

**Okorafor's Organic Fantasy: An Africanfuturist  
Approach to Science Fiction and Gender in *Lagoon*.**

**By**

**Brett Taylor Banks**

Master of Arts in English Studies

School of Arts

Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College

Supervisors: Dr Jean Rossmann and Dr Jethro Kayat

August 2021

## Table of Contents

<b>Declaration .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	7
1.2 Synopsis of the novel .....	11
1.3 Structure of the dissertation .....	11
1.4 Critical scholarship on <i>Lagoon</i> and Okorafor's <i>oeuvre</i> .....	16
1.5 Theoretical concepts.....	25
<b>Chapter Two: Africanfuturism: Recasting the ideological contours of science fiction.....</b>	<b>40</b>
2.1 Location: Lagos .....	41
2.2 Okorafor's organic Gods .....	45
2.3 Stranger than fiction: The melding of magic and reality in <i>Lagoon</i> .....	50
2.3.1 History and fiction in <i>Lagoon</i> .....	55
2.4 Pidgin English: Okorafor's inclusionary politics. ....	59
<b>Chapter Three: Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater: Okorafor's adaptation of the postmodern. ....</b>	<b>64</b>
3.1 Udide Okwanka: The master craft-maker. ....	65
3.2 Multiple perspectives.....	68
<b>Chapter Four: Okorafor's cyborg politics and Africanfuturism .....</b>	<b>78</b>
4.1 Cyborgs and Frontier Africans: Reading Ayodele's complex representation in Okorafor's <i>Lagoon</i> . 79	
4.2 The Black Nexus and their 'performance' of gender. ....	88
4.3 Guardians of the border.....	95

<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>108</b>

## Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English Studies in the School of Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College.

I, Brett Taylor Banks (215034583), declare that:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This dissertation does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
  - a. Their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced.
  - b. Where their exact words have been used, then their writing has been placed inside quotation marks or indented quotations, and properly referenced.
5. This dissertation does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the dissertation and in the References sections.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 13 August 2021

Brett Taylor Banks (215034583)

As the candidate's Supervisor(s) I have approved this dissertation/thesis for submission.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 16 August 2021

Dr Jean Rossmann

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 13 August 2021

Dr Jethro Kayat

## **Acknowledgements**

The completion of this dissertation leaves me with a great debt of gratitude to many people.

First and foremost, I would like to thank God who put me on this path for reasons as yet undiscernible to me.

To my fantastic girlfriend, Melissa van Rensburg, who has held my hand and dried my tears through my entire university career.

To my fellow postgraduate, Mia Hordyk, whose constant expressions of frustration and support allowed me to realise that I am not alone on my academic journey.

To my parents, without whose financial and emotional support this would not have been possible.

Lastly, to my supervisors, Dr Jean Rossmann and Dr Jethro Kayat. Your academic guidance and words of encouragement have kept me from abandoning this project many times over. My sincerest thanks to you for rejecting those ideas I thought were pure gold at the beginning of this journey.

## Abstract

This dissertation critically examines Nnedimma Nkemdili (Nnedi) Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* (2014a) in terms of how it exemplifies Africanfuturism. I will explore how Okorafor conceptualises her own genre – Africanfuturism – in contradistinction from western speculative fiction as well as from Afrofuturism. To explore *Lagoon*'s experimental form, I adapt Francis Nyamnjoh's convivial theory (2015) to estrange postmodernism from its western context, providing an African critical vocabulary to describe *Lagoon*'s experimental 'postmodern' narrative style. I also apply Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg ([1985] 2016a) to explore the gendered and ecocritical dimensions of the novel. The cyborg provides a useful analytical tool and lexicon for exploring pluralistic gender identities as it represents an 'other' identity which "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, 2016a). This dissertation explores how *Lagoon* challenges western cultural hegemony and recentres Africa in the global imaginary by taking the traditional tools of science fiction (advanced technology, magical powers, 'first contact' narratives) and subverts or reappropriates them to suit the goals of Africanfuturism. I focus on the plurivocal, fragmented structure of the novel and argue that Okorafor includes these elements to celebrate perpetual incompleteness and the reliance of the individual on the collective, rather than the superiority of individual subjectivity. For Okorafor, ontological 'incompleteness' (as propounded by Nyamnjoh) is the recognition of the self's capacity for growth and new connections/understandings of our relationship to the natural world rather than a terminal point of development or a signal for nihilistic despair. My employment of Donna Haraway's theorisation of the cyborg identity and the chimeric nature it propounds helps explore the gendered aspects of the novel. I also seek to link the concepts of ecological degradation and the patriarchal oppression of women to one of the broader goals of Okorafor's Africanfuturism, which is to create a space for literature which is free from the oppressive binary codes of western imperialism. Lastly, I highlight the broader significance of Africanfuturist narratives in a post-colonial literary context, and comment on the broader ethical and political implications of Okorafor's Africanfuturist project by discussing the potential of speculative fiction and Africanfuturism as a catalyst for social change.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

This dissertation critically examines Nnedimma Nkemdili (Nnedi) Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* (2014a) in terms of how it exemplifies Africanfuturism. I will explore how Okorafor conceptualises her own genre – Africanfuturism – in contradistinction from western speculative fiction as well as from Afrofuturism. In particular, I argue that *Lagoon*'s experimental style and form, as well as transgressive representation of gender epitomises the tropes of her self-named genre, and its vision of an endogenously African future society.

Okorafor – born in Cincinnati, Ohio, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1974 – is an Nigerian-American, or rather “NaijamERICAN”<sup>1</sup> science fiction and fantasy writer. Okorafor attended school in the United States of America (USA) but as the daughter of Nigerian immigrants the American Okorafor has travelled extensively between the USA and Nigeria throughout her life. Despite growing up and living in the USA, Okorafor has stated that Nigeria has become her “muse” (Okorafor in Alter 2017: n.p.) due to multiple family holidays spent in Nigeria. Nigeria's influence on Okorafor can be seen in her writing as the body of Okorafor's work is set in west Africa and “feature[s] the cultural and social touchstones of her youth” (Kendall, 2010:28) such as traditional elements of Nigerian culture, strong female protagonists, and African landscapes rich in flora and fauna.

In interviews, Okorafor has made it clear that there is no specific writer who influenced her decision to write science fiction. As a child she was simply “working [her] way through the library reading whatever caught [her] eye” (Kendall, 2010:28), although she does mention avidly reading authors such as Stephen King and Clive Barker as a child. Okorafor has also stated that a large

---

<sup>1</sup> NaijamERICAN is a term which means one is “A Nigerian American.” Okorafor explains that “‘Naija’ is slang for ‘Nigerian,’ implying an intimacy and familiarity with Nigeria. Also, ‘NaijamERICAN’ is one word, implying a hybridized new individual whose parts cannot be separated” (2016: n.p.).

reason she began writing science fiction was because she noticed there was “a dearth of young adult fantasy novels featuring main characters of African descent” (Okorafor, 2009b:285). In a panellist discussion at the Brooklyn Museum with N.K. Jemisin and Ibi Zoboi, Okorafor says, “I started writing these [science fiction/magic realism] stories because I wasn’t seeing them, I wasn’t seeing reflections of myself” (Okorafor in Zutter, 2016: n.p.) in literature.

Okorafor’s attempts to populate library shelves with novels featuring African protagonists has resulted in the publication of several critically acclaimed novels such as *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), which won the 2005 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature. *The Shadow Speaker* (2007), which won the 2008 Carl Brandon Parallax Award. *Who Fears Death* (2010), which won the 2011 World Fantasy Award and the 2012 Kindred Award. *Lagoon* (2014a), the *Akata* series (2011, 2017), and most recently, the *Binti* series (2015, 2017, 2018), the first instalment of which won both the 2016 Nebula Award and Hugo Award (science fiction Awards Database, 2019).

Okorafor’s oeuvre has been identified by critics such as Ytasha Womack (2013) and Melody Jue (2017) as inherently “Afrofuturist” in its thematic preoccupations and subversive deployment of the speculative mode in an African context. These critics situate *Lagoon* within a literary tradition that includes other writers such as Octavia Butler or Tomi Adeyemi who use the science fiction genre to explore the complexities of disenfranchised people usually overlooked within western science fiction narratives. In light of these comments, it can be seen that *Lagoon* certainly reflects many key elements of Afrofuturist fiction in its engagement with an alien invasion from an African perspective. *Lagoon*’s recreation of an alien invasion in Africa is “a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (Womack, 2013:8). *Lagoon* critiques western notions of Africanness through its “reenvisioning” of a futuristic alien invasion narrative set in Africa, and it challenges western literary conventions with its subversive content and Afrofuturist appropriation of postmodern techniques.

Despite the clear resemblance that her work bears to Afrofuturism, Okorafor has contested her work being labelled Afrofuturist, preferring the self-coined term, Africanfuturism. An in-depth

definition of both terms will be presented in the theoretical framework to follow. However, I will briefly define these two terms here in order to clarify their shared attributes and (perhaps most crucially) the differences between them. The term Afrofuturist was first coined by Mark Dery in 1994 when he said, “[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism’” (1994:180). Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism has been expanded upon by other scholars since his original statement, but the defining characteristic has remained the same: Afrofuturism is about African-Americans imagining a future that is Black. Okorafor’s rejection of the Afrofuturist label stems from her belief that the term does not adequately encompass her narratives as she is not simply imagining a Black future from the point of view of an African-American. She is imagining a future that is endogenously African. Okorafor’s term, Africanfuturism, “is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or centre the West” (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). Okorafor believes this distinction to be important as many Afrofuturist novels are still heavily influenced by western narrative modes.

This dissertation will explore how Okorafor writes Africanfuturist stories which do not privilege the west through an examination of Okorafor’s novel *Lagoon* (2014a). This dissertation aims to show how *Lagoon* forms a part of ‘Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project’ (which is what I am calling her campaign to bring indigenous African narratives into the international spotlight) through an in-depth analysis of the novel’s content, structure, and themes. In the following study I critically examine the ways in which *Lagoon* subverts western science fiction tropes through its setting in Lagos, Nigeria, and its’ inclusion of supernatural tropes such as African deities. I also analyse the novel’s experimental form, which I tentatively and warily label postmodern. Any analysis of style perforce demands engaging with the problematics of imposing western theory and terminology upon an African text, especially one that overtly asserts an Afrocentric ontology. I consequently foreground Dennis Ekpo’s acerbic criticism of postmodernity, and explore how a middle ground might be found by invoking Francis Nyamnjoh’s socio-cultural theory of conviviality (which bears

stylistic similarities to postmodern tropes) in order to qualify my use of the term ‘postmodernism’ in my analysis of *Lagoon*’s structure.

According to Derek Barker, postmodernism can “never fully explain the state of the contemporary world without first becoming postcolonial and vice versa” (Barker, 2014: n.p.). Consequently, in my study I aim to look at postmodernism “awry” (Žižek, 1991) – to problematise it by means of estranging or alienating postmodernism from its context so that it may “deliver a truth-value that ramifies far beyond its own [western] domain of circulation” (Barker, 2014: n.p.). In order to do this, I bring postmodernism into conversation with Nyamnjoh’s conviviality to draw parallels between the two and to meld postmodernism to a more Africanist ontology. *Lagoon* is ideally suited for such a counter-hegemonic subversive re-appropriation of postmodern techniques because (as a science fiction novel) it is fundamentally concerned with estrangement from the familiar and the destabilisation of binary oppositions.

Nyamnjoh’s theory of conviviality is also employed in my study to explore the rhizomatic interconnections between characters and events and explore how these connections reflect the ontology and ethos of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism. Lastly, I will apply Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg to explore the gendered and ecocritical dimensions of the novel. I will discuss how these concepts link with Okorafor’s Africanfuturist goals through a detailed analysis of the character Ayodele and her shapeshifting abilities, as well as discussing members of an LGBTQ group in Lagos called, the Black Nexus.

## 1.2 Synopsis of the novel

*Lagoon*'s narrative spans three separate acts: Welcome, Awakening and Symbiosis. In these acts, the novel focuses primarily on four protagonists: Ayodele, an alien ambassador sent to earth to decide if the aliens should inhabit the planet; Adaora, a marine biologist; Agu, a member of the Nigerian military; and Anthony, a famous Ghanaian rapper.

The first act, "Welcome," begins with aliens landing on Bar Beach in Lagos, Nigeria. The aliens engage with the aquatic life and transform them into monstrous sea creatures able to defend themselves from humans. The aliens also clean up the ocean that has been contaminated by devastating oil pollution. At the same time, three of the four protagonists, Adaora, Agu and Anthony, all inexplicably meet on Lagos' Bar Beach and are abducted and released by the aliens. Upon regaining consciousness on the beach, the three protagonists are joined by Ayodele, the shapeshifting alien ambassador who takes on the guise of a Yoruba woman.

In "Welcome," Okorafor begins unfolding her narrative through the perspectives of multiple characters (not just the protagonists) and reveals how the news of a shapeshifting extra-terrestrial in Lagos spreads terror and paranoia throughout the city. Fragments of the novel reveal the perspectives of a sprawling cast of seemingly disparate secondary characters, but the narrative constantly returns to the four protagonists, recounting the genesis of their magical abilities in the past and detailing their interactions with Ayodele in the present. The three human protagonists decide they must inform Nigeria's president of Ayodele's shapeshifting abilities in order to keep her safe. Adaora and Agu go in search of the president while Anthony remains at Adaora's house with Ayodele. Ayodele finally decides that Earth is the perfect place for her people to live and enlists Anthony's assistance in broadcasting a video to all digital devices in Nigeria. This message informs the population that more aliens are coming to inhabit the world with them and that they do not mean to harm anyone. At the same time as she makes her announcement, Adaora's plan to tell the president goes awry as the military official she goes to for aid (Lance Corporal Benson) decides to take Ayodele prisoner. He detains Adaora and sends a handcuffed Agu with two privates

to investigate an oil spill from the FPSO Mystras.<sup>2</sup> “Welcome” ends with hundreds of extra-terrestrials disguised as humans emerging from the submerged spaceship in the lagoon and inhabiting Lagos alongside its current populace.

Act two, “Awakening,” details the eruption of violence which engulfs the entire city after contact with the aliens is made. Benson’s attempt to detain Ayodele results in a riot outside Adaora’s house in which Benson and members of his military command are violently transformed into a plantain tree by Ayodele. Agu escapes his guards and wanders through the riotous streets of Lagos, eventually reuniting with Adaora, Anthony and Ayodele. The four protagonists leave Adaora’s house in search of the president and encounter violence at every turn as citizens seek to flee Lagos. The highways become gridlocked, and riots ensue as supernatural entities attack stalled vehicles and Igbo masquerades prance around the city. Act two ends with the four protagonists meeting the president as his private jet lands at the airstrip and Ayodele convincing the president to meet with the Elders of her people.

Act three, “Symbiosis,” details a period of “utopian transformation” (O’Connell, 2016:295) where humans accept the aliens and begin to work together to construct a new “postcapitalist Nigeria” (295). The shift is initiated when Ayodele heals the president from his pericarditis and reveals that the aliens are “technology” (Okorafor, 2014a:220) and will offer their services to help Nigeria. The four protagonists, the president and his wives, several guards, and a news reporter travel out to sea to meet the Elders. Upon returning to the shore, Ayodele is attacked by members of the Nigerian military and is mercilessly beaten to death. As she passes, her body is transformed into a mist which is inhaled by everyone in Nigeria. Ayodele’s essence instils a feeling of optimism and co-operation in everyone who inhales it. Following Ayodele’s sacrifice, the president broadcasts himself to all electronic devices across Nigeria, explaining that the aliens are here to stay, and the people of Nigeria will no longer rely on oil to build their economy, but on alien technology. As the president addresses the nation, the novel depicts the consciousness of citizens who listen to his

---

<sup>2</sup> The FPSO (Floating Production Storage and Offloading) Mystras is an oil and chemical tanker which exists outside of Okorafor’s fictional construction of Lagos. The FPSO Mystras currently sails under the Nigerian flag (Balticshipping.com).

speech. The optimism of the president is shared by everyone who listens to him. Act three ends with an epigraph from the narrator who reveals that she will no longer narrate the story of Lagos but that she will “join [her] people” (293).

Through its use of multiple focalisers and Okorafor’s imaginative deployment of the science fiction genre in a distinctly Nigerian context, *Lagoon* navigates the themes of consciousness, gender and ecocriticism in the postcolonial world. The science fiction genre gives Okorafor the freedom to foreground postcolonial issues of racial and cultural hegemony without succumbing to dry didacticism due to speculative fiction’s unique ability to revisit “even the most overdone ideas in fresh ways” (Okorafor, 2009b:278). Joshua Yu Burnett argues that speculative fiction (and by extension, science fiction) is “uniquely well-suited for grappling with current neo-colonial reality” (2015:136) due to its estrangement of the real world. These comments are pertinent to my study as I read this novel as a response to pervading negative attitudes towards African science fiction literature as it has been perceived as “not being real literature” (Okorafor, 2009a: n.p.). I argue that Okorafor not only produces her own African literature, but that she also contests western narratives of Africa through her writing.

### 1.3 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One, my introductory chapter, provides a brief biography of Nnedi Okorafor, highlighting her Black diasporic identity, and how her intimacy with Africa influences her choice of setting and her ideological (re)centring of Africa. I outline her reasons for writing science fiction and briefly explore the distinctions she draws between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, a distinction which informs my interpretation of the novel. This chapter also includes an outline of the dissertation structure, a literature review of recent scholarship on *Lagoon*, and an explanation of theoretical concepts that inform my analysis of the novel.

Chapter Two, “Africanfuturism: Recasting the ideological contours of the science fiction narrative,” examines the various methods employed by Okorafor which enable her to write in the science fiction mode without being dependent on western models of speculative fiction. Francis Nyamnjoh’s theories of conviviality and interconnection are read in conjunction with current scholarship on *Lagoon* by Esthie Hugo (2017) and Melody Jue (2017) to illuminate how *Lagoon* is exemplary of Okorafor’s unique brand of Africanfuturism.

My third chapter, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater: Okorafor’s adaptation of the postmodern,” provides a close reading of several passages in the novel where the structure strongly resembles elements of postmodern writing. In this chapter I again make use of Nyamnjoh’s theories of conviviality, in conjunction with comments from Dennis Ekpo, Derek Barker and Slavoj Žižek, to examine Okorafor’s use of the ‘postmodern’ in African literature. In this section I argue that Okorafor estranges postmodernism from its western circle of influence and reappropriates postmodern writing techniques to inform her own Africanfuturist literature. Okorafor achieves this estrangement through the use of a narrator who is directly involved in the narrative and her employment of multiple focalisers, which reveals the inadequacies of totalising views of Lagos.

The fourth chapter, “Okorafor’s cyborg politics and Africanfuturism,” discusses how Okorafor’s characters enact gender politics within the novel. I employ Donna Haraway’s theorisation of the cyborg identity and the chimeric nature it propounds to explore how the four protagonists, Ayodele, Adaora, Agu and Anthony embody posthuman gender archetypes. I argue that the protagonists’ actions and supernatural abilities allow them to be categorised as markers of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism within *Lagoon*. I also explore the conflicting viewpoints of Okorafor’s posthuman characters (Ayodele, Adaora, Agu and Anthony) and those who wish to maintain rigid binary gender dichotomies like Lance Corporal Benson, Moziz and Father Oke. I explore the ideological dissonance, and the eventual demises of Moziz, Father Oke and Lance Corporal Benson, to emphasise the significance of Okorafor’s inclusive Africanfuturist politics.

In my conclusion I summarise my analysis of *Lagoon* and highlight the broader significance of Africanfuturist narratives in a post-colonial literary context. I also comment on the broader ethical and political implications of Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project by discussing the potential of speculative fiction and Africanfuturism as a catalyst for social change. This is achieved through *Lagoon*’s reimagining of a society beyond the violent hegemonies of anthropocentrism, patriarchy and gender binarism.

#### 1.4 Critical scholarship on *Lagoon* and Okorafor's oeuvre

*Lagoon* is a thematically rich novel that foregrounds various issues such as gender, ecocriticism, identity, postcolonialism and Afrofuturism. As a science fiction novel, *Lagoon* engages in a process of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvín, 1979:4) through examinations of the real-world city of Lagos, making it both strangely familiar and fantastical at the same time. It embodies Darko Suvín’s definition of science fiction as “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (1979:8). As the daughter of Nigerian immigrants, the American Okorafor, who spent family holidays in Nigeria, straddles two worlds. Okorafor contends that Nigeria is ideally suited to the science fiction or ‘organic fantasy’ genres, arguing that it is a place where the “idea of the world being a magical place, a mystical place, is normal” (Okorafor in Alter 2017: n.p.).

In recent years, Okorafor has been making waves in the science fiction community and is quickly becoming an iconic name within African science fiction, being placed alongside seminal authors of Black science fiction such as Ben Okri, Samuel R. Delaney and Octavia Butler. Okorafor is not only a science fiction author, but also a blogger, and a prolific user of Twitter with a strong following. There is no shortage of discussion of her work in the popular and digital media. It is only recently that there has been an increase in academic scholarship on her novels. This literature review focusses on scholarship on *Lagoon* that deals with the themes of gender, ecology, and genre and style. My review is ordered thematically rather than according to publication date. I begin with Esthie Hugo’s ‘Looking forward, looking back: animating magic, modernity and the African city-future in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*’ (2017), which offers an analysis of the Lagos cityscape and how it is utilised in Okorafor’s novel. Hugo’s views on animism and her discussion of the Anthropocene to examine the collapse of seemingly impermeable boundaries between species and genders within the novel informs my study of the organic deities and mystical elements of *Lagoon*. I use the links between the mystical and mundane to aid in breaking down stratified conceptions of the spiritual and physical realms in Chapter Two. Melody Jue’s ‘Intimate Objectivity: On Nnedi Okorafor’s Oceanic Afrofuturism’ (2017) assesses the novel as a work of “petrofiction” (2017:172) and explores how Okorafor’s deployment of African deities could be read as a form of

cultural “self-love” (178). I make reference to Jue’s article in Chapter Two as I explore the overlaps between Okorafor’s aliens and African deities like Mami Wata. Hugh O’Connell’s ““We are change”: The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*” (2016) presents key insights into genre and style relevant to my analysis of the novel. In this article O’Connell discusses *Lagoon*’s restructuring of the traditional science fiction ‘first contact’ narrative. O’Connell also briefly highlights Okorafor’s use of multiple focalisers within the novel, which challenges western tendencies to impose totalising imperialist views onto African subjectivities. I use O’Connell’s insights in Chapter Three of my study where I explore the multiple focalisers mentioned by O’Connell as a tool of Africanfuturism used to contest totalising views of Africa. I engage with Gibson Ncube’s ““Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to That Which Does Not Resemble Them”: Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*” (2020) in Chapter Four. Ncube’s article centres on the novel’s disruption of western thought paradigms surrounding binary gender constructs and narrative norms through Ayodele’s shapeshifting and the de-centralised narrative structure. Lastly, I examine Joshua Yu Burnett’s ‘The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor’s Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction’ (2015). In this article Burnett explores how the post-apocalypse creates a new form of postcolonialism. While his discussion is on Okorafor’s earlier novels, (*The Shadow Speaker* (2007), and *Who Fears Death* (2010)), I explore how the insights made are relatable to my study of *Lagoon* in my introductory chapter since its alien invasion also creates a post-apocalyptic, dystopian depiction of Lagos which acts as a “launching pad for counter-hegemonic discourse” (2015:136).

Esthie Hugo, drawing on John and Jean Comaroff’s theories (2006, 2012) of the city “as future lab to be learned from,” (Hugo, 2017:46) argues that Okorafor’s future Lagos presents a model for “the birthing of a new world order” (48) which bridges the divisions between “local and global, sea and city, old and new, magic and modern, human and nonhuman” (48). Citing Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, Hugo observes that Lagos is “at the forefront of globalising modernity” (46), precisely because of its “innovative anarchy” which defies the logic of western town planning with its thriving informal economy and lack of ‘typical’ infrastructure. Notably, Hugo sees Okorafor’s use of animism as a catalyst for “subverting the oppositional logics which separate modernity from

magic and the human from the nonhuman” (55). Hugo examines how the figure of the alien, based on an African water deity, Mami Wata, is herself a threshold symbol for a merging of gender, being able to shapeshift between male or female bodies at will. Hugo argues that meetings between people and aliens in the novel alter the relationship that humans have with the environment. The aliens bring ecological restoration to the water, allowing human characters to re-examine their relationship with the sea. Hugo focuses on how *Lagoon* promotes “ecological themes that currently circulate in Anthropocenic thought” (51). This “Anthropocenic thought” emphasises “the enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the Earth” (Schwägerl in Hugo 2017:51). Hugo examines how *Lagoon* creates “a strange new world” (52) through the arrival of aliens and the radical alterations to aquatic life which allows conceptual changes to become possible. She illuminates how the Anthropocene signals “the dissolution of a human/nonhuman divide” (51).

In addition to acknowledging humanity’s imbrication in the natural world, Hugo has reviewed the inclusion of the supernatural and traditional African deities in Okorafor’s works. In her discussion, Hugo contends that Okorafor incorporates animist logic and African deities such as Mami Wata, Ijele, Legba and The Bone Collector as counter-hegemonic tools (53) to weaken the western valorisation of the rational over the supernatural. An example of this in the novel is the Lagos-Benin Expressway, or The Bone Collector, a highway in *Lagoon* that is ‘alive’ and consumes the victims of car wrecks like an ancient, sacrificial deity. In Comaroff and Koolhaas’s interpretation of the city, roads signify modernity and advancement, bringing with them economic growth, communication and development. However, Hugo believes that if this Nigerian highway could speak “it would speak of modernity’s seductions and pitfalls” (52) instead. In this way, Hugo shows how Okorafor imbues inanimate objects with life and uses west African mythology in order to foreground Nigeria’s complex relationship to ‘modernity’ and ‘discourses of progress.’ Hugo contends that Okorafor uses these genre elements to “take cognisance of the profound interconnectivities and interdependencies that constitute our world” (56). In my discussion of the “strange new world” (52) that *Lagoon* imagines in Chapter Two, I will argue that *Lagoon* steps away from western literary influences and promotes its own Afrocentric ontology. Okorafor’s depiction of organic African deities explores a fundamentally altered relationship between the

physical and spiritual realms that allows humanity to acknowledge ‘interconnectivities’ and ‘interdependencies’ within the natural world.

