

The Rise of the Afrofuturistic Novel: The Intersection of Science Fiction and African Environmentalism in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*



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Abstract: *Lagoon* (2014) by Nnedi Okorafor is an Afrofuturistic science fiction novel which fuses cyberculture, race issues, ecologism, and alien invasions. When Ayodele, an extra-terrestrial being, lands on planet Earth, Anthony, Agu and Adaora will be forced to cooperate towards the goal of building a postpetroleum, more democratic and egalitarian Nigeria. Science fiction works as a vehicle for environmental critique. *Lagoon* engages in an ecocritical debate, as it denounces anthropocentric attitudes that permeate cultural representations, animal exploitation and the petrostate of Nigeria. Afrofuturism and postcolonial ecocriticism interact in *Lagoon*, an example of anticolonial environmentalism exposing the dangers of pollution in the Niger Delta region. Okorafor's work also decentres the human subject, as it includes animal and spiritual narrators as well as humanoid beings.

Keywords: *Lagoon*, Nnedi Okorafor, ecocriticism, postcolonial literature, Afrofuturism, science fiction by black authors

Lagoon (2014) written by Nnedi Okorafor (a Nigerian-American author born in 1974 who currently lives in New York) is an Afrofuturistic novel and a rich and complex text where science fiction meets African folklore and horror intertwines with environmental concerns. The three protagonists—Adaora, Agu and Anthony—embark on an adventure that will require them to save the polluted coast of Lagos and cooperate with the visitors

from outer space in order to build a utopian, post-petroleum Nigeria.

The aim of this article is to explore why non-mimetic postcolonial literature is still quite unknown and marginalized in literary studies and by readers. African or Afro-diasporic writers are only now beginning to gain popularity and success amongst the general public. However, science fiction is still a predominantly white Western genre and non-Western people



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may be often othered and reduced to a stereotype in these works. It is imperative to decolonize fantasy literature and this is why black writers are beginning to transform the rigid parameters of speculative fiction by creating literary works that are more inclusive and diverse. Afrofuturism is the flourishing movement that reconsiders the way African peoples have been depicted in mainstream science fiction works, while promoting content created by black artists.

Another objective of this article is to analyse how environmental concerns are tackled from a non-Western perspective in this novel. Ecological devastation, pollution and droughts are often the consequence of centuries of colonialism in the Global South. I study here how *Lagoon* portrays a powerful image of the damage inflicted on the communities and the marine ecosystems of the Niger Delta, while at the same time paying attention to how it articulates a critique of the neo-colonial dynamics that are still perpetuated in the current capitalist world order. Ecocriticism but also Braidotti's post-humanism constitute the theoretical framework of this article, which also addresses how anthropocentric values and human exceptionalism are revisited and interrogated in the novel.

The hypothesis I defend here is that science fiction can be used as a valid vehicle for an environmental critique, as Okorafor does. The tropes of speculative fiction serve to articulate a counterhegemonic discourse that questions anthropocentric values, the commodification of animal life, and Nigeria's utter dependence on oil (arguably, one of the consequences of neo-colonialism). *Lagoon* seeks to revalorise the human-nature relationship within the context of a technological society which is why bearing in mind the intersection of science fiction, postcolonial

studies and ecocriticism is essential to read it.

The following analysis is divided into three main sections. Firstly, I focus on the main controversies regarding black science fiction and postcolonial ecocriticism. Secondly, I show how *Lagoon* elaborates a critique of petro-culture in Nigeria and the country's reliance on oil, considering the alternatives and the solutions for the future that this text presents. Finally, the last sections deal with the deconstruction of anthropocentrism, as this novel celebrates non-human forms of life—and this includes animals, the air, the soil and even aliens.

1. The Emergence of Black Science Fiction

1.1. Afrofuturism

Lagoon is an Afrofuturistic novel that revolves around the idea of an alien invasion in Nigeria. Mark Derry coined the word "AfroFuturism" in an essay written in 1993 (Nelson, 2018: 2635) and this refers to a cultural movement that explores the intersections between race, speculative fiction, blackness, technology and the future. Ytasha Womack states that it is more than just a literary current: Afrofuturism is a political movement, a cultural revolution that impregnates all sorts of artistic manifestations and it aims to "redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future" (2013: 9). Moreover, Womack emphasises the heterogeneous nature of the movement, since it "combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (2013: 9). Hence, it is "a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation of the future rife with cultural critiques" (9).



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Another aspect Womack highlights is the stereotyped presence of black people in mainstream works of speculative fiction. This is probably due to the misconception that Africans or African Americans dislike science fiction, that it is only successful in North America, Europe and Australia, and that there is no such thing as an African geek culture. Bryce provides an illustrative example: when author Nick Wood tried to publish his novel *The Stone Chameleons* in South Africa, the publisher replied that “black people don’t read science fiction” (“South African SF”, 2012, cited in Bryce, 2019: 3). Accordingly, there are few examples of black protagonists in canonical science fiction films or novels and, whenever they appear, their depiction tends to be simplistic and full of clichés. Womack mentions “the silent, mystical type” (2013: 7) or the “scary witch doctor” (2013: 7); these fictional figures are closely related to African and pagan mythology, the unknown, witchcraft, occultism and magic (some of these figures certainly resemble shamans). It is deeply problematic that even in fantasy literature—a genre in which everything is possible, where “cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines” (Womack, 2013: 7) are acceptable—the readership cannot bear the idea of “a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future” (7). These examples show that non-realist fiction can also be embedded in colonial patterns of thought and that it can reproduce the same racial stereotypes as any other narrative genre. However, it needs to be acknowledged that modern science fiction is more diverse and there are white authors, such as Ursula K. Le Guin, who have introduced fully developed black characters that are not mere archetypes—Genli Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is a good example. Other white writers have shown interest in is-

sues of race, such as Richard Morgan in his novel *Black Man* (2008).

