreted through the lens of Malcolm Ferdinand's "colonial inhabitation" and Hannah Arendt's notions of *dwelling* and the *terrestrial condition*. The Afronauts' attempt to "inhabit" space symbolizes a rejection of the colonial exploitation of African terrestrial landscapes, envisioning an escape from the historical constraints imposed by colonial systems. De Middel's astronauts represent an act of reclaiming agency over the very concept of *dwelling*, where the African subject transitions from being bound by exploitative earthly structures to imagining new, autonomous habitats in extraterrestrial realms. This speculative imagery underscores the fragile boundary between survival and transformation, as the Afronauts embark on a journey that challenges their terrestrial ties and engages with the philosophical question of whether humanity can reconstruct its essence while inhabiting radically altered environments. The juxtaposition of the African landscape with space exploration reflects a confrontation with annihilation – not of humanity's physical presence, but of colonial narratives that deny Africa a place in technological and imaginative futures. The photographer, thus, consciously adopts a Western point of view, only to then break it with a series of photographs

showing the actions of Africans in the sphere of space colonization, portraying them as colonizing unknown worlds rather than being colonized (by the West) or as throwing off the yoke of colonization. At the same time, however, the most serious interpretative challenge in *The Afronauts* project is, paradoxically, its title. Traditional terms for space travelers – "an astronaut" or, in the linguistic practice of Eastern European socialism, "a cosmonaut" – refer to the assumed destination of the journey: "towards the stars" or "into space". The term "Afronaut", on the other hand, identifies the wanderer not by the destination, but by his place of origin: an African in space, an African astronaut. This may have been done to, perversely, keep with the astronaut tradition, treating the image of the world in the photographs precisely as a landscape of Africa – altered, unrecognizable even to those Africans who are trying to discover it for themselves. After all, we are already familiar with this motif in science fiction – an Earth unrecognized by star travelers returning to it is one of the topoi of speculative literature, as seen in *Return from the Stars* (1961) by Stanisław Lem or *Planet of the Apes* (1963) by Pierre Boulle, just to mention a few. In this context, the wilderness where Cristina de Middel's Afronauts travel can be both a landscape of an alien, uninhabited planet and an image of the African barren land (the wasteland), ravaged by centuries of colonization and exploitation, known, for example, from post-apocalyptic films such as *Pumzi* (2009, directed by Wanuri Kahiu). However, the image of the extraterrestrial exodus and interplanetary expansion of Africans here is undoubtedly confronted with the stereotype of Africa as a colonized continent, rather than a colonizing one, founded on this misrepresentation that the photographer confronts in her work.

The theme of migration itself, seen both in historical-realist and mythological-religious terms, was, moreover, invariably present in the stories of the African diaspora, also permeating Afrofuturist narratives and practices as early as the initiators of this artistic movement, such as Sun Ra: "This black cosmic vision is easily seen as part of the theme of travel, of journey, of exodus, of escape, which dominates African-American narratives: of people who could fly back to Africa, travel in the spirit, visit or be visited by the dead; of chariots and trains to heaven, the Underground Railroad, Marcus Garvey's steamship line, Rosa Parks on the Mobile bus, freedom riders" (Szwed, 1998, p. 134). Referring to the tradition thus defined, confronting in the memory of successive generations the experience of forced displacement marked by the nightmare of the Middle Passage, with the

