


Antarctica and Africa: Narrating alternate futures

Charne Lavery 

Department of English, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa and Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (WiSER), University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, PO Box Wits, Johannesburg 2050, South Africa

Commentary

Cite this article: Lavery C (2019) Antarctica and Africa: Narrating alternate futures. *Polar Record* 55: 347–350. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000743>

Received: 5 July 2019
Revised: 31 October 2019
Accepted: 1 November 2019

Keywords:

Antarctica; Africa; Literature; Future; Anthropocene

Author for correspondence:

Charne Lavery,
Email: charnelavery@gmail.com

Abstract

Africa has been marginalised in the history of Antarctica, a politics of exclusion (with the exception of Apartheid South Africa) reflected unsurprisingly by a dearth of imaginative, cultural and literary engagement. But, in addition to paleontological and geophysical links, Antarctica has increasing interrelationship with Africa's climactic future. Africa is widely predicted to be the continent worst affected by climate change, and Antarctica and its surrounding Southern Ocean are uniquely implicated as crucial mediators for changing global climate and currents, rainfall patterns, and sea level rise. This paper proposes that there are in fact several ways of imagining the far South from Africa in literary and cultural terms. One is to read against the grain for southern-directed perspectives in existing African literature and the arts, from southern coastlines looking south; another is to reexamine both familiar and new, speculative narratives of African weather – drought, flood and change – for their Antarctic entanglements. In the context of ongoing work on postcolonial Antarctica and calls to decolonise Antarctic studies – such readings can begin to bridge the Antarctica–Africa divide.

Icebergs in Africa

In April 2018, a plan was announced to solve Cape Town's water crisis by towing an iceberg from Antarctica to South Africa. Proposed by Nick Sloane, a local marine salvage expert, it rekindled an idea that has been around for decades if not centuries (Leith, 2019). Despite the waning of the Capetonian drought (Ziervogel & Joubert, 2019), there is widespread consensus that Southern African water shortages will gradually worsen, as a result of both climate change and population growth (Boretti & Rosa, 2019; Conway et al., 2015; Cameron & Katzschner, 2017). Iceberg plans are again gaining attention and corresponding promises of financial investment in both Africa and the Middle East. Sloane's seemingly outlandish idea has become the "Southern Ice Project," backed by two South African banks and a Swiss company called Water Vision. South African Antarctic glaciologists and oceanographers are part of the project team (Winter, 2019).

Unfinished stories of towed icebergs bring into focus the relationship between Antarctica and Africa, a relationship of proximity yet paradox. The two continents evoke contradictory stereotypes of heat and ice, poverty and wealth, blackness and whiteness. This is an imaginative problem, reflected by a dearth of cultural production linking the two continents, in turn the result of a history of exclusion and marginalisation. When the Treaty was signed in 1959, most African nations had not yet achieved independence from European colonialism – although Ghana's independence in 1957 was followed by a wave of independence declarations just the year after, in 1960. If the Treaty "froze" territorial claims to Antarctica, then it has also effectively frozen anachronistic colonial and Cold War geopolitics exemplified by the case of African decolonisation. A letter to the editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1959, the year of the signing of the Antarctic Treaty, acknowledges the analogy:

But supposing that the nations of Europe had signed an agreement of this nature 150 years ago in regard to Africa, a continent almost as impenetrable then as Antarctica is now and populated with beings who were treated with less kindness than penguins are today? ('For the Present and the Future', 1959)

This intriguing counterfactual possibility could be revisited prospectively as well as retrospectively, prompting us to imagine an independent Antarctica (free from claimants) as well as alternative, interlinked African futures.

This is critical because, as we advance further into what is being called the Anthropocene era, political and imagined geographies are shifting due to melting ice and rising seas. Africa is widely predicted to be the continent worst affected by climate change, an effect of both continental proximity and politico-economic vulnerability, which is in turn the result of racialised histories (Hulme, Doherty, Ngara, New, & Lister, 2001; van Sittert, 2015). Antarctica and

the Southern Ocean are uniquely implicated as crucial mediators for changing global climate and currents, rainfall patterns, melting ice and sea level change. Antarctica could therefore be determining for Africa's future, whether in terms of drought or drowning (as an example see Hoogendoorn, Grant, & Fitchett, 2016).