Burnett discusses how the colonial gaze is present in science fiction as well. This scholar claims that these narratives “often engage in the othering of indigenous people to the point where the latter become nonhuman” (2015: 134). Thus, natives are presented as exotic, opposed, remote and alien (quite literally). Moreover, it is not unusual to find that even when such novels attempt to critique colonialism, they promote in fact “the problematic assumptions underlying the colonial project” (Burnett, 2015: 134). Burnett mentions *The War of the Worlds* (1897) as an example of this (2015: 134), as H. G. Wells supported the eugenics movement and some readings of the text suggest he might be in fact defending these beliefs.

These issues are only a few of the controversies the genre of science fiction presents: it often was a predominantly white, middle-class, male, straight narrative genre rather than a platform for counter-hegemonic discourse (Burnett, 2015: 137). However, Afrofuturist writers are changing these preconceived notions and they are exploring the new realities of a post-colonial—or neo-colonial—situation in the African countries in their works. They are reversing preconceptions about Africa and its peoples: they want to reintegrate black people into the discussion of modern science, technological advances and cyberculture (Womack, 2013: 17). Therefore, writers such as Okorafor are contributing to the diversification of this literary genre by including varied characters (social outcasts, women, members of the LGBT+ community) and engaging in debates about the role of black people when it comes to scientific advances and the future. For instance, the protagonist of *Lagoon*, Adaora, is a marine biologist with an impressive career as an academic and



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a scientist. Hence, Afrofuturist artists are trying to deconstruct the idea of Africa—and its people—as a backward and primitive continent, not related to progress, technoculture or the future. As Burnett says; “our imagined futures cannot be exclusively white and Western, with people of color absent or peripheral, either way written out of humanity’s future and past” (2015: 135).

1.2. *The Postcolonial Novel and Science Fiction*

Much of Anglophone African literature has been mainly social realist; the publication in 1958 of *Things Fall Apart* shaped the postcolonial literary landscape (Bryce, 2019: 2). Hence, it could be argued that black science fiction has also been overlooked by postcolonial scholars, even those specializing in African literature.

Novels dealing with the traumatic history of African countries, the violence executed by colonizers, religious issues, identity, wars and so on have received much scholarly attention. As Bryce puts it, “the paradigms of postcolonial theory—writing back, hybridity, mimicry, center and periphery, etc.—have tended to privilege explicitly national narratives and concepts of identity-construction” (2019: 2). Another academic, Alondra Nelson, emphasises that a tradition of social realism has been encouraged and fostered by Afrodiasporic artists and scholars in order to be taken seriously (2018: 2637). She further argues that they “feared that to stop keeping things real was to lose the ability to recognize and protest the very inequities in the social world” (2637). African or Afrodiasporic authors believed it was their duty to tell their truth, to unmask the crimes perpetuated by the colonisers, to articulate a discourse that chal-

lenged dominant narratives, in other words, to write back. This was no doubt a necessary effort for it was—and still is—important to analyse and examine the colonial (and neo-colonial) violence that is perpetuated in today’s world.

Some African artists still think today that science fiction has not come to Africa yet because it fails to fulfil the requirements of the readers or spectators. The following quotation is the opinion of the Nigerian film director Tchidi Chikere:

Science fiction will come here when it is relevant to the people of Africa. Right now, Africans are bothered about issues of bad leadership, the food crisis in East Africa, refugees in the Congo, militants here in Nigeria. Africans are bothered about roads, electricity, water wars, famine, etc, not spacecrafts and spaceships. Only stories that explore these everyday realities are considered relevant to us for now. (in Okorafor, 2014b: online)

This statement is perfectly reasonable, but it has some limitations that must be acknowledged. In the first place, the film director is defending that there are genres which are praiseworthy because they deal with serious issues, like political crises or wars in the continent, and do not pay attention to banalities like “spacecrafts and spaceships.” This assumption is shared by many authors, who believe they cannot write science fiction if they want to be taken seriously: Okorafor herself notes that “many African writers still dismiss genre fiction like science fiction and fantasy as ‘childish’ or ‘amateur’” (2014b: online). In fact, science fiction can be ethically committed as well. Speculative fiction has the power to build sophisticated and complex metaphors of current socio-political crises; it is a genre rich in symbolism. An apparent simple story of an alien invasion or intergalactic wars could be



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questioning gender constructs, it could be articulating an anticolonial critique or it could be challenging the essence of humanness. The allegories can be more complex in speculative fiction narratives and thus the underlying critique could be more opaque to the reader. Nnedi Okorafor shares this line of thinking: "Aside from generating innovative ideas, science fiction also triggers both a distancing and associating effect. This makes it an excellent vehicle for approaching taboo and socially-relevant yet overdone topics in new ways. *Oh, and these narratives are a lot of fun, too*" (Okorafor, 2014b: online, emphasis added). Finally, Okorafor highlights the recreational purpose of science fiction, making a literary genre which aims at providing entertainment is also laudable.

Because of the insistence on considering the colonial past, any futuristic thinking has been erased from mainstream postcolonial literature. Nelson mentions that this "cultural environment" was "often hostile to speculation, experimentation, and abstraction" (2018: 2637). Henceforth, it could be said that science fiction and fantasy literature have been neglected both by authors and by postcolonial scholars. Nelson also points out the need to speculate about the future: "futurism is a necessary complement to realism" because otherwise "the reality of oppression without utopianism will surely lead to nihilism" (2018: 2637). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the extremely violent situations the countries of the Global South have experienced for centuries as a product of their colonial past, but imagining what a future, more advanced society might look like is also much needed.

It has now been suggested that traces of non-realist literature could be found in indigenous cosmologies and beliefs: "myth, orality, and indigenous belief sys-

tems are intrinsic to African modes of speculative storytelling" (Bryce, 2019: 3). Traditional African mythologies contain supernatural elements and this could certainly be the seed for non-realist literatures. Henceforth, Bryce implies that "futurism has been a strain in African writing from its inception" (2019: 1). Bryce's theory is plausible and it would contradict the preconception that fantasy literature is a Western invention. In fact, the insertion of elements of African mythology is a device which Okorafor uses in *Lagoon*: Ijele's apparition in a café near Bar Beach or the presence of the Haitian spirit Legba (the god of crossroads) both constitute horror episodes in the novel. Furthermore, Adaora's husband makes constant allusions to witchcraft and he accuses his wife of being a *marine witch*. The intersection between elements of African folklore and science fiction is hence made explicit in *Lagoon* but from an African point of view.