privilege of voluntary migration in search of a happy place, Sun Ra, who formed the foundations of Afrofuturism, agreed that "black people should have their own culture, and he favored cultural centers for blacks at one point, and later even urged emigration to space, thus solving the nationalists' 'land question' (what Baraka called the 'space question') on an intergalactic level" (Szwed, 1998, p. 311). It was this aspect of this future-oriented ideology, which included a pan-African space project, that Paul Youngquist emphasized, noting explicitly that Sun Ra used "the prospect of space travel to produce an astro-black solution to historically enforced injustice" (Youngquist, 2016, p. 212). Ytasha L. Womack calls this "the sankofa effect", quoting the chairman of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians: "We get to pull from our past to build our future. That's what Afrofuturism is about, going back to ancient traditions so that we can move more correctly into the future" (Womack, 2013, p. 253). Sankofa is a sign from the Adinkra language of symbols, being a graphic or pictorial representation of the West African Twi proverb "Se wo were fi na wo sankofa a yenkyi", which translates as "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten" or simply "Go back and get it". It is present in contemporary cultural texts and practices in the US (Temple) and West Africa (Mayer and de Witte) and is graphically depicted as a bird with its head pointing backwards, dropping an egg on its back. It often functions in the context of another powerful Black Atlantic story, namely the myth of the Flying Africans, which tells the story of how slaves turned into birds and returned to Africa. Variants of this myth have influenced the imagination of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and the Americas for centuries, where it has developed very strongly, especially in the Caribbean Basin (Binczycka-Gacek, 2021, p. 512). As a cultural trace, the myth of the Flying Africans returning home has been present in folklore, music, poetry, literature, film, and the fine arts, and continues to inspire artists and writers today, as they incorporate it in many ways, including in futurist contexts. By proposing a series of juxtapositions of concepts such as "blackness", "outer darkness", "outer space", "travel" (and even "space travel" or "intergalactic travel"), as well as "exodus" and "world" with space age futurology and ancient Egyptian mythology in his poetic and programmatic texts, Sun Ra shifted, through his ideological work on the imagination of his readers and listeners, the traditional image of the "return to Africa" as the land of the ancestors towards the migration of the black community into space, which is the promised land of future generations of Africans

(Sun Ra). In this way, in his texts, the two images overlapped, creating a coherent vision of the return to the lost homeland, while this return was perceived as the conquest of the future.

The exhibition *O Futuro na Lista de Espera* (The Future on the Waiting List) by Collective Waitinglist, comprised of Mussunda Nzombo and Manuela Grotz, opened on 13 October 2023 at the Internacional de Exposições do Museu Nacional de História Natural – SEXPO in Luanda. It explores themes of anticipation and speculation about scenarios concerning the future. As with Cristina de Middel's photobook, the artists' narrative is speculative, presenting a series of images of the African future generated through artificial intelligence. The exhibition, which had an interactive and performative opening, consists of AI-generated images and installations that combine dystopian visions of the future with reflections on contemporary social and environmental issues. It presents a variety of images of the future, featuring motifs of a ruined, post-apocalyptic city, futuristic landscapes, and elements related to earth and space exploration. The thematic core of the exhibition revolves around the elements of nature: water, earth, air, and fire, which are contextualized in relation to contemporary themes spanning the worlds of fashion, politics, environment, architecture, and society. The exhibition encourages reflection on the potential future impacts of human activities on these fundamental elements. It presents water as a symbol of endangered life, fire in the context of energy challenges, air in relation to atmospheric pollution, and earth in terms of sustainable food production and population mobility. It also addresses the issue of migration: in two paintings, we see crowds of people disembarking from a plane at the airport, with officials walking toward it, and modern train stations in skyscraper-filled cities. These landscapes are interspersed with images of muddy roads, crumbling structures, rubble, and an industrialized landscape, presenting a picture of a world on the brink of decay and a new beginning. In the center of the exhibition, we see two large-format portraits of astronauts with the faces of Grotz and Nzombo, wearing orange jumpsuits, standing against a background of space shuttles, which fits with the theme of exodus from Earth and the search for new worlds. The scenery of a deteriorating post-industrial landscape, reflected through the lens of a DSLR camera named *Future*, and the futuristically dressed models in a landscape referencing the four elements, as depicted in the other prints, add depth to the narrative of survival and adaptation amid changing environmental conditions. There, the elements of nature are mixed with

