

Peter J. Maurits

# Fuel Scavengers: Climate Colonialism in the South African Science Fiction of Alex Latimer's *Space Race*, Henrietta Rose-Innes' *Poison*, and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*

**Abstract:** Despite science fiction's rootedness in colonialism, a solid connection between the sf genre and postcolonial studies, one that pivots on the subversion of colonial tropes, has been forged over the last two decades. This chapter argues, however, that the sf-postcolonial connection needs further critical attention now scholars have shown the climate crisis and colonialism to be intertwined to such a degree that it necessitates a conceptual shift from climate change to climate colonialism. Particularly, it suggests that a focus on tropes may be insufficient to demonstrate how climate colonialism operates discursively and it instead advocates a Saidian analytical sensitivity to the way in which colonialism is a codified presence in fiction. To this end, the chapter analyzes three South African sf works – Alex Latimer's novel *The Space Race* (2013), Henrietta Rose-Innes' short story "Poison" (2009), and Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009) – which through this Saidian sensitivity emerge as *fuel-scavenger narratives* in which colonialism and the climate crises overlap in a concern about fuel shortages.

**Keywords:** Science fiction, Africa, postcolonial, District 9, climate colonialism

## 1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes climate colonialism in three contemporary South African postcolonial works of science fiction. Despite science fiction's rootedness in colonialism, a solid connection between the science fiction (sf) genre and postcolonial studies has been forged over the last two decades. While this sf-postcolonial link has been beneficial, a brief look at its history reveals that it nevertheless deserves further critical attention, particularly in the context of the climate crisis. In the introduction to her foundational collection of postcolonial sf short stories *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy*, Nalo Hopkinson confessed to struggling with the "unholy marriage between race consciousness and science fiction sensibility" (2004: 7). She clarified that a dominant sf trope has been "that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives" (7). In a postcolonial con-

text, she explained, this is “not a thrilling adventure story; it’s non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere” (7). Hopkinson’s remark gains further clarity in the context of the history of the sf genre. In his seminal monograph on colonialism and sf, John Rieder wrote that the period of “fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also the crucial period for the emergence of the genre” (2008: 2–3), and that both colonialism and sf are inflected by “[e]volutionary theory and anthropology” (7). This is manifest in many of sf’s tropes and motifs, which he argued can be understood as ideological tools to grasp “the social consequences of colonialism” (20), which include the “rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth [. . .], the racist ideologies that enabled colonialist exploitation, and [. . .] triumphal fantasies of appropriating land, power, sex, and treasure in tales of exploration and adventure” (20). Hopkinson, further clarifying her struggles with the sf genre, thus unsurprisingly described the sensation that to be a “person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one’s colonization” (2004: 7). And yet, she insisted, sf *can* be used in a postcolonial context. Authors like herself can and do take colonial tropes and, “from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things” (9).

Almost two decades later, postcolonial sf no longer rings as a contradiction. A so-called ‘rise’ or ‘boom’ of the genre can be observed in formerly colonized regions from China (Liu 2016) to India (Banerjee 2020), and from Africa (Maurits 2018) to First Nations (Spiers 2021). Moreover, sf from the postcolony has been theorized extensively from a postcolonial perspective (Kerslake 2007; Hoagland and Sarwal 2010; Ellis, Raja, and Nandi 2011; Smith 2012), and in line with Hopkinson’s remarks, what could be called a postcolonial sf methodology has crystalized and has become widespread. Thus, Jessica Langer, in her milestone publication on postcolonial sf, argued that “[r]ather than shying away from [. . .] colonial tropes [. . .], postcolonial science fiction hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain in a play of Bhabhaian masquerade” (2011: 4). Aimee Bahng, less explicit about her postcolonial roots, similarly claimed that “the genre’s emergent cultural producers usurp conventional science fiction tropes of abduction, alienation, and teleportation and recast them against the backdrop of slavery, histories of forced migration, and deportation” (2018: 7). Despite the knowledge this theoretical scope created about the postcolonial use of genre fiction, it also created a paradox. As Gerry Canavan has highlighted, it shifted sf from being “empire’s propaganda arm, its R&D lab, prototyping the weapons of the future and accommodating us to tomorrow’s genocides today,” to a genre whose “utopian impulses align it with anti-colonialism’s on-the-ground

