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Fish Out of Water: Black superheroines in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

Dr. Nedine Moonsamy

She swims around the alien home that was in the water ... they could not stay underwater for a long time, they could not breathe it as she could

—NNEDI OKORAFOR, *Lagoon*

NNEDI OKORAFOR'S *LAGOON* opens with a swordfish narrator who watches aliens while they populate the Nigerian waters. Unlike the narrator, who is entirely at home in the ocean, the aliens cannot breathe water with the same ease because, like the two black female protagonists in the novel, Ayodele and Adaora, the aliens are amphibian-like in nature. As the novel proceeds, Ayodele and Adaora's amphibian bodies become increasingly suggestive of the tentative navigation of spaces that they do not necessarily inhabit. My sense is that this oxymoronic habitation of an "alien home" alludes to that which is both strange and familiar, and so performs a metatextual mapping of the precarious space that black women more generally occupy in science fiction.

As Mae G. Henderson observed "the complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the 'other' of the same, but also as the 'other' of the other(s)" implies "a relationship of difference and identification with the 'other(s)'. Because oppressive representations of black women in literature stem from both racialized and gendered discourse, she argues that multiple sites of othering must be interpolated *and* interrupted in black women's writing. This is equally true of science fiction, where race and gender discourses can often work at cross-purposes in wanting to produce alternative and affirmative narratives for black female characters. The importance of *Lagoon*, however, is that it is more self-conscious in this regard and plays with our expectations of science fiction superheroines by marking ideological and representative failures that arise in relation to black women. It thus follows that in wanting to

retain the integrity of the black female subject, Okorafor insists on the tentative abode of an “alien home” that operates both within and against the wider generic frameworks of popular science fiction.

In his monograph, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, scholar Richard Iton argues that popular culture is, by definition, a nonblack culture—a series of hegemonic tastes that rely heavily on the identification of the other that, in the American context, was achieved through the production of the negro. This is not to suggest that black characters do not appear in popular arts and culture, but rather that the abundant stereotypes of blackness exist only as counterfoils to the neutrality of normative whiteness. Somewhat ironically, the range of available signifiers for blackness is an excess that renders the black experience invisible. According to author Michelle Reid, this invisibility of black experience occurs in science fiction, where early space exploration stories were “narrated by the inheritors of advancement, often assumed to be white, Western, and on

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an adventure.” Consequently, the genre became susceptible to various colonial and imperialistic fantasies that captured a troubled relationship to women, people of colour and nature by using the figure of the alien to symbolise these others. Nevertheless, in “Becoming Animal in Black Women’s Science Fiction,” Madhu Dubey explains that “although science fiction perhaps more than any other genre traffics in otherness, its conventions strongly discourage direct representations of that which is alien to humanity. The alien is typically encountered, comprehended, and subsumed by a human perspective; rarely (if ever) is the alien the subject of narration.” Science fiction is replete with feminised or racialized robots aliens and monsters, however, they are always othered and the narrative requires that their otherhood be rendered benign through a process of masculine purging or consumption.

Consequently, the question remains—what *does* it mean for a black artist to engage in contemporary popular culture? For Iton, the solution is to lend visibility to the black experience by engaging the fantastic that sits on the margins of popular culture. Black self-narration must then take on surreal dimensions and embrace the art of making strange. Hence, it is a search for blackness in a “minor key” where, much like the surrealists, the engagement with popular culture is not denied but rendered deeply ironic and fundamentally political.

This mode of engagement is congruent with conceptions of African science fiction and Afrofuturism, as these movements both seek a more



Florine Démosthène, Activation #3, 2018. Ink charcoal and pigment stick on mylar. Photo courtesy of Nii Ayitey Tetteh.

self-determined African and black aesthetic. For example, Nnedi Okorofor’s notion of “organic fantasy,” British science fiction novelist, Ian MacDonald’s identification of “jupyter” and Marlene Barr’s exemplification of “anti-science fiction” all point toward instances where Western technology fuses with aspects of African myth, fable and fantasy. Okorofor and MacDonald, however, more clearly highlight that inherent to the appreciation of African science fiction is an acknowledgement of its

She asserts that the style she employs is not new or invented, but an inherited and organic mode of experience and storytelling in Africa

roots in local style. In her 2008 essay “Organic Fantasy,” Okorafor describes her own style as typical of African literature and offers examples of authors, like Ben Okri, to illustrate how fantasy has always been a trenchant part of African literature and reality. She asserts that the style she employs is not new or invented, but an inherited and organic mode of experience and storytelling in Africa that is more suitable for the narration of black and African experiences.