Melody Jue contributes to the discussion on the fundamentally altered relationship between humanity and the environment through her ecocritical discussion of *Lagoon*. Jue situates the novel within the genre of “petrofiction,” a term coined by Amitav Ghosh, which refers to novels that deal (explicitly or implicitly) with oil production (2017:172). Jue argues that Okorafor “introduces the aliens as the antidote to dependence on fossil fuels” (172), highlighting the necessity of looking to the future to preserve our environment. In exploring the novel’s critique of petroculture, Jue posits that a new worldview, which she refers to as “intimate objectivity” (174) is observable through Adaora’s interaction with the aliens in *Lagoon*. Okorafor’s aliens are simultaneously strange and familiar to Adaora. They are analogous in some ways to Mami Wata, a traditional African deity which places them within the realm of fantasy, or science fiction, eliminating the possibility of scientific inquiry, yet they are recognisable to Adaora as their molecular structure is compared to coral reefs, something that Adaora (a marine biologist) is deeply familiar with. Like Jue, I am concerned with the overlaps between Okorafor’s aliens and African deities like Mami Wata which I discuss in Chapter Two. Jue states that “Adaora models a kind of intimate objectivity in which marine biology calmly confronts the elements of the folkloric and the fantastic” (174). Jue foregrounds intimate objectivity as a feminist reaction against science’s typically masculine desire to control the natural world, and that *Lagoon* “constitutes a practice of resistance against western paradigms of scientific practice that are centred around the control and domination of nature” (174). Adaora’s study of Ayodele is not predicated on a selfish desire to master Ayodele for personal gain like the military, Father Oke or Moziz. Borrowing from Jue, I apply the term ‘intimate objectivity’ to my study as I believe it to be particularly apposite in discussions of Adaora. I believe that Adaora uses ‘intimate objectivity’ to provide an alternative to typically masculine scientific practices which seek to dominate its subject. The practice of intimate objectivity, a mode of non-invasive, empathic engagement with the ‘other,’ necessitates a new understanding of the relationship between human and nature, human and non-human that celebrates incompleteness and seeks to learn from differences, rather than attempting to subsume identities dissimilar to the subject. Intimate objectivity and its preoccupation with altering

exploitative western models of the interaction between humans and nature are similar to the goals of this dissertation as Okorafor's Africanfuturism seeks to create a body of African literature free from western influences.

In addition to her discussion of intimate objectivity, Jue explores how Okorafor mixes aliens with indigenous deities such as Mami Wata and Uride Okwanka, which creates difficulties in categorising the novel as science fiction rather than folklore. Jue argues that "the arrival of aliens does not mark a break with indigenous cosmologies and tradition, but rather a continuation of them" (177). The alien, Ayodele, is frequently compared to African deities such as Mami Wata or a marine witch, suggesting that they should not be categorised as separate entities, but rather that the aliens represent a blending of indigenous cosmologies and cultural traditions.

Jue explores how Okorafor's protean Gods could be read as a reaction against orthodox Christianity brought to Nigeria through colonial expansion. Okorafor believes that Christianity is "teaching Nigerians to hate their own indigenous traditions, spiritualities and religions" (Okorafor quoted in Jue, 2017:178). The subversion of orthodox Christian beliefs through the incorporation of indigenous Gods in the story could be read "as a form of self-love" (178) or patriotism, trying to privilege indigenous value systems over colonial imports. In the second chapter of my dissertation, I follow Jue's view that the privileging of an African cosmology in the novel is a form of Afrocentric self-love, and is integral to Okorafor's vision for Africanfuturism. Okorafor foregrounds indigenous African belief systems, creating a science fiction narrative which de-centres the west's hegemonic domination of the genre.

Hugh O'Connell also discusses Okorafor's use of indigenous Gods. However, O'Connell's analysis shifts focus to the novel's use of multiple focalisers (such as Adaora, Fisayo, the swordfish and Father Oke) to decentre the reader and prevent them from easily "identif[ying] with any one character or space as being representative of twenty-first-century Lagos" (2016:297). In Chapter Three I contend that Okorafor uses postmodern stylistic elements (such as the multiple perspectives mentioned above) to underline her even-handed, fluid narrative structure and explore

a heterogenous cityspace filled with radically diverse characters who differ in terms of gender, species and class position. Being unable to privilege human perceptions of the world above an animal perspective forces the reader to grapple with and deconstruct the human/nonhuman divide.

The larger thrust of O'Connell's argument explores how *Lagoon* reworks the traditional colonial ideology of the first contact narrative by recasting it in an African setting. He argues that by having aliens land in Nigeria, Okorafor contests the colonial narrative where aliens only appear in westernised countries. O'Connell explores how the aliens' arrival in Africa allows them to act as both the coloniser and the colonised. The aliens can be positioned as colonisers because they are a "technologically advanced race that comes from the outside to colonise a society or [...] enslave the local population" (294). The seeming counter-intuitive positioning of the aliens as the colonised rather than the coloniser arises when the aliens are recast "as the perpetual other to Enlightenment conceptions of humanity" (294). This allows the alien to "become a site of identification for the colonized or enslaved" (294), instead of being identified as the traditional colonial or alien oppressor. O'Connell also notes how the aliens' arrival in Okorafor's novel invokes the historical memory of Portuguese colonisers arriving by ship off the coast of Lagos in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (298).

O'Connell explores the thematic connections between depictions of an alien invasion (or first contact narratives) and the colonial experience. He analyses certain features of these stories, such as technologically superior beings coming to earth and subjugating humans, offering them technology in exchange for compliance. O'Connell argues that first contact narratives such as *Lagoon* that are set in Africa "might better be described as stories of second contact due to the degree to which the original historical circumstances and the colonial legacy inform contact and perspective" (Ferreira, quoted in O'Connell, 2016:294). These fictitious alien invasions then become eerily reminiscent of domineering colonialist practices. For example, the aliens' arrival in *Lagoon* can be read as a second contact narrative that foregrounds the complex relationship between contemporary Nigerian society and its history of colonial exploitation, or its first contact of domination by an external colonising force. The novel is read as a second contact narrative in an alternative way when O'Connell proposes an ecological reading of the novel. O'Connell argues

that “upon landing their ship in the ocean [the aliens] make ‘first contact’ with the oceanic wildlife, prior to their ‘second contact’ with the Nigerians” (2016:305). Following O’Connell, I argue that the healing of the ecological sphere prior to contact with humans destabilises anthropocentric conceptions of ‘man’ as the supreme species on Earth, and informs Okorafor’s Africanfuturism by altering conceptions of the relationship between the human and non-human.

The healing of the ocean in *Lagoon* is not simply a utopian cleansing of Nigeria’s marine life. In addition to purifying the water, the aliens grant the sea creatures the ability to fight back. The ocean is both healed and made more dangerous to humans than it ever was. The sea creatures become actively violent towards humans. O’Connell believes that “[t]he transformation belies a larger recognition that humans will no longer simply be able to subsume nature as a means to dominate [...] it” (305). The aquatic transformation alters the relationship that humans have with the water, as they are no longer able to abuse the natural resources around them. O’Connell argues that instead of reconciling the humans with the ocean, the regeneration of the sea perpetuates an ecocentric relationship where all life should be regarded as equal so that one does not subjugate the other, thus repeating neo-colonial practices. O’Connell highlights how the legacy of colonialism – the domination and exploitation of land and its indigenous people – continues in the present, particularly through the extraction of oil, which traps Nigeria in exploitative neo-colonial economic relations.

Gibson Ncube explores the gendered dimension of colonialism’s legacy in Africa in his article “‘Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to That Which Does Not Resemble Them’: Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*’ (2020) as he explores how *Lagoon* “defies normative ideas of stable and fixed [gender] identities” (2020:2). Ncube analyses *Lagoon* from the lens of both Afrofuturism and queer theory, since “Afrofuturism and queer theory intersect at the point where both are interested in questioning long-held ideas that have come to be deemed normal” (3). Ncube discusses how Ayodele and her shapeshifting provides an avenue through which humanity can free itself “from the constraints of what is considered normative and, by default, appropriate and desirable” (9). Ayodele thus “exemplifies the future that humanity should seek to attain” (9). When dealing with queer identities Ncube discusses how members of the LGBTQ group, the Black

Nexus, are beaten up during the riots outside of Adaora's house which shows how society "fails to budge from its long-held ideas" (7) regarding gender identity. This stubbornness "confirm[s] the difficulty of changing mentalities and prejudices" (7). Ncube asserts that "queer individuals cannot continue to be ignored" (7) and theorises Ayodele as a figure which the Black Nexus can identify with and be vindicated through. Ncube also posits that *Lagoon* disregards traditional literary norms through its "plurivocal narrative technique" (7). He argues that the African modes of storytelling which are employed by Okorafor "should be considered a turning away from Western paradigms" (7), and that "reading a novel such as *Lagoon* thus demands, equally, that the reader be a shapeshifter, able to adapt to the uncomfortable, provocative, and unpredictable shifts and changes in the narrative process. Indeed, the reader cannot be left out of the process of creating the future world. The author, the characters, and the reader are all involved in a collaborative process of questioning the normative and forging new future" (11).<sup>3</sup> As perceptive as Ncube's work is, his article does not synthesise all the elements I cover in this dissertation. In Chapter Four I provide a much more substantive discussion of the Black Nexus by focusing on individual members in depth. I also focus on the gendered dimensions of the protagonist's activation of their supernatural powers. Furthermore, I extend Ncube's discussion surrounding the shapeshifting Ayodele in Chapter Four by invoking the image of the cyborg, theorised by Donna Haraway, to display how Ayodele allows us to reformulate dichotomous views on gender and sexuality.

Joshua Yu Burnett, in his analysis of *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), highlights how "Okorafor uses the post-apocalypse as a way to imagine a new form of postcolonialism" (2015:134). In his analysis, Burnett outlines how displaying an Africa free of colonial influence is impossible unless the past is reconfigured. Burnett posits that the easiest way to reimagine the past is to create an apocalypse, rewriting (future) history. Both *The Shadow Speaker* and *Who Fears Death* imagine African societies which have acquired political and cultural independence from western powers through an apocalyptic event.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ncube's perceptive insights, released in late 2020, came to my attention when I was completing my final draft of this dissertation. The unexpected parallels in research foci between the two projects was initially perceived as unfortunate. However, the correlations and shared research interests indicate the underlying persuasiveness and power of these connections.

Furthermore, Burnett explores Nalo Hopkinson's argument that "postcolonial writers must engage with speculative fiction" (134), to create speculative futures that are not "exclusively white and Western" (135). Burnett questions why speculative fiction has remained a white dominated discourse for so long, rather than being appropriated as a "launching pad for counterhegemonic discourse" (136) as Okorafor and others are attempting to do. Burnett believes that speculative fiction is uniquely suited to anti-colonial writing because of how "black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine" (Lavender, quoted in Burnett, 2015:136).

Burnett's compelling argument expands on Jessica Langer's ideas of postcolonialism as "a changeable, flexible set of practices and discourses" (Langer in Burnett, 2015:138) concluding that postcolonialism can be a framework of resistance against colonial power as well as against larger notions of empire and imperialism. Burnett continues this discussion by exploring the post-apocalyptic setting of the two novels and arguing that to present a truly postcolonial Africa "some sort of apocalypse is necessary, destroying the institutional power structures that presently make neocolonialism so persistent and difficult to undermine" (139). I show how Burnett's arguments are applicable to my study of *Lagoon* in Chapter One as the novel constitutes a framework of resistance against colonial power through the inversion of the traditional science fiction narrative as the aliens choose to make contact with the inhabitants of an African city rather than the 'more developed' west. The novel also breaks from western science fiction tropes as the aliens liberate Lagos from its dependence on fossil fuels since the exploitative mining practices that fuel the capitalist economy mostly benefit western owned oil tycoons.

## 1.5 Theoretical concepts

*Lagoon*'s overlapping narratives and webbed structure advocate for a multifaceted analysis. This analysis thus demands casting a wide theoretical and ideological net to meet Okorafor's boundary-breaking imagination. This study, following the technique of *Lagoon*'s mythical spider narrator, Udide Okwanka, weaves in an eclectic array of critical thinkers to illuminate the novel's complex, rhizomatic web of meaning.

This dissertation will examine *Lagoon* through the lens of three key concepts that will be explored at length in this dissertation, namely Afrofuturism, conviviality, and gender. My theoretical framework will begin with an introduction to Afrofuturism and its genesis as a response to western science fiction narratives. The second chapter of my dissertation will rely heavily on this discussion as it deals specifically with Okorafor's (2019) formulations of Afrofuturism and her own genre, Africanfuturism, which inspires my analysis of her novel as an exemplary piece of Africanfuturist literature. After detailing the crucial distinctions between these genres, I will explore critiques of a postmodern analysis of African texts by Dennis Ekpo (1995). I then discuss Francis Nyamnjoh's article 'Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality' (2015). I explore how the discursive potential of Nyamnjoh's convivial theory can be used to estrange postmodernism from its western context, thus qualifying my use of postmodern terminology in my analysis of *Lagoon*. While Francis Nyamnjoh's socio-cultural theory of conviviality (2015) will be the primary theory utilised in all three chapters, it is particularly useful in Chapter Three where it provides an African critical vocabulary to describe *Lagoon*'s experimental 'postmodern' narrative style. The third and final aspect of my analysis is concerned with Okorafor's treatment of gender in the novel. I read *Lagoon*'s transgressive representations through the lens of Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg ([1985] 2016a). I consolidate the cyborgian theory, and re-situate it locally, by referring to the African feminist thought of Agnes Apusigah (2006).

## Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism

Science fiction, a genre defined by its ability to create cognitive estrangement (Suvin, 1979) and depict vivid imaginings of potential futures, has been identified by the critic John Rieder “as a product of imperialist culture” (Rieder in Smith, 2012:1). Rieder’s point of view is influenced by the fact that the majority of science fiction narratives are “both produced and consumed [...] in European and American imperial centres” (Smith, 2012:5). These narratives continue to embody the central trope of colonisation through the subjugation of other planets, which strongly resembles the expansionist policies of British and French colonists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Hugh O’Connell explores the genesis of the Afrofuturism genre as a response to these totalising narratives of western science fiction which place people of African descent in marginalised spaces. O’Connell states that Afrofuturism “developed as a mode of intervening in the SF discourse by interjecting African and Afro-diasporic concerns and desires into the narratives of futurity” (2016:303), which have historically been dominated by white western authors.

O’Connell expands his discussion by situating Okorafor within the Afrofuturist genre, claiming she “is part of a growing vanguard of global science fiction (SF) writers currently challenging the hegemony of SF as a purely Western, metropolitan genre” (2016:291). While O’Connell’s statement is not wholly inaccurate, Okorafor has contested her position within the genre of Afrofuturism. To understand Okorafor’s reasoning behind distancing herself from Afrofuturism, I will now discuss the central tenets of Afrofuturism.

The term “Afrofuturism” was first coined by Mark Dery in 1994 when he stated: “[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called ‘Afrofuturism’” (1994:180). While Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism is relatively new, the genre itself is not. Texts such as Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* (1975), Octavia E. Butler’s *Patternist* Series (1976–1984), the futuristic music of Sun Ra in his album *Astro Black*

(1973), and even W. E. B. Du Bois's short story *The Comet* (1920) demonstrate that Afrofuturist themes and narratives have been present since the early years of the twentieth century. While Black science fiction writers have been imagining Black futures for over a century, the Afrofuturism genre has only been gaining mainstream popularity in the last thirty years. The scholarship of Greg Tate (1992), Tricia Rose (1994) and Kodwo Eshun (1998, 2003), alongside comic books starring African-American superheroes such as Black Panther, Nick Fury and Luke Cage (and their respective film and TV adaptations), have catapulted Afrofuturism into the spotlight. While Dery's definition of Afrofuturism is possibly the first official definition, it has since been expanded upon by scholars such as Ingrid LaFleur, who defines Afrofuturism "as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens," (LaFleur in Womack, 2013:8), and Michael Bennett, who posits that Afrofuturist works "often focus on appropriating and redeploying technological devices or scientific knowledge and on both raising and razing the consciousness of people from the African diaspora" (2016:92). In these definitions, and most subsequent variants of the term, Afrofuturism has been limited to visions of the future from an African-American point of view.

Okorafor, however, distances herself from the term Afrofuturism because it "didn't describe what [she] was doing" (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). Okorafor instead coined the term "Africanfuturism" to define her work. To Okorafor, Africanfuturism differs from Afrofuturism in that it "is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or centre the West" (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). To draw further contrasts between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism, Okorafor makes use of the term "organic fantasy" (2009b:278) to describe her narratives as they "bloom directly from the soil of the real" (278). This contrasts with Afrofuturism, which appropriates 'Africanness' into its narratives. Highlighting the reasons for her distinctions, Okorafor talks of a bus ride to Arondizuogu which she shared with her Nigerian-born, Catholic uncle where he told her stories of cannibalistic head-hunters in Africa. Okorafor reveals that the way these stories were divulged to her was as if they were being related by a European adventure writer, not her Nigerian uncle. To Okorafor, it was as if she "had [her] uncle who was born and raised in Nigeria telling [her] stories that sounded like *interpretations* (not favourable ones) of Africa from outsiders" (278, emphasis in original). Okorafor reveals distaste for the bus ride as the stories indicate that her uncle has

internalised the objectifying white gaze in a manner reminiscent of Franz Fanon's seminal work on the psychological mechanisms of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon claims that colonialism led to Black Africans internalising the objectifying white gaze which renders Africans villainous, worthless, and abject, and results in African's – like Okorafor's uncle – attempting to resolve the resulting inferiority complex by masquerading as white. Okorafor's writing is a response to the western narratives of inferiority that her uncle has internalised as her writing promotes Africanness through natural and traditional stories. Through her African subject material, Okorafor advocates for the telling of African stories which are free of the biases of western imperialism discussed by Fanon.

The organicism of Okorafor's stories is where I believe her distinction between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism is most evident. To Okorafor, Dery's definition of Afrofuturism “positions African American themes and concerns at the definition's center” (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). Okorafor defines ““African Americans”” as “direct descendants of the stolen and enslaved Africans of the transatlantic slave trade” (2019: n.p.). Okorafor's definition of African American's resonates with O'Connell's statements about second contact narratives as these descendants “recall the past moments of colonialism” (2016:297). Okorafor's *Lagoon* is her Africanfuturist variation on a second contact narrative which interrogates Nigeria's legacy of colonial exploitation from the vantage point of the postcolonial present. This is evident from the very beginning of *Lagoon* through the ironic Welcome page which references the Portuguese ‘discovery’ of Lagos:

The city takes its name from the Portuguese word for “lagoon”.

The Portuguese first landed on Lagos Island in the year 1472.

Apparently, they could not come up with a more creative name.

Nor did they think to ask one of the natives for suggestions (2014a:0).

Okorafor, however, does not base her stories on the descendants of enslaved Africans in America. Her fantasy does not extend beyond the African continent. Her stories are steeped in African influence and mythology, from the Masquerades of her *Akata* series (2011, 2017) to the depictions

of Mami Wata in *Lagoon*. Her stories are all set in Africa, from the “post-apocalyptic future Sudan” (Burnett, 2015:134) of *Who Fears Death* (2010) to an alien invasion of present-day Nigeria in *Lagoon*. Okorafor blends her experiences of African culture and mysticism with elements of science fiction to create her own unique form of Africanfuturist fiction.

Okorafor’s blending of African mysticism with reality resonates with J. Griffiths Rollefson’s contention in his article on Afrofuturism that African identities desire to “reflect an oppositionality and an historical critique that seeks to undermine the logic of linear progress that buttresses Western universalism [and] rationalism” (2008:84). While this insight relates to Afrofuturism generally, I argue that Okorafor’s writing displays it most aptly. Okorafor undermines western logocentrism by usurping the position of the magical as belonging exclusively to fiction and placing it within the realm of the known world and uniquely African experiences.

### **Conviviality and postmodernism**

Through her melding of the magical and the known world and her explorations of consciousness, Okorafor creates a narrative of intentionally messy entanglements explored through a fragmented narrative replete with authorial interjections and asides to the reader. *Lagoon* demonstrates a range of postmodern elements, from its polyvocality and fragmentation to the playfulness of irony and intertextuality.

Despite the multitude of postmodern features present in *Lagoon*, it is still a distinctly African novel in its treatment of identity, gender and ecocriticism, as well as its depiction of Igbo and Yoruba deities. In view of Okorafor’s re-centering of Africa and African ontologies, it may seem counter-intuitive to refract the novel through the lens of (western) postmodern theory which is a reaction against *western* rationality and a denunciation of the “deifi[cation] of the *European* subject” (my emphasis; Ekpo, 1995:122). Dennis Ekpo highlights the problematic implications of labelling African texts postmodern in his seminal essay ‘Towards a post-Africanism: Contemporary African

thought and postmodernism' (1995). Ekpo discusses how "postmodernism can be said to be of no concern to Africans" (1995:121) as "the absurd self-inflation [of] the European subjectivity" (121) and the subsequent crisis of the subject it created is of no concern to a culture that did not "deif[y] human reason" (121) in the first place. Ekpo goes on to state that, to the African subject, "the postmodern project of de-deification, de-absolutization of reason of man, of history, etc., [...] cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake that it appears to be for the European man. In fact it cannot even be seen as a problem at all" (121) as Africans did not engage in the west's deification of human consciousness. Ekpo acerbically concludes that "[n]othing therefore, stops the African from viewing the celebrated postmodern condition a little sarcastically as nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of overfed and spoilt children of hypercapitalism" (121).

Ekpo's impassioned critique is compelling, and I am aware of the difficulties inherent in applying concepts developed in western academic discourse to Afrocentric texts. However, Ekpo's criticism arguably veers toward an essentialism that Okorafor's Africanfuturism discourages. To avoid such essentialist debate I will, in my analysis of *Lagoon's* postmodern elements, adopt Derek Barker's (2014) position that postmodernism can "never fully explain the state of the contemporary world without first becoming postcolonial and vice versa" (n.p.). Consequently, in my study I aim to look at postmodernism "awry" (Žižek, 1991) – to problematise it by means of estranging or alienating postmodernism from its context so that it may "deliver a truth-value that ramifies far beyond its own [western] domain of circulation" (Barker, 2014: n.p.). In order to do this, I bring postmodernism into conversation with Nyamnjoh's conviviality to draw parallels between the two and to incorporate aspects of postmodern theory in a more Africanist ontology.

Before drawing direct parallels between postmodernism and conviviality, I will first discuss the basic tenets of Nyamnjoh's socio-cultural theory of conviviality and examine how textual elements of *Lagoon* resemble Nyamnjoh's convivial society. The inspiration for Nyamnjoh's convivial culture originally developed from Paul Gilroy's *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (2004). Gilroy describes conviviality as "the process of cohabitation and interaction that [has] made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas" (2004:xi). Gilroy

highlights the problems of race and identity politics and believes that “the radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification” (xi). Gilroy argues for a convivial culture as a way to “live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent” (xi). Conviviality provides the context for a non-violent, racially diverse society. For Gilroy, a convivial culture promotes multiculturalism and reduces the negative societal effects of racism in Britain.

Nyamnjoh draws on Gilroy’s critique of multiculturalism in Britain and applies it to his local, African context, advocating for a convivial ontology by comparing western modernity to a baby. Nyamnjoh explores how all babies are “inadequate or incomplete at birth” (2015:2) and argues for learning and development to occur via “inclusion and legitimisation through the relationships forged with others” (2), since babies “imbibe and embod[y] the ways of seeing, doing and being of the social contexts in which they are born and grow up” (2). Nyamnjoh argues that the western baby is particularly incomplete as its socialising influencers “tend to privilege neat dichotomies and dualisms” (2) instead of accepting varied and multicultural social agencies. Nyamnjoh believes that instead of outright rejecting western modernity (the baby) due to its preoccupation with a confined reality, we should attempt to “disabuse [the baby] of these obvious inadequacies” (2) by inviting it to “pay greater attention to the interconnections, hierarchies and gradations that spring from and are consolidated by the ever-evolving messiness of lived experiences” (2). Nyamnjoh explores how a convivial ontology may aid in re-socialising the western baby and argues that this could be effected through an examination of human consciousness within Africa. Nyamnjoh’s conviviality makes “recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete” (10) and argues that “incompleteness is the normal order of things” (10). The concepts of incompleteness and the resocialisation of the ‘western baby’ apply to my study as *Lagoon* forms part of Okorafor’s oeuvre which seeks to undermine western logocentrism and celebrate the African subjectivity. The complex structure of the novel and multiple narrative voices co-opts the reader into the interconnected lived reality of *Lagoon*’s Lagos. The complicated and interwoven interactions between multiple subjects in *Lagoon* reveal entirely different orders of meaning, experience and perspectives that do not necessarily correlate to western ideals of the complete subject.

Nyamnjoh goes on to explore how conviviality “challenges us to be open-minded and open-ended in our claims and articulations of identities, being and belonging” (10) through his examination of consciousness in Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952). The Palm-Wine Drinkard embodies the “ever-evolving messiness of lived experience” (2015:3) that Nyamnjoh refers to as the Drinkards’ consciousness can manifest itself in any vessel, from human to plant, alive or invisible. Tutuola creates “endless possibilities of being and becoming, thanks to the multiplicity of consciousness” (4). Messiness is distanced from its negative associations. Instead, its synonymy with confusion, contamination and the breakdown of boundaries enables creative, positive transformation. This is pertinent to my study as elements of Okorafor’s writing resemble the social aspects of conviviality and the reconfiguring of consciousness explored in Tutuola’s novel. Passages in *Lagoon* do not privilege human consciousness over animal consciousness, as Okorafor explores the consciousness of animals and even folkloric creatures within her novel, displaying an openness towards the mythic that is so often rejected by western modernity.

With Nyamnjoh’s examination of conviviality and consciousness in mind, it is important to revisit Ekpo’s critique of postmodernism in Africa. Despite the potential inadequacies of postmodern analysis of African texts, postmodernism itself is engaged in a deconstructive process *critical* of western epistemologies and grand narratives. These criticisms of western rationalist assumptions resonate with Nyamnjoh’s comments on conviviality when he states:

To save the baby of western civilisation and modernity, I suggest we disabuse it of obvious inadequacies. These include its tendency to claim completeness and superiority often with little evidence to substantiate such extravagant claims. We should also disabuse it of the reluctance to see the realities of others in historical perspective, or to selectively employ history when it suits its purposes. The western(ised) baby needs to be disabused of epistemologies that tend to privilege neat dichotomies and dualisms, and to caricature, dismember or confine reality to sensory perceptions or to essences (3).

