Surveilling the Black Womb: Dystopian Biopolitics and Posthuman Kinship in *Womb City*

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Abstract

Tlotlo Tsamaase's novel *Womb City* is an Africanfuturist dystopia that stages the entanglement of biopolitics, surveillance, and reproductive control in a near-future Botswana. This article interrogates how the novel exposes the fusion of algorithmic monitoring with a market-driven artificial womb economy and how it imagines counter forms of kinship that resist this order. Through close readings of key scenes, the analysis shows how microchips, purity tests, and the Murder Trials render Black women's bodies legible as data and capital, turning fertility into what Melinda Cooper names "life as surplus." The study reads the text through feminist posthumanism and African feminist thought to argue that Tsamaase integrates Setswana cosmology with cyberpunk motifs in ways that provincialise Western theoretical frames. Nelah's metamorphosis with Moremi's ghost and Matsieng produces a composite subject that refigures autonomy as posthuman kin-making and reframes justice through ancestral affiliation rather than technocratic reform. By situating *Womb City* within contemporary Africanfuturist discourse the article demonstrates how Tsamaase expands feminist science fiction by interrogating surveillance and biocapitalism from a decolonial African vantage and by offering a contingent model of kinship that contests the racialised governance of life in the Global South.

Keywords: Africanfuturism; feminist posthumanism; surveillance; biopolitics; reproductive justice; kinship; Tlotlo Tsamaase

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Introduction

In an era when human bodies and intimate biological processes are increasingly managed as economic resources, speculative fiction serves as a laboratory for our cultural anxieties. Twenty-first century realities like big data policing, fertility capitalism, and biotech innovation have converged to create novel modes of control over marginalised bodies. Feminist scholars have long warned that neoliberal regimes privatise and datafy biopolitics, shifting the burden of governance onto individuals, especially women, under the guise of "choice" and personal responsibility (Murphy 2017, 5; Roberts 2015, 170). Reproductive and surveillance technologies often enforce what Dorothy Roberts (1998) terms a "reproductive caste system," wherein affluent white women's childbearing is facilitated and celebrated while women of colour's fertility are problematised, policed, or curtailed (246–293). Fears abound that ubiquitous monitoring and market-driven fertility programmes could turn women's wombs and lives into assets controlled by the state and capital, a biopolitical dystopia where life itself becomes a commodified surplus.

Tlotlo Tsamaase's *Womb City* (2024) engages these concerns through an Africanfuturist lens in which speculative narrative is "rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point of view" and does not privilege the West (Cleveland 2024, 8). Tsamaase, a Motswana writer, localises a high-tech near-future Botswana in dialogue with Setswana cosmology, and the book's spiritual motifs are consonant with what Okorafor (2019, "Africanfuturism Defined") describes as Africanjujuism, a seamless blend of "existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative." The novel centres on Nelah, an architect who has body-hopped into a new corporeal form and now lives under a surveillance saturated order in which her host body's criminal history and embedded microchip subject her to continuous biometric scrutiny by the state's Criminal Behaviour Evaluator AI and by her abusive police officer husband, Elifasi. Her desire for motherhood draws her into the Wombcubator Program, a state sponsored artificial womb system that monetises pregnancy, while a fatal accident entangles her in a conspiracy and summons the vengeful ghost of Moremi, forcing her to confront the Murder Trials and their sacrificial logic linked to Matsieng. The narrative poses a central question, what autonomy means when both mind and womb are colonised by technocratic power. This article exposes the dystopian convergence of ubiquitous data monitoring with a for-profit artificial womb economy that renders Black women's reproductive capacities extractable surplus while imagining an African posthuman kin-making practice in which Nelah allies with Matsieng and with Moremi's ghost to resist the state's apparatus.

Building on Preite and Xausa (2025), who read *Womb City* through reproductive politics and the critique of the heteropatriarchal family, this article advances a complementary account of surveillance and biocapital. This article uses Michel Foucault's formulation of biopolitics as the power to "make live and let die" to name a regime that optimises life for some while disallowing it for others (Mavelli 2016, 491). Furthermore, it reads

the novel's convergence of predictive policing, biometric governance, and commodified gestation through Melinda Cooper's account of life as surplus under late capitalism (Cooper 2011). In this framework *Womb City* shows how intimate data and reproductive labour are rendered extractable and tradable, and it figures resistance through insurgent kin-making that exceeds the neoliberal family. The stakes are twofold. First, the essay contributes to feminist science fiction criticism by centring an African perspective on surveillance, biocapitalism, and artificial reproduction and by showing how the novel provincialises Western genre conventions through Botswana's cultural and historical specificities. Second, it answers the call for deeper engagement with African feminist and decolonial thought by placing Sylvia Tamale alongside Donna Haraway and Achille Mbembe, thereby adopting a decolonial feminist lens attuned to local life worlds and global power. In doing so, the argument speaks to debates on surveillance and reproductive justice in the Global South and asks how emerging technologies of monitoring and reproduction differentially affect African women and how speculative fiction can help envision liberatory resistance where policy has failed.

