

Posthuman Fiction: The Speculative Landscape of Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* & Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia*

KIRSTEN HUNT
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Abstract: Both *LaGuardia* by Nnedi Okorafor and *Tales from the Inner City* by Shaun Tan seek to conceptualize the interconnectedness of life on our planet by sketching a speculative landscape of future Earth. Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* decenters the human experience and demonstrates the agency of the natural world as animals regain, morph, and mutate against human impact. Whereas, in Okorafor's *LaGuardia*, intergalactic migration is centralised to decentralize humans as the dominant life form, whilst paying attention to the complexity of interspecies relationships. In this article, both texts are analyzed through the lens of posthumanism to bring to the forefront what has often been considered merely a background element of speculative fiction texts—their setting. Two principal questions frame this enquiry; “How does the speculative landscape lead the reader into a different way of thinking and discussing prevalent issues in our world?” and “What is the role of speculative

fiction in offering a more nuanced and hopeful imaginative landscape to confront the climate crisis?” As a means of promoting expanded literary-ecological cognition, the article will proceed to recommend posthuman fiction as a new subgenre within the umbrella of speculative fiction.

Keywords: Posthumanism, anthropocene, speculative fiction, ecology, young adult.

“The universe is so close” (Okorafor, 2019)

For adolescent readers living in the era of the Anthropocene, the natural world and ecology of life has moved from a backdrop role to human rhythms to predominate the forefront of identity construction and sense of place on Earth, whether these generations are ready or not. Readers' sensory perceptions have become more attuned to the natural world, and with this new awareness comes anxiety about

the future and a need for literature that speaks to this change, which is capable of looking around the corner with trepidation into the unknown future. As I will shortly proceed to critically define, the role of posthuman fiction is a vital pathway for diverging from dystopian/utopian stories that consume the larger cultural field of speculative fiction. Rather than focusing on dystopian depictions and utopian desires, posthuman fiction projects a more hopeful mirror of speculating on *what if?*, affording the adolescent reader insight into their identity as a human being in relation to the natural world of the Anthropocene. Via posthuman fiction, the reader's identity becomes an embodied and embedded form of coming-of-age narrative, within which Anthropocenic speculative landscapes prove central to internal growth.

The speculative landscape *within* posthuman fiction is focalised to demonstrate its agentic qualities that move it from a background element of narrative structure to the forefront. When a reader ventures across the terrains of an imagined future Earth, they are afforded an opportunity to reconstruct an altered identity—a mirror self that is not bound to the constraints of mimetic reality. Certainly, landscapes are pivotal to the worldbuilding of speculative futures more broadly; vital for the creative development of the story, and to position the reader within an imagined and constructed terrain. However, in the examples provided below, the landscape demonstrates an additional role within posthuman fiction, one that embodies agency and motive, operating both independently of, and in cooperation with humans, as supportive to their character development.

Set within speculative landscapes, *Tales from the Inner City* (2018) by Shaun Tan and *LaGuardia* (2019) by Nnedi Okorafor bring awareness to the Anthropocenic spectrum of anxieties and issues prevalent in our world,

such as climate anxiety, speciesism, xenophobia, and racism, to name but a few which emerged through this analysis. Both Okorafor and Tan create cartographies that are potentially plausible given our rapidly shifting mimetic landscapes. In his illustrated storybook *Tales from the Inner City* Tan depicts a surreal future where animals regain agency in the ruins of the urban landscape, theorising an ecological posthuman turn against anthropocentric norms. Meanwhile, in her graphic novel *LaGuardia* Okorafor imagines interplanetary migration, positioning Earth as a meeting ground for an interspecies community that supports imaginative identity construction in uncertain times.

Okorafor's and Tan's speculative landscapes neither resist conceptualising Earth's present or future, nor do they allude to dystopic demise. Rather, each author conceptualises Earth to explore the geologic and psychic turn to the Anthropocene and provide a place for possibility, hope, and constructive imagination throughout change and crisis on Earth. To the degree that Oziewicz affirms the necessity of stories to negotiate the "biocentric philosophical commitment to standing up for the planet and an applied hope articulated through stories" against the forces of an "ecocidal unconscious" (2022: 58), we can consider the position of posthuman fiction as a response to the call for "sustainable, equitable future for all forms of life on this planet" (2022: 59). As is demonstrated through this article's analysis of Tan and Okorafor's texts, traversing across a speculative landscape does much to 'stand up for' the planet by encouraging hopeful imaginative reconnections between readers and the natural world. By positioning posthuman fiction as a new subgenre, attention is paid to the broader field of speculative fiction, and also the popularised and frequently read dystopian story.

Diverging From Dystopia

Considering our future Earth in speculative terms becomes necessary in order for humans to understand their evolving role in the Anthropocene. However, extrapolating from current trends to project visions of the future that actualise the classic “what if?” proposition of speculative fiction too often generates a plethora of dystopian stories that do little to offer a truly imaginative landscape of Earth—one differing from today’s expectations—or simply promote fixation upon futuristic habitations divorced from Earthly considerations. To counter the persistence of dystopian stories, it is first important to consider that the field of speculative fiction encompasses an ever growing cultural field representative of a breadth of non-mimetic genres and mediums calling attention to itself as, “an inherently plural category” (Oziewicz, 2017: online). The malleable boundaries of the genre can be referred to as a *fuzzy set*, drawing from Brian Attebery’s (1992) application, and further layered by Oziewicz within the context of speculative fiction as, “a category defined not by clear boundaries but by resemblance to prototypical examples and degrees of membership: from being exactly like to being somewhat or marginally like” (Oziewicz, 2017: 1). By resisting firm thematic boundaries, the broader field affords the consistently evolving form scope to articulate voices and representations of sub-cultural movements and undercurrents in society. Indeed, whenever “we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction” (Imarisha, 2015: 3). In this sense, speculative fiction as a cultural field can move readers to conceptualise different realities that subvert our consensus reality (Oziewicz, 2017: online). In diverging from dystopian projections but remaining speculative,

posthuman fiction presents itself as a subgenre that embraces speculative landscapes that are neither anchored in despair and destruction, or reversely, within the utopian myth that we can continue on with the status quo. In effect, readers gain opportunities to reimagine themselves that push the boundaries of what it means to be posthuman in the Anthropocene.

