Judith Rahn (Re-)Negotiating Black Posthumanism – The Precarity of Race in Nnedi Okorafor's Lagoon

The Posthuman and the Literary: Narration Beyond the Human

In his 1988 essay entitled "What Has Literature Got to Do with It?" Chinua Achebe stated that "[p]eople create stories create people; or rather, stories create people create stories" (Achebe 1990, 162), thus questioning the validity of a differentiation between people(s) and their stories. It seems, almost, as if the making-of-worlds through storytelling is an integral human characteristic that points towards the connectedness of all human experience. Storytelling, thus, is marked as such an intrinsically (if possibly not exclusively) human concept which connects cultures, languages, and literary traditions. These connections, however, are never linear and might branch out in any direction, locating literature within a network of stories and storytelling. This network of literary (and oral) storytelling provides connections that reach out into the past, while also facilitating new, future imaginaries.

As critical posthumanist thought is becoming more and more institutionalized, it is often perceived as providing entangled networks of pluralities that are post-racial and post-gender. Operative notions of the '(hu)man,' however, which are essential in the term posthumanism itself, are firmly rooted in Western tradition and remain largely uncontested (Jackson 2013). As black literary voices are becoming ever more audible in popular culture and academic discourse, however, the conflicting realities of Western and non-Western formations of (human and non-human) actors and actants\(^1\) manifest themselves in texts. Literatures that incorporate non-traditional actors attempt to imagine life beyond traditional human subjectivity. Aiming at portraying life in its agentic potency, I want to argue that these literatures seek to perform subjectivities that challenge perceptions of normativity and species boundaries. This provides intriguing opportunities to engage with the multitude of subjectivities, to determine the status quo of life in literature, and to consider the importance of these new imaginaries.

Nnedi Okorafor's award-winning novel Lagoon, first published in 2014, navigates the plurality of subjectivities in the wake of a maritime alien invasion (Okorafor 2015a).\(^2\) Set in the vibrant metropolis of Lagos, the narrative shifts between Black human and Black alien subjectivities, while engaging human, animal and spirit narrators. On the one hand, this questions the singularity of human experience and underlines the interconnectedness of all life on earth, while pointing, on the other hand,

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\(^1\) Here, I am using the terms in Bruno Latour's sense of 'actor' as "anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference […], if it has no figuration yet, [it is] an actant" (Latour 2005, 71; original emphasis).

\(^2\) Hereafter cited as 'L.'
to the unique singularity of each individual life. Staging the action not in global
centralised spaces of power but in a postcolonial space that is presented as acting
independent of political, economic or historical ties to the West, the novel re-negotiates
canonical categories of race and species and emphasises the importance of symbiotic,
horizontal imaginaries in the relationships between humans and aliens.

Critical posthumanist engagement with literature seeks to bring about new ways of
negotiating (literary) subjectivities and to expose a Cartesian, human-centred
worldview as limiting, inconclusive, and inaccurate. Yet, although Afrofuturist
narratives and the respective discourses (Dery 1994; Eshun 2003) are continually
gaining momentum, critical negotiations of symbiotic global futures are still endorsing
surprisingly Western-centric genealogies. Black posthumanist research is only
beginning to emerge (Lillvis 2017; Jackson 2013), as the new imaginaries require
novel, critical engagements with the multiplicity of subjectivities they produce. As
early as 1950, critics (Césaire 2000; Fanon 2008; Wynter 2003) have asked for a re-
evaluation of those extra-European parallel ontologies in order to avoid binding
binarisms of Western vs. non-Western thought. Césaire concludes that those colonial
binaries only result in the "thingification" (Césaire 2000, 42) of colonised subjectivities.
As Okorafor illustrates the multidimensionality of overlapping realities in her
intriguing novel, it becomes apparent once again that a traditionally categorical
separation of Western vs. non-Western imaginaries is insufficient to portray the
complex, interconnected relationships which are evoked in the text. Furthermore,
contemporary posthumanist thought needs to find ways to re-negotiate the term 'human'
to include Western and non-Western ontologies, so as to recognize the multifaceted
connections between human actors. Afrofuturist texts in general and Okorafor's novel
in particular help to set the scene for a Black posthumanism that will recognise the
complex topography of horizontal subjectivities to include all human actors. Black
posthumanism will re-invent the term hu-'man' to go beyond the traditional Western
(essentially still humanist) understanding of the term 'man' as predominantly white and
Western and will allow the intricate global networks of actors to establish an all-
inclusive notion of the human. In this article, I will attempt to explore the uniqueness
of Black subjectivities and its relational embeddedness in the literary world of
Okorafor's novel. I want to examine the need for a re-negotiation of categories of
Western and non-Western subjectivities within a framework of critical posthumanist
thought and highlight the plurality of (hu)man experience.