Posthuman Biopolitics and Feminist Kin-Making

Foucauldian biopolitics refers to a modern regime of government that disciplines individual bodies and regulates populations (Foucault 2010). Under neoliberalism, this regime fuses with market rationality so thoroughly that the capacities of living beings, such as bodily labour, genetic material, reproductive work, and even lifespan, are reorganised as monetisable assets, a dynamic often described as biocapitalism (Rajan 2006). Yet biopolitics is never racially neutral. Postcolonial theorist Mbembe shows that colonial histories and contemporary racial hierarchies determine whose vitality is secured and whose lives are rendered disposable (Mbembe 2019; see also Hong 2015). Mbembe's account (2019) of necropolitics clarifies that, in colonial and postcolonial contexts, the management of life proceeds through decisions over death, exposing non-white populations to premature mortality or exclusion from valued life (Mbembe 2019). Black feminist interventions such as that of Alys Eve Weinbaum (2019) deepen this critique. She argues that modern reproductive technologies bear the "afterlife of reproductive slavery," where a "slave episteme" continues to structure how black women's reproductive labour is instrumentalised for others' profit and genetic "renewal" (Weinbaum 2019, 1). Together, these strands frame reproduction not as a private matter but as a key site where markets, states, and techno sciences converge to sort value and vulnerability.

Feminist posthumanism enters here as both critique and proposition. It challenges the universal "man" of classical humanism, a figure historically centred on European, white, male rationality, and instead theorises subjectivity as relational, embodied, and distributed across human, technological, and more-than-human milieus (Braidotti 2013, 91; Haraway 1991, 149). Haraway's cyborg reframed the human–machine relation as a resource for feminist refusal of patriarchal and biological determinisms, envisioning hybrid assemblages that could rewire inherited boundaries and dependencies (Haraway

1991, 150–52). Braidotti's zoe-centric ethics similarly decentres the human by foregrounding the continuity of life across species and systems, inviting more egalitarian arrangements among women, technologies, animals, and environments (Braidotti 2013). Read together with biopolitics, feminist posthumanism does not celebrate technicity in the abstract; it asks who benefits from particular human–machine couplings, which bodies are made optimisable, and which are rendered expendable under biocapitalist terms.

Kin-making crystallises these concerns into a practical, world-building ethic. Haraway's (2016, 103) call to "make kin, not babies" reframes family as an ethical project rather than a biogenetic destiny, urging solidarities and care networks that exceed bloodlines and open onto nonhuman alliances. In African contexts, Pan-African feminist and Ubuntu philosophies extend this move by centring interdependence, reciprocity, and communal flourishing in place of possessive individualism. Sylvia Tamale (2020) argues that decolonial transformation requires grounding liberation in African feminist and Ubuntu ethics. Forwarding Graham's claim (2011, 142–148), "the interconnectedness of all things; the spiritual nature of human beings; collective and individual identity and the collective and inclusive nature of family structure," Tamale asks for renewing indigenous kinship practices and spiritualities as the basis for hopeful futures. Literary imaginations already model such modes of resistance. Africanfuturist works frequently experiment with non-normative households, spiritual kin ties, and techno-ancestral alliances. These literary kin formations are not romantic retreats from politics; rather, they are counter-infrastructures that refuse the extractive logic of profit and punishment that organises biopolitical and necropolitical orders.

Decolonising Theory: An Africanfuturist Engagement

In the tradition of Sylvia Tamale (2023) who calls for a "decolonial break" from Euro colonial intellectual tethers, this article grounds its analysis in African feminist and decolonial perspectives. It uses Western theory as one tool among many and asks how cyborg and biopolitics concepts shift when viewed from Gaborone rather than Paris or California. Accordingly, we supplement Foucault on panoptic surveillance with insights on racialised surveillance attentive to Black women under technocratic oversight. Likewise, when discussing kin-making, Donna Haraway is placed in dialogue with African spiritual ontologies that shape Tsamaase's narrative. We therefore interpret Nelah's transformation not only as a science fiction trope but also in relation to Achille Mbembe (2019), who discusses African modes of inhabiting the border of life and death, and Tamale, who focuses on revalorising spiritual imagination in African feminism.

Tsamaase's use of Setswana folklore indigenises the posthuman and yields an African vision that resists "epistemic preeminence" of Western templates, so this analysis treats these elements as primary rather than as analogues of familiar theories (Nzegwu 1994, 91). *Womb City* also unsettles Western feminist assumptions by imagining liberation through a spiritually empowered collective female embodiment rather than a secular individualist heroine. That's why Braidotti and Haraway are cited as interlocutors while

marking points of divergence, including the text's far darker view of technological emancipation than early cyborg thought. The framework is intentionally hybrid, drawing on feminist posthumanism, biopolitics and biocapitalism, and kin-making, and filtering them through a decolonial African feminist lens that demands reflexivity in a postcolonial setting. This approach honours the specificity of *Womb City* as Africanfuturist while placing it within broader debates, setting the stage for its placement in related scholarship and for close readings of its most haunting scenes.

Close Readings and Contextual Analysis: Situating *Womb City*

This section offers three interrelated close readings of *Womb City*, each centred on a pivotal facet of the narrative: surveillance, biocapital and reproduction, and resistance through posthuman kin-making beyond death. By attending closely to diction, imagery, and metaphor, the analyses show how Tsamaase's text operates on literal and symbolic planes, mapping bureaucratic control onto bodies and reframing kinship through ancestral and posthuman ties. Each subsection returns to the article's central claim about biopolitics and posthuman kinship, ensuring that evidence from the novel directly underwrites the larger scholarly argument.

