Future Frontiers: Ontological Osmosis and Africanfuturist Cyborgs in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

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ABSTRACT

This article will examine Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) — a tale of shapeshifting aliens arriving off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria — as a quintessential Africanfuturist novel replete with disruptions of traditional science fiction tropes, transcorporeal mutations and endogenous African epistemologies. Our theoretical framework brings together two seemingly disparate thinkers whose work challenges essentialist identity politics: American ecocritical feminist, Donna Haraway, and Cameroonian anthropologist, Francis Nyamnjoh. Haraway's (1985) myth of the cyborg resonates with Okorafor's aliens and their dissolution of the boundaries separating human/machine, man/woman, and self/other. Nyamnjoh (2015:6-7) presents a similarly liminal figure in the 'frontier African' to whom 'everyone and everything is malleable, flexible and blendable, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, gods, ghosts and spirits'. Okorafor's counter-hegemonic representations of gender and selfhood are inextricably interwoven into a decolonising literary project of 'ontological osmosis' that transforms superficially 'fixed' markers of difference into permeable thresholds of becoming. These concepts reflect Okorafor's Africanfuturist goals, as we show through a detailed analysis of

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the alien ambassador, Ayodele, and other key characters. This article will also consider Okorafor's allusions to Mami Wata (a feminine west African water deity or witch) in relation to the protean Ayodele. This analysis will underline Okorafor's thematic concerns with the question of gender and its relationship with the broader ecological and cultural forces of this society.

Keywords: Africanfuturism, Nnedi Okorafor, ontological osmosis, *Lagoon*, frontier African, cyborg, gender, decolonisation.

Introduction

In *Lagoon*'s opening chapters, the marine biologist. Adaora, recalls a diving expedition in which she asked a man from the Sahara how he could be an expert scuba diver. The man's response is an evocative aphorism encapsulating Okorafor's distinctly Africanfuturist literary ambitions. The diver simply states: '*Aman iman* […] The phrase meant "water is life" in the Tuareg language of Tamashek' (Okorafor 2014:12) (original emphasis). The fact that this proposition is expressed in Tamashek, a language of the Berber ethnic confederation indigenous to Northern Africa, is emblematic of Okorafor's desire to construct endogenously African speculative fiction. Okorafor (2019) proclaims her genre as 'Africanfuturism': a project that is 'specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or centre the West'. In this way, Okorafor distinguishes her fiction from 'Afrofuturism', an appellation coined by Mark Dery (1994:180) to describe '[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture — and, more generally — African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future'. For Okorafor, Afrofuturism denotes a cultural aesthetic and strain of speculative fiction that explores African American identities and futures. Okorafor is not depicting a Black future from the point of view of an African American: she is envisaging future worlds from *within* African societies that reflect the local specificities of her African characters' quotidian experience.

This article analyses Nnedi Okorafor's fifth full-length novel, *Lagoon* (2014), foregrounding the fluid intersections of gender and ecology that recur and reformulate throughout the text. This article takes up *Lagoon*'s Africanfuturist perspective and argues that the adage '*Aman iman*' is equally significant when reversing its terms and considering the proposition that *life is water* and the disruptive, generative implications of this essentially fluid vision of decolonised African futures. This article begins by highlighting how *Lagoon*'s fluid, counter-hegemonic representations of

selfhood are interwoven into the author's decolonising poetics. Gibson Ncube (2020) and Esthie Hugo (2017) have also analysed the transcorporeal morphologies and dissolution of boundaries initiated by the aliens' arrival and how Okorafor 'imagines for us 'a strange new world' of collective existence: and, in doing so, fosters the kind of conceptual shifts required to comprehend the contingencies and connectivities that characterise this changing ecological order' (Hugo 2017:51). Other critics, such as Nedine Moonsamy (2020), have provided more pointed critiques of Okorafor's ostensibly progressive vision of transcorporeal embodiment. Moonsamy (2020:188) argues that Ayodele's shapeshifting physicality 'turns her into something that is readily exploitable rather than empowered', the alien ambassador's heroic transcorporeality nullified in a despairing representation of degradation and agonising death. This opening section will explore some of the complexities of these divergent critical perspectives concerning Okorafor's depiction of corporeal 'limitlessness'. We assert that *Lagoon* is suffused with imagery of 'ontological osmosis': a radical form of inter-subjective liminality and transhuman entanglement[1] that characterises Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction.

The second part of our article discusses Haraway's (1985) myth of the cyborg in relation to Okorafor's shapeshifting aliens who expand and collapse the binaries of human/machine, man/woman, self/other. Examples of the hybridised, transhuman beings theorised by Haraway are evident throughout Okoarafor's oeuvre, in characters such as the shapeshifting sorceress Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death* (2010) and the eponymous protagonist of the *Binti Trilogy* (2019), who is a master harmoniser with magical, tentacular hair. Our final section foregrounds the work of Francis Nyamnjoh (2015), who formulates a comparably transitional figure in the 'frontier African'. We explore how Okorafor's characters exemplify the destabilising liminality articulated by Nyamnjoh. We will also consider Okorafor's repeated allusions to Mami Wata (a feminine west African water deity or witch) in relation to the shape-shifter, Ayodele, and her novel's fluid disintegration (or osmotic interpenetration) of gendered, heteronormative and interspecies boundaries.