1.3. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Science Fiction*

Lagoon is a complex, multi-layered novel that combines different narrative genres and critical perspectives. I focus next on the ecological disasters portrayed in the novel and the relationships between humans and nature, therefore a brief review of the evolution of environmental thought and ecocriticism is fundamental.

Scholars have introduced the notions of first-wave and second-wave ecocriticism, which differ considerably. On the one hand, first-wave ecocritics embrace mimetic representations of nature and focus on achieving "a clear, unmediated reflection of the natural world and to give voice to nature" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014a: 10). First-wave ecocriticism con-



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siders the relationship between humans and the non-human, the connection with the natural world and the depiction of wilderness within a particular text. This theoretical approach is very much apolitical, as it leaves the social aspects aside. Consequently, some scholars have shown how problematic this is, as it “can lead to an uncritical approach to Western science and its claims of scientific objectivity” (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014a: 10). In fact, Caminero-Santangelo reminds us that behind the colonization of Africa there was a scientific justification (2014a: 10).¹ Postcolonial ecocritics highlight the flaws and limitations of this perspective, while sharing the main postulates—revalorization of the non-human, concern for pollution and global warming.

On the other hand, second-wave ecocritics focus on decentring ecocriticism instead. The role of imperialism in transforming traditional economies, ecosystems, livelihoods and the nature of the African continent cannot be denied. The imperial project did not only cause the destruction of the socio-cultural structures, but it also altered the physical environment and the natural landscapes (and these consequences are still very present). Hence, a theoretical position that favours objective environmentalist

¹ Environmentalist discourses sometimes run parallel to colonial history. Environmental historians argue that dominant Western narratives have tended to portray Africans as incapable of understanding and taking care of their biodiversity and thus “suggesting that environmentalist efforts in Africa need to be conceived and led by non-Africans” (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014a: 10). This has caused the removal of entire communities in order to create spaces of wilderness; these measures were executed by those from the West—who had a supposedly proper environmental sensibility (13).

literature can “unwittingly justify the violence done to indigenous peoples, cultures, forms of knowledge, and places through an imperialism working in the name of objective science” (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014a: 10).

Therefore, any ‘objective’ writing on the environment in the African continent would be overlooking the ecological disasters caused by the West: poverty, health risks and social injustice. African narratives are ideological and political; they do not aim at impartiality and neutrality because this aesthetic position would simply be negationist. These writers want to unmask the power dynamics working in the exploitation of African resources, the unequal distribution of wealth and the consequences this has on the population; they are politically committed and they articulate counterhegemonic discourses. In this sense, postcolonial ecocriticism is similar to eco-Marxism and social ecology, since these theoretical approaches understand that ecological disasters are not caused by anthropocentric attitudes exclusively; they are attributed to capitalistic forms of exploitation and domination (Garrad, 2004: 28).

Nevertheless, this taxonomy has received serious criticism. Some scholars object to this distinction as it implies the existence of a hierarchy; it suggests that postcolonial ecocriticism is a secondary phenomenon, thus rather marginal and peripheral. First-wave ecocriticism appears unmarked and universal if this categorization is taken into account. Postcolonial ecocritics argue that, on the contrary, African writers have actively created an imaginary of nature and that their contributions are not derived from American and European representations (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014a: 12). Nigerian writers such as Niyi Osundari, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila are conscious



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of “the ecological implications of man’s exploitative tendencies on earth’s resources” (Edebor, 2017: 43), thus proving that this is not only a Western concern and that they are actively involved in this global social movement. These examples show that the distinction between “first-wave” and “second-wave” criticism seems to rely on the centre-periphery opposition; therefore proving that it is essential to decentre ecocriticism. Chengyi Coral Wu (2016: 6) prefers to use the word “rhizomatic” to refer to environmental criticism, as it was an extended phenomenon which took root in several parts of the world. African ecocriticism, she insists, was not a “derivative development” of Anglo-American scholarship (7) but an independent creation.

Lagoon is a hybrid text where science fiction, environmental critique and post-colonialism are intermingled. Mackey uses the term “environmental science fiction” (2018: 530) to refer to stories in which all those elements come together, acknowledging the contribution of “Afrodiasporic, African, and Indigenous and Aboriginal futurisms [...] in widespread cultural debates about humanity’s responsibility toward the environment” (530). These narratives explore the ways by which humans can reconnect with the non-human elements of the universe always through a postcolonial lens. “Located in the interstices of environmental and postcolonial science fictions,” Mackey writes, “these narratives can, at the very least, serve as antidotes to complacency in light of the uneven planetary distribution of resources or despair in the face of environmental devastation” (530). In the past, science fiction was regarded as a light, non-serious genre, fitted only for the lower classes and those who consume popular culture. In fact, despite the British scientific romances by H.G. Wells the

publication of Anglophone 20th century science-fiction proper began in the USA through pulp magazines, which were inexpensive periodicals aimed at the masses (Attebery, 2003: 32). However, *Lagoon* proves that a science fiction novel can articulate a subversive, sophisticated discourse which is critical with the legacies of colonialism and deeply concerned with ecological issues. Environmental science fiction thus engages in discussions about sustainability, pollution, or climate change always paying attention to the role of imperial exploitation in defining the current socio-economic landscape of Africa. This makes it as relevant or more than mimetic fiction.

Mackey (2018) makes an interesting contribution, as the scholar says science fiction can serve as an antidote to passivity; it can offer new perspectives on the consequences of environmental devastation in a few years’ time. It serves as a pedagogical tool: “Providing readers and viewers with a glimpse of possible futures, the extrapolative nature of the genre lends itself to critical ecological pedagogy” (531). Thus, it is “a catalyst for environmental change” (530). Okorafor also believes in the intrinsic value of speculative fiction for, as she writes, “[s]cience fiction carries the potential to change the world” (Okorafor, 2014b: online).