Surveillance, Self-Policing, and the Murder Trials

Womb City opens by immersing the reader in a surveillance-laden atmosphere that closely reflects contemporary realities. Through Nelah's perspective, Tsamaase deftly illustrates how omnipresent monitoring becomes internalised, shaping a subject's emotions and behaviour. Early in the novel, as Nelah awakens to her routine government-mandated "morning assessment," her microchip vibrates in her neck, sending "quivers down [her] spine" (Tsamaase 2024, "05:00 Pure"). Elifasi, her husband, remarks that she always passes these daily evaluations, implying there is nothing to fear. Nevertheless, Nelah's response is revealing when she states, "You don't understand what it feels like to lose a body … What if I had a child?" (Tsamaase 2024, "05:00 Pure"). Immediately, Tsamaase links surveillance with bodily autonomy and maternal anxiety. Nelah's dread of "losing a body" refers to the draconian punishment for failing assessments. If deemed deviant, one's consciousness can be evicted from the host body, a literal form of expulsion from society. Nelah's response reveals deeper terror that, under constant surveillance, even her hypothetical child could be taken or harmed if she is found "unfit." This foreshadows how the state eventually weaponises her child through the kill switch contract to enforce compliance.

The narrative explicitly casts *Womb City* as a panopticon (Foucault 1995) where people internalise the gaze of authority and police themselves to avoid punishment. We see this in Nelah's internal monologue before Criminal Behaviour Evaluation, a "purity test," where she says, "I'm terrified that one tiny wrong move could destroy my chances. I need to be perfect. I need to be perfect. I must be perfect" (Tsamaase 2024, "08:00 The Black Womb"). The repetition of "perfect" thrice is a stylistic enactment of panic which reads almost like a mantra or a desperate prayer. This moment powerfully illustrates

Foucauldian self-discipline because Nelah has so thoroughly absorbed the scrutiny that she urges herself to eliminate any potential aberration. The cause of this pressure is her microchip, which constantly "observes [her] behavioural patterns" (Tsamaase 2024, "08:00 The Black Womb"). The text describes the implant as "an operating system implanted in my brain stem to remotely control my body during criminal activities" (Tsamaase 2024, "08:00 The Black Womb"). The implant exemplifies the surrender of bodily sovereignty to technology, as it effectively allows the state to manipulate her actions if she deviates from the norm. We could argue that surveillance has colonised Nelah's consciousness itself. Tsamaase underscores the point by demonstrating the effective criminalisation of Nelah's feelings. The morning assessment captures the claustrophobic effect of such surveillance in a metaphor where Nelah feels "incarcerated in [her] own bed" (Tsamaase 2024, "05:00 Pure"). As surveillance penetrates the home and blurs the line between prison and private life, the microchip's continuous data streaming dismantles barriers to confinement and incessantly manipulates behaviour across all domains of existence, a tangible embodiment of the Deleuzian society of control that supersedes the distinct confines of discipline (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 605–622).

Apart from the everyday gendered surveillance, the Botswanan government runs a clandestine system of punitive justice known as the Murder Trials. It is a "city-sanctioned purification ritual" administered under the Department of Crimes and National Security to root out and punish crimes undetected by conventional surveillance (Tsamaase 2024, "20:04 An Honor"). Ostensibly based on an older logic of human sacrifice and Setswana spirituality, they are tied to the deity Matsieng, whose sacred caves and waterholes supposedly unearth criminals through supernatural means. In practice, a committee of officials and private sponsors, including Serati and Aarav, oversees a secret trial by ordeal for flagged suspects, most often microchipped people, primarily women, marked for criminal tendencies in this patriarchal order. It resonates with Ruha Benjamin's (2019) critique that new technologies often reinforce old inequalities while feigning neutrality. The trials supplement the AI Criminal Behaviour Evaluator and annual tests, activating for severe offences such as murder that might evade prosecution. According to the government's own officials, "the victim sets the rules that mysteriously emanate from Matsieng, and we deal with the aftermath. It's the way it's always worked" (Tsamaase 2024, "20:04 An Honor"). Outcomes are binary. If the murderer wins, they evade prison, receive monetary rewards, and are covertly exiled abroad with a new body and identity while the public is told they were imprisoned, rendering them no longer a citizen of Botswana. If the spirit wins, the victim is resurrected and compensated with a new body.

The trials deepen the biopolitical dystopia in which a regime uses technology and tradition to regulate life, death, and reproduction among its citizens, especially women. The government literally treats bodies as state property, a government-issued resource, to be managed, exchanged, or discarded for the collective security of society. From a Foucauldian perspective, this represents an extreme form of biopower, as the state

closely monitors citizens at the level of blood and womb, even dictating the conditions of rebirth. Nowhere is this principle clearer than in the Murder Trials, where the state orchestrates life and death rituals. By enabling the resurrection of the wronged or the erasure of the guilty, the Trials display the government's ultimate biopolitical fantasy: controlling who may live in society and who must be expunged even if physically kept alive elsewhere. The trials thus become an instrument of necropolitics as well, as the state decides whose death is required to maintain order, whether through the literal sacrifice of criminals or the staged deaths and exiles of those who win. Every aspect of this system is framed in the language of purification and the health of the social body; for example, a low crime index achieved by brutal means embodies what Mbembe (2019) calls the sovereign power over mortality in a sovereign's domain.

