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"Into the mutation": Osahon Ize-Iyamu's "More Sea than Tar" (2019) as Climate Fiction

Cédric Courtois

- 1 In a 2005 *Guardian* article titled "The Burning Question," British writer Robert Macfarlane ponders over the relationship between the climate change crisis and language: "Where is the literature of climate change? Where is the creative response to [...] 'the most severe problem faced by the world'?" While Macfarlane argues that the literary reaction to the threat of nuclear power has been quite copious, he nevertheless rues the dearth of a similar literary impetus and output when it comes to climate change:

Climate change [...] exists as paper trail, as data stream [...], as journalism, as conversation, and as behaviour. But it does not yet, with a few exceptions, exist as art. Where are the novels, the plays, the poems, the songs, the libretti, of this massive contemporary anxiety? (emphasis added)

The unfortunate insufficiency of creative response to so great a threat is surprising when compared to the "literature [tackling the issue of the use of nuclear power that] did not only annotate the politics of the nuclear debate, [but] helped to shape it. As well as feeding off that epoch in history, it fed into it" (Macfarlane). Fiction addressing the nuclear issue may have had the capacity to fashion the manner in which nuclear power is perceived and, possibly, used. If one follows Macfarlane, it could also be argued that fiction about climate change could help change attitudes regarding the environment.

- 2 More recently, in a 2016 *Guardian* article, Indian writer Amitav Ghosh also raises cardinal questions about the existence of a "fiction about climate change": "Why does climate change cast a much smaller shadow on literature than it does on the world?" (2016a).¹ Ghosh also notices that despite his wish for more climate change fiction to be written, paradoxically enough "this subject figures only obliquely in [his own] fiction" (2016b, 9). For Ghosh, literature does not arise from a vacuum. On the contrary, it dialogues with the (social, economic, historical) conditions from and in which it emerges, which echoes what Edward Said explains when he writes that "[t]exts [...] are

in the world, and hence are worldly" (1975, 4). Adeline Johns-Putra casts doubt on Ghosh's argument about a lack of climate change fiction when she explains that since the publication of one of her articles on climate change fiction in 2011, where she, too, mentioned the paucity of literary response to climate change, "it [has since then been] clear that climate change is no longer a marginal topic in literary studies. Climate change fiction, or cli-fi, has gained considerable public and critical attention" (2016, 266).² She also refers to "a canon of climate change literature" (267) which has so far been mainly Western. Within this context of a global rise in the number of works tackling environmental issues, it is still US and European (white, male) writers³ who are often, if not always, considered as having the potential to produce works that trigger (militant) action for the benefit of planet Earth.⁴

- 3 What happens when readers and critics care to look at the literary productions of "the developing world's inspiring [writers and/or] activists," to quote Nigerian writer Chika Unigwe (2019)? I propose to analyse "More Sea than Tar," a short story written by Nigerian writer Osahon Ize-Iyamu, published both online and in a book by Reckoning Press, a nonprofit, annual journal of creative writing about environmental justice. It frontally addresses climate change, and can be considered as an African "ecodystopian fiction" (Otto 2012, 9) set in an unspecified future. The narrator, a teenager named Uti, and his family, navigate the waters that surround their community's neighbourhood in order for the father to find a way to work and make money, but also for them to be able to find edible fish in a world that has been profoundly affected by floods.⁵ This article aims to analyse the poetics and politics of the "African Anthropocene" (Omelsky 2014, 36; original emphasis) as put to the fore by Ize-Iyamu in "More Sea than Tar." As Ursula K. Heise explains, criticism about climate change fiction, which used to be based on content, needs to focus more on "questions of aesthetics" and "questions of literary form" (2010, 258), something this essay aims to achieve by, first, addressing the issue of the exploration of African Anthropogenic topographies in "More Sea than Tar," then by analysing human vulnerability in the dystopian setting that is depicted. Finally, the issues of resilience and hope in, and the transformative potential of "More Sea than Tar" will be raised.

"A world of obstacles lies ahead of us": exploring a future Anthropogenic African topography

- 4 In "More Sea than Tar," Osahon Ize-Iyamu puts forward an explicitly Anthropogenic African topography, in the sense that the African environment described has been deeply affected by human activity, which makes the narrator declare: "[a] world of obstacles lies ahead of us" (2019) and "Our days are numbered." Uti, his parents and his brother Joseph live in a community that is separate from and better-off than the one which Uti's father decides to explore on a canoe with his sons.⁶ These two communities are reminiscent of those of well-off Victoria Island and other parts of the sprawling city of Lagos, among which the slum of Makoko, described at length by Elvis in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), for example. In "More Sea than Tar," Ize-Iyamu stages a two-tier Nigerian society. The title – which echoes Helon Habila's third novel, *Oil on Water* (2013), set in the Niger Delta – both invokes and defamiliarises infamous African topographies, among which that of part of the slum of Makoko, where a third of the people lives in habitats built on stilts by the lagoon. Some elements of this life on