fight for global justice” (2012: 495). In Amy J. Ransom’s terms, postcolonial sf became a genre of “political struggle” (2006: 291). Even though, as Canavan pointed out, some postcolonial sf performs this political work, there is the risk that through the postcolonial theory scope, the “meaning and political import is always safely known to us in advance without our ever actually having to bother to read any of it” (2012: 496). Consequently, he argued, “postcolonial” becomes a “slogan, [and] risks losing its ability to challenge and inspire us – it risks becoming dead theory” (496).

Paradoxically, Canavan’s comments come in a moment in which colonialism reasserts itself. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has consistently shown that the climate crisis has irreversible and grave consequences. In the wake of these reports, scholars have foregrounded the coloniality of that crisis. Empire, it was shown, was and is “predicated on coal” and other fossil fuels (Barak 2020: 3); formerly colonized countries are more vulnerable to climate change (Táíwò 2022: 120); current climate mitigation like forestation “enable[es] contemporary carbon colonialism and [. . .] neoliberal land grab” (Lyons and Westoby 2014: 13–14); and planned climate change mitigation “perpetuate[s] colonial inequalities” (Hickel and Slameršak 2022: e628). Doreen Martinez even insisted that climate change and colonialism are intertwined to such a degree that it is “necessary” to conceptually shift “from climate change to climate colonialism” (2014: 79). In light of these studies, it appears important to stress that the postcolonial scope needs not to be limited to the methodology described above. Edward Said observed that “empire functions [. . .] as a codified [. . .], marginally visible, presence in fiction” (1994 [1993]: 63), and he argued that it is therefore the task of the scholar to “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (66). The benefit of the postcolonial scope for him, in other words, lies not only or even primarily in the subversion of colonial tropes or in the analysis of counter-narratives, but in its sensitivity to the way in which colonialism was registered in the margins of works of the creative imagination. This chapter argues that even though Said focused on canonical works of the European nineteenth century, this analytical sensitivity to colonialism has not lost its importance, even in the context of postcolonial sf, particularly relative to climate colonialism. To do so, this chapter analyzes three South African sf works, respectively Alex Latimer’s novel *The Space Race* (2013), Henrietta Rose-Innes’ short story “Poison” (2009), and Neill Blomkamp’s film *District 9* (2009). All of these works are part of what Mark Bould calls “climate catastrophe culture” (2021: v), even if they do not say “climate change aloud” (4). All of them use postcolonialism-associated narrative techniques such as hybridity and the perverting of colonial sf tropes. All three works have been understood from a postcolonial perspective as part of the post-Apartheid and (White) South African post-apocalyptic narrative traditions, which include works like Karel

Schoeman's *Na die Geliefde Land* (1972), Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), Eben Venter's *Horreelpoot* (2006), Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010), and so on. As this chapter illustrates, while such a categorization is both understandable and justifiable, it may also displace a focus on the way in which climate colonialism operates in these works. In particular, this chapter will argue that *The Space Race*, "Poison" and *District 9* are fuel scavenger narratives, in which colonialism and the climate crises overlap in different ways in concern about fuel shortages.

## 2 Space Race

Alex Latimer's novel *The Space Race* relies both on the apparent postcolonial perversion of colonial tropes and on the justification of colonialization through the climate crisis. In the story, a character called Lindsey goes missing, and when her sister Charlotte attempts to find her, she stumbles upon a nuclear space research and development station in a place called Vastrap. The facility has been developed by White-supremacist Afrikaners aiming to revive and improve the pre-Apartheid status of the Afrikaners on a different planet. They want the project to remain a secret and decide to kill all people involved as soon as the rocket is ready to launch, including the scientists and engineers. When Charlotte finds her sister near the site, two engineers called Eugene and Tertius, who manage to escape their executors, join them. And when a mercenary attempts to hunt them down and kill them, they eventually get into the rocket and fly to its intended destination: a moon called "Die Tweede Aarde" [Earth Two] (Latimer 2013: Ch. 50), which is "supposedly habitable" (Ch. 1), which they will be "colonizing" (Ch. 1), and on which they will no longer be "fugitives" (Ch. 32).