Posthuman Fiction

“Putting posthuman theory to work is both exciting and daunting. Posthumanism invites us (humans) to undo the current ways of doing – and then *imagine, invent and do the doing differently*” (Taylor, 2016: 6, emphasis in original)

Tucked under the expansive umbrella of speculative fiction, I argue that posthuman fiction is a subgenre that draws upon tenets of posthumanist ideology to support a type of creative speculation that rests in more hopeful conclusions of future Earth. Posthumanism is a broad theoretical framework that recognises many schools of thought, and also comprises multiple practical applications across disciplines, operating in a malleable fashion to ‘fit’ within paradigms; “a philosophical stance about what might be termed a *perpetual becoming*” (Miah, 2008: 98, emphasis in original). There are however, constant ontological and epistemological undercurrents within this ever-shifting, often cacophonous frame of thinking. One theme foundational to posthumanist thought is the persistent questioning of anthropocentric values and the associated practices central to humanism. Posthumanists ask ‘who matters’ and ‘what counts’ in order to generate a current set of ethics that equally

values non-humans, other-than-humans, and more-than-humans (Taylor, 2016).

To engage theoretically with posthumanism, we must comprehend that the category of human emerged within a particular sociohistorical moment, stemming from the classical idea of *man*, a conception that encompasses all things, a kind of bodily perfection (Braidotti, 2013). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being human was (read: *still is*) considered to be the highest level of being. However, the concept of human was (*is*) not inclusive to all peoples, and historically, the humanist ideology developed alongside whiteness, Christianity, and colonialism, the combination of which justified the exploitation of people of colour outside Europe, and the takeover of their resources. If *others* were considered not to be human, but rather, sub-human, then inhumane exploitation was deemed acceptable. Further, embedded within humanism is the Hegelian ideology that there is the *self* and there is the *other*; therefore, the exclusion of an indeterminate *other* proved necessary for a creation of a *self*, an “in and out group” so to speak (Guignion, 2019). In response to the abuses of humanism, posthumanism favours new possibilities that challenge the hierarchical barrier between humans and others whilst considering: what comes after?

Posthuman fiction therefore comprises a valuable conduit for adolescent explorations into uncharted territories in line with posthumanist theory; decentering the human, and undermining our dominant cultural constructions of *man* as the highest form of being. Drawing from scholars who engage theoretically at the crossroads of posthumanism and young adult literature (Paulsen *et al.*, 2022; Tarr & White, 2018; Taylor & Hughes, 2016), as well as posthumanism more broadly (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari,

1987; Ferrando, 2019), the following list serves as a guide to explore tenets of young adult posthuman fiction:

- (1) The human being is decentered.
- (2) Orders of hierarchy are disrupted.
- (3) More-than, other-than, and non-humans are central protagonists alongside the human.
- (4) The normalised human body of mimetic reality is disrupted either by machine(s) or by ecology.
- (5) Landscapes are brought to the forefront & have agency.
- (6) Identities are reconstructed and understood in a different manner to their typified construction within societal constructs and mimetic reality.
- (7) Ideas, thoughts, and stories do not have to resolve into a singular story or idea. Rather, there emerge opportunities for multiplicitous meaning and understanding.
- (8) Resistance is materialised to utopian and/or dystopian thinking.

This list is, of course, another ‘fuzzy set’ like the field of speculative fiction itself, and is not intended to be proscriptive or exhaustive of the manifold possibilities which arise within a posthumanist framework. To qualify this list within a posthumanist framework, it deserves clarification that each tenet is plural and rhizomatic. These tenets interact, merge, and entangle throughout the analysis in this article, and would, I assume, also do so in any future use. In this article, I will draw from this tentative list with a primary focus upon the fifth tenet—in line with this issue’s overarching theme.

Landscapes

In its insistence upon reimagining the human place in nature, posthuman fiction also emphasises the reimagining of the landscapes which humans occupy. Posthuman fiction brings awareness to the agency of the natural world, therefore its speculative landscapes become pivotal, as opposed to a background element. Evoking landscapes complete with sensory details is central to the development of all fiction in order to provide readers a world to exist in, however, landscape construction becomes especially imperative in the realm of non-mimetic representation. Specifically, speculative landscapes are agentic; their role in the development of narrative is centralised alongside the construction of human characters. Not only does the landscape function as a type of imaginative playground, but even key human aspects such as identity construction and coming-of-age revelations are often dependent upon the speculative landscapes they occur within. If differences and imaginative opportunities enter the world through fiction, it follows that we are creaking open a door that someone else can peer into, maybe even open. An example of one speculative landscape's focal narrative role is apparent, for instance, in Vandana Singh's *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (2008).