Nyamnjoh's discussion of the fluidity of consciousness in Tutuola's novel can be paralleled with postmodernism's fragmented nature, while ideas of incompleteness in Nyamnjoh's conviviality also resonate with postmodernism's incredulity towards grand narratives and totalising discourse. Nyamnjoh foregrounds the inadequacy of the self, which requires other influences to develop. In this way, Nyamnjoh's theory of conviviality shares certain anti-hierarchal tendencies with postmodern theory.

In light of the similar objectives of both postmodernism and conviviality, Nyamnjoh's concept of the convivial scholar becomes appealing. Nyamnjoh's convivial scholarship makes provision for the reality of being incomplete by "recognis[ing] the deep power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections and nuanced complexities" (16). Convivial scholarship permits the inclusion of western influences in non-western socio-cultural or literary contexts. Returning to the baby metaphor, Nyamnjoh argues that a complete rejection of western civilisation "would be tantamount to throwing the baby (however incomplete) out with the bathwater of western excesses and inadequacies" (3). Taking Nyamnjoh's comments into consideration, I propose to take up the mantle of 'convivial scholar' and adopt a theoretical 'middle ground' of using postmodern terminology to discuss form and technique while using analytical perspectives rooted in African experience to discuss the novel's themes and the way of seeing and being it propounds. As a convivial scholar, I acknowledge the problems of a postmodern analysis of African texts expounded by Ekpo. However, I will still use the term postmodern and other postmodern terminology, but I will be using them in a qualified and convivial manner, cognisant of their inadequacy, yet functionality for the task at hand. Okorafor's novel uniquely displays both conviviality and postmodernism through the myriad interactions of the characters, and by its fragmented narrative structure. Instead of using these postmodern narrative techniques to highlight feelings of dislocation or inadequacy, she uses them to recognise and celebrate "being incomplete" (10). For Okorafor, this incompleteness is the recognition of the self's capacity for growth and new connections/understandings of our relationship to the natural world rather than a terminal point of development or a signal for nihilistic despair.

Nyamnjoh's convivial theory not only provides a new critical idiom to discuss experimental African fiction, but crucially contributes to an epistemological paradigm shift in African academia and in public policy. Nyamnjoh laments how the use of African epistemologies have fallen out of favour in scholarly circles, as the African elite "tends to despise endogenous African ways of knowing and knowledge production" (3) as these elite tend to be educated through a colonial school system. Nyamnjoh asserts that "African elites schooled in western modernity are all too eager to label and dismiss (however hypocritically) as *traditional knowledge* the creative imagination of what their western counterparts love to term 'the African mind' – instead of creating space for the fruit of that mind as a *tradition of knowledge*" (3, emphasis in original). Okorafor, herself a scholar and professor at the University of Buffalo, New York, celebrates African traditional knowledge systems through the inclusion of masquerades, Igbo and Yoruba deities, animism and other cultural figures in her writing.

## **Gender:**

This study further adopts a method of "cross-cultural learning and borrowing" (Apusigah, 2006:33) by bringing together western and African theoretical paradigms. Following Okorafor's definition of Africanfuturism as "a bridge" rather than a wall of exclusivity (2019: n.p.), I aim to "bridge" theories that show congruence irrespective of their seemingly disparate geopolitical origins. My approach is informed by Ghanaian feminist scholar, Agnes Apusigah, who views African cultures as dynamic and ever-evolving. She cautions against the "culturization of gender [...] romanticization of ethnic culture, and the simplification of difference" (2006:23). For Apusigah, decolonising scholarship implies acknowledging the uniqueness of African contexts while simultaneously allowing for diversity and complexity within culture, resulting in "multi-layered interpretations" (33). Chapter Four, "Okorafor's cyborg politics and Africanfuturism" thus depends on an array of thinkers who explore gender fluidity and transgression. Donna Haraway's concept of cyborg identity (2016a) is particularly apposite to my analysis of the alien Ayodele and members of the Black Nexus. Francis Nyamnjoh's "frontier African" is also useful in my examination of Ayodele's shapeshifting and the transgressive potentialities it provides. I explore the non-normative behavioural codes of Jacobs and members of the Black Nexus through the lens

of Judith Butler's notion of performativity, Haraway's cyborg and Apusigah's relativist position. Lastly, I explore the ecofeminist dimension of the novel through the work of Laura Hobgood-Oster (who draws on the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether) and Haraway's cyborg.

As a starting point in my discussions on gender I draw on Donna Haraway's theorisation of the posthuman cyborg to illuminate concepts of non-binary gender within the novel. In her essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' ([1985] 2016a), Haraway posits the cyborg (cybernetic organism) as a subversive figure of "potent fusions and dangerous possibilities," (14) undoing the binary essentialism of human/machine, man/woman, civilised/primitive, self/other. Haraway's description of the fluid, even celestial nature of the cyborg – "both material and opaque [...] ether, quintessence" (13) – accords with the complex makeup of Okorafor's shapeshifting aliens. Okorafor's aliens seem to embody the fluid state of being outlined in Haraway's discussion of cyborg identity. These beings adopt the form of a posthuman creature, not composed of organic material, but rather made up of "[t]iny balls [that] aren't fixed together as our cells are" (Okorafor, 2014a:25). The unfixed nature of the aliens' molecular makeup allows them to mould themselves to any shape they wish, be it human, animal, male or female. In so doing, Okorafor's aliens can easily transgress the heavily stratified gender boundaries of Nigerian society.

Haraway's formulations of the posthuman further pertain to my study as she conceptualises humans as analogous to cyborgs: contrary to the assumptions of Cartesian dualism, humans are simultaneously mind and body, machine and animal. We are not separate from nature; neither are machines. An example of this is how our memory itself is external to our bodies as we "outsource our memory, agency and thought [...] to external media" (Plastic Pills, 2019:11:13–11:21) by writing and painting. We map our experiences onto parts of the natural world to aid in memory. Therefore, we are reliant upon the natural world for our collective memory. Humanity is imbricated in nature. In turn, machines are imbricated in humanity (for their design) and nature (for the materials used to construct them). The natural extension of this is that "the machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshiped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. [...] We are responsible for boundaries; we are they" (Haraway, 2016a:65, emphasis in original). In this sense "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and

organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (7). While Ayodele’s shapeshifting makes her a more overt embodiment of Haraway’s cyborg, other characters also display notable features of cyborgian liminality. Adaora, Agu and Anthony all transgress the boundaries of western rationalism through their magical abilities, while members of the Black Nexus, like Jacobs and Rome, contest the rigidity of sexual and gender norms. The gendered dimension of the novel is representative of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism as the removal of such rigid boundary markers is a significant thematic concern of Okorafor’s writing.

While Haraway’s theory is apposite to my analysis, it is also pertinent to situate Okorafor’s text in terms of contemporary African feminist debate.<sup>4</sup> I turn to Ghanaian scholar-activist, Agnes Aita Apusigah’s article ‘Is gender yet another colonial project? A critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi’s proposal’ (2006). Apusigah interrogates Oyewumi’s claim that “gender is a Western imposition” (2006:28) and how “both Western and colonised Africans employ structures and frameworks that are alien to [...] local realities” (25). These statements can be compared to the racist ideology of Okorafor’s Nigerian-born Catholic uncle whose politically reactionary views on African subjectivities are discussed earlier in the theoretical framework. The views of Okorafor’s uncle underscores the Africanfuturist aims of *Lagoon* as many characters contest hegemonic discourse in their actions.

Apusigah argues for the adoption of a relativist position that “embraces difference and diversity” in order to decolonise and liberate people from the “snares and shackles of neo/colonialism” (33), an observation which links to Nyamnjoh’s comments on the need for Africans (like Okorafor’s uncle) to liberate themselves from western discourses. Apusigah’s primary contestation is against

---

<sup>4</sup> I am cognisant that Haraway’s early writings on the cyborg have been criticised for “colorblindness” (Wilkerson, 1997:169). Abby Wilkerson contends that in transcending boundaries of race and sexuality, the cyborg myth “evades the very issues [...] it seems to be addressing” (164). It is thus an inadequate tool for “dismantling racism and white privilege” (169) as the cyborg imagines a utopian dream beyond race. Cyborg theory is seen as white, Eurocentric denialism. However, Haraway has more recently addressed these criticisms and engaged with issues of race in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) where she acknowledges that “like all offspring of colonizing and imperial histories, I – we – have to relearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars” (Haraway, 2016b:13).

cultural and gender essentialism in an African context. *Lagoon*, reflects Apusigah's relativist position by highlighting the fluid and protean nature of cultures. The novel foregrounds African, Yoruba and Nigerian subjectivities through African Gods, and women and men who embrace difference with no thought to 'social boundaries,' while also expressing western ontological concerns through passages which explore the perspective of characters such as Chris and Fisayo.

Apusigah foregrounds an identity politics that "embrace[s] the fluidity of spaces" (30), situating gender in fluid spaces of intersectionality. The protagonists of *Lagoon* are often placed in these fluid spaces. Ayodele contests the notion of 'woman' through her shapeshifting, while members of the Black Nexus embrace these fluid spaces by engaging in drag. Apusigah's concern with the politics of identity is underlined in her discussion of those living in society's marginal spaces. Apusigah draws on Gloria Anzaldúa's comments on "border women" (1999 [1987]) when she claims that the world we live in is made up of "continually eroding borders instanced by technology, globalization and developmentalism" (40), and that these immaterial, fluid borders are causing physical borders to "ceas[e] to exist, as boundaries as becoming thinner and more blurry" (40). Apusigah's comments on the fluidity of borders echo Haraway's cyborg/posthuman subjectivity, as both see boundaries as mutable. In *Lagoon*, Adaora embraces the fluidity of her space as she contests the boundary markers placed upon her subject position. As the wife of a devout Christian, Adaora contests her subject position by eschewing the westernised faith of her husband, Chris. She further breaks the mould of the subservient housewife as she overpowers Chris using her magical abilities during an altercation in which Chris is trying to assert his patriarchal dominance over his wife.

Nyamnjoh's formulation of the "frontier African" can be considered a 'relative' of Haraway's cyborg, and is thus useful in elucidating how Okorafor's characters further break from western rationalist gender paradigms. Nyamnjoh describes frontier Africans as "those who contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalised and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces" (2015:6). To Nyamnjoh's frontier Africans "everyone and everything is malleable, flexible and blendable, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, Gods, ghosts and spirits. No boundary, wall or chasm is challenging enough to defy frontier

Africans seeking conversations with and between divides. At the frontiers, anything can be anything” (6–7). I will explore how Okorafor’s characters exemplify Nyamnjoh’s concept of the frontier African. Adaora, Agu and Anthony all slip through the boundaries between reality and magic due to their supernatural powers, while Ayodele destabilises binary modes of thought through her ability to physically shapeshift. These characters are emblematic of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism because they ignore the tenets of western rationalism in favour of African epistemologies which allow for the blending of the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional.’

To expand upon Okorafor’s radical treatment of the ‘shapeshifting’ gender of the alien, Ayodele, I rely on Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006). According to Butler gender is constructed “through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (2006:191, emphasis in original). Once gender is seen as a performance that is “radically independent of sex” it “becomes a free-floating artifice” (9). This fluidity or malleability of gender is evident in the non-binary gender or ‘queerness’ of Ayodele the alien. Ayodele predominantly presents herself as a woman, but at other times takes on the form of a man such as Adaora’s husband, Chris, or even Karl Marx. Even when she chooses a masculine avatar during her continuous gender performance, Ayodele is still referred to as “she” by other characters and the narrator. This distinction confuses a simple reading of gender and forces us to adopt gender as the “free-floating artifice” that Butler outlines.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler draws on the pioneering research on drag queens conducted by cultural anthropologist, Esther Newton. Newton’s insights are particularly relevant to the representations of drag in *Lagoon*. I argue for similarities between shapeshifting and drag in my analysis of the characters, Jacobs, Rome and Ayodele. Drag and shapeshifting in the novel “effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Newton in Butler, 2006:186). I argue that by adopting elements of drag and shapeshifting, Jacobs, Rome and Ayodele challenge heteronormative behavioural codes.

Ayodele's gender fluidity and the Black Nexus's engagement in drag call into question all fixed notions of sexual and gendered subjectivity. Consequently, my study also relies on queer theory, to which Butler has been a significant contributor. From an African queer perspective, I rely on the South African scholar, Cheryl Stobie. In particular, and in terms of the novel's postmodern techniques, I make use of Stobie's article, 'Postcolonial Pomosexuality: Queer/Alternative Fiction after *Disgrace*' (2009) to explore the gendered dimensions of the novel. In her argument, Stobie makes reference to the origins of the term 'queer' and how it has been reclaimed by the homosexual community and used as a positive force which "focuse[s] instead on questioning the notion of fixed sexual identities and the perception of heterosexuality as normative" (2009:321–322). This notion of unfixed sexual identities is useful in my analysis of the novel, as the narrative depicts a convivial, anti-binarist figuring of gender and sexuality through its shapeshifting aliens and members of the Black Nexus.

In examining the aliens' transgression of gender boundaries, I will be using ecofeminist theory from Hobgood-Oster, in conjunction with Haraway's image of the cyborg to inform my discussions on gender fluidity and the novel's environmental dimension. In Hobgood-Oster's article 'Ecofeminism: Historic and International Evolution' (2005) she states that "[e]cofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: heaven/earth [...] male/female, human/animal" (2005:534), and that "[e]cofeminism posits that as long as any of the dualisms exist as an integral component of societal structuring and justification, they will all continue to serve as starting points to justify patriarchy" (534). *Lagoon* can then be classified as ecofeminist as it offers alternatives to the binaries of western patriarchy by promoting queer characters such as Ayodele or the cross-dressing Jacobs and non-human/creaturely focalisers. The novel thus subverts both gender and anthropocentric hegemonies creating an environment where the terms 'gender' and 'human' lose almost all significance as distinctions between the human/nonhuman, male/female and human/nature are contested throughout the narrative.

## Chapter Two: Africanfuturism: Recasting the ideological contours of science fiction

This chapter focuses on the ways in which Okorafor writes Africanfuturist literature by exploring how *Lagoon* incorporates elements of African culture and belief systems in its science fiction narrative. What makes *Lagoon* worthy of study is that it takes the traditional tools of science fiction (advanced technology, magical powers, ‘first contact’ narratives) and subverts or reappropriates them to suit the goals of Africanfuturism, one of which is to represent Africa through an organic epistemology that originates on the African continent and does not build upon the foundation set up by a western authorship. *Lagoon* challenges western cultural hegemony and recentres Africa in the global imaginary. In the first segment of this chapter titled “Location: Lagos” I argue that Okorafor’s novel “recast[s] the ideological contours of the first contact narrative” (O’Connell, 2016:292) through the arrival of the aliens in the former colonial city of Lagos as opposed to a major hub of the western business world such as New York, London or Moscow.

My discussion in “Okorafor’s organic Gods” proposes that the inclusion of African spiritual deities in *Lagoon* is a crucial element of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism as an active resistance to European science fiction narratives. The inclusion of traditional deities informs Okorafor’s Africanfuturism since it involves a distinct interconnection between the spiritual and the physical realms. Nyamnjoh’s theory of conviviality is useful in this examination as he proposes that similar interconnections are essential to our growth as human beings. I use current scholarship by Hugo (2017) and Jue (2017) to further support the links between organic deities and Okorafor’s Africanfuturism.

The magical abilities of *Lagoon*’s protagonists will be discussed in the third part of this chapter, “Stranger than fiction: The melding of magic and reality in *Lagoon*.” In this way, I will explore in more depth precisely how Okorafor’s novel exemplifies Africanfuturism. The novel’s celebration of the supernatural powers of its protagonists elevates African belief systems and challenges western, rationalist attitudes that disparage the supernatural as symptomatic of backwards-

thinking, underdeveloped ideologies. I again make use of Nyamnjoh's theories of conviviality to explore the interconnectedness of magic and mundane elements within African culture. Okorafor weaves the magic and mundane together throughout her novel to upset dichotomous interpretations of lived reality. I also explore how the arrival of the aliens initiates a shift in perspective towards "Afro-optimism" (Eze, 2015:216), which contests the overbearing attitude of 'Afro-pessimism' which currently prevails in western discourse regarding Africa.

In the final segment of this chapter "Pidgin English: Okorafor's inclusionary politics" I discuss how Nigerian pidgin English and its uses in *Lagoon* are an integral aspect of Okorafor's Africanfuturist literary project. The use of language in *Lagoon* underlines that this is an endogenous story which highlights the inextricable influence of Africa on its characters' identities. Nyamnjoh's comments on conviviality are again useful in analysing Okorafor's use of language as it helps to "bridg[e] divides and fascilitat[e] interconnections" (2015:12) between African subjectivities and western rationalist attitudes towards Africa.

## **2.1 Location: Lagos**

In interviews, Okorafor has expressed her desire to see more African fiction and fantasy on the shelves of libraries (Okorafor in Zutter, 2016), and *Lagoon* is her contribution towards achieving this goal. Due to Okorafor's Nigerian heritage it is no surprise that she wrote a novel set in the country she describes as her "muse" (Okorafor in Alter, 2017: n.p.). *Lagoon*'s west African setting allows the novel to embody Okorafor's Africanfuturist literature that is "rooted in the history and traditions of the [African] continent" (Borrelli, 2019: n.p.), as it is a story about Africans in Africa.

The novel's setting is significant as it contests western imperialist science fiction narratives which archetypally involve extra-terrestrials making first contact with a developed, western nation in a city such as London, New York or Moscow. By having aliens land in Africa, Okorafor "recast[s] the ideological contours of the first contact narrative" (O'Connell, 2016:292) which challenges

western narratives of implicit superiority, and creates a space for Africanfuturist stories to flourish in Africa. On her personal blogspot, Okorafor has engaged in discourses surrounding the African audience and their apparent disinterest with the conventional themes of science fiction, like space exploration, aliens, advanced technology or the political influence of the west. Their concerns are more immediate, such as food shortages, poor governance or inadequate infrastructure (Okorafor, 2014b). *Lagoon* deals with the issues of poor infrastructure as it explores the poverty of characters like Moziz, a struggling medical student making most of his money through 419 scams, who resides in a block of “face-me-I-face-you”<sup>5</sup> flats. Additionally, Okorafor comments on the poor political leadership of Nigeria through caricaturising both the president and his vice president, highlighting their inadequacies in a semi-comical manner. I return to this topic in more depth later in this chapter. Okorafor also foregrounds the issue of poor service delivery by detailing the frequent power outages due to a failing governmental electrical company called NEPA, which “took the lights like God took human lives” (2014a:185). The blending of a first contact narrative set in Lagos with political issues of relevance to many Africans forms a part of Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project as it deals with issues endemic to Africa, and “radically transform[s] the worlds of speculative fiction to be more representative of the world we live in” (Väättänen, 2019: n.p.) rather than focusing on the ideological parameters of the western science fiction narrative.

The revelation that the aliens choose to land in Lagos furthers Okorafor’s goal of ‘Africanising’ science fiction. The aliens reveal their landing in Lagos was not an accident. Rather, it was by design as the water in the bay “seemed like [a] good place for [them]” (Okorafor, 2014a:40). Adaora later comes to realise another reason the aliens landed in Lagos is because “if they’d landed in New York, Tokyo or London, the governments of those places would have quickly swooped in to hide, isolate and study the aliens” (64). While it constitutes one of the largest cities on the African continent, Lagos lacks the administrative power necessary to conceal or isolate the aliens upon their arrival in Lagos, thus allowing the extra-terrestrials to freely interact with the populace as well as with the country’s leaders. The lack of control exhibited by the political administration

---

<sup>5</sup> “Face-me-I-face-you is a pidgin English expression used to describe a particularly popular architectural style of housing in various urban settlements across Nigeria. The houses are utilitarian in design and affordable for low income earners. Their primary function is to accommodate as many tenants as possible within very minimal space” (Dele-Adededeji, Jeffreys, 2020: n.p.).

in Lagos is relatable to the citizens of many African countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa who can claim ties to ineffectual leaders in recent years. The aliens' calculated decision to land in Lagos allows the aliens to disregard social stratifications and interact with whomever they desire, from street vendors to politicians.

The aliens' seamless integration into the Lagos cityspace could be read as a uniquely Africanfuturist depiction of Nyamnjoh's theories of conviviality within the Nigerian cityscape. Through his writings on conviviality, Nyamnjoh mentions how "some spaces, dispositions and possibilities militate in favour of the emergence of conviviality more than others" (2015:14). These spaces, for Nyamnjoh, are cities with high population densities which promote a natural community as they "require trust, interdependence, solidarity and mutual support to get by" (Brudvig in Nyamnjoh, 2015:12). Lagos, with its chaotic and diverse city spaces, coincides with Nyamnjoh's ideas of the city to deliver a wealth of examples of conviviality through the lived realities of its citizens, who make up the population of the largest city in Africa (Karuga, 2019). Through Okorafor's representation of the city and her use of multiple focalisers (discussed in detail later in this chapter) Okorafor creates a more inclusive view of the city and its myriad inhabitants. Okorafor's narrative structure creates a web of constantly shifting narrative voices, flitting between characters as if the boundaries between their subjectivities were permeable and indistinct. Here, Okorafor's goal of writing science fiction informed by African subjectivities and Nyamnjoh's advocacy for city spaces as places of conviviality and inclusion mesh through the multiple perspectives presented.

The spaces for conviviality that Brudvig and Nyamnjoh articulate in their respective theories are present in *Lagoon*; however, the "trust, interdependence, solidarity and mutual support" (Brudvig in Nyamnjoh, 2015:12) are absent. This is evident in the text when, in a traffic jam of people fleeing the city of Lagos, street vendors gather to sell food to individuals stranded in their vehicles. However, the vendors are often harassed and become targets of theft and abuse (Okorafor, 2014a:189–190). Further, Father Oke's church, a place typically associated with sanctuary and acceptance, becomes a place of physical abuse as he incites his flock to violence and creates a mob mentality by slapping a woman and naming her a "witch" and a "foul devil" (59). This kind of

behaviour extends beyond the highway and the church as the streets of Lagos become a breeding ground for violence as riots break out (147) and people burn buildings they have inhabited their whole lives (181).

The chaos erupting in the city following the arrival of the aliens fails to represent a unified or mutually beneficial society. The violence and riots which occur in the streets and Father Oke's physical abuse of women indicate that the cityspace of Lagos lacks a convivial dimension due to lingering neo-colonial influence. The aliens demonstrate the necessity for these dimensions as the novel seeks to provide an insufficient interaction amongst humans, leading to the pandemonium in the text. The novel addresses the need for convivial relationships in the Nigerian cityspace through multiple encounters between lawless, unsafe environments and the aliens. While the aliens' arrival is the cause of humanity's anarchic behaviour, the aliens are also offered as a salve or balm, as they seek to interact with individuals with no regard to status or wealth. The aliens seek to remedy the bedlam brought by their arrival through "mutually edifying conversations" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:15) and personal exchanges with the citizens of Lagos. In the traffic jam on the roads outside of Lagos, Ayodele brings calm to a riot by 'returning' the mentally unstable Fisayo "to the water" (Okorafor, 2014a:193) after she shoots a child. Ayodele does the same in the riot outside Adaora's house, vaporising violent soldiers to restore some semblance of order (137). Aliens lend aid to Agu as he is walking through the chaotic streets towards Adaora's house (175), and they help restore order in the aftermath of the riots (233). The violent and destructive behaviour of humans contrasts with the simultaneously mild and malevolent aliens. While the aliens have the potential for catastrophic violence, they reserve violent action for those who transgress upon 'innocent' individuals. The violence of the aliens is almost judicial as they inflict harm upon those who commit violent acts in Lagos. The violently restorative behaviour of the aliens shows the necessity of a convivial society to survive in densely populated areas. By displaying the destructive results of violent individualistic actions by humans, *Lagoon* highlights the urgent need for an alternative model for human interaction based on connection and interdependence to restore order.

## 2.2 Okorafor's organic Gods

Okorafor's inversion of traditional science fiction narratives is not limited to the setting of her novel. In this section I will examine how Okorafor constructs Africanfuturist narratives through her inclusion of "various Nigerian folkloric and mythical entities" (O'Connell, 2016:296). By invoking traditional African deities, Okorafor "resists global Science Fiction tropes and instead draws on a West African mythology" (Hugo, 2017:49) to underline her Africanfuturist literary stylings, as she is incorporating distinctly African themes into her novels. Science fiction (a genre that has typically been dominated by western authors such as Isaac Asimov or Frank Herbert) rarely explores the rich theological landscape of the African continent. In *Lagoon*, Okorafor makes mention of Ijele, king of the masquerades, who appears as a masked figure in clothes of colourful design and whose stature is "the size of a traditional Igbo hut" (Nwanna, 2017:559). Ijele's presence imbues Okorafor's science fiction with "mythological narratives derived from West African traditions" (Hugo, 2017:48), and brings traditional belief systems to the fore through an African narrative which promotes an indigenous African epistemology. Ijele is not tainted by western influences and is directly related to Africa and its people. He forms part of an African worldview and triggers an organic reading of the novel that does not correlate with western conventions for science fiction. The African Gods are not the Gods of traditional science fiction, many of which are fictional divinities belonging to imaginary races from outer-space. Instead, Okorafor paints Ijele as a real creature, a cultural myth come to life. Ijele's corporeal form is witnessed by a stunned 419 scammer in an internet café. The scammer expresses how the cultural theatre productions of Ijele in his youth never prepared him to "imagin[e] something like this. [...] this was Ijele" (2014a:199). Ijele's presence in the internet cafe explores how, in many non-western cultures, "the mystical coexisting with the mundane is normal" (Okorafor in Zutter, 2016: n.p.). Unlike the created worlds and deities of traditional western science fiction, Okorafor incorporates existing African theologies into her stories.

