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Wangari Maathai's environmental Afrofuturist imaginary in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi**

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ABSTRACT

Wangari Maathai's environmental activism aims at the restoration of ecosystems to guarantee ecological sustainability. It is a mission premised on the need to place measures such as the planting of trees to remedy environmental wounds. To stress both the gravity of loss and the possibilities of arresting it, the metaphor of healing the earth underlines her vision that speaks to concerns of Afrofuturism. However, scholarly attention to ways activism finds expression in Afrofuturistic discourses needs to increase. Therefore, this study zooms in on and analyzes notions of remediation in Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2009). The discussion of the film teases out and aims to mobilize the content of Wangari Maathai's Nobel Lecture of 2004. The film blends traits of science fiction with aspects of Gĩkũyũ orature to position *Pumzi* as nurturing Afrofuturist environmental imaginary that builds on Wangari Maathai's call to heal the earth.

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Introduction

> The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder.[1]

Wanuri Kahiu's 2009 short science fiction film *Pumzi* is set against the backdrop of the aftermath of a war about one of the world's most valuable resources: water. The 21-minute film premiered at the Kenya International Film Festival in October 2009 as well as at the Cannes Independent Film Festival of 2010, where it won the best short film award. It is a film that engages with pasts, present and futures of communities on East African Territory (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:00:10). The film is set 35 years after the Third World War, which is aptly dubbed "The Water Wars" (00:0:10). This article applies Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (1999) idea of remediation in the analyses of ways in which *Pumzi* mediates an Afrofuturist environmental imaginary. To that end, this article explores ways the film embraces Wangari Maathai's championing of tree planting in order to arrest the further degradation of environments in Africa. Reforestation goes beyond restoring the already over-exploited forests for the role they play in

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conserving water. In Wangari Maathai's environmental activism, it is also the anchor which steadies the vision on how caring for environments contributes to the realization of justice, the eradication of poverty and nurturing democracy in Africa. Bolter and Grusin's (1999) research into remediation in new media is the basis for this study to consider the adaptation and transposition of Wangari Maathai's Nobel Lecture into an uplifting Afrofuturist environmental narrative that exploits remediation as its aesthetic approach. *Pumzi* is, therefore, the medium through which Wangari Maathai's vision of the need to help "the earth to heal her wounds" (Maathai, 2004, n.p.) materializes as the environmental imaginary of Afrofuturism. To explore how the film accomplishes such a feat, this article first explores the remediation of Wangari Maathai's environmental activism in *Pumzi*. Secondly, it zooms in on the relationship of Asha, the film's protagonist, with water. Thirdly, it explores how the portraiture of the protagonist relates to the fictionalization of the 2004 Peace Laureate's environmental activism. To track the ways in which *Pumzi* "repurposes" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) Wangari Maathai's vouching for the regeneration of the already degraded environment, this article refers to her 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture.

Science fiction as Afrofuturism in *Pumzi*

Kahiu, in an independently organized TEDx Talk she gave in Nairobi in July 2012, holds that science fiction is a feature of African orature (TEDx Talk, 2012). Lynsey Chutel (2016), in "Science Fiction Has Ancient Roots in Africa: Why Shouldn't It Also Have a Future There?" quotes Kahiu's conviction that "[a]s far as I know, science and Africa have never been separate." Chutel further notes that Kahiu's Afrofuturist imaginary is evident in the stance that "[w]e're just the next line of science fiction storytellers that have always existed, we're just continuing the lineage" (Chutel, 2016, n.p.). Science fiction thus permits the perpetuation of an Afrofuturist imaginary in art. Samatar defines this as

> reject[ing] the drama of a paralyzing standoff between tradition and modernity. In the philosophy of the remix, the combination of folklore and science fiction is perfectly possible; in the poetics of mythmaking, which draws on the past in order to imagine the future, it is necessary. (2017, p. 183)

