Black as Drought
Arid Landscapes and Ecologies of Encounter
across the African Diaspora

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**ABSTRACT:** In the poem “ca’line’s prayer,” Lucille Clifton marks the progression of Black generational memory through the metaphor of drought. The poem’s 1969 publication coincided with one of the worst droughts in modern history. Across the West African Sahel late rains and the onset of famine led to widespread death and displacement. Starting from this conjunctural moment in the late 1960s and using Clifton’s provocation about the “Blackness” of drought, this article contemplates representations of arid environments in African and Afro-diasporic texts. I consider various imaginings of arid spaces, presented simultaneously as wasteland and homeland. Surveying critical scholarship on the Sahelian drought, I interrogate the contested meanings of Black life and death in deserts. I also consider the contemporary resonances of these themes, engaging African eco-critical and Afro/Africanfuturists texts. I show how these portrayals of actual and imagined deserts reveal alternate modes of encounter forged through Black/African ecological thought.

**KEYWORDS:** Africa, Afrofuturism, blackness, climate change, deserts, diaspora, eco-criticism

i have got old
in a desert country
i am dry
and black as drought
— Lucille Clifton, ca’line’s prayer

“Talk of Deserts”

In the poem “ca’line’s prayer,” Lucille Clifton charts the progression of Black generational memory through the metaphor of drought. Clifton narrates a female ancestor’s voyage from Dahomey (present-day Benin) to the plantations of the United States South, reconfigured here as a “desert country.” “ca’line’s prayer” appeared in Clifton’s first volume of poetry Good Times, published in 1969, and this early collection presages environmental themes that would thread throughout Clifton’s oeuvre in the coming decades (Bennett 2020; Dungy 2009). The publication of Good Times also coincided with one of the worst droughts in modern history. Between 1968 and 1985, across the African Sahel¹ late rains and famine induced by the vagaries of com-
Commodity markets under global racial capitalism led to the deaths of an estimated 1.2 million people and the displacement of millions more (Salgado 2004; Sheets and Morris 1974). While famines and droughts, particularly throughout the African continent, are often spoken about in a register of environmental inevitability, they are primarily socially, politically, and economically produced. Scholars have traced the vulnerabilities of the West African Sahel to colonial-era cash crop schemes and the erosion of indigenous food systems that made communities less able to respond to the shocks of the drought (De Waal 1997; Mann 2014; Watts 2013). In this review article, I draw on Clifton's provocation about the “Blackness” of drought to theorize the racial parameters of this produced vulnerability and the inordinate environmental effects of both empire and capitalism for Black/African communities (Vergès 2017; Yusoff 2018). I explore the stakes of African life and death in arid and semi-arid landscapes, reorienting ideas about Blackness through an alternate ecological framing. The work of Tiffany King has urged scholars to think Blackness beyond totalizing metaphors, noting the political and conceptual limits of tying Blackness solely to the oceanic and aquatic (2019: 4, 102). Similarly, Vanessa Agard-Jones suggests, “If water is the romantic metaphor that has irredeemably made its place in Caribbean and African diasporic studies, sand is the less embraced referent that returns us to the body’s messy realities. Water washes, makes clean. Sand gets inside our bodies, our things, in ways at once inconvenient and intrusive” (2012: 325–326). Even as water persists as the most durable ecological framework for Blackness, this article asks: In what sites do Black/African peoples make life that fit uneasily within the aquatic? What other approaches are useful in theorizing Black ecological thought and contemplating Black livelihoods in a range of physical environments? As such, I survey a number of theoretical and artistic engagements with deserts to sketch out other Black ecological encounters. First, I trace critical scholarship on drought and famine in the West African Sahel, tracing the colonial legacies of an environmental commonsense (Davis and Burke 2011; Leach and Mearns 1996) about Black/African life arid ecologies. Then, I move to eco-critical writings and other works by Black/African artists and cultural workers depicting desert lifeworlds to propose new countermappings of these spaces. I conclude by reviewing the Afrotopic possibilities of arid environments. Taken together, this review article analyzes the significance of Black/African worlds revealed through careful attention to arid landscapes. Thus, my conceptual approach takes up quite literally a dyad of questions posed by Ugandan poet Petero Kalulé (2018) in his poem “Sahara”: “shall we put an end to the sea? . . . maybe talk of deserts?”

