



Looking forward, looking back: animating magic, modernity and the African city-future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

Esthie Hugo

To cite this article: Esthie Hugo (2017) Looking forward, looking back: animating magic, modernity and the African city-future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, Social Dynamics, 43:1, 46-58, DOI: 10.1080/02533952.2017.1345528

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2017.1345528>



Published online: 27 Sep 2017.



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



Article views: 424



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Looking forward, looking back: animating magic, modernity and the African city-future in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

Esthie Hugo

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Lagos has recently become the focus of much scholarly interest, with a strong emphasis placed on the city as crucible of global innovation. Rem Koolhaas, in his well-known formulation of Lagos has, for example, memorably theorised the city as an African megalopolis “at the forefront of globalising modernity.” Contemporary African artists have similarly begun, in recent years, to place Africa at the vanguard of planetary discourse, producing a new wave of cultural output that signals the continent as a site from which to imagine the emergence of future worlds. Salient to this growing body of work are the writings of Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor, who writes in the register of “African science fiction.” This article takes Lagos as its focus by considering its futuristic representation in Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* (2014). Drawing on John and Jean Comaroff's theories of the city “as future lab to be learned from,” I suggest that it is from Okorafor's account of Lagos, infused with a series of connections between magic and modern, city and sea, global and local, human and nonhuman, that the novel imagines the potential birthing of a new world order. Given the vital presence of nonhuman interlocutors in Okorafor's text, this article concludes by arguing that *Lagoon* merits consideration within the growing field of Anthropocenic studies.

KEYWORDS

Lagos; African science fiction; African futures; animism; neoliberalism; Anthropocene

I started noticing Africa's futuristic ways. Then I started imagining...

Nnedi Okorafor, *Ventures Africa Interview*, (2015)

Introduction

“Lagos today,” writes architectural historian Worsely (2001, par. 12), could be “London tomorrow.” Such sentiments, which suggest that Lagos serves as an icon for the latest global trends, are memorably echoed by Dutch architect Koolhaas and Harvard Project on the City (2001, 652), whose study on Nigeria's economic capital lead him to conclude that Lagos “is at the forefront of globalising modernity.” Lagos is the fastest growing city in the world – its population estimated at 21 million inhabitants in 2012 – but this is not the only reason for its uniqueness. What makes Lagos a pioneering urban centre is that the city has,

since Nigeria's political independence in 1960, succeeded in unshackling itself from previous colonial constraints imposed by old town-planners, while still managing, as Koolhaas argues, "to work" in spite of growing poverty and corruption, a shortage in infrastructure and working sanitation system, as well as a deficit in effective urban administration (Koolhaas 2002, 183). One thinks here of Lagos' notorious "go-slows": huge traffic jams that are, in fact, "functional" in the sense that these hold-ups allow for "interface between vendors," who turn disadvantage into advantage by selling their wares to a long queue of stagnant car drivers and passengers, now transformed into a "captive cargo of consumers" (Koolhaas 2002, 179). Such "innovative anarchy" speaks of a city that has indeed invented a system of its own, one that "creatively defies constrictive Western ideas of urban order" (Packer 2006, par. 14). It was precisely this counter-hegemonic quality that first drew Koolhaas' attention, leading him to famously declare that "Lagos is not catching up with us [the global north]. Rather we may be catching up with Lagos" (2001, 652). This African urban centre is compelling to think with, then, because of the particular temporal vision that it performs by way of its *futuristic present*. To put it more pithily: the future is Lagos.

African artists have similarly begun to place Africa at the vanguard of planetary discourse, producing a new wave of cultural output that signals the continent as a site from which to imagine the emergence of future worlds. Artists who are looking at Africa through a futurist frame include Neill Blomkamp, whose Sci-Fi film *District 9*, a South African rendition of alien invasion in Johannesburg, elicited much fame and controversy when released in 2009. Alongside *District 9* are Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahui's *Pumzi*, a 2009 speculative short-film set 35 years in the wake of the Third World War in a ravaged desert in East Africa, and *Crumbs* (2015) by Miguel Llansó, an Addis Ababa-based director who has been touting his latest project as "the first ever Ethiopian post-apocalyptic, surreal, sci-fi feature length film" (Sefa-Boakye 2015, par. 1). Many African writers, too, are breaking new ground by drawing on the conventions of global speculative forms. *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010) by the South African author Lauren Beukes advance futuristic visions of dystopian new world orders from local points of view, while a recent anthology entitled *AfroSF* (Hartmann 2013) features African writing imbued with some of the staple ingredients of the Sci-Fi genre, such as cyborgs, extraterrestrial life and time travel. These themes and genre staples are evident, too, in the 2015 online issue of *Jalada Africa* entitled "AfroFutures 02" – a collection of short stories that speculate on the constitution of an African form of futurity. This budding opus of experimental cultural production is testament to the ways in which "African aesthetics" have become, as Matthew Omelsky (2014, 38) asserts, "more mutant and global than ever, poised to move into radically new speculative and imaginative terrain."

