



The dream trainers

Jenna N. Hanchey

To cite this article: Jenna N. Hanchey (2021) The dream trainers, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 18:3, 305-314, DOI: [10.1080/14791420.2021.1954212](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2021.1954212)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2021.1954212>



Published online: 13 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



The dream trainers

Jenna N. Hanchey

Communication Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, USA

ABSTRACT

The Dream Trainers takes place in a fictional near-future U.S.-run compound in Tanzania. Nnedi Okorafor and Octavia Butler inspired the “world made of change.”¹ Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Wanuri Kahiu catalyzed my thought on the future politics of water.²

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 July 2021
Accepted 7 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Africanfuturism;
neocolonialism; white
saviorism; Tanzania

The Dream Trainers

We built a world made of change. Because we are *wajanja*, we named it *Jua Majini*. If you listen for awhile, I will show you what it means. *Tupo pamoja?*

I came to this place many years ago, before it was our world, before we became and shaped change. Before Mama Odwina and I learned how to dream. Then, it was called C.A.R.E., the Center for Africans Realizing Empowerment, what was known as an “NGO.” A group from what used to be the United States thought they were helping in trying to tame Tanzania, this beautiful land arising from the seas. Thought they were helping by teaching us to tame it, too. The Trainers sought to capture our imaginations. They did not understand that we are water, and water cannot be captured.

Jamani, sikiliza. I will tell you a story of that time, the time before *Jua Majini*. The time of the dream trainers, and the second *Maji Maji*. *Sikiliza na umakini.*

Odwina awoke, gasping. She tried to rip the sheets off of her, forgetting, as she always did, that she could not yet move. Sucking her teeth in frustration, she closed her eyes and slowed her breath, trying to will herself calm. Her mind fought back, desiring nothing more than to flail against the restraints. All she could do was close her hands into fists, allowing her fingernails to cut into her palms.

The sound of footsteps echoed against the ascetic walls and tiled floors, stopping with a sigh as a body lowered into a nearby chair. She squeezed her eyes shut even more tightly, wincing in anticipation.

“I am disappointed in you, Odwina. You had been making such progress!” Mr. Stone looked up from his notepad and frowned when he saw her eyes yet shut. “It is rude not to look at your trainer when he is speaking to you,” he warned. She immediately looked up, but could only hold his pale face in her gaze for a split-second before her eyes retreated from the glare.

“I am sorry, Trainer Stone. I do not know what happened. I was working for an economic treaty, but the terms kept placing Tanzanians at a disadvantage. I do not know how it became so ...” she trailed off, the final sequences of flame and violence flashing across her mind. “*Nitajitahidi*. I will do better next time.”

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to downgrade you back to the historical Simulations for awhile, Odwina. Just ’til you master the concepts. You have to remember to *distance yourself*, to keep yourself neutral and unbiased. Then, you will be able to tackle the present no problem, I’m sure. You’ve got talent; you will make a fine representative for your country once you finish your training.” He tapped her cheerily on the arm, punctuating his words: “Just a few kinks to work out!”

When he finally released her from the bindings, Odwina quickly pulled the sensors from her forehead and nodded once to show respect, before turning and fleeing down the hallway as quickly as she could. She avoided eye contact as she passed the other trainees, each hurrying on their own individual errands before classes began. Although she knew time was short if she wanted to *oga* and oil her hair, she could not help but pause as she passed a window. Longing swelled in her with each wave crashing upon the shore below, and the reflection of the rising sun on the water bristled with something like energy waiting to be released. She rubbed her wrists, recognizing a kinship with the pieces of the sun, rising and falling, shifting side to side, waiting for an opportunity to unite. She imagined the pieces stitching themselves together as they rode the waves, and what it might look like to watch a sun burst out of the ocean, whole. She closed her eyes to cement the moment before going on her way.

As she scooped water from the bucket and poured it over her body in the bathroom, she reveled in the idea: *I am a piece of the sun in the water*. It helped to ease the sting of the Dream Trainer’s words, and her own shame. *I am a piece of the sun in the water*. Odwina scrubbed her torso and tried to remind herself that she was special. So few were chosen for the Dream Trainers; she was the only one from her village ever to make the list. Her parents were so proud. She hoped they still were. None of them had been prepared for the strange ways the C.A.R.E. facility operated, or the *ugeni* of US customs. She held onto the regal bearing and huge grins her parents had displayed when they waved as the Land Rover took her away. She had to; she had not been allowed to speak with them since.