In its 60th year, the Antarctic Treaty System now has 54 members from across the globe, in which none of Africa's 54 countries is included, other than South Africa. Apartheid South Africa was the only African signatory to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, and post-apartheid South Africa remains the exclusive representative of the African continent to Antarctic affairs, whether in politics (as represented by the Antarctic Treaty System) or science (as represented by the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research). But despite their history of racist and colonial exclusion from Antarctic affairs, African states such as Zimbabwe and Congo spearheaded the UN debates on the "Question of Antarctica" in the 1980s and 1990s, which asked awkward questions about the manner in which the polar continent was governed (Beck, 2006; van der Watt & Swart, 2016). The economic potential of Antarctica including its living resource potential is a matter of concern not just to South Africa but also to others such as Namibia and Mozambique (Reason, 2017). In the early era of southern polar exploration, port cities such as Cape Town were crucial stepping stones for the European colonisation of Antarctica. Cape Town in this view becomes not only a slaving and imperial port city, site of colonial incursions into the rest of the continent, but an "Antarctic gateway city," a jumping-off point for continental engagement with Antarctica and the Southern Ocean into the future (Hofmeyr, 2017; Roldan, 2015).

Importantly, as South African novelist Mohale Mashigo (2018) argues, any alternative futures need to be imagined at least in part by and "for Africans living in Africa." Can we reimagine Antarctica from Africa without reproducing the marginalisation of Africa from the governance of the polar south, and despite the resulting absence of Antarctica from Africa's cultural production? What, for instance, could a counterfactual Antarctic Black Consciousness look like, or a speculative Pan-African Antarctic (perhaps based on geological notions of a Pan-African belt; see Kröner, 1993)? In this short intervention, I outline two areas of investigation which may act as a provocation to further research in literary and cultural studies: literary perspectives looking south from southern coastlines, and speculative fictions of the two continents' interlinked climactic futures.

From Southern Africa looking south

One avenue for exploration is to read African literature for southern perspectives – from southern coastlines looking south. Much Southern African literature looks to the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, as passageways to northern and eastern populations, with the Cape as the convergence point between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. Scholars have elaborated "thinking from the Cape," as an intellectual position emphasising mobility and creolisation (Samuelson & Musila, 2011). But thinking from the Cape becomes more complicated when looking north to terrestrial Africa. Harry Garuba (2011) describes this view as symbolised by a statue of Cecil John Rhodes which rests on a mountainside in Cape Town, in which Rhodes is seated on a rearing horse and looking greedily to potential imperial possessions in the north. But what if we look instead over Rhodes's shoulder? Rather than thinking Africa from the Cape, imagining the far South from Africa.

One example is Lindsey Collen's *Boy*, a novel set on the African Indian Ocean island of Mauritius and translated from the original Mauritian Kreol. In it, the boy of the title circumnavigates the island until he reaches a southeastern promontory that is the site of both slave memory and newfound maturity:

Here I am sitting on the golden-silver sand of the beach, casuarinas trees murmuring behind me, the reef rumbling to comfort me in the distance, a lagoon turning from turquoise to orange as I look out at what promises to be a magnificent sunset, asking myself how far I am seeing when I look out to sea. [...] if I look down to my left, would I, if I went straight, get to the South Pole? (Collen, 2005, p. 71)

The oceanic expanse of the southern Indian Ocean both provides a sense of spacious freedom – "A word comes into my head now, from the thought of that distance. Free." (Collen, 2005, p. 71) – and paradoxically, geologic connection to the far south.

Another example is Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2006). In the novel an itinerant protagonist, the eponymous whale caller, wanders along the South African Cape coastal cliffs, watching for a particular whale among the many southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) returning from Antarctic feeding grounds to the shelter of the Southern African coastline. The novel stages an interspecies encounter that extends the geography of the novel (and the continent) both towards the far south and beneath the surface of the sea. The novel links colonial whaling on the Cape coast to older indigenous histories of whale utilisation captured in the archeological record (for a longer discussion, see Samuelson & Lavery, 2019). While the narrator's perspective is land-based and coastal, the whales trace a circling itinerary from Antarctica to Africa and back again, signalling a submerged connection to those who know where and when to look.

Cold, wet African futures

Other than shared geological histories, Africa and Antarctica are perhaps most intimately connected via weather. The Capetonian drought with which I started was marked by weather maps showing how seasonal storms bringing rain from the Southern Ocean were dissipating before striking the coast, a vivid reminder of oceanic-climatic links. Historically, South Africa's concern with Antarctica was motivated by weather, a point of intense concern for the white state's agriculturally based electorate (van der Watt & Swart, 2015). Even more so, swiftly progressing climate change calls for creative (re)readings of both canonical and speculative African narratives of rain, drought, cyclones and rising seas as linked to Antarctica-derived weather patterns.