Famine, Desertification, and Black (Arid) Ecologies

In 1968, rains across the West African Sahel became more sporadic than usual. This area of the African continent along the southern edge of Sahara had always experienced variable rainfall. A transitional landscape characterizes the region, morphing from arid to semi-arid to savannah without a clear demarcation between these different ecological zones (Austen 2010; Raynaut 1997). The Sahel indexes a certain ecological liminality and offers a fitting example of an “ecotone,” a destabilizing ecological formation that opens up new pathways of relational inquiry (King 2019: 2). Still, the changes taking place in the late 1960s signaled something unsettling. By the early 1970s, the prolonged period of drought, defined by both a reduction in mean rainfall and lowered availability of ground water, had become a disaster (Franke and Chasin 1980; Mortimore 1989; Sheets and Morris 1974). As historian Jacob Hamblin explains, “In just a few years, a dry year had turned into two, then three—and soon farmers began to wonder whether something long-term, or even permanent, might be under way” (2013: 217). The onset of fam-
ine had devastating consequences, resulting in widespread multi-species death and the upending of multiple forms of life. As Amy Niang notes during this period, “Mass decimation of cattle put a brutal end to transhumance following the unprecedented droughts of the 1970s and 1980s and subsequent ecological disaster and famine. The acute vulnerability of nomadic populations during this period was not lost on Sahelian states and the international community (development and disaster relief) as residents were made dependent on food aid and required to return to their ‘official’ village of residence if they were to receive their ration” (2014: 235). The Sahelian famines would become one of the most devastating disasters of the twentieth century, with more than a million estimated deaths and millions more displaced. Foreign commentators predicted a complete end to the Sahel: “An international conference in July 1973 proposed ‘evacuating’ the Sahel entirely . . . journalists wrote obituaries for an entire region that was ‘slipping out of human use.’ By their reckoning, the future of the Sahel was not only parched, it was impossible” (Mann 2014: 171). While popular commentary at the time blamed indigenous communities for the worst impacts of the famine, critical literature on the Sahelian famines has often stressed the global environmental changes unfolding in the mid-twentieth century (Hamblin 2013; Leach and Mearns 1996; Mortimore 1989). Alessandra Giannini elaborates: “The interpretation of drought in the Sahel as a consequence of local environmental degradation fundamentally rooted in rapid population growth arose in the 1970s—the time of the ‘population bomb’ and ‘limits to growth’” (2016: 265). This perspective proved fundamentally flawed and recent scholarship has shown that the Sahelian droughts were likely the result of changing atmospheric conditions caused by warming ocean temperatures stemming from greenhouse gases emitted by wealthy states, not “overgrazing” by pastoralist communities (Davis 2016a; Giannini 2016; Webb 1995).

The drought and famine in the Sahel also helped popularized the concept of desertification. At the most basic level, desertification as an idea seems simple enough. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) defines desertification as “land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities” (Ambalam 2014: np). Desertification remains the term most often used to describe deleterious changes occurring in dryland areas, and the concept circulates widely in policy and media reports about climate change. Yet, this seemingly self-evident ecological descriptor obscures the complex history of the term’s emergence and cyclical usage. The origin story of desertification winds through colonial periods as a European scientific concept seeking to make sense of African spaces. Historical geographer Diana Davis (2007, 2016a) has shown how French colonial forester Louis Lavauden first theorized the concept in the 1920s, suggesting that the Sahara was spreading southward. Jeremy Swift reveals that French colonial administrators feared the spread of desert-like conditions in West African colonies would threaten the possibility of cash crop cultivation (1997: 74). These ideas echoed those of French geographers and geologists who worried that the progressive spread of deserts would undermine colonial agricultural projects (Benjaminsen and Hiernaux 2019: 210). The idea further circulated among colonial environmental scientists working in British and French-occupied territories throughout the early twentieth century. Scholarship on empire and the environment has shown how theories about racial and environmental difference operated as justifications for imperial conquest (Beinart and Hughes 2007; Grove 1996; Livingstone 2008; Tilley 2011). Michael Mortimore (1989) describes how French colonial forester André Aubréville envisioned West Africa as an emerging ecological disaster in the 1940s. As Mortimore avers: “It is striking that after a relatively short acquaintance with interior West Africa, a number of European observers were already convinced of the reality of ecological degradation in the medium and longer term” (1989: 13). Arid landscapes served as a key site in the imaginative geographies of the grotesque associated with “the dark continent,” and “Of all the colonial landscapes of the
empire, the desert became the land of moral elevation and cultural shock” (Livingstone 1993; Taithe 2009: 76). Development schemes during the colonial era linked ideas of racial inferiority to the inferiority of Sahelian landscapes. For example, British colonial forester E. P. Stebbing accused West African communities of creating “man-made deserts” through “over-cultivation” and “excess pasturing” (1938: 6). Stebbing warned of a worsening ecological situation and advocated more forceful colonial administration to address the issue. Similarly, Ralph Austen explains how French colonial engineer Ernest Belime derided the Sahara itself for separating the “Black races” from civilization and advocated irrigation projects to help “civilize” French-occupied West Africa (2010: 126). European imperial ventures in African deserts echoed and informed efforts across the Atlantic, as US soldiers and scientists pushed into the southwest. Katherine Morrissey and Marcus Burtner explain: “American ideas about deserts were embedded in economic, colonial and expansionary perspectives. The hunger for arable lands had long shaped evaluations of western US arid and semi-arid lands, defined as the Great American Desert or what US expeditionary Lt. Philip St. George Cooke called ‘nature’s most inhospitable wastes’” (2019: 106). Thus, the challenge of making empire viable in these “extreme” environments became a cause célèbre for imperial states.

