

The Relationship between Futurity and the Rurality and Urbanity of Spaces in the Queer African Science Fiction of *Triangulum* by Masande Ntshanga

Bibi Burger

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9483-6671>

University of Pretoria, South Africa

bibi.burger@up.ac.za

Abstract

The science fiction novel *Triangulum* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2019) by Masande Ntshanga challenges both the association of the queer with the urban and the use of the city as symbol for the future in science fiction. The verisimilitude of the life of a queer teenager in the rural Eastern Cape of South Africa—a type of rural queer existence not often depicted in literature—is represented in the novel. While the unnamed narrator of the novel does eventually, like many queer characters, leave her rural background behind in order to move to Johannesburg, the Johannesburg of the future is portrayed in dystopian terms. In this novel the future that the city symbolises is the result of extractive and exploitative capitalism. This vision of the future is rejected as unsustainable and unethical. In order to enable another, more hopeful future, the narrator has to return to the rural and embrace ways of living which, like the rural, are associated with the past. The novel's advocacy of a return to pre-industrial Africa can be considered anti- or decolonial, since it complicates and ultimately rejects Western conceptions of temporality and progress. It can also be considered in terms of José Esteban Muñoz's argument that a queer utopia is necessary to prompt political action in the present (*Cruising Utopia*. New York: New York University Press, 2009). Like Muñoz, *Triangulum* rejects a future which consists of a reproduction of the present; instead, it holds out hope for a radically different utopian future.

Keywords: the city in science fiction; decolonial science fiction; metronormativity; queer anti-urbanism; queer temporality; queer science fiction; South African science fiction

Introduction

Since Jack Halberstam (2005, 36) coined the term “metronormativity” to describe the normative association of queer lives with the urban, queer theorists such as Scott Herring (2010) and Karen Tongson (2011) have taken up the call to assert the presence of queer people and practices outside of the metropolises and within rural and semi-rural spaces, as well as those urban spaces neglected or ignored by academia. Afrofuturism and African science fiction more generally, too, often display an urban bias. In reclaiming aspects associated with Western futurity for Africans and the African diaspora, Afrofuturist fictions are often set in large cities. The use of the city as symbol of the future in both queer and science fiction narratives can, however, be criticised for the ways in which it is influenced by colonial schemas that label both the rural and Africa as a continent as “traditional”, “uncivilised”, and, in short, temporarily lagging behind Western metropolises (see Halberstam 2005, 34; Mignolo 2011, 151).

The first half of Masande Ntshanga's second novel, the science fiction work *Triangulum* (2019), is not set in a city. The queer unnamed protagonist of the novel whiles away her days in suburbia in the Eastern Cape, in King William's Town and in semi-rural spaces that are explicitly introduced as part of the former Ciskei homeland. Her teenage ennui is interrupted by visions of a possibly extraterrestrial nature. This setting contributes a texture to the novel different to that which is conventionally associated with both queer narratives and African science fiction. As an adult, the protagonist moves to Johannesburg, and in this way *Triangulum* seemingly conforms to the popular narrative of "queer migration", according to which queer people who grow up in rural areas (should) move to more forward-thinking urban spaces as soon as they can (Herring 2010, 3). The fact that the second half of the novel is set in the near future, in 2025 and 2035, whereas the first half is set in 1999 and 2002, means that in *Triangulum* the city is seemingly a symbol of the future.

The treatment of temporality in the novel is, however, more complicated. The Johannesburg of the future is depicted as a dystopic space, one that bears an uncanny resemblance to South Africa's apartheid past. The only hope for an escape from the overwhelming trajectory of capitalist exploitation is, eventually, represented as a return to the rural. Far from the Western-style high-tech city representing the future, the novel posits that humanity must return to rural ways of living, which are usually associated with the past. The fact that this narrative plays out in a *queer, African* science fiction novel is especially relevant, since it means that hegemonic metronormative and colonial conceptions of time, space, and progress are challenged. The queerness of the novel also means that the return to the rural cannot be understood as a conservative impulse aimed at protecting heteronormative traditions in favour of a reproductive future. Rather than the kind of reproductive future that is rejected by queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004), the future that is hoped for in *Triangulum* has more in common with the communitarian utopia that José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues is necessary to inform actions in the present.