2. “Oceanic Futurism:” *Lagoon* and the Coalescence of Petro-Fiction and Science Fiction

Lagoon’s target for its environmental critique are the ecological disasters and the social inequalities in the Niger Delta region that have been exposed and analysed by Rob Nixon. He explains that Nigeria depends largely on oil for its economic



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survival and that the corporation Shell is the most important foreign stakeholder (Nixon, 2013: 106). Nixon adds that the distribution of oil revenue is extremely unequal since “85 percent of oil wealth goes to a mere 1 percent of the population” (2013: 106). Moreover, the ecological devastation affects the minorities who live in the Delta, as they lack political representation and thus Government protection and proper rights. The extremely polluted landscape in the regions inhabited by the Ogoni people are described as follows: “Ogoni air had been fouled by the flaring of natural gas, their croplands scarred by oil spills, their drinking and fishing waters poisoned” (Nixon, 2013: 108). The traditional subsistence economies have been destabilised and destroyed systematically; the delta communities lack the most basic human needs and their survival depends entirely on them; it is a life-or-death struggle.

Edebor (2017: 43) mentions the growing consciousness and interest of African authors such as Sophia Obi-Apoko and Ogochukwu Promise or the poets Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide regarding environmental degradation. These writers thus show their concern for the prospects for the future if no effective change is made and the exploitation of the natural resources goes on in a region that is one of the most polluted on earth and “would take thirty years and one billion dollars to clean up” (Caminero-Santagnelo, 2014b: 137). This scholar analyses Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), a novel which provides a perceptive insight into the severely damaged Niger Delta region and the violence-ridden country of Nigeria. The problems that plague the African nation seem endless: “mass deaths, dislocation, sicknesses, avoidable accidents, serious violence” (Edebor, 2017: 45). *Oil on Water* also draws attention to the con-

sequences and irreversible dangers on the environment, the communities and other living beings, namely animals and sea creatures.

Unlike *Oil on Water*, *Lagoon* is a non-mimetic narrative, but that does not mean it ignores the social injustices and environmental degradation in Lagos. In fact, there is in the novel a clear ethical positioning and it expresses a deep anxiety about the future of Nigeria, the humans that live in the most polluted regions and the marine species. *Lagoon* contains many episodes in which a critique of the environmental situation in Nigeria is made explicit. Okorafor denounces the pollution of the water in the Niger Delta region from the very first chapter. The novel focuses on the marine animals, who are even more fragile and vulnerable to this situation because they do not have a voice. The character through which the action is focalized is in fact an angry swordfish that aims to destroy one of the oil pipelines: “She knows where she is going. She is aiming for the thing that looks like a giant dead snake” (Okorafor, 2014a: 3).² The motive behind this action is revenge, the swordfish has experienced the harmful effects of water pollution and she has decided to fight back: “They brought the stench of dryness, [...] and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface. [...] *Inhaling them stings and burns her gills*” (3, emphasis added). The descriptions are enigmatic and the author is successful in creating a lethargic, oceanic-like atmosphere; however, this excerpt is not simply a fantastic interlude, it contains a powerful social commentary. A striking example of this is the insistence on the word *they* to signal

² Henceforth all quotations from the novel will be indicated by the page number only.



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the difference between the sea animals (*we*) and the humans, especially those who own oil companies and are responsible for the ecological catastrophe. By the end of the novel, Adaora manages to speak to the swordfish: "I heard its voice in my head" (261). Then she adds that it "spoke like a member of that group Greenpeace" (262), with a fully articulate discourse.

There are more passages in the novel which focus on petro-culture and the damages caused by it. When Kola, the daughter of Adaora, speaks to Ayodele she emphasises the destruction of the natural environment: "My mother says the waters are dirty and dead because of oil companies" (68). Edebor also notes the failure of the Governments to "ensure regulation and prosecution of environmental polluters" (2017: 42). According to Nixon, Shell and other companies argue that these are Nigerian internal affairs and they cannot intervene; then, "under cover of deference for national sovereignty, they continue to act as ethical absentees" (2013: 107).

Ayodele, the alien from beyond the stars, is able to understand the ocean animals and communicate with them. The extra-terrestrial being carries their message to humans: "It's the people of the waters [...]. They are tired of boats and human beings" (240). The marine species revolt and they threaten to destroy the oil companies' technology: "All the offshore drilling facilities would be destroyed by the people of the water. [...] Oil could no longer be Nigeria's top commodity" (273). Jue mentions that a process of renewal is necessary, though nobody is really acting: "*Lagoon* recognizes that the key to Lagos's survival is a clean ocean, purged of leaky oil-drilling operations" (2017: 173).

The interesting twist this science-fiction narrative presents is that aliens

are willing to help humans; Ayodele tells the Nigerian president they "do not want to rule, colonize, conquer or take" (220). They settle in the ocean and they cleanse it: "*the ocean water just outside Lagos, Nigeria, is now so clean that a cup of its salty-sweet goodness will heal the worst human illnesses [...]. It is more alive than it has been in centuries and it is teeming with aliens and monsters*" (6, original emphasis). Melody Jue comments that the aliens are an antidote to dependence on fossil fuels (2017: 173). The key to renewal lies in mutual cooperation; *Lagoon* celebrates interspecies connection—from the smallest animals to aliens, the ocean and even breathing air—in order to regenerate the natural landscape. Ayodele acknowledges that "It is a matter of connecting and communicating" (220).

The aliens are willing to help the humans (in exchange for a home) and, thanks to their lessons, Nigeria is finally marching "towards a maturing democracy" (277). The president feels his country will be mighty and he says so when he addresses the nation: "For the first time since we cast off the shackles of colonialism, over a half-century ago, since we rolled through decades of corruption and internal struggle, we have reached the tipping point. And here in Lagos, we have passed it [...]" (277). The prospects for the future are positive, Okorafor imagines a utopian society which finds peace after decades of conflict. This is accomplished by a total integration of the diverse groups of people and races who conform this futuristic Nigeria. The president encourages a solidarity that transcends species: "People of Lagos [...], look at your neighbour. See his race, tribe, or his alien blood. And call him brother" (278). The general outlook of the novel is a positive one; ecological reparation is possible thanks to the technology of the aliens:



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“the land would be pure and [...] crops would grow as they never had before. Extinct creatures would return” (279). Jue mentions that “Okorafor’s oceanic Afrofuturism leads to a utopian politics of the possible”, thus this “petrofiction” constitutes a portrait of what a post-petroleum Nigeria could look like (2017: 175) if only the Government were willing to diversify the economy and rely on other natural resources other than oil. The ending is not fatalistic or grim; fantasy literature has the power to imagine better futures, even if this is not close to reality. Afrofuturism has the power to envision a different future and *Lagoon* conceives an idealistic future where the destruction of the environment, species, habitats and livelihoods in the Niger Delta is no longer a painful reality.³

The danger inflicted upon the natural environment, and especially upon the ocean, can only be understood if we see the notion of respect for the sea as an integral part of Nigerian culture in this discussion. The significance of the sea in *Lagoon* is in line with broader and increasing interest for the ocean as a space for rethinking environmental imaginaries—mainly focused on terrestrial spaces—, epistemologies and theoretical frameworks (Buell, 1998; Cohen 2012, cited in Jue: 2017, 176). Alaimo (2019) uses the term *blue humanities* to refer to the environmental orientation of oceanic scholarship. Jue also notes that the ocean is a recurrent element in Afrofuturism; it is a space where traditional cosmologies

and diasporic imaginations after the Middle Passage come together (2017: 176-177). In fact, the enslavement of millions of Africans finds its echo in the current situation; Western countries still exert their influence on the former colonies. The paradigms have changed (the Atlantic slave trade is a past abomination), but the Nigerian economy still depends on North American, Western European and East Asian multinational corporations. The ocean thus offers enormous creative possibilities and it becomes highly symbolic for these authors as a model for regeneration.

The oceanic imagery Okorafor creates in *Lagoon* is very powerful; the novel is a celebration of the diversity of sea life. For example, Adaora is taken into the depths of the sea and afterwards she recalls the magical, almost surreal atmosphere:

In the surrounding glowing water had been a riot of bright yellow butterfly fish, clown fish, sea bass, eels, shrimps, urchins, starfish, sharks, stingrays, swordfish, barracuda, a bit of everything local; some from the deep, some from the shallows. She’d never seen such a thriving coral community in any of her drives off the coast of Lagos. (53)

This is a mesmerising and vivid marine scene; colours, shapes and creatures come together in a vertiginous spiral of ocean life. This scene suggests the sublimity of the sea; it is enigmatic in its hugeness.

Lagoon praises the ocean: its water, fluidity, floods, dynamism. Melody Jue (2017) uses the word “Oceanic Futurism” to describe this particular genre in which the water becomes a fundamental element. The love, awe, admiration for water and the belief in the purifying powers of the sea impregnate this novel. The sea is presented as a magical space, an unfath-

³ Eutopias convey momentary relief from the calamities that surround us. In our coronavirus times, it is surprising to observe the increasing consumption of dystopian movies and series in successful online platforms. The fact that some audiences crave for this sort of fiction is perplexing.



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omable place: “*The sea always takes more than it gives. / Right now, as I weave, the sea roils and boils with life*” (228, emphasis in original). It also has healing powers and it is the source of life: “The cure for anything is salt water—sweat, tears, or the sea” (epigraph). The paratext is thus important because it gives clues to the reader; in this case emphasising the relevance of the ocean in this literary work. Furthermore, Adaora repeats the phrase “aman iman” on several occasions, a saying in the Tuareg language Tamashek that means “water is life” (12).

Another example of the centrality of water in *Lagoon* is the initial name Adaora thinks of for the extraterrestrial being the first time they encounter her: immediately, she thinks of the name “Miri”, but then the biologist dismisses it because “[t]he name needed to be more subtle than the Igbo word for ‘water’” (18). This clarification makes us think that the novel is written for an American readership rather than a Nigerian one, as they would have known this information. Okorafor was born in the United States from Nigerian parents and she currently lives in New York, so her readers are mainly American, a point that must be noted even though the author is here emphasizing her Nigerian heritage.

The title of the novel itself is very revealing. The author tells us in a note at the beginning of the narrative that the story takes place in the capital of Nigeria, Lagos, a “city [that] takes its name from the Portuguese word for ‘lagoon’ in plural (epigraph). The author notes that the Portuguese landed in Lagos in the 15th century and “[a]pparently, they could not come up with a more creative name” (epigraph). The irony contained in the remark presents an anticolonial positioning. Furthermore, there is an inherent energy to Lagos, a chaotic yet unescapable force.

The city exerts its fascination upon Adaora: “Lagos was riddled with corruption but she couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. *And its ocean life was fascinating. And problematic. It needed her*” (64, emphasis added). Adaora feels the moral need to remain in the main city of Nigeria because she wants to contribute to the reparation and further improvement of the severely damaged marine ecosystem. Thus Lagos, its waters and its ocean life captivates its inhabitants, and even the visitor from outer space.

3. Deconstructing Anthropocentrism

The following sections will examine how the notion of anthropocentrism is challenged and revisited in the novel. Okorafor’s work disputes the hierarchical model that places (white) man at the centre of the universe. *Lagoon*’s purpose is to question the anthropocentric vision that dominates Western epistemologies and cultural representations. Rosi Braidotti (2013a: 13) confronts the model of the classical and universal Man, “the measure of all things” and the Vitruvian man (who has become the emblem of European humanist thinking). She argues that this fixed paradigm has determined Western philosophy. Braidotti further adds that this cultural logic excludes alternative subjectivities; non-human entities (animals, plants, the physical environment), as well as racialized and sexualized bodies categorized as the “other” (2013a: 15). Braidotti expresses this idea as follows: “the women’s rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity. They inevitably mark the crisis of the former humanist ‘centre’ or dominant subject-position [...]”



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(2013a: 37). Braidotti's post-humanism is, thus, a theory that displaces Europe, the unmarked category of Man, from the centre of Humanism, and which advocates a plural, more ethical philosophy which directly confronts human exceptionalism.