Black Posthumanism?

Sylvia Wynter, in her 2003 essay on the status and historical formation of Black
subjects, stresses the semantic discrepancy between the terms 'human' and 'man,'
concluding that while Man is considered human, not all humans are considered to be
Man. The separation of historically and culturally visible actors and less (if not in-)visible
subjects that have limited to no agency has had a tremendous influence on black
lives and the constitution of black identification. Tracing the history of mankind – of
Man – through the ages, she remarks upon the replacement of religious (Christian)
truths with the awakening political agenc of man.
In the wake of the West's reinvention [the] terms of the Rational Self of Man, however, it was to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), – as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e. Negroes) – that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of Otherness-to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other, to this first degodded (if still hybridly religio-secular) ‘descriptive statement’ of the human in history as the descriptive statement that would be foundational to modernity. (2003, 266)

This trajectory transposes the broadness of the term 'man' from a "descriptive statement" to a very specific, politically and culturally charged term. The "homo politicus" (Wynter 2003, 269) is deeply embedded in the emerging humanist tradition and at the heart of the colonizer/colonized dualism:

This issue is that of the genre of the human, the issue whose target of abolition is the ongoing collective production of our present ethnoclass mode of being human, Man: above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernized (or conversely) global middle classes. (2003, 313)

That which is man is a 'normalized' human with the privileged position to shape knowledges and determine powers. As the human is an integral part of the posthuman, just as much as all non-human actors are, it remains peculiar that current critical posthumanist scholarship rarely takes into account non-Western philosophy. However, the distinction between Man and the hu-'man' is in itself no new distinction – Césaire for example already refers to this in the Discourse on Colonialism – yet it illustrates the acute awareness of Global South thinkers of the need to move forward from the Western-centric dichotomies of humanism (Césaire 2000). Césaire thus remarks in 1950: "the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world" (Césaire 2000, 73). In 2013, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argued that scholars tend to conveniently side-step the problematic notion of the human as a bourgeois, humanist notion in posthumanist discourses (Jackson 2013). Literary engagements with non-traditional imaginaries make visible the vast variety of actors and actants that may be featured in literary texts. The expanding significance of Black British and other non-traditional subjectivities challenges academic scholarship into adapting new modes of non-binary, non-hierarchical thinking. As new literatures emerge in a globalised world, new and innovative literary figurations develop that attempt to open these worlds of previously inaccessible subjectivities. I argue that posthumanist notions of the human are, of course, not limited to Western discourses, but can also be found in non-Western scholarship. Surprisingly, this has not been widely and explicitly recognised in contemporary critical posthumanist scholarship. As Frantz Fanon remarks in Black Skin, White Masks:

There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence. There are in every part of the world men who search. […] I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself: I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it. (Fanon 2008, 179)
I see in the "Being" that Fanon describes the "going beyond," the leaving-behind of dualisms and the moving towards an inclusive, relational embeddedness of all human and non-human subjectivity in the world. Especially in literary studies the engagement with new spatio-temporal modes of writing and the exploration of new literary realms can be seen as contributing to the establishment of a rather specific posthumanist aesthetic. I would locate this aesthetic at the intersection of the postmodern breaking with traditional form and the conciliatory belief in Fanon's endless recreation of the self by "go[ing] beyond." The recent Afrofuturist movement imbeds Fanon's "leap" of "invention" into a genre traditionally dominated by Western authors: science fiction, thus creating a novel mix of Western form and African storytelling.

**Science Fiction and the Afrofuturist Tradition in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon***

*Lagoon* proposes a fundamental re-thinking of the hierarchies of traditional humanist binaries. As an alien ship lands in the bay of Lagos, Nigerian society, politics and the city's unique ecosystem reveal a country which is deemed by the alien 'invaders' to be exceptional in its capability to engage with plural subjectivities across species boundaries. Okorafor's book ties in with an ever-growing genre of science fiction literature in an African setting, which in itself unsettles the traditional Western hegemony over science fiction and techno-futurity in literature.