Like all works discussed in this chapter, *The Space Race* is part of the larger post-2008 boom of postcolonial and specifically of African sf (ASF). Its concern with the Afrikaner legacy is reflective of South African post-Apartheid literature and its particular use of the space exploration trope apparently places it squarely in the realm of postcolonial sf. As with that sub-genre in general, ASF writers typically modify the space exploration trope. For example, Deji Bryce Olukotun's *Nigerians in Space* (2014) and Tade Thomson's *The Rosewater Insurrection* (2018) disable the trope by raising the expectation of space travel without ever satisfying it – no one goes to space. Nnedi Okorafor's "Africanfuturist 419" (2016) and Olukotun's *After the Flare* (2017) sabotage the exploration trope by sending astronauts into space who are unable to return to Earth. Frances Bodomo's 2014 counter-historical *Afronauts*, finally, focuses on the historical attempt of Edward Mukuka Nkoloso's 1960s Zambian space program, which aimed to beat the USA in the race

to put the first human on the moon. Where that historical attempt failed, *Afronauts* succeeds. *Race* also adopts a counter historical approach and centers on the real South African nuclear test site Vastrap, located in the Kalahari Desert. In the historical account, no launches or even detonations ever took place because a Soviet intelligence satellite discovered the site shortly after its completion, in the summer of 1977. This resulted in pressure on South Africa from the USA to abandon its nuclear (weapons) project, which it eventually did in 1993 (von Baeckmann et al. 1995).

In *Race*, however, people continue the nuclear program in secret, and when the four protagonists manage to launch the nuclear-powered spaceship developed at Vastrap, it is presented both as a defeat of US-American space science and as a victory of the South Africans. As the narrator explains, the Americans have known about the moon “for over three decades [but] kept [it] secret, hoping they’d have the technology to reach it first” (Latimer 2013: Ch. 1). They failed to do so because conventional propulsion provides insufficient speed to reach the moon, but South African scientists outsmarted and outpaced the Americans by developing “nuclear pulse propulsion” (henceforth NPP, Ch. 23), a real technology invented by the Polish-American scientist Stanislaw Ulam in 1947. Ulam’s NPP was discarded for risk of radiation pollution and made illegal in the 1963 *Partial Test Ban Treaty*, and the “Americans” in *Race* are equally reluctant to use NPP and “risk [a] nuclear fallout” (Latimer 2013: Ch. 16) that “could affect every corner of the globe” (Ch. 39). Yet the South African scientists, scavenging for the right fuel to reach the moon, “making do with what we could find” (Ch. 39), develop a way to shield the rocket’s fuel reserves so that if “anything malfunctions in the blast, it won’t vaporise uranium reserves” causing global catastrophe (Ch. 39). Ridiculing the Americans, Eugene adds, “[i]t was just so simple” (Ch. 39). The launch thus successfully puts South Africans on Die Tweede Aarde first, which the protagonists celebrate as a colonial reversal: “it’s not 1652 anymore. We’re well into the space age” (Ch. 13).<sup>1</sup> In Jennifer de Klerk’s terms, “South Africa has won the space race [with] a proudly South African spaceship powered by the nuclear capacity we weren’t supposed to have” (De Klerk 2013).<sup>2</sup>

If *Race* appropriates the colonial space exploration trope through a postcolonial reversal, it nevertheless fails to establish a critique of colonialism for two

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2 I am grateful to Jennifer de Klerk for sending me the text of this article, which is not accessible online.