Prominent among this growing body of work are the writings of Nnedi Okorafor, a prolific and award-winning Nigerian-American writer who recently added three new novels to her oeuvre – *Lagoon* (2014), *The Book of Phoenix* (2015a) and *Binti* (2015b) – which contribute to her ongoing project of capturing "Africa's futuristic ways" (Onifade 2015, par. 6). *Lagoon* takes up this thematic in particularly evocative ways. The novel is set in Lagos and charts the stories of the three protagonists – Adaora, Anthony and Agu – who witness the arrival of a group of extra-terrestrials one evening from the waters of the Bar Beach. One of the functions that the alien arrival serves in *Lagoon* is to surface various invisible components that constitute Okorafor's fantastical imagining of Lagos: the novel continually reminds the reader that "there is more to this city than you imagined," and that "there are other things inhabiting Lagos besides carbon-based creatures. There are greater beings of

the earth, soil, sea, lagoon and land” (Okorafor 2014, 168–120). After their ascendance, these creatures enter Lagos and subsequently catalyse a disruption of the city’s status quo: as the presence of the alien infiltrates the metropole, the city and its mythological others meet and merge to form an urban environment of entropy and enchantment.

Salient to *Lagoon*, then, is its use of tropes from the global literary mode of Science Fiction and how it imbues these with various mythological narratives derived from West African traditions. The emphasis that *Lagoon* places on “other things” inhabiting the city is aligned, in this sense, with both the international Sci-Fi form, as well as with Veronique Tadjó’s (2013, 1) description of West African writing as informed by the “belief in vital forces animating all earthly creations, alive or dead.” *Lagoon* notably situates “an animistic mode of thought” (Garuba 2003, 267) at the heart of its futuristic imagination. This focus on animistic thought, says Okorafor, is birthed from her “complex African experience” expressed as “a series of cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian” (Okorafor 2009, 277). The discomfort of the warring dominant cultures within push Okorafor to invest a style of storytelling she was “exposed to while growing up in the United States” with the “indigenous material” gleaned from her Igbo heritage (Onifade 2015, par. 15). Okorafor selects elements of Igbo oral folklore and manipulates these in the creation of her fiction, which comprises her project of “growing fantasy from reality” (Okorafor 2009, 280).

This is not to suggest, however, that Okorafor writes in the register of what Brenda Cooper (2003, 460) has elsewhere termed “magical realism.” Many “African writers tend to reject” this category, argues Cooper, because it “implies the slavish imitation of Latin American narratives” and thereby a “denial of local knowledge and beliefs, language, and rhetoric; it seems to perpetuate imperialist notions that nothing new, intellectually or spiritually, originated in Africa.” Hence, Garuba’s (2003, 272) preference for the term “animist materialism.” He suggests that the label “magical realism” cannot fully account for either “the scope” or “the multiplicity of representational practices that animism authorizes.” The reason for this is that animist strategies involve the materialisation of abstractions – what Garuba (274) terms “giving a concrete dimension to abstract ideas” – and are therefore not to be confused or aligned with the devices of “irony,” “repetition and difference” upon which magical realism depends. Irony, Cooper (2003, 460) shows, is indeed central to magical realist texts, as these narratives often present the reader with a tension between “the points of view of an indigenous peasant class,” which are often steeped in magical thinking, and those of “ordinary people ... who have a far more thoroughgoing Western experience and who look upon the culture’s uneven development with self-knowledge and some distance.”

Lagoon features none of this ironic distance. In fact, key to this novel is not a “tension” between oppositional views as observed above, but a mythological merging of visible and invisible, reality and fantasy, local and global, human and nonhuman. A more useful categorisation of Okorafor’s fiction is thus that which she employs herself: “African science fiction” (Onifade 2015, par. 7). This fictional mode is one that Okorafor employs as a means of “shap[ing] contemporary Africa” by speculating on the continent’s future; as she puts it, “Afro Sci-Fi” allows her to “imagine what’s to come” (Onifade 2015, par. 13). Focusing on *Lagoon*, this article engages with Okorafor’s future-imagining of Lagos through the register of African science fiction. I suggest that it is from this mesh of connections between local and global, sea and city, old and new, magic and modern, human and nonhuman, that *Lagoon* realises the potential birthing of a new world order.

Mythology and the ecologies of land and sea

One of the most compelling ways in which *Lagoon* inscribes a West African orientation into the Sci-Fi form is through a focus on animist mythologies of land and sea.¹ Most notable in this regard is Okorafor's portrayal of the reason for the arrival of aliens in Lagos. These creatures enter the city for reasons to do with the specificity of this urban centre and its adjoining marine life: "we have chosen," says one of the aliens, "to live *here* ... in Lagos and the water" (Okorafor 2014, 40). This gesture towards the city's environmental surrounds is one of many that the novel makes. One of the novel's central protagonists, a marine biologist named Adaora, remarks, for instance, that she chose to live in Lagos because of the ocean life that laps against the city's borders, which Adaora describes as both "fascinating" and "problematic" (Okorafor 2014, 64). Such a thematic concern with ecological degradation and sustainability is a notable thread that runs not only through *Lagoon* but all of Okorafor's work, which as Alice Curry states, evince an "invisibility of a western-derived nature-culture dichotomy," and thus "model a mode of being in the world" that successfully unravels the human/environment binary often seen to determine "western" or "modern" discourse (Curry 2014, 38).