industrial destruction, symbolizing the coexistence and conflict between the environment and human interference. *O Futuro na Lista de Espera* shows different facets of the African city in the context of global change and speculation about the future, mixing dystopian elements with visions of hope for new solutions. Kabudi Ely, curator of the exhibition, highlights the interdisciplinary and intertextual narratives created in this exhibition, which integrate history, culture, and contemporary socio-political issues in the context of humanity's challenges for the future. She points to references to the Greek idea of *arché* as a fundamental world-building principle. The exhibition's AI-generated landscapes depict a world where the *terrestrial condition*, as Arendt defines it, is destabilized – earth, air, water, and fire, once fundamental to human dwelling, become uninhabitable due to unchecked industrialization and climate crises. This forced transformation raises Heidegger's concern of *annihilation*, where the destruction of natural environments necessitates new artificial ways of being, challenging the very essence of what it means to *dwell*. The exhibition, thus, speculates on a future where Africa, instead of being a site of passive extraction, is central to imagining alternative modes of survival, yet still grapples with the long-term consequences of colonial and capitalist destruction. Elements such as water, air, earth, and fire were then considered its basic components and were central to pre-Socratic natural philosophy, which sought to explain nature and natural phenomena without reference to mythology or supernatural forces. In Nzombo's and Grotz's work, they illustrate key issues in the contemporary world, such as sustainability, climate change, and consumerism. These works ask questions about environmental degradation as a result of climate change and human activity – the harmfulness of industrialization, the oil industry, and the fashion industry – while serving as a medium for artistic and predictive speculation, drawing a picture of alternative futures and posing questions about the ways in which humans can redefine and negotiate their relationship with the Earth. Through the lens of artificial intelligence and augmented reality, Nzombo and Grotz speculate on habitats that could become future spaces for humans and post-humans.

The poet, writer, and musician Anthony Joseph goes even further in his reflections on the cosmic future of Africans in his text entitled *The African Origins of UFOs*, in which present-day Trinidad is intertwined with a mythical past and a narrative of a post-apocalyptic future on a distant planet. As Lauri Ramey writes: "This new world is shown to be striving to

reconcile the wrongs of the past that resulted in the characters' fictional migration, which parallels the diaspora of black people in the 17th century from their African homeland due to the international slave trade" (Ramey, 2016, p. 168). As Ramey further notes, by referring to and recreating the myths of African origins, Joseph draws on Mircea Eliade's notion of using myths to give new meaning to the present. The diaspora is seen as an effect – the result of events that took place in specific locations in the past, and their echoes spread through time and space to the present (Ramey, 2016, p. 169). Joseph fully uses and expands this concept, imagining a wave of diaspora extending into the future, into space and other planets, but aiming to reverse the migration – a return to Africa. In doing so, he has fused the diasporic present with aboriginal myths, reactivating them as something new and using techniques associated with avant-garde practices, speculative fiction, and scientific literature.

In *The African Origins of UFOs*, Joseph engages with *colonial inhabitation* by reframing the forced displacement of the African diaspora as a cosmic journey, where intergalactic migration becomes an extension of historical exile. Key themes include the relationship between the future and the past, race, identity, exile and collective memory, the experience of colonialism and migration, as well as settlement. The novel's narrative is avant-garde and full of formal experiments, such as combining science fiction with gangsta rap, or blurring the boundaries between poetry and prose by using techniques such as cut-up prose and glued-up poetry. The novel refers to recognizable themes of magic, myths, fairytales, and rituals, making good use of irony and wit. The specific style is evident in syntax, punctuation, spelling, and the frequent use of neologisms such as "niggerfish" and "pissfunk". Joseph also uses elements of music and folklore, especially in the section on the floating island, while the section on Ïeré is characterized by a less experimental, more traditional narrative. As Adriano Elia writes, Joseph's work draws on diverse influences such as surrealism, magical realism, jazz music, and black poetry, reflecting the influence of, among others, Ted Joans, Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, Ornette Coleman, and Franz Fanon. It is also inspired by musicians such as Miles Davis and John Coltrane, as well as writers and poets such as Léopold Senghor and Ishmael Reed (Elia, 2017).