In addition, Chutel indicates Kahiu's mission of restoration in the claim that "[s]o often in our own lives, we have been written out of our histories, so we want to write our children into our futures so that we make sure that there is a place for them for when they come into imagining themselves in the future" (Chutel, 2016, n.p.). Imagining the future is a thematic concern both in *Pumzi* as well as in many Afrofuturist works. However, tendencies to project futures for collectives of beings that share ecosystems signal the injustices of colonialism for humans and nonhumans. *Pumzi* visualizes such injustices through the protagonist's strife to restore the natural world. Wangari Maathai underlines this fact in the conclusion of her Nobel Lecture: "The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder" (2004, n.p.). Here, Wangari Maathai refers to the collective of future generations. This fits in with Samatar's observation that Afrofuturism "embrace[s] […] black futurists without regard to their position on the planet […]. [This] aligns with Afrofuturism's emphasis on blackness rather than nationhood" (2017, p. 176).

In an effort to show how the narration of Asha's journey mirrors Wangari Maathai's beliefs, the film portrays the protagonist as trusting in ideals that mimic Maathai's activism as presented in her Nobel Lecture. Hence, this article considers the lecture as one of the major sources of the film. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to detail ways in which Wangari Maathai's activism differs from existing approaches elsewhere, the push to reforest is relevant to the analysis of the film's presentation of her Environmental Afrofuturist Imaginary. The analysis of the film, therefore, pays attention to ways *Pumzi* imagines Wangari Maathai's activism: First, it offers material to frame Asha as the promoter of the regeneration of the environment. Second, the setting of the film 35 years into the future reflects the more than three decades of activism that Maathai alludes to in the Nobel Lecture. In the Lecture, she acknowledges how being part of the Green Belt Movement amplified the planting of trees throughout Africa. *Pumzi* transposes the Lecture through the figuration of Asha as a curator at the futuristic Virtual Natural History Museum (VNHM) as well as the bold move s*he[2] makes in venturing out to revive the "outside world" that the Council of VNHM had declared dead (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:07:51). In her 2012 TEDx Talk, Kahiu argues that Afrofuturism predates the coining of the term (TEDx Talk, 2012b, 4:40–4:45). This observation enables the analysis of *Pumzi* to apply the conception of Afrofuturism beyond Mark Dery's (1994) initial association of the term with artistic productions re/presenting Afrodiasporic experiences. Further, Lisa Yaszek's article "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future" (2006) supports this argument as she states: "By recovering Afrodiasporic future story telling traditions we gain a better understanding of the important intellectual and aesthetic work that these [Black] authors have performed on both national and global cultural fronts" (p. 58). Singling out the employment of oral African narrations, Kahiu in the TEDx interview implies that Gĩkũyũ orature was influential on the making of *Pumzi*.

Kahiu reworks a journey motif that derives from the Kenyan Gĩkũyũ oral narratives. There are shots in *Pumzi* that capture the distance that Asha covers upon exiting the VNHM. The visualization of the distance Asha travels is evident from the trail of footprints that Asha's wobbly walking leaves behind. S*he also punctuates the walking with pauses, turns, and peering into the horizons of landscapes behind and in front. These acts summon both the past and future within Asha's presence. On that note, *Pumzi* aesthetically exemplifies Wangari Maathai's resolve to champion the "shap[ing of] […] sustainable future[s]."

There is also an artistic visualization in *Pumzi* of some of the cause–effect relationship of environmental degradation that Wangari Maathai enumerates in the Nobel Lecture as follows:

> In 1977, when we started the Green Belt Movement, I was partly responding to needs identified by rural women, namely lack of firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter, and income. (2004, n.p.)

In *Pumzi*, an adaptation and a reworking of the Nobel Lecture becomes evident through the protagonist's actions. The I, representing the Laureate in the Nobel Lecture, seems to be synonymous with the protagonist, whose resolve to preserve nature stems from the need to remedy the ills of climate change. In the process, s*he guides the viewer to visually experience the gravity of environmental degradation and the urgency to regenerate

the environment. For instance, through the newspaper captions on climate change ("The Greenhouse Effect: The Earth is Changing Already"), water scarcity and deforestation ("Whole Day Journey in Search of Water"), *Pumzi* foregrounds the reality of environmental change (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:00:24–00:00:26; 00:00:35–00:00:38). The three captions mirror collective challenges that the Green Belt Movement has been addressing. Thus, *Pumzi* illustrates the way(s) in which the earth has changed. Such an accomplishment on the part of the film, I argue, is attributable to Kahiu having grown up partly in Kenya where she started her formal education—the country that has been experiencing the environmental degradation Wangari Maathai echoes in her Nobel Lecture. In addition, Kahiu has received some of her university education in the United States. The latter was instrumental in the art of filmmaking while the former is linked to the Afrofuturist environmental imaginary she presents in the film.