Ontological Osmosis: Decolonising implications in *Lagoon*'s transcorporeal reworlding

Lagoon's primary narrative depicts an alien spaceship landing in the waters of Bar Beach in Lagos, Nigeria. An alien ambassador, Ayodele, takes the guise of a Yoruba woman and enlists the help of three other characters — Adaora, Anthony, and Agu — on Bar Beach as she embarks upon a quest to introduce her people, and the

'utopian transformation' (O'Connell 2016:295) they represent, to the inhabitants of Lagos. The aliens' arrival within and emergence from the waters of Lagos is the catalytic event mediating the myriad depictions of transcorporeal embodiment that recur throughout *Lagoon*. The aliens' transformative imperative is evident before they even breach the surface to commingle with the human characters in Okorafor's opening depiction of an avenging swordfish purposefully gliding through Lagosian coastal waters on a mission to destroy an oil pipeline that is polluting the ocean. The swordfish is described as:

> the largest predator in these waters. *Her* waters. Even when she migrates, this particular place remains hers. Everyone knows it. She was not born here but after all her migrations, she is happiest here' (Okorafor 2014:3) (original emphasis).

It is tempting to conflate this migratory swordfish who claims ownership over 'this particular place', despite not being born there, with Okorafor (2016) herself, who was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and considers herself a 'Naijamerican […] implying a hybridised new individual whose parts cannot be separated'.

It is equally enticing to interpret the swordfish's deadly attack on the 'giant dead snake' (Okorafor 2014:3) as a repudiation of neo-colonial oil exploitation[2] in the Niger Delta. This serpentine imagery intimates that the pipeline is a phallic interloper in these Edenic waters, while also foreshadowing Okorafor's depictions of attempted rape later in the novel, suggesting the interpenetration of mutually constitutive discourses of rapacious ecological domination and toxic masculine attitudes towards sexuality. The swordfish piercing the pipeline with her spear-tip could be read as a subversion of heteronormative sexual practices, and the diminution of this phallic symbol is illustrated after the attack when the swordfish 'feels the giant dead snake deflating. It blows its black blood' (Okorafor 2014:4).

The destabilisation of the interlinked systems of patriarchal and ecological domination foregrounded in this sequence is central to understanding Okorafor's Africanfuturist imaginings. However, this anti-hierarchical imagery is merely a prelude to more radical depictions of ecological and ontological transmutation following the pipeline's destruction. After her attack on the pipeline, the swordfish is surprised when she notices 'something large and glowing is down ahead. A great shifting bar of glimmering sand' (Okorafor 2014:5). This fluctuating mass of alien energy (which is, in fact, the alien spaceship that has landed in the lagoon of Bar Beach) emits 'sweet, clean water' (Okorafor 2014:5), which, the swordfish hopes, 'will drown out the foul blackness of the dead snake she pierced' (Okorafor 2014:5). Its fluidity of light and colour reminds the swordfish of a previous visit to a beatific coral reef, inaccessible

to humans, where the 'water was delicious and there was not a dry creature in sight' (Okorafor 2014:5). However, this alien presence initiates ontological changes beyond the limits of the swordfish's experience, as 'here in her home is something even wilder and more alive than her lost paradise' (Okorafor 2014:5). The swordfish (like the rest of the novel's human and non-human characters) is about to traverse unmapped ontological frontiers after communicating with these alien entities. The aliens offer the swordfish the ability to alter her appearance and the swordfish willingly (and gleefully) requests that her skin be tougher, her spear tip be sharper, and her size be trebled (Okorafor 2014:6). They 'make it so' (Okorafor 2014:6) and she is transformed into a monster. They offer the same to any sea creature that approaches them, and soon the ocean water outside Lagos is '*more alive than it has been in centuries and it is teeming with aliens and monsters*' (Okorafor 2014:6) (original emphasis).

In *Lagoon*, water's fluidity and the mysteries concealed beneath its inscrutable surface are a symbolic counterpoint to the Nigerian society Okorafor is depicting and imaginatively reconstructing. Okorafor examines Lagos in all its contradictory complexity, like a marine biologist inspecting the contents of a petri dish before inserting a catalytic enzyme into her 'sample' and enumerating the subsequent transfigurations. This transformative agent is the alien beings (led by the ambassador Ayodele), who emerge from the ocean to communicate their message of transcorporeal revolution to Lagos. The discourses of scientific empiricism alluded to in this metaphor are themselves subverted when the marine biologist Adaora takes Ayodele to her home laboratory to analyse and decipher the alien being's biological composition. Scientific logic has always comforted Adaora, who admits that when 'she was afraid, nervous or uncomfortable, all she had to do was focus on the science to feel balanced again. It was no different now' (Okorafor 2014:23). Even though Ayodele's body appears inimical to standard methods of technological inquiry, she proposes that Adaora's expertise as a marine biologist still makes her ideally suited to understand the seismic ontological transformations soon to be unleashed upon Lagos. '"Adaora, you understand water," Ayodele said; "You'll soon also understand something about yourself and what's to come. You can explain"' (Okorafor 2014:53). This insistence upon the critical nature of Adaora's knowledge of water is significant to our reading of *Lagoon*'s representations of transhuman permeability and chimerical embodiment. It is eventually revealed that Adaora was born with webbed feet and hands and conjoined legs that were surgically separated when she was a child. Adaora's affinity for the ocean endured while memories of her quasi-amphibian identity receded, although she notes that 'maybe it's always been there. Beneath the surface' (Okorafor 2014:258). Adaora's knowledge of her

own unfixed, transhuman ontology lies dormant beneath the surface of her material corporeality, and her reidentification with this fluid, permeable conception of embodiment makes her the ideal conduit for the aliens' mission of transcorporeal social transformation.