"[I]s social realism the mode that best captures the texture and meaning of the black experience?" Kilgore (2008, 119) provocatively asks and concludes that, of course, this cannot be the case. Where better to negotiate Black experience than in speculative fiction or science fiction texts that are not bound to produce historically congruent narratives, but give free reign to the production of African subjectivities away from the literary norms of realism. Ivor Hartman, editor of one of the first anthologies on African science fiction, *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (2012), rightfully points towards the importance of a new and long overdue confidence of non-Western literatures that claim futurity as their own. He furthermore points out that this non-Western confidence marks a turning point for science fiction literature; it not only reveals a sense of uncertainty but simultaneously signals the development of a sense of freedom and possibility in the futurity of the African imaginary:

"SciFi is the only genre that enables African writers to envision a future from our African perspective [...]. The value of this envisioning for any third-world country, or in our case continent, cannot be overstated nor negated. If you can't see and relay an understandable vision of the future, your future will be co-opted by someone else's vision, one that will not necessarily have your best interests at heart. (Hartmann 2012, 7)

Touching upon the problematic agency of mediated narration, and the precarious position of the subject which is 'spoken for,' Hartmann makes clear that non-Western literary notions of futurity need to be established. In 2015, Mark Bould made the case for the deep historical rootedness of science fiction literature in the African tradition, assessing that, of course, such labelling is often not in the interest of productive and evolving literary discourses. Instead, he asks "to keep matters fluid, relationships open, and potentials in play, and to recognize the specific conjunctural value of 'African sf' as a temporary, flexible, non-monolithic, and, above all, strategic identity" (Bould
2015, 11). It is not the aim here to simply oppose established Western practises or to convert them into counter-narratives, but to create novel literary forms that are more appropriate to reflect and engage with changing political, social, and technological advances. From this vantage point, Okorafor's novel is an exemplary Afrofuturist text as it engages in, and even performs, non-traditional subject positions. The text makes a distinct point of interrupting traditional modernist expectations of chronology and features many unexpected protagonists. Each section of the book takes great care to open with an introductory chapter, featuring an animal protagonist. Changing perspectives and various shifts between subjectivities add a creative vibrancy to the text.

The narrative shifts between several narrative strands: On the one hand, there is Adaora, a marine biologist and prolific scientist, married with two children in suburban Lagos. Trapped in a loveless marriage, her prophetic ability of detecting vibrations makes her the ideal vessel for alien encounters. On the other hand, we learn of her husband, Chris, who demands the loyalty of his wife. This storyline is intersected with the lives of Agu and Anthony – a soldier and a Ghanaian rap musician. The curious alliteration of names is striking from the beginning: "Adaora, Anthony, Ayodele and Agu . . . […] She knew plenty about both Anthony and Agu, and they knew plenty about her" (L, 19, 1st ellipsis in original). The incidental nature of this phonological coincidence is revealed as the plot progresses, yet, the slightly wayward nod to the Christian tradition, the reference to the alpha and omega that is God, is unmistakable. The protagonists seem to bear in them an inherent beginning that draws them to the water's edge where they first meet. The striking alliteration of names is, indeed, the marker of newness, of a beginning away from divided religion. It points towards an enigmatic future that is in no way imaginable in this present, but which is already inherently laid out within it: "'Why do all our names start with A?' […] 'Did you make all that happen, so we'd be all be there at the same time?' […] 'We are change,' Ayodele calmly responded" (L, 39). If Agu, Adaora, Ayodele, and Anthony are the beginning, the alpha, then what is to follow and where will it lead?

While the novel itself anticipates change, it does not specify an end. Rather, it envisions beginnings in many forms. Political, literary, mythological, religious, and biological change creates unlimited opportunity. The focus on new beginnings implicitly counters the – prominently featured – Christian understanding of life and the world as finite and resolvable. This is reversed in Okorafor's novel. Although Christian belief features repeatedly in the text, it does not entail eschatology – although the narrative elements seem to evoke the possibility of an apocalyptic scenario (the alien invasion, civil unrest, a weak political leader). Yet, the novel never commits to depicting the end of the world. However, through Ayodele's sacrifice the novel finds a way to incorporate core motifs of the New Testament into the narrative (the Eucharist, boundless divine love, followers that mourn their saviour's passing, the sacrifice itself) without subscribing to predictable expectations of an ending. Okorafor portrays biological re-modelling as having every potential to bring about social, political, and ecological newness: "The knowledge is in you, Ayodele made sure of that" (L, 275). In fact, Okorafor is reluctant to bring her novel to a conclusion, thus adding ending after ending, to give a voice to the manifold subjectivities she evokes over the course of the narrative. While "Good Journalism is Not Dead" (L, 284), as the human narrative, "The
Swordfish" (L, 289) closes the circle of the narrative by letting the swordfish of Chapter One speak again. Now a monstrous beast, unique and entirely new, a sentient, curious creature, "[s]he swims out to sea, to see what she can see" (L, 289). The phonological play on the word 'sea/see' is picked up again in the first line of the following chapter, "Spider the Artist: "I am unseen." (L, 290). The last of the three endings closes the novel with the words of the great spider Udide Okwanka, who weaves stories and has its own agency throughout the story. It reminds readers of its unique position halfway between human folklore and animal subjectivity by interchanging the sensations it experiences: "I see sound. I feel taste. I hear touch" (L, 290). The counterpoint to human physicality and experience questions the superiority of the human that the humanist tradition has suggested for so long.