She wondered what they would think of her now. She was getting good marks in her classes, she always had. But the Dream Application Simulations evaded her grasp. No matter how much she studied the manuals and attempted to follow the proper procedures, she failed to bring about the correct outcomes. She sighed as she bent down to grab her bookbag. She would just have to work harder, and dream better.

By the time she reached her Developmental Futures class, she felt recentered, ready to achieve what the Trainers wanted from her. *I am a piece of the sun in the water*.

“Alright, everyone, it’s time to begin,” Trainer Snow waved her hand slightly to catch everyone’s attention. “Today, we are going to be practicing Simulation Type F, easing class tensions. I realize most of you are F.2, city-level tensions, but today we are going to be practicing an F.5 Simulation so you can begin to get the hang of it ...”

Odwina lost track of Trainer Snow’s instructions. F.5? She’d never done a global Simulation before! She felt the lines she had left on her palms that morning. This was her chance to make her hard work count for something. She walked over to her assigned

dream monitor, thankful that they did not have to be restrained for coursework. She carefully placed the electrical monitors in their proper positions before sliding the visor down over her head. It would only be a few seconds now before the flashing light sequences started that sent her into ...

I know, as you can only in dreams, that Tanzania had discovered a new mineral that could be used to create technologies and weapons like never before imagined.

I am in a laboratory, and I get the sense we have just completed a tour. A small crowd of government officials, peppered with scientists, stand around me in a shiny white hallway looking to me for instruction. Ah, I am the President. As proper, I first turn to the head scientist. “*Asanteni sana kwa kazi ngumu yenu na kwa kutuelekeza kuhusu mada za umuhimu haya.*” I shake each of their hands in turn. They look tired, so I imagine a room set for tea immediately to my right. “*Karibu kunywa chai. Halafu tutaongea.*”

After the tea break, we sit down at a round table I design with the perfect number of chairs for each person present. I create tablets at each position, connected to a holographic display in the center of the room. Each of the presenters in the room shares a different perspective on what to do with the mineral, highlighted by facts about the large supply and its apparent uniqueness to Tanzania, as well as background information on the mining industry and how poorly it has treated the country since governmental control shifted to private corporations under international pressure in the 1980s and 1990s. I listen intently, a plan forming in my mind.

I stand. “*Jamani, asanteni. Sisi kwa kweli tuna nafasi kubwa kusaidia wananchi yetu, lakini pia tuna uwezo kwa kusaidia waafrika wote.*” Some look surprised, having only considered the interests of the nation, but others nod in agreement. “For Africa!” someone cheers.

The dream switches time and place, and I am giving a speech at a beach party that is half-banquet and half-festival. All have been invited, and the attire varies from gowns and tuxedos to cut-off trousers and *kanga* wraps. Even among the clamor, I can hear—feel?—the waves lap gently against the shore. I see again the image of the sun emerging from the water; we are pieces of the sun that have joined as one. I announce that we have made the mineral accessible to anyone in the continent, as long as they pledge to share all knowledge with the African Public Information Center, and all proceeds return to the Continental Trust. Already, new transportation is being built that makes the high-speed trains of Japan look like horse-drawn carriages. As support for the Information Center gains, coding, electronics, and software is being shared as well. The advances in farming technology made from the mineral, combined with the broad networks emplaced by the Continental Trust, have practically eradicated famine through resource sharing initiatives. The so-called world superpowers backed off once we seized collective control of the mining, oil, and tourism industries. Western immigrants and white settler populations have been allowed to stay, as long as they are ready to set aside individual wealth for collective world-building.

“*Afrika, tupo pamoja!*” I raise my fist in the air as the crowd reverberates with cheers and ululations. I signal the end of my Dream Application Simulation by allowing the scene to fade to black.