reasons: its treatment of Apartheid and positioning vis-à-vis colonialism. First, Nedine Moonsamy (2016) has argued that *Race* fails to distance itself from the Afrikaner legacy. She explained that the novel's main approach to Afrikanerdom is ridicule and provides the following example: Character Eugene recounts that the "Afrikaner Space Programme" resulted from the Apartheid-era realization that "the suppression of a majority wasn't sustainable, and out of a desire for a real homeland came this crazy idea to colonise space. [It] would be a monument to their vision and national pride" (Latimer 2013: Ch. 16). When Apartheid ended, various right wing organizations continued working on the program with the same aim of creating a pure volk. The protagonists think of themselves as disturbing these plans. And when Tertius wonders, "we go and colonise a moon? Are we the right people for that? [ . . . ] I've got eczema and ibs and hardly any social skills" (Ch. 32), Charlotte interjects that they are "exactly the right people" and that in their imperfection they will be "pissing all over the Afrikaner Space Programme" (Ch. 32). In Moonsamy's interpretation, the novel thus seemingly ridicules the Afrikaner fantasy of a "pure or perfect Afrikaner race" by making the reader "bear witness to the pleasurable bastardisation of [that] heinous eugenic fantasy" (2016: 83). However, she contextualizes, the narrative strategy of ridicule is ineffective because in post-Apartheid South Africa, a society which has "rendered lament for the object unavowable," ridicule has become the central way to celebrate Afrikanerdom and express nostalgia for it (89). Citing Russ Truscott, she adds that "[The] technique of self-parody preserves, as a spectacle, precisely what it negates" (89). She continues to criticize the novel and adds that, often, there is not even an "ironic distance nor humorous ripostes to temper the nostalgia" for Afrikanerdom at all (81). She concludes that *Race* oscillates between the unsuccessful desire to be "critical of Afrikaner nostalgia and moments of whimsical indulgence of the volk" (82).

*Race* not only facilitates Afrikaner nostalgia but also embraces and justifies colonial practice. Initially, *Race* justifies colonization through climate apocalypticism. The narrator observes that the "overwhelming majority [of the public] fell in love with the idea [of] humankind colonizing space [because] after years of being told about carbon emissions and global warming and floods and earthquakes and diseases, people were glad to cling on to this one hope for [ . . . ] humankind's continued existence" (Ch. 1). This justification disappears over the course of the novel, and when the narrator says towards the end of *Race* that news of the successful arrival on Die Tweede Aarde caused the global "realignment of our collective hope" (Ch. 49), this no longer relates to climate change. In fact, the success of the South Africans leads to launches from other countries and because, as the narrator mentions, Vastrap became "radioactive" after the launch (Ch. 1), the reader can extrapolate that more radioactive sites will be created in the future. Rather than prob-

lematizing this from the perspective of the previously expressed concern with the climate crisis, the narrator comments that Vastrap is only “mildly radioactive” (Ch. 49), even though he had earlier specified that both protective gear and “iodine tablets” are a necessity on the base (Ch. 1). Remarkably, then, with climate change no longer being a factor, it is colonization itself that becomes the ground for the “realignment of our collective hope” (Ch. 49). Subsequently, the novel justifies this colonization only implicitly. It suggests that the moon has “oceans [. . .] an atmosphere [. . .] vegetation [and] animals” (Ch. 39), and thus implies that there are no beings to which the moon belongs. This argument is known as the “legal fiction of *terra nullius*,” in which “a tract of territory” that is seen as “practically unoccupied” is considered anyone’s for the taking, and which was used *inter alia* by the British colonial State to justify the colonization of Australia (Sen 2017: 971).<sup>3</sup> Rather than providing a postcolonial critique of colonization then, *The Space Race* reinvigorates Afrikaner pioneering, revives the colonial trope of space colonialism, and rehearses the classical colonialist justification for it, albeit desultorily dressed in the inventiveness of South African fuel scavenging.

### 3 Poison

Henrietta Rose-Innes’s short story “Poison” (2009) registers climate colonialism in a more complex way than *Race*, by romanticizing colonized land and erasing carbon pollution through a colonial gaze, while creating distance to that position by means of an unsympathetic protagonist. In the story, an explosion in Cape Town causes a toxic cloud of chemicals of apocalyptic proportions to spread over the city and outwards over the countryside. Many flee immediately but protagonist Lynn ignores it at first and leaves “terribly late, despite all the warnings” (182). She finally escapes the pollution and, after some time, her “old Toyota ran dry on the highway,” after which she walks to the nearest “petrol station” (181). There, she finds several others stranded, some of whom are “petrol scavengers,” who are gathering fuel from abandoned vehicles so they can fill the tank of one car and flee the cloud and its poisonous fallout together (183). Lynn, again struck by apathy, refuses the ride she is offered and chooses to stay at the petrol station. By the end of the story, she hopes that someone will come to her rescue but for the time being, she turns away from the pollution: “She wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veld.” (191)

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3 International space law explicitly does not consider space *terra nullius*, but *res communis*.