Throughout this collection of short stories, the reader is pushed to notice the small details of mimetic reality that magically transform to reveal hidden dimensions beyond. In the chapter titled *Thirst*, the unconscious fusion of nature pushes the reader into a multifaceted sensory experience that is an example of the ecologically altered posthuman body: "In the dream there were snakes coiling about her, dark and glossy as the hairs on her head, and an altar, and the smell of sandalwood incense, her mother's favourite kind" (Singh, 2008: 89). Subsequently, the

protagonist Susheela comes to understand her role amongst Snake divinities along with the root of the "nameless hunger that was in her" (96). Throughout the story that Singh weaves, the young protagonist Susheela experiences a slow transformation from human to snake, and more deeply, her life becomes less mundane, and she more alive: "A spasm shook her from head to foot; as she lost consciousness she felt warm currents coursing painlessly through her, stretching and squeezing, shaping and molding, as though she were a lump of clay in a potter's wheel" (103).

Singh does more than offer up a rich sensory story here; she utilises the landscape as an elemental part of the story, which interpellates Susheela to think more deeply about her connection to the universe, in a manner other-than, and more-than human. Consequently, readers also benefit vicariously from her existential revelation, becoming remolded by the Earth ourselves. In the analyses that follow, I demonstrate that *Tales from the Inner City* and *LaGuardia* are similarly representative of posthuman fiction, via their inclination to highlight the centrality of speculative landscapes. Both stories affect readers visually and viscerally, in order to speculatively introduce readers to a future Earth that does not feel unreal, impossible, or dystopian. The reader can sense themselves in this landscape; it is after all Earth. Through these disrupted depictions of future Earth, Okorafor and Tan introduce our senses to new *beings*, and to a different way to imagine means of *being* in the future. By highlighting how speculative landscapes within posthuman fiction both operate and elicit awareness and comfort for adolescent readers in the Anthropocene, we learn about reconnecting with the natural world and our inherent connections with animals through *Tales from the Inner City*, and about reconstructing our

identity by becoming something more-than-human through *LaGuardia*.

Ecological Posthumanism through *Tales from the Inner City*

"Run with us a while, they say, and we'll tell you a story"

(Tan 2018: 80, emphases in original)

In 2020, while the world locked down during the COVID-19 pandemic, animals and the natural world crept out and into the forefront of consciousness, in a brief moment termed the anthropause, which was generated by "the substantial reduction of human mobility observed during early COVID-19 lockdowns" (Rutz, 2022). Whilst human activity was stilled during quarantine, we were astonished and humbled by the animals that emerged into old habitats formerly expropriated by humans. Loggerhead turtles crawled onto shore during the day on a formerly human-crowded beach in Florida; the rare wildcat Guina was spotted in an urban space in Chile; and shy marine fish emerged within a once tourist rich area of the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador (Stokstad, 2020). This quick emergence of animals moved us, intrigued us, and then led many to question our influence on animals and the Earth. We noticed at least, and at last, that our presence is problematic—"WE are the virus!" becoming one the most influential anthropause memes, as humans took a backseat for a moment in time.

Nevertheless, this brief moment did indeed stir us to speculate on our continued role on Earth, sensing that our posthuman being will be faced with the natural world more directly as the impacts of climate change continue to redirect human attention to the landscapes that surround and sustain us; as posthuman fiction can remind us, we are interconnected

equal beings. Thus, ecological posthumanism is a helpful framework that examines the interaction between humans and the natural world as the landscape of our mimetic natural world continues to slowly move to the forefront of our existence in the Anthropocene. For Chen, "[e]cological posthumanism is critically focused on how environmental changes force humans to come into physical contact with other nonhuman entities, how changing environments affect the human body, and how, as a result, they recontextualise and redefine the human experience materially, culturally, and biologically" (2018: 183). Hence, ecological posthumanism looks closely at how other-than-human actors shape the world, and how the agency of the natural world directly impacts the ways in which humans make sense of who we are in the world, as coexisting inhabitants.

Layering this ecological lens on posthuman fiction highlights the pivotal role of the speculative landscape in affording adolescent readers a window wherein ecological implications are invited via protagonists' interactions with the landscape. Carroll (2011) and Dewan (2010) argue that any protagonist who intra-acts (Barad, 2003) in spaces such as forests, oceans, trees, gardens, and/or other natural ecologies creates a sense of heightened spatial understanding which can help support young people's identity construction, and provokes an invitation to become entangled within the intra-action of non-human matter to form a dynamic relationship among nature, as has been demonstrated via my engagement with Singh above. Nevertheless, other scholars such as Curry (2013) posit that hostile fictional landscapes instil that their protagonists must survive through adaptation and post-natural transformations. Consequently, here on Earth, young readers are developing a mixed relationship with the landscapes they inhabit.

There is harmony and love to be found, but there is also a tendency towards a growing hostility due to the disturbances caused by climate change.

The short stories which comprise *Tales from the Inner City* elicit the reader to critically consider the agency of the natural world, drawing specific attention to our relationships with animals. Through the collection of stories paired with stunning illustrations, Tan explores the intermingling of humans and animals against an alien cityscape where adaptation and survival are reimaged and speculated upon. For instance, Tan's creative weaving of the complicated relationship between humans and animals is beautifully portrayed in the story 'Bears with Lawyers.'