Lagoon tells many stories at once, but the central narrative commences on the Lagos beachfront where three characters, Adaora, Agu and Anthony, are suddenly sucked into the ocean by a tsunami wave. Eventually they are beached and wake on the shore to find that an alien that has left its watery abode to join them on a terrestrial journey. As we later discover in the novel, these three characters have been chosen by the oceanic alien populace to carry their demands to the citizens of Nigeria and, by extension, the human race. When Adaora first encounters the alien on the beachfront, she is quick to correct her thoughts by saying, “no, not ‘it,’ ‘her.’ The woman wore a long white sundress and looked like someone from Adaora’s family—dark skinned, broad-nosed, with dark thick lips.” By making the semantic shift from “it” to “her,” Adaora is immediately struck by its lack of alien properties, and it is precisely this more banal apparition of the alien that holds disconcerting power. Adaora names the alien Ayodele, after a friend who passed away, which again stresses the familial intimacy that the alien evokes.

Anthony too has an uncanny experience of the aliens: as he wakes on the shore, he remembers “how they called him ‘brother.’ He had several brothers, and being called one reminded him of home.” Still fuzzy from the mysterious trip into the ocean, Anthony is nevertheless able to recall sensations of comfort and familiarity amongst the aliens. Hence, from the outset, the alien is assimilated into the milieu with an ease that renders its state of otherness banal. Okorafor cleverly undermines the “event” of the alien who is far from other in her Nigerian context. Instead, her evocation of the uncanny is not met with revulsion or fear, but with familial hospitality that can be likened to a homecoming.

The notion of a return—as opposed to arrival—is reiterated through Ayodele’s resemblance to a Mami Wata figure which situates this science fiction narrative in more local belief systems. Mami Wata are the pantheon of African water deities—half human, half sea creature—they are sea goddesses who protect the waters and its inhabitants. Ayodele performs acts of shamanic healing on various characters and her alien



**Florine
Démosthène,
Activation
#2, 2018.** Ink,
charcoal and
pigment stick
on mylar. Photo
courtesy of Nii
Ayitey Tetteh.

technology is based more along the lines of telepathy and telekinetic shape shifting, giving it a distinctly organic as opposed to mechanical quality. Hence it is precisely the amphibian aesthetic of her body that legitimises her presence by providing a mythical and spiritual framework for her identity. Her powers are jarring, but not to the extent that it arouses immediate hysteria and people are able to “place” her,

however imperfectly, as a witch in the social imaginary. Eventually exasperated by the underwhelming label of a witch, Ayodele firmly declares “I am not a witch; I am an alien to your planet; I am an alien.” The novel thus foregrounds how there is a general failure to interpret Ayodele’s presence which is further explored in the following episode when Adaora, a marine biologist, takes Ayodele home to her lab to conduct a forensic investigation.

Under the microscope, she notes that Ayodele is “made of tiny, tiny, tiny, metal-like balls” that “can be anything and are nothing.” In a state of disbelief, she acknowledges that “there was a flicker of oddness about her if you looked long enough. Like she was more than what she was and less than what she was presenting, like a double-exposed photo.” Despite looking, in all appearances, normal, she is a jagged composition of two overlapping images—like a double exposed photo—that disrupts ordinary perception. Okorafor undoubtedly offers some tongue in cheek commentary about the current inability to “see” and “read” black women in contemporary science fiction, but this extends further by delineating the limits of Adaora’s scientism that fails to yield results. Piqued by this outcome, T.S. Miller review of the novel opines that:

I was not entirely convinced of Adaora as a working scientist; she rarely thinks about her work, and the reader never learns what exactly it is that she works on as a biologist. The novel seems hazy on the details about what a marine biologist actually does day-to-day, and Adaora’s generic job description as ‘scientist’ finally functions in a somewhat simplistic, *gestalt* fashion to give her a rationalist perspective that the incredible events of the novel will challenge, as well as a convenient home lab in which she can analyze the strangeness of alien tissue (that overfamiliar filmic scene).