and out of water – these communities mostly live from fishing – seem to have inspired Ize-Iyamu. "More Sea than Tar" frontally tackles the issue of rising waters. In an article published in *Le Monde Afrique*, Nyancho Nwanri explains that the "sprawling city of Lagos in Nigeria is [currently] sinking" (my translation); the rising water puts at risk the dwellings of some 20 million inhabitants in Lagos alone, among whom not only those of the destitute inhabitants of Makoko, but also those of the "afrofuturistic" (Nwanri; my translation) Eko Atlantic City, that is being built on land reclaimed from the Atlantic Ocean, where only the wealthy will be able to live. Chief Ede Dafinone, the Chairman of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, recently cautioned: "Several communities [in this coastal city] have been swept away. If nothing is done, Lagos will be submerged by 2050" (quoted in AFP). In addition to these elements that for some in Nigeria appear familiar – and to which inhabitants of other African coastal cities on the Atlantic coast could relate – the setting of "More Sea than Tar" is explicitly African and, more accurately, Nigerian. These elements are visible through various devices, among which geographical, linguistic and more generally cultural, markers, that are disseminated in the whole text: "water that draws too much like *ogbono soup*," "*afrobeats*, loud and violently *Nigerian*, play in the background," "*Nigerian hawkers*," "*Yoruba dialect*" (emphasis added). The use of Pidgin English by Uti's father when he meets the inhabitants of the poorer community that is more affected by climate change also enables the readers to situate the setting in West Africa.⁷ These elements that allow a recognition of a situation that is currently ongoing – the threat that looms over Lagos of possibly being underwater by 2050 – added to the textual elements that indicate that the scene takes place in Nigeria, show that Ize-Iyamu intends to offer his readers a possible articulation of the "*African Anthropocene*" (Omelsky 2014, 36; original emphasis). "More Sea than Tar" can be considered as a speculative short story as some of the elements that are described have much to do with the situations – whether they be political, social, environmental – of present-day Nigeria.⁸

- 5 In "More Sea than Tar," Ize-Iyamu stages a Nigerian family's exploration – "exploring the shallow far ends of our community [...]" (2019) – of their environment on a canoe, as the world they live in has mostly been drowned and has become barren. This exploratory endeavour appears very early in the story when Uti explains: "We stuff our things in huge hiking backpacks, keeping our hands free to lift the huge canoe above our heads." The alliteration in [h] indicates how exceptional this "adventure" (Ize-Iyamu 2019) is. Uti compares the landscape to a "wasteland." As the three characters – embodiments of what Achille Mbembe would call "wandering subject[s]"⁹ (2003, 1; original emphasis) – explore their environment, the readers are also given the opportunity to immerse themselves into it.¹⁰ The "explore (v.)" entry in the *Online Etymology Dictionary* reads: "'to investigate, examine,' [...] from Latin *explorare* 'investigate, search out, examine, explore,' [...]. [Also] 'to go to a country or place in quest of discoveries'." Both meanings of "investigating, examining" and "going to a country or place in quest of discoveries" are present in the story as the narrator, his brother and father observe how people who belong to the other community eke out a living. The narrator explains: "My father, Joseph and I don't talk. We are *studying* this new environment, *expanding our understanding* with every direction we look in" (emphasis added). There is an anthropological approach to their exploration of this flooded environment.

- 6 A reference to "floods" (Ize-Iyamu 2019), mentioned four times in the whole story, appears at the very beginning. By alluding to "*these* floods" (emphasis added), the narrator does not explain to the reader their whys and wherefores. The use of the demonstrative "these" at the very beginning of the story contributes to showing that Uti builds a shared community of knowledge with the readers: there seems to be no point in explaining why their environment has become so hostile. The use of the present tense in the whole story contrasts with the more traditional use of the past tense and partakes in the narrative strategies put in place in order to allow the readers to feel proximity with the characters' precarious, fragmented, even shattered lives. In a desperate *cri du coeur* uttered no fewer than four times and reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, that might be considered as another hypotext, Uti says that "everything is falling apart," that his family's "house" itself "is falling apart." He explains:

The rain outside makes my body run cold; I can actually hear the floods swishing all around us through our thin walls. Thin enough for the ceiling to give out above where I stand, water splashing through. It soaks me so much that my clothes are see-through, stuck on me while my teeth chatter.

- 7 This house fails to do what it was built for, something Gaston Bachelard depicts in *The Poetics of Space*:

[I]f I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. [...] [T]he house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. [...] In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies [...]. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. (6-7)

The rain that falls is so intense that it seems to drain the characters – particularly young Uti – of their energy and vitality. "[D]aydreaming" has become impossible. The house, supposed to be a protective environment "thrust[ing] aside contingencies," that shelters the ones inhabiting it, is no longer suited for that precise role, as the rain and floods jeopardize people's lives: this ominous presence of the liquid element can be heard through the alliterative use of [s] in "floods, swishing, splashing, soaks, see-through, stuck." The house synecdochically mirrors the collective, the country (or world?) as a whole: in an allegorical way, the degradation of the house parallels and foreshadows that of society. The reference to flooding episodes, which remind the readers of the epic proportions of the Genesis flood narrative, echoes the world of the readers as sea water rises, therefore threatening entire ecosystems, islands, and coastal areas more generally.