In this story, bears seek legal assistance from lawyers able to speak and study the Ursine language in order to sue humankind in a class-action lawsuit, leading to *Ursidae v. Homo sapiens*. "Human Law is not the only legal system on the planet, it turned out. There are as many systems as there are species, the lawyers for the bears explained to an incredulous room, under which all animals are recognised as legal entities within a cosmic hierarchy" (Tan, 2018: 175). Although the humans have the "best legal team that money could buy" (176), the bears show them non-human knowledge that suddenly appears indisputable, which shakes and shocks them. The bears' case proves strong, and the evidence appears clear that *Homo sapiens* is at fault for many crimes against the bears, "*Theft. Pillage. Unlawful Occupation. Deportation. Slavery. Murder. Torture. Genocide*. Not to mention all the crimes we'd never even heard of, things like *Spiritual Exclusion, Groaking, and Ungungunurumunre*" (177, emphasis in original). The humans fight with all their legal might in what they know is an impossible struggle against the mountains of evidence of

anthropogenic harm. Thus, the humans gain insight into their own wrongdoing, "Deep in our hearts we knew they were right. Even as we fought our defense with such intellectual ferocity, as if to convince ourselves more than our opponents of a truth mired in self-contradiction" (178). Faced with this loss, the humans can only conceive of one thing to do, "we shot the bears" (178). And so, bears are gone, but the story ends with the arrival of a new legal team seeking reparations against *Homo sapiens*, "The cattle are here... with lawyers" (179).

Tan is critically calling attention to how those animals subject to acts of specicide, if they were given agency (in this case legal agency), would bring us humans to our knees. We are already witnessing the legal phenomenon of granting personhood status to physical features on Earth. For example, the Whanganui River in New Zealand was declared a legal personhood in 2017, soon after a similar personhood status was granted to the Ganges and supporting tributaries in Uttarakhand, India, whereas Bolivia passed the *Law of Mother Earth* effectively granting the natural world equal rights to humans in 2010 (Andrews, 2019). These examples demonstrate the ethical shifting of human values in relationship with landscapes, and serve as a catalyst for future movements that recognise the cultural and ecological significance of the natural world. As is further evidenced below, Tan is not simply telling stories about agentic animals demanding justice; rather, he more broadly speculates on how future humans and future animals might intra-act, including how we humans could process the reorganising of species hierarchy, ridding us of the "false integrity not only of the humanist self but also the idea of nature as essentially natural, other, elsewhere, or outside" (Taylor, 2012: 359). As our world shifts through the parallel slow and quick cycles of climate

change, such ecological posthumanist themes in young adult literature have the potential to help address anxieties about the changing Earth.

In another story, 'The Butterflies Came at Lunchtime,' butterflies come in an unthinkable number to the tips of human noses, tickling the arms, and filling every space of a city during lunchtime, "*Look! Look! There on your shoulder, your arm, your knee, your head! Hold still!*" (18, emphasis in original).

They perch and hum their wings, bringing a moment of pure joy and quietude to the human mind, reminding us that there are other means of cognition aside from the endless chatter of our busy brains. "We thought of nothing but the butterflies, the butterflies settling on our heads, on the heads of friends and family, on everyone we knew and everyone we didn't, on the whole city all at once. *Don't move*, we whispered, wishing it could last forever. *Hold still! Hold still! Hold still!*" (18, emphasis in original). Here, Tan highlights how the sheer magnitude of butterflies coming to the city makes the humans of the story stop, look, feel,

and listen. The expanded sensory perception that Tan offers through the small but numerous butterflies provides an example of the enduring relationships we inherently sense within the ecology of the world. In this moment, as the butterflies reach toward us through the pages, we can feel the sense of making kin (Haraway, 2016).

Tan similarly directs readers to conceptualise how the utter closeness of another species can shift our preconceived notions of love, togetherness, and public behaviors in his story 'The Public Called Them Indecent.' Enormous snails inch along the train lines in a city making love without a care or concern, "finding each other in the byways and intersections of our great city and making love right then and there, answering every shout of indignation with grace and pride in the slowest of slow dances in the dark" (61). In this story, humans gradually learn to love and be envious of the snails' beautiful presence in the world and unabashed love making over the course of a hundred years: "We would be so sad if they