Ayodele summarises perfectly the difficulties of decentring the human subject by stating that "human beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them" (67). However, one of the main postulates of ecocriticism is precisely this one: the need to acknowledge and revalorize the literary depictions of other terrestrial beings, the earth, the wilderness, that is to say, the non-human. *Lagoon* constitutes a celebration of all living beings; human and non-human creatures connect in it, even aliens and spiritual deities from West-African folklore. The novel is thus a call for total integration, and this expands to plants, foreign creatures from other parts of the cosmos, inanimate beings, and even the earth we tread on.

The amalgam of beings that populate the pages of the narrative is extraordinary, and it makes the literary work eclectic and diverse. The range of individuals who appear goes from science fiction characters—aliens, monsters who look like *Star Wars* creatures (251)—to humans and animals that inhabit this planet. Jue adds that this novel "does not pre-categorize the other—aliens, underwater cities, monstrous sea creatures, indigenous deities—ahead of time, into the genres of science fiction, fantasy, or the folkloric" (2017: 175) instead "it cultivates a practice of listening to the other" (2017: 175) in order to work together towards the goal of cleansing the ocean and making it habitable. The desire and ambition to include all forms of life can also be seen in Okorafor's other productions. The following image is the front cover of *LaGuardia*, a graphic story the

Nigerian-American author has recently published:



Fig. 1 @nnediokorafor. *LaGuardia*'s front cover. Instagram, April 12, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-4j5OclEqW/>

The image shows people and aliens attending a demonstration: they are holding banners with powerful messages, appealing to the rights of non-human populations. Alien beings and Nigerian women—there is even one who is pregnant, which is an allusion to the fight for reproductive rights and personal autonomy—are marching together. They are taking part in a protest against the oppressions and inequalities these minorities experience in their daily lives. Again, the symbiosis of science fiction, environmental ethics and anticolonial thought is made explicit.



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3.1. *Decentering the Human Subject: Narratological Devices*

In *Lagoon* there are three chapters written from the point of view of animals. Thus, non-human narrators—a bat, a spider and a swordfish—offer new perspectives on how they see, experience and connect with the outside world. In a note at the end of the novel the author mentions that in first contact narratives, aliens initially interact with humans. *Lagoon* reverses the parameters of mainstream science fiction novels, as the extraterrestrial beings communicate with sea creatures in the first place. The visitors from beyond the stars make no distinction between the diverse forms of life and they decide to interact with the animals first. The note also adds that most of the planet—around 70% of the surface of the Earth—is covered by oceans, rivers, lakes and so on. Hence, although humans populate land surfaces, there is life beyond our cities, countries and civilizations. The focus is no longer on humans but rather on marine species and the deep waters of the Atlantic, “the people of the waters” (240). In fact, it is important to note that *Lagoon*'s innovation is two-fold. On the one hand, as noted the aliens contact marine animals—and not humans—in the first place. On the other hand, the extra-terrestrial beings do not land in a cosmopolitan, “advanced,” European country, but they do so in a country from the Global South. Thus, the action takes place in Nigeria and not in Tokyo, Los Angeles or London (Jue, 2017: 175) or any other city of the rich North.

There are multiple subjectivities that appear on the pages of *Lagoon*. Okorafor gives animals a voice, a space within the myriad of stories that conform this novel. In fact, the work is dedicated to “the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nige-

ria—animals, plant and spirit.” Their experiences are no longer marginal or peripheral and they take part in the events. The novel is divided into three main sections or acts (“Welcome”, “Awakening” and “Symbiosis”). At the beginning of each part there is a chapter narrated by an animal. The first chapter is the one featuring the swordfish, which has been examined above. The marine creatures have a fundamental role in the novel as they rebel against the oil companies' infrastructures that are poisoning their habitat: they want the water to be clean, “for sea life... which meant toxic for modern, civilized, meat-eating, clean-water-drinking human beings” (248, original ellipsis). Humans have taken possession of natural goods, they have dominated other species (provoking the extinction of countless creatures) and exploited resources, but in *Lagoon* the inhabitants of the seas have the opportunity to fight back and regain that which had always been theirs. Hence, the introduction of the voice of the swordfish allows for a critique of the dominating nature of human enterprises.

The other two narrators that open Act II and III are a tarantula and a bat. The readers are able to experience their lives and struggles because they are given an opportunity to see the world through their lenses. The bat can communicate with other members of her species using ultrasonic squeaks and echolocation. The reader learns that “[s]he has no words for color because she is a bat and bats do not see colors” (224), but they can perceive sounds in a different way; a sound can be “visceral, thick, but not quite substantial” (223). The human senses, our system of communication (language), the way we categorize the world and the meaning we attribute to sounds, words and sentences are being interrogated. We take these concepts and our understanding of the



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universe for granted but these interludes offer a new prism, a different perspective on everyday events.

Moreover, the narrator praises the lives of these beings, no matter how minuscule, insignificant and apparently annoying. The readers are told that the spider has lost a leg in an accident, and that this was a “blow to his identity” (120). Thus, the seven-limbed tarantula has a sense of being, just as humans do. Besides, both these animals meet tragic destinies: Adaora's car crushes the spider unintentionally and the bat is killed by the Nigerian President's plane. These episodes show that these lives are disposable because animals are only a commodity for humans: we consume animal products, we keep them as pets, we trade and sell them and we destroy them non-chalantly. Braidotti emphasizes this point: “In advanced capitalism, animals [...] have been turned into tradable disposable bodies, inscribed in a global market of post-anthropocentric exploitation” (2013b: 70). Okorafor is therefore revalorising the naturalized other stating that these bodies, these lives are equally important.

Another narratological device Okorafor uses in order to decentre human subjectivity and give voice to other entities is exemplified by the fact that the narrator of the story is the Igbo deity Udide Okwanka—the spiritual dimension of the novel is worth noting. All the chapters are narrated in the third person: there is a heterodiegetic narrator who knows all the details regarding the plot and this is Udide Okwanka. It seems to hover above the story, but it is not involved in the main action. The narrator is an internal-focaliser because it adopts the perspective of the different characters this novel contains—sometimes it explains the events from the point of view of the swordfish, Adaora, the prostitute Fisayo and so on.

However, there are some parts written using the first person and they are visually distinct from the others because these parts are in italics. In chapter 44 the reader becomes aware of who is narrating this tale: “*I am Udide, the narrator, the story weaver, the Great Spider*” (228, emphasis in original). The Igbo deity has been weaving and carefully layering the different parts and pieces of the story: “*I spin the story. This is the story I've spun*” (291).