“Poison” can also be understood as part of the post-Apartheid and (White) South African post-apocalyptic narrative tradition. Christopher Thurman highlighted that the different people passing through the petrol station are initially split “into tribes” (Rose-Innes 2009: 182), based on race and class. He proposed that the story thus “entrench[es] racial difference” and that it suggests that in “the near-future [. . .] things will be as they have been” (Thurman 2015: 63). However, over the course of the story, “signs of inter-racial cooperation” emerge in the “pressure-cooker microcosm of South African society” that the petrol station represents for him (63). Aghogho Akpome echoed this point and argued that, even though Lynn’s refusal to join other travelers may “reflect the difficulties of post-apartheid national reconciliation” (2020: 8), the fuel scavenging shows “the ways in which social exigencies in the post-apartheid era make social realignments both imperative and possible” (7). Worth highlighting is that, in these analyses, the importance of the explosion is reduced; even Rose-Innes herself commented that “Poison” is not about “the explosion [but about] a breakdown of traditional social divisions and social groupings” characteristic of the “post-apartheid transition” (quoted in Akpome 6). A narratological perspective would confirm the triviality of the explosion, which constitutes what Roland Barthes called a “cardinal function” (1975: 248) and derives narrative importance from facilitating the events that follow rather than from, in this case, its “explosionness.”

While, by extension, the importance of pollution caused by the explosion has been reduced in these readings, I want to propose that “Poison” primarily registers anxiety about fossil-fuel pollution, and that this pollution has a definitive colonial dimension. Starting with pollution’s importance, it may be observed that aestheticized descriptions of pollution permeate the story, establishing a sense of its ubiquity. Lynn says that it concerns a chemical with a coppery smell, but descriptions of the contamination are strongly suggestive of petroleum: the “oily cloud [was] so black, so large, [with] dirty rain bleeding from its near edge [and with] oil-clogged wings, [it] created its own weather system [and left] black grime [and a] tarry black precipitate” on skin and roads (Rose-Innes 2009: 181–191). Petroleum is also omnipresent in its refined form of petrol: petrol is the most frequently used adjective/noun (19 times) after “car” (23 times) in a story about a petrol shortage set in a petrol station that the protagonist cannot leave due to that shortage. Petroleum and the pollution that it causes thus shape the backdrop, aesthetics, plot, and stage of the story. And if Patricia Yaeger suggested that “fuel sources tend to ‘hover in the backgrounds of texts, if they speak at all’” (2011: 310), in “Poison,” to continue her metaphor, they scream from the rooftops.

The colonial dimension of this pollution could be argued for in several ways. We could recall WReC’s claim that the “unevenness at the level of [post-Apartheid] economics is coded into the fabric” of South African cities and understand the oily

cloud metaphorically as colonization (2015: 148). We could highlight Max Liboiron's observation that "pollution is colonialism" (2021: 42); that "[u]nevenness is a defining feature of pollution" and "its goal" (78). An obvious way in which this unevenness of climate colonialism is registered in "Poison" is through the unequal distribution of consequences. On the one hand, only those who have the means to do so can escape ("lack of petrol was trapping people in town," Rose-Innes 2009: 182) and the rides on scavenged petrol are not free ("We made a price – for you too, if you want," 184). On the other hand, English-speaking, White, South African, middle-class protagonist Lynn can choose to stay or go. There is, however, a more hidden instance of climate colonialism that I want to draw attention to, found in the figure of the veld [field]. The veld may be understood as a palimpsest of coloniality. They are Southern African grasslands from which indigenous people were mostly expelled through migration and colonization going south from central Africa and north from what is now Cape Town. During apartheid, they were largely divided among So, 'Whites' and 'non-Whites', who, based on several criteria (e.g. suitability to farm) got allocated good and bad parts respectively. This division largely endures post-Apartheid. It has been demonstrated on numerous occasions that the veld is subject to the climate crisis in the form of *inter alia* severe land degradation (cf. Mani 2021). Historicizing this process, M. E. Meadows and M. T. Hoffman specified that, even though the "causes of [ . . . ] land degradation are varied," it is a "uniquely South African land tenure pattern rooted in its colonial and apartheid past" (2002: 429). In settler-colonialist and later apartheid literature, the veld was romanticized as a pastoral utopia despite the harsh living conditions (e.g. Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, 1883) and it remains an important figure in South African literature even today (e.g. Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*, 2017). The veld figures three times in "Poison," where it has an apparent ambiguous status. Lynn first contemplates that in