The text *The African Origins of UFOs* by Anthony Joseph is composed of three interweaving stories. The first takes place in the future, on the planet "Kunu Supia". The second takes place in contemporary Trinidad and is

entitled *Journal of a Return to a Floating Island*. The third and final part of the novel, *The Genetic Memory of Ancient Ïerè,* is set in the mythical past.

The year is 3053 on the distant planet Kunu Supia, where only those with the darkest skin tone can survive. One of the key characters is Joe Sambucus Nigra, a hustler who trades in synthetic melanin. His business balances technology and magic, selling illegal melanin to enable lighter-skinned people to survive in the planet's hostile environment. In *The African Origins of UFOs*, the place of "black" as a socio-political category is taken, in Joseph's terminology, by "post-Earth Negroes". On Kunu Supia, black people are not discriminated against; on the contrary, they are the most powerful and dominant social group. The idea of "blackness" was only relevant on Earth; on Kunu Supia, if you are not black enough to survive, you need synthetic melanin. As Lauri Ramey writes: "The formal and narrative purpose of this work is to provide significant insight into the history of the African diaspora by foregrounding the fundamental longing and search for home among people who have uniquely preserved their culture when removed from it. At the same time, it is a poet's way of discovering a path through language and experience, regardless of race" (Ramey, 2016, p. 168).

The setting for Kunu Supia is Toucan Bay, a space replica of a Caribbean port city. Its inhabitants have Ïerèan blood in their veins, a reference to the former inhabitants of Trinidad, which was destroyed by floods in the 30th century. The survivors of the catastrophe emigrated to the remote Kunu Supia, where they recreated the Caribbean way of life in a cosmic dimension, creating a scenario reminiscent of the American Wild West. Joseph depicts Caribbean culture in space in a metaphorical and parodic manner, exploring themes of diaspora and the resilience of Black culture. In this layer, the oneiric nature of the language is, in part, a reflection of the narrator's narcotic genetic flashbacks, giving him access to the cultural history recorded in his body. The story in this section of the work is scattered and also includes fragments of the narrator's ancestral stories describing the destroyed ancient Ïerè.

Journal of a Return to a Floating Island is set on land, in the present. Here, Joseph refers to the work of Martinique poet Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* from 1939, invoking similar themes of identity exploration and colonialism. The eight chapters of *Journal* present a series of genetic flashbacks that take the form of meditations on themes of exile, return, and the futile attempt to find one's former self. These chapters constitute an "intimate travelogue", a record of snapshots of images and

collages of sounds. This part is also described as a return to an island that exists only "in the ocean of memory", in the contested territory of native land and lost land. It is a place that, once abandoned, undergoes an irreversible transformation, becoming only a shadow in the memory of the returnee.

The third layer of the novel, *The Genetic Memory of Ancient Ïerè*, is set in the past. The name Ïerè is the original name of Trinidad, which means "land of the hummingbird". This part focuses on exploring the genetic memories of the islanders, their origins, and their long history before colonization. This plane of the work is a collection of cosmogonic myths set in the past, particularly in the water. A key narrative stems from the Flying Africans myth circle, recounting Daaga's return to Africa, which inspired Joseph to write *The African Origins of UFOs*. The inspiration came from a tourist guidebook to Trinidad, which mentioned a slave named Daaga, who, in 1837, vowed to return to Africa and take his people with him. The guidebook's line, "they set off to walk to Africa", led Joseph to imagine their journey in a spacecraft, symbolizing Black people's quest for their roots and a mythical Africa. This became a sci-fi story that linked past, present, and future (Ramey, 2009, p. 159).