Afrofuturism and the Post-Colonial Project

As a text that embodies contemporary modes of writing Black subjectivities outside of a science fiction-centred narrative, Okorafor's *Lagoon* stays true to a very specific Afrofuturist aesthetic. Taking my cue from Eshun's delineation of Afrofuturism as being "concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional" (Eshun 2003, 293), I would argue that the proactively "predictive" stance of Okorafor's narrative adds a complex piece to the Afrofuturist movement.

In 1993, Mark Dery introduced the term 'Afrofuturism' in a round table discussion with Tricia Rose, Samuel R. Delany, and Greg Tate as a general description of the concerns of contemporary African(-American) speculative fiction and the arts (Dery 1994, 180). In traditional science fiction literature, for example, alien invasion narratives are often a manifestation of an underlying psychological phenomenon, where centuries of colonialism have generated a substantial need "for reviving colonial narratives in the postcolonial era [by] recast[ing] the historical colonizers in the role of victims-turned-hero" (O'Connell 2016, 294). The dynamics of a reversal of the centre/periphery binary challenge power relations and question the inherent value of traditional Western domination. While such tropes raise awareness of social injustice and ethical values, in classical science fiction literature they tend to support hegemonic binaries more often than they invert them. Although the genre has prided itself in being "colorblind […] blithely portraying a future free from racial struggle" (Lavender III 2011, 185), science fiction literature has a very close relationship with political and social realities. As many colonies move towards independence in the 1950s, there is a

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3 In his interview on the state of the future of African(-American) writing in general and futuristic African(-American) texts in particular, Mark Dery assesses that "[s]peculative fiction that […] 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" (Dery 1994, 180). While Dery's focus is originally set on African-American literature, the term has since evolved to denote a wider range of texts that focus on African futuristic imaginaries, typically in opposition to Western notions of dualism and dominance.
notable increase in science fiction literature (Lathers 2010, 182) that 'pre-imagines' such a reversal of power structures in an upturned world.

Paul Gilroy observes in *Between Camps* that it is paramount to consider and acknowledge the complexities of Black culture(s), and to find "means of adequately describing […] theorizing, intermixture, fusion, and syncretism without suggesting the existence of anterior 'uncontaminated' purities" (Gilroy 2004, 250). What is more, however, is the "absence of an adequate conceptual and critical language" to discuss the "density of today's mixed and always impure forms" (2004, 251) of Afrodiasporic subjectivities. Afrofuturism is able to provide this language to fully address the intricacies of Black life in literature and the arts, by acknowledging the preconceptual 'impurity' of its subject matter. This manages to evade nostalgic logics of a return to a state of pure culture, free from intermixed global influences.

*Lagoon* uses the heterogeneity of influences by incorporating traditional Nigerian and pan-African elements into a classical Western science fiction alien invasion plot. In this fashion, the novel highlights human experience and de-centralises the monopoly of Western-centric science fiction narratives. Gilroy's postulation of an "absence" finds academic literary discourse strangely lacking in equipment for the discussion of African imaginaries. Afrodiasporic subjectivities. Afrofuturism and posthumanism might just offer the tools through which a multitude of influences, thoughts, and traditions can create new imaginaries. Posthumanist Afrofuturism provides a platform for narrating specifically Black subjectivities that do not yet have an autonomous place in the humanist tradition.