all her years of driving at speed along highways, Cape Town, Joburg, Durban, she'd never once stopped [ . . . ], walked into the veld. Why would she? The highways were tracks through an indecipherable terrain of dun and grey, a blurred world [ . . . ]. To leave the car would be to disintegrate, to merge with that shifting world. How far could she walk, anyway, before weakness made her stumble? Before the air thickened into some alien gel, impossible to wade through, to breathe? (Rose-Innes 2009: 185)

Lynn perceives the veld and those associated with it in contrast to the city, through the familiar urban/rural and nature/culture binaries. Through this scope, city/culture is knowable while rural/nature is incomprehensible, alien even, and increasingly threatening. This animosity is enhanced in the second veld scene, in which "an old two-wire fence with wooden posts [is] holding back the veld" (187). The last time the veld is mentioned, however, the narrator says that Lynn "wanted to face clear skies, sweet-smelling veld" (191), thus returning to the romanticized image. In

this last instance, the veld in Lynn's gaze becomes simply a piece of nature, bereft of fully human inhabitants, indifferent to its surroundings, including to earlier and current climate colonialism – a place outside of history. This ambiguous status of the veld in "Poison" – threatening, romanticized – can be unpacked in Said's terms as being of "inimitable foreignness" to Lynn while she can also "mobilize" an "enunciative capacity" about it (1979 [1978]: 222–223). To explicate, Lynn's is a colonial gaze, one that "by seeing names and dominates" (Coetzee 1988: 174). Through it, the veld is emptied of its content and history, allowing her to project her fears and desires on it, to perceive it as pristine even when "dirty rain [is] bleeding" So, (Rose-Innes 185) "black grime" (182) onto it. In "Poison," then, climate colonialism past and present are screened out through Lynn's colonial gaze. However, Lynn's apathy hinders sympathizing with, and creates narrative distance from her, and by extension, from that gaze.

## 4 District 9

*District 9* (2009) is a complex work that consciously formulates a critique of colonialism, transforms it into a colonial redemption narrative, while registering climate colonialism in its margins. In the film, a White clerk named Wikus van der Merwe heads the forced eviction of 1.8 million aliens from their home – the refugee-camp-cum-ghetto called District 9 – and their relocation to a camp 200 kilometers from the city of Johannesburg. The xenophobic motives for the operation are overt. The aliens, derogatorily called prawns, are portrayed as hated by the South African population, and Wikus explains that the aliens must go because "this is our land" (10:38–10:42), and that moving them means that "the people of Johannesburg and of South Africa are going to live happily and safely, knowing that that prawn is very far away" (6:50–6:55). The process is brutally violent and includes Wikus' explicit enjoyment in committing infanticide. However, it is interrupted for Wikus when he encounters a canister filled with alien liquid that he clumsily sprays over himself. The liquid causes him to transform into one of the aliens – a visibly bloody and torturous process – and leads to his immediate rejection from the category of human. When it turns out that he can now use the powerful alien weapons, which can only be fired by those with alien DNA, his (former) employer, the weapons manufacturer MNU, makes him an object of medical experiments. Eventually, he befriends and helps an alien by the human name of Christopher Johnson (henceforth CJ), partly in the hope that CJ can help him morph back. When CJ discovers that humans are doing medical experiments on aliens, however, he

escapes Earth to find help for his fellow beings. Wikus is left waiting in the hope that CJ will bring back a cure.