In his Afrofuturist hybrid of poetry and prose, Joseph has Daaga pilot a spaceship, treating his story as a kind of afterword, weaving the myth of the Flying Africans into the fabric of a text that escapes genre classifications, coming at the intersection of science fiction, myth, and surrealism. Using the means and aims of diasporic, futuristic, and avant-garde writing, Joseph pursues the common goals of all these literary and stylistic categories. In *The African Origins of UFOs*, Daaga represents all the members of the African diaspora who transform from former slaves into intergalactic citizens, gliding through the sky in flying saucers. The book disrupts Arendt's *terrestrial condition* by imagining a future where survival depends on adaptation to an alien world, echoing the existential rupture of the transatlantic slave trade. On Kunu Supia, melanin is not just a marker of identity, but a necessity for survival, transforming blackness into both a biological and political force. This shift interrogates Heidegger's notion of *annihilation*, as the novel speculates on whether humanity, when radically altered by its environment, remains human at all. Joseph's fragmented, avant-garde narrative mirrors this existential instability, presenting a speculative history where the descendants of the displaced redefine *dwelling* beyond Earth, challenging the limits imposed by colonial histories.

An interesting counterpoint to these speculative fantasies in the form of alternative histories can be found in the work of Jacek Dukaj, the most important contemporary Polish science fiction writer, whose novels often evoke precisely the African context, as well as issues of cosmic migration and colonization in juxtaposition with the categories of race, species, and evolution. Although Polish fantasy literature began to demonstrate an interest in Africa and its possible future quite early on – including in the perspective of colonial aspirations and the migration of Poles in search of a new homeland (Bolesław Prus's *Zemsta* [Revenge] of 1908) and the development of independent African states (Brzostek, 2021, pp. 479–495) – Dukaj's achievements deserve special attention, not least because of the intertextual references to books by Joseph Conrad, another famous writer of Polish origin, whose works are the object of Dukaj's frequent polemics. Dukaj eagerly engages in dialogue with colonial fantasies (including the never-achieved Polish aspirations), taking up themes of (interplanetary) migration, (cosmic) colonization, and the exploitation and transformation of alien worlds in the context of their terraforming – often taking the actions of European states towards the African continent as a model and analyzing their possible future consequences.

In Dukaj's fiction, the notion of *colonial inhabitation* is transposed from terrestrial history onto cosmic and post-human landscapes. His works engage with Arendt's *terrestrial condition* by depicting environments where humanity is no longer bound to Earth but instead subjected to radical transformation, either through technological augmentation, alternative physics, or evolutionary shifts. Dukaj's vision of terraforming and bioengineering also evokes Heidegger's *annihilation* – not merely as physical destruction, but as the erasure of the human essence itself, where individuals become something fundamentally other due to their adaptation to artificial or non-human conditions. By positioning Africa and its historical experiences as a model for planetary colonization, Dukaj critiques the continuity of colonial logics in speculative futures, questioning whether human agency remains intact when existence itself is reshaped by external forces.

Reigning among these phantasms is the notion, reinforced under Hegel, that "Africa is a continent without history", whose inhabitants are too primitive to know the concept of freedom. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, "notoriously condemning African culture to prehistory and blaming the Africans themselves for New World slavery, Hegel repeated the banal and apologetic argument that slaves were better off in the colonies than in