Set on the same stretch of coast as *The Whale Caller*, "somewhere after Hermanus and before the Eastern Cape," Mohale Mashigo's short story "Floating Rugs" (2019) describes a related set of submarine connections between the two continents, although directed towards the future rather than the past. The story is told by a young woman who lives beneath the waves of the Cape shoreline, part of a secret community who draws on their knowledge of the sea gained through ancestral "poaching" to become what the narrator ironically calls a "lost conservation tribe" engaged in marine stewardship. In this story, set in the near future after the "snow faraway [has] melted," seaside holiday homes that had been abandoned due to sea level rise are turned into an underwater resort, only to be abandoned again to become the ramshackle submarine homes of the former fishers and poachers. As in Mda's novel, Antarctic migratory whales interact with the protagonist, but here the interspecies divide is further narrowed by a shared ecological vulnerability and submarine oceanic home.

This wet future is the climate-changed flip side of the planetary drought depicted in Wanuri Kahiu's well-known short film, *Pumzi*. In the film, set "35 years after World War III – 'The Water War'" in "Maitu Community, East African Territory," the few remaining survivors are confined to high-tech bunkers where even sweat is mopped up and recycled as precious drinking water. The film explicitly links the catastrophic drought of the future to present climate change by, in the first seconds of the film, panning across framed newspaper headlines announcing rising global temperatures and melting Antarctic ice. Unusually, it also depicts the technological innovation required for survival as coming from the African continent rather than outside (for a longer discussion, see Pereira et al., 2020).

Other stories depict sea-risen cities from further afield, like a sunken Lagos in "The Last Lagosian" by Wole Talabi (2016), or narrate sudden changes in climate, such as "A Winter in Lagos" by Saratu Abiola (2014), which depicts the formerly tropical city as snow-bound in arctic conditions. While this new speculative strand of African futurist fiction has rich potential for transcontinental literary exploration, more canonical or realist fiction can also be reread for weather and environmental change (one thinks of Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975), for example). Linking both of these, Zambian epic novel *The Old Drift* by Namwali Serpell (2019) situates rivers, dams and water at the centre of its narrative, in a productively historical-speculative mode that links dam-building of the colonial past to the dam-busting of a drought-ridden future.

Conclusion: decolonising the African Antarctic Imagination

Exploring the imaginative relationship between Antarctica and Africa is part of a wider call to imagine a postcolonial Antarctic, or to decolonise Antarctic science, history and art (Dodds, 2006; Dodds & Collis, 2017; Howkins, 2010; Scott, 2017). The Antarctic Treaty is by no means devoid of colonial and racial hierarchies. But Antarctica is nevertheless becoming more central to the earth's and particularly Africa's future in a time of planetary change (Leane & McGee, 2019). Ongoing and growing entanglements with Antarctica provide rich cultural possibilities, and urgent motivation, for imagining alternate Antarctic and African futures.

Acknowledgements. The author thanks Klaus Dodds for his detailed comments, and to the attendees of the 2019 SC-HASS Conference in Ushuaia, Argentina for feedback on an early draft.

Financial support. This work was supported by a South African National Antarctic Programme grant, "Southern Oceanic Humanities," from the South African National Research Foundation.