Expanding on western and African theology, Jue believes that Okorafor's inclusion of African Gods into her fantasy could be a form of resistance against the Christian fundamentalism espoused by Adaora's husband, Chris. Okorafor holds the belief that such fundamentalism is "teaching

Nigerians to hate their own indigenous traditions, spiritualities, and religions” (Okorafor in Jue, 2017:178). In response to Okorafor’s comments, Jue posits that the presence of indigenous deities in the novel could be read “as a form of self-love” (178) as it subverts Christian beliefs and replaces it with African religious elements. I would add to her observation, as I maintain that Okorafor’s inclusion of African deities is both a celebration of traditional belief systems and an active attempt to alleviate the dearth of science fiction literature and scholarship that celebrates Africanness. It is her way of writing organic African science fiction. It is Okorafor’s method of achieving her Africanfuturist goal of representing Africa through an organic epistemology which stems from Africa and does not draw upon a western authorship. One that was born on the African continent and not imported through colonialism. Ijele is a distinctly African symbol. He exemplifies an unmistakably African experience of religion and the supernatural. Ijele, king of the masquerades, makes appearances in several of Okorafor’s other novels such as *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *Akata Witch* (2011) where he plays a much larger role in the narrative, but is no less significant in Okorafor’s deeper purpose of promoting Africanness and aiding in the construction of Africanfuturist narratives.

Okorafor’s incorporation of African deities in *Lagoon* goes beyond Ijele and encompasses other divinities such as Legba, “the Yoruba trickster god of language, communication and the cross-roads” (2014a:195), who has also featured in multiple works by Okorafor. In *Lagoon*, Legba is invoked twice. Legba is the nickname of a particularly smart 419 scammer and appears again as an old man named Scratch who is met by an aspiring musical star during the chaos that erupts in the aftermath of the alien invasion. The depiction of Ijele and Legba opens avenues through which to examine the presence of an African ontology throughout the novel. In other religions such as Christianity, there are multiple accounts of individuals meeting with divine beings or angels throughout their respective religious texts. Scratch (Legba)’s encounter with the musician in *Lagoon* paints a picture for a western audience of what an African spiritual encounter could look like, and it creates a link between the spiritual and the physical world in a manner that emphasises the rhizomatic interconnections present in Nyamnjoh’s theories of conviviality.

Mami Wata's involvement in the novel and the implications of her spirituality lends further merit to the prior discussion of Ijele and Legba. Mami Wata is an African deity described as a half-human, half-fish creature, able to transform into any form of her choice, often appearing with long, dark hair (Johnson, 2018). Mami Wata's name, which means "ocean water" (Womack, 2013:86), is mentioned several times within the novel. The first mention of Mami Wata is made by a mentally challenged boy on Bar Beach. He glimpses Ayodele emerging from the water and likens her to Mami Wata. The boy perceives a being that "was not human" yet took the form of a "naked dark-skinned African woman with long black braids" (Okorafor, 2014a:13). The boy stares at the creature from the sea, and after a moment the "strange woman creature [...] ran back to the water and dove in like Mami Wata" (13). The strange woman displays physical attributes that are similar to descriptions of Mami Wata in African folklore. Okorafor's inclusion of Mami Wata in the novel could be an instance of the African 'self-love' mentioned by Jue as it promotes traditional epistemologies over western rationalism in its readers.

A second encounter with Mami Wata is described towards the end of the novel when Father Oke meets a strange woman who, after discussing a few trivialities, asks, "do you want to come with me?" (234). Her destination is not stated, and Father Oke agrees to go with the woman after some internal debate. The reader is informed that Father Oke headed toward the sea with the strange woman and was never seen again. The sequence of events that unfolds for Father Oke is eerily reminiscent of tales of Mami Wata deceiving sailors to capture them and take them to her water kingdom (Johnson, 2018). Father Oke's companion is revealed to be Mami Wata through the conversation she has with him as they stand in front of the Glass House, a building the woman claims she loves for its intricate architecture and blue-glass panels. The woman speaks to Father Oke saying, "it is Mami Wata who loves this building. Do you know Mami Wata?" (Okorafor, 2014a:235). Here, Father Oke realises this woman is neither human nor alien, but "was from the earth's water" (235). Father Oke's realisation of the nature of the woman, combined with his imminent 'abduction' into the sea, strongly indicates this is Mami Wata herself. The woman can also be identified as Mami Wata by Udide's (the narrator of *Lagoon*, whose significance is expanded upon in Chapter 3.1) indirect admission that "Father Oke was destined to meet one of my cousins" (292). Claiming the woman as one of her cousins evokes the strong familial ties

characteristic of African culture, and leaves little doubt that she is one of many African deities present in *Lagoon*.

Additionally, Mami Wata's presence in Okorafor's Africanfuturist literature is analogous to Nyamnjoh's theories on the interconnectivity of all things. In exploring this concept, Hugo indicates how Mami Wata is both "local and translocal simultaneously" since "traces of Mami Wata can be found throughout the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean under many different guises" (2017:50). Mami Wata's connections to the global African diaspora means she not only represents links between the rational and spiritual world, also represents links between diasporic people groups. Mami Wata's connections to the global African diaspora make her a symbolic figure that bridges the divide between the rational and spiritual world and intimates the interconnected, transglobal characteristics of a shared African heritage. Mami Wata's presence builds upon the ideas of Okorafor's narrative as a web-like structure as she connects elements from multiple areas to form a single spider-web of Africanfuturism.

Tied to Okorafor's use of African spiritual entities is her use of animism. In *Lagoon*, the Lagos-Benin expressway is described as a living being known as "the Bone Collector" (Okorafor, 2014a:208) since it claims so many lives through motor vehicle accidents every year. Okorafor takes this comparison further, depicting the road as a living entity that consciously attacks and devours its human victims. The presence of the Bone Collector is explored in a passage detailing a Nigerian family attempting to flee Lagos after the arrival of the aliens. Due to the evacuation of the city the Lagos-Benin expressway is gridlocked, preventing movement in any direction. It is in this gridlock that the Bone Collector becomes active and begins to rise "in a huge snake-like slab of concrete" (207), pushing cars off the road and feeding off the vehicle's former inhabitants. An alien, who was travelling with the Lagosian family, confronts the Bone Collector and offers herself up as a sacrifice to appease its appetite so it will leave the people alone. While the exchange between the alien and the Bone Collector is occurring, the father of the family spies on the proceedings from the grass. He notes that while the alien woman was "from outside the earth" (207) the Bone Collector was from "*here* and had probably been here since these roads were built" (207, emphasis in original). The statement claiming the Bone Collector to be from "*here*" paints it

as an organic African entity. The Bone Collector's presence could then be interpreted as "a synthesis of the material and the spiritual" (Hugo, 2017:53) which exhibits elements of African belief systems where the mystical and physical realms are imbricated with one another.

The Bone Collector can also be likened to discussions on modernity and the "seductions and pitfalls" (52) that are associated with modern urban environments in an African context. Hugo points out that roads are undeniably a symbol of modernity as they connect rural to urban areas, increase economic activity and promote greater interconnections and commerce within countries. Okorafor's road however "disrupts a Euro-American perception of modernity" (53) as it does not solely represent western goals of economic activity. The animist logic behind the Bone Collector "weakens Euro-American modernity's hierarchical positioning of the physical, 'rational' realm over the sphere of magic and myth" (53). In weakening Euro-American hierarchies, the animistic inclusion of the Bone Collector forms part of Okorafor's Africanfuturist project as it takes the road, a symbol of western modernisation, and inverts it to suit her Africanfuturist project. Okorafor does this by collating markers of modernity (the road) with "complex African experience[s]" (Okorafor, 2009b:277) which involve elements of the supernatural (such as the Bone Collector being a living entity).

Okorafor's inclusion of the supernatural and of deities from African folklore in *Lagoon* can be interpreted as "constitut[ing] a practice of resistance against western paradigms of scientific practice" (Keller in Jue, 2017:174). This is particularly true since, in interviews, Okorafor has expressed distaste at the extent to which western literary attitudes influence the creation of African science fiction, and the lack of original African content in libraries and schools. Considering Okorafor's antipathy towards western classifications of her work, *Lagoon*'s usage of African deities such as Mami Wata, Ijele, or Legba is recognisable as an attempt to promote an African epistemology that privileges traditional African values and beliefs over "western paradigms of scientific practice" (Jue, 2017:174). The privileging of African values is an attempt to create and celebrate Afrocentric literary material. Okorafor's integration of the spiritual and real world through the presence of Ijele, Legba, Mami Wata, Udide, Anansi and the Bone Collector, displays a coalescence between the two realms, pointing towards a new convivial worldview espoused by

Nyamnjoh which “emphasise[s] the interconnection of everyone and everything” (2015:6), including the natural and supernatural. Okorafor’s inclusion of “nonhuman presences drawn from the West African spirit world [...] explores the ways in which the alien – a figure derived from global Sci-Fi narratives – is resonant with local beliefs and cultural practices” (Hugo, 2017:50). Okorafor’s inclusion of African deities in *Lagoon* promotes the fantastic as part of the natural world, rejecting a binary approach to viewing the world in favour of a more inclusive, Africanfuturist figuring of the post-colonial science fiction sphere of literature.

### **2.3 Stranger than fiction: The melding of magic and reality in *Lagoon*.**

The magic in Okorafor’s novel creates links between the tangible and spiritual worlds which represents the inseparability of the two within African culture. Okorafor believes that “in writing about Africa the magic naturally, organically sprout[s]” (2009b:284). For Okorafor, (and other authors such as Amos Tutuola or Credo Mutwa) Africa and magic are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are intrinsically linked. Nyamnjoh, in his analysis of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), discusses how Tutuola does not consider magic to be external from our lived reality. In describing *The Palm Wine Drinkard* Nyamnjoh asserts that “the supernatural is quite simply natural” (2015:5), and the drinkard’s ability to shift into anything he wants collapses boundaries between nature and culture. Nyamnjoh believes that Tutuola “invites us to perceive things [such as magic and reality] as interlinked and to factor interconnections into how we relate to the world” (4). In her article “Organic fantasy” (2009b), Okorafor outlines a thought process similar to the interlinking of magic and reality outlined by Nyamnjoh when she discusses stories about ‘the flying Africans.’ These stories surround the disappearance of African slaves during the transatlantic slave trade. Okorafor discusses how, in some circles within Nigeria, the belief that Africans can fly is not discarded as magic or myth but taken as reality and supported by “literal accounts of the Flying Africans in African American history” (2009b:280). Okorafor incorporates the flying African narrative within *Lagoon* through the inclusion of Adaora’s ability to levitate. In the aftermath of the riot that destroys Adaora’s home, Chris, Anthony, Ayodele, her children and Adaora take a moment to process the events of the past few days. After remembering a bullet wound her daughter received, Adaora begins to go downstairs to her lab and realises that “she was

floating three inches above the ground” (2014a:142). Adaora’s mystic powers of flight are a direct link to the stories of ‘flying Africans’ circulating in Nigerian lore and during the transatlantic slave trade. The inclusion of Adaora’s magical levitation in a story about extra-terrestrials landing in Nigeria can be interpreted as an exploration of a convivial, inclusionary African ontology which portrays elements of the mystic and folkloric (like flying Africans) as real.

Magic is further explored in the novel through the supernatural abilities of Adaora, Anthony and Agu, as the powers of the protagonists begin to “physically manifest themselves and interact with the material world” (O’Connell, 2016:296) in the second act of the novel. Adaora has the ability to shapeshift, levitate (as discussed previously) and create invisible barriers of force to control or contain other beings. Anthony has the ability to manipulate sound waves, which he refers to as “the rhythm” (Okorafor, 2014a:164), either to aid his music and positively influence those around him, or to unleash a forceful barrier of sound to protect himself. Lastly, Agu has super-strength, first exhibited when he punches his superior officer and sends him “flying like a sack of feathers” (26).<sup>6</sup> Okorafor’s inclusion of the protagonists’ magical abilities is often deeply rooted in African experience and mythologies, thus reflecting an overall Africanfuturist ‘agenda.’

The protagonists’ supernatural powers could also be an imagining of human capabilities if we were disabused of the “obvious inadequacies” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:3) outlined by Nyamnjoh through his concept of the western baby (expanded in the theoretical framework). Nyamnjoh’s baby metaphor references the inherent inadequacies of an infant and how it develops through continuous interactions with caregivers. Western conceptions of the self often lead to the view of individuals as ‘complete’ while having limited external influences. The view of oneself as ‘complete’ often discourages further development in the individual. The result is that the child never evolves past their infancy due to limited encounters with outside influences. Thus, the western baby metaphor

---

<sup>6</sup>It is interesting to note that the genesis of the protagonist’s powers occurs when a woman is being threatened with violence. Adaora is being threatened with violence by her husband when she creates a mental barrier, preventing him from moving, Anthony’s younger sister is being intimidated by extended family members when he uses the rhythm to blast them away from his home to protect her, and Agu punches his superior, Lance Corporal Benson, to prevent a woman from being raped. This discussion will be extended in Chapter Four.

exemplifies a closed western culture characterised by strict “dichotomies and dualisms” (3), which are inflexible and unaccepting of other modes of being. The magical abilities of Okorafor’s protagonists force its western audience to engage with mythic African constructions and view African configurations of the supernatural that are distinct from a western cultural experience. Western readers are confronted with a text that “contest[s] rigid modes of being and becoming” (8) articulated in western science fiction. Nyamnjoh argues that if these distinctly African epistemologies are engaged with on their own terms, “then the universe depicted by Tutuola (1952) [and Okorafor (2014a)] is likely to make more sense than simply as a primitive world of magic, superstition, witchcraft and fantasies gone wild” (8). Okorafor’s depiction of magic promotes an interconnection between the supernatural and the material worlds that is not seen in western epistemologies.

Okorafor’s Africanfuturist writing does not dismiss elements of magic as ‘unreal,’ but rather embraces such extravagances in its attempts to bring about greater interconnectedness between the ‘magical’ and the real, which subverts “a western-derived dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular” (Hugo, 2017:53). Adaora’s incredulity at being faced with an otherworldly being brings about memories of a conversation she had with a college friend in which he said that “everything human beings perceived as real was only a matter of the information their bodies recorded. ‘And that information isn’t always correct or complete,’” (Okorafor, 2014a:37). With this conversation, Okorafor depicts magic as something possible since the magical abilities of Adaora (and her companions) form part of a body of knowledge that is not complete. Additionally, Adaora’s comments about the limits of rational knowledge and the characters’ fantastical powers position them as specifically Africanfuturist examples of Nyamnjoh’s “frontier Africans” (2015:6). Nyamnjoh describes frontier Africans as “those who contest taken-for-granted and often institutionalized and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces” (6). In these contestations, frontier Africans view “everyone and everything [as] malleable, flexible and blendable” (6–7). Adaora’s ability to levitate, as well as her openness to discussions on the known and unknown, position her as a frontier African, capable of contesting rigid western modes of being. The representation of Adaora’s ability of flight, alongside the other protagonists’ magical abilities, reflects Okorafor’s desire to “do justice to the legitimate quest for activation of

African potentialities” (16), as her narrative does not define and delineate what is or is not true. It is simply open to multiple possibilities, such as the coexistence of magic in quotidian reality.

The meshing of magic and reality in *Lagoon* is supplemented by the views of Adaora’s deceased grandmother. Upon discovering Ayodele’s shapeshifting abilities, Adaora remarks that she wishes her grandmother could be alive to see Ayodele as “she was always sure the markets were full of them, witches, shape-shifters, warlocks” (Okorafor, 2014a:29). Adaora’s grandmother belongs to a generation of Nigerians who hold firm to the belief that magic and witchcraft thrive alongside the ‘real’ environment. The beliefs of Adaora’s grandmother represent “African realities [...] not steeped in dualisms, binaries, dichotomies and essences” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:6), and rather suggest a “universe of incompleteness and infinite possibilities” (6). Adaora’s grandmother characterises an African ontology, free of western thinking which separates the belief in the mystical from ‘measurable reality.’ The inclusion of Adaora’s grandmother in Okorafor’s narrative is informed by traditional storytelling and those alternate modes of knowledge often scoffed at by western empiricists as ‘superstition.’ Adaora’s grandmother’s views are reflective of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism as the readers understanding of the folkloric and scientific are meshed to initiate a perspective shift towards inclusivity.

Okorafor’s inclusion of the magical into the everyday goes beyond simply creating “witches, shape-shifters [and] warlocks” (Okorafor, 2014a:29). In one passage in *Lagoon*, Okorafor introduces the character, Femi, a journalist who accompanies Ayodele and the presidential party on a boat to speak to the Elders of the alien race. While filming this meeting, Femi witnesses Ayodele’s shapeshifting ability and he also records Adaora, Anthony and Agu using their powers to protect the boat, the president, and his wives from sea creatures. Upon returning to shore, he uploads his footage to YouTube and titles it; “The President of Nigeria Saved by Witches and Warlocks!” (287). The ridiculous title of the video is a sensationalist attempt to grab views, but the irony is that within the novel the title is not wholly inaccurate in Okorafor’s reimagining of the boundary between ‘superstition’ and reality. The label, which resembles ‘click-bait,’ reveals the truth of the event. The title of Femi’s article adds to Okorafor’s deconstruction of rationality and western epistemologies as its sensationalist heading resembles headlines found in unreliable

tabloid newspapers, yet it is “the most honest piece of journalism [Femi] had ever produced” (288). The contrasting melodrama of the headline and the seriousness of the article challenges and subverts notions of western rationality as the article would typically be met with incredulity by its standard audience. The scepticism of individuals towards outlandish forms of magic such as this creates a critical node from which Okorafor can explore an African ontology, where magic mixes with reality and the president of Nigeria really can be saved by witches and warlocks.

Okorafor destabilises the boundaries between magic and ‘reality’ in another important passage of the novel from Chapter 28: The Plantain Tree. Kola (Adaora’s 10-year-old daughter) is shot in the arm during a riot outside Adaora’s home. Ayodele heals the child by transforming her hand into a mist that envelops Kola’s arm and allows Ayodele to knit the wound back together. Kola reveals that the healing process feels like ants crawling inside her. Ayodele responds that this sensation is her “*speaking* with [Kola]” and urging Kola to “rebuild [her]self” (139), which confirms a communicative healing process. In *Lagoon*, the healing process is always preceded by communication, and those who are unwilling to communicate, change or adapt struggle to find a place in the altered cityscape of Lagos after the arrival of the aliens. In the opening pages the sea creatures’ transformation is initiated through communication with the aliens that emerge off Lagos’s coast. The sea creatures are met by the aliens, and they communicate what they wish to become. Upon hearing the animals’ desires, the aliens change them to fit their requests. After meeting with the president of Nigeria, Ayodele asks him if he wants his health back before she heals him, and Ayodele talks to Kola and tells her to heal herself from the inside. This is not to say that all transformation in the novel requires communication. Several passages in the novel depict radical change occurring without prior consultation. The moral ambiguity of the aliens reveals itself in when violent characters such as Lance Corporal Benson, his soldiers and Moziz (all of whom are covered in depth in Chapter Four) are vaporised by the aliens after displaying a malevolent desire to physically dominate the otherworldly visitors or others. Reviewing the behaviour of Benson, his soldiers and Moziz, it could be argued that it is the humans’ intolerance, ignorance and fear that drives the violence which occurs in the novel.

Kola's regeneration through communication further explores the possibility of describing Okorafor's protagonists as frontier Africans, individuals who are interested in "seeking conversations with and between divides" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:6). When comparing the healing of Kola to the fate of Lance Corporal Benson it is easy to see the differences between Nyamnjoh's frontier Africans and those who wish to maintain rigid boundaries and control. Okorafor's protagonists resemble Nyamnjoh's frontier Africans and are willing to enter into conversations with those who do not resemble their lived realities, while other characters are not. The lack of intimidatory control present in conversations with frontier Africans points towards the benefits of a convivial relationship with the other, with constructive communication occurring which benefits all parties. It shows the power of interconnection and discussion over coercive methods of control. Okorafor uses the trope of healing preceded by communication to convey a powerful message of interconnectivity and communication as the first step in a process of redressing racial and political inequalities of the past.

Okorafor's inclusion of fantastical elements in her novel, such as the flying Africans, her protagonists' supernatural abilities, the traditional beliefs in warlocks and witches, the sensationalist title of a YouTube video and the magical healing of Kola, portrays a universe where magic and reality are intrinsically linked. The magic that "organically sprouts" (Okorafor, 2009b:284) in Africa is evident in her representation of Lagos in *Lagoon* and this is central in her exemplary representation of Africanfuturism and conviviality as a form of celebrating incompleteness. Okorafor's combination of magical elements with the real world highlights an organic, African epistemology that resists simplistic binary oppositions or hierarchal categorisation, creating a rhizomatic, almost fluid interaction between fiction and reality which underlines her progressive literary treatment of convivial African ontologies.

### **2.3.1 History and fiction in *Lagoon*.**

Similar to its inclusion of magic and the 'supernatural,' the fantastical narrative of *Lagoon* is fluidly interwoven with actual events which occurred in Nigeria's past. This inclusion reflects Okorafor's belief that "fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality" (2009b:279).

Okorafor uses her fantasy to explore African lived experiences by writing science fiction narratives depicting Nigerian political and social realities. Her purpose in doing so is to “allow one to experience even the most overdone ideas in fresh ways” (278). What follows is a discussion of the novel’s depiction of actual events in Nigerian history and how this creates the capacity to discuss African realities, inequalities and subjectivities within Okorafor’s Africanfuturist framework.

In exploring Okorafor’s fantastical reality, I wish to discuss a reference to a major bus incident on the Lagos Benin expressway in *Lagoon*. In the novel, an unknown family is fleeing the chaos that has erupted in Lagos due to the aliens’ arrival. They become stuck on the Lagos Benin expressway and the wife mentions a tragic bus-robbery-cum-bus-crash which occurred near their location. Her husband, who drove past the event as it happened, recalls how “mangled, twisted bodies” (Okorafor, 2014a:204) lay over the road, and how photos revealed how “torn up bodies” with “twisted torsos” (204) littered the road after the accident. The bus robbery being discussed by the family did, in fact, occur in Lagos in August 2011, when several robbers stopped a luxury overnight bus and ordered the passengers to disembark and lie face down on the road while they searched for valuables. While lying in the road, another bus ran over the victims and drove off, leaving fourteen people dead (CBS, 2011).

While grisly and disturbing, this incorporation of legitimate events provides further context to the violence displayed by the Bone-Collector throughout the novel. As discussed previously, Okorafor’s inclusion of the Bone-Collector demonstrates an African epistemology as its presence reconfigures a traditional marker of western modernity (the road) into an element of African folklore which “is resonant with local beliefs and cultural practices” (Hugo, 2017:50). The inclusion of the violent bus accident displays the Bone-Collector ‘consuming’ crash victims or orchestrating car accidents as an explanation for the continued violence and destruction that occurs along the Lagos Benin expressway in non-fictional Nigeria. Okorafor’s attribution of this real-world tragedy to a creature from African folklore serves to promote an Africanfuturist worldview by disabusing the reader of dualistic worldviews that forbid the fantastic to be a part of the ‘real.’ A rationalist western epistemology would discard such an interpretation for the causation of the

accident, yet the Bone-Collector's presence promotes an African epistemology of difference, displaying the slippage of the fantastic into the everyday experience of Nigerians.

Okorafor again uses her Africanfuturist science fiction to foreground contemporary African realities through the political context of the novel. In *Lagoon*, the reader is placed within a Nigeria that has an absentee president. It is revealed that the president is in Saudi Arabia, recovering from heart surgery to assist his pericarditis (Okorafor, 2014a:83). The narrative of the missing president is eerily reminiscent of Nigeria's political situation in 2010, when then-president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua disappeared from the public eye for over 45 days without relinquishing any presidential responsibility. Reports from Nigeria's ambassador to Saudi Arabia confirmed that the president was in a hospital in Saudi Arabia, and it is widely believed that he went to Saudi Arabia for the treatment of pericarditis (Smith, 2010). The similarities between the events of *Lagoon* and real-world Nigerian politics create a sense of verisimilitude between Okorafor's fantastical Nigeria and contemporary African realities.

The real-world echoes continue as the name of the vice president is mimetic of recent Nigerian political history. *Lagoon's* vice president, Wishwell Williams, is a caricature of the former vice president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan (Smith, 2010). There are correlations between Goodluck Jonathan and his fictional counterpart, as both are regarded negatively. *Lagoon's* president expresses his distaste for Wishwell Williams, describing him as "power-hungry" and "money-grubbing" (Okorafor, 2014a:83), claiming that, due to his Zoology degree, he "knew more about governing lizards and birds than human beings" (83). Ironically, due to his Zoology degree, Wishwell Williams may be better equipped to deal with Ayodele and the aliens' boundaryless conceptualisation of humans and animals than anybody else in the Nigerian government. Similar sentiments were expressed about Goodluck Jonathan's competency, as the president of the Civil Rights Congress in Nigeria described him as "a lame duck: weak, indecisive" (Smith, 2010: n.p.).

The parallels between the presidential cabinet depicted in *Lagoon* and Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's problematic administration blurs the line between truth and fiction by creating a narrative

experience that is both strange and familiar for the reader. In doing so, Okorafor articulates an African ontology that accepts the mystic as real, incorporating the factual world into a fantasy realm. Through her representations of real events like the bus robbery, Yar'Adua's unexplained absences and the periodic oil spills in the Niger delta, Okorafor uses the vehicle of the science fiction narrative to explore issues endogenous to Africa, such as inadequate political leadership and service delivery issues in the form of inadequate roads riddled with potholes and crime. This then forms part of Okorafor's unique Africanfuturist narrative as she "grow[s] fantasy from reality" (Hugo, 2017:48), as major incidents within her novel are based on events in Nigeria's history.

Okorafor's depiction of Nigeria's weakened presidential cabinet can also be analysed through Chielozona Eze's exploration of a cosmopolitan imagination in South Africa. Eze outlines two conflicting attitudes pervasive in discourses about Africa; Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism (2015:216). Afro-pessimism tends to focus on "the weakness of African socio-cultural foundations" (216) and explores the population's disappointment in its policies and "the moral vacuity in the leadership of most African countries" (216), while Afro-optimism focuses on "the emergent positive cultural narratives from the continent" (216). In *Lagoon*, Okorafor's depiction of Nigeria's president reflects a certain strain of 'Afro-pessimism,' as the president's disappearance can be viewed as a retreat from the country's seemingly insoluble political problems. His weakened physical abilities and laissez-faire leadership tactics (which are almost non-existent) indicate an individual disconnected from the interests of the people. The radical physical change he receives at the hands of Ayodele reframes his perspective, transforming his views to align more closely with 'Afro-optimism.' This interaction with Ayodele regenerates a sense of agency, prompting the president's return to the country to provide citizens with an explanation for his absence and an admission of his guilt, alongside an optimistic plan to turn the country around with the otherworldly visitors help. The president's restorative entanglement with the aliens generates the impetus with which he can act. His words are an encouragement to the populace of Nigeria, producing a growing solidarity and encouragement through the kind of cobwebbed interconnections outlined by public intellectuals such as Antjie Krog and Achille Mbembe (Eze, 2015). The restoration of the president and his renewed optimism towards his

country forms part of a resistance towards Afro-pessimist perspectives of technologically ‘backward,’ primitive nations. Here, Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project aides in promoting Afro-optimist narratives through the restoration of Lagos and the implication that Nigeria will become a “mighty nation” (Okorafor, 2014a:273) through their alliance with the aliens and their technology.