This literary strategy creates a polyphonic effect; the different stories, voices, echoes, visions and perspectives overlap in the “*great tapestry*” (292) which Udide Okwanka weaves non-stop. The spider seems to be an omniscient force, a divine creature who is aware of everything because it has been part of this universe from the beginning: “*I know it all because I created it all*” (291). The deity knows the stories of everybody: “*I've knitted their stories and watched them knit their own crude webs*” (291). The narrator addresses the reader to ask jokingly if we wish to know what happens to Chris, Agu, Adaora, Anthony, Kola and the others. However, the god-spider cannot solve this mystery because it “*feels the press of other stories*” (292). Udide Okwanka seems to establish a continuum, there is no end and no beginning because the stories of the people of Nigeria are part of the same tapestry, they are rather cyclical than lineal. Therefore, *Lagoon* seems to be like a palimpsest: new texts dialogue with former texts, all stories are imbricated and interconnected, the voices of the characters overlap.

The notion of weaving, transforming and rewriting stories continually resonates with ancient story-telling rites and ceremonies typical of West African regions. Anansi is a mythical creature that takes the form of a spider and is thought



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to know all the stories. The parallels with Udide Okwanka are obvious for “*Anansi is my cousin*” (292, idem). The Akan-speaking people in Ghana have a rich oral culture; there is an art form, called *Anansesem*, which consists of telling stories accompanied by a musical performance (Sutherland, 1999: v). However, these folktales are not rigidly composed, storytellers can introduce some variations to prove their artistry and they also accept contributions and suggestions from the audience; therefore, “stories in the tradition are under constant revision for renewal and development” (Sutherland, 1999: vi). The idea of composing a story with multiple voices in *Lagoon* certainly takes its inspiration from West African communal traditions. Hence, Okorafor adopts certain elements of African communities and their storytelling events: while in the West there is a “strong individualistic ideology of [...] (literate) historiography” (Tonkin, 1992, cited in Okpewho, 2003: 227), in oral cultures the creation of a new text is a shared experience and the limits between individual and collective memory are interrogated (Tonkin, 1992, cited in Okpewho, 2003: 227).

The spiritual component in *Lagoon* is relevant, as other deities from African and Nigerian systems of beliefs appear in this story. Science fiction and traditional myths are intertwined; Okorafor draws on traditional cosmologies to create powerful episodes of terror. African mythology, horror and speculative fiction are intermixed. For instance, a huge creature makes its entrance in a cybercafé where a man involved in the well-known Nigerian internet scam 419 is involved. The protagonist of the chapter is busy working on his manipulative plan when Ijele, “[t]he Chief of all Masquerades” (199) comes through the door. Mayhem and destruc-

tion follow. Another example of a spiritual entity that provokes chaos in the middle of Lagos is Legba, the god of crossroads. The Ghanaian singer's protégé (see section 4.2.), is waiting “on the corner of a busy intersection” (211) after a concert, when he witnesses an anarchic and tumultuous scene: there is a deafening noise that makes windows shatter and traffic go wild. The young man cannot contain his excitement for “Legba, the god of the crossroads was alive and well in the country of his origin” (214). These are chapters narrated by minor characters who only appear once in the novel, but they reinforce the idea that Afrofuturism has its roots in African myths and cosmologies, as Bryce (2019) suggests. Moreover, they exemplify the scope of characters that appear in this narrative, which is not only reduced to animals and humans but even includes the divine.

3.2. *The Limits between Human and Non-human*

Adaora's mutation illustrates the questioning of the constructed hierarchy that places the human subject as “the measure of all things” (Braidotti, 2013a: 13) since her hybrid body blurs the lines between human and non-human entities. Braidotti argues that posthumanism is a brand of vital materialism and thus “contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category” (2013: 66). Therefore, *Lagoon* interrogates and redefines the categorization of the animal as the “much cherished other of *Anthropos*” (Braidotti, 2013b: 68). This is exemplified by the transformative process that Adaora experiences at the end of the novel when she is about to meet the Elders: “Her legs were no longer legs. This part of



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her body had become the body of a giant metallic blue fish" (251). She relates how she is suddenly able to breathe inside the water because "she didn't have lungs anymore... she had gills" (250, original ellipses). The marine biologist becomes "half fish and half human" (261). Adaora becomes then a hybrid creature who inhabits multiple spaces at the same time as she is located in the interstices. The protagonist embodies this heterogeneity and seemingly diametric contradictions. The point, though, is that this mutation "complicates any comfortable distinction between human and non-human beings" (Mackey, 2018: 534). Her fusion with another species destabilises the accepted dichotomy between human and animals.

Although Adaora explains that she was born "with webbed feet and hands" (257) which the doctors had to separate surgically and that she did not need to learn to swim because she was a natural at it, she only becomes half fish and half human once the aliens come to Earth. Hence, the biologist undergoes this physical transformation when the extraterrestrial beings land; their presence and their technology are a catalyst for this alteration in Adaora's body. Therefore, the Nigerian-American author uses science fiction tropes to question the dualistic opposition between animals and humans. Science fiction and ecocriticism are intermingled once more. Adaora's "strange naked mermaid body" (256) could also be read as the fusion of technology with the human subject, which resonates with the idea of the cyborg developed in "A Cyborg Manifesto." Donna Haraway (1985) states that the cyborg destroys dualities—animal and machine, body and mind—with its mere existence, and it appears "where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed" (1985: 68). The cyborg is also the emblem of postmodern

identities, which are "contradictory, partial, and strategic" (1985: 72). Therefore, the hybrid being Adaora transforms into is representative of fractured identities that resist fixed labels. This new being embodies in-betweenness, fluidity and fragmentation.