Odwina emerged from the hypnotic state induced by the training equipment feeling euphoric. Her mind still raced with the potential unlocked in the dream, with details that the restrictions of classtime did not allow her to explore. She looked around excitedly, catching the eye of another student in the class. Enritha tilted her head, her curiosity piqued. What had Odwina done?

Enritha had been discussing her global trade arrangements of the mineral, using the corporate networks already in place, with Trainer Snow. Given Snow's nodding and lack of surprise, she figured she had met most, if not all, expectations on the assignment. Enritha held back a sigh as Trainer Snow prattled on about how she had done an excellent job protecting global systems from the risk posed by the capacities of the mineral, maintaining order and peace. She always did so well on the Dream Application Simulations; she could *literally* protect the global networks in her sleep. Why did she still feel so unsatisfied by her work? She kept her eyes lidded as she stole another glance at Odwina's evident euphoria. How could she learn to dream like that?

Odwina could not keep from smiling when Trainer Snow eventually made it around the class to speak with her. But her excitement died as she noticed Snow's obvious discomfort and inability to meet her gaze.

"I, um, well ... you see, uh, I ... I cannot give you feedback on this Simulation. It is ... unlike anything I have ever studied." Trainer Snow stared at the tablet in her hand, scrolling and moving along the surface, as if looking hard enough would make it coalesce into something reasonable. "None of what you have done is part of our manuals; most of it was not even considered a possibility. I—I don't know what to say."

Then Snow looked back up, her eyes a chaotic dance of conflicted emotions, pride, and fear that held Odwina steady ... or captive. "It'sbrilliant."

Odwina felt something burst within her, hot and beautiful, like the sun rising out of the water. Only to quickly plunge back in.

"But" Trainer Snow could see the expression on Odwina's face fall as she fumbled for words. "I mean, it's amazing—I never would have thought ... you know, working together? But the other Trainers" Snow shook her head as if to settle the words tumbling around in her head. "Look, this was really well done. Really well. I could never have imagined such an innovative and successful solution. You should be proud of your work here today." Trainer Snow looked at her carefully, hopefully, before quickly walking back to the front of the class.

As the rest of students shuffled away for midmorning *chai*, Odwina looked back through her Simulation, trying to find what cause she had given Trainer Snow for the creases that had appeared between her eyes. By the end of her review, she was angry. Not at Snow, but at how much her interpretation of her own talent had stemmed from Snow's approval. Her gut hardened, contracting in certainty. She knew when she had found the answers that her people needed, even if the Trainers did not understand.

Her gut relaxed enough to let her feel its slight rumblings of hunger. She had missed *chai* break, but maybe she could at least grab some *maandazi* to eat in her next class. Walking down the hall thinking about donuts, she was surprised when she heard voices arguing around the corner.

“Look, I’ve never seen anything like this—the collective infrastructure, the mutual support—” a feminine voice began.

“Of course not!” A deeper voice snapped, interrupting. “We don’t teach them this for a reason. This is communist bullshit that always ends up with a dictator running things and lots of people dying.”

“But, sir, you didn’t see—let me show you. This is different, it’s truly shared governance—” As the voice once again gets cut off, Odwina realizes that Trainer Snow is arguing with Trainer Stone.

“Look, Snow, I’ve been doing this far longer than you have. We all see students come through with grand visions of pan-African futures. But we have to squash that shit for their own good. It just doesn’t work in the real world. And if we let them leave here thinking they could actually make those goals happen—well, we’d be failing them.” Odwina peeked around the corner to see Stone placing his hand on Snow’s shoulder. Snow seemed to wither from the touch. “You’ll come to understand, I’m sure. For now, just make sure Odwina gets that her solutions to global Simulations have to actually be *global*, not just *African*.”

I know, as you can only in dreams, that the city I am standing in is facing a plague. A disease that the government is working to contain, but is rapidly spreading through the city’s population. The nobles have increased the guards outside of the castle, restricting entrance to the seat of power at the top of the hill. I am returning from a visit to the lower districts, having spoken with community leaders in the city sprawling down the mountainside. As I walk up the spiraling path, I see the ocean over the top of the stone wall rising on my left, gently caressing the base of the city. Although I am too far to hear the sounds, I feel its rhythmic pull on my body.