In the segment above I have discussed the purpose of Okorafor incorporating elements of Nigerian material reality into her science fiction narrative. Writing in the science fiction mode allows Okorafor to explore and critique elements of African realities in new ways. Her addition of the Bone Collector and details of the problematic presidential cabinet enables the novel to appeal to its African audience as it deals with issues familiar to their own experiences. Okorafor uses these elements to write a science fiction narrative grown from an African reality.

#### **2.4 Pidgin English: Okorafor’s inclusionary politics.**

In an examination of *Lagoon*, it is interesting to note how Okorafor uses the science fiction form to imagine alternatives to western neo-colonial practices and control through its inclusion of Nigerian pidgin English in its dialogue. Much of the novel’s conversations are interspersed with Nigerian phrases and passages filled with pidgin English that are not immediately comprehensible to a non-Nigerian reader. In many postmodern novels, the deliberate exclusion of the reader would instil a feeling of distance between the reader and the characters, often creating the same feelings of confusion or dislocation from events that the characters undergo. This is not the case in *Lagoon*, as (most of) the characters do not have a fractured sense of identity that needs to be conveyed to the reader. The novel’s use of pidgin English combines cultures in the same way that pidgin English combines languages in these extracts. By using pidgin English (itself a hybrid of English and Nigerian languages), Okorafor emphasises one of conviviality’s goals of “bridging divides and facilitating interconnections” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:12). Nigerian pidgin English was originally founded as a means of communication between traders and west-African locals during the transatlantic slave trade and rapid expansionism of Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Carons,

Onyioha, 2012). The result of the hybrid language structure created out of the necessity for trading is a loss of national identity as Nigerians slowly surrendered more and more of their culture to the growing global stage of colonialism. Okorafor explores and consolidates her bifurcated sense of national identity through pidgin English as it represents one of the many “cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian” (2009b:276) that Okorafor experienced growing up. By mixing English with Nigerian dialects, the novel celebrates the inadequacy or incompleteness of both languages for describing post-colonial Nigeria and its hybrid culture and inhabitants.

In exploring the hybrid culture of Nigeria an examination of Chapter 44, ‘Narrator’s Welcome’ is useful as it reveals that even the narrator, Udide, makes use of pidgin English in her welcome to the reader when she ends her greeting with, “Na good good story. I go continue to listen, o. Quietly...” (Okorafor, 2014a:229). What is interesting to note is that a language originating from trade necessity and exploitation became something so intrinsically African that even the Gods have adopted it. Okorafor’s polyglot depiction of African deities emphasises the complexities of colonial history and the intermingling of cultures and languages and the indelible impact of this fusion on Nigerian life and belief systems.

This fusion of Nigerian life and belief systems becomes problematic for several characters such as Chris and the president of Nigeria, who do struggle to find their identity within the novel. Chris, a wealthy accountant, and Adaora’s husband, unconsciously distances himself from his cultural heritage through his fundamentalist Christianity, his wealth and his prestigious occupation. In many facets of his identity, Chris espouses western religious systems and global capitalist systems, yet he cannot escape his African heritage as, in moments of passion, he incorporates pidgin English words and exclamations that seem out of place in his predominantly western English speech. When confronted with Adaora and her shapeshifting ability, Chris exclaims, “Marine witch, o!,” and “*Amusu!* I knew it! I knew it! Jesus Christ will send you back to hell, o!” (31). Chris’ exclamations – ‘amusu’ being an Igbo word meaning ‘witch’ and ‘o’ being an intensifier which places additional emphasis on the previously spoken phrase – are emblematic of

his (and by extension, Nigeria's) essentially hybrid cultural inheritance from colonial expansionism.

Chris' hybrid cultural inheritance reflects Okorafor's own hybrid cultural experience as she attempts to navigate the "clashes between being American and being Nigerian" (Okorafor, 2009b:276) in her own life. Chris reflects the complex national identity Nigerians are faced with through his speech and his actions as they do not reflect the tenets of 'western rationalism' and Christian faith he so desperately wants to embody.

The president of Nigeria also displays the struggles associated with Nigeria's hybrid identity through his use of pidgin English. The president, like Chris, espouses western ideals and Afro-pessimist sentiments as he states how he hates speaking pidgin English as it is the "ignorant man's language" (Okorafor, 2014a:237). Yet at times he must segue into pidgin English to communicate directly with the people of Lagos. One such incident is when the president returns to land after speaking with the aliens' Elders. The conflict between the president's dislike of pidgin English and its necessity in communicating effectively with the people he is governing displays his hybrid identity as he must straddle both cultures to effectively navigate the complex political landscape of post-colonial Nigeria.

Chris, the president and (even though he is not discussed here) Father Oke all seek to immerse themselves in global capitalist systems and western religious systems in an attempt to eschew their relationship with African subjectivities. Yet their African-ness cannot be simply discarded or abandoned, as it naturally comes forth in their interaction with one another through their use of pidgin English. Nigerian pidgin English and its uses are an integral aspect of Okorafor's Africanfuturist literary project as the use of language in *Lagoon* underlines that this is an endogenous story which highlights the African-ness of the characters.

Advancing beyond the Afro-pessimist and post-colonial context of pidgin English, I turn my attention to a glossary of pidgin English words and phrases at the end of *Lagoon*. The glossary emphasises the inclusionary nature of Okorafor's narrative vision. By providing its audience with the resources to interpret difficult conversations within the narrative, Okorafor invites readers to engage with the text and to learn from it. The text itself provides the tools for connection between a monolingual English reader and an African dialect. This incorporation of African languages is one of the ways that *Lagoon* promotes an African epistemology. It also exemplifies Nyamnjoh's theories of conviviality as the glossary is a literal "recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:10).

The glossary is most useful in chapters devoted to Moziz and his companions, as their conversations are almost unintelligible to a monolingual English reader due to the colloquial nature of their dialogue. Okorafor celebrates African subjectivity through Nigerian pidgin English as it allows her characters to express themselves in their 'traditional' or 'native' language. Here I would briefly like to make recognition of the problem of referring to pidgin English (a direct result of colonial exploitation) as a 'native' language. I refer the reader back to the point made above about how, through the use of the narrator adopting pidgin English, Nigerians have assimilated pidgin English and moulded it into something that is now globally recognised as their own dialect. Okorafor demonstrates this 'native' use of language when Moziz comments on Father Oke's reaction to Ayodele's shapeshifting. Moziz says "de man wey dey do *gragra* before see as he dey shake like waterleaf!" (That man is pretending to be brave. Look how he is shaking like a waterleaf!) (Okorafor, 2014a:49–50). Moziz's exclamations of cowardice are not immediately comprehensible to the English audience, and the reader is left perplexed until consultation with the glossary reveals the meaning of his words. Moziz's use of pidgin English within the novel is one of the ways that Okorafor promotes African subjectivities and a worldview which advocates for inclusiveness, as it forces non-Nigerian readers to meaningfully engage with Nigerian culture and languages.

In her use of pidgin English, Okorafor makes recognition of the difficulty of discovering identity in a country still struggling with the fallout from global colonial expansionism. Instead of using

historical colonial exploitation as a point of critique, Okorafor uses the result of this exploitation (pidgin English) to “produce literary fairy dust” (Okorafor, 2009b:277) in her narrative. Okorafor highlights the “friction of [her] cultures” (277) through the conflicting pressures on Chris and the president and then offers a solution to their confused identity by providing a glossary of pidgin English words to bridge the divide between the western colonial world and an Africanfuturist Nigeria.

Okorafor’s construction of a distinctly Africanfuturist narrative is evident throughout *Lagoon* as the novel presents elements of African culture and belief systems through the science fiction medium, the setting of the novel, and its inclusion of magic and folkloric African deities. Okorafor’s Africanfuturist approach is underlined by her inclusion of pidgin English throughout the novel, which demonstrates the complex African subjectivity resulting from the legacy of colonialism in Africa. Okorafor’s use of pidgin English is a vivid celebration of the African subjectivity and a recognition of the complexity of navigating life as an African in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global community. These elements seek to bring the audience into contact with African belief systems and lived reality. Introducing Okorafor’s novel as a work of Africanfuturist literature is essential to the following chapter where I argue that the fragmented structure of the novel represents a convivial African worldview, rather than a western postmodern ontology.

### **Chapter Three: Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater: Okorafor's adaptation of the postmodern.**

This chapter examines how the postmodern elements of *Lagoon*, such as the interjecting narrator and the continual employment of multiple focalisers, can be explored in terms of Clive Barker's (2014) and Slavoj Žižek's (1991) ideas of looking at postmodernism "awry." Reconceptualising the term 'postmodernism' opens it up to discussion in contexts outside of its western "domain of circulation" (Barker, 2014: n.p.). I thus adopt the position of the 'convivial scholar' and make "provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:10) by adopting a 'middle ground,' to qualify my use of postmodern terminology in discussions of the novel's structure and literary techniques, while still using analytical perspectives rooted in African experience to investigate the novel's broader Africanfuturist goals.

In the first part of this chapter titled "Udide Okwanka: The master craft-maker" I discuss how the narrator of *Lagoon*, Udide Okwanka, embodies tenets of 'postmodern' literary forms both stylistically and structurally. I examine how the narrator's recurring interjections in the text directly engage with the reader and allow the reader to interrogate *Lagoon* from the position of the convivial scholar who is simultaneously involved with and distant from the narrative.

The latter half of Chapter Three, "Multiple perspectives," interrogates Okorafor's use of multiple focalisers within *Lagoon*. I use elements of Nyamnjoh's theory of conviviality, alongside comments by Clive Barker and Slavoj Žižek in order to read postmodernism "awry" (Žižek, 1991) and meld postmodern elements to an African ontology. I argue that Okorafor's use of the postmodern has different goals to western scholarship. Western literature often has moments of fragmentation to indicate isolation and a fractured sense of identity, whereas Okorafor includes these same elements to celebrate perpetual incompleteness and the reliance of the individual on the collective, rather than the superiority of individual subjectivity.

### 3.1 Udide Okwanka: The master craft-maker.

I am Udide, the narrator, the story weaver, the Great Spider [...] and here, I greet you.  
Welcome, listener, welcome (Okorafor, 2014a:228–229).

The extract above, taken from, ‘Narrator’s Welcome,’ Chapter 44 of *Lagoon*, indicates how Udide disrupts the flow of the narrative by introducing herself to the reader and interjecting herself into the text. While the use of the interjecting narrator is not a new concept, or even exclusive to postmodernism as its origins hail back to Laurence Sterns writings in the 1700’s, it has become a device used within postmodern texts to disrupt simple readings of texts and to create distance between the audience and the events occurring within the narrative.

In Chapter 44 of *Lagoon*, Udide, the narrator, complicates a simple reading of the novel as she constantly ‘interferes’ with the narrative. Even though the chapter begins with a “welcome,” it is not a traditional welcome as it comes towards the end of the novel, closer to the resolution of the conflict between the Nigerian people and the aliens, rather than at the outset. Udide states: “I approach the end of this leg of the tale. And here, I greet you” (229). Udide’s greeting is analogous to tenets of postmodernism in its disruption of linear chronology. The reader is catapulted through a complex, shifting story for 228 pages, then abruptly halted as they are reintroduced to the novel’s narrator. In this passage Udide also returns the reader to orality and the origins of the narrator in the legacy of the traditional storyteller. She is able to impart deeper cultural knowledge and connect the past, present and future for her readership.

Udide first reveals herself and her metatextual nature before the novel even begins, in a brief epigraph before the novel’s primary text. In this passage, Udide comments that “[her] designs grow complicated” (2014a:0). The use of the word “design” hints that the following story has been pre-ordained, as a design includes only what is necessary for a completed structure or plan. However, Udide’s plan reworks traditional boundaries as hers is a dynamic, ceaselessly changing design, as evidenced in the extract by her admission that she did not foresee the arrival of the aliens. The

constant fluctuations within the narrative highlight the continuously shifting ecological and gender boundaries discussed in the following chapter.

The presence of these shifting narrative boundaries and the textual instability they create, accentuated through the interjections of Udide, strongly resemble elements of postmodern writing. Here is where my position of the convivial scholar comes into play as I look at these postmodern forms “awry” (Žižek, 1991). I argue that the textual instability caused by Okorafor’s interjecting narrator is not an attempt to destabilise the reader and unsettle their sense of self, which is often the goal in postmodern texts that interrogate the unstable nature of identity. Instead, it is done in an attempt to link seemingly disparate events and worldviews together in a changed relationship, which reflects Nyamnjoh’s ideas of conviviality and his focus on “emphasis[ing] the interconnection of everyone and everything” (2015:6), over the exclusionary western literary practices associated with postmodernism.

Udide’s meddling nature is further displayed as she reveals herself a third time in the novel. On this occasion, Udide reveals herself not only to the reader, but to the characters Adaora, Anthony and Agu as she steps over them while they wait to meet with the elders in a bubble at the bottom of the Lagoon at Bar Beach. Her warning to them: “[e]ven in the corners of palaces, spiders dwell, [...] Remember that, if you ever find yourself walking the halls of the great and powerful” (Okorafor, 2014a:259), displays a metatextual reference to her role as narrator. This disclosure is characteristic of postmodern texts, as the narrator inserts herself into the story, warping traditional narrative conventions, similar to novels such as Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), or Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991). I argue that the interjection of Udide does not serve to distance the reader from the narrative, or to highlight the artificial, constructed nature of the text – as is the goal of the novels listed above – but rather operates as a bridge which enables the reader to enter into the narrative and to establish links between the reader, characters and their narrative threads. Udide’s inclusion of herself within the narrative is a celebration of incompleteness rather than an attempt to disrupt the chronology of the narrative and displace the reader. I believe Udide’s involvement in *Lagoon* is an attempt by Okorafor to celebrate the

incomplete nature of human consciousness and encourage a deeper connection with the larger collective consciousness propounded in African ontologies.

Another postmodern trope evident in the extract taken from Chapter 44 is narratorial intrusion. Uside addresses the reader and interacts with her audience, extending a welcome to the reader: “I greet you. Welcome, listener, welcome” (Okorafor, 2014a:229). Uside’s greeting serves to break traditions of the realist novel by disrupting the reader’s conventional status as voyeurs who are uninvolved in the events of the text. By addressing the reader, Uside brings the audience into her story. She broadens her web to encompass not only her protagonists in Lagos, but her readers across the world as well. Uside’s incorporation of the reader links her audience to her characters, creating feelings of global community and interconnection between the audience and the citizens of Okorafor’s Africanfuturist Lagos. By directly addressing the reader, she connects her readership with the events that are occurring on a more personal level. She is also preparing the reader for the change that is coming on a global level. The reader becomes a voyeur-protagonist, now intrinsically linked to the events unfolding in the novel. Uside’s interruption is not an attempt to alienate her audience – as is so often the case in postmodern literature – but rather an inclusionary ploy to create community through her stories. The incorporation of the audience in her story hints that Okorafor could be utilising Nyamnjoh’s tactics of privileging conversations over conversions to demonstrate the inadequacies of Eurocentric logic in an African setting. The ‘postmodern’ incorporation of the reader into the story then forms a part of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism as her literary form encourages connections between her audience, her narrative and her characters. These connections are characteristic of African ontological outlooks as spiritual elements of African culture often emphasise interconnections which are absent in western dichotomous scholarship. Through the postmodern interjections of Uside, Okorafor celebrates the incompleteness of the individual and encourages communal knowledge systems rather than a reliance upon the self.

The novel also exemplifies postmodern techniques in its recurring self-reflexivity, calling attention to its own constructedness. Uside reveals herself to the reader on multiple occasions in the novel, as discussed above. At these moments, Uside regales the reader with information her characters

are not privy to, such as when she reveals that the narrative being read is her design, woven together as part of her narrative web:

But I feel the press of other stories.

I wove that which Adaora draws from to practice her witchcraft. I wove that which gives Agu his leopard's strength. Anthony's life became part of my web when he first set foot in Lagos. I know the one who wove his rhythm. Anansi is my cousin. Anthony has always been within my reach. Fisayo's destiny was written. The boy with no name had no destiny until I wrote that part of the story. Father Oke was destined to meet one of my cousins. The young man Benson and the other soldiers – they are all part of my great tapestry. (2014a:292)

The extract reveals many interactions within the novel that are not coincidental but are designed by Udide, which she reveals when she says, “I wove that which gives Agu his leopard's strength. Anthony's life became part of my web when he first set foot in Lagos” (292), and “I wrote that part of the story [...] they are all part of my great tapestry” (292). Furthermore, Udide says “If they do [understand the events occurring around them], then they will not step on to that boat and the story will not continue. My strong webbing will snap” (228). In these extracts, the constructedness of the story is unequivocally revealed to the audience. The self-referential nature of the novel (a traditional feature of postmodern narratives) is repurposed here to display a interrelated, coordinated worldview rather than the haphazard, alienating structure that many metatextual narratives present. The biological imagery of the spider and its woven web instils images of rhizomatic interconnections between events and characters, while the ceaseless connections within the novel (explored through the organic, web-like narrative structure) are a repurposing of postmodern techniques, creating an Africanfuturist representation of Africa, not viewed through a western lens, but re-imagined from an authentic African perspective.

### **3.2 Multiple perspectives.**

In the following section I will continue to discuss Okorafor's Africanfuturist re-appropriation of postmodern novelistic techniques through her depiction of multiple perspectives in *lagoon*, which

provides the space for a convivial Africanfuturist reading of the novel. This interpretation celebrates African subjectivities and creates a rhizomatic, interwoven narrative which exemplifies ideas of interconnectivity and entanglement. The multiple perspectives of Okorafor's novel outline radically disparate stories in an Africanfuturist take on the alien invasion narrative.

The novel's multiple perspectives are evident from the beginning of the text, as within the first fifteen pages the reader has been presented with chapters told from the perspective of the narrator, a swordfish, Adaora, the receptionist-cum-sex-worker Fisayo, and a mute, mentally handicapped child. At this juncture, the audience has an unclear understanding of what the novel is about or who its protagonists are, as Okorafor has made no attempt to provide clear exposition about the rapidly unfolding events, nor explored the reason for the multiple viewpoints. This sprawling narrative structure is maintained throughout the rest of the narrative, as the main storyline involving Adaora and Ayodele is constantly interjected with vignettes from other Lagosians. The opening passages of the novel and its fragmented structure are representative of the construction of the rest of the text, as only a small portion of the narrative is devoted to the protagonist, Adaora.

The infrequent visitations to the protagonists' perspectives open many possibilities within the novel. O'Connell (2016) speculates that by including multiple perspectives in the novel, Okorafor deliberately attempts to "short-circuit the reader's easy identification with any one character or space as being representative of twenty-first-century Lagos" (297). O'Connell also indicates how the multiple perspectives employed by Okorafor show the reader that we cannot "reduc[e] Lagos simply to the viewpoints of its three main protagonists" (296). Following this interpretation, it is possible to imply that Okorafor's multiple perspectives are emblematic of Africanfuturism rather than postmodernism. I again read these elements of postmodern literature "awry" (Žižek, 1991) in order to highlight and celebrate the fragmentary nature of human subjectivity. My interpretation is heavily informed by Nyamnjoh's conception of conviviality as a celebration of incompleteness (2015), since Adaora's account of the invasion in isolation would undermine the significance of the events because Adaora cannot speak for all people in Lagos, nor can she express their lived experiences. However, the people of Lagos can speak for themselves, and their often-divergent opinions are articulated as Okorafor makes allowance for their myriad voices by continually

interspersing her narrative with their perspectives. The lack of a privileged viewpoint and narrative stance indicates resistance to a single, totalising perspective of Lagos, as O'Connell has pointed out.

In exploring how totalising perspectives of events can be detrimental to knowledge generation and understanding, I wish to examine the responses of Fisayo (the receptionist-cum-sex-worker mentioned previously) and the mentally handicapped boy to the abduction of the three protagonists at the beginning of the novel. Both Fisayo and the boy witness the same events, but they interpret them in different ways. Both hear the sonic boom that signals the arrival of the aliens, both see a wave rise and snatch Adaora, Agu and Anthony into the sea, and both see a black bat flying away (although neither of them realise what it is). The boy views the woman that emerges from the water as “smoke” (Okorafor, 2014a:13) and the bat that Anthony threw into the air as “a black bird” (14), and he responds to these events almost with happiness, aware somehow that his world is about to change, which pleases him (14). Fisayo's response is a stark contrast to the boy's, believing the end of the world has come. She sees the sonic boom and the abduction of the protagonists as “the rapture” (14) and believes that the woman who jumps back into the water is a “devil” (14). Fisayo also sees the bat that Anthony releases but she sees it as someone “release[ing] something black and evil into the air like a poison” (14), instead of the harmless creature the boy saw.

The radical difference in perspective between Fisayo and the boy can be used as a starting point for a discussion on the subversion of postmodern elements of the novel. I interpret the differing responses of Fisayo and the boy in terms of Nyamnjoh's theories on conviviality rather than postmodernism. Reading these interactions as a celebration of incompleteness in the context of Okorafor's multiple depictions of Lagos indicates a need for inclusivity which encourages greater understanding. Both characters witness the same events but have vastly different reactions. Fisayo believes the abduction to be a sign of 'evil' and becomes a fanatical doomsday prophet to ensure her soul's salvation. In contrast to Fisayo, the mute boy gains a sense of positivity through the same encounter and nearly regains the ability to speak after further encounters with the aliens later in the novel. The disparate responses of Fisayo and the boy display a need for greater connection and understanding between individuals, as Fisayo's interpretation of the events, informed by

western religious “legacies of colonialism” (O’Connell, 2016:297), eventually lead to her mental decline and ultimate demise at the hands of Ayodele.

The differences here also present an opportunity to discuss Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project, promoting African ontologies over totalising western conceptions. Fisayo, in her adoption of western Christianity, believes the woman diving into the water is a “devil” (Okorafor, 2014a:14), and she begins to pray “to the Lord Jesus Christ” as she believes the woman’s presence signifies “the rapture” (14). However, the woman on the beach is interpreted as the African water deity, Mami Wata, by the boy. In this passage, Christianity is presented as a remnant of colonial exploitation that ensnares the consciousness of Nigerian citizens (like Fisayo) and compels them to be subordinate to a western, patriarchal conception of God. In turn, this leads to Nigerian citizens abandoning traditional belief systems and perceiving them to be backwards or regressive. Fisayo is unsettled at the presence of Mami Wata as her Christian fundamentalist socialisation causes her to interpret the creature as a “devil,” while the boy, who is uncritical of the presence of the supernatural being due to a lack of western socialisation, identifies Mami Wata as a positive force for change. Through this interaction the text promotes an “Afro-utopian” (O’Connell, 2016:295) perspective as a more positive alternative to the western expansionism mentality of Afro-pessimism that has influenced Africa for centuries.

Going beyond this individual encounter, *Lagoon* explores multiple disparate perspectives as it devotes chapters to characters including (but not limited to): 419 scammers, a swordfish, spiders, a bat, roads, the president of Nigeria, Fisayo, the corrupt Father Oke, the mentally challenged child, members of an LGBTQ group, a middle-class father fleeing the chaos of Lagos with his family, and Adaora’s husband, Chris. Whilst all the ‘peripheral’ narratives add information to the story, the narrative only progresses through the perspectives of the three protagonists, Adaora, Agu and Anthony.

The plethora of perspectives offered by Okorafor indicates a strong link to postmodernism. Okorafor utilises the postmodern mode as a means to revel in the messy entanglements offered by

additional focalisers, and to draw attention to the incompleteness and difference in our lived realities. For Okorafor, the multiple perspectives in *Lagoon* are an “evocation of autonomy and radical futurity” (O’Connell, 2016:311). They are a celebration of an incomplete nature, and an advocacy of Nyamnjoh’s ‘baby’ metaphor that learns through interactions with others and is the symbol “for inclusion and legitimization through [...] relationships forged with others” (2015:2). The multiple perspectives do not seek to distance the reader from the protagonist or the story, but to draw the reader in, and to acknowledge variance and celebrate it through entanglement. It “creates a kinetic multicultural and global city” (O’Connell, 2016:297) which illustrates the diversity of Lagos’s inhabitants, and shows the profound differences (and commonalities) between its inhabitants. The multiple perspectives in the novel also replicate a sense of community through oral storytelling, as it accommodates and reflects the diversity of the group. It displays the range of lived experiences and the chaotic interplay of different social, religious and economic systems.

The incomplete nature of each segment serves to emphasise the dependence of the self on others, *Lagoon* has entire chapters devoted to recounting multiple perspectives of a single event. One part of the text, spanning six pages (87–93) covers four shifts in perspective between Moziz and his gang, Anthony, Adaora and then back to Moziz, with no individual focaliser lasting longer than a few paragraphs. These passages describe Moziz and his gang driving up to Adaora’s house to execute their haphazardly constructed plan to kidnap Ayodele for monetary gain. Anthony’s perspective reveals Ayodele, the children Fred and Kola, Philomena and himself inside Adaora’s house waiting for the crowd to swell before they reveal Ayodele and her alien identity. Adaora is being held captive by Lance Corporal Benson, and together they are driving towards her house where all the commotion is occurring. In each passage, there is a sense of tension and unease amongst the characters, each deeply involved in their own thoughts as they seem almost disconnected from the world around them. However, the audience does not share in Anthony’s anxiety when neither Adaora nor Agu answer their phones, as they are aware of the locations of all the other protagonists. Readers do not share Moziz’s disappointment upon finding a crowd gathered at Adaora’s house when there was supposed to be none, because they already knew this was the case. In these instances, the reader is aware of the multiple connections between each character’s viewpoint. From their external vantage point, the reader is able to view multiple

perspectives which bestow a greater understanding of the event. Instead of dislocating the audience from the surroundings, Okorafor's complex yet accessible narrative structure allows the readers to see a multiplicity of perspectives and gain access to varying subjectivities.