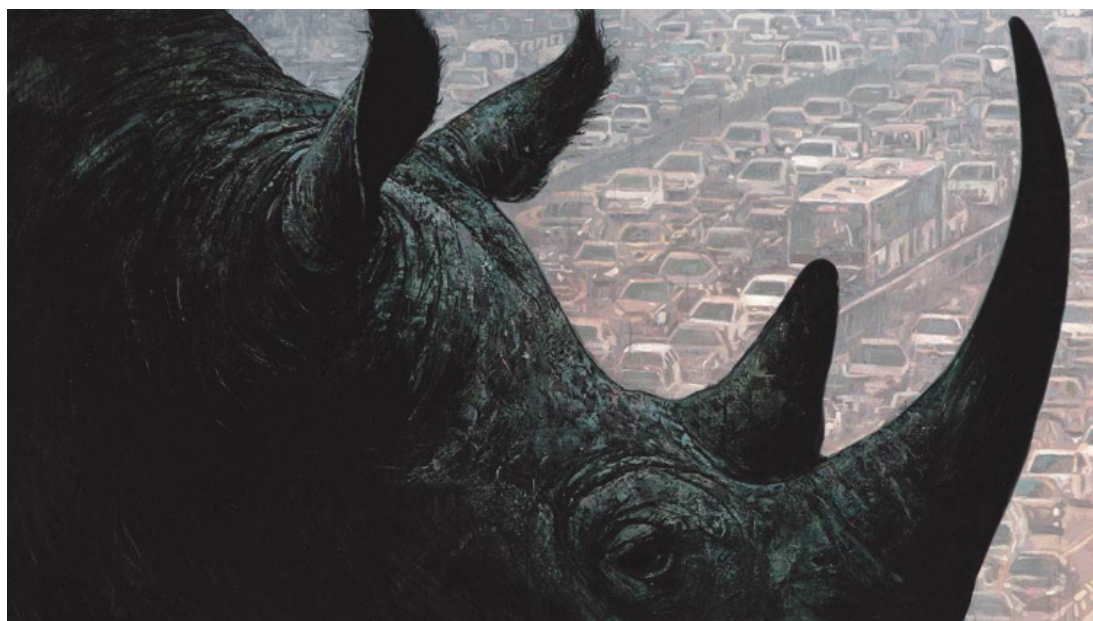




ever went away, leaving us all alone with our small ideas about love” (61). As these examples highlight, anthropocentric biologists reduce animal behavior to mere ‘tropisms when they are in reality so much more complex than that, merely *different* to human behaviours.

Long after this reading, we might continue to wonder about what animals could teach us if

they become centred in our thoughts, as a result of being literally magnified. The butterflies were innumerable, the snails were enormous; Tan plays with size and magnitude to centralise the validity of these animals’ existence visually and mentally. In another story, ‘The Monster of Our Nightmares Was Finally Dead’ a gigantic shark spanning an unrecognisable length is captured and slaughtered; those humans responsible rejoice that “[t]he monster of our nightmares was finally dead” (65), only for the slaughter to leave them (and the reader) with a lingering sense of regret and guilt. “We searched for words that didn’t exist, wondered why we needed them so badly, then went home” (67). In some instances we will never be able to answer that question, as Tan underscores by addressing what we lose when we neglect and destroy animals—such as in the story ‘The rhino was on the freeway again.’ As it opens, “We blew our horns in outrage! Men came, shot it dead, pushed it to one side. We blew our horns in gratitude! But that was yesterday. Today we all feel terrible. Nobody knew it was the last

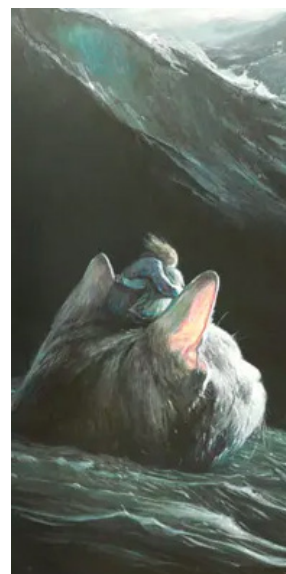


rhino. How could we have known it was the last one?” (105). Living through the time of the sixth mass extinction (Kolbert, 2014) drives us toward tremendous grief; just as the rhino is lost in *Tales from the Inner City*, we are continually losing our fellow animals to extinction. There is no meteor to blame this time; this time we are driven to look inward at the costs of our consumption.

In an abrupt shift, the final story in the collection, ‘We Tell Each Other the Same Story’ sees posthumans considering their place upon what was once the Earth, “We stare at our own upturned five-fingered hands for a moment and ponder the crazy fluke of existence” (217). Tan’s words ring with a sincerity and sadness at the potential for humans to be *more*, and for the harmful ways that we *still are*, “Still, we can’t help fossicking about, forever looking backward. We are that kind of animal, as if the rebellion of our spines against gravity, this bizarre upright gait, had also caused some other anomaly of the eyes and mind” (218).

Tales from the Inner City brings its speculative landscape to the forefront of readers’ minds, creating synaptic connections that are not easily drawn in mimetic reality. The butterflies elicit memories of joyful moments within the natural world, the slimy mating snails evoke much discomfort, but also acceptance that love is not tidy or simple. Most prominently, the reader considers their own relationship with animals, along with how climate change and shifting environments alter their phenomenological positionalities.

As such, through the lens of ecological posthumanism we can begin to mend the fractured relationships we have with animals and the natural world. Speculative landscapes play a valuable cognitive role in teaching us to replicate these lessons within our mimetic landscapes, which remain so deserving of close contemplation. This is not to say that humans should be pushed aside or disregarded; rather, Tan positions the human as insuperably connected to the animal, and the natural ecology



of the Earth as a reciprocal relationship between interdependent entities, giving a sense that we are not alone here. We have kin in animals, we share an old love, as Tan is reminding us. “Time flowed out before us, an endless river, the plains opened up, the sky lifted, and you cried out to me then, *This world is ours!* And so it was” (27, emphasis in original)...

Becoming Posthuman: Constructing Identity in the Anthropocene Through *LaGuardia*

“If adolescence is the time when one considers what it means to be human [...] then there has never been a period of history when it has been more difficult to figure out than now” (Ostry, 2004: 222).

Just as the changing ecology of Earth is central in reconnecting the self with the agency and intelligence of other Earthly actors through young adult literature, the ecological landscape also plays a pivotal role in constructing identity for the reader by repositioning its protagonists in a *speculative* landscape. One of the most prevalent themes in young adult literature—the coming-of-age theme, or *bildungsroman*—depicts a character’s internal struggle which eventually concludes with their personal growth and identity construction. As the Earth changes, our lives also change, therefore ways in which we conceptualise humans growing from childhood to adulthood must also shift.

