

BOOK REVIEW

Sheree René Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight, eds.
Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction. New York: Tordotcom Publishing, 2022. 528 pp. \$22.98. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1250833006.

The editors of *Africa Risen*, Sheree Renée Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight, present thirty-two original stories created by established and emerging writers. Where once upon a time speculative fiction ventured from what Ursula K. Le Guin described as “from Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” *Africa Risen* presents authors who call places just as disparate home, from Tlotlo Tsamaase’s Botswana to WC Dunlap’s northern New Jersey. The editors include writers who infuse speculative fiction with a black cultural aesthetic which proclaims that we are not in Caucasian-centric Elfland anymore.

The “Introduction” contains capacious lists of black speculative fiction writers, anthologies, presses, short fiction magazines, comic book artists, and cosplayers. Uncharacteristically—and appropriately—the editors never mention the names of the authors and stories which comprise their anthology. This unusual omission seems to imply that while black speculative fiction once centered around two American authors—Octavia E. Butler and Samuel Delany—the genre has become a worldwide enterprise. More specifically, discussing all the authors and stories appearing in a five hundred and fourteen page doorstopper anthology is beyond the scope of any introduction—or review. This silencing of the table of contents makes the point that black speculative fiction’s ascendancy is synonymous with the ascendancy of Africa itself. As I will emphasize, the title *Africa Risen* refers to both speculative fiction and political reality.

This title also proclaims the interconnected relationship between African speculative worlds and Africa. More simply stated, the anthology is not named “African Speculative Fiction Risen.” Holland Cotter’s interpretation of Charleston’s new International African American Museum is relevant to the anthology’s comingling of Africa with African speculative fiction. Cotter describes “the first major new museum of African American history in the country to bring the whole Afro-Atlantic world, including Africa itself, fully into the picture.... [The museum] suggests a kind of Afro-futurist spacecraft, hovering, set for take off” (“At Slaveport, New Museum Is Tribute to Afro-Atlantic Journey” [*The New York Times*, June 25, 2023, A1]). This museum which resembles an Afro-futurist spacecraft architecturally represents the anthology’s achieved goal to fuse the entire Afro-Atlantic world, including Africa, with African speculative fiction. The editors assert that Africa and African speculative fiction have both taken off.

The “About the Authors” section, in which the authors’ names appear in the order of their stories’ appearances in the volume, not alphabetically, removes

the authors from rigid conventional structure. This decision not to adhere to prescribed alphabetical standard form signifies the need for new reading practices and terms specifically applicable to black speculative fiction's anti-science stance and emphasis on magic. The editors' purposeful deviation signals that literature stemming from Afro-centric belief systems—such as vodun and obeah—is written in a different voice from the ray gun and warp drive-sodden science fiction that emerged from so-called scientific rationality. The editors' call for newness incorporates Madhu Dubey's term "black anti-science fiction" and Nalo Hopkinson's notion of Caribbean writers' "different worldview" (Madhu Dubey, "Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science echoes Fiction," [Marleen S. Barr, ed., Ohio State University Press, 2008]). It is necessary to generate new language and categories to discuss the individual talent of black writers who purposefully deviate from science fiction traditions.

Science fiction (including black "anti-science fiction"), as has often been said, reflects the time in which it is written, not the future. The anthologized stories, then, represent the present importance of Africa. I turn to emphasizing the anthology's relationship to Africa's present important political reality.

Africa has risen vis-a-vis both black speculative fiction and world politics. Ama Ata Aidoo, "a Ghanaian playwright, author and activist who was hailed as one of Africa's leading literary lights as well as one of its most influential feminists" (Alex Williams, "Ama Ata Aidoo, Ghanaian Writer On Struggles and Strength of Women" [*The York Times*, June 6, 2023, A20])—and who served as a cabinet minister in Ghana as well as the country's minister of education—epitomizes the juxtaposition between African literature and politics which I address. *Africa Risen* was published a month before African leaders arrived in Washington D.C. in December 2022 to attend a summit hosted by President Biden. Aidoo could have appropriately attended this political summit as a representative both of African literature and of Ghana's government.

The summit was described as "the latest diplomatic drive by a major foreign power seeking to strengthen its ties to Africa.... Africa has become 'a major geopolitical force'," U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said (Declan Walsh, "Biden Is Bringing Africa's Leaders to Washington, Hoping to Make Deals" [*The New York Times*, December 12, 2022, A8]). The African political force is with black speculative fiction. The Biden administration also promotes engagement with Africa. The administration "addressed its ... belief that Africa will play a crucial role in changes that will reshape the global order" (Declan Walsh, "Biden Faces Challenge Of Winning the Trust Of Africa's Leadership" [*The New York Times*, December 16, 2023, A10]). Black speculative fiction is similarly engaged in a partnership with African writers which will reshape the literary canon. This respective political and literary change will become operative if, in regard to politics, "Mr. Biden is willing to truly engage with Africans as equals" (Walsh, "Biden is Bringing"); and, in regard to literature, if the literary powers that be will truly respect speculative fiction in general and black speculative fiction in particular.

Africa Risen proclaims that black speculative fiction authors are being heard. President Biden might agree. According to Biden, "African voices, African leadership, African innovation, all are critical to addressing the most pressing global

challenges and to realizing the vision we all share: a world that is free, a world that is open, prosperous, and secure” (Walsh, “Biden Faces Challenge”). Kudos to Sheree Renée Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, and Zelda Knight for celebrating African speculative fiction’s leadership, voices, and innovation. *Africa Risen*, the editors’ championing of black speculative fiction, makes the world—planet Earth—a better place. In Aidoo’s words: “I mean where will the whole western world be without us Africans? Everything you have is us” (Williams 2023).

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