We posit that *Lagoon* is characterised by 'ontological osmosis': a liminal state of transcorporeal being that reimagines boundaries separating species and genders as permeable thresholds of becoming. We investigate what Okorafor's depictions of fluid, transhuman African identities may signify in the broader context of her fiction's Africanfuturist, decolonising ethos. Critics such as Moonsamy (2020:189) have asserted that speculative representations of Black identity politics such as *Lagoon* are fraught with peril, contending that these 'acts of "making strange" within a popular genre like science fiction can have inadvertent effects for black women by reproducing other forms of historical otherness and dehumanisation'. Moonsamy (2020:175) argues that Ayodele and Adaora's 'amphibian bodies become increasingly suggestive of the tentative navigation of spaces they do not necessarily inhabit', and that attempts to inscribe notions of cyborgian identity 'in the context of black feminist discourse begin to read like a form of historical betrayal' (Moonsamy 2020:184). However, we argue that the uncanny effects of Okorafor's delineation of Ayodele and the aliens' otherness are hardly 'inadvertent'.

Lagoon's Africanfuturist portrayal of osmotic ontologies directly engages with the problematic ideological implications inherent in any depiction of alien invasion in a postcolonial African context. Hugh O'Connell (2016:295) explores Okorafor's subtle and knowing portrayal of Ayodele and her fellow aliens, arguing that they embody the 'dual position of the alien as the colonizer and colonized […] introduc[ing] a certain undecidability that is not only at heart in any utopian revolutionary desire for futurity […] but perhaps doubly so when that postcolonial vision of futurity is then coded through such a colonially ambivalent figure'.

Ayodele's equivocal embodiment of the dual roles of coloniser/colonised can be inferred from Adaora's discomfitingly ambiguous visual perception of her as 'both attractive and repellent… [giving] Adaora the same creepy feeling as when she looked at a large black spider. Her mannerisms were too calm, fluid and…alien' (Okorafor 2014:17). No single novel can *entirely* subvert the historic legacy of hegemonic, predominantly white science fiction. However, we argue that Okorafor's foregrounding of the conceptual overlaps between alien invasion and colonialism embodied in the aliens' dual position is indicative of her broader Africanfuturist project, which assiduously confronts the past's impingement on post-colonial, African futurities. Other critics such as Gibson Ncube (2020) have also emphasised

the destabilising fluidity of Okorafor's fiction, particularly in relation to her representations of queer identity. Ncube invokes Kinitra Brooks's (2016) delineation of 'fluid fiction' as 'a genre of literature that purposely blurs the boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, and horror in a manner that mirrors how black women confound the delineations between race, gender, and sexuality'. *Lagoon*'s various characters (including the shapeshifting Ayodele and members of the Black Nexus) reflect Okorafor's thematic concerns with gendered identities and their relationship with the broader ecological and cultural dimensions of Lagosian society.

Ayodele as cyborg: Reading cyborgian transcorporeality in *Lagoon*

Donna Haraway's formulation of the posthuman cyborg shares some enticing parallels with Okorafor's depiction of non-binary gender in Lagoon. In her essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985; 2016a), Haraway (2016a:14) posits the cyborg (cybernetic organism) as a subversive figure of 'potent fusions and dangerous possibilities,' which works to '[imagine] a world without gender' (Haraway 2016a:7) by undoing the binary essentialism of human/machine, man/woman, civilised/primitive, self/other. Haraway's (2016a:13) description of the fluid, even celestial nature of the cyborg – 'both material and opaque […] ether, quintessence' – resonates with the complex biology of Okorafor's shapeshifting aliens.

The cyborg physicality of *Lagoon*'s aliens is most pronounced in Ayodele. As the aliens' ambassador, Ayodele is tasked with introducing a new transcorporeal social order to Lagos. Her non-binary, 'limitless' corporeality evokes Haraway's cyborg. Ayodele's body *appears* organic, but Adaora's analysis of her 'cells' reveals '[t]iny [vibrating] balls [that] aren't fixed together as our cells are' (Okorafor 2014:25). This fluid transcorporeality allows Ayodele to mimic most sentient organisms in multiple demonstrations of ontological osmosis. Ayodele's array of performative embodiments encompass a wide spectrum of human and non-human avatars, including a Black woman, Karl Marx, a monkey and a spectral molecular mass that reminds Adaora of 'the kind of mist you see at the bottom of a large waterfall' (Okorafor 2014:192). Ayodele's biological indeterminacy, alongside her multiple assertions that she is 'technology' and 'change' (Okorafor 2014:220), appears analogous to Haraway's (2016a:5) definition of cyborgs as 'a hybrid of machine and organism'.