Literature which speaks to this often intense period of adolescent time is particularly pivotal in supporting contemporary children, and providing stories that are reflective of how young people construct their identity in the Anthropocene. As Phoebe Chen states, “for young adult protagonists” to sufficiently attain posthumanistic signification it is vital

that “their physical interaction with and within nature, ecology, and the environment is treated as foundational to their self-awareness and self-identity” (Chen, 2018: 180). On these grounds, it is crucial to interrogate how identity is constructed in young adult literature for a changing Earth where unknowing and indeterminacy are key components of growing up. In Nnedi Okorafor’s *LaGuardia*, the central human characters literally transform from human to posthuman in a physicalised materialisation of interspecies union, and thereby demonstrate a future where humans can readily become *more-than-human*, and bring the reader into a space of curiosity towards their own potential to magically transform as a citizen of the future.

LaGuardia opens by portraying a changed Earthly landscape, with bright and vibrant animated florals crawling and reaching around architecture, amidst a tapestry of aliens from tiny blob creatures to shapeshifting kangaroos. Okorafor also builds in other familiar near-futuristic elements that are already possible to imagine, such as self-driving cars, plasma screen tablets operated with full artificial intelligence, and so on. Each page of Tana Ford’s vibrant illustrations builds on this interesting bricolage of creative imaginaries visually, alongside working to defamiliarise recognisable Earth systems. This grounded approach to speculating on the future brings the reader into a believable space, and also attunes the mind to the restructuring of human identity with the addition of intergalactic species as inhabitants of Earth.

The graphic novel’s protagonist, Future Nwafor Chukwuebuka, enters the *LaGuardia* airport from Lagos, having been delayed going through a very familiar rite of travel—security. In the first pages, Okorafor sets the stage for a United States that is altered but hangs onto



dangerous *isms* that are not only still prevalent but heightened from intergalactic assimilation into the country, drawing connections specifically to racism and xenophobia as it currently exists.

Future travels to New York from Lagos for two key reasons. Firstly, she is pregnant but struggling to align values with her boyfriend Citizen who is actively supporting a movement agitating for a pure race of humans. Secondly, she is smuggling a floral named 'Let-me-live' into the United States to forestall a floral war. She arrives to the care and comfort of her grandmother Obioma, an immigration lawyer and supporter of the interspecies community. Intergalactic immigration thus decentralises humans as Earth's dominant life form while paying attention to the complexity of

interspecies relationships and suggesting what humans could become if we accept otherness.

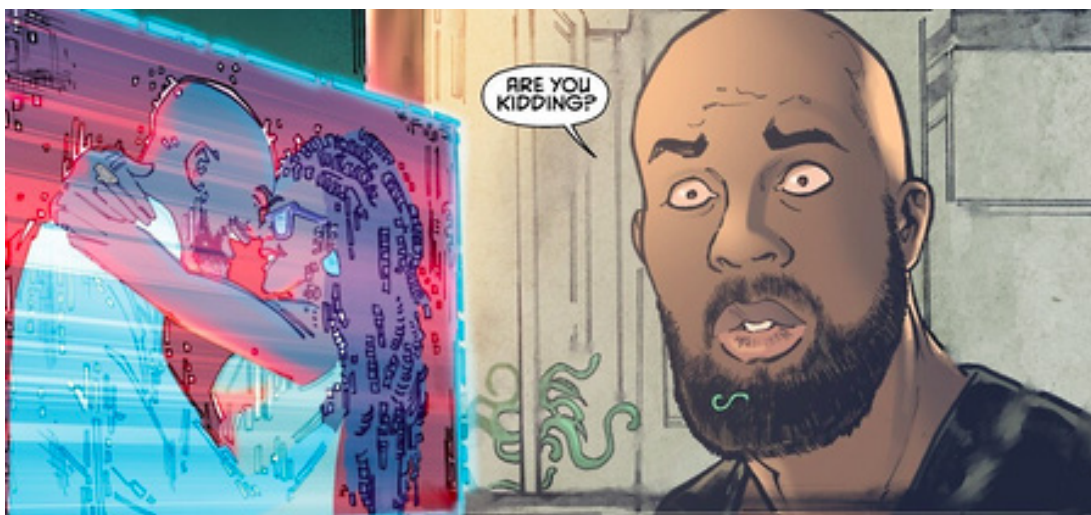
However, posthuman identity in *LaGuardia* is not simply a rejection of humanity. It is a re-engagement with our potential to become *more-than-human* by building community with other species from other dimensions and planets. Although Future provides a model of how to be effortlessly posthuman in *LaGuardia*, readers are also presented with an alternate focal positionality. Specifically, they have the opportunity to witness and potentially connect with the internal struggles of the character Citizen, as he reconciles his new interspecies identity with his xenophobic beliefs, "I kept getting those damn *green* hairs in my beard" (Okorafor, 2019, emphasis in original).



This interspecies union proceeds gradually throughout the novel as “Let-me-live” releases transformative spores into both Future and Citizen. The latter is less than accepting of his altered biology initially: “Your grandmother told me everything... How I got that alien DNA from that floral I gave you, how you smuggled it here.” Citizen thus plays an important focal role in demonstrating resistance to posthuman means of being, and more broadly, a cognitive disconnection with the changed landscape of his world. “After I found out I had alien DNA, it was this quiet chaos... it’s like not knowing

who you **are** anymore” (Okorafor, emphasis in original).