Within the Murder Trials, the posthuman theme merges with the supernatural, reflecting an Africanfuturist blend of technology and ancestral spirituality. Matsieng's waterwombs, described as underground pools filled with a blood-like liquid, are a mystical counterpart to high-tech incubation pods and data servers above ground. These waterwombs function as a kind of natural databank of souls tied to Botswana's cosmology of reincarnation. The government has co-opted this sacred resource by filling the waterwombs with the blood of every woman citizen, thereby anchoring women's biological essence to Matsieng's domain as a means of control. In effect, the regime turns women's bodies into sites of extraction, as their blood, which symbolises life force and lineage, is syphoned into Matsieng's pools, presumably to fuel the creation of empty shells and cloned bodies used for body-hopping and housing resurrected souls. This phenomenon vividly represents the loss of bodily autonomy, since women's reproductive and regenerative power is harnessed by the patriarchal state for its ends, echoing real histories of exploitation of Black women's bodies from forced reproduction to medical abuse. The appropriation of blood and womb within market principles exposes the Western world's "inseparability from both its economic foundations in the naturalisation of property and its racialised history of colonialism" (Vint 2021, 16). The Trials, a hybrid of mythic ritual and authoritarian control, thus fuse judicial, religious, and biopolitical power, exploiting ancestral forces to enforce justice while branding the practice as cultural heritage and public safety.

Tsamaase's language often merges the technical with the visceral to underscore surveillance's intimate violence. For instance, during her morning assessment, when Nelah fears her data's betrayal, she disciplines herself saying, "I must not think of him (Jan) or else a detection alert will prompt … by a rising heart rate, dilated eyes" (Tsamaase 2024, "05:00 Pure"). Tsamaase anthropomorphises her own body data as an informer, suggesting a split self, with part of her enlisted by the regime against her will. Likewise, the repeated reference to Nelah's body as "wiretapped" objectifies it, as the term is usually applied to phones or communications, not flesh. Calling her a "wiretapped woman" encapsulates how invasive the surveillance is, not just watching from outside but implanted within, recording the signals of her very nerves. This melding of human and surveillance apparatus effectively makes Nelah a cyborg subject

of the state. Unlike Haraway's liberated cyborg, however, Nelah's cyborgisation is involuntary and punitive. It is a cautionary inversion of posthuman integration because technology is not empowering her—it is disciplining her. Importantly, *Womb City* shows that the psychological toll of such surveillance can be as debilitating as physical coercion. Nelah's constant stress contributes to her isolation and trauma. She even suggests that the microchip's intrusions may be linked to her miscarriages, a speculative correlation that symbolically ties surveillance to reproductive failure. The novel hints that her body might be "rejecting" life under these conditions. Whether or not that is literally true, the metaphorical truth stands that living under total surveillance is antithetical to flourishing life.

In sum, *Womb City*'s depiction of surveillance and criminal justice is a linchpin in the novel's critique of dystopian biopolitics. Tsamaase translates theoretical concepts like the panopticon and "internalised gaze" into narratives and bodily experiences that the reader can viscerally feel, including the unease of being watched and the fragmentation of the self when one's body is not fully one's own. These scenes buttress the argument that *Womb City* portrays Black women's autonomy as severely curtailed by a surveillance regime that operates on both external and internal levels. They also set the stage for understanding Nelah's later actions, since her eventual rebellion can be read as a response to this total surveillance, an attempt to reclaim privacy, agency, and embodiment from a system that stole those things. The next subsection will examine how this regime of surveillance intersects specifically with reproductive control in the Wombcubator context, further advancing the novel's biopolitical critique.

Biocapital and Reproduction: Wombcubators and the Surplus Life

If constant surveillance is one pillar of *Womb City*'s dystopia, the artificial womb economy is the other. Tsamaase devotes a crucial sequence to Nelah and Elifasi's visit to the Body Hope Facility to initiate their Wombcubator contract, and this scene crystallises the novel's commentary on the neoliberal commodification of reproduction.

Upon seeing her foetus grow in a translucent pod, Nelah privately observes, "it's like ordering a meal and then fetching it once it's fully cooked" (Tsamaase 2024, "08:00 The Black Womb"). This casual simile encapsulates the key theme, as reproduction has been reframed as consumption. It also suggests alienation, since the baby is something made elsewhere by machines, technicians and just picked up by the parents. The language of "ordering" and "fully cooked" externalises the profound process of human gestation which is "not only alien, but hostile and antagonistic, when it appears before [the worker] objectified and personified in capital" (Marx 1976, 1025). Tsamaase further asks what it means if a baby is like a takeout meal and what that does to concepts of motherhood, kinship, and the sanctity or dignity of life. Tsamaase exposes the intricate details of the Wombcubator agreement, revealing a disturbing conclusion.