Particularly striking in this respect is one of the novel's opening passages, which resists global Science Fiction tropes and instead draws on a West African mythology to portray the arrival of aliens in Lagos. The scene is relayed to us through the eyes of a boy standing on the shores of the Bar Beach, watching as the first of the extra-terrestrials emerge:

as it walked out of the water ... he knew it wasn't human. All his mind would register was the word "smoke". At least until the creature walked up the quiet beach and stepped into the flickering lights from one of the restaurants. By then it had become a naked dark-skinned African woman with long black braids ... Then the strange woman creature silently ran back to the water and dove in like Mami Wata. (Okorafor 2014, 13)

Salient here is the comparison of the alien to Mami Wata, a West African water deity comprised of the upper body of a beautiful black woman with long braids and the tail of a colourful fish. To some, Mami Wata "bestows good fortune through monetary wealth" (Drewal 2008, 1), while others believe that the Mami Wata aids in matters of fertility and procreation or associate her with irresistible powers of seduction. According to Drewal (2008, 1), many desire a meeting with this water spirit in order to commence a love affair with her because it is believed that Mami Wata "literally creates *wet dreams*." To undertake such a liaison, however, is to plunge oneself into dangerous waters indeed, for a coupling with Mami Wata often requires a substantial sacrifice, such as the life of a family member or lifelong devotion and celibacy.

Mami Wata embodies what Meg Samuelson has elsewhere named "an amphibian aesthetic": her body is made up of two different species – fish and human – thus enabling her to inhabit "the unsteady zone that divides and connects the land and the sea" (Samuelson 2012, 512). Indeed, as Drewal argues, it is Mami Wata's

trans-ness that helps to explain her power and presence. She is compelling because she transgresses boundaries; she embodies the qualities of "mixed-origins". In her manifestation as mermaid, Mami Wata is at once human and fish, air-breathing and water-dwelling; she is fish, yet not fish; human, yet not human. (2008, 2, *italics mine*)

It cannot be overlooked, then, that *Lagoon*'s portrayal of the alien is modelled upon this transgressive creature who lives on the threshold of existence and in whose body the

boundaries between human and nonhuman collapse. Tellingly, Okorafor's "woman creature" (2014, 7) emerges at Lagos's Bar Beach – a location which Adaora describes as "the perfect sample of Nigerian society [because it was] a place of *mixing* [where] the ocean mixed with the land and the wealthy with the poor" (7, *italics mine*). Like the ocean from which she ascended, the alien, too, embodies a mixing. Encoded within the figure of the alien is not only an incorporation of the land with the sea but also the new with the known. The female creature is undeniably resonant with local myths and the extra-terrestrial, thus also clearly *alien* and therefore new. The author describes the female creature as "coming from your outer heavens, beyond" (Okorafor 2014, 37). This alien figure is thus local and translocal simultaneously, given that traces of Mami Wata can be found throughout the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean under many different guises (Drewal 2008, 2). Particularly significant, then, is that Okorafor's rendition of alien arrival in Lagos is enabled through an engagement with nonhuman presences drawn from the West African spirit world. In doing so, Okorafor explores the ways in which the alien – a figure derived from global Sci-Fi narratives – is resonant with local beliefs and cultural practices.

As such, Okorafor's portrayal of the alien convenes the various local/translocal influences that sculpt *Lagoon* into form. Nyairo (2007, 131) speaks of the formation of urban identities in post-colonial Africa along similar lines. Nyairo argues that African urban culture is characterised by a "complex relational logic" that is misread if taken to be a simple matter "about how the local gets drawn and absorbed into Western modernity." Instead, African cultural formations are best understood as constituted by an "acquisitive blend of continuity, appropriation and modification" (Nyairo 2007, 147). This "blend," writes Nyairo (131), "is not some simple combination of 'traditional' with global texts," but points instead to "the markers of the foreign that simultaneously appeal to reworked constructions of traditional values and practices." Okorafor's imagining of the alien shares this attribute: it functions as more than merely a combination of global Sci-Fi tropes with local myth, but rather gestures to the ways in which constructions of West African myth resonate with global cultural formulations. The novel thus generates, rather than closes down, various different meanings and significances.