Ayodele's gender indeterminacy is evident in Adaora's initial encounters with her. When Adaora comes to consciousness on the beach she hears a 'female voice' tell

her to 'Awake' (Okorafor 2014:16). Ayodele's gender and species status are still unclear to Adaora as she vacillates between pronouns: 'Adaora squinted at it in the flickering light […] no, not "it," "her"' (Okorafor 2014:16). The dehumanising 'it' brings into question Ayodele's subjectivity; however, after a pause, Adaora identifies her as a woman again. It is plausible that Ayodele mirrors Adaora in feminine affect and morphology to put her at ease and engender familiarity. Adaora notes that the 'woman looked like someone from Adaora's family – dark-skinned, broad-nosed, with dark brown thick lips. Her bushy hair was as long as Adaora's' (Okorafor 2014:17). As mentioned earlier in this article, Adaora takes Ayodele to her laboratory where she hopes to '*make sure I am seeing what I know I'm seeing*' (Okorafor 2014:23) (original emphasis). Adaora notes that '[e]very time she looked at [Ayodele], there was a disorientating moment where she was not sure what she was seeing. It lasted no more than a half-second, but it was there. Then she was seeing Ayodele the "woman" again' (Okorafor 2014:23).

Adaora is not the only character confounded by attempts to 'fix' Ayodele's identity. On numerous occasions, Ayodele is referred to as 'the woman who was not a woman' (Okorafor 2014:121, 235, 276, 277), and even as 'that creature in women's clothing' (Okorafor 2014:230). These tentative definitions underline both Ayodele's ambivalent gender identity and the indeterminate nature of her species. Okorafor obfuscates any stable markers of Ayodele's identity or sexuality to emphasise that the alien is a fundamentally unknowable and 'other' entity. In this way, Okorafor's depiction of Ayodele provides a reference point for discourses on alternative, gender-diverse identities such as those belonging to the homosexual and drag communities. These characters in *Lagoon* also demonstrate dimensions of Haraway's cyborg liminality. Ayodele is arguably the most overt embodiment of Haraway's cyborg due to her literal shapeshifting. However, members of the Black Nexus also epitomise cyborg ontological uncertainty by contesting the rigidity of sexual and gender norms in Nigeria[3] through their engagement in drag. Okorafor's cyborg characters In *Lagoon* disrupt the rigid, gendered binaries erected upon the foundation of imperialist Christianity as the image of the cyborg has 'made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body' (Haraway 2016a:11).

'Reworlding': The cyborg reimagined in Okorafor's Africanfuturist vision

Haraway's formulations of posthuman identity are particularly relevant for their transcorporeal implications in the context of Okorafor's decolonising fiction. For Haraway, humans are simultaneously mind *and* body, machine *and* animal. We are

not separate from nature in a detached state of anthropocentric domination; neither are machines. An example of this is how our memory itself is external to our bodies as we 'outsource our memory, agency and thought […] to external media' (YouTube 2019) by writing and painting. We map our experiences onto parts of the natural world to aid in memory. Therefore, human beings are reliant upon the natural world for our collective memory. The natural extension of this is that 'the machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment [...] We are responsible for boundaries; we are they' (Haraway 2016a:65) (original emphasis). In this sense 'we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs' (Haraway 2016a:7).

Lagoon embraces a similar emphasis on the transcorporeal interconnectedness of humanity, nature and machine. Okorafor writes passages describing the life of the monstrous swordfish and sequences focalising the lived experience of various 'carbon-critters' (Haraway 2016a:15) after the arrival of the aliens, such as a bat and a spider who have fatal encounters with technologically-mediated humanity. The aliens' transformative powers heighten the bat's innate echolocation and, while exploring its new abilities, it is decimated by a passing plane. Similarly, the spider feels the urge to relocate as a result of the aliens' presence. In the process of relocating, the spider crosses a major Lagosian highway and is crushed by Adaora's car. This accidental destruction of the natural world indicates the need to reimagine the acquisitive, anthropocentric mindset characteristic of colonial and neo-colonial economic relations.

Like Haraway's myth of the cyborg, Ayodele casts doubt upon reductive dichotomies through her very existence. She subverts the Cartesian dualism that legitimates patriarchy, overturning the subjugation of woman, nature, and body to man, culture and mind. In this essentialist conflation, woman and nature are assumed to be the passive, emotional inferiors of rational masculinity (which is aligned with culture and science). Okorafor imbues Ayodele with symbolic connections to a transcorporeal Nature, but she is no benign or passive 'Mother Nature.' She is powerful, dynamic, even violent and vengeful, like the Greek Gorgons. Notably, Haraway (2016b:53) embraces these figures feared and detested by men, and calls them the Chthonic Ones, from *chthonios*, meaning 'of, in, or under the earth and the seas'. These chthonic ones are Haraway's (2016b:54) recent permutation of the cyborg: 'their reach is lateral and tentacular; they have no settled lineage and no reliable kind (genre, gender)'. In Ayodele, Okorafor has created a truly 'Chthonic one,' by drawing on her own African cultural mythology and the figure of Mami Wata.