There are other bizarre, human-looking characters in the novel, which also fluctuate between the limits of humanness. Adaora explains that at one moment she sees "five humanoid figures that reminded her of something out of *Star Wars*" (251). The monsters represent the symbiosis of human features, science fiction classic movie characters and the cyborg. Another example of these mixed monsters are the aliens that come out of the water to populate the Nigerian city; they look like humans save for the strangeness that surrounds them. This is the reaction of a man when he encounters one of these impostors: "She looked so normal. Except... [...] There was a flicker of oddness about her [...]" (205). These figures destroy any sense of familiarity; they combine a human appearance with something alien and undecipherable, something that cannot be fully grasped. Their indefiniteness and ambiguity are deeply disturbing but also attractive.

The three main human characters of this Afrofuturistic novel have some sort of supernatural power, something that differentiates them from the general population. Anthony Dey Craze's power is that he feels an energy coming from the earth. He is able to establish a connection with inert matter, the cosmos, other species; it is what he calls a "rhythm." The Ghanaian singer recalls an episode from his infancy; he had a bitter argument with some relatives and he felt the anger invading his chest, a strange force fighting to emerge from his entrails: "Then that which was building up within him, hum-



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ming to the rhythm of the earth, burst" (164). The explosion generates a sonic wave that makes windows shatter and houses shake. This raw power also connects him with the larger cosmos, specifically with the "Elders from the starts" (160), the messengers of Ayodele's people. These are the creatures "that Anthony was having a hard time separating from himself. He could still hear their song [...]" (160). This rhythm is the reason why he is a successful singer; people who attend his concerts are touched by this unstoppable force, by his energetic aura. His protégé explains that when he saw Anthony's live performance for the first time, he was changed, he knew that the strength "came straight from the soil of the continent" (211).

Therefore, his energy works like a link between the humans and the cosmos. This suggests that there is an inherent bond between humans and the rest of the universe for which I will use the terminology Braidotti uses to talk about non-human life, which she calls *zoe* (this category includes more than animal and human life). This powerful network of interconnections could refer to "the alliance with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or life in its nonhuman aspects" (2013b: 66) that Braidotti announces. This scholar states that "the vitality of this bond is based on sharing this planet, [...] on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical, nor self-evident" (2013b: 76). This new holistic approximation deconstructs human supremacy and understands that all species are related as they all belong to the same planet. Anthony's power reflects a new understanding of the relations between different species, one that celebrates life in all its forms. This ability, "this vibration that swelled up inside him" (167) is what allows him "to touch all things" (167). Therefore, *Lagoon*

praises integration and global connection and it also reflects some ideas of new materialist theories that authors like Braidotti are developing.

Conclusions

In *Lagoon*, speculative fiction tropes merge with an anticolonial positioning to articulate a powerful critique of petroculture, animal exploitation and human exceptionalism. Okorafor's work constitutes a good example of an alternative discourse that addresses ecological devastation in Nigeria. Furthermore, this novel seeks to raise awareness about ecosystem destruction and spread the message that we, as a society, need to work towards a sustainable development.

The first sections have analysed the Afrofuturist aesthetics, along with the controversies canonical science fiction movies or novels present. Black characters in mainstream science fiction are as marginal as in any other genre, and whenever they appear, they are reduced to a mystical figure or some sort of shaman. Afrofuturism is born as a reaction to this: the aim of Afro-diasporic and African writers is to produce literary works in which black people travel to outer space and interact with aliens. These authors are actively dismantling the idea that geek culture or cyberculture is a Western invention; it is indeed a global phenomenon. Moreover, speculative fiction written by black authors offers new perspectives on issues of race, identity, colonization and it enriches and widens the horizons of mainstream science fiction works.

Another aspect that has been addressed is that postcolonial theory has often overlooked non-mimetic literature. Some authors and critics believe that Africa is torn apart by insurgencies, wars,



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corrupt governments and human rights violations and therefore readers consume literature that denounces these crimes. I argue that an ethical positioning is not an exclusive feature of realist narratives and that futurist thinking is also necessary because it proposes solutions. Extremely crude depictions of violence lead to nothing if no effective alternatives are offered; fantasy literature has the potential to imagine new possibilities, utopian futures, better societies.

Thirdly, I have also shown how problematic it is to advocate for an apolitical, objective ecocriticism. Instead, postcolonial environmental criticism has proved to be more accurate because it does not ignore the role that the colonizing nations played in transforming the natural habitats, the traditional agricultural practices and, in general, the social structures of the native communities. Hence, it can be said that this novel is an example of environmental science fiction work (Mackey, 2018: 530), since it is a non-mimetic novel that focuses on the unequal resource distribution across the world. Nnedi Okorafor's narrative could also be classified as a petro-novel; it highlights the environmental damage inflicted upon the marine ecosystems outside Lagos. Western corporations—oil companies such as Shell in the case of Nigeria—are a legacy of colonialism. While a small part of the population prospers, the communities of the Delta Niger region suffer the consequences of the exploitation; oil spills, illnesses derived from pollution or the destruction of the marine habitat.

In *Lagoon*, animals—especially the swordfish—have an important role because they rebel against the oil infrastructures that pollute the Niger Delta region. Thanks to the technology of the aliens, ecological reparation is achieved. The sea, whose powers and almost super-

natural energy are celebrated throughout the novel, is finally clean and wildlife flourishes again in all its splendour. Interspecies cooperation—involving aliens, sea creatures, humans, the president—makes the construction of an advanced, post-petroleum Nigeria possible.

Therefore, this narration is a call to protect the environment and the natural resources, to embrace non-human forms of life and to transform the hierarchical relationship that places the human species at the centre of Western epistemology. The theoretical framework I have used in order to examine how human supremacy is challenged and revisited in *Lagoon* has been Braidotti's post-humanism. A good example of the notion of decentring human subjectivity in Okorafor's novel is the introduction of animal and spiritual narrators, such as a tarantula, a bat or the Igbo deity Udide Okwanka (who is represented as a spider). Moreover, Adaora's transformation into a fishlike creature—a hybrid being which is part cyborg, part mermaid, part human—destroys any sense of distinction and it blurs the boundaries between human and non-human bodies. She is the emblem of fractured and fluctuating postmodern identities. Furthermore, Anthony's "rhythm" or ability to perceive the vibrations of the earth, the soil (the *zoe*) and even the alien species and the larger cosmos shows that humans are somehow connected with the physical environment and that we are all part of the web of life.

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