Metronormativity

In one sense, it could be claimed that the 2019 Afrikaans novel *Smit Motors* by Reney Warrington complicates traditional narratives around the relationships between queerness and rural spaces. The most common spatial queer narrative is a flight from the (oppressive) rural to the (accepting, progressive) urban (Herring 2010, 31). Instead, the lesbian protagonist of *Smit Motors*, Petra, travels from her home in Johannesburg to the small Free State town of Edenville to renovate a garage she has inherited from her grandfather. The common association of the rural with conservatism is complicated by the fact that some of the inhabitants of the town are more progressive and accepting of Petra's sexuality than she expects (Warrington 2019, 162). In general, though, Petra's gaze is that of the sophisticated urban queer who sees the town and townsfolk as ignorant and uncultured. It is within this framework that the following scene, set in the local supermarket, stands out (156–57):

It turns out that there were two cashiers. Identical twin sisters. Petra has to look twice before she figures out what is going on. They are both blonde, definitely still in school, and dressed like surfers with Vans sneakers, denim shorts, Billabong T-shirts and wooden beads around their wrists and necks. Petra can't stop staring at them. What lives are they living in this godforsaken town? What do they do on a Friday night? She would bet money that they

make out with girls. She admires their bravery. Here they stand with open-faced smiles, for all the world to see and to judge. She is astounded.¹

The focalisation in this quote is clearly that of an urban queer gaze, the product of an urban queer logic which finds the existence of rural queers almost unimaginable. The quote also provides a glimmer, however, of the undeniable reality of rural queer lives, and rural queer lives in South Africa specifically. The verisimilitude of rural queer existences, depicted in the above excerpt, was historically largely absent from queer theory as well as underrepresented in literature. It is this invisibility of the rural queer, and the concomitant “conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities”, which Halberstam (2005, 36) calls “metronormativity”. The prevalence of metronormativity is likely informed by what Georg Simmel described in 1903 as the blasé attitude that characterises urban encounters. Whereas everyone takes an interest in everyone else’s business in the small town or small community (Simmel [1903] 1969, 53), in the city, every individual is bombarded by sensory stimuli.

Urbanites cannot react to every piece of information or every other person they meet without being psychologically overloaded; so, according to Simmel (51), they develop a sense of apathy. In a society in which the hegemonic view is that anything but heterosexuality is considered outside of the norm, and where this is policed in actual and symbolic ways, the anonymity of the urban holds an appeal for “erotic dissidents” (Halberstam 2005, 35). Another aspect of urban life discussed by Simmel ([1903] 1969, 56–58) is the competition of so many other people, which drives urbanites to extreme individualism—an emphasis on that which differentiates them from everyone else. Due to this aspect, queer culture has become associated in positive ways with phenomena that emerge from the creative industries situated in cities, such as cutting-edge art and design. Halberstam (2005, 41) also notes that the greater number of urban queer people (as opposed to rural queers) in the creative industries contributes to the common representation of urban, rather than rural, queer people in the arts.

With regards to the anonymity that cities allow and the cultural capital of urbanites, Herring (2010, 3) refers to the ways in which New York City “is framed—naturalized—as the epicenter of contemporary queer life ‘around the world’” and how this implies that “the metropolis is the final designation point for queer kids of any gender, class, race, or region”. He argues that this narrative is exclusionary, foreclosing, and normalising (31), since it ignores the existence of those many queers who do not live in cities and thus invalidates their lifestyles and experiences. Halberstam (2005, 29) draws on the work of anthropologist Kath Weston to contend that the aforementioned “distinction between the urban and rural that props up the gay imaginary” is a symbolic distinction that not only puts the presence of rural queers “under erasure”, but also “constitutes a dream of an elsewhere that promises a freedom it can never provide”. In other words, the city is never quite the safe, accepting

¹ My own translation. The original Afrikaans reads as follows: “Daar is toe twee kassiere. Identiese tweelingsussies, nogal. Petra moet twee maal kyk om uit te werk wat aangaan. Hulle is albei blond, definitief nog op skool, en aangetrek soos surfers met Vans-tekkies, denimkortbroeke, Billabonghemde en houtkrale om hulle gewrigte en nekke. Petra verkyk haar aan die twee. Watse lewe lei hulle in hierdie godverlate dorp? Wat doen hulle op 'n Vrydagaand? Sy sal geld daarop wed dat hulle meisies vry. Sy bewonder hulle moed. Hier staan hulle met oopgesigglimlagte vir die wêreld om te sien en te veroordeel. Sy is verstom.”

haven for queers that it promises to be. Violent homophobia, after all, still exists in urban spaces.