The reader is first introduced to Ayodele through the eyes of an unnamed neurodiverse child and a prostitute, Fisayo. The child describes 'the strange woman creature' (Okorafor 2014:13) who emerged from the water on Bar Beach as 'smoke' (Okorafor 2014:13), while Fisayo gives her the title of 'shape-shifter' (Okorafor 2014:14). We later learn that the boy interpreted the arrival of Ayodele as an encounter with Mami Wata, the 'Mother of Water' (Stobie 2016:95), a west African deity described as a half-human, half-fish creature, able to transform into any form of her choice (Johnson 2018). Stobie reads Mami Wata as a mermaid-like creature who promises riches, but also brings disaster. She is 'an ambivalent deity who functions as a metaphor for the desire for a life of plenty and fulfilment in Africa' (Stobie 2016:95). Instead of focusing on the destructive potentialities of Mami Wata as Stobie does, our reading of Okorafor's allusions to Mami Wata focuses on the way in which African traditional knowledge is infused with images of the alien or cyborg, as both possess the power to alter their physical appearance. Notably, confusion and disorientation are necessary precursors to re-imagining subjectivities that go beyond human gender binaries. *Lagoon*'s alien reworlding resonates with Haraway's (2016b:12) call to challenge and counter the dominant western narratives about gender and ecology. '[I]t matters,' she states, 'which stories we tell to tell other stories'. Stories give credence to certain modes of being, just as they can deny or denigrate other modes. Haraway's assertion highlights that every act of storytelling is political. Okorafor's writing takes up this rallying call of 'storying otherwise' as *Lagoon* counters dominant western narratives in its imbrication of 'traditional' African cosmologies into the generic mode of science fiction. *Lagoon* uses the science fiction medium and extra-terrestrial interlopers as a way of reworlding gendered beings as mutable and fluid. The ambiguity of Ayodele's biological, mythological, and cyborg identity opens multiple possibilities for the destabilisation of rigid categories and provides a new (sustainable) model for survival.

Frontier Africans in *Lagoon*

Francis Nyamnjoh's (2015) formulation of the 'frontier African' can be considered a relative of Haraway's cyborg, and is thus useful in further elucidating how Okorafor's characters champion hybridity and navigate the spaces in-between established ideologies. Nyamnjoh (2015:7) argues that the frontier African's ability to 'straddle physical and cultural geographies enables them to point attention to the possibility and reality of a world beyond neat dichotomies', an assertion that is comparable with Haraway's conception of the cyborg. For him, frontier Africans are 'those who contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and

practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces' (Nyamnjoh 2015:6). Nyamnjoh (2015:4) asserts that 'at the frontiers, anything can be anything'. This description is analogous to *Lagoon*'s hybrid vision of transhuman interconnectedness and indigenous African epistemologies. Therefore, like Haraway's cyborg, the frontier African becomes a meaningful theoretical prism through which we can examine Okorafor's distinctly Africanfuturist depictions of gender and identity.

In this section of the article, we pay particular attention to how Ayodele and the Black Nexus exemplify Nyamnjoh's (2015:8) concept of the frontier African as they 'challenge essentialism, play with limits' and champion 'African realities [which] are not steeped in dualisms, binaries, dichotomies' (Nyamnjoh 2015:6). Ayodele usurps prescriptions of gendered difference through her ability to shapeshift and flit through various gender identities. This unsettling of rigid gender positions is also evident in Okorafor's depiction of Jacobs, Rome and Seven, all of whom are members of the underground LGBTQ+ group, the Black Nexus. Some of these characters engage in drag, whilst others courageously embrace their queer sexual identities despite the stigmatisation and threat of violence at the hands of a dogmatic, heteronormative society. The marginalisation of characters who exemplify the destabilising liminality articulated by Nyamnjoh emphasises the necessity of rethinking exclusivist attitudes towards non-binary gender classifications. Members of the Black Nexus can also be read as frontier Africans as they contribute to the recentring of the Global South through their contestation of rigid binary gender norms.

Beyond the frontiers of the Anthropocene: Reading Ayodele as a frontier African

Ayodele's constant transformations between men, women, and animals embody Okorafor's Africanfuturist depiction of transhuman entanglement, which is congruent with the concerns of the frontier African as they 'straddle myriad identity margins and constantly seek to bridge various divides in the interest of the imperatives of living interconnections' (Nyamnjoh 2015:7). Ayodele's manifestations of ontological osmosis could signify that she is a progressive agent for social justice. Okorafor's depiction of Ayodele's interspecies fluidity can be read as an Africanfuturist instance of the frontier African's negotiation of a 'world of flux, where structure is a temporary manifestation of what is otherwise a flow of constant change' (Nyamnjoh 2015:6). Ayodele's transhuman identity is demonstrated in one sequence where Ayodele shifts into a lizard, and later a monkey, when threatened by Moziz and his gang. Moziz is the calculating criminal leader of a ragtag band of disenfranchised university