Afrofuturism as a form of African science fiction has from its beginnings been linked to the overcoming of Black historic trauma, with analogies of the experience of uprootedness present in contemporary alien abduction narratives (Sinker 1992). Sinker's influential article in *WIRE* magazine collected and refined long-established notions of an Afrofuturist agenda and, although the term itself was only coined a year later, the argumentative strategies were already inherent in contemporary discourse. Sinker convincingly outlines conceptual scopes of Afrodiasporic culture and aesthetics by understanding Afrofuturism as a global phenomenon, arguing that "Africa and America – and so by extension Europe and Asia – are already in their various ways Alien Nations" (Sinker 1992, 32). In Sinker's astute play on words regarding the alienating experience of Black (cultural) presence in the world, there is an implied reference to the middle passage as the driving factor that establishes an Afrofuturist imaginary. In what is termed the "extraterrestrial turn" (Latham 2017, 466) in Rob Latham's anthology on critical science fiction studies, the imagined experience of human-alien interaction is always also a site of negotiation for issues of race. Kodwo Eshun's revised version of his essay "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" in the same volume, therefore, concludes:

Extraterrestriality […] becomes a point of transvaluation through which this variation over time, understood as forcible mutation, can become a resource for speculation. It should be understood not so much as escapism, but rather as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance within the high-pressure zone of perpetual racial hostility. (Eshun 2017, 467)
In Afrofuturist narratives, the alien as a stock character of science fiction literature undergoes a process of "transvaluation." Observing the figure of the alien against the backdrop of colonialism, it is re-configured to receive a different value within the structure of the plot. The action of *Lagoon* is entirely situated in Nigeria, specifically Lagos, with only very little reference to other locations. The narrative relies on an independently African setting and plot, without feeling the need to supply non-African social, cultural, and political customs as points of reference. While, indeed, mobile technology, for example, is referred to as "Western" (L, 201), its uses and users are exclusively African. But, as Ash Amin points out, "the nonautomated" city, as which Lagos is certainly portrayed by Okorafor, produces "agency very much [as] an entanglement of mind, body, machine, and matter" (Amin 2015, 247). We are forced to recognise the unique locality of *Lagoon* as an African (science fiction) text, which is situated simultaneously at the locus of the Black Atlantic slave trade and the site of alien colonisation. At the same time, it also demonstrates the ambiguous position of the alien community as both coloniser and colonised.

The coexistence of both these situations also renders the position of the Lagosian population ambiguous: Caught between notions of monetary and political profit, exploitation of a technologically superior but outnumbered alien race and awed reverence toward this shape-shifting, inherently benevolent, extra-terrestrial force, Lagosians reveal themselves as being all-too-human. Greedy, self-centred, irrational, they still are too preoccupied with their personal, political, and religious difficulties to seriously intend to exploit the alien technological power or their genetic superiority. It is this mixture of human fragility and the almost comical self-absorption of those who come into contact with the aliens that provides an affective connection to all human life. The aliens, much less than mere monsters, are too alien to be truly human, but also exude too much (human) life to not generate an intuitive, affective understanding of these creatures’ perception. By keeping the balance between casting the alien people as the perpetual other in a (post-)colonial discourse and articulating them as a threat of enslavement to the local population and culture, Okorafor's Afrofuturist narrative accentuates the relational connectivity of all life – alien or otherwise. It creates a form of alienisation that reveals the human population as just as other as the extra-terrestrial community. Rather than reproducing a historic notion of enslavement, however, the plot keeps a balance between the outlandish otherness of Ayodele's people and their intuitively accessible experience of being stranded in an alien land, searching for a place called home. The ultimate fusion of alien and human consciousness through the inhalation of Ayodele's essence upon her sacrifice (L, 261) redefines the notion of the human and blurs the boundaries between what is human and what is not.

Afrofuturist literature, however – very much in a posthumanist and postcolonial literary mode – reinvents speculative fiction from an African perspective. The classic alien-invasion narrative gains particular importance in an Afro-futurist context, as it re-focuses the constitution of the experience of Black Atlantic subjectivity. John Rieder, for example, assesses that these kinds of narratives are manifestations of centuries of colonialism and have generated a substantial subconscious threat of "colonial blowback" (Rieder 2008, 123-126). This means that there is a noteworthy contrast in the underlying historical, political and literary implications between Western
and non-Western (alien) invasion plotlines. While in a Western context it may serve to illustrate the fragility of human life in the hands of an overpowering alien force, in a non-Western, postcolonial context it is a re-engagement with a traumatic history. Rieder, therefore, argues as follows:

Environmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague, and genocide following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilization with vastly superior technology – all of these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixed upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being "discovered" by Europeans and integrated into Europe's economic and political arrangements from the fifteenth century to the present. [...] The antithetical relation of colonial or imperial triumphalism to sciencefictional catastrophes is in some instances a straightforward matter of the fiction's reversing the positions of colonizer and colonized, master and slave, core and periphery. (2008, 124)

Okorafor's imagining of an alien invasion, where the alien invaders are threatening to displace, even enslave, the planet's entire population by introducing a technologically and genetically superior alien collective, is consciously reminiscent of a colonial past. Not only does the alien force seem to be a threat to the human population, the narrative also evokes contemporary environmental concerns: "So far, [the sea level] has risen over seven feet above its normal level [...]." (L, 42) The explanation of the rise in sea levels turns out to be a precarious and laden one: "'It's the ship,' [Adaora] said" (L, 42-43). The image of the ship, so clearly related to the atrocities of the middle passage, however, is re-defined in Okorafor's novel as the bearer of peace and communication (L, 37). Okorafor avoids the direction of a neo-slave narrative here, by re-claiming a trope that had such a profound influence on Black history and culture and, rather than denying its history, shaping it into a narrative of newness. True to a posthumanist tradition (which ought to see at its centre not the renunciation of humanist ideals, but the acknowledgement of the past while moving beyond), it is a trajectory of continuous becoming that collects its pasts and presents and is already turned towards the future. Or, as Joshua Yu Burnett phrases it: "Okorafor plays both the critic and the trickster, taking the often white supremacist past (and sometimes present) of mainstream/white speculative fiction and, in true trickster fashion, transforming it into something new and counterhegemonic" (Burnett 2015, 133-134).

The novel envisions a vigorous "new global futurity [...] a condition of radical possibility that breaks with the conditions of capitalist realism" (O'Connell 2016, 292) by shifting the focus from locally restrictive narratives of Global North metropolitan centres to the vibrant cosmopolitanism of Nigeria's lagoon city Lagos. The text determines not only that Nigeria "had vigorous life" (L, 64), it also concludes that an alien invasion can only be possible in a city like Lagos. While the governments of New York, Tokyo and London would have "swooped in to hide, isolate, and study the aliens" (L, 64), the intrinsic chaos of the non-Western city, the bloodstream of this place, the overwhelming presence of all life, makes Lagos the ideal place for the aliens to take up their new home. The agentic nature of the city, its physical presence in the text, combines the pluralities of life and incorporates human, animal, and thing life into one narrative. After the terrible days that follow the arrival of the alien delegation, the Nigerian president – who, it is said, "has never been a great orator" (L, 276) – proclaims:
For the first time since we cast off the shackles of colonialism, over a half-century ago, since we rolled through decades of corruption and internal struggle, we have reached the tipping point. [...] Last night, Lagos burned. But like a phoenix, it will rise from the ashes – a greater creature than ever before. (L, 276)

*Lagoon* depicts the alien not solely as a site of identification for the colonised, while humankind is not the only species to claim its agency in the interaction with the extraterrestrial visitors. Intertwining on a structural level the science fiction tradition with African modes of writing and promoting the alien-human experience in a complex narrative unhangs enlightened conceptions of humanity. The symbiotic quality of life engages with posthumanist ideals of flexible, interconnected webs of relationality that disengage with hierarchical notions of life (Braidotti 2013). In addition, the physical forms of life on earth are intertwined with spiritual beings of the Christian and Nigerian tradition.