The imaginary nature of the urban/rural distinction also implies the relativity of these terms. A town which would be considered small when compared with a capital city can function as an urban node in a rural space. In South Africa, towns such as Worcester and Beaufort West, for example, are small and rural in comparison to urban Cape Town, but are still relatively urban considering the farmland and smaller towns surrounding them. As such, they may represent a comparatively urban ideal in the local gay imaginary. Similarly, cities are situated within a hierarchical framework with regards to their perceived urbanity and resulting queer capital. These perceptions are, of course, based on real statistical facts (for example, Johannesburg has a larger population than Bloemfontein). The aim of this article is not to deny that specific urban spaces have more queer enclaves than rural ones. The anonymity of the city life described by Simmel does provide real freedom and comfort to people who would have been ostracised in smaller towns (Johnson, Gilley, and Gray 2016, 15–16). What this article *is* calling for is a more nuanced approach—one which acknowledges the lives of rural queers and takes into account that their experiences might sometimes be the norm rather than the exception, and one which considers the internal dynamics of cities (some spaces are more queer-friendly than others).

An aspect which links the discourse on queer urbanity with that on the city in African science fiction is the global hierarchy that it implies. As Herring (2010, 3) notes, and in keeping with American cultural and economic neocolonialism, cities such as New York and San Francisco especially are seen as the global centres of queer life and culture. Halberstam (2005, 34) notes that this logic even has an impact on American anthropology, and that “when nonurban [American] sexualities have been studied ... they are all too often characterized as ‘traditional’ and ‘non-Western’”. Both this idea of some cities as more progressive than others and the general narrative of queer migrations to the city depend on what John Howard (as quoted in Halberstam 2005, 35) calls a “linear, modernist trajectory”. Metronormativity therefore has not only a spatial dimension, but also a temporal one, as it implies movement from “backward” towns and rural spaces to “progressive” cities. It implies a linear progression in the life of the individual queer person, and also maps this trajectory onto different spaces, locating them at different points on a linear chronology. Figure 1, taken from *Meanwhile ...: Graphic Short Stories about Everyday Queer Life in Southern and East Africa* (Qintu Collab 2019), indicates that the rural/urban binary (and the resulting logic which associates tradition with the rural and modernity with the urban) also plays a role in Africa, even as the traditional rurality depicted in the left side of the image is not denigrated as “backward” or undesirable. Rather, this image of a bathroom mirror divided in two represents the attempt of the viewer (the man depicted in the middle of the image, split in two) to reconcile two different but equally significant parts of his identity. This is different from the Western narrative, according to which the traditional and rural must be left behind when embracing queerness and urbanity.