students who discover Ayodele's shapeshifting abilities and seek to kidnap her with the intention of forcing her to print money for them. Moziz and his crew are confused by her transformation, thinking that she, 'Melted? Melted! Imploded? Disintegrated? Right before [their] eyes. Evaporated into something small on the floor. […] A green lizard' (Okorafor 2014:103). Ayodele's transmutation into a reptilian being evokes (like the frontier African and the cyborg) a transcorporeal rejection of anthropocentric worldviews. Ayodele does not see creatures 'lower down' on the evolutionary chain as being less valuable. Her transformations into a lizard and monkey are a reminder of our connection with all 'carbon-critters' and our 'joint kinship with animals and machines' (Haraway 2016a:15). Ayodele bemoans humanity's narrow view of alterity when she says, 'human beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them' (Haraway 2016a:67). With this observation, Ayodele denounces human intolerance and exceptionalism and highlights our lack of conviviality toward those who are different in terms of colour, gender, or species.

The conceptualisation of Ayodele as a frontier African is particularly salient when considering that the aliens' power of physical transformation is not restricted to their own bodies, but extends to their organic surroundings, including humans. This is evident from the beginning of the novel, when the aliens alter the biological structure of the swordfish to change it into a 'monster' (as discussed in the introduction to this article). Through her shapeshifting abilities, Ayodele is an exemplary frontier being who is able to 'bridge divides' (Nyamnjoh 2015:12) between man and animal. Okorafor celebrates the interpenetration of human and non-human experience through her characters' ability to transcend the boundaries of embodiment. Okorafor's aliens can be interpreted as frontier Africans whose arrival in Lagos initiates extraordinary, sometimes terrifying, social and ontological conversions that allow the city's inhabitants 'the opportunities to explore the fullness of their potentialities without unduly confining themselves with exclusionary identities' (Nyamnjoh 2015:7). The dynamic of transformation depicted in Okorafor's fictional Lagos displays how, instead of interlopers from outer space having to adapt and change to fit Lagos, the city itself must transform to fit the new social order presented by the aliens. This multidimensional reformulation of Lagosian society is a powerful expression of the broader decolonising ethos of Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction. The aliens represent Okorafor's impassioned rallying cry to other frontier Africans to challenge corrupt local governments, neo-colonial economic relations and concomitant matrices of ideological power and exclusion mediating African identities in the twenty-first century.

The radical change required from the Lagosians is evident in the passages describing Ayodele's death. After returning the Nigerian president from his underwater political *tête-à-tête* with the alien elders, Nigerian soldiers see Ayodele emerging from the water and beat her to death by 'rain[ing] blows on every part of Ayodele's body with their boots, the butts of their guns, their fists' (Okorafor 2014:266) because they believe she is a witch. Ayodele's body releases a vapour (Okorafor 2014:268), which spreads over the city and is inhaled by everyone in Lagos. After inhaling Ayodele's essence, Adaora realises that 'Lagos will never be the same again' (Okorafor 2014:270), heralding the foundational changes that will irrevocably transform Okorafor's Lagos. Ayodele's final sacrifice and transformation also place her as a frontier African, as her final transformation implies a celestial cross-over between the physical and spiritual realms. Ayodele's death (and by extension, that of the aliens in general) echo traditional Nigerian belief systems about ancestor worship and the self's continued existence in another realm beyond the material world. The subtle imbrication of distinctly African themes of ancestor-worship — along with the depiction of multiple African deities — within *Lagoon*'s speculative narrative of frontier Africans effecting social transformation embodies the decolonising focus of Okorafor's endogenous, Africanfuturist fiction.

The Black Nexus: Queer and feminist articulations of frontier African ontologies in *Lagoon*

In this section, we explore how Jacobs, Rome, and Seven (members of the Nigerian LGBTQ+ group, the Black Nexus) challenge heteronormative prescriptions for identity and how Okorafor's depiction of these frontier Africans' 'queer/feminist desire produces futures that rupture and move beyond the violence of contemporary heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalistic coloniality' (Hanchey 2020:121). Their engagement in drag and flouting of socially conditioned gender norms is comparable to the ontological osmosis recognised in Ayodele's fluid destabilisation of gendered boundaries and dualistic hierarchies. The depiction of these characters embodies Okorafor's convivial Africanfuturism as they are not able to be 'define[d] and confine[d]' (Nyamnjoh 2015:16) into predetermined gendered categories, but are instead illustrative of the 'nuanced complexities' (Nyamnjoh 2015:16) of sexuality.