**Spirituality and Animism: Symbiotic Entanglements of Belief**

The narrative structure points to the symbiotic effect of the human-alien contact. It is constructed around three acts, 'Welcome,' 'Awakening,' and 'Symbiosis,' which adhere surprisingly closely to a traditional Aristotelian dramatic structure. While 'Welcome' introduces the aliens and maintains the element of first contact with the alien population, 'Awakening' imagines the violence and exploitation of the general chaos in the city of Lagos. 'Symbiosis,' finally, brings together the elements of alien presence, political upheaval, and the ultimate merging of alien, human, and animal consciousness. The exploitations of political and social uncertainties of the second act are resolved and the way is paved for establishing a Nigerian (and possibly soon-to-be global) post-capitalist, eco-considerate, non-binary future. Ayodele, as ambassador of the alien force, is the extra-terrestrial agent who familiarises the protagonists Adaora, Agu, and Anthony with the alien world, the considerable alien technological abilities and their ambiguity of form. A marine biologist, educated at the university of Lagos, a soldier, and a Ghanaian rap artist come together to create a pan-African human symbiosis that is indifferent to gender, origin and education. The three human protagonists are selected by the alien invaders based on their (previously undetected) super-human powers: Adaora "can create some sort of force field" (L, 268), Agu has super-human strength, while Anthony's supersonic powers enthrall audiences across West-Africa, and prove the enormity of his influence. Together, the three seem very uniquely equipped and hardly representative of a larger human population. Nonetheless, they form a group of humans that evoke the notion of a (holy) trinity and have the ability to connect and interact with a broad variety of characters in the novel. The text provides characters of various social and religious backgrounds and includes the equal-rights group The Black Nexus, the religious circle around Father Oke, and the powerful, multi-vocal animal presence that acts as a link between the separate narrative strands. The three protagonists each find ways to interact with the human and non-human characters in the novel and thus expose the relatability to their desires. The characters fear the unknown, they wish for spiritual and social stability (both in their individual lives and in a larger political context), they long for forgiveness, they have suffered rejection and
THE PRECARIOITY OF RACE IN NNEDI OKORAFOR'S LAGOON

Although many elements of the characters' psyche overlap, they each find their individual ways to navigate life. While some turn to Christianity, others embrace performing a different gender. Animals wish to change into a powerful body and traditional African spirits demand human sacrifices. Thereby the boundaries between spiritual elements (i.e., the traditional Christian and Nigerian motifs embedded within the alien-invasion narrative) and science fiction are blurred. In her analysis of postcolonialism and speculative and science fiction texts, Jessica Langer sees "strong links between science fiction and religion and spirituality" (Langer 2011, 128) where native spiritualities and non-Western sciences are often more closely related than Christian tradition and science in the West. Historically, of course, it is the heritage of the Enlightenment that demanded a clear separation of rational logic from spiritual and inexplicable phenomena, favouring standardised methodologies and repeatable, verifiable results. Langer also explains that the often "traumatic and destructive hybridity" (2011, 127) between Western science and traditional ways of knowledge production causes tensions that can only be resolved in a form of hybridity that is in itself productive and which, I would conclude, allows for the emergence of new, symbiotic formations that bear the potential for change.

Okorafor blends her narrative with distinctive Nigerian mythical and folkloric elements (Olaoye 2016, 238), which locates the plot in a non-Western context. It receives its posthumanist elements through the casual incorporation of these African components into a narrative form that is derived from a humanist, colonial, science fiction tradition. It artfully refrains from capitalising on the non-Western perspectives of the story, but rather proceeds to portray African mythological, social, and political themes without marking them as unconventional to a Western audience. Rather than drawing differentiating lines between these two traditions, they effortlessly blend into the mesh of experience that does not distinguish between human, animal, and spiritual aesthetic forms. Elements from Yoruba and Igbo mythology make an appearance and in act three turn out to hold greater power over the human world – and thus the narrative – than the first two parts would suggest. It is the arrival of the alien that brings to life these previously insubstantial figures and features them as all-too-present characters in a world that is in need of a diversity of religious figures. There is, on the one hand, the great spider Udide Okwanka, a trickster figure who weaves tales, as well as Legba, the trickster character and god of language, who is also the guardian of crossroads. He is featured in the novel as a 419 scammer, an expert manipulator and also appears as the spirit Papa Legba. The Igbo and Yoruba legends are counteracted by the misdirected Christianity of Father Oke and Adaora's husband Chris; the small but deadly spider ("for a tarantula, he is not very big," L, 121), narrator of the prologue of act two which is mirrored by the powerful Udide; the swordfish's wish for power which is reflected in the exploitations of the Lagosian population by the menacing presence of human scavengers in the confusion that ensues after the announcement of the alien invasion. Yet, the plot is set in an "urban milieu whose paradoxical mixture of novelty and colonial legacy" (Marx 2017, 414) is constantly balanced and counterbalanced by the independent agency of the urban space itself. The entangled network of roads, beaches, maritime and land-based life that pulsates through the city's veins creates a powerful urban being that affects all its inhabitants. The agentic nature of a city refines the critical
significance of Lagos as an actor in the narrative almost more significant than any of the human, animal, and spiritual characters. Without the sentient nature of the city, whose bloodstream is the chaotic presence of life that accumulates at land and in the water, there would be no narrative. The spatial implications of the text emphasise the need for diversity and inclusive connectivity between species, between habitats and an awareness of the unique location that is the planet earth.