Central also to Okorafor's construction of the aliens is that they emerge from the littoral parts of Lagos, from the shores of the Bar Beach, a place where classes of rich and poor converge and where the elements of land and water meet. One of the consequences of the alien's advent from these waters is that they are cleared of effluence: we are told that since the ascendance of the aliens, "the ocean water just outside Lagos, Nigeria, is now more clean and alive than it has been in centuries" – this "despite the FPSO Mystra's loading hose leaking crude oil [into the sea]" (Okorafor 2014, 6). A "thriving coral community" (53) has now formed under the ocean's surface, while the water lapping the shore has become so "sweet and clear" that it drowns out the sea's "foul blackness" (5). Before the arrival of the aliens "the oceans were ailing from pollution. Today, as the sun rises, there may as well be a sign on all Lagos beaches that reads: 'Here There be Monsters.' This has always been the truth, but today it is truer" (228). The encounter between the human and the nonhuman thus also transforms the relationship between human and environment. From this moment onwards monsters emerge from all corners of the city as the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman begin to crumble. Surfaced along with the arrival of the extra-terrestrials are various invisible elements of Lagos, which are awoken and subsequently meet with the land of the urbanites. Among those who are subject to these awakenings is Adaora, who,

we later find out, was suspected from childhood of being a “marine witch” because she was born “with webbed feet and hands [and] legs that were joined together by flesh” (Okorafor 2014, 257). The story of her birth had to remain a secret, however, because her father “said that if it were the old days, they would have thrown me in the bush” (257). After coming into contact with the aliens, Adaora enters the sea and finds that she has indeed been harbouring dormant power within herself: as she is engulfed in a wave “that looked like the hand of a powerful water spirit” (13), her body morphs into a supernatural version of her original form, in which “something old” is combined with “something new” (255). Along her neck grow gills “like several numb hairy flaps of skin,” and her legs cease to be her legs – “[they] had become the body of a giant metallic blue fish ... Adaora was ... half fish and half human” (251–263). As a result of this transformation, Adaora wonders whether her ability to transform is in fact new at all: “maybe,” she tells us, “it’s always been there. Beneath the surface” (258). Thus, a parallel is drawn between the corporeality of the aliens and Adaora’s amphibious body, which similarly performs a combination of newness with oldness; like the alien, Adaora, too, bears a resemblance to Mami Wata.

Moreover, as with the ecologically emancipatory potential that is projected through the figure of the nonhuman, it is once Adaora has crossed the threshold between human and nonhuman that she, too, is imbued with supernatural power. Along with her bodily transformation, Adaora comes to possess the ability to harness and shape water: “she spread her hands on the water’s surface. It felt warm and solid. She pushed and felt something emanate from herself ... Adaora’s invisible force” (Okorafor 2014, 243). This new power is used by Adaora to sustain and protect the sea life upon which Lagos depends. As the novel concludes, Adaora tells us that she has begun to draw on “the knowing” that comes with “being a marine witch” and that “aman Iman” has consequently become her mantra – “aman Iman ... *water is life*” (250 and 280). Thus, it is through Adaora’s transformation that we are returned to the novel’s epigraph: “the cure for anything is salt water – tears, salt or the sea” (Okorafor 2014, n.p.).

Continually advanced in *Lagoon*, then, are the kinds of ecological themes that currently circulate in Anthropocenic thought. Coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The Anthropocene” describes the age of “human dominance of biological, chemical and geological processes on Earth,” and thus stresses “the enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the Earth” (Schwägerl 2011, par. 7). Formed “since the turn of the century in response to worldwide ecological crisis” (Chakrabarty 2012, 9), the term “Anthropocene” is used to express the ways in which “human beings act as a force determining the climate of the entire planet all at once.”² In his recent lectures, entitled “The Great Derangement,” Ghosh (2015) notes that one of the fundamental consequences of climate change is the human reawakening to “the things that we had previously turned away from – that is to say, the presence and proximity of non human interlocutors.” According to Ghosh (2015), “the uncanny and improbable events” that have resulted from worldwide ecological crisis have stirred within us a renewed “sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts.”

The Anthropocene marks, in other words, the dissolution of a human/nonhuman divide in new and unfamiliar ways. It also signals a need for “new ideas,” “new myths, new stories [and] a new conceptual understanding of reality” that will aid us as we adapt to what Roy Scranton expresses as “this strange new world” that is the Anthropocene (Scranton 2015, 7). Such charges find an evocative release in Okorafor’s invocation of Mami Wata.

By imbuing her novel with this West African mythological figure that bridges the divide between land and sea, Okorafor constructs a narrative wherein the presence of the non-human is not displaced. Instead, her text incorporates the nonhuman by drawing on the “continual re-enchantment of the world” that Garuba (2003, 284) identifies as characteristic of animist thought to destabilise Western-derived nature/culture dichotomies. *Lagoon* imagines for us “a strange new world” of collective existence – and, in doing so, fosters the kinds of conceptual shifts required to comprehend the contingencies and connectivities that characterise this changing ecological order.

Magic, modernity and the economy of the occult

As we have seen, Okorafor’s novel actively opens the door to West African spirit worlds. Such mythical realms are often located in Lagos’ ocean waters, but these realms find their manifestation in the land, too – or more specially, in tar. “Throughout Africa,” writes Adeline Masquelier (2008, 77), “an entire discursive register can be associated with roads as symbols of modernity and of their contradictory impact on people’s experiences.” In the African context, roads often take on “an ambivalent nature as both horrifying and fascinating [that] expresses an equally dual perception of what roads stand for” (77). Ideally, highways and streets represent a pathway into modernity because they open up rural communities to the city, “to economic and industrial centres that can facilitate communication and bring in development” (77). But when these roads bypass communities, or when they come to be perceived as pathways for crime and violence, they can also signify an obstacle to wealth, commerce and communication. Objects of simultaneous terror and desire, “roads,” avers Masquelier,

offer a discursive space in which contemporary Africans can deploy ideas about power, violence, mobility, and death in an attempt to wrestle with their conflicted experience of modernity. [In Africa] people routinely consider the mixed blessings of modernity by listening to and circulating stories about the blood-thirsty spirits that prey on innocent travellers. (2008, 78)