Wangari Maathai's Afrofuturistic environmental imaginary in *Pumzi*

Kirk Bryan Sides' (2019) "Seed Bags and Storytelling: Modes of Living and Writing After the End in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*" discusses the film's Afrofuturist aims. Sides observes that "Afrofuturism […] might alert us to how much black speculative cultural production, such as *Pumzi*, thinks about the potential futures and pasts of environmental and climate precarity" (p. 109). In a related study, Amanda Renée Rico's (2017) "Gendered Ecologies and Black Feminist Futures in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*" argues that the film is among Afrofuturist artistic productions that feed into conversations on environmental concerns. Rico notes: "In her numerous interviews, Kahiu also discusses how her films interconnect with ecology and the notion of a post-apocalyptic or science fiction world by claiming that Afrocentric perspectives have always used speculation and science to critique societal ills" (p. 83). Such a position is testament to *Pumzi*'s exploration of remediation as an aesthetic approach. It is a method that runs parallel to the focuses of Afrofuturism, as Ytasha Womack (2013) explains. Womack maintains that the scope of Afrofuturism exceeds its concerns to specific peoples. She notes:

> Afrofuturism provides a prism for examining this issue through art and discourse, but it's a prism that is not exclusive to the diaspora alone. Whether by adopting the aesthetic or the principles, all people can find inspiration or practical use for Afrofuturism to both transform their world and break free of their own set of limitations. (2013, p. 192)

Such a stance explains how *Pumzi* remediates Wangari Maathai's belief in Africans' ability to attend to their own needs. Thus, as an aesthetic approach, its relevance in Afrofuturism lies in its portraying Africans as taking charge in safeguarding their environments and regenerating their futures.

One study that this article relies on in affirming that the production of *Pumzi* deals with remediation is Sofia Samatar's (2017) article. In the article, Samatar posits that:

> Afrofuturist art rejects the drama of a paralyzing standoff between tradition and modernity. In the philosophy of the remix, the combination of folklore and science fiction is perfectly possible; in the poetics of mythmaking, which draws on the past in order to imagine the future, it is necessary. (pp. 182–183)

One of the successes of *Pumzi* lies in its blending of cultural elements from Gĩkũyũ orature and science fiction. Thus, Kahiu's emphasis on remediation, this article argues,

is employed in *Pumzi* to advance an environmental Afrofuturist imaginary trajectory whose impetus derives from Wangari Maathai and her activist achievements. Bearing in mind Fredric Jameson's (1976) position that form mediates ideology, this article explores the connection between *Pumzi* and the ways it conscientizes its viewers for the environmental trajectory of Afrofuturism. Jameson suggests that "the forms of consciousness are shaped or at least influenced by their social or historical ground, and that this 'determining' relationship is worth studying in its own right" (p. 30). Thus, this article advocates that the portrayal of environmental change in *Pumzi* is a way to actively encourage a change in attitudes and endorse the remediation of environmental degradation, especially (but not exclusively) in Africa. In the case of *Pumzi*, the need to arrest environmental degradation finds support in Ritch Calvin's (2014) analysis of the film. Calvin (2014) observes that "[in] *Pumzi*, Kahiu uses the science fiction film to foreground environmental issues, including the availability and rationing of resources, low-impact production of energy, and the elimination of pollution" (p. 34). Calvin's understanding of the film also implies Kahiu's admission that Wangari Maathai's environmental activism informed the production of the film. In the epigraph of his chapter, Calvin quotes Kahiu as having had the sentiments way back in 2008 (p. 33).