However, Okorafor also introduces new characters, such as the conscious stretch of the Lagos-Benin Expressway, which she names the Bone Collector. This is a reference to the innumerable and increasingly brutal accidents that have claimed so many lives on the Lagos-Benin Expressway over the years that it is considered the most hazardous road on Nigerian soil (Pundt 2018, 179). Lending the highway a narrative voice of its own makes the brutality of the road's revenge more palpable. Understanding the logic behind the horrific accidents by portraying the road as an actor that has suffered makes the cruelty of its actions if not ethically laudable, then at least psychologically relatable. In her blog *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. The Adventures of Writer Nnedi Okorafor and her Daughter Anyaugo Okorafor*, Nnedi Okorafor explains more specifically that the road monster is based on the photo of a dreadful accident on the Expressway that had made a lasting impression on her. Moreover, there was no conclusive explanation for the photo, yet several "inaccurate, but […] very possible" (Okorafor 2015b, n.p.) ones circulated on the internet. The animated spirituality of the road implies the deep entanglement of the spiritual-mythological and the techno-focused presence of human civilization. Although the ancient spirituality of the "road monster" (L, 201) is at odds with the efficient expertise of private and public transportation, the Nigerian lack of maintenance of the roads and simultaneous need for reliable means of transportation create a vacuum that Okorafor skilfully intersects with the spirit monster of the roads. Alien intervention alone can appease the monstrous Expressway and only in the symbiosis of the alien, animal, and human life can the earth be made a habitable place.

**Conclusion**

Harry Garuba, in his assessment of the modernity in the African tradition, claims that "animism is the spectral Other that simultaneously constitutes and haunts the modern" (Garuba 2012, 4). Going against a notion of modernity that argues for the transformation of animist worlds into modern subjectivities, Garuba also warns about engaging with the African tradition and its animistic roots only in order to expose them as pre-modern, anti-humanist, and traditionally short-sighted. On the contrary, this emphasis on the hegemony of colonialism does not reflect the complexities of – particularly – the Nigerian animist tradition. Maintaining a tradition of imploring inanimate objects with god-like qualities that not only tie them to the local attribute they are associated with leads to a "continual re-enchantment rather than a disenchantment of the world" (2012, 7; original emphasis). As Masao Miyoshi pointed out in 1993, Western influence on former colonies cannot be easily revoked. Once a people have come into contact with "the 'chronopolitics' of the secular West, colonized space cannot reclaim autonomy and seclusion" (Miyoshi 1993, 730). The challenge for any Afrofuturist (literary) artist is, thus, to find ways of recognising the strong Western
influence on cultural, political, social aspects, and incorporating traditional aspects of local languages and cultures into the narrative in ways that claim them as one's own, rather than treating them as alien and other. An incorporation of both Western and non-Western tradition is what makes the symbiotic transcendence of hegemonic power relations an integral part of Afrofuturist literature.

The powerful connection between the heritage of the past and its translation into the future creates novel narratives that reach out across spaces and times. Emphasizing life's ability to adjust to newness as strength and a means of survival, as Homi K. Bhabha states in his seminal work *The Location of Culture*, newness and culture share a strong bond: "The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present" (Bhabha 1994, 7). Nnedi Okorafor's novel argues along the same lines, pointing towards a future of life on earth only through its ability to "go beyond" the confines of history, biology, belief and solitariness, while staying firmly rooted in their heritage. Only in the symbiotic relationship with the non-human aliens, so the novel seems to claim, can we achieve a continuous human existence on this planet. In an almost hyper-spiritualised final scene all humans are infused with the 'essence' of Ayodele, the alien ambassador who sacrificed her life for the benefit of the entire human race. The ending, strangely familiar in its reference to the Christian tradition, exemplifies what I would consider to be at the heart of a posthumanist literary aesthetic. It is not so much the invention of new philosophical and literary paradigms than it is the acknowledgement of the past as a part of our planetary history, and the notion to move beyond the limiting hegemony of binaries and their deceptive causalities. Afrofuturism with its implementation of African elements into the genre of science fiction exceeds (but does not negate) an African (post)colonial heritage. It provides an experimental platform where non-traditional and traditional actors and actants coincide and interact. Therefore, I argue that it is this open form, the multiplicity of voices and the embracing of diversity without attributing value that firmly roots the narrative of Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* within a (Black) posthumanist aesthetic.

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