Desertification’s legacy as a colonial construct took on added significance in the mid-twentieth century, as these approaches to drylands were adopted uncritically by large multilateral institutions like the United Nations following formal independence (Davis 2016a, 2016b; Selcer 2018). Colonial-era scientists were incorporated within the United Nations system as “postcolonial” environmental experts and contributed to agenda setting in ways that helped augur what has been called the “Age of Desertification” (Davis 2016b). The West African Sahel became the preeminent site for research about the hazards of arid environments. Desertification provided an easy shorthand for Western observers to comprehend what they saw as the recursive miseries of the Sahelian life, as widespread famine deaths became associated with the presumed inherent vulnerability of the landscape. In addition to serving as a moral indictment of indigenous Sahelian communities, the popularity of the desertification narrative worked to naturalize the suffering of Black/Africans living in arid and semi-arid environments and justified a whole host of interventions that both ignored centuries of indigenous life building in these areas and also undermined the robustness of biodiversity in arid landscapes. Betsy Hartmann contends “Neo-Malthusian assumptions became increasingly prominent from the 1960s on, serving as a common explanation, for example, for famines in Ethiopia and the Sahel. Within large international agencies like the World Bank, degradation narratives became a rationale for both rural development and population control interventions” (2010: 196). Additionally, the discursive transits of desertification heralded one of the first global environmental issues. The “apocalyptic” marching desert provided a potent symbol, helping to inaugurate a global environmental sensibility about an increasingly dangerous and unlivable planet (Bettini and Andersson 2014; Davis 2016a; Hamblin 2013; Masco 2014; Selcer 2018).

Political ecologists, historians, and geographers have worked to trouble desertification as an environmental commonsense. Some scholars have even called for the “end” of desertification as a concept, not to deny the profound ecological changes occurring in drylands, but to encourage greater specificity about what those changes actually look like. According to Roy Behnke and Michael Mortimore, “If desertification denotes an environmental crisis consisting of irreversible degradation on a subcontinental scale, then the most significant thing about desertification in the Sahel is that it never happened” (2016: 4). They continue, “While degradation is certainly a reality in the Sahel at some localities with respect to certain components of the environment, there is no evidence of a catastrophic regional environmental crisis: ‘Existing data do not support the claim that the African Sahel is a desertification hotspot’” (2016: 4). Geomorphologists
Brittany Meché

concur and high-resolution satellite images show that “the Sahara is not marching relentlessly southward into the Sahel” (Laity 2009: 269). Interventions from Science and Technology Studies further reveal how desertification operates within a series of “short circuits” through which “scientific knowledge has been constructed, mobilized to legitimize certain understandings and policy recipes, and communicated to the public” (Bettini and Andersson 2014: 161).

Arid landscapes have been cyclically fashioned by transnational epistemic communities, powerful states, and transnational organizations as a type of wasteland. Victoria Di Palma defines wasteland as “a place, but even more it is a category of land, a category united not by what is has but by what it lacks: it has no water, food, or people, no cities, buildings, settlements or farms” (2014: 3). Emptiness and malleability are the signal characteristics of wastelands. Wastelands also sit at the heart of questions about humanness; wastelands are often seen as inhospitable to human life, even when they are teeming with forms of life, erecting a dichotomy between worthy and worthless kinds of life (Di Palma 2014: 4, 11). Euro-American notions of habitability and desirable productivity often privilege forests and agricultural scapes (Davis 2007; Di Palma 2014; Palmer 2020), what Eyak scholar Jen Rose Smith has described as “temperate-normativity” (2021: 158). As Davis contends, “The assumption that the world’s drylands are worthless, deforested, and overgrazed landscapes has led, since the colonial period, to programs and policies that have often systematically damaged drylands environments and marginalized large numbers of indigenous peoples, many of whom had been using the land sustainably” (2016a: 4). The positioning of drylands as wastelands enables a pervasive cultural construction inflected through fear and disgust as well as an aspirational civilizing impetus to turn waste into use (Di Palma 2014: 5; George 1979). Yet, drylands must be viewed within their unique variability, not the extent to which they conform to Euro-American notions of livable landscapes (Davis 2016a, 2016b; Smith 2016). This does not mean that anthropogenic climate change has no impact on such areas, just not in the ways most popularly theorized by colonial-era scientists and present-day development experts. Scholarly work criticizing simplistic environmental narratives does not mean denying the impact of environmental changes in dryland areas, especially soil erosion and lowered water tables; however, the overreliance on the concept of desertification has blocked more detailed engagement with dryland environments in ways that would actually address these challenges (Swift 1997: 86).