In expanding upon the above I will revisit my examination of Chapter 44 of *Lagoon*, titled: 'Narrator's Welcome.' The chapter highlights the multiplicity of the text through its retelling of various events witnessed throughout the narration. As the audience, we are aware of the "burned vehicles. Smoldering buildings. Dead animals" (Okorafor, 2014a:229) that litter the streets of Lagos because we witnessed it when Agu had to run through the chaotic, riot filled roads to make his way back to Adaora. We are aware of the "giant of the road go[ing] back to sleep, leaving a trail of terror" (229) because we were present when an alien sacrificed her life to pacify the Bone Collector. We are aware of the death of the neurodiverse boy as we were there when he was shot by Fisayo on the freeway in a religious frenzy (191). We are aware of Ijele's presence in Lagos because we were there when the alien confronted him and walked with him into a computer in an internet café in the city (201). We are aware that "the Bight of Biafra's waters are teeming" (229) because we were there when the swordfish attacked the FPSO Mystras's oil line and the aliens cleaned up the polluted waters, restoring the aquatic life in the process. We were present when the swordfish was approached by the aliens and asks to be changed (6). We were present at these events as witnesses. Through the novel's numerous points of view, the reader is granted a near-omniscient perspective; to see through the lens of the creator/narrator, Udi the spider weaver. We are allowed to see the events unfold and are granted an understanding of them, unlike the characters within the novel. I argue that this highlights how these heterogeneous, divergent perspectives capture the multiplicity of Lagos, whilst also serving to demonstrate its fundamental interconnectedness. The enmeshed stories the reader has viewed "[are] recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:10), which are analogous with the central tenets of conviviality. The novel presents a myriad of incomplete sequences to the audience who must untangle and interpret events as they see fit, gaining a greater understanding and connection to the external world with each additional perspective witnessed. The novel's use of multiple focalisers prevents individual, totalising views of Lagos. The use of fragmentation in the novel encourages a convivial, Africanfuturist reading of the text as the multiplicity of lived reality

is explored through the interconnections between animals, people, and Gods in the African context, while simultaneously being rooted in African culture and point-of-view rather than adopting a western perspective.

While offering a broad spectrum of events is useful in adding depth to the narrative, the novel often includes descriptions of a single event recounted through numerous alternate sources. Ayodele's appearance on TV to relate her message to all of Lagos is one such instance. Ayodele's statement: "we are change" (112) is seen and heard all over Nigeria as Ayodele hijacks the airwaves and projects her face onto digital devices such as computers, cell phones and e-readers. Ayodele's proclamation of change hints at the reordering of societal structures to follow and ties into O'Connell's idea of the aliens' presence as a marker of "Afro-utopianism" (2016:304). The aliens are emblematic of Afro-utopianism as they present "alternatives to the global capitalist world-system" (295) and contest pervasive attitudes of Afro-pessimism through the positive change brought about by their presence.

Ayodele's message disrupts 419 scammers in an internet café. It halts conversations amongst patrons of The Tribe's Calabsh, a restaurant in Lagos. In an open-air market in Abuja, people crowd around an electronics' stand to watch Ayodele's announcement on a TV. A woman driving along the Lagos Expressway opens her phone to see Ayodele's face on the screen. A Nigerian family watch the broadcast on their own TV at home, and in a Saudi Arabian hospital the president of Nigeria watches the transmission with his wives on his phone. The reader is taken all over Nigeria to participate in multiple exchanges between disparate people. While it does not explore the emotional responses of the individuals, these passages are reflective of Okorafor's uniquely Africanfuturist perspective as it presents a convivial worldview in its exploration of interconnectedness as the reader witnesses the same event through multiple focalisers. They share a sense of awe and uncertainty with those viewing the message within the text. The multiple perspectives show a message that is not intended for one individual, but for all. Its very nature is inclusive as even devices with no video playback capabilities (like an e-reader) are not excluded from displaying the message sent to all citizens of Lagos. This passage repeatedly makes use of postmodern literary elements by dislocating the reader from their environments and placing them

in new surroundings. I argue that this forms part of Okorafor's Africanfuturism since the constant disruption of the narrative is not done to upset the reader's sense of identity, but to expand their humanity by interacting with disparate subjectivities in a way which resembles African epistemologies and knowledge generation.

Towards the end of the novel, the president of Nigeria gives a speech (after his meeting with the alien elders at the bottom of Lagos's bay) which is broadcast to the citizens of Nigeria in a similar fashion to Ayodele's message of change discussed above. As the president speaks the audience are witnesses to Adaora's reflection on the events and what will happen now that the aliens have come. Readers are transported to Arondizuogu where members of Agu's family discuss the positive turn of events as thugs leave their house alone. The text moves to Chris and the children at his mother's house as several aliens arrive and have tea with his family. Proceeding to Accra in Ghana, the reader spectates a superstitious woman tentatively watch the president's speech on her tinfoil covered mobile phone. Lastly, the chapter shows Waydeep Kwesi, who did not watch the president's speech as there were no screens near him, yet he displays a favourable disposition as he bites into his garden egg as if it were "the sweetest mango" (Okorafor, 2014a:285).

Waydeep Kwesi's positivity is shared by all characters in this passage and his outlook is indicative of new "possibilities for Afro-utopianism" (O'Connell, 2016:305). The rhizomatic, enmeshed structure of the chapter displays an interconnection between people that can be interpreted as an admonition for inclusivity as a way to bring about progress and change. The sense of positivity is an endorsement of the achievements to be gained through convivial interaction.

While the novel explores multiple perspectives of a singular scene to create holistic views of African experiences, it also weaves together disparate events in a similar fashion. The novel features many seemingly random encounters which draw attention to interconnections between dissociated instances. A clear example of this is shown in the prologue to the third act of the novel. This passage describing the life of a bat after the rhythm (or a "sonic boom" (Okorafor, 2014a:114) a devastating soundwave, similar to echolocation, used by the aliens to gain an understanding of

the city) was heard and felt in Lagos. The bat is granted the ability to see and its echolocation is boosted to heights it has never experienced before. While exploring its new capabilities, the bat is hit by an airplane and killed. The next paragraph reveals that the airplane that killed “the most enlightened bat on earth” (225) was the same plane housing the president on his way back to Lagos to try and restore order. Okorafor’s inclusion of the enlightened bat is exemplary of a rhizomatic narrative structure where all parts of a narrative weave into one another with no beginning or end. Okorafor’s decision to contrast these markedly different birds of flight (one organic and imbued with agency, the other a manmade, inorganic airplane) demonstrates Okorafor’s dense network of imbricated narratives, whose structure and biological imagery is reminiscent of a spiders web, all informing the central plot mechanic surrounding Adaora and Ayodele.

The rhizomatic, animistic structure is again displayed in the prologue to the novel’s second act where a passage introduces a tarantula that lives by the Lagos-Benin expressway. Events similar to what happened to the bat unfold as the spider feels the vibrations caused by the sonic booms of the alien ship and decides that change is necessary. The spider decides to move to the other side of the expressway as he has done many times before. A third of the way across the highway, the tarantula feels the vibrations of a car and continues running, “certain that he will make it across. Certain of his extraordinary speed. *Crunch*” (120, emphasis in original). The car that crushes the spider is Adaora’s as she and Ayodele speed to the airport to intercept the president. Through the two incidents above the novel encourages the reader to “pay greater attention to [...] interconnections” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:3), as even insignificant links between small animals and the protagonists are given space in the text. This passage momentarily reverses anthropocentrism, and by giving voice and subjectivity to an arthropod, also serves to highlight the complex interconnections present between humanity and nature, the significance of which is discussed in detail in the following chapter. However, it is important to draw attention to them here as they form a part of Okorafor’s Africanfuturism since African knowledge systems often emphasise the inseparability of the natural, animal world from the human world. In this passage, the audience witnesses the life of a spider and a bat as they come into deadly contact with the human world to draw attention to the overlapping connections present in our lived reality. It is a humorous and tragicomic moment because we recognise in the spider our own Olympian hubris and “certainty”

that we can defy death. The animistic inclusions of the bat and the spider's consciousness are emblematic of Okorafor's Africanfuturist project, exploring the myriad consciousness of Lagos. Okorafor's organic reproductions of animals' consciousness indicate an openness to the permeable boundaries between humanity and nature, and her explorations reveal that human consciousness is not the only significant consciousness in Lagos.

In *Lagoon* Okorafor generates an organic rendering of Lagos through her meddling narrator and multiple focalisers. Her deliberate inversion of postmodern narrative elements adds to her production of Africanfuturist literature as her narrator (Udide Okwanka) and her multiple focalisers (citizens of Lagos) formulate a narrative that is endogenous to Africa. Through her inclusion of multiple perspectives, Okorafor explores the complexity and irreducibility of African subjectivities in real-world environments, indicating how individualistic, totalising views towards nations, cities and people are detrimental to humanity's understanding of one another. Okorafor's repurposing of postmodern literary stylings shows a resistance against western binary representations of Africa in literature as the meddling narrator and multiple focalisers create opportunities for connection and communication, rather than the isolation and fragmentation which is characteristic of postmodern literature.

## Chapter Four: Okorafor's cyborg politics and Africanfuturism

This chapter explores Okorafor's subversion of binary and hierarchical gender norms in *Lagoon*. This examination will be refracted through the double lens of Haraway's concept of the cyborg, as well as Nyamnjoh's frontier African. This chapter focuses on characters in the novel who contest the stratifications of the society in which they are placed: Ayodele is a literal shapeshifter; Adaora, Anthony and Agu all have magical powers; and members of the Black Nexus contest the rigid stratifications surrounding sexuality in Lagos by organising a gay pride march. Haraway's concept of the cyborg provides a useful analytical tool and lexicon for exploring pluralistic gender identities as it represents an 'other' identity which "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, 2016a:67). I argue that Haraway's conception of cyborg identity can be meaningfully examined in relation to Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction. In *Lagoon*, Okorafor's characters are able to break from the rigid binaries of western discourse as the image of the cyborg has "made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body" (11).

This Chapter begins with a section titled "Cyborgs and Frontier Africans" which I will commence with an exploration of how the alien protagonist Ayodele exemplifies Haraway's cyborg identity. Subsequently I will consider how the cyborg is a 'relative' of Nyamnjoh's frontier Africans. I will conclude this section by exploring how Adaora, Anthony and Agu also fall into the category of 'frontier African.' Here I show how the cyborg and frontier African both provide persuasive theoretical insights that can elucidate Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction and its intentions. In particular, I explore the characters of Ayodele, Adaora, Anthony, and Agu and how their magical abilities destabilise binary subjectivities and free them from the "shackles of neo/colonialism" (Apusigah, 2006:33). The second part of this chapter is titled "The Black Nexus and their performance of gender." Here I will be examining how members of the LGBTQ group, the Black Nexus, namely, Jacobs, Seven, Rome and Royal, exemplify Butler's theory on the performativity of gender. I discuss how these characters engage in their own performance of gender, challenge boundaries and transgress dualistic hierarchies. In order to demonstrate how these characters defy dualistic assumptions of gender, I will draw on theory by Apusigah and Haraway. Apusigah and

Haraway explore concepts of gendered relativism and cyborg identity respectively, and these will be crucial analytical frameworks that will be employed in my examination of Okorafor's transgressive characters. I explore how the transgression of gendered dimensions by members of the Black Nexus is consistent with Okorafor's inclusive Africanfuturist ideals. In the last part of this chapter, titled "Guardians of the border," I explore the binary masculinities present in *Lagoon* in relation to Hobgood-Oster's comments on the relationship between patriarchal oppression of women and ecofeminism and Haraway's image of the cyborg. I relate this to my study by exploring how the characters of Father Oke, Moziz and Lance Corporal Benson provide a contrast to boundaryless characters such as Ayodele, Adaora or members of the Black Nexus. I explore Okorafor's treatment of these 'guardians of the border,' a phrase I use to describe those who rigidly adhere to binary understandings of gender, in relation to her Africanfuturist project which seeks to eschew western influence over African subjectivities.

#### **4.1 Cyborgs and Frontier Africans: Reading Ayodele's complex representation in Okorafor's *Lagoon***

In *Lagoon*, Okorafor uses Ayodele as a means to critique myopic discourses surrounding gender. In *Lagoon*, the demonisation of characters with alternative sexualities emphasises the necessity of rethinking exclusivist attitudes towards non-binary gender classifications. By focusing on characters such as Ayodele, Adaora, Anthony and Agu, I aim to explore how Okorafor presents a space to celebrate sexual diversity and critique binary representations of gender and feminine identity. The space created in Okorafor's fictional Lagos displays how, instead of interlopers from outer space having to adapt and change to fit Lagos, Lagos itself must transform to fit the 'new' social order presented by the aliens.

As the ambassador of the aliens, Ayodele is tasked with introducing the new, transhuman social order to the people of Lagos. An examination of Ayodele's physiology and actions reveals that she is analogous to the cyborg described by Haraway as Ayodele's body appears organic, or human, yet is non-biological. Ayodele's unique physiology is composed of vibrating balls rather than

biological cells, allowing Ayodele the ability to mimic most biological organisms. Her unique physiology, alongside her multiple assertions that she is “technology” and “change” (Okorafor, 2014a:220), confirms her anatomical structure to be congruent with Haraway’s definition of cyborgs as “a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway, 2016a:5). Ayodele’s shapeshifting makes her exemplary of the (im)possibilities of the cyborg to defy boundaries, and “blur[s] the lines of heteronormativity’s stable binaries” (Ncube, 2020:5). Therefore, Ayodele’s fluid and protean nature serves as a critique of the inadequacies and limitations of binary thinking. She thus represents a new, inclusive understanding of social relations and gender. In this way Ayodele is an agent for social justice; and in her boundary-breaking furthers Okorafor’s Africanfuturist goals by undermining western universalism.

Ayodele’s identity and gender are in flux throughout the novel as characters are never certain what Ayodele is: whether she is a real “woman” (Okorafor, 2014a:17) or something else entirely. The reader is first introduced to Ayodele through the eyes of an unnamed, neurodiverse child and the sex worker, Fisayo. The child describes the “the strange woman creature” (13) who emerged from the water on Bar Beach as “smoke” (13), while Fisayo gives her the title of “shape-shifter” (14). We later learn that the boy interpreted the arrival of Ayodele as an encounter with Mami Wata. In the boy’s interpretation of Ayodele as Mami Wata, African traditional knowledge is infused with images of the alien or cyborg. Notably, confusion and disorientation are necessary precursors to re-imagining subjectivities that go beyond human gender binaries. *Lagoon*’s alien reworlding resonates with Haraway’s call to challenge and counter the dominant western narratives about gender and ecology. “[I]t matters,” she states: “which stories we tell to tell other stories” (2016b:12). Narratives allow us to make sense of the world. Stories give credence to certain modes of being, just as they can deny or denigrate other modes. Haraway’s assertion highlights that every act of storytelling is political. Okorafor’s writing takes up this rally call of ‘storying otherwise.’ *Lagoon* uses the science fiction medium and extra-terrestrial interlopers as a way of reworlding gendered beings as mutable and fluid. The muddling of Ayodele’s biological/mythological/cyborg identity points to how Ayodele, as a figure, opens multiple possibilities for the destabilisation of categories and provides a new (sustainable) model for survival.

Ayodele's gender indeterminacy and malleability are marked in Adaora's thoughts when first encountering her. When Adaora comes to consciousness on the beach she hears a "female voice" tell her to "Awake" (Okorafor, 2014a:16). Ayodele's gender and species status are still unclear to Adaora as she switches between pronouns: "Adaora squinted at it in the flickering light ... no, not 'it,' 'her'" (16). We come to discover that Ayodele has telepathic as well as shapeshifting abilities, and it is likely that Ayodele mirrors Adaora in terms of feminine affect and morphology in order to put her at ease and elicit a feeling of familiarity. Adaora notes that the "woman looked like someone from Adaora's family – dark-skinned, broad-nosed, with dark brown thick lips. Her bushy hair was as long as Adaora's, except where Adaora had many, many neat shoulder-length dreadlocks, this one had many many neat braids that crept down her back" (17). A little later she notes that if she introduced this alien to her husband she could "easily pass the woman off as her cousin" (17). Despite this description which makes her appear a human woman, her existence continues to mystify and confound Adaora who keeps shifting pronouns: "It...*she* smiled" (18). The nondescript, dehumanising "it" brings into question Ayodele's subjectivity; however, after a pause she identifies with her as a woman again. Ayodele's form is never entirely fixed. After their first encounter on the beach they return to Adaora's home and her laboratory, where she hopes to "*make sure I am seeing what I know I'm seeing*" (23, emphasis in original). Here Adaora notes that "[e]very time she looked at [Ayodele], there was a disorientating moment where she was not sure what she was seeing. It lasted no more than a half-second, but it was there. Then she was seeing Ayodele the 'woman' again" (23). Adaora is not the only one confounded by attempts to 'fix' Ayodele's identity. On numerous occasions Ayodele is referred to as "the woman who was not a woman" (121, 235, 276, 277), and even as "that creature in women's clothing" (230). These titles point not only to the ambiguity or ambivalence of gender but also to the indeterminate nature of her species. Okorafor deliberately creates confusion around Ayodele's identity to set her up as an unknowable 'other' entity. In this way, Okorafor's depiction of Ayodele provides a reference point for discourses on alternative, gender-diverse identities such as those belonging to the homosexual and drag communities discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Ayodele's gender ambivalence and representation of cyborgian politics can be seen when she transforms into Adaora's husband, Chris, in Adaora's lab in order to stop an imminent conflict

between the husband and wife. Ayodele's transformation echoes Haraway's metaphor of the cyborg as her assumption of the masculine avatar of Chris suggests that there is no "natural matrix of unity and that no construction [of gender] is whole" (Haraway, 2016a:21). Ayodele even adopts Chris's clothing and voice as she shouts, "'CHRIS!' [...] Her voice was identical to Chris's, as was her physique. Not only did she look like him, she was evening wearing the same wrinkled shorts and singlet" (Okorafor, 2014a:31). Despite her masculine physical appearance, characters continue to think of Ayodele as biologically female. The pronoun usage remains the same as Ayodele is referred to as "her" and "she" (31) while masquerading in Chris's form. The deliberate blurring of boundaries through mixed appearances and feminine pronouns subverts binary gender definitions. Like Haraway's myth of the cyborg, Ayodele casts doubt upon reductive dichotomies through her very existence. She subverts the Cartesian dualism that legitimates patriarchy, overturning the subjugation of woman/nature/body to man/culture/mind. In this conflation woman and nature are assumed passive, emotional and inferior, while man (aligned with culture and science) is active, rational and superior. Ayodele may be aligned with Nature, but she is no benign or passive 'Mother Nature.' She is powerful, dynamic, even violent, and vengeful, akin to the Greek Gorgons. Notably, Haraway embraces these figures feared and detested by men, and calls them the Chthonic Ones, from *chthonios*, meaning "of, in, or under the earth and the seas"—a rich terran muddle for sf, science fact, science fiction, speculative feminism, and speculative fabulation" (2016b:53). Perhaps, Haraway wonders, the Gorgons might not have turned men to stone, if they "had known how to politely greet the dreadful chthonic ones" (54). These chthonic ones are Haraway's recent permutation of the cyborg: "their reach is lateral and tentacular; they have no settled lineage and no reliable kind (genre, gender)" (54). In Ayodele, Okorafor has created a truly 'Chthonic one,' by drawing on her own African cultural mythology, and the figure of Mami Wata (discussed earlier).

Ayodele's transformation into Chris has a parodic effect, and signifies a kind of carnivalesque reversal. Simon Dentith (2005) describes Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival form as "an attitude in which the high, the elevated, the official, even the sacred, is degraded and debased, but as a condition of popular renewal and regeneration" (2005:66). In taking on the form of Chris, Ayodele (aligned with feminine and liminal states) subverts and delegitimises patriarchal power. Through the

introduction of humour and chaos, the carnivalesque “provides a malleable space, in which activities and symbols can be inflected in different directions” (73). Chris, a blind devotee of the misogynistic Father Oke, believes in his right as husband to control his wife, and yet his authority is completely unmasked here, with Ayodele’s transformation revealing the socially constructed dimension of gender roles.

Chris’s patriarchal authority is also debunked by Adaora, as she subverts patriarchal norms regarding motherhood set up by heteronormative social structures and Christian fundamentalism. The novel reveals how Chris and Adaora initially had a good relationship. He even built Adaora a lab in their basement and encouraged her in her work, claiming: “[t]he institute can’t give you everything you need [...] but I can” (Okorafor, 2014a:22). Their relationship changed after their children were born and Chris became a “born again” (22) Christian. The Christian fundamentalism instilled in Chris by Father Oke causes Chris to view Adaora as subservient to him. When Adaora does not abdicate her position at the university to raise their children, Chris begins to view his wife’s knowledge as a threat to his masculinity as she is both a professor and widely celebrated in the scholarly community. He begins to feel emasculated by her success and attempts to exert his power over her multiple times through force: “Chris raised his hand to slap her for the second time in three hours” (30). Adaora’s refusal to give up her career<sup>7</sup> displays how “women who defy [gender roles] by challenging patriarchal control of their sexuality, fertility, or autonomy disrupt the status quo and threaten patriarchal hegemony by exposing the possibility of alternative, non-normative meanings and practices. To defuse the subversive potential of these ‘wicked’ women, patriarchies must stigmatize the women’s actions or persons as ‘wicked’ or morally corrupt” (Hodgson, 2005:149). Chris clearly expresses this repressive, moralistic patriarchal logic when he calls Adaora a “witch” and refers to the lab he once made for her out of love as a “witches den” (21).

---

<sup>7</sup> Adaora not only resists patriarchal masculinities by refusing to give up her career, but she also recasts patriarchal narrative tropes. After the riots outside her house, Adaora instructs Chris to “take the children to [his] mothers” (154) where they will be safe. By doing so, Adaora inverts narrative tropes where the women and children are removed from a dangerous area to safety so the men may deal with a threat without risking the lives of women or children. In this inversion, Chris becomes the ‘matronly’ figure protecting the children while Adaora becomes the ‘masculine’ hero who goes out to save the world.

Returning to Ayodele's cross-gender shapeshifting, another significant incident occurs when she is granted an audience with the president of Nigeria. To convince the president of her abilities, Ayodele transforms into Karl Marx to appeal to the president's secret desire to implement Marxism in Nigeria. In this passage, she is described as "Ayodele-the-man" (Okorafor, 2014a:219). References to her "manly voice" (219), combined with the feminine pronoun of "she" (219) while mirroring the masculine Marx creates a moment of comic reversal which disrupts any kind of assumption of Ayodele's gender, exhibiting its unfixed nature. Bringing this iconic figure into the African present is another moment of carnivalesque humour, highlighting how far from Marx's ideals African politics has fallen. *Lagoon's* concern with social, and especially gender equality, is underscored by Ayodele's manifestation of Marx in the African present. Reviving and revitalising Marx highlights the socio-political concerns that inform Okorafor's Africanfuturism. It also summons Haraway's truism that "it matters which thoughts think thoughts" (2016b:57). The latter's theory is largely influenced by Marxist ideas. Indeed, Marx was one of the first thinkers to assert that gender is not biologically determined but is a historical and social construct, and therefore open to change. Heather Brown asserts that "Marx appears to point in the direction of gender as a dynamic rather than static category" (2014: n.p.). It therefore makes sense that Ayodele would choose the body of Karl Marx as his views directly align with Ayodele's goals.

Ayodele's gender-ambivalence muddles the distinctions between genders and confuses a simple reading of binary modes of being, causing her to become a literary depiction of Butler's understanding of gender as a "free-floating artifice" (2006:9). Ayodele's gender plurality exemplifies the posthuman notion that "there is not even such a state as 'being' female" (Haraway, 2016a:16), as it is a "constructed" (16) category contested in both scientific and social fields of study. Ayodele's inter-sex shapeshifting in these two instances (Chris and Marx) highlights the necessity of social transformation in Okorafor's Lagos, as the 'guardians' of the border (those who insist on maintaining rigid, binary understandings of gender) have no place in the new, transhuman vision of Lagos. These characters are subsequently removed from the novel through violent means, a discussion which is continued in the last part of this chapter.

Ayodele's shapeshifting goes beyond simple cross-gender morphology and enters a cross-species transformation as she shifts into a lizard when threatened by Moziz and his gang inside Adaora's house. Moziz and his crew are confused by her transformation, thinking that she "Melted? Melted! Imploded? Disintegrated? Right before [their] eyes. Evaporated into something small on the floor. [...] A green lizard" (103). Here, Ayodele's change from a humanoid to a reptile form indicates that, like the cyborg, Ayodele sees past hierarchical norms humans have imposed upon the natural world based on our own narcissistic Anthropocentrism. Ayodele does not see creatures 'lower down' on the evolutionary chain as being less valuable. Her transformation into a lizard is a reminder of our commonality with all "carbon-critters" and our "joint kinship with animals and machines" (Haraway, 2016a:15). Thus, Ayodele advocates for a restructuring of existing hierarchies based on domination which characterises our Anthropocentric understanding of the relationship between human and non-human life. In the novel there are instances exhibiting the dangers of such Cartesian dualistic thought, like the exploitation of rich oil deposits just offshore of Lagos, the drilling of which disrupts the natural ecosystem. Lagos's marine life resists the oil rigs' unnatural incursion into this ecosystem, as demonstrated in the prologue's description of an attack on an oil pipeline by a swordfish (2014a:3), an instance which Okorafor admits is based on a genuine incident where "Swordfish attack [an] Angolan pipeline" (2015: n.p.).