- 8 Osahon Ize-Iyamu's short story addresses climate change in a direct manner. It is explicitly about the impacts – geological, historical, economic, sociological, cultural – of a catastrophe. Indeed, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "catastrophe" means "reversal of what is expected' [...] 'an overturning; a sudden end,' [...] 'to overturn, turn down, trample on; to come to an end'" (2019). "More Sea than Tar" is an eschatological narrative that insists on an event, or a series of events, which can be considered as a "sudden end" of the world and as a veritable *katabasis*, a descent into the underworld, a descent into Hell, where the waters are reminiscent of the marshy river Styx. As the narrator indicates, "[b]ut sooner or later, we're all going to fall, because we can only stand so tall before we're sinking: to our legs, to our knees, to our torsos, to our heads."

Ize-Iyamu clearly centres his narrative on a future Anthropogenic African setting which mainly affects the inhabitants' vulnerable bodies.

"[A]ll of us vulnerable without solid ground": human vulnerability in "More Sea than Tar"

- 9 Similarly to Robert Macfarlane and Amitav Ghosh, US environmentalist and author Bill McKibben remarks: "[T]hough we know about [climate change], we don't *know* about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas?" (2005; original emphasis). *Knowing* about climate change seems to depend on a specific type of knowledge: one that is visceral and dealing with the possible consequences of the devastating climate crisis.¹¹ In this article, McKibben also highlights the importance of literary texts – but also the arts in general – in order to supplement scientific studies which do not "register in our gut" (emphasis added). Only through the arts can environmental activists find an efficient medium that could lead to action. In 2011, in an introduction to a collection of stories by Mark Martin, McKibben explained that "[t]he scientists have done their job – they've issued every possible warning, flashed every red light. Now it's time for [...] the artists, whose role is to help us understand what things *feel* like" (3; original emphasis). McKibben has also explained that "an imaginative repertoire [about climate change] is urgently needed by which the causes and consequences of climate change can be debated, *sensed*, and *communicated*" (2005; emphasis added). Ize-Iyamu takes into account those elements related to the readers' "sensing" the catastrophic situation of climate change mainly through the stress he lays on corporeality in an antagonistic environment. Corporeal elements must be focused on, as McKibben considers that if humans/readers do not experience "fear in their guts" (2003), they will not (re)act.
- 10 Uti's community might be better off than the other one, but its living conditions are also deteriorating, as already shown in the way the narrator's house is crumbling, and in the manner in which Uti's mother seems to be resigned to accepting her fate. The community which Uti visits faces food scarcity because of extremely polluted water, which has turned black, and in which fish are smothered by the trash, oil, and organic matter – including human corpses – that deprive it of all its life-sustaining qualities: "Water that's mixed with the leaves and the soil and the garbage I didn't throw away properly. Water that isn't water" (Ize-Iyamu 2019). This excerpt not only highlights the individuals' responsibilities in this situation – the readers can also identify to Uti's "I" – but it also emphasises the instability of the signifier "water" in such a polluted and dystopian context. "More Sea than Tar" displays a world where water is no longer water, where water, essential for all forms of life, has become a vector of disease and, worse even, death, as Uti explains:

When I open my mouth, I get the rancid taste of sickness, of cholera and dysentery, of swallowing bugs and mosquitoes. My lungs are filling up. [...] I vomit all the water that tried to enter me. All the disease and sickness that touched my tongue, the pollution and sand and *ugh*. (original emphasis)

This noxious water is endowed with a willingness to bring death as the action verb "tried" indicates; this "agency" is underlined when Uti describes the "[f]loods of water [that] come *screaming through*, thick and muddy" (emphasis added), when he shows that "water draws me back into its thickness," and when he describes "all the things that

have tried to drown me, all the things that have tried to kill me." Uti also remembers traumatic memories: "Each step brings back the memory of exploring the shallow far ends of our community three months ago and seeing bloated bodies floating in the stagnancy." The use of the internal rhyme "bloated / floated" extends Uti's vision of horror. This description of water that leads to "stagnancy," a term that not only refers to an absence of flow and movement, but also to an unpleasant smell of putrefaction – therefore appealing to the readers' sense of smell¹² – echoes that of the protagonist of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011, 108). Right from the title, Ize-Iyamu hints at what his narrative will hinge on. At stake then, through the word "tar," is "petroculture," a term used by the Petrocultures Research Group "to emphasize the ways in which post-industrial society today is an oil society through and through. It is shaped by oil in physical and material ways, from the automobiles and highways we use to the plastics that permeate our food supply and built environments" (Szeman 2016, 9).¹³ In "More Sea than Tar," the outcome of the use of oil is visible – a crocodile is "covered in greasy film and toxic waste" – and this attests to the fact that the planet has entered the geological age of the Anthropocene, whereby humans are "[b]iological agents, geological agents" (Chakrabarty 2009, 206) that have contributed to undeniable changes on the planet. Uti explains that the waters he and his family navigate are filled with "glass and plastic [and] industrial waste and chemical reaction." This dystopian depiction is reminiscent of US writer Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) which, like Ize-Iyamu's short story, describes the terrible future consequences of climate change, on both nature and human beings. In both works, an "environmentalism of the [vulnerable] poor" (Nixon 2013) is put to the fore and nature has become so hostile to human beings that a poetics of survivalism is put in place. The characters are first and foremost vulnerable beings: "Other humans pass by, all of us vulnerable without solid ground." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "vulnerability" as "[t]he quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally." The landscape and the animals that inhabit it represent veritable threats for the characters.