Condensed in the symbol of the African motorway, then, are some of the perils and potentialities of the modern era; if the highway were to be given voice, it would speak of modernity’s seductions and pitfalls.³

Lagos is host to one such road, the Lagos–Benin Expressway, which is notorious for the number of car accidents, murders and robberies that have taken place on its strip of precarious tar. The expressway plays an important part in *Lagoon*. Okorafor describes it as “the Bone Collector,” so named for its history as “a deathtrap” and for being “full of ghosts” (Okorafor 2014, 189). Also significant are the magical abilities of the highway, namely the capacity of the road to consume its travellers, whose bodies sink into “the road’s sun-warmed surface like fresh palm oil on hot bread” (120). These corpses are believed to sustain the spirit that has made this highway its home: “something has been haunting the road ... from *here* and ha[s] probably been here since these roads were built, maybe even before then” (207). As with the latent power that surfaces in *Adaora*, this road spirit, too, is awoken when the aliens enter Lagos. A young traveller, for example, encounters it when he tries to cross the freeway only to feel the ground softening beneath his feet “like a squashy pillow” as the motorway takes on a monstrous form: with “a deep guttural growl that intensified into a roar” the road begins “rearing up like a serpent of asphalt” (172).

Manifest in this haunted highway is a synthesis of the material and the spiritual. It thus conveys not only the mixed blessings of modern African life, but also what Garuba (2003, 267) has identified as “animist materialism,” a conceptual structure wherein “the object world” becomes “spiritualized.” Garuba makes the point that “animist materialism is grounded in the religious consciousness of the material world” and argues this animist world view is made manifest in African literature by way of “a representational strategy that involves giving the abstract or metaphysical a material realisation” (280 and 284).⁴ This is a form of conceptualisation, in other words, by which the stuff of matter merges with the immaterial world. What is re-inscribed when the Bone Collector seeks to collect his bones is the presence of the magical *within* the material, which significantly subverts a Western-derived dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular. It also disrupts a Euro-American perception of modernity that has sought to “emancipate humankind,” as John and Jean Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, 3) describe it, “from the thrall of miracle and wonder.” Put slightly differently, the highway – perhaps one of the most pertinent symbols of modernisation in the novel – is infused with an animist logic that weakens Euro-American modernity’s hierarchical positioning of the physical, “rational” realm over the sphere of magic and myth. This the text achieves by actively encoding the city into the matrices of the occult.

The supernatural roadway animates what Mbembe and Nuttall (2008, 9), writing of Johannesburg, have termed “the originality of the African modern” – an ingenuity that many critics associate also with Lagos. The Comaroff and Comaroff (2012), for example, have drawn on Koolhaas’s description of Lagos as “ahead of the West” in order to posit the Global South as “an ex-centric hub of alternative theories” to be learned from as Mark Duerksen (2014, 91) glosses their project of doing “theory from the South.” As such, contemporary Lagos represents what the Comaroffs refer to as the “privileged insight” that the African continent currently affords “into the workings of the world at large” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 1). The contemporary African city, “where highly flexible, informal economies have long thrived,” is challenging preconceived notions of Africa as “caught and imagined with a web of difference and otherness ... still seen as an object apart from the world, or as a failed or incomplete example of something else” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008, 9). Lagos, in other words, serves as one example of an African city that is articulating a unique mode of urbanisation that radically alters the “normal” trajectory of things, rather than a partial or failed imitation of Euro-American modernisation. As one character in *Lagoon* observes: “Nigeria [has] much to give the world – and to show it” (Okorafor 2014, 279). Thus, the novel suggests that it is not the logic of the global north that is the deciding factor in this African urban centre – rather it is the innovative lifestyles and economies created by the locals that determine how Lagos is constituted today as a crucible of African innovation.

A large part of what determines the city’s inventive quality is the rise of the material, political, societal and moral effects of neoliberalism, which, for the most part, are most strikingly evident here (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 15). It is in the Global South that the resulting effects of neoliberal policy are most palpably felt: on his arrival in the city, Ghanaian rapper Anthony soon realises that “you bring in what you put out” (Okorafor 2014, 40). Lagos is undoubtedly the city of hustlers: over 60% of the city’s economic activity is undertaken in informal transactions. In other words, money-making ventures are taking place predominantly in the darker corners of this city. Black markets have erupted in Lagos, and these take as their source the post-colonial nation state’s espousal of “market fundamentalism” since this global economic policy is responsible for “a gradual erasure of

received lines between the informal and the illegal, regulation and irregularity, order and organized lawlessness” (Comaroff 2006, 5). “[O]pened up ... under neoliberal conditions” are thus “new aporias of jurisdiction,” which have become potential sites for “amassing value” – that is, for making “lucrative returns” by exploiting “zones of ambiguity between the presence and absence of the law” (5).