Ayodele's ability to transgress interspecies boundaries as well as inter-sex boundaries can also be linked to Nyamnjoh's ideas of incompleteness and interconnection, as Ayodele's constant transformations between men, women and animals demonstrate Okorafor's Africanfuturist interest in the transhuman entanglement of the natural world. Ayodele continues to break interspecies boundaries as she adopts the form of a tiny monkey after the bedlam created by Corporal Benson's soldiers at Adaora's house convinces her she no longer wishes to be human. Ayodele spends several hours as a monkey before finally changing herself to inhabit her human form again. Ayodele's continuous transformation between male and female, as well as between human and animal, reveals a tentacular imbrication between all organic life. Here I return to Nyamnjoh's conceptualisation of the frontier African who accepts that "African realities are not steeped in dualisms, binaries, dichotomies" (2015:6) and views "everyone and everything [as] malleable, flexible and blendable, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, Gods, ghosts and

spirits. No boundary, wall or chasm is challenging enough to defy frontier Africans seeking conversations with and between divides” (6–7). The conceptualisation of Ayodele as a frontier African is useful when considering her shapeshifting capabilities and her ability to transform the biological structure of others around her. This is evident from the beginning of the novel as the aliens alter the biological structure of the swordfish to change it into a “monster” with “impenetrable” skin, a “sword-like spear” and “spikes of cartilage” that jut out from her spine (Okorafor, 2014a:6). Subsequently, images of the altered aquatic life of Bar beach are glimpsed throughout the novel, indicating that the aliens’ power of physical transformation is not restricted to their own bodies, but extends to any organic surroundings, including humans. Through her shapeshifting abilities, Ayodele (and the rest of the aliens who arrive in Lagos) are exemplary frontier beings who are able to “bridge divides” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:12) between human and animal. Okorafor celebrates the interpenetration of human and non-human experience through her characters’ ability to transcend the boundaries of embodiment.

These transgressive potentialities of the frontier African are again displayed during the riots outside Adaora’s house when Corporal Benson’s men shoot Adaora’s daughter, Kola (an interaction which has been discussed previously in section 2.3). Ayodele ignores the distinction between human and nature and uses her abilities to transform Benson and his soldiers into a plantain tree by simply rearranging the “oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen [...] and magnesium” (Okorafor, 2014a:137) elements of their biological makeup. Ayodele’s transformational power is again visible when she vaporises Fisayo (in the same manner as she did Benson) and returns her to the water after Fisayo begins firing a gun in the middle of the Lagos-Benin freeway (192–193). Ayodele’s ability to shift, not only her own biological structure, but also that of other characters like Benson, his men and Fisayo’s, underscores the biological similarities between human and non-human organisms, as well as exposing the binary nature of patriarchal structures through Benson’s desire to dominate Ayodele. Ayodele embodies characteristics of the frontier African through her polymorphous abilities. Her ability to transgress physical boundaries and re-arrange atoms places her in the same category as Nyamnjoh’s Palm Wine Drinkard, who has the capacity to manipulate his body “to be anything and to take any form” (2015:5). Ayodele’s ability to

“collapse the boundaries” (5) which surround her allows her to be the medium through which a restructuring of the relationship between the human and non-human is imagined.

Ayodele not only alters physical form (her own and others), but is able to alter and influence the mindset or consciousness of others. She encourages shifts in consciousness in those she encounters, such as the president of Nigeria, Adaora and everyone who views her countrywide broadcast on their digital devices. Ayodele’s statement, “we are change” (Okorafor, 2014a:39) hints at the massive scale of change the city of Lagos will have to undergo in the near future. Ayodele points to humanity’s narrow view of alterity when she says, “human beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them” (67). In this seemingly simple observation Ayodele speaks out against human arrogance and intolerance and highlights our lack of conviviality toward those who are different in terms of colour, gender, or species. Nyamnjoh’s conviviality might be a solution to this antipathy as conviviality can be used “as a tool for activating human capacity to manage social transformation, drawing inspiration from anti-colonial [...] struggles” (2015:11). Ayodele’s declaration of change, conflated with Nyamnjoh’s statements on conviviality, indicates the necessity to decolonise and liberate ourselves from the “snares and shackles of neo/colonialism” (Apusigah, 2006:33).

Ayodele is not the only character in the novel who is simultaneously a frontier African and cyborgian. Okorafor’s three other protagonists, Adaora, Anthony and Agu, can also be described as cyborgian and frontier Africans as they exhibit these liminal identities. Here I explore how the three protagonists’ magical abilities enable them to be interpreted as representative figures of an alternative future society that embraces alterity and negotiates the spaces in-between essentialist worldviews and fiction.

All three characters exhibit particular attributes of Nyamnjoh’s frontier African as they “challenge essentialism, play with limits and expand possibilities” (2015:8) through their magical abilities which are activated in moments of great distress. Adaora is threatened with violence by her husband when she creates an invisible barrier, preventing him from moving (Okorafor, 2014a:9).

Anthony's younger sister is being intimidated by extended family members when he uses the rhythm (a sonic blast) to knock them away from his home to protect her (164). Lastly, Agu punches his superior, Lance Corporal Benson, with superhuman strength to prevent a woman from being raped (26). What all these moments have in common is that the catalyst for awaking 'magical' or superhuman power is potential injury towards a woman. In Adaora's case she is the potential victim, for Anthony it is his sister, and for Agu it is a female stranger. The use of these magical abilities also underlines the cyborgian dimensions of these protagonists. Due to these powers, the characters have found "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, 2016a:67) and their actions are no longer restricted by the limitations of the 'rational' world. Similar to the *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, they are also frontier Africans as they "bridge various divides," display "inextricable entanglements," present the possibility of "a world beyond neat dichotomies" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:7) and challenge the boundaries of rationalism through their employment of magic. The protagonist's resistance against patriarchal power struggles informs a discussion on Okorafor's Africanfuturist gender politics as her characters embody a conjugation of worlds "with partial connections and not universals and particulars" (Haraway, 2016b:13) which points to an inclusive approach towards the densely woven interconnections of lived realities.

#### **4.2 The Black Nexus and their 'performance' of gender.**

I begin this section by introducing Butler's theory of performative gender, which leads into a discussion on the characters of Jacobs and Rome and how their 'unconventional' preference for drag challenges heteronormative behavioural codes for men. The way in which Jacobs and Rome challenge heteronormative behavioural codes allows them to be classified as figures similar to Ayodele who challenge boundaries and transgress dualistic hierarchies. Their love of cross-dressing demonstrates the polymorphous richness and multiplicity of lived experience and gender identity potentialities. In this way, Jacobs and Rome embody Okorafor's particular brand of Africanfuturism as their characters embody a convivial approach to gender politics that privileges the malleability and multiplicity of bodies and gender potentialities in society. Closely tied to

discussions on the performance of gender and drag is the concept of queer theory, which I explore in this section through the work of Cheryl Stobie.

Butler argues that gender is constructed “through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (2006:191, emphasis in original), resulting in the need to continually perform ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ activities to maintain a particular gender status. In the narrative, Jacobs, Rome and Ayodele contest typically assigned gender behaviour. Ayodele, despite her ability to assume any physical form, continues to inhabit the body of a woman for most of the narrative, while Jacobs and Rome, in their male bodies, display distinctly feminine characteristics in their enjoyment of wearing women’s clothing. All three characters ‘perform’ gender in a manner that is not congruent with conservative, patriarchal social norms. I argue that the depiction of these characters embodies Okorafor’s convivial Africanfuturism as they are not able to be “define[d] and confine[d]” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:16) into predetermined gendered categories, but are instead illustrative of the “nuanced complexities” (16) of sexuality.

Here I wish to expand briefly upon Butler’s gender performativity by introducing the concept of ‘drag.’ Esther Newton’s ideas on drag outline how “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (Newton in Butler, 2006:186). By mocking the idea of a “true gender identity” (186) drag also demonstrates the inadequacies of binary modes of gender identity. Ncube notes that by “challenging the status quo, both Afrofuturism and queer theory compel us to envision new ways of being and new ways of thinking” (2020:4). Furthermore, the intersections between Afrofuturism and queer theory “demand a re-visioning of the past and the present in order to imagine a future that is liberated from the prevailing oppressive systems” (4). Therefore, rather than analysing Okorafor’s depiction of fluid, non-binary gender identity through a myopic, hierarchal lens, this dissertation will consider Apusigah’s relativist position which insists that “in asserting difference and engaging in the politics of identity, an embrace of the fluidity of spaces and the multiplicity of impinging forces is possible” (2006:30). Apusigah’s relativist position requires that “multi-layered interpretations and enriched meanings [...], subjective realities and multiple positions become central to knowledge production processes” (33). This can be

meaningfully explored in relation to *Lagoon*, which directly engages with notions of gendered difference and its social manifestations through the depiction of Ayodele, Adaora and members of the Black Nexus.

Jacobs, when not surrounded by other members of the Black Nexus, must engage in Butler's 'performance' of hyper-masculinity for Moziz et al. Jacobs simultaneously participates in the masculine spectacle while contesting the notion of a true gender identity through his impulses to engage in traditionally 'feminine' behaviour, such as dressing in women's clothing. This can be seen when he visits with other members of the Black Nexus at a secret meeting in an abandoned secondary school:

No matter how carefully Jacobs walked, his heels made too much noise. Click, click, click. The hallway of the abandoned secondary school amplified the sound. It was afternoon and the sun shone brightly outside, and he was wearing his favorite long black dress and high heels. They'd parked right beside the building and quickly run inside. Right now was a terrible time to draw attention to himself, but he couldn't show up to this meeting speaking the Pidgin English he spoke with the guys, nor could he arrive *dressed* like a "guy". He needed to present this new development to his friends as *himself* (Okorafor, 2014a:70, emphasis in original).

References to "his favourite long black dress and high heels" (70), his reluctance to "arrive *dressed* like a 'guy'" (70, emphasis in original), and the need to appear before his "friends [dressed] as *himself*" (70, emphasis in original) demonstrate the radically subjective nature of sexuality and gender identity. Jacobs, unlike other characters who engage in drag such as Rome or Royal, maintains a heterosexual orientation as he states that "he wasn't gay at all. He just liked wearing women's clothes" (73). The fact that Jacobs had to make this statement points to the tendency to conflate and confuse sexual orientation with gender expression. Jacobs's justification of his heterosexual desires, alongside his love for feminine clothing, "challenge[s] the heteronormative logic which functions in such a way that non-normative identities are marginalised and rendered invisible and illegible" (Ncube, 2020:6). Jacobs blurs the lines between gender boundaries and forges a 'new' identity for himself, where 'himself' identifies with neither straight male, nor homosexual gender politics. His gendered identity encompasses both masculine and feminine

dimensions to create a distinctly interconnected identity. Jacobs's behaviour points towards the multiple ontological dimensions and potentialities of selfhood inherent in each individual which forms part of the novel's critique of rigid social stratifications.

Ncube's persuasive discussion of the way queer theory and Afrofuturism both challenge heteronormative social structures is useful in examining Jacobs's situation as it "allows for the embracing of difference rather than the discounting of it" (Apusigah, 2006:33). Jacobs's love of women's clothing contests imperialist discourses surrounding gender, and his adoption of drag serves to liberate himself from the "shackles of neo/colonialism" (33) as his actions are not congruent with conservative masculine gender norms. Jacobs's actions and the way he describes his clothing choices also relate to Ayodele's effortless shapeshifting. Ayodele's protean performance of gender makes human dichotomies seem as absurd and socially mediated as they truly are, while Jacobs's cross-dressing makes a similar mockery of gender constructs. Jacobs, "the queer members of the Black Nexus and the aliens represent difference and non-normativity" (Ncube, 2020:7) as their transgression of traditional gender boundaries displays a less fixed relationship between male and female. Their behaviour advocates for a more open view towards gender, contesting "rigid modes of being" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:8), such as prescriptive or binary gender constructs.

Similar to Jacobs, Rome also challenges western heteronormative behavioural codes as he too engages in drag. Rome is described as "immaculate" wearing "dark blue skinny jeans and a loose white blouse" with "tiny gold hoop earrings [which] perfectly accented his closely cut hair" (Okorafor, 2014a:71). His appearance is made more effeminate as it is revealed that "even without make-up, he passed as a beautiful woman" (71). The description of Rome as "a beautiful woman" (71) creates a disconnect between Rome's biological male sex and his dress code. The division present emphasises the fluid spaces between genders, breaking binary constructs and 'queering' the idea of the masculine by offering a masculine figure in feminine attire, with 'feminine' sexual desires. Rome figuratively (and often literally) poses as a model for unfixed sexual identities as he actively contests traditional gender norms through his non-conformist behaviour and dress code. For this reason, Rome, like Jacobs and Ayodele, "exert[s] pressure on monolithic and simplistic

ideas of what is deemed normal/abnormal” (Ncube, 2020:7) as his sexuality and dress code undermines conservative gender ideals.

The continued performance of non-binary gender roles by Jacobs, Rome and Ayodele mark these characters, and their non-normative gender codes, as a threat to traditional notions of embodied gender identity. Butler’s comments on drag can be used to expand this idea as she believes that “the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag [and] cross-dressing” (2006:187). To this end, Jacobs and members of the Black Nexus act as characters who parody “primary gender identities” as they engage in “drag” activities. This performative subversion of fixed gender roles is crucial in “questioning the notion of fixed sexual identities” (Stobie, 2009:321) and imagining new modes of being such as Haraway’s posthuman cyborg. Ayodele’s shifting between species can also be read as a “destabilisation of the established order through an obscuring of the lines between the human and the non-human” (Ncube, 2020:5). This is particularly true in her decision to turn into a monkey. By engaging in drag and shapeshifting, Ayodele and members of the Black Nexus “demand a questioning of the heteronormative status quo and imagine a future in which identities are liberated from the restrictions imposed by socially constructed ways of being” (7). These characters can then be read as exemplary embodiments of Haraway’s cyborg identity since they recognise that “[they] are responsible for boundaries” (2016a:65) and are using “cyborg imagery” (67) to “suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms” (67) created by western binary thought. Okorafor’s characters mock the idea of single identities and can be theorised as chimeras, integrating multiple gendered identities into one and reforging the boundaries surrounding gender politics.

Despite their contestation of gender politics, members of the Black Nexus still face challenges to their sexuality in contemporary society, revealing the need for the social transformation initiated by the arrival of the aliens. Jacobs’s challenges are evident through his reluctance to reveal his fondness for drag. Jacobs reveals that he couldn’t be “dressed like a ‘guy’” (70) in front of the Black Nexus. He must dress up as a woman and reveal his ‘true self’ to show that he was unafraid, yet Jacobs is hesitant to allow Moziz, Troy and Tolu into his apartment in case they find out about his cross-dressing. Jacobs’s identity is split between his support of the LGBT community and his

heterosexual friends. He is also “immensely proud and intensely ashamed at the same time” (92) as he sees the members of the Black Nexus out on parade for the first time without him. Other members of the Black Nexus such as Chioma and Yemi also feel the same simultaneous pride and shame as “both looked like they wanted to creep right back into their closets but they held their chins up” (91). The inner conflict and shame felt by these characters surrounding their gender politics is a manifestation of the exclusivist social classifications that Okorafor (through Ayodele and the Africanfuturist genre) is interrogating. Ncube notes that “[t]he coming out of the members of Black Nexus shows that queer individuals cannot continue to be ignored in the imagining of the present and the future of the evidently African space and time that is depicted in the novel *Lagoon*” (2020:7). *Lagoon* introduces the aliens as a ‘cure’ for the virulent gender politics of western imperialism. The aliens reform Nigerian society to closer reflect an integrated, Africanfuturist society which “challenge[s] monolithic dystopian representations of Africa” (4).

Here, I would like to turn my attention to Stobie’s discussion on ‘queer’ politics, specifically, the way in which she discusses how the non-heterosexual community reclaimed and positively reconstructed the term ‘queer’ from a pejorative term for homosexuals, to a positive force signalling the “questioning [...] of fixed sexual identities” and contesting “the perception of heterosexuality as normative” (2009:321–322). Exploring Stobie’s notion of contesting fixed sexual identities is advantageous to this dissertation as the narrative depicts an anti-binarist figuring of gender and sexuality through its shapeshifting aliens and the members of the Black Nexus. Additionally, Stobie’s views on queer politics provide a lens through which we can scrutinise Okorafor’s depiction of various characters and how this reflects her views on binary gender politics. My discussion will focus specifically on how members of the Black Nexus queer gender through their actions and lifestyle.

Rome displays the positive reclamation of ‘queer.’ In one passage, Rome is lauded with the title: “the greatest queen of them all” (Okorafor, 2014a:91). In this context, the term “queen” can be read as a derogatory slur referring to homosexuals. In the same encounter, he is also described (unfacetiously) as “look[ing] like a Yoruba queen” (91). In the first instance, the derogatory comment “queen” (referring to Rome’s homosexuality) has been insultingly extended towards Rome and his

cohorts, and in the second instance, the appellation is used in an inclusive, positive sense, invoking images of Rome as royalty. The use of the term “Yoruba queen” is significant, evoking a rich cultural heritage of west African royalty such as Queen Moremi Ajasoro,<sup>8</sup> or the Queen of Sheba, both of whom are figures of strength who embody ‘traditionally’ masculine martial qualities. The positive imagery associated with descriptions of royalty acts as a reclamation of identity and power for members of the Black Nexus as they are able to rework negative associations of words such as “queen” and instead apply them to imaginings of “a future in which identities are liberated from the restrictions imposed by socially constructed ways of being” (Ncube, 2020:5).

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

One thing Ayodele, Jacobs, Seven, Rome and Royal all have in common is their position as frontier Africans. As mentioned previously, Nyamnjoh’s frontier Africans are a response to the binary

---

<sup>8</sup> A Yoruba queen who played a significant role in stopping Igbo groups attacking Ife during her rule (Blier, 2012:77).

restrictions of western culture. They are individuals which belong to a reality “not steeped in dualisms, binaries [or] dichotomies” (2015:6). Characters such as these are able to “straddle physical and cultural geographies” (7) through their sexual orientation. The queering of normative hierarchies through Ayodele’s shapeshifting, Jacobs’s cross-dressing and the “coming out and becoming visible” (Ncube, 2020:6) of the Black Nexus draws attention “to the possibility and reality of a world beyond neat dichotomies” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:7). These characters are on the frontlines of multiple realities as they struggle to exist in the constrained, binary world of post-colonial Nigeria, while simultaneously existing in their tiny free societies where their sexual orientation, desires, or shapeshifting abilities are not demonised by their fellow citizens.

### **4.3 Guardians of the border**

*Lagoon* not only presents positive reclamations of sexual agency, but also explores instances depicting the effects of pernicious, binary masculinity. In this section, I will first outline the fundamentals of ecofeminism. I then conflate the image of the cyborg with ecofeminist themes in *Lagoon* in order to deconstruct the violent masculinities espoused by Father Oke, Moziz and Lance Corporal Benson. Here I explore Okorafor’s scathing depictions of these three ‘guardians of the border’ who insist on preserving patriarchal gender norms in an attempt to examine her critique of this binary masculinity and its embeddedness in patriarchal systems. In this way, I hope to illuminate how Okorafor’s subversion of gendered stereotypes and embrace of ecofeminist themes is in line with the goals of Africanfuturism.

Ruether outlines a few of the basic tenets of ecofeminism in her book, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), when she states that:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society (204).

More contemporary critics such as Hobgood-Oster (2005) have elaborated on Ruether's claims by exploring how ecofeminism combines both "feminist and deep ecological perspectives" (534) in order to "challenge patriarchies from different angles" (534). Furthermore, she claims that "earth and the other-than-human experience the tyranny of patriarchy along with women. Classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism [...] and speciesism are all intertwined" (533–534). In light of the comments made by Ruether and Hobgood-Oster, I believe the image of the cyborg is an appropriate vehicle to explore ecofeminism because it provides a "radical reshaping" (Ruether, 1975:202) of our thought patterns. Haraway (2016a) contends that the cyborg world is about "lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (15). Haraway's ties to ecofeminism are undeniable as she states that "certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, [and] animals" (59). This section of my dissertation seeks to link the concepts of ecological degradation and the patriarchal oppression of women to one of the broader goals of Okorafor's Africanfuturism, which is to create a space for literature which is free from the oppressive binary codes of western imperialism. In *Lagoon*, characters with patriarchal, oppressive views are unable to perceive and adapt to the literal and ontological shift which is occurring in Lagos. I again draw attention to Ayodele's statement: "human beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them" (Okorafor, 2014a:67). Ayodele's damning critique of human nature reflects Okorafor's Africanfuturist disavowal of the interconnected tyrannies of patriarchy and anthropocentric exceptionalism. This critique is foregrounded in Okorafor's depiction of characters such as Father Oke, Moziz and Benson, and their doomed resistance to the aliens' ontological transformation of Nigerian society. In the narrative, it is their own stubbornness that prevents these characters from finding their place in the everchanging structure of *Lagoon*'s Lagos. These characters' social inflexibility results in their eventual removal from the narrative. In this way the novel challenges narrow, domination-based worldviews and provides a cyborg/ecofeminist approach to relationships that supplants the static, oppressive dichotomies currently present in Anthropocenic thought. I interpret this 'culling' of characters who are resistant to the aliens' proposed social transformation as Okorafor's critique of totalising gender ontologies and emblematic of her view that patriarchal dominance and ecological exploitation have no place in an Africanfuturist society.

The oppressive behaviour and actions of Father Oke, Moziz and Benson tie into discussions on ecofeminism, as ecofeminism holds “that all forms of oppression are connected” (Hobgood-Oster, 2005:533) and that patriarchal power structures oppress both women and the natural world through physical dominance and capitalist exploitation. I argue that the image of the cyborg can be aligned with the tenets of ecofeminist criticism as it “does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms” (Haraway, 2016a:65). The cyborg also believes “there is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic” (60). As I have explored in section 4.1 of this dissertation, Ayodele and her kin display the fluid, transgressive nature of the cyborg through their shapeshifting abilities. The aliens become markers of ecofeminism as they arrive on earth and use their powers of transformation to provide an ecological liberation of the natural world. They clean up the pollution from oil rigs on Bar Beach and then they bargain with the president, trading pieces of their technology as a replacement for oil. Their condition is that “oil could no longer be Nigeria’s top commodity. It could no longer be a commodity at all” (Okorafor, 2014a:273). The aliens can also be viewed as ecofeminist as they challenge, interrogate and undo the domination and violence wreaked upon the planet, women and social relations engendered by a patriarchal dualism which legitimates patriarchy and promotes industrial capitalism. They do this by equipping the aquatic life of Bar Beach with the tools to fight back against human oppression. The aliens transform a swordfish into a monstrous creature “the size of a bus” (240) with impenetrable skin. They also alter a giant squid into a “sea beast” (241) “the size of two horses” (245) with “fifty-foot tentacles” (241) that are able to output an electrical current. The aliens ensure that the sea reasserts itself as a truly ‘alien’ space inimical to human life and exploitation by changing the water of Bar Beach to cause great discomfort and sickness to any humans who decide to brave its depths.

By providing alien technology as a substitute for oil and enabling marine life to reclaim the bay, Okorafor’s aliens represent an opportunity to reformulate current ontologies informing humanity’s treatment of the natural environment and the patriarchal behaviour of many characters such as Father Oke, Moziz and Benson. Hobgood-Oster even suggests that a new ontology “based on dynamic and admittedly partial knowledge as well as awe toward the complexity of embodied and

embedded existence” (Warren in Hobgood-Oster, 2005:538) is necessary to contribute towards “the profound social transformation that is needed” (15). Hobgood-Oster’s comments resonate with elements of Haraway’s formulation of the cyborg and Okorafor’s Africanfuturism which stress that incompleteness and social transformation are natural and necessary in contesting hegemonic structures. The necessity of social transformation can be seen through the following exploration of Father Oke, Moziz and Lance Corporal Benson’s actions and demises. The static, unchanging nature of these three characters creates a stark contrast to the cyborgian, fluid nature of the aliens and the three protagonists. Ayodele’s malleability and constant shapeshifting are necessary in navigating the continually changing landscape of *Lagoon*. Ayodele is able to change and adapt to her surroundings, and Adaora, Anthony and Agu are capable of acknowledging alterity.

The first of the static characters whose actions I examine is Father Oke. Father Oke maintains a patriarchal attitude toward women which often exposes itself in his desire to control and manipulate women in the text. Father Oke’s controlling desires are evident when he advises Chris to “break her [Adaora] with [his] hands, then soften her with flowers” (Okorafor, 2014a:44), after Chris confides their marital problems to him. Father Oke again exposes his patriarchal and oppressive views towards women when a woman in his congregation seeks help. He refers to the woman as a “weak vessel” (35) and displays contempt for her, stating that she is “female trash,” “rubbish,” “filth,” “a waste of a woman,” (59) and a “bitch of the devil” (60). In these interactions, Father Oke espouses a domination-based worldview informed by Cartesian dualism which legitimises patriarchy and its insidious ubiquity across all levels of human society, including the ostensibly metaphysical realm of spirituality. Father Oke’s violent dominance is also eerily reminiscent of colonial practices that used religion as a ‘civilising’ tool and rational for mass exploitation. Father Oke can be interpreted as a symbol of western imperialism in Africa as he seeks to control Ayodele to “pull in a flock to be reckoned with!” (47). I argue that Okorafor’s depiction of Father Oke’s brutal misogyny and casual sense of superiority reflects her attitude towards unchecked patriarchal dominance. This is especially evident in the concluding sections of Father Oke’s narrative and his fateful encounter with Mami Wata. Mami Wata lures Father Oke into the water and he is never seen again. In this exchange, Father Oke, a guardian of the border

who insists on maintaining rigid, patriarchal attitudes towards women, is removed from the narrative by a powerful, transgressive embodiment of African femininity and folklore. Through this exchange, Okorafor reveals how oppressive binary viewpoints have no place in her Africanfuturist imaginings.

The second character I would like to examine is Moziz, who displays a “Eurocentric logic of conquest” (Nyamnjoh, 2015:1), similar to Father Oke. Moziz’s first thought upon learning about Ayodele is the desire to control her and force her to print money so he can become rich. Moziz believes that he can overpower and control Ayodele based on her feminine appearance. When he explains his plan to his friends he says, “she just woman; she no dey harm” (57). Similar to Father Oke, Moziz’s immediate response to Ayodele is to think of her as weak as he expresses his desire to exploit her for his own economic advantage. His desire to exert masculine power over Ayodele sexually arouses Moziz. Moziz’s perspective of women being weak or simply sexual vessels is shared by all his companions except for Jacobs, who realises (due to her shapeshifting) that Ayodele “wasn’t *just* a woman. And maybe that made her dangerous” (57, emphasis in original). Moziz’s patriarchal views position women as creatures to be dominated. His disrespectful attitude towards women is not only viewed in his thoughts and desires about Ayodele, but also in his actions and responses to his girlfriend, Philomena. Moziz never shows genuine affection towards her and only uses her for sex. His attitude towards Philomena evolves from a casual indifference to her existence (excepting her ‘function’ as his lover and sexual object) to complete revulsion after the plan to kidnap Ayodele fails. Moziz dismisses Philomena, claiming “[she] was not only stupid but she was shit during a time of crisis” (181). He also reminds himself that he should dump her the first chance he got because “he could do so much better than her” (182). Moziz’s self-importance and misogynistic attitude towards women is reflected in his chilling perception that Philomena is someone to be used when it suits him and discarded when she is no longer necessary.