their African homeland, where slavery was 'absolute'" (Buck-Morss, 2009, pp. 67–68). Joseph Conrad, the most famous Polish author in exile, also wrote his well-known novella *Heart of Darkness* in the same vein. Conrad's text is quite racist – black people are completely and, in many ways, dehumanized, with Africa being presented as a continent without history, an alien, dangerous planet, a wild, prehistoric twin of Earth. One of the key scenes in *Heart of Darkness* is the moment in which the novella's main character, Marlow, sailing up the Congo River in a steamer, realizes that the sound of drums coming from the shore may be linked to some kind of religion, and he is horrified by this observation. For a moment, he allows himself to believe that there might be some kind of equality between him and the inhuman mass of black people, their eyes glaring ominously white. Very often, *Heart of Darkness* depicts not people hiding in the jungle, but just the eyes themselves, watching the passing steamer from afar, while individual natives, if they show themselves at all, emerge "out of its womb" and return to it – as if they were not people, but animals or strange creations of the landscape. Their connection to the (terrifying and wild) habitat further emphasizes the "state of nature" they are in. However, in the scene where Marlow hears the sounds of drumming, more terrifying than the idea that the natives are inhuman is the thought that they might be human; they might actually be people like him. This is seen even more acutely in another passage in which, having seen the natives on the "prehistoric" shore of Africa, amidst an inhuman moonscape, Marlow finally verbalizes his greatest fear: "It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman" (Conrad, 2008, p. 39). Marlow's horror at the idea that black people could be human shows how deeply rooted "the myth of the white man" (Binczycka-Gacek) has made him think that there is really only one people – white people. It makes him shudder to think that this might not be the case. For what do these untamed creatures, these cannibals who feed on human flesh, say about humanity? Marlow's horror, however, is not driven by humanist motives; he does not shudder at the idea that, because black people are human, it means that we whites are murdering people, exploiting people, and watching those people die in suffering. He is more horrified by the fact that he has to "share" humanity with "something" that, after all, does not in any way deserve to be called human. The quote above fully reveals not only Marlow's racism, but also the racism of *Heart of Darkness* as a whole, in which blacks are not only not the subject

of the story, but are the object that allows whites to reflect on themselves and their own condition. They are the path to the goal, which in Conrad's text is to understand the phenomenon of human nature, and yet they are completely excluded from that nature. What outrages Marlow most about the Belgian Company's actions is not its inhumane treatment of the natives, but its focus on the most mundane factor: profit, and the complete abandonment of the facade of civilization or European values on the way to that profit. On the African continent, one even encounters a "cult" of ivory, a cult of profit that makes people look like "unfaithful pilgrims" who whisper the words "ivory" as if they were praying to it. In Dukaj's futuristic novel *Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość* (Perfect Imperfection), Africa is depicted as a place of special significance. It is relatively free from electronic manipulation, although large areas are still literally hijacked by traffickers and pirates to create Saks – African habitats consisting of fragments of wrapped space (folds) that resemble "a bubble within a bubble, an onion" (Dukaj, 2021, p. 89). These are places for prisoners to be sent down or for tourists to rest – beyond the control of the artificial intelligences overseeing everything: "It's obvious, I can walk a thousand miles, but still I won't go anywhere beyond the same patch of Africa, torn from the Earth and locked by my captors in a space-time onion stretched out on the Fang" (Dukaj, 2021, p. 103). The novel's action is set in a futuristic, technologically advanced, and post-human world in which few humans, their innumerable avatars, and artificial intelligences coexist in a virtual reality called the *Plateau*, which is a simulation and extension of physical space-time. In this universe, romance and business flourish, wars are fought, and conspiracies are hatched. Here, the African continent once again becomes the object of plundering extraction, though this time it does not concern natural resources, but space itself, extracted in a way that, despite its futuristic staging, brings to mind mechanisms well known to postcolonial ecology: "By exporting nutrients from the countryside to the cities, without any recirculation being assured, the industry strips the soil of the countryside and diminishes its fertility" (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 43). In this case, however, the colonial management of space can lead to the annihilation of the African lifeworld (Lebenswelt) along with its environment, culture, and human beings.

The extensive novel *Inne pieśni* (Other Songs) offers an alternative history of humanity and constructs a speculative world governed by different physical principles, rooted in Aristotle's writings, particularly his