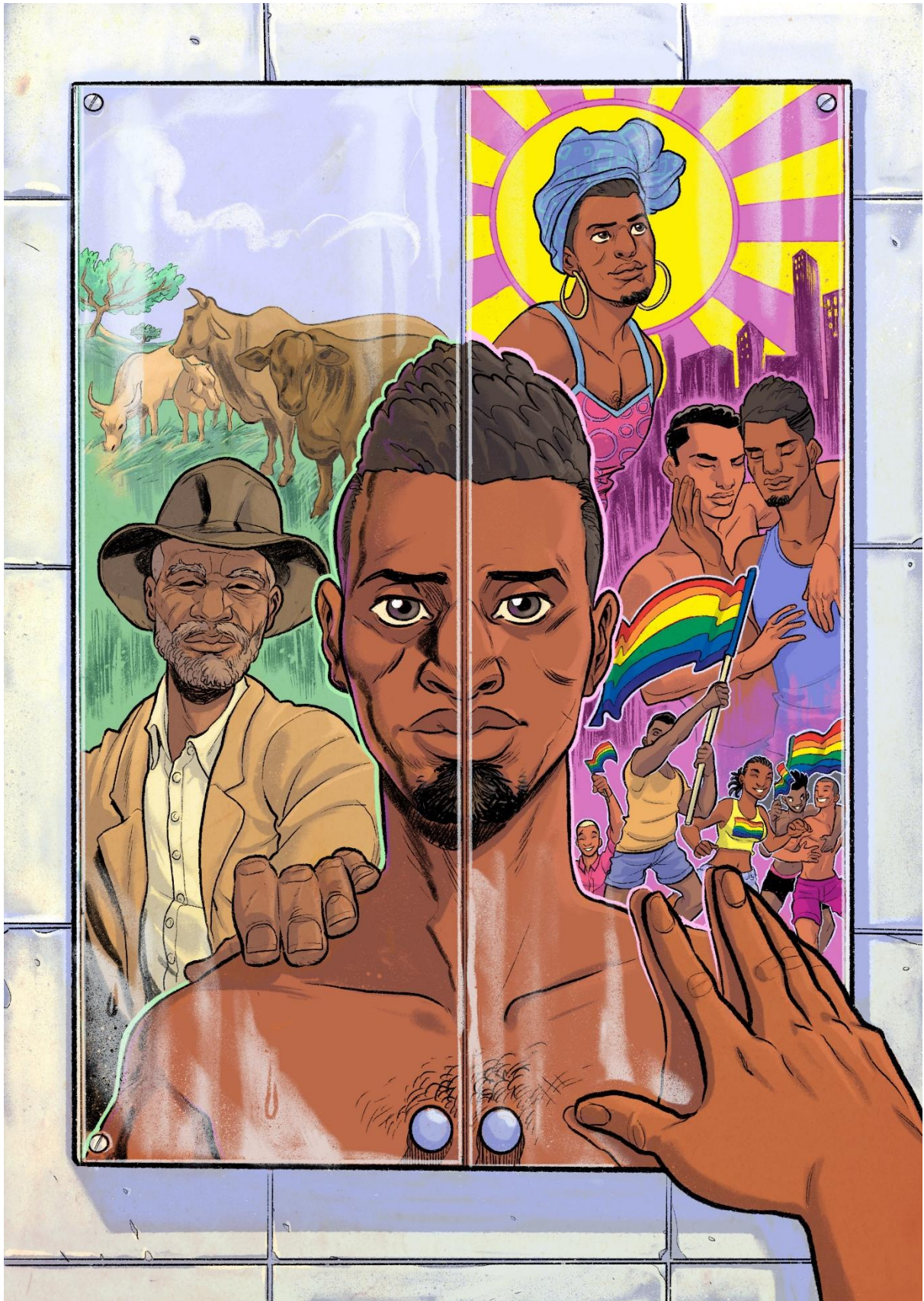


Figure 1: An image reproduced from *Meanwhile: Graphic Short Stories about Everyday Queer Life in Southern and East Africa* (Qintu Collab 2019, 31).

As Halberstam (2005, 34) implies when he notes that non-urban spaces within America are seen as traditional and non-Western, this linear chronology is also related to colonial logics. As Walter D. Mignolo (2011, 151) explains, Immanuel Kant's cosmopolitan ideals and the so-called "civilizing mission" of colonialism conspired to "place societies in an imaginary chronological line going from nature to culture, from barbarism to civilization following a progressive destination toward some point of arrival". Georg Hegel built on Kant's ideas to organise the continents in chronological order—Asia, Africa, America, and Europe—and as a result "[t]he planet was all of a sudden living in different temporalities, with Europe in the present and the rest in the past" (Mignolo 2011, 151). This temporal ordering of spatiality justified the colonisation of "barbaric" countries by "civilised" ones. As I implied earlier, this logic functions not only between continents and countries, but also within them, with urban spaces most often being seen as more civilised and rural spaces as barbaric, and some cities considered more advanced than others.

This colonial schema has, as I have shown, also had an influence on the supposedly counter-hegemonic discourse of queer theory and on queer culture more generally. While Western modernity has a long history characterised by homophobia, in this conception "'gay' and 'lesbian' identities act ... as the markers for modernity" (Altman, quoted in Halberstam 2005, 36–37). In coining the term "metronormativity", Halberstam is aiming to address the normalising influence of this logic and implicitly also gestures towards its colonial underpinnings (by noting that rural spaces are conceived of as "non-Western"). In the next section I will further explore the valuation of Western modernity implicit in an idealisation of the city. I do this by focusing on the representation of the urban in science fiction, and in African science fiction specifically.

African Science Fiction and Urbanity

In science fiction, the city tends to be idealised for some of the same reasons that it is in queer narratives—specifically urbanity's association with the future and with progress. In science fiction films such as *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) and *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), cityscapes signal futurity, regardless of whether this future is utopian or dystopian. Science fiction that centres the African or African diasporic experience, too, is often set in cities. In some examples of what has come to be known as "Afrofuturism", such as Milestone Media's *Hardware* comics, the ways in which Western technology is "brought to bear on black bodies" are depicted, and this subjugation is set in a dystopic metropolis (Dery 1994, 180–82). In this setting, a "multicultural" superhero team emerges and battles injustice. While the role of technology and metropolitan ideals in perpetuating whiteness is therefore explored in this and many other examples of Afrofuturism, the genre also often involves an appropriation of technology and futuristic cityscapes, symbols of futurity, *for* black culture. As in the case of queer identification with the urban, the appropriation by black artists of what has historically been denied them can be politically inspiring and artistically exciting. At the same time, as with the relationship between the queer and the urban, this appropriation carries colonial ideological baggage.

The 2018 Marvel superhero film *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler, has brought an Afrofuturist narrative and visuals into the mainstream (Staples 2018). The movie draws heavily on Christopher Priest's writing for Marvel's *Black Panther* comic, in its merging of

various African leadership structures to conceive of the titular character as a king with spiritual powers rather than a traditional American superhero (Staples 2018). Visually, the film is characterised by futuristic, high-tech urban locales. Wakanda, the fictional African nation depicted, is technologically advanced.