I finally reach the gates protecting the castle at the top. I take a few steps toward the guards, but then hesitate, turning back to look down the hill. The people who are at risk, the people who I am here to help—*my* people—are all outside the gates. I look down, lost in thought, and catch a glimpse of my clothes. I’m wearing a corset over a long-sleeved dress, like something you would see in a British historical drama. It feels funny on my body. The colors are vibrant, coated with gems and glistening thread. I glance back up at the castle. I could walk past the guards if I wished. I am supposed to. But the feeling of the ocean pulls at me again, drawing me away.

I know what I must do. This is my dream; I am who I say I am. As I stride back down the hill, I alter my place in the Simulation. The material on my dress thins. The gems dissipate. I keep the vibrant colors, but swirl them around on the cloth until they form a *kitenge* pattern. The sun is quickly disappearing behind the high stone walls. Perfect. I create a tavern to my right, and walk in.

The tavern is still hazy, settling into solidity. I move as I create, enjoying being inside the changes as they are happening, as reality shifts from one thing to another. It feels like swimming. I imagine a hidden staircase in the back as I cautiously sneak up one floor, then another, covering the entrance with a tapestry after I pass. It opens to a large room made for secret gatherings. The windows provide a strategic view of the city. From here I can even see the water, pushing at the walls, frustrated at being kept at bay. It calls to me, and I respond.

I feel the pull of the sea inside me, retreating as on the sand before a wave. I close my eyes and ride back with the water only to then push forward, throwing all my creative energy into the wave's cresting return. My swell breaks on people throughout the city, pulling them as the sea pulled me, drawing them into this room. I collapse on the ground, panting. When I again lift my head, a few moments later, there are 20 people in the room. A wave of resistance.

I have never created people before in a Simulation, only objects, places, and ideas. I do not have a good sense if I have created them now, pulled them out of thin air, or somehow called to characters who were already here. Whatever I have done, it seems to have worked. Looking around, the people in the room are strong and confident. Only one lacks poise, seeming almost bewildered. She looks familiar ... ah, perhaps I did create some of these characters, but not out of thin air—I clearly imagined this one based on Enritha!

A man stands in front and holds a hand up to garner attention. "There is a shadow over our city. We all feel it, and know those who have been struck. A fever eats away at the poor, taking the lives of our children, our elderly, and even our colleagues and friends. Their deaths could have been prevented. But those in the castle were unwilling to listen, unwilling to share their precious medicines with us. Happy, instead, to let us die as they remain impenetrable in their castle. We, of the Rising Tide, must do something to change that."

The Rising Tide. The title surprised me. Did I provide a name for this resistance?

"We must strike fear into the hearts of the rich, the same fear that haunts us, day in and day out. The leaders of this city will do nothing until they themselves are threatened. I propose to bring the virus to them. We must infect the children of the city leaders with the fever."

A few people gasp. I gasp. Children? Others nod their heads. He continues, "I know this seems extreme. But what other choice do we have? We do not have the resources or ability to create a cure ourselves."

"That is quite a gamble." My Enritha-based character seems slightly confused, but is clearly thinking deeply about the possible plan. "But it might work. If they do not know how their children were infected, they will assume that the virus is more potent than they first imagined, and unable to be contained in the lower districts. They will assume they have to cure us to keep their children safe."

The silence in the room weighs heavily. A few people raise other options, but in our hearts we know what must happen.

My clothes need changing again. I imagine cloth as black as night in the form of a tunic and trousers for ease of movement. I add pockets, and a pair of leather gloves. As I carefully accept a padded pouch with two vials containing the essence of infection, I catch the eye of the woman who looks like Enritha across the room. She smiles wryly, and waves. "*Bahati njema.*" I see her mouth the words. She is too far away to hear. She has also been given a pouch and two vials. "*Hata wewe,*" I silently call back, before slipping out the window.