metaphysics. The novel presents two natural theories: perfect and imperfect zoology and botany. Both theories build on Aristotelian views of unchanging species and definitional classifications, with perfectionists proposing that the quest for entelechy applies to nature as a whole. In this view, while species themselves are unchanging, the types of species present evolve from less perfect to more perfect forms (Dukaj, 2013, p. 188). Interestingly, however, in such a different world, Africa, as viewed by European travelers, conquerors, and colonizers, appears to be a place very close to the colonial stereotypes familiar to our world: "Nevertheless, this was already a wild Africa, detached from the forms of civilisation" (Dukaj, 2013, p. 160). What makes it decidedly different from the rest of the world is, above all, its peculiar biological imperfection, resulting directly from what is known as the African Curvature, which, when viewed by the protagonists up close, turns out to be an extraterrestrial habitat located at the very center of the continent and constituting, as a terraforming area, a foothold for the colonization of Earth by non-human life forms. Here, Dukaj introduces the motif of first contact, characteristic of science fiction, but situates it in a colonial perspective and makes the conquest of Africa a clear metaphor for the enslavement of the Earth and, potentially, the annihilation of humanity as a species by forms infinitely more powerful and perfect than man. It is worth noting at this point that this theme recurs in analogous terms, both in Polish fantasy literature (Wiktor Żwikiewicz's *Druga Jesień* [The Second Autumn] and Krzysztof Boruń's *Małe, zielone ludziki* [Little Green Men]) and in the speculative narratives of African writers (Tade Thompson's *Rosewater*). The most interesting short story of this type, *Serce Mroku* (this Polish title translates into English as *Heart of Darkness*), is an adaptation of the classic plot of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, transposed to outer space and to the world of alternative history, where Dukaj explicitly interrogates the colonial structures of conquest and exploitation within an interstellar setting, extending them into outer space, where European imperialist logic persists in the domination of alien territories. The story is set in a future in which Nazi Germany has successfully conquered space and is colonizing more extraterrestrial worlds. The setting for the events depicted, meanwhile, turns out to be the planet Darkness (*Mrok*), which is an easily recognizable allegory of Africa at the time of European colonial expansion – with all its attributes defined, of course, by the European colonizer: "It is an absolute wilderness" (Dukaj, 2010, p. 605). This biological wilderness, however, offers explorers astonishing

opportunities to control evolution as a process entirely subordinate to the will of the human conqueror: "I have entered Hell. (…) There are animals here, Darkness is full of animals, animals and plants and God knows what else" (Dukaj, 2010, p. 619).

The protagonist of the story – a German intelligence officer, following the example of Conrad's Marlow – has to travel to the unexplored interior of the planet in order to find the Polish colonizer and rebel, Count Leszczyński, nicknamed "The Devil" by the Nazis, who is suspected of conducting illegal experiments with the local fauna, or even of discovering intelligent natives on planet Darkness and conspiring with them against the Reich. The truth, however, turns out to be more complex and undoubtedly terrifying. For the Polish renegade has discovered the biological principles of accelerated natural evolution on Darkness, interfering with them directly, with the goal of creating a race of (non)human beings in his own image and likeness, ready to take over the planet and overthrow the Nazi hegemony, even at the price of the ultimate annihilation of humanity. In doing so, Leszczyński mixes biological eugenics with religious messianism in his subversive work, creating an inverted, revisionist version of Nazi racism whereby that which comes from the very heart of Darkness is to become a new humanity (Dukaj, 2010, p. 634). Thus, the new Poles[3] – born of Leszczyński's will for revenge and the extra-human fauna of Darkness, subjected to genetic modification and messianic formation – are intended, in time, to emigrate into space, destroy the Reich, and recolonize Earth, making it not the cradle of humanity, but its destiny, after what is purely human ceases to be an indelible burden on the inhabitation of the world.

Jacek Dukaj's science fiction novels and short stories, discussed above in the context of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, take up several important themes that have been recurring for years in both speculative fiction and alternative histories, particularly in relation to colonization and migration as problems directly linked to environmental transformation and changes in the conditions of human existence. These themes include, first and foremost, the plundering of the world – specifically, the removal of entire

[3] It is intriguing that, just as in the novella *Zemsta* (Revenge) by Bolesław Prus, mentioned above, the Poles became Africans through forced migration and colonization, so in Dukaj's novel, the inhabitants of Darkness, modeled on Africans, are to become new Poles through migration and recolonization.