Both characters’ struggles and revelations in the process of becoming posthuman are amalgamated in the birth of their child “Future Citizen”; a name suggesting that through interspecies relationships, we can ourselves become the posthuman body, we can become *more-than-human* future citizens of Earth. By shining a light on these characters, the reader understands that our human identity does not lose relevance or value in the territory of the future, rather, the human is afforded a deeper





insight into their existence (Chen, 2018). Not only can we understand our relevance into the future through *LaGuardia*, but in addition, we can also make connections to the ways in which we already embody a multitude of diversity via the human body's immense microbiome, or gut flora.

As Ironstone phrases it, "We are not alone," since that "the human microbiome has significant ontological and epistemological ramifications for thinking about who and what the human is" (Ironstone, 2018: 325). Indeed, the characters in *LaGuardia* have both an internal and external mutation and burgeoning plurality of the self, and we could assert that this dynamic representation of the posthuman body is a "hungry self to move itself in a direction that is not merely random but that coincides with where its own 'selfish' interests lie" (Glasgow, 2020: 201). The characters (read: *us*) hunger for change; outside of the mere happenstance of Let-me-live releasing spores, lies a selfish desire to transform into the posthuman self and body.

Conclusively, *LaGuardia* presents emergent themes about the future of our species, the relationships we make or break with beings initially alien to us, and ultimately how we could transform our identity from human to posthuman.

Lines of Hope

"You leave, you return, you take, you bring. And so it goes. Good. We embrace you and we wish you safe travels" (Okorafor).

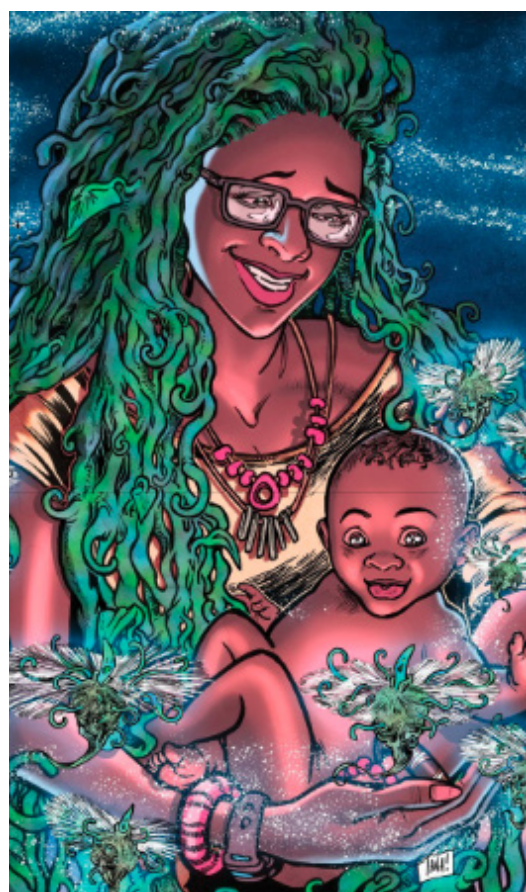
Our Earth-bound world is brimming with impossibilities and future possibilities in the era of the Anthropocene. Humans are simultaneously walking a line of hope and despair, navigating loss and unforeseen imaginaries. We can sense the Earth changing, and familiar mimetic landscapes are being drastically altered through abuse and neglect from human impact and consumption. We hope for "safe travels," as Okorafor terms the iterative nature of our existence and the hopeful possibilities of our future as a posthuman race. She says as much when she writes:

I believe in the existence of aliens. I fantasize about how their eventual arrival will force an amazing paradigm and identity shift in humanity and for the entire earth. I'm an irrational optimist, so I look forward to all this with excitement, anticipation and curiosity. The future portrayal in this series has its problems but it's not a dystopia.

The futuristic, altered landscape of Earth has largely been relegated to speculative fiction that insists on depicting demise through dystopian themes, or reversely,

through utopian desires that center humanistic idealism. However, one only has to look within our mimetic reality here on Earth to become cognisant that a futuristic, altered landscape is before us through the effects of the climate crisis. As our world changes in the Anthropocene, so must young adult literature shift to support adolescent readers in navigating this indeterminate time. The conclusions that are typically drawn from dystopian young adult literature fail at giving choice to outcomes; they leave the reader with a sense of hopelessness that marinates into a blend of fear, anxiety, and inactivity to effect positive change for the Earth. As a counter, posthuman fiction reveals a unique lens to explore the agency of the natural world, and further speculate on the posthuman self; creating moments of disruption to the otherwise automatic ways that readers make meaning (Hayles, 2017).¹ Nestled within the rhizomatic tentacles of posthumanism, this type of fiction embodies indeterminacy, and reflects a disentanglement from anthropocentrism that is necessary in a world that is in flux and crisis. In my illustrative analyses of *Tales from the Inner City* and *LaGuardia*, the landscape is brought to the forefront of the story, and supports character development. From this perspective, the landscape embodies agency; it is centred equally alongside the protagonist and characters. The agency of the speculative landscape provides a cognitive shift, emphasising how narrative structures function differently within posthuman fiction in comparison to its umbrella genre of speculative fiction.