Dr. Nnete lays out the terms, and it reads like dystopian satire of a bank loan contract. She warns the couple that the Wombcubator has "a kill switch" for contingencies,

including “late payments” (Tsamaase 2024, “08:00 The Black Womb”). Nelah’s reaction is internal panic. “That’s all I can think about. I can’t lose another baby.” The conversation continues. “Failure to pay the charges and monthly medical bills means you lose ownership of your daughter, which will automatically give us the authorisation to either terminate the pregnancy or foster it for the Body Hope Facility’s supply chain.” At this, “Her latter statement sends a chill up my spine” (“08:00 The Black Womb”). The corporate tone starkly contrasts with the human horror of what is being described, essentially state-sanctioned baby theft or infant indenture. Tsamaase’s effect here is the calm banality of evil, reminiscent of bureaucratic language in real-world policies. By using terms like “ownership” and “supply chain,” the text explicitly invokes the lexicon of property and commerce in the context of a child, evoking slavery comparisons without needing to say the word. This instance is where Weinbaum’s notion of the “slave episteme” comes alive in the text because the foetus is treated akin to the progeny of slaves in that its fate is determined by an owner’s (parents’) compliance or default, and it can be repossessed by the government for use by others. It is easy to recall how, under slavery, children could be sold away or killed at an owner’s whim. *Womb City* has bureaucratised that power into a twenty-first century form. This incident underscores the article’s argument that Tsamaase is reflecting historical oppressions in futuristic guise.

Nelah reflects further, “rather than turn off Wombcubators, the government confiscates foetuses it takes from prospective parents, nurtures them for several years, and uses those bodies to increase the body supply” (Tsamaase 2024, “08:00 The Black Womb”). The chilling description of raising seized children as inventory for adult body transplants is dispassionate. It reveals a society that has fully marketed human life cycles, where there is a demand (wealthy ageing people needing new young bodies) and a supply (infants grown without family ties and commodified). The state produces dehumanised individuals who function as producers of “biovalue,” a metric which renders them like machines by “capturing, domesticating, disciplining, and instrumentalizing the vital capacities” instead of recognising them as independent entities (Rose 2007, 33). Nelah recognises the callousness when she reflects, “It’d be a waste to discard an original prime body… better to appropriate existing bodies like mine that fall low on the grading scale” (Tsamaase 2024, “08:00 The Black Womb”). Here she notes an added layer because even her current body (third-hand and “imperfect”) is considered a lower-value life. In contrast, the foetus her Wombcubator carries is “prime,” not yet flawed by experience or status, and thus more valuable. This practice is a perverse twist on eugenics. Through technology, the society believes it can manufacture “purer” bodies free of the “errors” that come with life. It is telling that Nelah, a Black woman with an amputated arm and criminal mark, sees herself as equivalent to a “used” commodity devalued by multiple owners. The metaphor she uses, “the trite version of women considered sluts because they’ve had multiple sex partners,” connects bodily value with sexual purity and draws a parallel between how patriarchy devalues women who have had multiple partners and how this biocapitalist system devalues bodies that have had multiple “users” (Tsamaase 2024, “08:00 The Black

Womb"). Both are forms of misogynist thinking that treat women's worth as tied to an unblemished, unused status. Tsamaase weaves this commentary in subtly, showing how even high-tech oppression recapitulates age-old sexist tropes.

From a feminist perspective, *Womb City* illustrates stratified reproduction where some women's reproductive labour is supported and celebrated while others' is undermined or appropriated (Rapp 1999). Here, wealthy white or pure women get to raise families (with technological aid), whereas Nelah's attempts at motherhood are surveilled, penalised, and ultimately co-opted by the society. This stigma manifests in her everyday life, as gossip rags label her the "Black Womb," linking her racial identity to barrenness and portraying it as a source of shame. Nelah's own brother lambasts her for being "ungrateful" when she laments her host body's infertility. This interpersonal dimension drives home what Dorothy Roberts argued in real life, namely that social narratives often blame women for reproductive "failures" while ignoring structural issues (Roberts 1998, 250). Tsamaase captures this perspective in scenes where even Nelah's loved ones turn against her, internalising the belief that her worth is linked to having children and that any inability to do so reflects a personal or moral failing, a defect.

Another layer is the eugenic undertone of purity tests mentioned in the novel. Passing a purity test can free Nelah from the microchip, implying she must prove she is genetically or behaviourally pure, despite her body's criminal history. Eugenics in the traditional sense sought to breed out "undesirable" traits. In *Womb City*, technology and policy enforce a similar goal, eliminating "impure" bodies through strict control or by not allowing them to reproduce freely. It is noteworthy that Nelah's ultimate child in the Wombcubator is a girl, a daughter who, if born to them, would inherit the stigma of her mother's criminal-marked body as Elifasi, her husband, fears. That fear highlights how eugenic thinking affects lineage, as there is concern that a daughter would inherit the stigma. The Wombcubator rules potentially allow for the removal of a child to be raised by the state, ensuring that even if such a child is born, she may be separated from her bad family and repurposed. Such an arrangement is chillingly reminiscent of colonial practices of taking children to save them from "unfit" families, again a historical echo in speculative form.

In tying the previous point back to the concept of "life as surplus," we see that *Womb City* portrays certain lives (foetuses, young bodies) as surplus to be harnessed for profit or utility. Nelah's foetus is literally treated as surplus capital. Nelah's own life is surplus in that as soon as she cannot pay or behave, she is discardable. Grace Hong's (2015) notion that women of colour are "existentially surplus" in neoliberalism rings true in Nelah's scenario since her existence is only valued for what can be extracted, and otherwise she is a problem to be managed or eliminated. Hong also argues that those rendered surplus can generate radical politics, a point that the novel's later events will illustrate and which we will explore in the following section.