Like *Race* and “Poison,” *D9* has also been understood from the perspective of post-Apartheid and (White) South African post-apocalyptic narrative traditions. Sam Okoth Opondo (2015) claimed that the film allegorizes the forced relocations of the “apartheid-era,” and specifically the violent and forced removal of “non-whites [. . .] from Cape Town’s District Six to the Cape Flats” (Opondo 117). Rebecca Weaver-Hightower proposed that *D9* is “not simply an allegory of apartheid [but] a vision of *postapartheid*” (2014: 251), that it explores “the struggle of a postcolonial nation trying to reimagine itself” (249). She observed that “Wikus’s external hybridity causes an internal transformation as well, for his [. . .] outcast status changes his perspective, making him emphasize with ‘the prawns’” (256–257). Yet using the horror technique of gore to depict the transformation, she argued, *D9* demonstrates a “lingering ambivalence about assimilation and racial blending” (249–251). Ewa Mazierska and Alfredo Suppia, finally, preferred an even later social referent, and argued that the film allegorizes the labor migration crisis involving violent xenophobic responses towards migrants from Southern Africa (2016: 121). There is reason to suggest that *D9* deliberately creates resonance with the historical events mentioned above and that this constitutes a conscious critique of the coloniality of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid era. In one interview, director Blomkamp explained that he was consciously aware of the history of District Six while making the film (Fischer 2009). In another, he indicated that the “whole film exists because of” South Africa’s “segregationist history” (Itzkoff 2009), and he added that he was also “trying to comment on” how, in the post-Apartheid era, townships “were ravaged by outbursts of xenophobic violence perpetrated by indigenous South Africans upon illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe, Malawi and elsewhere” (Itzkoff 2009). That this “comment” constitutes a critique is evidenced by *D9*’s narrative devices. The eviction’s extreme and visceral brutality virtually forces the viewer to condemn Wikus and the operation. The medical experiments and architecture of the camp to which the aliens will be deported have a similar effect because, as Shohini Chaudhuri observed, they appear an equally conscious effort to resonate with the extermination camps of Nazi Germany (2022: 21, 140), which have their origins in South Africa (cf. Kreienbaum 2019).

If *D9*’s historical resonances are of an intentional nature, it raises the question of what is “codified [and] marginally visible” (Said 1994 [1993]: 63). I shall suggest below that what is hidden is climate colonialism, but before doing so I want to consider the possible effectiveness of this apparently intentional colonial critique. *D9* opens with interviews that elucidate the history of the aliens’ arrival and the reasons for the eviction. However, already at the seven-minute mark, the narrative forces viewers to focus on Wikus’ transformation by making the inter-

viewees raise questions about him – by speaking of him in the past (“he was a wonderful son,” 7:38–7:39) or by implying he will do something wrong later in the film (“There was always a hint of something not kosher with Van de Merwe,” 9:57–10:02). The narrative thus centers on Wikus’ transformation. And while Weaver-Hightower correctly observed that this allows for emphasizing with the aliens, it also rehabilitates Wikus, at least in part. In other terms, the centrality of Wikus’ hybridization provides *D9* with aspects of the colonial redemption narrative, a versatile and not seldom problematic narrative form, which has *inter alia* been used, as Kamran Rastegar has noted, as “colonial propaganda” (2015: 41). In the case of *D9* (and leaving aside for now the ethical question if Wikus, whom earlier that day set fire to a nursery, deserves absolution), the redemption of the figure who initially embodied colonial violence, a redemption paradoxically facilitated by the postcolonial device of hybridity, marginalizes *D9*’s concerns about coloniality.