I know, as you do in dreams, exactly where I need to go to reach the first target. As I swing down from the balcony to land softly on a bedroom's carpeted floor, the child within stirs, but his breathing doesn't change. It remains low and steady. The room is dark, but I catch hints of its ornateness even so. A sliver of light peeks in from under

the doorway, reflecting in glints and hues off the metal and gems inlaid in the furniture and cloth throughout the chamber. I carefully remove one of the vials from my pouch, as well as the thick leather gloves from the pocket of my tunic. I put the gloves on, and slowly remove the cap from the vial. I hold the vial above his lips, and pause. He looks content in his sleep. I am enthralled by the child's face, his breathing, his moment of calm before his life's storm. I feel the ocean calling, soothing the swirl of sickness and determination within me. I tip the vial into his mouth. He coughs quietly, yet does not wake, as he shifts onto his side and swallows.

Odwina sat upon the rocks outside the C.A.R.E. compound, holding her head in her hands and listening to the ocean. She let the sound envelop her; it was the only thing keeping her sane. She had awoken that morning to find her wrists already unbound, and the Trainer nowhere in sight. Instead, he had left a formal notice on the table beside her that she was suspended from Dream Application Simulation training for the next three weeks. She would be allowed to report to class, but not to speak—or dream.

She did not go to class, instead sneaking out the side door of the compound to move closer to the water. There was not much space outside for relaxing; the students were not supposed to leave the building. But no one would be looking for her today. They were too angry, or perhaps afraid. She was afraid of herself.

A voice startled her out of her misery. “How the fuck did you do that?!”

Odwina turned around, eyes wide, to find Enritha tight-fisted and brimming with emotion to the point her whole body shook. “Wh—what? Do what?”

“You got me suspended too, you know! When I suddenly left my Simulation and appeared in yours, it took them awhile to figure out what happened. They didn't even get it right, they didn't realize it was the same dream. They accused me of planning in advance to *mimic* your Simulation—me, who aces every fucking assignment!—and now they are not happy. My Trainer lectured me for an hour this morning on self-reliance, as if that wasn't a fucking key tenet of our national culture that I've been trained on since childhood, and how I shouldn't allow myself to be swayed by your ‘collective nonsense’—again, as if *ujamaa* doesn't have a fucking legacy and can be reduced to teenage peer pressure!”

Enritha's city language aside, it still took Odwina a minute to put the pieces together. She froze in shock. “*Kumbe*. That was actually you? In the dream? You were ... there?”

“I wished you luck, didn't I?”

Odwina suddenly felt as if she were submerged. Everything slowed. Her mind swam back through the muddy waters of time, back to the room in the dream, back to all the people she had summoned. She examined their faces as they oscillated back and forth, wavering in her recollection. How many were people that she knew? How many were actually there?

A hand gently touched her shoulder. “Odwina, what happened?”

“I don't know,” she responded carefully. “I ... *called* people. Just like in any other Simulation, I was creating what was necessary to solve the problem. Only, this time I thought the solution was a resistance movement among the poor, so I imagined it, and then all those people were in the room! I ... I thought they were characters, you know, part of the program.”

“A resistance movement? That doesn’t sound like any Simulation I’ve done.”

“I, uh, also changed the parameters.”

“What?!”

“I made myself part of the lower class, and—”

Enritha sucked her teeth, and then burst out laughing. “No wonder the Trainers are so mad! You took the Simulation out of their control, sided with the enemy, and managed to collectively organize against the powerful.” She continued chuckling, grabbing Odwina’s hand in a chummy manner. Sitting down, still clasping Odwina’s hand, she breathed out powerfully before gazing into her eyes. “Thank you. I’ve done everything right, aced all the lessons, and it’s only made me feel despair. This ... your dream ... this is the first time in a long time that I’ve believed things can be different. And that we have the ability to *make* them different.”

Confused, Odwina looked down at the ground, trying to tame her thoughts and emotions. “It wasn’t all me, you know. I seemed to tap into something, a power that was already there. It built in me like a wave and then swept you all toward me.”

Enritha cocked her head. “*Aisee!* Like a ... Rising Tide?”

Her silly grin made Odwina giggle. But she sobered quickly, asking, “Have you ever felt the pull of the water?”