Resistance: Posthuman Myth, Ancestral Ghosts, and Kin-Making beyond Death

Midway through *Womb City*, the narrative undergoes a tonal shift as supernatural elements intensify, signalling that rational technocracy alone cannot contain the haunting spectres of injustice. The ghost of Moremi Gadifele, Nelah's daughter from a previous lifespan, whom Nelah and her lover Jan accidentally killed in a car accident and secretly buried, begins to stalk Nelah for vengeance. What might seem at first like a separate horror subplot is gradually revealed to be deeply entwined with the novel's themes of surveillance, guilt, and resistance. Moremi, an ordinary university student, is briefly employed by Aarav Koshal, during which she is trafficked to powerful clients and pacified through her implanted microchip. With a friend's technical help, she partially seizes control of the device and edits its logs, producing evidence that implicates Aarav, Serati, and Elifasi on the Murder Trials committee. In retaliation these actors fuse Matsieng's ritual power with targeted microchip manipulation of Nelah and Moremi, resulting in Moremi's death, after which the state rigs the murder trials to pit her spirit against Nelah under the guise of justice. The ensuing hit-and-run is concealed when Nelah and Jan bury the body, rendering the killing both senseless and administratively invisible. The ghost's recurring question "Why?" functions as a compact indictment and a demand for explanation and justice that official mechanisms refuse to provide.

Tsamaase marks Moremi's first appearance with forensic detail that refuses erasure. Jan and Nelah left her corpse with a twisted foot and missing fingers, and as a ghost she still carries those wounds, delivering a walking testimony to the violence done to her. Her very appearance accuses Nelah and Jan, reminding them that this supposedly utopian city still produces unacknowledged deaths. The image of a damaged young woman wandering corporate hallways and homes disrupts the clinical, controlled spaces of the city with something messy, raw, and real. At first only Nelah can see her, so the symptom of truth appears as pathology, an apt allegory for how technocratic orders pathologise the spiritual or any knowledge that resists their metrics. Moremi's increasingly aggressive physical attacks on Jan and Nelah multiple times represent the return of the repressed. In Avery Gordon's (2008) terms, Moremi is a *haunting*, that moment when home becomes unfamiliar and the present overlaps the past, a social figure through which the unresolved violences of the order make themselves felt in the everyday.

What begins as a gothic visitation deepens into an ancestral politics. Nelah discovers that the state's clandestine murder trials have long weaponised the sacred, harnessing ghosts and spirits in a perverse synthesis of myth and technics. Crucially, those forces cannot be fully instrumentalised. The link to Matsieng, the primordial being tied to the underground waterwombs, allows the ghost and eventually Nelah to turn the sacred against the managers of death. The kin relation between Nelah and Moremi re-emerges in the very site of violation as they move from adversaries to allies through an act of

surrender that both recodes and reverses the novel's earlier scenes of coerced control. "I submit my body to you … Possess me … I feed all of me to Matsieng, as Xe unclothes me of my female body, dousing me in Xem" (Tsamaase 2024, "01:34 I Am Xem"). The line presents a deliberate contrast between technological capture and ancestral embrace. Where the chip violated her will, the ritual requires an offering. Nelah is alchemised "into a foetus of hellish pain … spun … and then Peace, peace, finally, as I float in Matsieng's universe. I am frozen in the starburst of what I used to be" ("01:34 I Am Xem"). The metaphors of foetus and starburst position the scene as death and rebirth in Matsieng's waterwombs, a posthuman genesis that refuses the state's monopoly on birth and identity.

At the apex of this metamorphosis, Nelah's consciousness merges with Moremi's and Matsieng's: "Xe [Matsieng] unclothes me of my female body, dousing me in Xem, and abolishes the spirits' evil … I drop into my body … I am not a murderer; I own what is given to me. I transmute evil to good … I am Xem. I am a god" (Tsamaase 2024, "01:34 I Am Xem"). Several claims are layered here. First, the shedding of the female body affirms gender by refusing the administrative category through which the regime governed Nelah's life. Second, the statement "I am not a murderer" reorients guilt through incorporation rather than denial. Moremi's rage and Nelah's remorse are transfigured into a shared purpose. Third, the sequence ends with the theophany, "I am Xem. I am a God," which names a composite subject comprising Nelah, Moremi, and Matsieng. That pronouncement is grammatically carried by the text's use of *Xe* for Matsieng, a non-binary pronoun that signals a sacred voice exceeding individual personhood and fixed sex. Tsamaase thus imagines a radical kin formation by which the living, the dead, and the ancestral converge against a state that had already fused code with ritual to dominate them.

Having become Xem, Nelah emerges with a form that exteriorises the hybrid ontology. "I stare down at my legs … not bare feet and toes I see. Instead, I have spindly legs with hooves for feet: dark, hard, and dangerous. My arms are streaked with blood as if my skin is blood. … A horn protrudes from the right side of my forehead … My jaw … my canines grow into long spears. … My bones peek out like the scapula of an animal" (Tsamaase 2024, "01:34 I Am Xem"). The metamorphosis is then named in Setswana terms, "A totem births itself in my bones I am the people's totem I am their sereto" ("01:34 I Am Xem"). The Sereto claim relocates sovereignty from the committee rooms of the Murder Trials to a communal icon grounded in African cosmology. Where the regime spoke incessantly of purity and security, Xem takes up those discredited terms and returns them as a counter-theology of purgation. Xem utters, "I am the wrath of all your sins … I am the destruction of this city" ("01:34 I Am Xem") and "We are perfect; we are pure" ("01:34 I Am Xem"). The lines function as a bitter echo of state rhetoric now turned towards the removal of its perpetrators.