This phenomenon is particularly evident in Lagos, which is well-known for both its lawlessness – its “African chaos” (Okorafor 2014, 64) – and for the ability of its citizens to invent ways of benefiting from this very lack of order. *Lagoon* provides us with a case in point: caught in one of the traffic jams for which Lagos has become notorious, Adaora passes the time by watching the comings and goings of the market outside her window. She describes

a girl carrying a tray of peeled oranges was going from car to car ... the girl wasn’t the only hawker trying to make some money from the chaos. Women and girls had emerged selling all sorts of foodstuffs ... two young men knocked over a young girl selling boiled eggs. They ran off with her money. (Okorafor 2014, 189)

What this passage renders apparent regarding the city is a furious need that Lagos cultivates within its denizens to invent new forms of employment and enterprise, to find ways of “capitalising on the chaos” (Okorafor 2014, 189). Fuelling this need are the vast economic inequalities that constitute the city – in Lagos, asserts Adesokan (2013, 192), the destitute form more than two-thirds of the city’s population, “suggesting a level of poverty at odds with Nigeria’s high earnings from oil revenues.” For Abani (2013, 6), it is indeed this disparate quality that strongly characterises Lagos today: the city, he writes, is home to “houses that even the richest people in the USA cannot imagine owning,” which “the poor go out of their way to drive past [because] everyone can dream.”

Lagos is a city in which wealth and poverty jostle alongside each other, in contrast to Fanon’s visions of the colonial, Manichean city as “cut in two” and “divided into compartments” (Fanon 1963, 29). It is the close conjunction of these two worlds and the way in which its citizens negotiate them that characterises Lagosian life, and which gives rise to yet another magical feature of contemporary African society. According to the Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, 15) the emergence of the post-colonial nation state was synonymous with the emergence of “an occult economy” – a form of “money magic” which looks to “secure immediate wealth by largely inscrutable means.” This spectral economy can be seen at work in almost all post-colonial contexts that have been confronted with the prospect of emancipation under neoliberal conditions, “where evocative calls for entrepreneurialism confront realities of marginalization in the distribution of resources ... with its taunting mix of desire and disappointment, liberation and limitation” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 159). Under these conditions, the African city often becomes a site where everyday transactions are imbued with a sense of a hidden magical order as individuals “work out their dreams,” as Onookome Okome (2002, 328) puts it, “in a post-colonial elixir of deceit and fraud.”

From the moment that Okorafor’s creatures enter Lagos, they are subjected to the city’s occult economy when they become hunted by some of the city’s citizens, who wish to commodify the aliens for their powers. “Any symbol of wealth,” we are told, “would eventually become a target in Lagos” (Okorafor 2014, 149) and the extraterrestrials are considered valuable indeed: they are coveted by a group of 419 scammers – Nigeria’s most notorious online con-artists. These scammers hope to capture the aliens and capitalise on the money-making potential presented by their shape-shifting skins. The aim of the scammers is to

force the aliens to “enter online people’s bank accounts” in order for the group to “bypass the middleman” and “go direct to the money” (56). For these scammers, the “true” magic that the aliens possess is that they seem to be able to make money immediately and *from nothing*; because of their ability to change form, the conmen believe that they can get the creatures to “print money ... Naira, notes, American dollar notes, euro, even sef, pound, sterling,” and conclude that they will “be rich before the sun go[es] down” (56–57). As such, the aliens literally embody the disjunction between the physical form of money, and the spectral mysteries of its origins.

Highlighted in the above passage is a performance of the occult solutions that the conmen seek for their material problems, as they turn to “magical means to attain material ends” by drawing on the mystical and the superstitious – to forces that promise the potential of yielding “money without material effort” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 3). Thus, are we here returned to the contradictory character that constitutes Lagos in Okorafor’s imagination: the “split character” of a metropolis caught “between a tradition that looks back to the past and a modernity that identifies with progress and the benefits of globalization” (Okome 2002, 327). This sense of negotiation between the global and the traditional is echoed in *Lagoon*’s framing – in its mixing of tropes from the Sci-Fi mode with those drawn from West African thought. By making use of the global Science Fiction form, and by incorporating into this framework various features of the local, Okorafor is able to fully capture the processes that mark contemporary Lagos as a place of negotiation and confrontation between international norms and local politics; as an urban imaginary where Western and African cultures collide and mix, and where these confrontations and resulting effects are played out.

Conclusion

Lagoon’s exploration of Lagos through the genre of African science fiction is effective as it allows Okorafor to speculate on Nigeria’s future while taking cognisance of its past. The modern project, as Bruno Latour reminds us, views time as “an irreversible arrow, as capitalisation, as progress” (1993, 68). By reaching both backwards and forwards in scope, *Lagoon* destabilises the linear temporalities that modernity has sought to decree – and it is this stance which lends the novel a particular post-colonial orientation. What I want to highlight here are the ways in which African science fiction enables Okorafor to embed “an animist unconscious” into her portrayal of Lagos itself – a conjuration which posits this African centre as a site wherein the presence of the supernatural is not considered at odds with the urban-realm, but which is rather an active part of societies that are both “modern and future-facing” (Curry 2014, 46). By consciously integrating various components derived from a West African knowledge order into its framework, *Lagoon* makes a claim for futuristic visions that take as their foundation a series of counter-hegemonic virtues by continually subverting the oppositional logics that look to separate modernity from magic, and the human from the nonhuman. In this sense, *Lagoon* places at its centre a code premised on the logic of animist thought “that operates on a refusal of the boundaries, binaries, demarcations, and linearity of modernity” (Garuba 2012, 3).