This ample critical scholarship on the Sahelian famines and efforts to rethink arid environments, while robust, has often missed how diverse communities of African and Afro-descended peoples reckon with and stage multiple ecological encounters in arid landscapes. The predominance of literature about “Arabness” as the primary racial configuration of arid landscapes misses Blackness as a category for thinking these landscapes anew. James Webb argues that arid landscapes are often decoupled from ideas about Blackness and Black/African cultural practices have been overlooked in the shaping of a “desert ethnicity” in the West African Sahel (1995: 15). Ideas about race and racialization have divergent histories here and as Bruce Hall has suggested, “Along the Sahel in West Africa, a long history of racial language is evident in the writings of Muslim intellectuals well before the arrival of Europeans . . . In these texts, ‘blackness’ worked as a marker of inferiority . . . the colonial administration used these existing local conceptions of racial difference in the organization of its rule, in part because they corresponded with European denigrations of people defined as black” (2011: 2). Charting the multiple Black ecologies of the Sahel requires further attention to the ways drylands have been conceptualized by outsiders as degraded and disastrous, while simultaneously acknowledging the real difficulties but ongoing strategies for living. Working from numerous sites, scholars have theorized African/Afro-diasporic geographies of the uninhabitable, the modalities of making life in spaces outside the purview of the human (Frazier 2016; King 2019; McKittrick 2006; Snorton 2017; Wynter
As Sylvia Wynter (1995) has shown, voyages along the coast of West Africa upended Medieval Christian geography. Wynter theorizes the designation of the so-called torrid lands as a geography of the uninhabitable. This conceptual move served to excise Africans living south of the Sahara from the category of the human. Katherine McKittrick takes up Wynter’s point, connecting the emergence of the non-human to the refashioning of lands once thought to be uninhabitable. The contested terrain of the human laid the conceptual groundwork for colonial landscapes to become knowable, workable, and profitable (2006: 130).

There were and remain myriad ways of making Sahelian life in excess of the limitations assessed by outsiders. Indigenous communities have lived in the areas bordering the southern edge of the Sahara for thousands of years, and knowledge about living in arid and semi-arid spaces forms the bedrock of social, cultural, linguistic, political, and ecological practices of West African communities (Sutherland-Addy and Diaw 2005). These communities developed complex and inventive ways of adapting to an environment with variable rain patterns (Akyeampong 2008). There have been and continue to be multiple adaptations and practices for living in and with, as well as altering, the physical environment of the Sahel. The Sahel has also served as an important political, cultural, religious, and commercial nexus, linking different areas of the African continent (Lydon 2009; Rossi 2017; Scheele 2012). Thus, reframing arid landscapes as Black ecologies requires acknowledging histories of trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan slavery (El Hamel 2013; Hall 2011; Rossi 2017), colonialism (Cooper 2014), warfare (Taithe 2009), and resource extraction (Hecht 2014; Niang 2014), alongside indigenous ingenuity in crop cultivation and animal husbandry (Mortimore 1989; Rain 2018; Webb 1995), cultural flourishing through linguistic and multi-ethnic plurality (McDougall and Scheele 2012; Sutherland-Addy and Diaw 2005), political community building (Villalón and Idrissa 2021), and transnational African/Afro-diasporic activism and advocacy for better lives (Azeb 2019; Gomez 2006; Levi and Thiam 2018).

Indeed, the work of Gregory Mann (2014) highlights histories of solidarity among and between Sahelian communities and Black communities globally. For example, prominent Civil Rights leaders in the US insisted in the 1970s: “The Sahel has to survive. If not, neither will the poor of Mississippi or Harlem” (cited in Mann 2014: 203). The Sahel famines were covered in depth by African American periodicals. While mainstream publications like the New York Times emphasized African neediness and desperation, Black periodicals, by contrast, often stressed the colonial legacies and racist undercurrents of the famines and championed African indigenous expertise in addressing the crisis. These efforts to forge transnational Black ecological sensibilities attentive to the environmental calamities impacting Black people globally built on themes from the Civil Rights Movement, including support for Black agricultural workers and demands for food sovereignty (Claborn 2017; McCutcheon 2019; Reese 2019). Taking up the mantra of diasporic self-sufficiency, African American and Caribbean American activists directed funds through local institutions attempting to build solidarities aimed at “reinforcing rather than reducing African sovereignty” (Mann 2014: 205). Self-sufficiency provided a guiding framework, and these articulations of self-determination signaled a worldmaking process linking Black/African communities in Africa, Europe, and the Americas (Getachew 2019). Multifaceted Black communities in the US used their own experiences of anti-Black violence to advocate drought and famine relief efforts, mobilized through Black churches, fraternities and sororities, and mutual aid funds. For example, in 1973, the National Association of Black Social Workers pledged ten thousand dollars to relief efforts in the Sahel, accompanied by a condemnation of racist US policy towards Africa. The head of NABSW Cenie J. Williams offered: “The U.S. Government's attitude has been callous and her commitment minimal in regards to the Sahel's plight. The government has shown a blatant disregard of Black human lives in the response to the crisis” (New York Amsterdam News 1973: np).
In this nascent moment of Afro-diasporic environmental encounter centering arid landscapes, one finds transnational communities deeply concerned with the interrelated impacts of racism, imperialism, and environmental devastation. Black activists in the US sought to de-naturalize the deaths and displacement of Sahelian communities, “blackening” conceptualizations of drought. Informal aid networks and support drives were later institutionalized as formal charitable agencies and non-governmental organizations (Blyden 2019; Mann 2014). The institutionalization of these solidarities had contradictory consequences. Nemata Blyden explains: “During the Cold War, as the United States began to see the continent’s importance, African Americans played a leading role in the new relationship between Africa and the United States . . . Some African Americans at this time posited themselves as experts on African issues, history, and ‘problems’ and ‘policy makers’ with growing interests in Africa called upon them” (2019: 161, 163). The enveloping of mutual aid efforts that had sustained Black communities in the US for generations within burgeoning international aid and development networks funded by the US government curtailed their more radical and liberatory potential. Despite noteworthy African American attempts to challenge the regimes of suffering so easily attached to African spaces (Brown 2014: 189), critical scholarship on the period asks how to understand these relations between Black US-based advocacy organizations and drought relief efforts as simultaneously decolonial—in their critique of global racism and empire and support for African statehood—and neocolonial, given their origination in the US and funding structures guided by US budget priorities. Attending to the significance of this moment reveals both the hopeful possibilities and limitations of transnational Black ecological advocacy.