In his writing for the 2016 *Black Panther* comic *A Nation under Our Feet*, Ta-Nehisi Coates explicitly explores the colonial implications of Wakanda being equated with Western symbols of futurity, such as the Western city and Western technology. It is the Western capitalist city and its products, especially Western forms of technology, which are relevant when exploring the modernist linear chronologising of spaces, as discussed in the previous section. Various scholars, such as Jennifer Robinson (2006, 5), have argued that within modernist developmental frameworks it is the Western city that is seen as ideal and that, as with Hegel's ordering of the continents, other cities are conceived of as "behind" the Western urban form and developing towards it. Within this developmental discourse, all cities are judged based on the degree to which they resemble Western ones. While I am, in this section, aiming to problematise the use of the city to signal the future in science fiction, and especially in African science fiction, it should be noted that science fiction has been active in imagining the city in other, non-Western ways. The aforementioned *Blade Runner* and the *Black Panther* film, for example, conceived of the city in ways that combine American-style urbanity with aspects of Asian and African cities respectively.

Nonetheless, in *A Nation under Our Feet*, Coates challenges the Western and urban-centric way in which the nation of Wakanda is generally imagined, and also, especially, the "linear, modernist trajectory" on which this imaginary is based. The first critique of this trajectory is focalised by an antagonist of T'Challa (the Black Panther) called Tetu (Coates and Stelfreeze 2016, 54). Tetu is an ecological activist opposed to the Western modernity represented by T'Challa. In dust clouds which double as Tetu's thought bubbles, the reader sees the course of history, with people appearing on earth and initially having spiritual deference to nature. Eventually, however, industrialisation takes place, visually represented by cityscapes; "now flesh comes with metal teeth, with chopping sticks and fire launchers" (Coates and Stelfreeze 2016, 55). The reader might dismiss this critical view of the trajectory of Western modernity because it is envisioned by an antagonist, but, as I have argued elsewhere (Burger and Engels 2019, 8), T'Challa is not depicted as purely heroic and his antagonists' motivations are too complex for them to be simply labelled villains. The violent and manipulative means that Tetu employs to further his cause are, however, eventually shown to be unethical.

On the other hand, the critique of modernity that is represented in the experiences of Shuri, T'Challa's sister, is unambiguous. At the beginning of *A Nation under Our Feet*, Shuri is caught in the Djalia: Plane of Wakandan Memory, a realm between life and death (Coates and Stelfreeze 2016, 50). Here she is guided by a griot, a figure from parts of West Africa who passes on her community's history through stories, songs, and so forth. Echoing Tetu's rejection of industrialisation, the griot tells Shuri that while she has always been told that Wakanda's power lies in its technology, in its "wonderful inventions, in its circuits and weaponry", the secrets of its greatness are actually much older. Shuri replies that vibranium "guided us through our savage years", to which the griot responds: "Do I seem savage to you?" (Coates and Stelfreeze 2016, 61). The idea that Wakanda was barbaric before it

reached a state of Western modernity is therefore rejected, along with the association of history and tradition with backwardness, something to be left behind. Throughout the rest of the narrative, the griot “arms” Shuri by telling her stories about Wakanda’s history. By the time Shuri leaves the Djalia and rejoins the realm of the living, she has learned that Wakanda’s embrace of the futurity associated with technology and the urban is flawed and that Wakandans cannot attain wisdom without looking to the past. Everything needed to resolve the conflicts in the country was already present in “Wakanda’s collective knowledge” (Coates et al. 2016, 3), its history and lore. As in Figure 1 discussed in the previous section, in *A Nation under Our Feet* the duality of the urban and the rural (and Western modernity and tradition) is explored without the rural and tradition being completely rejected or seen as irrelevant to the present or future. In the rest of this article, I will argue that this is also the case in the queer African science fiction novel *Triangulum* by Ntshanga.

Thus far I have used Mark Dery’s term “Afrofuturism” to describe an aesthetics which combines elements from science fiction and African and African diasporic cultures (Taylor-Stone 2014). However, as Sofia Samatar (2017, 175) notes, there have been objections to this term based on the argument that it centres the experiences of African-Americans specifically. For this reason, the American-Nigerian science fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor (2019) prefers the term “Africanfuturism” as one that emphasises the African continent. I use the term “African science fiction” as a broader term to include Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, but also literature, such as *Triangulum*, that does not share in the aesthetics usually associated with Afrofuturism. While *Triangulum* is written and set on the African continent, I do want to retain a sense of it participating, as Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism does (see Anderson and Jones 2016, viii), in a global black poetics—one which aims to write blackness into the future and explore global black concerns using the conventions of science fiction. Metafictionally, the narrator of *Triangulum* says that she wants to write something that makes her feel similar to the classic science fiction novel *Eden* (1958) by Stanisław Lem, “but [that has] us in it” (Ntshanga 2019, 362).