References

- Abiola, S. (2014). A Winter in Lagos. *Omenana: Speculative fiction magazine*. Retrieved from <https://omenana.com/2014/11/30/winter-in-lagos/> (accessed 29 June 2019).
- Beck, P. J. (2006). The United Nations and Antarctica, 2005: The end of the 'Question of Antarctica'? *Polar Record*, 42(3), 217–227.
- Boretti, A., & Rosa, L. (2019). Reassessing the projections of the World Water Development Report. *Nature, Npj Clean Water*, 2(1), 1–6. doi: 10.1038/s41545-019-0039-9
- Cameron, R., & Katzschner, T. (2017). Every last drop: The role of spatial planning in enhancing integrated urban water management in the City of Cape Town. *South African Geographical Journal*, 99(2), 196–216. doi: 10.1080/03736245.2016.1231622
- Collen, L. (2005). *Boy*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Conway, D., van Garderen, E. A., Deryng, D., Dorling, S., Krueger, T., Landman, W., ... Dalin, C. (2015). Climate and southern Africa's water–energy–food nexus. *Nature Climate Change*, 5(9), 837–846. doi: 10.1038/nclimate2735
- Dodds, K. (2006). Post-colonial Antarctica: An emerging engagement. *Polar Record*, 42(1), 59–70.
- Dodds, K., & Collis, C. (2017). Post-colonial Antarctica. In K. Dodds, A. D. Hemmings, & P. Roberts (Eds.), *Handbook on the politics of Antarctica*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- For the Present and the Future. (1959, December 9). *New York Herald Tribune*. Retrieved from ProQuest Historical Newspapers (accessed 18 November 2019).
- Garuba, H. (2011, July 5). How not to think Africa from the Cape. *Mail and Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://thoughtleader.co.za/readerblog/2011/07/05/how-not-to-think-africa-from-the-cape/> (accessed 2 July 2019).
- Hofmeyr, I. (2017). Southern by degrees: Islands and Empires in the South Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and the Sub-Antarctic World. In K. Bystrom, & J. R. Slaughter (Eds.), *The Global South Atlantic*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Hoogendoorn, G., Grant, B., & Fitchett, J. M. (2016). Disjunct perceptions? Climate change threats in two low lying South African coastal towns. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-Economic Series*, 31, 59–71. doi: 10.1515/bog-2016-0005
- Howkins, A. (2010). Appropriating space: Antarctic imperialism and the mentality of settler colonialism. In T. K. Mar, & P. Edmonds (Eds.), *Making settler colonial space* (pp. 29–52). New York: Springer.
- Hulme, M., Doherty, R., Ngara, T., New, M., & Lister, D. (2001). African climate change: 1900–2100. *Climate Research*, 17(2), 145–168.
- Kröner, A. (1993). The Pan African Belt of Northeastern and Eastern Africa, Madagascar, Southern India, Sri Lanka and East Antarctica: Terrane amalgamation during formation of the Gondwana Supercontinent. In H. Schandelmeier, & U. Thorweihel (Eds.), *Geoscientific research in Northeast Africa*. London: CRC Press. doi: 10.1201/9780203753392-1
- Leane, E., & McGee, J. (Eds.) (2019). *Anthropocene Antarctica: Perspectives from the Humanities, Law and Social Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Leith, W. (2019, August 10). How towing an iceberg to South Africa could solve Cape Town's water crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-towing-an-iceberg-to-south-africa-could-solve-cape-towns-water-crisis-plnfdj73> (accessed 31 October 2019).
- Mashigo, M. (2018). *Intruders*. South Africa: Pan Macmillan.
- Mashigo, M. (2019). Floating rugs. In *Current futures: A Sci-Fi ocean anthology*. Retrieved from <https://go.xprize.org/oceanstories/floating-rugs/> (accessed 29 June 2019).
- Mda, Z. (2006). *The Whale Caller*. London: Picador.
- Mungoshi, C. (1975). *Waiting for the Rain*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Pereira, L., Moyo, B., Lavery, C., Selomane, O., Sitas, N., Sitas, R., & Trisos, C. (2020). Wakanda Phambili! African science fiction for reimagining the Anthropocene. In S. Kemp, & J. Andersson (Eds.), *Futures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reason, C. J. C. (2017). Climate of Southern Africa. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.513
- Roldan, G. (2015). A door to the ice? The significance of the Antarctic Gateway cities today. *Journal of Antarctic Affairs*, 2, 57–70.
- Samuelson, M., & Lavery, C. (2019). The Oceanic South. *English Language Notes*, 57(1), 37–50.
- Samuelson, M., & Musila, G. (2011). Locations and locutions: Which Africa, whose Africa? *Social Dynamics*, 37(3), 424–426.
- Scott, S. V. (2017). K. Dodds, A. D. Hemmings, & P. Roberts (Eds.), *Three waves of Antarctic imperialism. Handbook on the Politics of Antarctica*, 37–49. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Serpell, N. (2019). *The Old Drift*. London: Hogarth.
- van der Watt, Lize-Marié, & Swart, S. (2015). Falling off the map: South Africa, Antarctica and Empire, c. 1919–59. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 43(2), 267–291.
- van der Watt, Lize-Marié, & Swart, S. (2016). The Whiteness of Antarctica: Race and South Africa's Antarctic History. P. Roberts, L-M. van der Watt,

- & A. Howkins (Eds.), In *Antarctica and the Humanities* (pp. 125–156). London: Springer.
- van Sittert, L.** (2015). 'Ironman': Joseph Daniels and the white history of South Africa's deep south. *Polar Record*, 51(5), 501–512.
- Winter, C.** (2019, June 10). The daredevil who aims to tow an iceberg to Cape Town. Retrieved 2 July 2019, from Business Day website: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/life/2019-06-10-the-daredevil-who-aims-to-tow-an-iceberg-to-cape-town/>.
- Wole Talabi.** (2016). The Last Lagosian. *Omenana: Speculative Fiction Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://omenana.com/2016/11/09/the-last-lagosian-wole-talabi/> (accessed 29 June 2019).
- Ziervogel, G., & Joubert, L.** (2019, July 23). Cities in the Global South can learn from how Cape Town survived the drought. *Daily Maverick*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-07-23-cities-in-the-global-south-can-learn-from-how-cape-town-survived-the-drought/> (accessed 1 November 2019).