- 11 One of the greatest threats for Uti, his father and brother, lies in the mutant animals that live in the filthy waters. In a very short sentence that stands on its own, Uti writes: "Into the mutation" (Ize-Iyuma 2019). This could echo US writer and mountaineer Jon Krakauer's nonfiction 1996 book *Into the Wild*, based on US hiker Chris McCandless's story of a journey into the Alaskan outdoors to purify himself from the evils of civilisation. However, in "More Sea than Tar," no purification is possible for the protagonist who faces evil and scary creatures, vectors of contamination and diseases. He mentions "the diseased sea creatures stalking for prey" but also

a crocodile dancing in the depths, its shadow eventually rising from the surface of the water, covered in greasy film and toxic waste. Rubbish that has... congealed and grafted to the animal's skin [...] like an infection sewn and healed onto the body. Like an operation done to make all living things abominations.¹⁴

- 12 These animals have become monstrous beings that are compared to mutants.¹⁵ The crocodile even has "mutated jaws" and Uti can see "[t]he shadows of animals merged with glass and plastic, mosquitos breeding, insects mutated by industrial waste and chemical reactions."¹⁶ The polyptoton "mutation / mutated" clearly enables the narrator to shed light on this alteration in the genes of living organisms. Even fish, a staple for the region's inhabitants, have been contaminated: "Greenish-black dots grow inside its mouth. We try to peel them off but they grow back again." Human beings

themselves seem to have started to mutate, as the abject details of people "covered in boils and scars, disease and infection" and the aforementioned "bloated bodies floating" indicate.¹⁷ People are no longer humans only: "Humans are vultures, I think, the way we decompose dead machines by taking them to bits, leaving the useless parts for the earth." They live a life that Giorgio Agamben calls "*zōē*" (1998, 183), "bare life," when humans are prevented from entering the political domain, therefore being reduced to biological beings. The presence of mutant bodies is not new in Nigerian literature as they are present in Amos Tutuola's works, for example. These works may constitute other hypotexts for Ize-Iyamu's "More Sea than Tar," which draws from various sources. The landscape described in "More Sea than Tar" mainly echoes that of Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954).¹⁸ In his article on Tutuola's work, Achille Mbembe alludes to "*extreme forms of human life, death-worlds, forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead (ghosts)*" (2003, 1; original emphasis). What Uti, his brother and father experience corresponds to what Mbembe calls a "*threshold experience*" (2003, 1; original emphasis) as they decide not to stay within the confines of their community's limits. They decide to go over this threshold, into "the zone of folkloric terror" (Omelsky 2018, 78), characterised by excess. Ize-Iyamu thus chooses a dystopian agenda: according to Adrienne Maree Brown, "we need to have a level of dystopian consideration [as] [c]ertain climate realities are no longer wild imaginings, they are happening, and they are coming" (2017, 58). "More Sea than Tar" puts to the fore the vulnerability of bodies in an environment that has become hostile. These very bodies, initially complete in the first paragraph of the short story – "in control of our bodies" – become fragmented or metaphorically dismembered: "*to our legs, to our knees, to our torsos, to our heads*" (original emphasis). A similar passage appears further down: "*To our feet, to our ankles, to our ribs, to our throats...*" (original emphasis). This metaphorical dismemberment mirrors that of the communities themselves, as shown in the tense relationship between Uti's parents. Graham Huggan explains that "[e]cological disruption is coextensive with damage to the social fabric" (2004, 704). "More Sea than Tar" is an eschatological narrative which adopts the survivalist scenario. Ize-Iyamu seems to conform to what Dan Bloom explains when he says that "the current default setting for most cli-fi novels [is] set around dystopian gloom and doom" (2015).¹⁹ However, not all seems to be lost in "More Sea than Tar."

Resilience, hope, and the transformative potential of "More Sea than Tar"