Shifting attention away from Wikus to the aliens, then, I propose that *D9* registers anxiety about climate colonialism not unlike “Poison,” although more in line with Yaeger’s proposal that fuel sources tend to “hover in the backgrounds of texts” (2011: 310). In the opening scenes of the film, a journalist recalls that there “were literally thousands of theories as to why the [alien space] ship seemed inoperable” after it arrived and that one prominent theory was that a “command module had detached itself from the main ship and then somehow mysteriously become lost” (4:05–4:08). An engineer investigating the case adds that “There’s pieces falling off that vessel for bloody months” (4:22–4:25) onto the area that would eventually become District 9. The reason for this inoperability is answered twenty minutes into the film, when the camera shifts from the hectic scenes of Wikus’ cruel eviction effort to three aliens – CJ, his earth-born son Little CJ, and a companion – on a garbage heap. The trio is looking for a liquid found only in their technology, which can be refined into a fuel that powers the lost module safely hidden under CJ’s home, which in turn can power the spaceship still hovering over Johannesburg. After twenty years, Little CJ finally completes the task by finding the last necessary bit of fuel in the trash-pile. They return home, refine the liquid into fuel, and add it to the now-full fuel canister. However, Wikus then barges into their lab, takes the canister, and sends it to MNU to find out what it is and how it can be of value, thus thwarting the departure. CJ spends the rest of the film recovering the fuel and, eventually, Wikus does, too, when he finds out it can retransform him.

The alien perspective thus highlights the centrality of fuel to *D9*: the aliens stranded and remained on earth due to a lack of fuel, and from CJ’s perspective *D9* is a story about mining and refining fuel, having the fuel stolen and taking it back, and finally escaping the Earth-prison, which mistreats the aliens. In the

terms chosen for this chapter, *D9* is a fuel scavenging narrative, in which a fuel shortage, maintained through dispossession, engenders oppression – what Claperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga calls “energy colonialism,” and which is an aspect of climate colonialism, as it implies preferential access to polluting (2014: 6). That it indeed concerns energy colonialism is manifest throughout the film, in the way that it messily entangles and mixes up pollution, land grab, and the extraction of fuel, technology, and alien bodies. It is possible, for example, to understand the eviction from the District, on which alien technology fell down for “months” (4:25), and to which the evacuation will provide unlimited access, along those entangled lines. Further, the extraction of the aliens from their ship at the beginning of the film leans heavily on fossil fuel mining aesthetics: humans in protective suits, helmets, and gloves, faces covered in a black film, objects covered in black grime, people wiping a crude-oil like substance of working surfaces, handling mining tools (“uh, we’re gonna need, uh, a drill down here,” 2:05–2:06). That *D9* deals with energy colonialism is made explicit when Wikus realizes that CJ intends to leave Earth: Little CJ: “Fuel goes in here! [. . .] Then we fly away.” Wikus: “What is he saying about the fuel? Are you little fuckers trying to start this [module] and get away, eh? Yeah, you sneaky fucking prawns, eh?” (57:44–58:07). Wikus, and by extension his (former) employer, do not want the aliens to leave Earth because their presence constitutes a resource to be exploited – in a way *D9* corresponds to what Rieder calls a tale of “appropriating land [. . .] and treasure” (2008: 20), albeit with the exploited subject as the deuteragonist. And even if, to borrow from Mark Bould, *D9* is unable to speak energy colonialism “aloud,” (2021: 3), and fails to get away from or even reverse colonial tropes, the messy connections it makes between extraction, land grab, fuel, and bodies, signal the content of energy colonialism.

The cases of Latimer’s *The Space Race*, Rose-Innes’ “Poison,” and Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* demonstrate that (the legacy of) colonialism and the climate crisis are bound together inextricably. Moreover, they show that as Said observed, empire takes on a codified present in the margins of artistic works. Thus, in *The Space Race*, a team of social rejects hijacks a spacecraft from a group of white supremacist Afrikaners who aimed to colonize a supposedly uninhabited planet, but they end up colonizing it instead, using the climate crisis to justify their actions. The protagonist of “Poison” paradoxically romanticizes colonized land and labels it alien and dangerous – a colonial gaze that screens out climate colonialism past and present, even when pollution is raining down on it before her eyes. *District 9* thematizes settler colonialism but its focus on the settler protagonist relegates the energy colonialism that is central to the film, and in which fuel shortages as a mode of domination are maintained through dispossession, to the margins of

the story. Thus, despite contemporary questions about the usefulness of the postcolonial paradigm, these works show the continued necessity of its analytical sensitivity to coloniality.

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