The lasting effects of the twentieth-century droughts in assembling a common sense about desert spaces as catastrophic cannot be overstated. The Sahelian droughts and famines codified persistent assumptions about African arid landscapes, both in the iconographies of Black/African suffering and also in the scientific mechanisms for understanding changes happening in these areas. Yet, there are a multitude of other countermappings of Black/African arid ecologies. As Ogaga Okuyade details, it is essential to assess “Africa's contributions to the environmental crises of our age and how artists deploy cultural art forms to arrest the reader/audience with different rhetorical strategies” (2013: xii). I now turn to African eco-criticism and speculative texts as a key repository for reframing abiding assumptions about arid landscapes.

**Eco-Criticism, Africanfuturism, and Desert Lifeworlds**

The role of African writers and artists in environmental criticism has been under-theorized in the Western academy, even as these writers and artists have long explored environmental themes in their work (Iheka 2018; Okuyade 2013). Chelsea Frazier has pointed to the insufficiency of “prevailing disciplinary and theoretical frameworks for comprehending black feminist subjectivity and its integral relationship to world/land/territory/earth ethics” (2016: 40). With African spaces increasingly occupying global discourses about environmental catastrophe and crisis, African writers, artists, and activists continue to be marginalized within eco-criticism, despite living on the front lines of global climate change and being robust and engaged critics of the present global environmental order (Bassey 2012; Nakate 2021). William Rueckert coined the term eco-criticism in 1978 to describe emergent strains of environmental sensibility in literary studies (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996). Postcolonial and decolonial eco-criticism has pushed beyond a narrow focus on cultural texts of the Global North to explore questions of race, empire, gender/sexuality, and capitalism in popular representations of various environments (Caminero-Santangelo and Benson 2011; Huggan and Tiffin 2015; Nixon 2011). Tanure Ojaide
maintains “There has been some form of eco-criticism in African scholarship long before it became in vogue in the Western academy” (2013: vii). African eco-criticism often advocates a deliberate reimagining of the relations between human and more-than-human worlds (Okuyade 2013: xi). African and Afro-diasporic eco-crit cannot be divorced from the legacies of enslavement and colonialism. These events shape much of the environmental writing produced by African and Afro-diasporic writers in explicit and implicit ways, blurring the conceptual lines of political, historical, ecological commentary. These linkages also work within a conceptual tradition of alternate geographic formations, playing fast and loose with territorial boundaries and transcending the nation-state. It is important to contend with African/Black writers as always already ecological thinkers and, rather than shoehorning these writers and thinkers into existing ecological frameworks, grappling with how they point to other ways of making sense of multiple environments. Some scholars assert that nature, broadly conceptualized, is essential to African cosmologies in ways that do not reify the “nature/culture” divide of Western epistemologies (Iheka 2018; Maathai 2010; Okuyade 2013). While such scholarship helpfully details the ways that indigenous African traditions engage the natural world not as separate and exploitable but integrated, it is important not to idealize a static, flattened pre-colonial African ecological ethic.

A modality of fictional renderings broadly defined as Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism also seeks to depict and theorize ecology beyond the circumstances of past and present. Nigerian-American novelist Nnedi Okorafor first defined the term Africanfuturism, explaining:

Africanfuturism is similar to “Afrofuturism” in the way that Blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It’s less concerned with “what could have been” and more concerned with “what is and can/will be.” It acknowledges, grapples with and carries “what has been.” (2019: np)

Similarly, in her “alternate history of Afrofuturism” as a “Pan-African psychogeography,” Somali-American novelist and critic Sofia Samatar highlights this spatial and temporal dynamism, as Afrofuturist interventions “vault” over time, “mixing folklore and science fiction” and mending “the breach between mythic past and technological present” (2017: 184). Afro/Africanfuturist works interrogate the violence of resource extraction, environmental degradation, and multi-species death and envision other modes of being. Consequently, African eco-criticism and Africanfuturism as creative genres have a conservation ethos, telling stories about the past, present, future of African lands (Cliff 2013: 47). This is a different kind of conservation paradigm, irreducible to the prescriptions that circulate in policy spheres and refusing to map onto the frames of conservation preferred by outsiders. Narrating pasts, presents, and futures of African landscapes in ways that do not rest solely on their exploitability nor capitulate to their inevitable ruin, Black/African eco-criticism and Afro/Africanfuturism ask: what other stories can be told?