- 13 In a context that is antagonistic to the extreme, Uti finds himself losing hope on a number of occasions, starting from the beginning of the story where his opinion about life in such a context is in sharp contrast with his father's: "But sooner or later, we're all going to fall" (Ize-Iyuma 2019), he writes. The use of the coordinating conjunction "but" shows their opposed visions of life in such an altered environment. Despite his father's enthusiasm, Uti explains: "I'd like to want to survive, but I've almost given up. If I can just desensitize myself enough, maybe it will feel less painful when the inevitable happens." He adds: "Maybe it's better to just float into oblivion, to row above the water till the moment I go under." His clear wish to pass away – "all I've been doing is running around, watching walls collapse, waiting to die" – could be considered as, to

borrow Ernst Bloch's idea, this short story's "most tragic form of loss [...] the loss of the capacity to imagine that things could be different" (quoted in Mauch 2019, 18). However, people around him in the neighbourhood that he visits with his father and brother seem to be resilient, in the sense that they are capable of adapting themselves to their ever-changing and threatening environment: "This new community is smelly yet vibrant, loud and exciting. It's what I've never seen before: vendors carrying goods on their heads with water up to their chests, chasing boats [...] the world's pollution the newest source of transportation."²⁰ Two examples of resilient characters appear in Mr. Abalaka and Mrs. Eneyo, whom Uti, his father and his brother, meet while rowing on the waters. Mrs. Eneyo explains that she and Mr. Abalaka do "[a] lot of side-work. Helping clear up this place, fishing work. Just ... anything to live."²¹ Uti's father himself – unlike his mother who might be more realistic as regards the situation they face – is a resilient man who is "hooked on the lust of his dreams," who is motivated by "the promise of a dry land," and who prefers to see the glass as half full, as shown in the following passage where he and his wife are discussing his use of the word "sea" to describe their environment: "'Haven't you ever wanted an adventure out on the open sea?'" My father laughs [...]. / 'It's not an open sea,' my mother adds [...]. / 'Figuratively,' my father counters." As to Joseph, he mentions a utopian place where life will be better; however, this life will be underwater, as water will continue to rise. The brochures that he and Uti read mention "underwater living facilities," "deep sea living experiences," and "decontamination pods," which, once again, tend to point to the resilience of human beings. However, it also shows that they have given up hope of living on Earth in a normal way. Moreover, Joseph mocks his father's "survival" mode: "A text from Dad. / 'We're going out in search of meat tomorrow,' I read. / Joseph laughs. 'Figures he'd try to opt out of this vegan lifestyle as fast as possible. He's looking towards the now, survival... which is a perspective, I guess.'" Regarding perspectives, "More Sea than Tar" goes beyond the dystopian mode as the uses of the polyptoton "hope / hopeful," Uti's repetitions of "Hope is never now" and "hopeful future" are disseminated in the text, as though the concept of "hope" had become a mantra.

- 14 In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch argues that human beings cannot help being hopeful; they cannot but dream. Dreams are one of the means through which utopia can be reached. Another characteristic of hope, according to Bloch, is that it can be "disappointed" (1995, 195). Moreover, "[h]ope can work as a wakeup call, an antidote to lethargy" (Mauch 2019, 39), an aspect that clearly appears at the end of the story where Uti, who until then had been lethargic, "jump[s] into the water and start[s] swimming away" so as to escape his father and brother's murderers:

Because I need to get back to my community, I need to tell my mother about Joseph's dreams of underwater living, about his hopeful future that better come quickly because I'm done waiting. I'm alone in this vast, polluted space, but I know which direction to go in. I'll find my way home. (Ize-Iyuma 2019)

Uti's vaguely optimistic will to survive is important in a context where

[s]trong representations of disaster and catastrophe can attract people's immediate attention to climate change, although fear is generally an ineffective tool for motivating sustained personal engagement. Simply framing climate change in catastrophic emotive terms [...] may itself be counter-productive. (Stoknes 2014, 162)

The question of the pedagogical reach of "More Sea than Tar" can therefore be raised as it can be read as a cautionary tale for the readers.²²

- 15 Renata Tyszczyk argues that "[i]n a sense we are living in a cautionary tale of our own making" (2014, 47). In this context of climate change-related catastrophes whose main victims are people from the Global South, "[a]rt, like religion, is one of the ways we digest what is happening to us, make the sense out of it that proceeds to action. Otherwise, the only role left to us – noble, but also enraging in its impotence – is simply to pay witness" (McKibben 2005). The Arts can therefore lead to action in favour of the protection of the environment. What can be said about the transformative potential of "More Sea than Tar"? This short story may have the capacity to educate.²³ Shelley Streeby explains that "[s]cience fiction gets people thinking in a way that another report on climate change doesn't" (quoted in Arguedas Ortiz 2019). The fact that Uti reveals that he is partly responsible for the devastation of the landscape where he finds himself – "Water that's mixed with the leaves and the soil and the garbage I didn't throw away properly" (Ize-Iyamu 2019; emphasis added) – can be considered as a pedagogical nudge to the readers in order for them to lead more ecofriendly lives, although that indirect piece of advice might be perceived as unfortunate in light of the sheer poverty in which the inhabitants of Makoko live, for example. Moreover, the use of the present tense in the short story enables Ize-Iyamu to strengthen his pedagogical take in order to raise awareness. Indeed, according to Fredric Jameson, the "mock futures [of science fiction] serve the function of transforming our present into the determinate past of something yet to come" and, whether utopian or dystopian, science fiction "enacts and enables a structurally unique 'method' for apprehending the present as history" (2007, 286, 89). Cli-fi, because of its "extrapolative nature" (Mackey 2018, 531) therefore makes it possible to think of the present as a possible past. This is also what Ursula K. Heise explains when she writes that "science fiction is one of the genres that have most persistently and most daringly engaged environmental questions and their challenge to our vision of the future" (1999, 1097). Furthermore, the choice of the short story genre in this context – added to its publication on line, enabling a free access – is also not accidental. This genre can be said to belong to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call "minor literature" where "everything [...] is political. [The] cramped space [of minor literature] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (1986, 17). The brevity of the short story genre is interesting in a context of crisis as it is depicted in "More Sea than Tar" since, indeed, "[o]n account of its brevity and often episodic structure, the [...] short story privileges the depiction of transitional situations and fleeting moments of crisis and decision" (Achilles 2014, 22). The shortness of "More Sea than Tar" favours dramatic intensity that shows the writer's commitment to his subject.
- 16 One of Ize-Iyamu's other commitments resides in the way in which he seems to perceive his role as a writer in Nigerian society. He is in line with his forefather, Ken Saro-Wiwa who, before he was hanged by Sani Abacha's administration in 1995, fought for the rights of the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta region. In *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995), Saro-Wiwa writes that "[l]iterature in a critical situation [...] cannot be divorced from politics. [It] must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention. [Writers] must play an interventionist role" (81).²⁴ In her afore-mentioned *Guardian* opinion piece about climate change activists across the global South, and the way Western media choose to ignore them in favour of Greta Thunberg and her white avatars – whose political achievements she however does not deny – Chika Unigwe writes:

It seems that the media is only interested in one climate change activist [Greta Thunberg] [...]. As an African I find these portrayals deeply offensive. It is insulting to present the members of the communities most threatened by climate change as passive onlookers who are only now being spurred on by the Thunberg effect. (2019)

Unigwe therefore refuses to listen to the Western media's "single story" (Adichie 2009) of passivity of people from the global South in front of catastrophes related to climate change. She further adds that "[t]hose [people from the global South] most affected should not be exiled to the fringes of the conversation. These words, written out of a deep frustration caused by the little interest granted to the voices from the global South in the global North, anticipated the outrageous editing of a photograph initially staging five young woman who are green activists at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos in 2020. Associated Press came up with a photograph of the four white activists, while the latter's peer, Ugandan Vanessa Nakate, was cropped out of the photograph. Unigwe's arguments about the invisibility and overt Western willingness not to hear – let alone listen to – what people from the global South have to say about the environment, could also be used in the context of literary productions about climate change. Taking a closer look at "More Sea than Tar" contributes to decolonising science fiction, something writers such as South African Mohale Mashigo and Nigerian Nnedi Okorafor, for example, wish could emerge.²⁵ In "Afrofuturism: Ayashis' Amateki," published in the short story collection *Intruders* (2018), Mohale Mashigo explains: "What I want for Africans living in Africa is to imagine a future in their storytelling that deals with issues that are unique to us" (xiv). This is echoed by Nnedi Okorafor (2019, 87). These are calls to sever the literary ties with the West and offer perspectives of identifications for African readers through the representation of African characters: not being represented means not being visible, therefore being denied status as a subject.²⁶ Writing Nigerian cli-fi might be a way to make Nigerians feel more concerned and more inclined to reflect on the world they live in.

- 17 In 1964, in "The Novelist as Teacher," Chinua Achebe explains: "Writing of the kind I do is relatively new in my part of the world and it is too soon to try and describe in detail the complex relationship between us and our readers" (40). Decades later, such a reflection can also apply to the emerging body of works dealing with climate change or, more generally, to representations of the future, in Nigerian literature. It might be "too soon" to analyse in detail how – or even if – readers can be touched by these fictional works. However, writers like Nnedi Okorafor, Osahon Ize-Iyamu-, and Chinelo Onwualu, to name but a few of them, firmly believe in the power of science fiction. In one of her blogposts, Okorafor explains:

Contrary to what was pounded into my head for years by brilliant well-meaning creative writing professors, science fiction is one of the most relevant and potent forms of storytelling.

Science fiction carries the potential to change the world. Literally. It has changed the world. (2014a)

- 18 The success Okorafor has had so far proves that there is indeed an audience for these science fiction writers writing from and about the Global South. These writers show that the African literary landscape no longer expresses "ecohesitation" (Slaymaker 2001, 132). In her aforementioned article, Unigwe argues that "the moral thing for western media to do is also highlight the contributions of the black and brown saviours trying to make that [saving the planet] happen so that when future generations talk of it, this will not be the story of a single narrative" (2019). This essay has aimed to

implement the critical endeavour Unigwe describes by applying it to a genre that has clearly been dominated by Western writers until recently, science fiction, and more particularly its recent development, climate fiction.