Set after the Third World War, the film depicts the story of Asha and their life as first curator at the Virtual Natural History Museum (VNHM) and afterwards as an activist against the environmental degradation of the "East African Territory." As a curator, s*he carries out tests on soil which seems mysterious to the VNHM. The test reveals that the soil has an abnormally high water content and no radioactivity, which prompts Asha to hypothesize that there could be life outside the Museum (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:6:50–00:6:55). Later, the film follows Asha's journey as s*he leaves the VNHM and embarks on the search for the source of this magical soil. However, while still working as a curator at the VNHM, Asha dreams. Their dreaming is to the Council of the VNHM a kind of ailment and an abnormality. To treat this illness, Asha is on prescription medication, dream suppressants, to restore the desired normality. The dreaming feeds Asha's curiosity about the origin of the unspoiled soil and ends up nurturing the idea to leave the VNHM.

The production of the film in 2009 occurred several months prior to Kahiu pronouncing her regard for Wangari Maathai's environmental visions. The publication of Kahiu's statement coincided with the euphoria over the declaration of Wangari Maathai as the 2004 Peace Nobel Laureate. Thus, the production of *Pumzi* mediated an almost immediate historical experience whose celebration extends beyond Kenya. The film's fictionalization of Wangari Maathai's journey to stardom through Asha's actions is a way of expressing an Afrofuturist environmental imaginary. Kahiu holds that elements of science fiction are present in Gĩkũyũ orature (TEDx Talks 2012a, 1:50–3:25). Such a reference hints at Kahiu's reliance on a framework deriving from Gĩkũyũ orature and remixed with elements of science fiction in the production of *Pumzi*. Thus, the availability of a framework on which to weave an environmental perspective of Afrofuturism portends promising futures.

Through Asha's search for the source of the miraculous soil, the film visualizes the extent of environmental degradation on East African Territory after the war. For instance, there is a scene in which the camera focusses on Asha crossing a river that has dried up. The river also has a sign warning of radioactive pollution. Before leaving

the VNHM, Asha plants a "mighty seed" (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:07:40–00:07:45) in a glass jar which contains the unique soil. When the seed germinates, Asha continues nurturing the seedling. In fact, the flourishing seedling motivates Asha's resolve to disprove the Council's view of what lies outside the Museum. S*he settles for a space where s*he plants the seedling that instantaneously grows into a gigantic tree. The sheer existence of the blooming seedling counters the VNHM's position that there is no life outside the Museum. In these filmic elements, this article sees Wangari Maathai's vision of healing the earth. This is how *Pumzi* makes concrete its rendering of an Afrofuturist environmental imaginary. Lisa Yaszek's (2006) allusion to Mark Dery's (1994) view of Afrofuturism as "a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences" (p. 42) provides a basis for interpreting *Pumzi* as a cinematic production whose intent lies beyond the depiction of Afrodiasporic experiences. Instead, it integrates Wangari Maathai's environmentalism as a source of the film's Afrofuturist environmental imaginary, projecting optimism in Africans initiating and nurturing the restoration of their lands and their biodiversities.

Pumzi interweaves the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner's concerns with anxieties about futures of environments in Africa. This article underlines that the Nobel Lecture is one of the sources that provided material for the plotting of the narratives extant in *Pumzi*. Specifically, the representations of agencies of water indicate the need to invest in optimism as a vital ingredient of Afrofuturist environmental imaginary. The recourse to the text of the lecture follows Gerald Prince's (2005) logic on postcolonial narratology. For Prince, postcolonial narratology "can not only permit the (re)assessment of indefinitely many texts; it can also, perhaps, function as a rhetoric and indicate hitherto unexploited narrative forms" (p. 379). Prince's suggestion sets out a basis for distinguishing the film as a category of presentation and water as a category of analysis.[3] In her Nobel Lecture, Wangari Maathai thinks about water by alluding to her childhood experiences and her relationship with water. Building on Astrida Neimanis' (2017) thoughts on the phenomenology of water, the exegesis of the film takes the positioning of water as a predicate for the pronouncements of Afrofuturistic environmentalisms. To offer an illustration, some attention goes to the way water is at the core of Asha's negation of "normative history" (Steinskog, 2018, p. 2). As Neimanis argues, such an exploration suggests that:

> what water is, is inextricable from how we imaginatively produce it […] water is changeable, and that water has a history. It is a substance, but it is also an idea. To ask what is water is thus to implicitly ask: what is water, in this place and at this time? Where does this idea come from and what does this idea do? (2017, p. 157)

Neimanis' position on water applies in the analysis of Asha, who is the embodiment of the way water stirs conventions. For instance, water features in the demarcation and presentation of ambiguities that Asha's lives inside and outside the VNHM exemplify. In the figurations of water as an agent in the engagement with the Afrofuturist environmental imaginary, this article treats water as a phenomenon that directs Asha's actions. While at VNHM, Asha recycles water which is part of the VHNM's policy. Sources of the recycled water include perspiration and urine. The camera at several instances focuses on Asha passing urine that s*he goes ahead to purify with the help of a machine. Once the purification is complete, Asha leaves some water for a colleague.

Such a gesture, this analysis argues, is proof of the VNHM's dedication to sustaining life in the museum. In addition, at the time Asha exits the VNHM, s*he smuggles out some water to water the seedling, thus pre-empting the realities outside the VHNM. During the search for the source of the soil, the camera magnifies an exhausted Asha who is bent on ensuring the seedling survives. S*he demonstrates the zeal when s*he wipes perspiration from their body and then wrings the piece of sweat-soaked cloth over the seedling. Thus, in pointing out the significance of Asha's states and actions as a medium of change in the environmental aspect of Afrofuturism, this reading uses Erik Steinskog's (2018) ideas on Afrofuturism to think through the position that Afrofuturism entails "re-readings of the past, negotiations of received stories, and establishing counter-histories to normative history" (p. 2). This article sees in the cinematic narrative equal negotiations of the past that is re-envisioned through counter-histories that inevitably speak toward the imagination of futures.

Negations of normative history

In *Pumzi*, the residents of the East African Territory, the Maitu Community, are on the verge of becoming extinct. Their endangerment is a result of ecologically unsustainable politics that manifest themselves in the losses the community has suffered. The film illustrates the community's loss by including captions that tell of the reality of climate change and its connection to the loss of trees, which is responsible for the scarcity of water. The film vividly depicts the shortage of water while mediating the phenomenon of climate change. For instance, *Pumzi* magnifies environmental change with the newspaper captions: "The Greenhouse Effect: The Earth is Changing Already" (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:00:20) and the headline "Whole Day Journey in Search of Water" invites viewers to imagine the agonies that members of the East African Territory would endure in search of water. Such captions signpost the East African Territory's ecosystems prior to, during or immediately after the Third World War. The use of such imagery has prompted me to bring[4] *Pumzi* into a dialogue with Wangari Maathai's alertness to the effects of climate change.

In the Lecture, Wangari Maathai refers to her childhood experiences to confirm the reality of climate change. She recalls for instance:

> As I conclude I reflect on my childhood experience when I would visit a stream next to our home to fetch water for my mother. I would drink water straight from the stream. Playing among the arrowroot leaves I tried in vain to pick up the strands of frogs' eggs, believing they were beads. But every time I put my little fingers under them, they would break. Later, I saw thousands of tadpoles: black, energetic, and wriggling through the clear water against the background of the brown earth. This is the world I inherited from my parents.
>
> Today, over 50 years later, the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost. (2004, n.p.)

In *Pumzi*, the narrative envisions the reality of environmental change that the Nobel Lecture presents. Maathai exudes confidence in Africans' ability to rescue the future of their environments:

> I would like to call on young people to commit themselves to activities that contribute toward achieving their long-term dreams. They have the energy and creativity to shape a

> sustainable future. To the young people I say, you are a gift to your communities and indeed the world. You are our hope and our future. (2004, n.p.)

While s*he represents the "young people," Asha's resolve to find the source of the soil displays ingenuity as s*he navigates toward securing futures for the seedling. Thus, the film serves as a catalyst in attaining Wangari Maathai's call to "Africans, especially, [to] re-discover positive aspects of their culture. In accepting them, they would give themselves a sense of belonging, identity, and self-confidence" (Maathai, 2004, n.p.).