The Urban and the Rural in *Triangulum*

Apart from two framing chapters, *Triangulum* is divided into two parts: “The Machine” and “Five Weeks in the Plague”. At first glance, these two sections seem to map neatly onto the aforementioned binary view of the rural and urban and their association with the past and the future respectively. “The Machine” takes place in the semi-rural Eastern Cape, and is set in the recent past. Every other chapter in this section consists of the narrator’s diary from 1999, while the rest consist of recordings made of hypnotherapy sessions in which the narrator recalls events and her experiences from 2002. “Five Weeks in the Plague” is largely set spatially in Johannesburg, and temporally in the near future, in 2025 and 2035.

Both sections have as protagonist the same unnamed first-person narrator. In the alternating chapters of “The Machine” she is fourteen and seventeen years old, whiling away her time in King William’s Town. In 1999 her father is dying from a lung disease which he contracted when working in the mines as a young man. The narrator is diagnosed with dysthymia and prescribed the SSRIs Celexa and Paxil (Ntshanga 2019, 104). In 2002, her father has died and her aunt Doris is her guardian. She is seeing visions of a triangle shape

she calls “the machine”. At the end of this section, she is diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, a diagnosis she seemingly accepts (194).

Earlier, however, when she saw the machine she interpreted it not as a hallucination but as a message from her mother, who went missing in 1995. The narrator, along with her girlfriend Part and their friend Litha, uses the machine to search for three girls who have gone missing in their town, and later also to search for her mother.

Common ideas about the non-metropolitan are challenged in “The Machine”, in the depiction of non-normative sex (the narrator has a threesome with Litha and Part) and in the simple fact that it explicitly deals with the legacy of the former Ciskei Bantustan, a part of South African history that is seldom explored in literature (Ntshanga, cited in Ndlovu 2019). The depiction of the semi-rural King William’s Town also conforms in some respects to the dominant queer discourse about rural spaces in that the town is represented as a homophobic environment. The narrator and Part only hold hands until someone can see them (Ntshanga 2019, 68). While “The Machine” ends with a delicate description of Litha, Part, and the narrator’s threesome (193–94), the reader finds out in the epilogue to the book (“Triangulum”) that they are punished and suspended from their respective schools when Litha’s foster parents find out about it (353).

Their punishment is also implicitly linked with an instance of homophobia when, after hearing about Litha’s foster parents’ discovery, Part tells the narrator and Litha about an incident she witnessed when she was younger. It was at the birthday party of a girl called Haley, on a farm near Queenstown (351). The children caught onto a rumour of a crocodile in the farm lake. Haley’s father took them to the lake to show it to them. He did not notice that Haley did not go to the lake with them, that she was in her room with a girl. He later discovered the girls when looking for a board game: “Haley had Joss straddled on the floor next to her bed, and both of them had their tops off” (352). A few months later Part sees Haley again, holding her mother’s hand: “Haley looked at me with a frown at first, confused, and then she smiled; but when she did, it showed her teeth, which were small and brown, almost like a child’s, and her expression was childlike too” (353). The implication seems to be that some kind of violence was enacted on Haley in order to make her docile and meek. The narrator’s life seemingly corresponds to the previously discussed narrative, according to which queer people who grow up in rural spaces move, as adults, to cities, where they can be honest about their sexuality without fearing homophobic reactions.

“Five Weeks in the Plague” is set in Johannesburg, where the narrator now lives. The experiences that the narrator shares with her girlfriend, D., in Johannesburg seemingly confirm the idea of cities being queer havens (262–63):

There were nights when we’d travel across time, roving through our twenties again, running a gamut that extended from the heart of the metropolis, from Braamfontein bars ... to Westdene, where, listening to Lee Scratch Perry with bearded men in berets and brown combat boots, we’d drink wine and talk until we heard the call for last rounds, waking up with our teeth furry and our lips crushed red. D. often took me out to brunch, too, where we’d share a litre of passionfruit mojito on sunlit tables from Parkhurst to Illovo. We’d head indoors for beer at the Melville bar, before heading further up 7th street to a dim

Mozambican restaurant, where we'd laugh as we won and lost our change on the slot machines at the back.

This is the only time in the novel that the city is described with such a focus on pleasure. Despite the narrator being able to live openly with D. in the Johannesburg of 2025 without them experiencing any explicit instances of homophobia, the city is not represented as a purely progressive space. Rather, it is a dystopia, with the narrator working for the government's "Grant Regulation Office" (GRO)—which the people who work there have more accurately dubbed "Population Control" (214). Officially, the function of the GRO is to research and regulate fraud committed by either the recipients or the dispensers of social welfare grants. In reality, however, the GRO is owned by the Silicon Valley investor Ian Carpenter, who uses the office for data mining, "to monitor the rise and decline of the worker population in the metropolis and beyond, and to note their consumption patterns in the townships and the CBD, where commuters clocked in each day to stoop their backs and pack on calluses for pennies" (214).