Scholars have turned to a number of recent cultural texts to explore these questions. The short film Pumzi by Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu stands as a popular text for scholars exploring Afro/Africanfuturist themes. Pumzi is set in a post-apocalyptic East Africa following World War III, “the Water War.” The film opens with flashes of newspaper articles about the Greenhouse Effect, the death of the last tree, and migrants walking days to reach water. It is worth noting that the latter is a stark reality in the present for many communities. The film is a provoc-
ative statement about the terrors of climate change and environmental degradation sited from East Africa. As Mich Nyawalo explains, “While Wanuri Kahiu’s Afro-futurist film Pumzi is set in a dystopian world ravaged by war and climate change, this post-apocalyptic theme, in a Kenyan context, undoubtedly, also speaks to the large scale economic devastation experienced by many citizens in the aftermath of Structural Adjustment Programs . . . In a country suffering from 67 percent youth unemployment, many of whom reside in urban slums, afro-futurist films like Pumzi challenge ossified economic and environmental realities in the present” (2017: 216). Pumzi’s central protagonist, Asha, lives in a fortified shelter, the Maitu compound, surrounded by a radioactive desert. Asha has recurring dreams of a broad, verdant tree. When she receives an anonymous package with a soil sample capable of sustaining life, Asha ventures out from the compound in search of a place to plant the seedling of her dream tree. According to Kirk Bryan Sides, “Pumzi cultivates a sympoietic—making together—mode of storytelling in an age of environmental crisis and planet-death as a well to both tell new stories and to think future worlds. In this way, Pumzi offers us a vision of an Afropoturoist eco-ethics based in narrative practice” (2019: 108). While commentators often highlight themes of renewal and rebirth in the film, a deep engagement with representations of arid landscapes in Kahiu’s dystopia remain underexplored. Kahiu’s film delineates an ecological nightmare embodied as desert. Here, arid landscapes provide a geographic and conceptual shorthand for the end of the world. The latter half of the film is punctuated by images of Asha walking over dunes, surrounded by sand, her limited reserve of water dwindling. In the end, she gives the last drops of water from her bottle and from the sweat on her body to the tree seedling, sheltering it as she lies down to die. As the camera zooms out a tree emerges from Asha’s body, and as the credits roll, thunder rumbles and the landscape morphs from tan to green. Nyawalo describes this as an “ecofeminist critical posture” stitching together the simultaneity of utopia/dystopia (2017: 218). Similarly, Aboubakar Sango interprets Kahiu’s dystopian desert as a “post nature world in which the possibility for regeneration lies in the hands” of the female protagonist who can quite literally make the desert bloom (2015: 143). Other commentators have traced this move to a broader legacy of African cinema. Matthew Durkin suggests “Pumzi emerges from the history of African cinema as it calls for audience participation and conversation, not only among Africans and Kenyans but transnationally, for a concerted response to the threats to the planet . . . The overriding sense of danger within Pumzi . . . asks viewers to wonder how their actions frame the world for future generations” (2016: 232). The Kenyan context here is important. Desert motifs have been taken up by East African writers to depict the overlapping violences of colonialism, capitalism, and climate change (Vambe 2013: 3). For James Wachira, Kahiu’s imbuing a single body and a single tree with the power to remake the world recalls the Green Belt Movement of Kenyan activist and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai (2020: 325).