It is one of the main achievements of the film to actively enforce the idea of creating a space for counter-histories. This is for instance, evident in the symbolism of the word play in the names of both the community and protagonist. The agency of word play features in Bolter and Grusin's (1999) and Ytasha Womack's (2013) theorizations on Afrofuturism. For the latter, word play works alongside irony in fostering examinations of what may pass as a given (p. 58), and for the former, it passes as refashioning, which is a form of remediation (p. 49). Therefore, the sound imagery in the names of the community and the protagonist of the film yields some space for this study to explore the ambiguities that the names summon.[5]

The name maitũ[6] is a word in Gĩkũyũ, a Kenyan language. In *Pumzi*, "Maitũ" lends itself to several interpretations. For example, while the first syllable [ma] in Maitũ translates to "truth," the second syllable [itũ] in the same language means "ours". Thus, the translation "our truth" appears as a meaning. In addition, [ma] could also mean "of" and [itu] "cloud," adding up to "of cloud," which, in Gĩkũyũ, would refer to rainwater. *Maitũ* also means "mother." Regarding *Pumzi*, all these meanings apply. In an almost religious connotation, the literal translation of the word exposes the importance of names as material agents. The notion of "our mother" finding ways to provide for her children again is a touching nod towards Asha's attempts to heal the natural world and restore the lost ecosystem. The sense of a "collective truth" (i.e. "ma-itũ") applies in reference to the benefits that accrue from either efforts of reclaiming the degraded environment or the effect of failing to act to restore the earth. Either way, the community is dependent on Asha as a mother figure to negotiate their truth. In addition, the pronunciation of the name Asha rhymes with the Gĩkũyũ negation, *aca*. When s*he goes out of their way to nurture the seedling, it amounts to an act of restoring the ecosystem. Therefore, Asha's defying the VNHM Council's directive to desist from determining the potency of the soil (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:7:58) signals a negation of traditionally dominant histories that view African scholars as incapable of complex scientific explorations. Asha's actions prove the power of counter-histories to be just as, if not more, powerful than the status quo would allow for.

African futurities and historic remediations

This study takes Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (1999) text *Remediation: Understanding New Media* as its point of departure to discuss the way *Pumzi* approaches remediation. Bolter and Grusin consider remediation as entailing the production of art based on a source. By remediation, Bolter and Grusin argue, artists strive to keep to the framework of an original source. They cite instances where artists observe such aspects as historical accuracy in the designing of costumes and setting of the source. Remediation, they

further contend, at times employs no overt reference to the overt sources. The emphasis lies on reusing an element of the source in a different medium (p. 47). This is the case with *Pumzi*. Therefore, in the making of *Pumzi*, Kahiu in the 2012 TEDx Talk in Nairobi comments on how both childhood experiences and the work of established writers such as Ben Okri and Nnedi Okorafor inspired her in creating the plot of *Pumzi* (TEDx Talk, 2012, 3:27–10:15). This article underlines that Wangari Maathai's speeches and publications express her admiration of the Japanese concept of recycling, *mottainai*. It is a concept that forms part of the four core values of the Green Belt Movement.[7] In addition, the author(s) of the Hot Secrets blog affirm that Kahiu admitted in a (Hot Secrets, 2009, 2011) interview that Wangari Maathai inspired her. In 2009, the same year she produced *Pumzi*, Kahiu directed *For Our Land*, a TV documentary on Wangari Maathai (Kahiu, 2009a). Kahui's insistence on promoting Maathai's environmental legacy is the subject of Philip Mwaniki's feature article in the *Daily Nation* of Saturday (2009). The need to take environmental activism to the next level led to her reinterpretation, reworking and adaptation of Maathai's speech. That means that *Pumzi* is a film whose reception differs across cultural arenas, and its discussion transcends its reception as specific to the nation of Kenya. Kahiu in the TEDx Nairobi talk "Afrofuturism in Popular Culture" avers that part of her interest in Afrofuturistic debates stems from the necessity to more closely connect debates about the future with Africa (TEDx Talks 2012). Furthermore, the fact that *Pumzi* has premiered in international film festivals and received numerous awards affirms the popularity of the film beyond Kenya.

Wangari Maathai cites one of the contributions of the Green Belt Movement to the regeneration of the environment:

> Although initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore, the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilised to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption, and environmental mismanagement. (2004, n.p.)