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NOTES

1. Ghosh adds: "When the subject of climate change occurs, [...] novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon. Indeed, it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction" (2016a, n.p.). Contrary to what Ghosh expresses through his disparaging comment about science fiction, I consider this genre as perfectly suitable to convey the urgency of climate change.
2. Cli-fi comprises literary works that address anthropogenic climate change. US blogger and writer Dan Bloom coined the word in 2008. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood also contributed to the popularity of the term (see 2013). J.K. Ullrich explains it is possible to identify various themes in cli-fi that include "examining the impact of pollution, rising sea levels, and global warming on human civilization" (n.p.).
3. A striking example can be found among the ten contributions to the collection of short stories titled *I'm with the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet*, edited by Mark Martin. All authors are white. Six of them are white men, three of them white women, and one of the pieces is by a group of Italian writers. This gender imbalance is problematic, to say the least, but so is the geographical imbalance. These participants – among whom literary superstars like T.C. Boyle or Margaret Atwood – are all either from the US or Britain: they are all from Western countries, countries which, so far, are not the ones that overwhelmingly bear the brunt of climate change.
4. Two notable exceptions can be found in Amitav Ghosh and his compatriot Arundhati Roy (see Roy's nonfiction work *The Greater Common Good*, 1999). One of her latest contributions appeared in *The Financial Times* in a piece titled "Arundhati Roy: 'The Pandemic Is a Portal,'" about the Covid-19 pandemic, where she advises against a "return to 'normality'": "[This] pandemic is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. / We can choose to walk through, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us" (n.p.). The reference to "dead rivers" echoes what the character of Kola explains in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*: "My mother says the waters are dirty and dead because of oil companies" (2014b, 62). "More Sea than Tar" by Osahon Ize-Iyamu also stresses the near incapacity of water to sustain life in the future.
5. Ize-Iyamu belongs to a rising crop of writers interested in imagining what the future holds for Africa. Chinelo Onwualu is another one of these Nigerian writers: among other works, she wrote the short story titled "What the Dead Man Said" (2019). Spotlighting these writers and their works has been at the forefront of Zimbabwean writer, editor and publisher Ivor W. Hartmann's project when he launched, in 2012, his anthology *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers*. In the Introduction, he writes: "SciFi is the only genre that enables African writers to envision a future from our African perspective. Moreover, it does this in a way that is not purely academic and so provides a vision that is readily understandable through a fictional context" (n.p.). Since then, he has edited and published two other anthologies, in 2015 and in 2018. Regarding Hartmann's project, Kris Van Der Bijl considers that "[t]he *AfroSF* series has been [...] a major player in the developing canon of African speculative fiction" (Hartmann 2020, n.p.).
6. One of the hypotexts, as defined by Gérard Genette (1997, 5), of "More Sea than Tar," is possibly Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as some elements could indicate: "Soon, we're paddling out of our neighborhood, into the depths of other roads we wouldn't dare step foot in on a normal day" (n.p.). The Conradian presence can also be felt through the name of Uti's brother, Joseph, but also through the depiction of a quest, an initiatory voyage, which consists in the exploration of the Other, embodied by the members of the community which the three characters visit.

7. The linguistic aspect will also be invoked later in the paper when an argument about "minor literature" is made.
8. Here, speculative fiction is a vehicle for environmental critique. This aspect raises the question of the potentiality of science fiction, speculative fiction and/or climate fiction to describe the impacts of climate change, compared to a more realist trend within the Nigerian literary context.
9. "*sujet fantômatique*" in the French version of Mbembe's essay.
10. Uti's mother stays at home, refusing to be part of this exploratory adventure. This could be understood as her having lost hope and her accepting her situation with resignation.
11. US science fiction writer Paolo Bacigalupi explains that by writing cli-fi "you have the chance of making people engage not with the future, but with the intense realities of our present – the realities that were previously passing them by"; doing this "viscerally [allows the readers to] think long term effectively" (quoted in Streeby 2018, 18).
12. The sense of smell is omnipresent in the story especially when the three characters explore the barren landscape : "We enter this new place, and the smell that quickly fills our nose is a welcome, for you have been have been gone so long, stayed within safe parameters, and now you are out in the big open world: the stink becomes part of us within minutes. Makes our insides feel like they're rotting and falling apart." The putrefaction that characterises the landscape impacts their own well-being.
13. "More Sea than Tar" also belongs to the genre of "Petrofiction" (Ghosh, 2002). When it comes to Nigerian literature written in English tackling oil-induced destruction of the environment, realist writers have so far been at the forefront. It is the case with Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* (1993), Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) – where the female protagonist explains that because of the discovery of oil in the 1970s, "[t]here was so much oil, and we could do nothing about it – viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep" (4) – Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011), where the protagonist navigates the "oil-polluted water" (5) and crosses villages characterised by "barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return" (9). Other literary works like Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010) and Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005), a collection of poems, also tackle the destructive impact of oil on the environment, in a realist fashion.
14. This is reminiscent of Nnedi Okorafor's 2013 short story "Moom!," a third-person narrative whose main character is a swordfish. Written in the past tense, "Moom!" also appears as a Prologue to Okorafor's *Lagoon*, albeit with an important change, as the narrator of the Prologue, also titled "Moom!" is written in the present tense, a choice also made by Ize-Iyamu. The swordfish is described as being "on a mission" (2013, 248), as "angry [because] [t]hey brought the stench of dryness, then they brought the noise and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface" (248). The swordfish is also described as "a monster" (251) due to the physical changes "she" underwent because of human oil-related activities.
15. Matthew Omelsky talks about a "mutant" "African aesthetics": "for the first time in the history of the African humanities, there are writers and screenwriters from the continent who are just as indebted to William Gibson, Octavia Butler, and Star Trek as they are to Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, and Ousmane Sembène" (2014, 38).
16. This reference to mutations can echo what, in 1977, semiotician Darko Suvin identifies as the foundation of science fiction: the "*novum*." A *novum* can be an object, a cultural element, a being, that has no equivalent in the world of the readers. This leads to "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin), something Nnedi Okorafor also alludes to when she writes that "science fiction [...] triggers both a distancing and associating effect" (2014a, n.p.).
17. For Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*: "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus,

or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. [...] The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (3–4).