Both Tan and Okorafor write within a similar paradigm that unveils aspects of mimetic reality on Earth, whilst simultaneously inserting



futuristic speculation enveloped within the context of prevalent real-world issues that we currently face. They share the common thread of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016: 1) of our world, but refract and bend reality just enough to portray a layer we did not know or see. It is this refracted mirror of mimesis that pulls the reader to gaze at their posthuman self, and upon their relationship with the ecology of the Earth. Just as Okorafor expresses optimistic enthusiasm for the future of our existence, Tan also leans into a hopeful state of future existence

¹ This disruption to the nonconscious cognitive process has the possible result of pulling the reader into extended consciousness, and can thus promote creative identity construction. It is outside of the scope of this article to explore the nuances of Hayles’ framework, but this matter nevertheless deserves mentioning through the posthumanist lens.

when he recently writes, “what gives me hope is *the future that has yet to be imagined* [...] I feel doors opening up, opening to things not yet known or thought about, I feel oxygen flowing in” (Tan, 2022: 187, emphasis in original). This kind of trepidatious optimism is rare, and yet both authors strike a long forgotten chord in human readers; hopeful imagination.

Tan has a posthuman pulse on the relationships between humans and animals, and a foreboding tone of what we risk losing if we continue on with the status quo and do not stop to consider our role as interconnected kin. We do not need to travel into the future or completely untether from reason and logic

to feel the tenderness and love that is waiting for us right here, right now, on Earth. Indeed, Okorafor also conceptualises the foreboding persistence of racism and xenophobia echoed far into the future; warning us of the omnipresence of dominance and power in societal structures. We might wonder, ‘Is this really the future Earth we hope for?’ leading us to consider the parts of ourselves that are yearning to reach out to an unknown *more-than-human*, posthuman self. We do not need to believe in the existence of aliens, or that florals and humans can interbreed to create a new type of human to imagine what we could be if we let go of anthropocentrism, and embraced otherness in all its forms.

Works Cited

- ANDREWS, Candice Gaukel (24 September 2019). "New Zealand Grants Mountains, Parks and Rivers Personhood," *Natural Habitat*. <https://www.nathab.com/blog/new-zealand-grants-mountains-parks-and-rivers-personhood/> (Access 15 October 2022).
- ATTEBERY, Brian (1992). *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- BARAD, Karen (2003). "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Gender and Science*, 28.3: 801-831.
- BARAD, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. London: Duke University Press.
- BRAIDOTTI, Rosi (2013). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- CARROLL, Jane Suzanne (2011). *Landscape in Children's Literature*. London: Routledge.
- CHEN, Phoebe (2018). "Posthuman Potential and Ecological Limit in Future Worlds," Anita Tarr and Donna R. White (eds.), *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 179-195.
- CURRY, Alice (2013). *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- DELEUZE, Gilles & Felix GUATTARI (1980, 1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi (trans.). London: University of Minnesota Press.
- DEWAN, Pauline (2010). *The Art of Place in Literature for Children and Young Adults: How Locale Shapes a Story*. New York: Edwin Mellen.
- FERRANDO, Francesca (2019). *Philosophical Posthumanism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- GLASGOW, Rupert D.V. (2020). "Minimal Selfhood," *Journal of Neurogenetics*, 34.1: 198-202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01677063.2019.1672680> (Access 15 October 2022)
- GUIGNION, David (21 September 2019). "Rosi Braidotti's 'The Posthuman' Theory & Philosophy." <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/theory-philosophy/rosi-braidottis-the-posthuman-xmte9Sp1Nry/> (Access 15 October 2022).
- HARAWAY, Donna J. (2016). *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University Press.
- HAYLES, N. Katherine (2017). *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- IMARISHA, Walidah & Adrienne Maree BROWN (2015). *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- IRONSTONE, Penelope (2019). "Me, My Self, and the Multitude: Microbiopolitics of the Human Microbiome," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22.3: 325-341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431018811> (Access 15 October 2022).
- KOLBERT, Elizabeth (2014). *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. London: Bloomsbury.
- MIAH, Andy (2008). "A Critical History of Posthumanism," Bert Gordijin and Ruth Chadwick (eds.), *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*. Berlin: Springer, 71-94.
- OKORAFOR, Nnedi (2019). *LaGuardia*. Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books.
- OSTRY, Elaine (2004). "'Is He Still Human? Are You?': Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 28.2: 222-246.

OZIEWICZ, Marek (29 March 2017). "Speculative Fiction," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78> (Access 15 October 2022).

OZIEWICZ, Marek, *et al.* (2022). *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, London: Bloomsbury Academic

PAULSEN, Michael, *et al.* (2022). *Pedagogy in the Anthropocene: Re-Wilding Education for a New Earth*. London: Palgrave.

RUTZ, Christian (2022). "Studying Pauses and Pulses in Human Mobility and their Environmental Impacts," *Nature Reviews—Earth & Environment* 3: 157-159. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-022-00276-x> (Access 15 October 2022).

SINGH, Vandana (2008). *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet*. Delhi: Penguin Books India.

STOKSTAD, Erik (13 August 2020). "The Pandemic Stilled Human Activity. What Did This 'Anthropause' Mean for Wildlife?," *Science*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/pandemic-stilled-human-activity-what-did-anthropause-mean-wildlife> (Access 15 October 2022).

TAYLOR, Carol A. (2016). "Edu-crafting a Cacophonous Ecology: Posthumanist Research Practices for Education," Carol A. Taylor & Christina Hughes (eds.), *Posthuman Research Practices in Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 5-24.

TAYLOR, Matthew A. (2012). "The Nature of Fear: Edgar Allan Poe and Posthuman Ecology," *American Literature*, 84.2: 353-79.

TAN, Shaun (2018). *Tales from the Inner City*. New York: Arthur A. Levine.

TAN, Shaun (2022). "The Future That Has Yet to be Imagined," Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dědinová (eds.), *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 188-190.

TARR, Anita & Donna R. WHITE (2018). *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.