sections to create enclaves (such as prisons and luxury developments) that exist outside of the time and space accessible to everyone (Perfect Imperfection). Additionally, there is the annihilation of the natural environment, natives, and humans that precedes the act of creating a non-natural environment and non-human beings, representing a transformation of an alien life form into a human being (*Serce Mroku*). Lastly, there is the concept of Earth being transformed by alien life forms into their future habitat, resulting in the annihilation of humans and the human world (Other Songs). In all these works, Dukaj fondly returned to the history of the conquest of the African continent, seeing it as a historical and civilizational model for the exploitation of the world, of which Malcolm Ferdinand wrote: "It also includes specific relationships to non-humans, to landscapes, and to lands through the colonial inhabitation of the Earth" (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 175).

CONCLUSION

The cultural texts discussed above, which invariably take the form of speculative fiction in the shape of literary narratives or paintings, have mostly touched upon issues of imaginary history, bringing about reinterpretations of the colonial past or artistic projections of a possible future: of Africa and its peoples, of cosmic migration, of humanity as a species and civilizational formation, and of terrestrial nature in general. They include visions stretched between the possibility of colonial inhabitation and the inhabitation (*dwelling*) of the Earth and worlds like it, and the need for migration or escape at the cost of "a leap into another essence" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 13), which can mean both a future "repudiation of an Earth" and a final catastrophe in which "the essence of the human will be annihilated" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 13). The complexity and diversity of the works in the exhibition *O Futuro na Lista de Espera* shed light on many aspects of human life and its future, from global migration to environmental degradation to speculation about future technologies and space colonization. Each piece of work becomes a vehicle for deeper reflection on how contemporary actions affect tomorrow, creating a multi-layered dialogue between the present and the future. In *The African Origins of UFOs*, Anthony Joseph has created a metaphorical space where former slaves travel into the future to reach a "home" located in yet another time and place. By creating

the planet Kunu Supia, Joseph explores the consequences of the human species adapting to extreme environmental conditions: cosmic ecosystems, harsh climates, and the rules of natural selection, forcing changes in physiology and social structure. Survival in this context involves a radical modification of the bodily functions of the inhabitants, an adaptation of their skin pigmentation to intense solar radiation, and drastic changes in the human condition hitherto understood as terrestrial. The social situation familiar from Earth has been dramatically reversed on Kunu Supia: melanin is a precious resource here; blacks are the dominant majority, and dark skin color is not only desirable, but essential for survival in extreme conditions. Jacek Dukaj's science fiction narratives clearly formulate questions about the survival of the species inhabiting a specific environment: cosmic habitats, alien planets, and virtual reality – at the price of a radical modification of bodily function (i.e., a change in the human condition understood as terrestrial). Dukaj's vision of terraforming and bioengineering also evokes Heidegger's *annihilation* – not merely as physical destruction, but as the erasure of the human essence itself, where individuals become something fundamentally other due to their adaptation to artificial or non-human conditions. By positioning Africa and its historical experiences as a model for planetary colonization, Dukaj critiques the continuity of colonial logics in speculative futures, questioning whether human agency remains intact when existence itself is reshaped by external forces. All of these stories, therefore, raise questions about the essence of what is human in the process of inevitable change – affecting both the world and humanity – that can result from both environmental (terraforming of alien planets) and human (space migration) transformations. If, therefore, Cristina de Middel's visual project raises the question of who the Afronauts are, alongside another equally important question asking who the (contemporary) Africans are, it is fair to assume that another question also arises: who are the migrating Africans, who are the migrating humans, and perhaps also, in a speculative mode, what is migrating humanity? Imaginary histories obviously serve here to narrate possible futures, both in their utopian and dystopian variants. However, they are also valuable diagnoses of the present, formulating the question of whether a sociopolitical reality based on colonial inhabitation is leading us straight toward a future in which humanity (if it remains humanity) will irreversibly lose its terrestrial nature and become only "humanity without a home of its own." (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 81).

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