Jacobs, when not surrounded by other members of the Black Nexus, must engage in Judith Butler's (2006) 'performance' of hyper-masculinity for Moziz and other characters, whose understanding of gender is mediated by inflexible conceptions of gendered difference. Jacobs simultaneously participates in the masculine

spectacle and contests the notion of a 'true' gender identity through his impulses to engage in traditionally 'feminine' behaviour, such as dressing in women's clothing. This can be seen when he meets other members of the Black Nexus at a secret meeting in an abandoned secondary school. References to 'his favourite long black dress and high heels' (Okorafor 2014:70), his reluctance to arrive at the meeting '*dressed* like a 'guy' (Okorafor 2014:70) (original emphasis), and the need to appear before his 'friends [dressed] as *himself*' (Okorafor 2014:70) (original emphasis) demonstrate the radically subjective nature of sexuality and gender identity. Jacobs, unlike other members of the Black Nexus who engage in drag such as Rome or Royal, maintains a heterosexual orientation as he states 'that he wasn't gay at all. He just liked wearing women's clothes' (Okorafor 2014:73). The fact that Jacobs has to make this statement points to the tendency to conflate and confuse sexual orientation with gender expression. Jacobs's justification of his heterosexual desires, alongside his love for feminine clothing, 'challenge[s] the heteronormative logic which functions in such a way that non-normative identities are marginalised and rendered invisible and illegible' (Ncube 2020:6). Jacobs blurs the lines between gender boundaries and forges a 'new' identity for himself, where 'he' identifies with neither straight male nor homosexual gender politics. This fluid self-identification encompasses both 'masculine' and 'feminine' dimensions to create a distinctly hybridised, unfixed gender identity. Jacobs's behaviour points towards the multiple ontological dimensions and potentialities of selfhood inherent in each individual: an inclusive and fluid process that correlates with Okorafor's progressive, Africanfuturist gender politics.

In a similarly subversive manner, Rome (one of the founding members of the Black Nexus) also challenges western heteronormative behavioural codes as he too engages in drag. Rome is described as 'immaculate', wearing 'dark blue skinny jeans and a loose white blouse' with 'tiny gold hoop earrings [which] perfectly accented his closely cut hair' (Okorafor 2014:71). Okorafor reinforces Rome's effeminate attributes when it is revealed that, 'even without make-up, he passed as a beautiful woman' (Okorafor 2014:71). Okorafor's description of Rome as 'a beautiful woman' creates a disjuncture between Rome's biological gender and his subjective gender performance. Rome's disruption of heteronormative gender roles emphasises the fluid spaces that exist between genders: breaking binary constructs and 'queering' the idea of the masculine by offering a masculine figure in feminine attire, with 'feminine' sexual desires. Rome figuratively (and often literally) poses as a model for fluid, liminal sexual identities as he contests traditional gender norms through his non-conformist behaviour and dress code. For this reason, Rome, like Jacobs and Ayodele, 'exert[s] pressure on monolithic and simplistic ideas of what

is deemed normal/abnormal' (Ncube 2020:7) as his sexuality and dress code undermine conservative gender ideals.

The continued performance of non-binary gender roles by Jacobs, Rome and Ayodele mark these characters, and their non-normative gender codes, as threats to traditional notions of embodied gender identity. Butler's (2006:187) observations on drag can be used to expand this idea as she believes that 'the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag [and] cross-dressing'. To this end, Jacobs and members of the Black Nexus act as characters who parody 'primary gender identities' as they engage in drag. This performative subversion of fixed gender roles is crucial in 'questioning the notion of fixed sexual identities' (Stobie 2009:321) and imagining new modes of being, such as Haraway's posthuman cyborg. Ayodele's shifting between species can also be read as a 'destabilisation of the established order through an obscuring of the lines between the human and the non-human' (Ncube 2020:5). Okorafor's decentring of anthropocentric thought is particularly evident during the sequence when Ayodele transforms into a monkey following a protest-turned-riot outside Adaora's house. This decision to transform into a creature that is closely linked to humans in evolutionary terms could be read as Ayodele's — and by extension, Okorafor's — wry critique of anthropocentric assumptions of human mastery over the natural world. By engaging in drag and shapeshifting, Ayodele and members of the Black Nexus 'demand a questioning of the heteronormative status quo and imagine a future in which identities are liberated from the restrictions imposed by socially constructed ways of being' (Nyamnjoh 2015:7). These characters can be read as exemplary embodiments of Haraway's (2016a:65) cyborg identity since they recognise that '[they] are responsible for boundaries' and are using 'cyborg imagery' to 'suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms' (Haraway 2016a:67) created by western binary thought. Okorafor's characters mock the idea of single identities and can be theorised as chimeras, integrating multiple gendered identities into one and modelling their own hybrid gender politics.

Despite their contestation of gender politics, members of the Black Nexus still face challenges to their sexuality in contemporary society, revealing the need for the social transformation initiated by the arrival of the aliens. Jacobs's challenges are evident through his reluctance to reveal his predilection for drag to his heterosexual friends from university: Moziz, Troy and Tolu. Jacobs is hesitant to let his peers and friends into his apartment in case they find out about his cross-dressing. Jacobs's identity is split between his support of the LGBTQ+ community and his heterosexual friends. He is also 'immensely proud and intensely ashamed at the same time' (Okorafor 2014:92) as he sees the members of the Black Nexus out on public parade

for the first time without him. Other members of the group, such as Chioma and Yemi, also feel the same simultaneous pride and shame as 'both looked like they wanted to creep right back into their closets but they held their chins up' (Okorafor 2014:91). The inner conflict and shame felt by these characters because of their progressive gender politics is a manifestation of the exclusivist social classifications that Okorafor (through Ayodele and the Africanfuturist genre) is interrogating. Ncube (2020:7) notes that '[t]he coming out of the members of Black Nexus shows that queer individuals cannot continue to be ignored in the imagining of the present and the future of the evidently African space and time that is depicted in the novel *Lagoon*'. The aliens encourage our formulation of ontological osmosis as their ability to transmogrify themselves and others aid in reforming Nigerian society to closer reflect an integrated, Africanfuturist society which 'challenge[s] monolithic dystopian representations of Africa' (Nyamnjoh 2015:4).