Maathai's position on the Green Belt Movement offers hope by indicating the need for individuals to champion the recovery of the earth. In *Pumzi*, Kahiu fashions a world in which Asha enables its regeneration. The film engages in a remediation of African history by connecting futuristic imagery with contemporary African problems. History in *Pumzi* is re-envisioned through notions of futurity that show ways out of the current tendencies of environmental exploitation.

In *QZ.com*, a web-edition of the *Quartz Africa*, Lynsey Chutel (2016) observes that Kahiu explains the remediation of history thus. To envision African futures, Kahiu's film imagines an initial situation that may be in our immediate future should Wangari Maathai's call for more environmental activism not be heeded.

> It is 30 years since we started this work. Activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated. Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and, in the process, heal our own—indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process. (2004, n.p.)

In *Pumzi*, the call to heal the earth finds representation through Asha's nurturing of the seedling in a glass jar. Its replanting signals a jumpstarting of the regeneration of degraded ecosystems. If communities in the East African Territory spend an entire day in search of water, there is no time and energy to dedicate to the production of food. As a result, the health of the members of the community deteriorates. In the same vein, Wangari Maathai expresses the need to nurture inspirations while sounding a warning:

> Initially, the work was difficult because historically our people have been persuaded to believe that because they are poor, they lack not only capital, but also knowledge and skills to address their challenges. Instead they are conditioned to believe that solutions to their problems must come from 'outside'. Further, women did not realize that meeting their needs depended on their environment being healthy and well managed. They were also unaware that a degraded environment leads to a scramble for scarce resources and may culminate in poverty and even conflict. They were also unaware of the injustices of international economic arrangements. (2004, n.p.)

Thus, Asha's push to regenerate the environment in the future mirrors Wangari Maathai's agenda of saving the earth today. Maathai's hope for the regeneration of ecosystems rests in the potency of the young, who, she thinks, "are a gift to [their] communities and indeed the world. [They] are our hope and our future" (2004, n. p.). By remaining inexplicit about which youth she alludes to, Maathai emphasizes that environmental remediation is in the interest of all young people, anywhere in the world. Regeneration, therefore, must happen in ways that are indiscriminate of gender, or geographical, political or social position. Some of those challenges and the way *Pumzi* reworks them through the actions of the protagonist point to the way the film speaks to the Afrofuturist environmental imaginary. For instance, Maathai recalls:

> My inspiration partly comes from my childhood experiences and observations of Nature in rural Kenya. It has been influenced and nurtured by the formal education I was privileged to receive in Kenya, the United States and Germany. As I was growing up, I witnessed forests being cleared and replaced by commercial plantations, which destroyed local biodiversity and the capacity of the forests to conserve water. (2004, n.p.)

In the film, Asha's inspiration to save the environment has its genesis in dreams. S*he works to negate the perception that dreaming is a kind of ailment. Asha's escape from the VNHM in search of the source of the magical soil is figurative. It mirrors Wangari Maathai's comparison to a resolution she made in the past. Wangari Maathai recalls:

> "Don't you have anything better to do with your education?" some people asked. After all, I was part of a small, educated elite within Kenyan society, someone who'd been a professor at the University of Nairobi, it was expected that I should be in classroom dealing with academic matters rather than in the fields persuading rural women to plant trees. […] Many other women were planting trees with me and were also expending considerable effort for something more than material compensation and personal gain. (2010, p. 34)

The parallels between Maathai's and Asha's experiences are ways the film envisions hope for an environmentally conscious future. The dream medication Asha is forced to take, for example, hints at the VNHM working against ideals of Africa's sustainability. In the dreams, Asha smiles any time a blooming tree appears. The vision of a blooming tree appears as Asha swims in clear water. Before s*he touches the tree, however, a dream-

detecting machine alerts Asha about the dream and immediately instructs that s*he take dream suppressants to prevent further dreaming. S*he faithfully takes the dream suppressants, yet s*he keeps dreaming. The dream detector is unable to keep track of how dedicated Asha remains to the VNHM's orders to tame the dreaming-illness. Despite the medication, Asha experiences the same dream, prompting the decision to bypass the authority's wish. The medication plays into imageries of science fiction films and their commercial depiction of dystopian societies. The dream in *Pumzi* feeds Asha's resilience in the search of a way to realize the visions in the dreams.