So vital is the presence of nonhuman interlocutors to *Lagoon* that it has implications for Anthropocene studies. Here, I want to turn one final time to Ghosh’s lectures, which usefully bring debates on climate change to bear on the techniques of the modern novel by arguing that what is needed now are new forms of fiction that are better attuned to “the

age of the Anthropocene.” What makes this age unique, argues Ghosh (2015), is that it is characterised by “insistent, inescapable continuities animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast,” the effect of which has been to “reverse our understanding of what it means to be advanced.” In light of this, Ghosh issues a call for new literary forms that might better capture the “uncanny and improbable” characteristics of the Anthropocene, and it is here, I think, that Okorafor’s intervention lies. My thought is that the value of Okorafor’s African science fiction narrative hinges on its project of reversing the temporality of Western modernity – such that *Lagoon* reanimates the kinds of insistent, inescapable continuities to which Ghosh refers. In so doing, the novel might aid us in formulating future-imaginings that take cognisance of the profound interconnectivities and interdependencies that constitute our world.

Notes

1. *Lagoon*, writes Okorafor (2014, n.p.) in her author’s note, was also written as response to *District 9*’s negative portrayal of Nigerians. Blomkamp’s film falls back on stereotypes as it depicts a group of Nigerians running an underground syndicate selling drugs, alcohol and cat food at outlandish prices to the aliens who share their urban squatter camp. The head of this gang, a formidable man named Obesandjo, is portrayed as one who embodies the worst of these negativities. He is imbued with supernatural power to kill and consume his alien-neighbours, enacting acts of cannibalism and therefore presents a “throwback” to what Michael Valdez Moses (2010, 159) notes as “the negative colonial stereotypes of the ‘primitive’ African.” This depiction is problematically complicated by its framing in a film by Africans that, superficially, seems to criticise these stereotypes when dealing with aliens, but nevertheless repeats them when dealing with émigré Africans in the form of the Nigerians.
2. One of the difficulties that comes from this shift in thinking is that the individual is called upon to imagine a “collective human agency” in spite of the fact that the effects of ecological crisis are experienced differently across the world due to “the inequities of capitalist development” (Chakrabarty 2012, 1–9). Rob Nixon elaborates on Chakrabarty’s point in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) by bringing environmentalism into dialogue with post-colonial literary studies, a formulation situated at the vanguard of a movement that seeks to engage eco-critical studies through the lenses of imperialism, global injustices, as well as post-colonial thought. Nixon suggests that what is needed is “inventive transnational comparative work” that brings into conversation “rich literatures” emerging from the global South, which might enable us to take cognisance of the “slow violence” – slow-moving environmental damage caused by “resource imperialism” (Nixon 2011, 22) – that circulates in the post-colonial world.
3. Here, we might think of a Nigerian novel such as Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), which renders the boundary between the material realm and the spiritual world fluid by charting the story of Azaru, an *abiku* or spirit-child. As the novel’s title suggests, the road functions as one of the novel’s central images: at times the road is invoked literally, as a strip of gravel upon which characters travel or get lost, and at other times, it is gestured to in a more metaphorical way, as The Road King – a mythical creature forever hungry for victims. See also Wole Soyinka’s 1965 play *The Road*.
4. Garuba notes, for example, that in Southwest Nigeria “ironsmiths, motor mechanics, drivers, and all those whose trade has to do with iron” often seek the protection of Ogun, the god of iron and warfare, by sacrificing a dog as a form of appeasement to him “to save them from the hazards of their jobs and keep them in employment” (2003, 268). The example Garuba provides for this phenomenon details the tale of a hotel manager in Lagos, whose previous car had been stolen, and who thus performs a ritual sacrifice of a dog to Ogun in order to protect his new Peugeot 504.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Meg Samuelson, Christopher Ouma and Philip Aghoghovwia for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Support for this project was received from the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Capacity (PERC) based in the Research Office, University of Cape Town.

Notes on contributor

Esthie Hugo completed her masters in Literature, Language and Modernity at the University of Cape Town's Department of English Language and Literature in 2016.