What follows is not indiscriminate carnage but a ritual redistribution of blood and ancestral obligation. Moremi's earlier rage and sorrow find expression through Nelah-

as-Xem but are directed properly at the real culprits: the corrupt officials like Serati and Elifasi who perpetuated oppression and violence. Xem literally uses ancestral blood ties to control and kill soldiers who choke on their ancestors' blood inside Xem in a moment of cathartic justice. When Xem speaks, it says things like, "Men may have not offered their blood to my waterwombs, but because of their relation to the spirits that fill me, I have every citizen's blood in me" (Tsamaase 2024, "01:34 I Am Xem"). It asserts interconnection, as everyone's blood flows in Xem, through the medium of the ancestral spirits. The oppressed mobilise the very bloodlines that anchor patriarchal authority against their heirs to achieve justice. That reversal purges the state's sin of feeding the waterwombs with the blood of women to extract life and labour and to manufacture shells while weaponising spirits through the Murder Trials. Xem's praxis returns the blood to itself as a judgement, an articulation of immanent justice. No one escapes ancestral relations, not even those who imagined themselves insulated by wealth, technology, and secrecy.

The kin-making inaugurated in the waterwombs extends beyond the dyad of Nelah and Moremi. Xem speaks of a new tribe whom she will protect, a posthuman reformulation of kin-making based on "mystical relationships with spirit-beings such as an animal, fish or plant" (Tamale 2020, 228). The release of the city's ghosts after vengeance signals not a nihilistic end but the completion of mourning practices that the regime's carceral technics had suspended. Nelah survives with the fragile possibility of future care symbolised by the digital echo of her unborn child. The transition from "Why" to "We" illustrates how a private wound transforms into a political kinship. Tsamaase offers a double critique. First, she exposes the limits of Western-inflected posthumanism that would seek liberation in better technology or biopolitical protocols. The novel shows that in a total surveillance regime such strategies can turn dystopian. Second, she foregrounds African cosmology as a reservoir of resistance. The living dead in Mbembe's sense remain proximate to the living and can be marshalled for justice when law is structurally complicit. The point is not to romanticise spirit over science, but rather to demonstrate that resistant knowledge and agency must be derived from what the established order deems "subjugated" (Foucault 2003, 1–19). In Haraway's terms, the novel is a practice of making kin with the excluded and the dead, a political ontology in which survival requires new relations rather than new gadgets.

This resonates with Grace Hong's (2015) notion of "the impossible politics of difference." Hong, analysing women-of-colour activism, argues that those deemed impossible or surplus by neoliberal standards can enact forms of politics that are unimaginable within the existing system. Nelah's metamorphosis is precisely an "impossible" development from the standpoint of her society's logic. A criminalised, infertile Black woman turning into a godlike avenger is not an outcome the technocrats ever predicted. So Xem is the embodiment of that impossible politics: It is a rupture in the deterministic world of *Womb City*, a break where the repressed agency of the oppressed explodes forth. By framing it in spiritual terms, Tsamaase avoids a tidy, rational revolution and instead uses allegory. We can thus read Xem as a metaphor for

collective resistance, a composite of Nelah, Moremi, and ancestors, implying no single person could do this alone, but collectively, even across time, something new can be born. Symbolically, the violence in the climax serves to externalise and exorcise the violence that had permeated society subtextually all along. The final scene where Xem makes a man's "mouth stretch over his skull" is akin to a purging fire that wipes away the old regime organised around extraction and erasure (Tsamaase 2024, "01:34 I Am Xem"). Xem's work is finite: kill the protected offenders, free the bound spirits, halt the cycle of sacrificial trials, then cease. The novel refuses a tidy epilogue because any future worth inhabiting would have to be made in the wake of this unmaking by ordinary people, not by a permanent avenger.

Therefore, the merged arc solidifies *Womb City*'s mythopoetics of liberation. Nelah's descent and surrender refuse the terms of biopolitical capture and open a counter-archive in the waterwombs. The fusion of Xem and God installs a composite subject in which woman, daughter, and ancestor act together. The retaliatory purge transforms the state's stolen blood economy into an ethics of relation and responsibility. The emergence of a new tribe recasts kinship as an African futurist feminist practice through which those deemed criminal, infertile or surplus become the grounds of a different polis. In Tsamaase's design, liberation requires neither the erasure of technology nor the abandonment of tradition but their reconfiguration under a kin logic that the Murder Trials could mimic but never own.