At the beginning of Asha's career as a curator at the VNHM, the camera treats the viewer to a caption that reads "there goes the last tree" (Kahiu, 2009b, 00:04:04–00:04:06). The cause of water scarcity remains incomprehensible to the viewer until Asha starts working at the VNHM. During their time working at the museum, Asha comes across the relics of that same "last tree", which is a part of the expedition. The displayed branches of that last tree emphatically reinforce a terrifying prediction of the outcome of our current negotiations on climate change. It draws closer and makes palpable the urgency of the situation and the inevitable devastation that "The Water Wars" cause(d) on East African Territory. Such a depiction amounts to a normative history of the Maitu Community, which the governing council controls, rather than a history of their own making.

Dreaming provides a positive, hopeful outlook on what is possible if the right measures are taken at the right time, while simultaneously warning against the effects of current climate policies. Wangari Maathai in the Nobel Lecture rallies young people to dream. Kahiu can be read as heeding such advice in the creation of her protagonist. Thus, Asha's continuous dreaming, despite the VNHM's attempts to manipulate and suppress it, points to Kahiu's ingenuity in choosing the name Asha from the Gĩkũyũ word for negation, *aca*. The symbolism in Asha's name lies beyond the failure to stop dreaming. This agrees with Womack's (2013) position on Afrofuturism in which she sees the breaking out of boxes that are "color-based, sex-based hierarch[ies] […] formed largely to regulate who ha[s] access to the world's resources and rights of self-determination and who [does] not" (p. 30). Asha's resolve to disregard forms of hierarchization is an artistic representation of Wangari Maathai's vision. For Womack, to realize any meaningful change, there is need for hope, imagination and desire. She is also aware that such qualities "are first targets for those who fight against it" (p. 42). Asha remains resilient in the desire to find the source of fertile soil and contribute to the reforestation of their homeland. She creatively overcomes the VNHM's restrictions and becomes a vehicle of knowledge about environmental degradation and what it entails for future generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Pumzi* illustrates the need to make environmental concerns a core task of Afrofuturism. The film portrays how regeneration of environments through, for instance, reforestation points to the need to broaden the trajectories of Afrofuturist imaginaries as actors guaranteeing futures of environments in Africa. This article has also shown the variety of ways in which Kahiu depicts climate change in (in)direct ways as both a warning and a chance for change. Asha's dreams, physical and figurative attempts

to restore ecosystems, borrow from the long-standing science fiction tradition in African storytelling. *Pumzi* also projects the effects of climate changes into futures and proves that current environmental crises need cultural mechanisms of dealing with them. In addition, the ingenuity that went into the production of the film promises to yield novel artistic productions that will enrich the conceptions of Afrofuturism. Kahiu proves that there is no shortage of means to advance and expand Afrofuturism's toolkit.

Notes

1. This is from Wangari Maathai's conclusion of the Nobel Lecture delivered on December 10 2014 in Oslo, Norway.
2. Asha's gender remains unclear throughout the film. Hence, this article prefers to mark the ambiguity in signposting Asha's gender by way of introducing an asterisk in the pronoun "s*he."
3. The concept of category of analysis derives from Rogers Brubaker (2013).
4. I owe the concept of relating to Bolter and Grusin's (1999) argument on interplay (p. 47).
5. The explanation of the inherent imagery in the names Asha and Maitu serves to dispel the fear that the inherent ambiguities may be inaccessible to anyone who is not fluent in Gĩkũyũ. The exploration finds inspiration in Womack's tasking Afrofuturist scholarship with the responsibility of "uncovering […] scientific inventors past and present and incorporating their stories into the larger conversation about science, technology, creativity, and race" (2013, p. 46).
6. In Gikuyu, the /u/ in Maitu gives the word a different meaning from Maitũ.
7. For a complete list of the core values of the Green Belt Movement, see Wangari Maathai's (2010) *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (pp. 14–15).

Notes on contributor

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