Taking a different approach, Nnedi Okorafor refuses to cede the desert to/as catastrophe. Across Okorafor’s work, deserts serve as both an agentive force all their own and as a source of immense power and cultural heritage for her novels’ characters (Bawin 2020; Burnett 2015; Death 2022; Lindow 2017). For example, in Who Fears Death, Okorafor’s narrative assembles homelands and kinship in aridscapes, thus defying both colonial-era and contemporary renderings of aridspaces as wastelands. Desert lifeworlds serve as a dynamic force in Okorafor’s text, and Carl Death describes this as an example of “Africanfuturist socio-climatic imaginaries,” highlighting “how dominant discourses of climate politics can be disrupted and challenged by more radical and counter-cultural imaginaries” (2022: 241). Who Fears Death follows narrator and protagonist Onyesonwu (meaning who fears death in Igbo). Born in the midst of a violent conflict between the Okeke and Nuru peoples, Onye is the product of sexual violence committed against her mother (an Okeke) by her father (a Nuru). Onye spent the first several years of
her life living in a large desert with her mother, whose shame at bearing an Ewu child (the term for children born of one Okeke and one Nuru parent) kept her from living among others. Onye soon discovers that she has magical powers and in her late teens she launches a revolution to end the bloody war between the Okeke and the Nuru and to avenge the rape of her mother by killing her father. Ultimately, it is not revolutionary violence but Onye’s “singing of a desert song” that writes a new origin story for the Okeke and Nuru peoples; this re-narration enables her to bring about a new world (Burnett 2015: 147; Kotecki 2020: 171). Okorafor describes her novel as a post-apocalyptic story set in a future Sudan, and commentators have likened the novel to a fictional accounting of the war in Darfur during the early 2000s, a conflict with ramifications that continue through to this day (Dowdal 2013; Jones 2015). Okorafor’s novel offers a more complex rendering of intra and intercommunal violence alongside attention to environmental themes without being reductive and presenting conflict on the African continent as inevitable. Joshua Burnett argues Okorafor’s “imagined postapocalyptic Africa allows her to explore the idea of a truly postcolonial Africa, free from neocolonial bonds” (2015: 132). Carl Death, taking up Sylvia Wynter (2003), asserts “the novels of Nnedi Okorafor can make an important contribution to imagining and practicing new genres of the human” (2022: 243). And in envisioning the sites of revolutionary struggle and the building of new worlds precisely within the landscapes otherwise presumed to be wastelands, degraded, and unproductive, Okorafor refuses utopic romanticism (Burnett 2015: 134) but still finds vibrant social, political, and ecological life. As Kristine Kotecki explains, “the inhospitable desert that threatens human survival becomes the setting for developing a vision of society better able to accommodate alterity. Onye is herself a creature of the desert and of fire: ewu children, with skin the color of sand, are considered desert spirits, and Onye thinks of the desert as a soothing place and as home” (2020: 172). In Okorafor’s depictions of arid landscapes one finds multiplicity: brutality alongside the comforts of kinship; sexual violence and consensual sexual exploration and ecstasy; hunger and thirst but also cultural delicacies and satiation, new technologies to capture water; garments adapted for the sun. Okorafor’s treatment of arid landscapes provides “a reminder that multiple worlds exist in parallel, that diverse ecosystems are an element of the diversity of life, and that environmental change is just as possible as social, political, and discursive change” (Death 2022: 249). This multiplicity points toward a living with and a form of futurity that Tina Campt famously defined as: “not a question of hope, though it certainly inescapably intertwines with the idea of aspiration. To me it is crucial to think about futurity through a notion of ‘tense.’ What is the ‘tense’ of a Black feminist future? It is the tense of anteriority, a tense relationship to an idea of possibility that is neither innocent nor naive” (2017: 17; Yusoff 2018: 98). Jeremy Davies (2016) argues that we are beyond the point of ending the profound climatological and geological changes taking place, and that transnational solidarity demands learning to live with and mapping the contours of what a more equitable form of life might look like. In the concluding section, I hold both Campt’s Black feminist “tense” and Davies’ living with to further explore the place of arid and semi-arid environments in Afrotopic visions of Black ecological futures.

**Conclusion: Arid Lands and Afrotopias**

The future is a site that does not yet exist, but which one can already shape within a mental space. For societies, this non-existent site must be the object of a prospective of thought. As such, one works within present time in order to help to create its occurrence. Afrotopos is Africa’s atopos: the as-yet inhabited site of this Africa to come. It requires an investment in thought and imagination. (Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*)
In *Afrotopia*, Senegalese economist and philosopher Felwine Sarr extends an impassioned call to bring forth a new future for Africa. Imploring readers to imagine the African continent anew, beyond its status as “the apogee of violence,” Sarr envisions a future of prosperity and self-determination (2020: x). He forwards a simple but audacious desire for peoples of African descent to be able to set the terms of their own lives. The text advocates for Africans to “produce their own metaphors for the future” through “creative gestation” (xii). Such aspirations cannot be reduced to “rational economic ordering” or assessed through concepts like foreign direct investment and gross domestic product (28). For Sarr, these forms of developmentalism seek to “universalize the West” (5). Instead, he calls for African “intellectual sovereignty.” Though he fixes his eye firmly on the future, Sarr also insists on “Afro-contemporaneity,” an acknowledgement and appreciation of the “present time” of African lived experiences (22). He challenges images of Africans as would-be migrants in perpetuity. Black/African diasporic thought often emphasizes mobility and flight, but recent scholarship has noted the importance of stasis, conceptualizing Black quotidian life that is not always in flux or on the run (Campt 2017: 9). Sarr’s Afrotopia dreams of the ability to choose to “inhabit one’s [own] dwelling,” to make fruitful lives in African homelands with diverse and dynamic ecologies (2020: 80). The text champions multiple “endogenous” knowledge systems, from the social and natural sciences, oral histories, and religious praxis. Sarr seeks to build new worlds, while still acknowledging the ecological challenges of the present: “Our African architects should be the builders of the Sahel, of the desert, of the mountains, of the tree-filled savannah . . . During these current times, when environmental concerns are continuing to be places at the forefront of everyone’s minds . . . [w]e must reacquaint ourselves with the benefits of nature already at hand” (107). Sarr’s notion of Afrotopia rejects the narrow confines of normative World Bank and United Nations policies, the fear-mongering of global militarism, the voraciousness of resource extraction and overconsumption. He locates African futurity firmly within the horizon of decoloniality: “Africa must complete its decolonization by way of a fruitful encounter with itself” (115). Sarr’s staging of decoloniality as an ongoing project aligns him with other scholars cautioning against premature calls to “provincialize” empire (Scott 2005). These calls often ignore the ways decoloniality remains a vision not yet fully realized. Such an approach links Sarr to decolonial theorizations in several other sites. Writing from North America, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd maintain: “In order to adequately address climate change . . . we also need to seriously think through and enact processes of decolonization” (2017: 774). For South Africa-based writer Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality names a cocktail of insurrectionist-liberatory projects and critical thoughts emerging from the ex-colonized epistemic sites . . . Decoloniality is born out of a realization that the modern world is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies” (2015: 489).