Seven, a founding member of the Black Nexus and a lesbian, also queers traditional gender norms during the Black Nexus's first public parade outside Adaora's house. Like Jacobs and Rome, Seven adopts a feminine dress code, but still inverts traditional gender stereotypes by 'smok[ing] a cigar, ignor[ing] the leers of the men and [blowing] kisses at the women' (Okorafor 2014:91). Seven's provocations are intended to attract masculine desire for the sole purpose of denying them sexual access to her body, while she openly proclaims her sexual preference for women. Seven is a character who confounds 'the delineations between race, gender and sexuality' (Brooks in Ncube 2020:2) as she gleefully subverts men's sexual desires for her own pleasure. Smoking a cigar adds to her inversion of traditional gender norms as the cigar, archetypally a vice of the rich and powerful western male (and, like the oil pipeline savaged by the swordfish, a symbol of phallic power) is ascribed to an African female body instead. Her open reappropriation of the masculine symbol of the cigar is a defiance of traditional gender norms and forms part of the novel's systematic uprooting of stagnant views on binary gender perspectives. The deliberate queering of Seven's gender acts as an invitation 'to question dualistic assumptions about reality' (Nyamnjoh 2015:6), which directly links to Okorafor's Africanfuturist project and images of the cyborg as the narrative continuously reworks binary assumptions of the world.

One thing Ayodele, Jacobs, Seven, and Rome have in common is their position as frontier Africans. Nyamnjoh's frontier Africans are used to critique the patriarchal heteronormativities of Nigerian culture. They are individuals who belong to a reality 'not steeped in dualisms, binaries [or] dichotomies' (2015:6). The queering of normative hierarchies through Ayodele's shapeshifting, Jacobs's cross-dressing and the 'coming out and becoming visible' (Ncube 2020:6) of the Black Nexus draws

attention 'to the possibility and reality of a world beyond neat dichotomies' (Nyamnjoh 2015:7). These characters pioneer ontological osmosis as they are on the frontlines of multiple realities, struggling to exist in the constrained, binary world of post-colonial Nigeria, while simultaneously existing in their tiny free societies where their sexual orientation, desires, or shapeshifting abilities are not demonised by their fellow citizens. Okorafor's nuanced depiction of such a wide range of divergent African subjectivities in *Lagoon* reflects her inclusive Africanfuturist literary project that foregrounds 'radical decolonial, antiracist, feminist, and queer potentialities' (Hanchey 2020:120).

Conclusion

Readers who engage with *Lagoon* on the most superficial level may perceive many resemblances to the time-honoured genre conventions of science fiction. The descriptions of chaotic alien invasion, spurts of grotesque body-horror and nascent communication between human beings and an otherworldly intelligence are all familiar tropes. However, Okorafor's novel defies such stale classifications with its constantly mutating plot and, most significantly, its setting in Lagos, Nigeria. The fluid portrayal of ontological osmosis is inextricably mediated by the indigenous knowledge systems of the Lagosian society she is examining. Okorafor's decision to make Lagos the fictional epicentre of a transformative encounter with technologically superior life forms subverts North/South binaries marking the division between the progressive 'first world' and its dependent peripheries. These are *African futures* that Okorafor is constructing, and her novel thrums with the energy of nascent possibilities and futurities that lie beyond the frontier of economic dependence and ossified anthropocentricism. Okorafor's Africanfuturist engagement with the interrelated themes of identity, gender and ecology creatively recentres Lagos as an aspirational vanguard of African futurities. And in her demonstration of the inherent permeability of boundaries – the inevitability of change in any ecosystem, be it organic or ideological – *Lagoon* can be read as a frontier African text that provides a tantalising, decolonising glimpse of as-yet unmapped African frontiers of gender and ecology.

Notes

1. Sarah Nuttall (2009:1) defines the concept of 'entanglement' as '[a] condition of being twisted or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness'. A full discussion of Nuttall's entanglement goes beyond the scope of this article.

2. Oil and petroleum giant, Shell has a long history of exploitation in the Niger Delta. Over the last five decades, 'oil and gas extraction have caused large-scale, continued contamination of the water and soil in Ogoni communities' (Amnesty International 2020). Attempts to hold Shell accountable have failed as Shell has begun clean-up work 'on only 11% of polluted sites' over the last decade and completed clean up procedures on none (Amnesty International 2020). The novel's critique of the economic exploitation and concomitant environmental devastation propagated by oil companies has been underlined by critics such as Melody Jue (2017) who identifies *Lagoon* as an exemplar of 'petrofiction': environmentally conscious fiction directly addressing the issue of oil and the possibility of transitioning to alternative energy resources.

3. Currently, same-sex marriage is illegal in Nigeria and same-sex relationships are punishable by imprisonment or stoning under Shari'ah law in parts of Nigeria (Bourbeau 2019:39).

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