Enritha was quiet, looking out at the ocean. For a minute, as they sat holding hands on the boulders high above the sea, there seemed to be nothing in the world but the sounds of the gulls calling and the waves crashing on the shore. “I always feel it. It constantly pulls me. I feel the back-and-forth of the waves most powerfully right before I go to sleep, laying in my bed at night, but the movement is always there, always calling.” She turned her head away, color lightly staining her cheeks. “I learned to ignore it. Made myself. It was the only way to do well in the Dream Application Simulations—the water kept pulling me away from what the Trainers wanted, moving me toward other people and places than we were told to engage.” She shook her head. “It’s been driving me slowly insane trying to keep the call of the ocean out.” Tears silently slid down Enritha’s face.

Odwina caught one with her finger, looking at the droplet intently. “I had a realization yesterday. I saw the reflection of the sun on the water. In the movement of the waves, it looked shattered in a million tiny pieces, each a small squiggle separated from the rest.” She placed the tear gently against her lips. “But they are all connected in the water. What if they all joined together? We would see a sun rising from the water.”

Her heart beat faster as Enritha leaned toward her, gently kissing her tear-moistened lips. “We are connected,” Enritha breathed in understanding. “We are the sun in the water.”

I know, as you can only in dreams, that Tanzania and Kenya are having trade troubles, and I am supposed to facilitate a meeting of the delegations. I know, and I ignore it. It is not their Simulation anymore. It is, in fact, not a Simulation at all anymore.

I am alive as I never have been before. Breathing deeply and closing my eyes, I sense the ocean outside the wall, around me, in me. We are the sun in the water. I feel water

pooling at my feet, glistening all over my body. I am no longer wearing clothing; it is not necessary for what we will do. I reach out first and find Odwina. We were not in the same place, but we are now, if you can call it a place. This time she did not call me; we called each other. We call others, reaching out in pulses, our senses oscillating first in one direction, then another, drawing more strength as our waves warmly embrace more and more. Our ocean expands. Our ocean is bright with purpose.

This is what we have spent the past three weeks working toward, bringing in the other students little by little. Learning together how to recognize what we have known all along: that we already know how to dream. We already know what to build. We find ourselves and each other in the seas' call, allowing the water to pull us under. We find the paths to connection in the deep. The water is in us. It is us. We are the sun in the water.

Dream and reality—all is one. Now that we see the flow through everything, we recognize this. On some level, the Trainers must have recognized this, too. Were they not training us to dream in order to train us how to live? To tame us. To limit us. But they did not understand that you cannot capture the ocean. We exceed all of your bounds.

We draw tiny bubbles around us, chainmail more resilient than the strongest steel. We arm ourselves with tidal waves. We send rivulets into the monitoring systems, shorting out the Trainers' surveillance. In the end, it only takes one striking splash to overwhelm the C.A.R.E. facility and sweep away the hegemony of the Trainers. They were still so stuck in the stark divisions they created and then pretended were immutable—between dream and reality, self and other, sea and land. They could not imagine what we know, that water flows through all and so can we.

Our current floods the facility, shutting down the machinery that sought to curtail the possibility of our dreams. The waters rise, engulfing all the people, filling the compound. Most of the Trainers are trapped by their dualities, unable to find the air within the water. But some, like Snow, understand and transform. Snow melts into water, *au siyo?* Together, we breathe in the change, breathe in our connection, and exhale a new world.

Eh-heh. And so we created *Jua Majini, watoto wazuri wangu*. We built a world made of change. When anything can be dreamt, and dreams are reality, the world constantly shifts and transforms in the most beautiful ways. We no longer train how to dream; *hapana*, those days have been washed away. Instead, we teach the old ways, *umoja na amani*, and watch as dreams grow wild and free.

You see here that we live in harmony with the water that is ourselves. When the oceans rose elsewhere, most saw it as a threat. But we understood, and our souls rose along with it. The second *Maji Maji* came as a surprise to many, for it did not look like the water wars predicted by the West. They expected humans to fight over the water, instead of the water to fight over the world. That is why their nations are gone now; they thought they had to fight the water to survive. We knew doing so would only be fighting ourselves.

Sasa unaona, eh? Jua Majini, Sun within Water. We are all pieces of the sun in the water. Together, we dream new worlds.

Notes

1. Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (New York: Saga Press, 2015); Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993).
2. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); *Pumzi*, directed by Wanuri Kahiu (2009; Cape Town; Inspired Minority Pictures), <https://vimeo.com/46891859>.