To conclude, I consider Sarr’s multiple enunciations of Afrotopia to survey additional research avenues for further scholarship on the Black ecologies of deserts. Arid landscapes continue to occupy the center of environmental catastrophism, with reports of severe droughts, famines, and “creeping deserts” emblazoned on the pages of global media reports. Drought, historically and in the present, most severely impacts communities on the African continent (Laity 2009: 268) and this disproportionate impact demands attention to drought, not merely as a scientific descriptor of changes in water availability, but, more crucially, as a racially inflected form of ecological vulnerability. Still, it is worth considering Sarr’s insistence on imagining viable futures in African homelands, even amid the challenges of the present. An estimated 49 percent of African communities live in arid and semi-arid parts of the continent (Laity 2009: 12). And 38 percent of the global population live in arid lands (Davis 2016a). Critical scholarship advo-
cates against the headlong rush to declare areas of the Global South a catastrophe. Catastrophic language can embolden the very actors who have helped produce the present circumstances of environmental change (Aradau and Van Munster 2011; Cooper 2006; Hamblin 2013). Indeed, Harry Verhoeven has shown how depictions of arid African spaces, particularly Sudan, as harbingers of climate change collapse and “green wars” has obfuscated local grievances and local claims to equitable responses to environmental change (2011: 692). Natalie Koch (2021), drawing on the work of Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte (2018) and Diné scholars Andrew Curley and Majerle Lister (2020), describes how the conjuncture of environmental catastrophism and technological modernism affirms a white settler imaginary of deserts as simultaneously dystopic and utopic, erasing generations of indigenous life in these spaces. Similarly, Axelle Karera argues climate change apocalypticism often works to disavow racialized violence and envisions a post-apocalyptic racial re-alignment that presumes the continuity of Black death (2019: 34). Emery Roe further notes the declaration of environmental crisis allows technical experts to position themselves as key stakeholders by supplanting the desires and priorities of local inhabitants (1995: 1066; cited in Leach and Mearns 1996: 20). Environmental crisis response projects have served, historically and in the present, as ways for Western countries to intervene in African countries. The challenge of understanding the multiplicity of arid landscapes as Black ecologies means both recognizing the present and future devastation of climate change and acknowledging the ways that deserts have been key environments of human life for thousands of years. People have and do live here, and as Mamka Anyona (2021) has argued, “Africans don’t just live to die.” Black/African communities continue to advocate for ways to build and sustain more robust and equitable livelihoods arid/semi-arid spaces. Thus, it is important not to declare their uninhabitability, to write off this kind of Black ecological configuration, but to reckon with what new forms of life making and habitation will emerge in these sites (Davis 2016a: xv). As the work of Snorton (2017), Frazier (2016), and others has shown, the persistence of Black/African life redefines habitability, living where life is not supposed to exist. This assertion does not sanitize or romanticize suffering; living in toxic or degraded landscapes is not valorous. But it does challenge the ease with which certain kinds of landscapes and livelihoods are written off. This approach works against the idea that Black/African peoples are barely living, that Black ecologies are always already a catastrophe. It also illuminates a bind identified by Tina Campt: “How do we create an alternative future by living both the future we want to see, while inhabiting its potential foreclosure at the same time” (2017: 107). Posed another way, inflected through a Black ecological sensibility, what would it mean to continue to build worlds in the very spaces most susceptible to the ravages of climate change? Such a question is markedly different from rote survivalism. John Claborn asserts “survivalism . . . is a white thing. Survivalism is an individualistic persistence through despair” (2017: 170). Instead, he advocates, “a collective persistence through despair that—through the support of the group—can potentially overcome despair” (2017: 170). Afro-diasporic feminist writing practices insist on “betraying” the archive, theorizing Black/African life beyond the ledger (Hartman 2008), the colonial map (King 2019), or colonial photography (Campt 2017). Similarly, it is important to betray a reductive archive rehearsing the catastrophe of African spaces. Ultimately, contending with Black life in and around deserts opens up new ways of understanding the profound social, political, and cultural significance of these lands. Afrotopic aspirations offer a key gesture in such a Black ecological project, taking seriously the materiality of arid landscapes, not as mere signifier but as a dynamic site of Black/African life. Julie Laity characterizes arid landscapes as physical “palimpsests,” layers of history marking changes in geologic time (2009: 2). They are also palimpsests in a sociopolitical and cultural sense. Further exploration of the Black ecologies of arid spaces can
help illuminate the layered histories of Black/African worldmaking, pointing to new solidarities, new strategies for adaptation, and an unyielding commitment to envisioning new ways of living amid and beyond ecological calamity.

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NOTE

1. The African Sahel refers to the arid and semi-arid areas spanning from present-day Senegal and Mauritania to Eritrea. In this article, I primarily refer to the West African Sahel, from Senegal and Mauritania to Chad.

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