References

- Abani, C. 2013. "Lagos: A Pilgrimage in Notations." *African Cities Reader* 1: 1–8.
- Adesokan, A. 2013. "Anticipating Nollywood: Lagos circa 1996." In *Rogue Urbanism*, edited by A. Simone and E. Pieterse, 191–203. Cape Town: Jacana Media.
- "AfroFutures 02". 2015. *Jalada Africa*. Accessed June 19, 2017. <https://jaladaafrica.org/2015/01/14/jalada-02-afrofutures/>
- Beukes, L. 2008. *Moxyland*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Beukes, L. 2010. *Zoo City*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2012. "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change." *New Literary History* 43 (1): 1–18.
- Comaroff, J., and J. L. Comaroff, eds. 2006. "Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction." In *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, 1–56. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff, J., and J. L. Comaroff. 2012. "Chapter 1: Theory from the South." In *Theory from the South: Or How Euro-America is Evolving towards Africa*, 1–49. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Cooper, B. 2003. "Magical Realism." In *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of African Literature*, edited by S. Gikandi, 458–461. London: Verso.
- Curry, A. 2014. "Traitorousness, Invisibility and Animism: An Ecocritical Reading of Nnedi Okorafor's West African Novels for Children." *International Research in Children's Literature* 7 (1): 37–47.
- Drewal, H. 2008. "Introduction: Charting the Journey". In *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, edited by H. Drewal, 1–18. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Duerksen, M. 2014. "Hot Air over Lagos." *The Johannesburg Salon* 7: 86–93.
- Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by C. Farrington. New York: Grove Press.
- Garuba, H. 2003. "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society." *Public Culture* 15 (2): 261–286.
- Garuba, H. 2012. "On Animism, Modernity/Colonialism, and the African Order of Knowledge: Provisional Reflections." *E Flux Journal* 36 (7): 1–9.
- Ghosh, A. 2015. "The Great Derangement: Fiction, History and Politics in the Age of Global Warming." *Berlin Family Lectures*, September 29–October 7. Accessed August 30. <https://berlinfamilylectures.uchicago.edu/2015-amitav-ghosh>
- Hartmann, I., ed. 2013. *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers*. S.I: StoryTime.
- Kahiu, W., dir. 2009. *Pumzi*. DVD. Universal City, CA: Focus Features.

- Koolhaas, R. 2002. "Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos." In *Under Siege: Four African Cities – Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*, edited by Okwui Enwezor, 173–185. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers.
- Koolhaas, R., and Harvard Project on the City. 2001. *Mutations*. Barcelona: ACTAR.
- Latour, B. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Llansó, M., dir. 2015. *Crumbs*. DVD. Las Palmas, Spain: Lanzadera Films.
- Masquelier, A. 2008. "Water Spirits in Water-less Places: The Case of Madame Sabot." In *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, edited by H. Drewal, 75–85. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Mbembe, A., and S. Nuttall, eds. 2008. "Introduction: Afropolis." In *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, 1–33. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Moses, M. V. 2010. "District 9: A Roundtable." *Safundi* 11 (1–2): 155–175.
- Nixon, R. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nyairo, J. 2007. "Modify': Jua Kali as a Metaphor for Africa's Urban Ethnicities and Cultures." In *Urban Legends, Colonial Myths: Popular Culture and Literature in East Africa*, edited by J. Ogede and J. Nyairo, 125–151. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Okome, O. 2002. "Writing the Anxious City: Images of Lagos in Nigeria Home Video Films." In *Under Siege: Four African Cities – Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*, edited by O. Enwezor, 315–334. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers.
- Okorafor, N. 2009. "Organic Fantasy." *African Identities* 7 (2): 275–286.
- Okorafor, N. 2014. *Lagoon*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Okorafor, N. 2015a. *The Book of Phoenix*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Okorafor, N. 2015b. *Binti*. New York: Tor Books.
- Okri, B. 1991. *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Omelsky, M. 2014. "After the End times: Postcrisis African Science Fiction." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1 (1): 33–49.
- Onifade, H. 2015. "Exclusive Interview with Nigerian Science Fiction Writer, Nnedi Okorafor." *Ventures Africa*, September 23. Accessed March 3, 2015. <https://venturesafrica.com/exclusive-interview-with-nigerian-science-fiction-writer-nnedi-okoroafor/>
- Packer, G. 2006. "The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos." *The New Yorker*, November 13. Accessed July 14, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/11/13/the-megacity>
- Samuelson, M. 2012. "Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fictions of the Swahili Coast: Littoral Locations and Amphibian Aesthetics." *Social Dynamics* 38 (3): 499–515.
- Schwägerl, C. 2011. "Living in the Anthropocene." January 24. Accessed March 4, 2016. https://e360.yale.edu/feature/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos/2363/
- Scranton, R. 2015. "Introduction." In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.
- Sefa-Boakye, J. 2015. "Ethiopia's First Post-Apocalyptic Sci-Fi Film Unveils Its Eerie Trailer." *OkayAfrica*, October 2. Accessed November 2, 2015. <https://www.okayafrica.com/news/ethiopian-post-apocalyptic-sci-fi-film-crumbs-trailer/>
- Soyinka, W. 1965. *The Road*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tadjo, V. 2013. "Lifting the Cloak of (in)Visibility: A Writer's Perspective." *Research in African Literatures* 44 (2): 1–7.
- Worsely, G. 2001. "Someday, All Cities Will Be Made This Way." *The Telegraph*, January 20. Accessed February 10, 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4721129/Some-day-all-cities-will-be-made-this-way.html>