Decolonial Dreaming in the Sauútiverse

by Nedine Moonsamy

Wole Talabi (ed). *Mothersound: The Sauútiverse Anthology* (Android Press, November 2023).

There has been a recent surge in Africanfuturist anthologies, and collections like *Dominion* (eds. Zelda Knight and Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki, 2020), *Africanfuturism: An Anthology* (ed. Wole Talabi, 2020), *Africa Risen* (eds. Sheree Renée Thomas, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki and Zelda Knight, 2022), and *The Year's Best African Speculative Fiction* (ed. Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki 2021, 2022, 2023) have established African SF as a global and popular genre in its own right. *Mothersound: The Sauútiverse Anthology* (2023), edited by Wole Talabi, is the most recent addition to this trend, but it also works to exceed it through a method of complex, shared worldbuilding which further exploits the decolonial potential of Africanfuturism.

Initially coined by Nnedi Okorafor, Africanfuturism has come to represent a genre quite distinct from Western SF and Afrofuturism (which accommodates Blackness in SF but is not entirely Afrocentric). The genre resonates with audiences because these stories are not mere window-dressing exercises where preconceived SF narratives are relocated to African geographies. Rather, they offer the profound awareness of how African indigenous epistemes feature in the creative construction of futuristic and alternative worlds. African cultures, folklores and philosophies thus inhere to the worlds in which these stories are based, which enforces a radical deconstruction of the very

foundations of Western science and technology, and, by extension, our understanding of genres like science fiction and fantasy itself.

Mothersound operates on similar terms, as the word 'Sauúti' is derived from the Swahili word for sound, which spearheads an entirely new philosophy for inhabitants of this imaginary multiverse. Based on the importance of orality in many indigenous African cultures, sound emerges as a powerful animating force that echoes across the five planets, three moons and two suns in the Sauútiverse. Using sound to (re) build alternate African histories, myths and geographies is deeply affirming as these indigenous modes of existence have been denigrated by colonial encroachment in our earthly lives. As readers, we get to witness how the lost archive of orality thrives in the vastness of the Sauútiverse as every whisper, wind, sonic blast, and intuitive echolocation between various beings and technological instruments alters the material world through its vibrational force, an idea that is most powerfully conveyed in stories like "What Has No Mouth?" (Dare Segun Falowo), "The Way of Baa'gh", (Cheryl S. Ntumy), "The Grove's Lament" (Tobias S. Buckell), "Sina, the Child With No Echo" (Eugen Bacon) "Kalabashing" (J. Umeh) and "Lost in the Echoes" (Xan van Rooyen). Each of the stories in the collection makes the reader grow sound-sensitive, aware of an alternative logic that we otherwise ignore because of our Western inclination towards sight as a primary sense for navigating the world. This is the decolonial labour of Africanfuturism at its best, for it provides channels to experience the world otherwise, while showing us the limitations of Western logic.

Yet, the greater harm inflicted by colonialism is the understanding that we inhabit a *uni*-verse; a world designed for a singular expression of power, being and mind. This push for hegemony has only generated more strife than freedom, which is why many decolonial scholars propose pluriversality as a means of reconstructing human agency against forces of oppression. As expressed by theorists like Walter Mignolo, the pluriverse challenges ideas of universality by understanding that realities co-exist, and that notions of truth – and reality itself – are deeply situated in our individual experiences. This is dramatized most strikingly in *Mothersound*, as our situatedness and orientation changes with each story. We are told stories by human and non-human subjects on different planetary bodies, which becomes a direct illustration of how radically new perspectives emerge from new angles. This pluriversal mode also yields the great pleasure of reading for interconnectedness, as contested narratives arise through carefully interweaved histories and characters. For example, in *Mothersound*, various stories help develop an understanding that history does not look the same on every planet, as some cultures, like the humanoids on Zezépfeni, cast themselves as the heroes, meaning that others must inevitably come to serve as the antagonists in their stories. Yet when residents of Mahwé (see "The Way of Baa'gh") and Wiimb-ó (see "Undulation" and "Muting Echoes, Breaking Tradition") get an opportunity to respond, historical events look rather different. Stepping into the Sauútiverse is stepping out of monomyth, as this collection educates on the partiality, diversity and situatedness of narrated events that go on to shape each other through acts of collaboration and contestation.

Even more significantly, *Mothersound* also translates pluriversal thinking into method as the Sauútiverse is a shared and open world, and only exists through collaborative worldbuilding. The project was first initiated in 2021 by Wole Talabi, Fabrice Guerrier and *Brittle Paper* who then invited established writers into workshops over the span of two years to design and create in the Sauútiverse. As an illustration of this collaborative ethos, the Sauútiverse is already expanding as the imminent arrival of a new anthology, *Sauúti Terrors: The Dark Side*, edited by Eugen Bacon, Stephen Embleton and Cheryl S. Ntumy, has been announced. The latest addition includes an exciting line-up of writers who all use their talents to explore the shadows of the Sauútiverse, and I am excited to witness the Sauútiverse grow in inclusiveness and range. ■