Like Father Oke, Moziz is a static character who is unable to accept the restructuring of the social order mediated by the aliens’ arrival. Moziz’s grotesque masculinist attitudes are perhaps most evident when he finds out that his best friend since childhood, Jacobs, engages in drag. Moziz’s inflexibility causes him to believe Jacobs is ‘unnatural’ and should be “stone[d] to death” (186)

for dressing up like a woman. Moziz summarily executes Jacobs with a gunshot to the chest. This lethal act has dire consequences for Moziz that perfectly encapsulates Okorafor's disdain for ignorant machismo. After their botched attempt to kidnap Ayodele, Moziz and his confederates collide with a young woman during their hasty getaway. This woman turns out to be an alien who goes by the name of Rain. She responds to the murder of Jacobs by vaporising Moziz in the same way that Lance Corporal Benson and his men were transformed into a plantain tree outside Adaora's house. Through Moziz's demise *Lagoon* advocates for the necessity to reformulate binarist logic. The oppressive masculinity displayed by Moziz has no place in the posthuman Lagos the aliens are attempting to create. Rain, an alien, cyborgian figure and a symbol of the nationwide change occurring in Lagos, violently expunges Moziz, the act of which contests stifling views towards women and ecology.

Lance Corporal Benson is the last 'guardian of the border' that I would like to examine. Benson is Agu's commanding officer in the military, and the readers first introduction to Benson is when Agu recounts the attempted rape of a woman which he stopped using his supernatural strength (26). Benson's patriarchal views lead to a sense of sexual entitlement towards the woman, and Benson's desire to control women is blatantly obvious through his attempted rape, since rape is such a dehumanising act of physical and sexual domination. Like Father Oke and Moziz, Benson's first response upon discovering Ayodele and her shapeshifting power is a desire to control her. Benson states that the military should "capture it, lock it down, and transport it to Kirikiri Prison" (8). Here, Benson (in an ironically amusing misconception) does not acknowledge Ayodele as an equal, nor even as a sentient being, when she is immensely superior to him. His constant references to Ayodele as "it" (98, 134, 136), or a "creature" (106), indicate his insecurities as he potentially feels threatened or intimidated by Ayodele. Benson, as a 'guardian of the border' is violently transformed into a plantain tree by Ayodele after he orders his men to repeatedly shoot "it" (Ayodele). Once again, the removal of binary characters such as Benson at the hands of the fluid, cyborgian aliens reveals Okorafor's criticism of static gender constructs and indicates a "need to confront violent masculinities [...] and the patriarchal men and women who protect and enable them" (Gqola, 2007:118).

Lastly, Ayodele's death plays a large part in initiating social transformation as her final sacrifice at the end of the novel transgresses borders by destabilising any understanding we may have of death and life as two distinct categories. Her death results in her turning into a "white mist" (268) which spreads over the city and is inhaled by everyone in Lagos. In this final encounter, Adaora realises that "Lagos will never be the same again" (270). Here (in a manner that oddly echoes Christian beliefs in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ) Ayodele's death is but a transformation, a movement from one state of being to another. It is not the terminal point of mortality commonly outlined by secular scientific explanations of the organic world. In this way, Ayodele's death (and by extension, the aliens in general) echo traditional Nigerian belief systems about ancestor worship and the self's continued existence in another realm beyond the material world. To further pick on the similarities between Ayodele's sacrifice and Christian doctrine I draw attention to the fact that Ayodele is figured as feminine, which is a direct inversion of androcentric Christian narratives of Jesus Christ being the son of a (masculine) God. By depicting Ayodele's death as a transformative process from one state of being to another, Okorafor destabilises the seemingly impermeable boundary between life and death. Ayodele's sacrifice can further be related to Okorafor's Africanfuturism and its incomplete, boundarylessness as Ayodele is still a part of the narrative after her death.

The death and transformation of Ayodele and the positive change her disappearance initiates enables discussion on the biological benefit provided by the removal of Father Oke, Moziz and Lance Corporal Benson. These characters (despite their outstanding failings as human beings) are still included in Okorafor's Afro-utopic Lagos as their remains will continue to fuel organic life even though their oppressive consciousness has been removed. This points to the "complexity of embodied and embedded existence" (Hobgood-Oster, 2005:538) as humanity is so intertwined with the surrounding world that even after death, humanity can fuel new life and regeneration. The repurposing of characters who act out detrimental masculinities signals the necessity of radical social transformation and emphasises the link between ecological oppression and feminine oppression.

Throughout the novel, Okorafor depicts Ayodele as a progressive character whose fluid, cyborgian nature foregrounds the massive change that is about to occur in Nigeria. Ayodele is exemplary of both Haraway's cyborg and Nyamnjoh's frontier African as she confounds binary gender definitions through her shapeshifting. Her protean nature allows her to contest the binary formulations of gender which have dominated visions of Africa for centuries. Through their interactions with Ayodele; Adaora, Anthony and Agu realise that the potentialities of Ayodele's shapeshifting does not only apply to the aliens, but also to them. The protagonists of *Lagoon* are all characters who contest the stratifications of Lagosian society, as each of them employs magical abilities throughout the narrative. Members of the Black Nexus also contest binary formulations of gender through their engagement in non-normative gender practices. These characters engage with their gender identity in a manner that reflects Butler's depiction of gender as a performance through their non-binary sexualities, while their protest and 'coming out' narrative seeks to normalise sexualities which are often viewed as 'deviant' according to hierarchical gender norms. *Lagoon* also condemns virulent patriarchy and its impact on the environment. *Lagoon* explores the ecological degradation of Lagos and the potential for restoration through the arrival of the aliens. The aliens seek to replace domination-based worldviews which are rooted in capitalism with a regenerative, convivial ontology.

## Conclusion

The influence of postcolonial literature has spread into many literary spheres in the last twenty years, including science fiction. This dissertation has explored the seminal role Okorafor is playing in the development of Africanfuturist narratives as she spearheads the vanguard of writers challenging the hegemony of western science fiction. I have argued that Okorafor is infusing science fiction narratives with her own Africanfuturist thematic and aesthetic sensibilities because she believes that science fiction is “practically made to redress political and social issues” (Okorafor, 2014b: n.p.) since it contains the potential to rethink boundaries and re-imagine our world. As a “cultural producer of SF” (Väättänen, 2019: n.p.) Okorafor manufactures “narratives of the future [...] which are firmly centred on Africa” (n.p.), and which reimagines a society beyond the violent hegemonies of anthropocentrism, patriarchy and gender binarism. In my dissertation I have explored how the novel upends traditional science fiction narratives and recasts them from an African perspective through its location in Lagos, Nigeria, and its incorporation of African indigenous traditions. By doing so, I show how Okorafor is producing a body of African literature which “grappl[es] with current neocolonial reality” (Burnett, 2015:136). I have also examined Okorafor’s idiosyncratic use of seemingly postmodern structural elements such as multiple focalisers and the interjecting narrator. I interpret the imaginative and subversive reworking of these classically postmodern motifs as a reflection of Okorafor’s Africanfuturist literary project, which legitimises the incompleteness of the self and highlights the individual’s interdependence upon others and the natural world in defining our humanity. Lastly, I interpret Okorafor’s challenging, anti-hierarchal representations of gender through the lens of Haraway’s fascinating discussion of cyborg identity which similarly deconstructs anthropocentric worldviews and emphasises the interdependence of all living organisms.

In *Lagoon*, Okorafor constructs her unique brand of Africanfuturist literature by locating her narrative in Nigeria. In my second chapter I indicate how Okorafor uses the “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin, 1979) offered by the science fiction mode to reimagine restrictive boundaries in post-colonial Africa by exploring the lived realities of citizens in the largest city in Africa. The novel explores the rich cityscape and politics of Lagos, while also delving into

complex themes such as religion, mythology, and neo-colonial economic relations. *Lagoon* promotes Africanness through organic and traditional stories as everything in the novel is steeped in uniquely African ontologies. I assert that Okorafor writes openly and honestly about Africa to encourage discussion around, and to generate interest in, African literature and Africanfuturism in a global context. Because Africanfuturism's "default is non-western" (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.), Okorafor depicts the aliens' radical social and biological transformation of Lagos as a speculative novum that signifies a departure from Nigeria's economic dependence on the west and privileges the reformulation and embrace of African ontologies. Possibly hinting at the power of science fiction to bring about this paradigm shift, Ayodele even states: "we are change" (Okorafor, 2014a:39). Characters who have been heavily influenced by the culture of the west such as Chris and Father Oke have to adapt to this change and accept traditional African mythologies as African Gods literally walk the streets in *Lagoon*.

In her production of Africanfuturist narratives, Okorafor's novel "happily disregards many literary norms" (Ncube, 2021: n.p.) and appears to incorporate several aspects of postmodern writing in its construction. In Chapter Three I argue that the imaginative reworking of these western literary techniques is a distinctly Africanfuturist approach that looks at postmodernism "awry" (Žižek, 1991). This is achieved by exploring the elements of postmodernism in *Lagoon*, such as the fragmented structure of the narrative, as indicative of a rhizomatic, "circular system of ramification" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:5) rather than an individualistic exercise in isolation. By telling the story of the alien 'invasion' of Lagos "from the point-of-view of many" (Okorafor, 2016: n.p.) Okorafor's work can be seen to express an inclusionary politics that is analogous to Nyamnjoh's conviviality. I have adopted the theoretical approach of a convivial scholar, and therefore my reading of *Lagoon* explores the significance of community and solidarity in Okorafor's representation of Lagos and its myriad inhabitants. The narrative grants a voice to many distinct characters from different social strata of Lagos, capturing the hopes, fears, wealth disparities and radically diverse multiplicity that comprise the quotidian reality of Africa's largest city. I have argued that Okorafor does not limit her transformative vision to the concerns of Lagos's marginalised and voiceless human inhabitants. *Lagoon*'s non-binary sweep goes much further, giving narrative agency to animals, indicating the rhizomatic imbrication of humanity with other

biological creatures. I hypothesise that the passages detailing the complex interconnections between human and animal are Okorafor's method of centring African ontologies which do not privilege humanity over Earth's non-human "citizens" (Okorafor, 2015: n.p.).

Okorafor's inclusionary politics are also apparent when examining the depiction of gender in *Lagoon*. In my fourth and final chapter I explore the novel's representations of gender through the lens of Haraway's posthuman cyborg. I explore how Haraway's cyborgs are creatures "in a postgender world" (2016a:8), unfettered by a western hierarchical ontology and therefore able to navigate the heavily stratified structures of Lagos with ease. Haraway's cyborg creatures are able to slip from one locale to another, or shift from human to animal form at will, due to their boundaryless biological construction. The most noticeable instances of the fluctuating nature of the cyborg occur in passages detailing Ayodele's shapeshifting abilities. Ayodele is not confined to a single body, and her constant cross-species transmutations are a literary embodiment of Okorafor's inclusionary politics. Additionally, Ayodele's protean nature is emblematic of the radical change that Okorafor believes necessary in contemporary discussions of gender, Africa and the environment. The figure of Ayodele is significant as her disregard for social stratifications and gender constructs undermines the foundations of binarist logic and positions an inclusivist African ontology as a necessary part of the transformations depicted in the novel. Ayodele's transformations also initiate dialogue surrounding the cyborg identity as a marker of Okorafor's Africanfuturism. The cyborg characters within the text "dismantles a well established system that denigrates ways of being that stray from what is considered normal" (Ncube, 2021: n.p.). Additionally, Okorafor's cyborgs map a politics of inclusion onto Lagos through Ayodele's sacrifice and 'rebirth' into the atmosphere.

In this chapter I also explored how the novel represents Judith Butler's ideas about the performance of gender by examining various members of the LGBTQ group the Black Nexus. I explored how particular followers of the Black Nexus display an inclusionary politics similar to Ayodele's shapeshifting through their challenges to heteronormative behavioural codes. This dissertation has explored how these characters' non-binary gender identities and their challenging of dominant

ideas on ‘straight’ sexual politics are consistent with Okorafor’s formulation of Africanfuturism as a “bridge” not a “wall” (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). This ‘bridge’ connects rather than ostracises, which affirms this dissertation’s investigation of *Lagoon* and its critical importance in examining intersecting fields like gender studies, literary analysis and eco-critical material.

In the final section of Chapter Four I discussed the lingering impact of Cartesian dualism on African masculinity and how Haraway’s conceptualisation of the cyborg is refigured as an ecofeminist icon in the novel. I explored how Okorafor’s depiction of extraordinary physical and mental transformations, and her destabilisation of anthropocentric thought, reflects the thoughts of various critics such as Hobgood-Oster and Haraway who foreground the profound interconnection between patriarchal thought and environmental degradation. The erasure of characters who espouse patriarchal masculinity is a crucial dimension of Okorafor’s Africanfuturist perspective, suggesting a future Lagos whose existence is predicated on inclusion and connectivity rather than violence and dominance.

The sprawling nature of this project has only permitted a cursory analysis of Africanfuturism, postmodernism and gender in *Lagoon*; however, this provides room for further scholarship to be undertaken when analysing Okorafor’s Africanfuturist writing. The novel’s treatment of ecocritical concerns mediated by the arrival of the aliens in Bar Beach is an avenue of study which may be extended far beyond what has been examined in my dissertation. The gender dynamics of Ayodele and members of the Black Nexus are another aspect of the text which invites further study, as these characters present a complex tapestry which this analysis has just begun to unweave. The very term ‘Africanfuturism’ and its literary features encourage additional study and explication as the genre is still young and evolving. Okorafor herself has made additions and recognised caveats to the definition of her own genre on her blogspot, most recently in 2019 when she uploaded a blogpost called “Africanfuturism Defined,” acknowledging that “there are grey areas, blends and contradictions, as there are with any definition” (n.p.). These various themes and questions of genre provide a rich framework for further critical evaluation of Okorafor and other African writers who explore similar concepts through an Africanfuturist perspective.

*Lagoon* utilises postcolonial speculative fiction to engage in “counterhegemonic discourse” (Yu Burnett, 2015:134) by exploring an alien invasion set in Africa. The novel is a narrative distillation of Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project as the text actively seeks to replace “Eurocentric, racist and colonial” (Väätänen, 2019: n.p.) “misrepresentations of Africa” (Ncube, 2021: n.p.) by asking the question “What if?” (TED Talk, 2017:4:08). What if aliens arrived in Africa? What if African “identities [were] freed from restrictive thinking that refuses to recognise difference and diversity” (Ncube, 2021: n.p.)? What if Nigeria were freed from the political and religious influence of western imperialism and neo-colonial economic dependence? Okorafor states that Africanfuturism is “less concerned with ‘what could have been’ and more concerned with ‘what is and can/will be’” (2019: n.p.). Okorafor’s Africanfuturist project seeks also to highlight the significance of storytellers in building this future. Udide, the narrator acknowledges this as she insists that the story “goes deeper [...] it is in the always-mingling past, present and future” (Okorafor, 2014a:194). Okorafor’s use of the biological imagery of the spider-narrator traps us in her congenial Africanfuturist web – a web that embraces diversity, looks beyond boundaries and creates feelings of global community. Exemplifying Nyamnjoh’s ontology of incompleteness, this web is constantly in the process of creation and constantly sending out new tendrils. Okorafor’s speculative fiction is a catalyst for imagining new ways of being, for cunningly forcing readers to be co-opted into Okorafor’s Afro-optimistic vision.

## Bibliography

### Primary Text

Okorafor, N. 2014a. *Lagoon*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

### Secondary Texts

Alter, A. 2017. *Nnedi Okorafor And The Fantasy Genre She Is Helping Redefine*. [online] The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/books/ya-fantasy-diverse-akata-warrior.html> [Accessed 12 May 2020].

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999 [1987]. *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza* (2nd edition). San Francisco, CA: Auntie Lute Press.

Apusigah, A. A. 2006. Is gender yet another colonial project? A critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi's proposal. *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy*. XX(1-2), p. 23-44.

Balticshipping.com. 2021. [online] Available at:  
<https://www.balticshipping.com/vessel/imo/7374280> [Accessed 9 August 2021].

Barker, D. 2014. *Postcolonialism And Postmodernism – Ato Quayson*. [online] CHINUA ACHEBE Father of African Literature 1930 – 2013. Available at: <https://viennachinuaachebe.wordpress.com/2014/01/16/postcolonialism-and-postmodernism-ato-quayson/> [Accessed 13 August 2020].

Bennett, M. 2016. Afrofuturism. *Computer*, [online] (2016 .04 Vol 49), pp.92-93. Available at: <https://www.computer.org/csdl/magazine/co/2016/04/mco2016040092/13rRUxBJhyX> [Accessed 9 January 2021].

Blier, S. 2012. Art in Ancient Ife, Birthplace of the Yoruba. *African Arts*, 45(4), pp.70-85.

Borrelli, C. 2019. *How Nnedi Okorafor Is Building The Future Of Sci-Fi From Flossmoor. (Being George R.R. Martin's Protege Doesn't Hurt.)*. [online] Chicago Tribune. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ae-nnedi-okorafor-sci-fi-0526-story.html> [Accessed 14 June 2019].

Brown, H. 2014. *Marx on Gender and the Family: A Summary*. [online] Monthly Review. Available at: <https://monthlyreview.org/2014/06/01/marx-on-gender-and-the-family-a-summary/> [Accessed 8 July 2021].

Burnett, J. W. 2015. The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction. *Research in African Literatures*, 46(4), p.133.

Butler, J. 1999. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, O. 2021 [1976]. *Patternmaster*. Headline Book Publishing.

Butler, O. 2021 [1977]. *Mind of my Mind*. Headline Book Publishing.

Butler, O. Morressy, J. and Van Vogt, A., 1981 [1978]. *Survivor*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

Butler, O. 2021 [1980]. *Wild seed*. Headline Book Publishing.

Butler, O. 2021 [1984]. *Clay's Ark*. Headline Book Publishing.

Carons, T. and Onyioha, A. 2012. The Origin of the Pidgin. *Afrostylemag*, [online] Available at: <http://www.afrostylemag.com/ASM7/pidgin.html> [Accessed 18 February 2021].

CBS News. 2011. *14 robbed travelers run over by bus in Nigeria*. [online] Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/14-robbed-travelers-run-over-by-bus-in-nigeria/> [Accessed 1 November 2019].

Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. 2012. Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa. *Anthropological Forum*, 22(2), pp.113-131.

Comaroff, J. 2006. *Law And Disorder In The Postcolony*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.

Delany, S. 2014 [1975]. *Dhalgren*. Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy.

Dele-Adedeji, I. and Jeffreys, E. 2020. *Face-me-I-face-you*. [online] Africa is a Country. Available at: <https://africasacountry.com/2020/07/face-me-i-face-you> [Accessed 18 February 2021].

Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. and Deleuze, G. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Athlone.

Dentith, S. 2005 [1995]. *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dery, M. 1994. *Flame Wars. The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Du Bois, W. 1920. *The Comet*. In: W. Du Bois, ed., *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. San Diego: Hardcourt.

Ekpo, D. 1995. Towards a post-Africanism: Contemporary African thought and postmodernism. *Textual Practice*, 9(1), pp.121-135.

Ellis, B. 1991. *American Psycho*. New York: Vintage Books.

Eshun, K. 2003. Further Considerations of Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(2), pp.287-302. Michigan State University Press.

Eshun, K. 2018 [1998]. *More Brilliant Than The Sun. Adventures In Sonic Fiction*. London: Verso.

Eze, C. 2015. Transcultural affinity: thoughts on the emergent cosmopolitan imagination in South Africa. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27(2), pp.216-228.

Fanon, F. 1986 [1952]. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press: London.

Gilroy, P. 2004. *After Empire: Melancholia Or Convivial Culture?* Abingdon: Routledge.

Gqola, P. 2007. How the 'cult of femininity' and violent masculinities support endemic gender based violence in contemporary South Africa. *African Identities*, 5(1), pp.111-124.

Haraway, D. 2016a [1985]. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. In: *Manifestly Haraway*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, D. 2016b. *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University press.

Hobgood-Oster, L. 2005. Ecofeminism: Historic and International Evolution. in Taylor, B., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*, London: Continuum.

Hodgson, D. and Mac Curdy, S. 2005. "Wicked" women and the reconfiguration of gender in Africa. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hugo, E. 2017. Looking forward, looking back: animating magic, modernity and the African city-future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*. *Social Dynamics*, 43(1), pp.46-58.

Johnson, E. 2018. *Mami Wata, the most celebrated mermaid-like deity from Africa who crossed over to the West*. [online] Face2Face Africa. Available at: <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/mami-wata-the-most-celebrated-mermaid-like-deity-from-africa-who-crossed-over-to-the-west> [Accessed 9 August 2021].

- Jue, M. 2017. Intimate Objectivity: On Nnedi Okorafor's Oceanic Afrofuturism. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 45(1/2), pp.171-188.
- Karuga, J. 2019. *15 Biggest Cities in Africa*. [online] World Atlas. Available at: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/15-biggest-cities-in-africa.html> [Accessed 18 February 2021].
- Kendall, M. 2010. *A Nigerian Sorceress Makes Her Way*. [online] Publishers Weekly. Available at: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/42774-a-nigerian-sorceress-makes-her-way.html> [Accessed 29 May 2019].
- Kundera, M. 1984. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. New York: Faber & Faber.
- Ncube, G. 2020. "Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to That Which Does Not Resemble Them": Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*. *Scrutiny*2, 25(2), pp.69-81.
- Ncube, G. 2021. *Aliens in Lagos: sci-fi novel Lagoon offers a bold new future*. [online] Mail & Guardian. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/friday/2021-02-27-aliens-in-lagos-sci-fi-novel-lagoon-offers-a-bold-new-future/> [Accessed 8 July 2021].
- Nwanna, C. 2017. Managing Masquerade Festivals for Tourism and Economic Gains: A Study of Mmanwu Festival in Anambra State. *Sociology and Anthropology*, 5(7), pp.556-561.

- Nyamnjoh, F. 2015. Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 52(3), pp.253-270.
- O'Connell, H. 2016. "We are change": The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*. *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 3(3), pp.291-312.
- Okorafor, N. 2005. *Zahrah The Windseeker*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Okorafor, N. 2007. *The Shadow Speaker*. Connecticut: Hyperion.
- Okorafor, N., 2009a. *Is Africa Ready for Science Fiction*. [online] Nnedi.blogspot.com. Available at: <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2009/08/is-africa-ready-for-science-fiction.html> [Accessed 13 August 2021].
- Okorafor, N. 2009b. Organic fantasy. *African Identities*, 7(2), pp.275-286.
- Okorafor, N. 2010. *Who Fears Death*. New York: DAW Hardcover.
- Okorafor, N. 2011. *Akata Witch*. New York: Viking Books.
- Okorafor, N. 2014b. *African Science Fiction is Still Alien*. [online] Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. Available at: <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2014/01/african-science-fiction-is-still-alien.html> [Accessed 27 November 2020].

Okorafor, N. 2015. *Binti*. New York: Tor Books.

Okorafor, N. 2015. *Insight into the Lagoon*. [online] Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. Available at: <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2015/09/insight-into-lagoon.html> [Accessed 8 July 2021].

Okorafor, N. 2016. *Naijamerican Eyes on Lagos*. [online] Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. Available at: <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2016/04/naijamerican-eyes-on-lagos.html> [Accessed 28 February 2021].

Okorafor, N. 2017. *Akata Warrior*. New York: Viking Books.

Okorafor, N. 2017. *Home*. New York: Tor Books.

Okorafor, N. 2018. *The Night Masquerade*. New York: Tor Books.

Okorafor, N. 2019. *Africanfuturism Defined*. [online] Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. Available at: <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html> [Accessed 15 November 2020].

Plastic Pills. 2019. *Posthumanism Explained – Nietzsche, Deleuze, Stiegler, Haraway*. [online] Youtube. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmJLsfUnGjY&ab\\_channel=PlasticPills](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmJLsfUnGjY&ab_channel=PlasticPills). [Accessed 8 July 2021].

- Rollefson, J. 2008. The “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith. *Black Music Research Journal*, 28(1), pp.83-109.
- Rose, T. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music And Black Culture In Contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Ruether, R. 1975. *New Woman New Earth*. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Science Fiction Awards Database. n.d. *Nnedi Okorafor*. [online] Available at: [http://www.sfadb.com/Nnedi\\_Okorafor](http://www.sfadb.com/Nnedi_Okorafor) [Accessed 21 May 2019].
- Smith, D. 2010. Crisis In Nigeria As President Drops Out Of View. [online] *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/08/crisis-nigeria-president-missing> [Accessed 14 April 2019].
- Smith, E. 2012. *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stobie, C. 2009. Postcolonial pomosexuality: Queer/alternative fiction after *Disgrace*. *Current Writing*, 21(1-2), pp.320-341.
- Sun Ra. 1973. *Astro Black*. [CD] Impulse Jazz.

- Suvín, D. 1979. *Metamorphoses Of Science Fiction: On The Poetics And History Of A Literary Genre*. London: Yale University Press.
- Tate, G. 1992. *Flyboy In The Buttermilk: Essays On Contemporary America*. Michigan: Simon & Schuster.
- TED Talk. (2017). *Sci-fi stories that imagine a future Africa*: Nnedi Okorafor at TED Talk. 22 November. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt0PiXLvYIU>. [Accessed 8 July 2021].
- Tutuola, A. 1952. *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Väättänen, P. 2019. *Afro- versus African futurism in Nnedi Okorafor's "The Magical Negro" and "Mother of Invention."* [online] Vector. Available at: <https://vector-bsfa.com/2019/10/13/afro-versus-african-futurism-in-nnedi-okorafors-the-magical-negro-and-mother-of-invention/> [Accessed 28 February 2021].
- Wilkerson, A. 1997. Ending at the Skin: Sexuality and Race in Feminist Theorizing. *Hypatia*, 12(3), pp.164-173.
- Womack, Y. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Žižek, S. 1991. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Zutter, N. 2016. *Masquerade, Initiation, and Sci-Fi/Fantasy: N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor in Conversation*. [online] Tor.com. Available at: <http://Masquerade, Initiation, and Sci-Fi/Fantasy: N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor in Conversation> [Accessed 13 May 2019].