The narrator's job as a data miner is linked with the literal mining her father did as a young man. The "plague" of this section's title is the metaphor which the narrator uses to refer to extractive economies. She considers George Harrison, the person who discovered gold in Johannesburg, as the plague's "patient zero" (256). The data mining she is doing is the manifestation of the "plague" in 2025. The narrator's job is compared not only to mining, but also to her parents' collusion with the apartheid government (both of them worked for the Ciskei homeland government) (239). The similarities between her and their collusion with the powers that be become even more obvious when she is recruited to join a classified "elite team" within the GRO (223). The job of the team is to do even more invasive data extraction and collection by monitoring the electromagnetic pulses of hospital patients who have been implanted with monitors and with contact lenses that capture everything they see (248). The narrator is informed that the aim of the monitoring is to map human desire, but she eventually finds out that the immediate goal of this initiative is to source exploitable labour for the Zones (316)—township spaces that are being "developed" into corporate-controlled micro-cities by the Delta Urban Renewal Project (215). A sociologist describes the Zones as a new form of apartheid (216), a credible comparison given what the narrator discovers about the project's exploitative nature and its attempts at controlling the disenfranchised.

In an interview with the author Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu, Ntshanga does not mention the influence of the queer narrative of migration to the urban, or the view of the urban as more advanced or progressive than the rural. He does, however, say that his aim with the novel was to interrogate the idea that apartheid is a thing of the past, and thus to question "the oppression-leads-to-liberation struggle-leads-to-freedom chronology of [South Africa's] history" (in Ndlovu 2019). Ntshanga therefore consciously set out to challenge ideas of (specifically South Africa's) historical progress. He explains to Ndlovu that when attempting to imagine a dystopian future South Africa, he looked to South Africa's dystopian past, and its continued "overlapping" with the present. Apart from the continuing influence of apartheid on present-day South Africa, it should be clear that the conception of extractive economies as a still-raging plague also implies the continuing *presence* of South Africa's history in this imagined version of the future.

Far from conceiving of Johannesburg as symbolising the future, the narrator thinks—with regards to the site on which they are data mining, which previously belonged to a mine investor—that “history in the metropolis was a circle” (Ntshanga 2019, 226). *Triangulum*'s rejection of historical progress brings to mind Edelman's queer antirelational argument. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), he calls for a queer rejection of procreative heterosexuality's obsession with the future and the image of the child as symbol of the future. While it is true that *Triangulum* complicates commonly held beliefs about the future, progress, and, in this case, the city as space of social progressiveness, I want to argue that the idea of the future set out in the novel has, ultimately, more in common with Muñoz's polemic in favour of an understanding of queerness as both antirelational *and* relational (2009, 11). On the one hand, queerness can be understood as a rejection of the reproduction of the present, but on the other hand it invests in the idea of a collective “visible on the horizon” (Muñoz 2009, 11). This collective queer future will be one that is hospitable to queer people and this vision is necessary to inspire political action in the present. The distinction between Edelman's and Muñoz's arguments can be formulated in terms of the image of the child that Edelman utilises. Without referring to either Edelman or Muñoz, Donna Haraway (2011, 116) distinguishes between parenting and reproducing. She argues that “parenting is about caring for generations, one's own or not; reproducing is about making more of oneself to populate the future, quite a different matter”. Like Edelman, she therefore rejects the compulsion to procreate in order to reproduce the present, and like Muñoz she still tries to care for the future and to conceive of ways of realising a better future. Muñoz and Haraway's vision is, therefore, utopian.

Triangulum does not provide the reader with an image of a utopian future. Where the novel is comparable to Muñoz's argument is in the representation of the “anti-tech” and “eco-terrorist” group called the Returners (Ntshanga 2019, 210, 242). Muñoz searches for ways of thinking about a utopian future within what Ernst Bloch calls “the no-longer-conscious”:
“This temporal calculus performed and utilized the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment” (Muñoz 2009, 11).