Situating Tsamaase in Africanfuturist Tradition

Tlotlo Tsamaase's *Womb City* belongs to a growing constellation of Africanfuturist speculative fiction by African women, including Nnedi Okorafor and Namwali Serpell. Earlier scholarship often abstracts "the human" from its economic foundations and its racialised colonial histories, a limitation that *Womb City* helps correct by integrating biopolitics, surveillance, and posthumanism within a specifically Global South frame and thereby challenging Western-centred models of techno dystopia and resistance (Vint 2021). Read alongside Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*, Tsamaase's novel occupies the same Africanfuturist constellation yet advances it in distinctive ways. Like Okorafor's Onyesonwu, Tsamaase's Nelah undergoes a transformative passage that fuses spiritual power with feminist agency, but where *Who Fears Death* foregrounds sorcery in a post-apocalyptic Sudan and addresses ethnic violence and patriarchy through a largely magical grammar that Okorafor elsewhere theorises as Africanjujuism, *Womb City* welds spiritual insurgency to an overtly high-tech, urban apparatus of control. Tsamaase saturates her setting with microchips that mine memory, AI adjudication that forecasts guilt, and a marketised artificial womb economy, then braids these with ancestral presences such as Matsieng and revenant kin to produce what we might call a cyber spiritual resistance that is unthinkable within conventional Western cyberpunk. The thematic overlap with Okorafor is clear in their shared attention to gendered violence and the ambivalent, open ended quality of liberation, yet the vectors of power differ starkly: Okorafor critiques

customary and state patriarchies through mythic initiation and communal ritual, whereas Tsamaase anatomises late capitalist surveillance and biocapital by showing precisely how reproductive labour and intimate data are extracted, traded, and weaponised against women. In contrast with Serpell's *The Old Drift*, which orchestrates a multi-generational Zambian saga of colonial debris, nation building, and technoscience through a choral form that ranges from mosquitoes to nanotechnological swarms and treats liberation with satirical ambivalence, *Womb City* narrows the lens to the intimate scale of the womb, the home, and the chip while nonetheless tracking transnational capital and juridical power. Both Serpell and Tsamaase stage posthuman convergences that dissolve bounded individuality into larger networks—Serpell through a techno collectivity that ironises utopian dreams and Tsamaase through a kin network in which the living, the unborn, and the ancestral co-inhabit the posthuman figure of Xem—but Tsamaase's convergence is explicitly feminised and insurgent, turning the very infrastructures of extraction into channels for ancestral adjudication and care. The result is a distinctive Africanfuturist dystopia that provincialises Western genre templates not by rejecting their devices but by relocating them within Setswana cosmology and feminist surveillance critique. Artificial wombs are not generic bio pods but nodes in a local moral economy of kin and stigma; predictive policing is not an abstract algorithm but a husband's remote control over a wife's body; and posthuman metamorphosis is not a disembodied upload but a waterwomb rebirth into collective, decolonial kin making. If Okorafor establishes that African spiritual epistemologies can found world shattering feminist quests, and Serpell demonstrates how African futures are braided to colonial and global systems at macro scale, Tsamaase hones the tradition into a granular anatomy of neoliberal patriarchy and then answers it with an Africanfuturist synthesis in which cybernetic surveillance and ancestral jurisprudence collide, making *Womb City* a singular intervention in the genre's ongoing effort to rethink what counts as human, whose lives are made liveable, and how liberation might be imagined from the Global South.

Conclusion

Womb City is a haunting, genre blending exploration of how anxieties about surveillance, reproductive control, and racialised patriarchy play out in a near-future African society. This article examines how Tsamaase's novel critiques dystopian biopolitics by fusing algorithmic surveillance with a commodified artificial womb industry while also envisioning resistance via posthuman kinship. Deeper readings show a Botswana where Black women's bodies are rendered as data and capital, as a microchip in Nelah's neck and a contract in her womb reduce personhood to compliance and credit. Nelah's passage from a pervasively monitored, stigmatised wife to a posthuman avatar of ancestral wrath dramatises both the weight of the dystopia and the radical means by which it might be resisted. The novel advances two claims. Under neoliberal surveillance capitalism Black women's reproductive capacity is treated as "life as surplus," an excess life to be regulated, bought, or destroyed (Cooper 2011). Symbolically, the seeds of liberatory kin-making lie in reuniting the living and the dead,

the human and the nonhuman, into an insurgent community that exceeds definitions of motherhood and humanity imposed by oppressors (Tamale 2020). Nelah's transformation as she merges with Moremi's ghost and Matsieng suggests that emancipation requires collapsing boundaries around life, death, and family.

The analysis draws on feminist posthumanism, biopolitical theory, and decolonial African feminism which enriches Nelah's metamorphosis as an allegory that speaks back to Western science fiction tropes. Where many Western dystopias end in despair or technocratic fixes, Tsamaase concludes with a spiritually inflected uprising that recentres African cosmology as resilience. Comparative discussion with Okorafor and Serpell shows shared Africanfuturist commitments, yet Tsamaase pushes further by entwining high-tech dystopia with indigenous myth. This challenges Western-centred paradigms and invites localised readings of feminist speculative fiction.

Ultimately, *Womb City* urges us to imagine that even in the bleakest womb of surveillance, the very belly of the beast, new forms of kinship can gestate, forged in collective pain yet birthed in collective power. Tsamaase offers no easy ending, rather a cautionary hope. The novel leaves urgent questions about balancing technology with personhood, about African ways of resisting dehumanising oversight, and about what counts as family when wombs are purchasable, and ghosts might dwell in the machine. While definitive answers lie beyond a single study, *Womb City* makes one truth clear. Justice requires not only policy change but a reweaving of relations to each other, to ancestors, and to the technologies we create. Tsamaase's Africanfuturist vision reveals an indestructible spirit of African communitarianism, a blend of local spiritual epistemologies with high-tech critiques of power and how societies can centre kinship over laissez-faire capitalism.

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