18. According to Jane Bryce, "myth, orality, and indigenous belief systems are intrinsic to African modes of speculative storytelling [...]. [F]uturism has been a strain in African writing from its inception" (2019, 1). Regarding Tutuola's works, see also Omelsky 2018, 67.

19. In another interview, with Bernadette McBride, Bloom adds: "As for whether cli-fi novels should unleash terrifying dystopian visions or offer promises of hope and optimism in the face of climate change issues, I think we need both kinds of visions and individual authors will create cli-fi based on their own considered feelings: we need both."

20. Later on, a character called Mr. Abalaka explains that his own "vessel" "runs on trash juice," another proof of the inhabitants' ability to adapt.

21. The use of suspension points (...) not only expresses Mrs. Enayo's hesitation to explain to strangers what they are up to, but it can also be considered as a proleptic element that announces something ominous. Indeed, Mr. Abalaka and Mrs. Enayo are employed by a lady to work, fish, and trade, and when they learn that this lady has decided to increase her profits by also hiring Uti's father, they decide to kill her. They literally can do "anything ... to live," since they also kill Uti's father and brother: "They're quick. Mrs. Eyeno has a pistol. A bullet to the head and Joseph collapses into the water. I scream as my father grabs his gun. Mr. Abalaka's spear stabs into his gut before he can fire. He follows Joseph into the water."

22. Dan Bloom explains: "For me, the best of cli-fi does two things: it delivers a powerful and emotional story and it pushes the reader to wake up to the existential threat that man-made global warming poses to future generations. So good cli-fi is both a great read and a call to action, either direct or indirect. If it doesn't wake us up, it's just escapist entertainment" (2016).

23. For Eric Otto, science fiction tackling the issue of the environment "can serve environmentalism as educational instruments" because it is capable of "creating transformative environmentalism in addition to reflecting it" (2012, 5).

24. This is also argued by Chinua Achebe in "The Novelist as Teacher." For Achebe, literature is a means for readers "to encounter in the sage, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life" (1988, 170) because it "offer[s] the kinetic energy necessary for social transition and change" (167).

25. Ize-Iyamu was only sixteen when he wrote "More Sea than Tar" in 2019. He is the same age as Greta Thunberg. This publication at such a young age clearly lays the emphasis on agency and debunks the idea according to which people from the Global South would be "passive onlookers," which Unigwe objects to. Ize-Iyamu's publication of this short story is proof that the protection of the environment is something (young) people from the Global South do care about.

26. Chinelo Onwualu's 2019 short story "What the Dead Man Said" is interesting from this perspective. The title can be said to convey two possible interpretations. On the one hand, the "dead man" the narrator alludes to is her own father, whose funerals are organised in the city of Onitsha. However, it also suggests another death, that of one of the fathers of science-fiction, American writer Philip K. Dick, who has been a huge influence over the following generations of science-fiction writers. Indeed, the title "What the Dead Man Said" echoes Dick's "What the Dead Men Say" (1964), a science-fiction novella considered one of the Ur-texts of the science-fiction genre. Through the slippage from "dead men" in Dick's novella to "dead man" in Onwualu's, and slippage from the present tense in Dick's title to the past tense in Onwualu's, the symbolic death of Philip K. Dick as a white, straight, male figure is staged to make room for an Afro-centric

sci-fi/cli-fi narrative about climate change, memory, new technologies, and trauma in the twenty-second century, in which the story is set.

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, Nigerian author Osahon Ize-Iyamu's 2019 short story "More Sea than Tar" is used as a template for "Climate Fiction." This ecodystopian short story is read within the broader category of speculative fiction and is part of an emerging stream of dystopian fiction from Nigeria and Africa more generally. I first analyse the poetics and politics of the "African Anthropocene" through a close reading of the text and through references to other writers and philosophers' works. Then, the question of vulnerability is raised, as Ize-Iyamu puts forward an environment that has become unfamiliar and hostile, in order for the readers to "experience fear in their guts." Finally, I study how Ize-Iyamu weaves both resilience and hope into his narrative in order to counterbalance the sinister atmosphere. Despite the "ecodystopian" environment, there are dreams of a better world, and strategies of survivalism that are put in place. "More Sea than Tar" can also be read as a cautionary tale, a pedagogical nudge to the readers in order for them to lead more ecofriendly lives.

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Keywords: Nigerian literature, short story, climate change, science fiction, cli-fi, Anthropocene, dystopia

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