As their name indicates, the Returners are not invested in a progressive, linear idea of history. They do not, however, reject the hope for a better future either. D. is a recruiter for the Returners, and she tells the narrator that the group is concerned with both the past and the future (Ntshanga 2019, 209). They consider the capitalist trajectory on which humankind is currently set (one which sets no limits to economic growth and the extraction of resources to support this growth) unsustainable. In order to imagine a viable future, they return to the past—that is, to “the no-longer-conscious”. The point in the past that they hope to “return” to is about two billion years ago, when an asteroid hit the earth, forming the Vredefort Crater in what is now South Africa's Free State province (209). The impact of the crater on the earth's layers allowed for the discovery of gold in 1886. The “plague” that the narrator diagnoses South Africa with can therefore also be traced back to what the Returners call “the fork in the path” (209). The path that humans actually took—the one of mining, industrialisation, and the exploitation of labour—is what the Returners call “the Path of the Machine” or “the Left Hand” (210–11).

To counter this, the Returners advocate taking the path not taken, the Right Hand. They do this by “calling for opting out of data and fighting from below the grid” (211). The Returners’ advocacy of a return to a way of life that predates the Industrial Revolution, and to a more sustainable relationship between humans and the earth, can be compared to the search for utopian ideals not in the Western futurity of the technological city, but rather in aspects associated with the “uncivilised” past such as tradition, the rural, and oral literature in Coates’s version of *Black Panther*. It also involves an opting out of the colonial temporalities described by Mignolo, in that rural Africa is no longer represented as connoting the past, but rather as the only hope for a utopian future. That this future would also be a queer utopia is not explicitly stated, but the narrator’s investment in it is intertwined with her sexual and romantic relationship with D. It is, after all, D. who introduces the narrator to the Returners.

When they first meet, D. tells the narrator that she is a recruiter for them, and later the narrator returns to the site of her rural origin story, the Eastern Cape, along with D., on a mission for the Returners. Like the narrator, D. also grew up in the rural Eastern Cape. Here, her mother thought that D. “was being ‘different’” and that this was pulling the family apart. D. interprets this as referring to her queerness (291). D. delivers messages to cells of the Returners located in different towns in the area. When they return to Johannesburg, D. tells the narrator that she wants to move back to Cape Town, to devote herself permanently to the Returners (300). The narrator declares that she will go with her—she has been successfully recruited into the Returners. Once in Cape Town, they both participate in a mission. The narrator plants a jamming device in a paper plant in Milnerton. This enables other Returners, including D., to return later to plant explosives. They are, however, discovered and D. is killed (322). The failure of the Returners is associated with the end of the narrator’s relationship with D.: her death is their death (323).

The Returners’ attempt at saving the possibility of a hopeful future by returning to the Right Hand has seemingly failed. In 2035, however, the narrator travels to the (rural) Vredefort Crater and receives an alien message, saying that it is not too late to stop the corporatisation of the earth and save the planet (341). The novel therefore holds out the possibility of an ecologically sustainable future for the narrator and other queer people, although it is only “visible on the horizon” (Muñoz 2009, 11).

Conclusion

The Returners are contrasted with another underground group who uses illicit means to try and influence the future. They are the Tank, a hacking group run by M/A/R/K. Unlike the Returners, M/A/R/K sees “no salvation in regression” (242). They see evolution as unidirectional, and believe that to advance their project, the Tank needs to use the proverbial “master’s tools”—“to stamp on the heads of the powerful, we have to climb their cages and turn them into scaffolds” (242). The Tank therefore represents a type of utopian thinking which sees the potential for the creation of another, more equitable future within the trajectory of the present. The narrator does not agree and uses the example of a novelist’s drafting: “A text gains refinement with each iteration, but the author must be willing, first and foremost, to destroy all that’s before her for a do-over, if it’s required. That

willingness is paramount, and without it, there's a limit on how much a draft improves" (242–43).

The Tank does, by the end of the novel, manage to sabotage the Delta Urban Renewal Project and slow down the implementation of the Zones. That is, however, seemingly all they can do from within the system: slow down the destructive "progress". It is the way of the Returners that ultimately still leaves open the possibility of a radically different, and better, future. This hope, then, lies in the return to the past, to a "nolonger-conscious" way of rural living that predates the discovery of gold and the resultant industrialisation and capitalism.

Advocacy of a return to traditional and rural ways of life can potentially be conservative, a way of ensuring the continued reproduction of heteronormativity and other entrenched ideologies. The queerness of *Triangulum's* narrator, however, complicates the association of the rural with the heterosexual and the conservative. Rather than conservatism, the novel's return to the past has more in common with Muñoz's argument that a queer, utopic future can be imagined by returning to the "no-longerconscious".

The South Africanness of the novel and its settings also means that its rejection of Western conceptions of linear time and progress has decolonial implications. The overlay of temporality on spaces and the resultant view of some spaces as being more progressive than others is, after all, a legacy of colonialism. For *Triangulum* to reject the ideal of the city as represented in dominant queer and science fiction narratives is to reject Western views of what constitutes the future.

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