Yet according to Barr, there is room to consider Okorafor’s technique strategic rather than sloppy. Black science fiction, she argues, works in a responsive mode and seeks to undermine the fact that science fiction narratives are often technological colonising fantasies.



Writers thus acknowledge how science and technology have been implicated in the production of racist discourse. Barr argues that black science fiction can be considered anti-science fiction because “writers alter genre conventions to change how we read and define science fiction itself” (xv), meaning that writers do not adhere to the generic bifurcation of fantasy and science fiction. It is possible to consider how this approach opens up new lexical possibilities for African science fiction rather than dismissing it as degenerative. Hence, ‘magical’ modes of knowing come to supplement and even override rationality and technology and allows for the critique of the excesses of science. Moreover, Dubey argues that this has further implications when considering the representation of women who are both symbolically and literally excluded from science fiction because of the abiding association of women with nature, the animal body and feeling. Dubey thus see it as salient to extend “definitions of science so as to include bodies of knowledge, such as herbal medicine, midwifery, or magic, which have been dismissed as unscientific because of their association with women,” Rightly noted by Miller, the quintessential ‘scene’ in a science fiction narrative involves using scientific discourse to render the alien intelligible and to provide methods to control these deviant bodies. Yet Ayodele’s body disrupts the reading of the other as a quantifiable object of scientific investigation. As a result:

Florine Démosthène, Releasing the Truth (diptych), 2018. Mixed media on canvas. Photo courtesy of Nii Ayitey Tetteh.

when Adaora looked into them [Ayodele's eyes], she felt unsure ... of everything. A college friend of hers used to say that everything human beings perceived as real was only a matter of the information their bodies recorded. 'And that information isn't always correct or complete,' he said. Back then, Adaora had dismissively rolled her eyes. Now, she understood.

Adaora is dedicated to her profession as a marine biologist, yet the alien exposes the limits of her empirical methodology. In this moment, both human and scientific perception are recognised as utterly limited. Yet as her discursive boundaries disintegrate, it is significant that Adaora declares that "now, she understood." The incident is not without knowledge, but, as she learns, the entire objective is that of finding alternative ways of reading the black female body and, by extension, herself.

Adaora is aware of the sharp physical resemblance between her and Ayodele and the uncanny reflection of Adaora's identity in Ayodele's body. Not entirely comfortable with this revelation, Adaora feels that "there was something both attractive and repellent about the woman, and it addled Adaora's senses." She concedes to a rising feeling of disgust and, exploring her repulsion, Adaora states that "she had piercing brown eyes that gave Adaora the same creepy feeling as when she looked at a large black spider. Her mannerisms were too calm, fluid and ... alien." It is evident that she seeks to undercut the intimacy of the uncanny by reverting to similes of the animal *and* the alien in order to construct distance between them. Yet this is an exercise in hermeneutics that ultimately fails.

Prior to Ayodele's arrival, it becomes apparent that Adaora is in a troubled marriage. Her once loving husband has fallen under the sway of the cunning Pastor Oke and now accuses Adaora of witchcraft.

Adaora also senses her own power but has tried to suppress any memory of it; she is a scientist and is unhappy with an identity that cannot be explained in rational terms.

He recognises a supernatural power in his wife that emasculates him and he has recently taken to beating her, and, because of her obsession with her sea, he often refers to her as a "marine witch." This is the first intimation that she is not immune to the amphibian aesthetic that Okorafor uses to describe Ayodele in the narrative. Adaora also senses her own power but has tried to suppress any memory of it; she is a scientist and is unhappy with



an identity that cannot be explained in rational terms. Yet the presence of the alien coincides with the reawakening of her own powers and she projects her repulsion onto Ayodele.

Adaora has spent most of her life internalising shame and stigma and it is only much later in the narrative that she tells her friends about the fact that she was born with webbed feet and toes. She, like Ayodele, is more amphibian than she has led people to believe and we see that Okorafor wishes to restore her to this state. When she falls out of the boat she does not drown but starts “breathing water.” Once recovered from the shock of being in the water she finds that “her lungs didn’t hurt [...] she didn’t have lungs anymore ... she had gills.” Thinking back to all the painful accusations of being a “marine witch,” she begins to accept that there is some truth to it—“I am a marine witch,” she whispered.” The narrative thus affirms a process of assuming a fantastical amphibian body but her “powers” as scientist and “witch” are never seen as mutually exclusive and once she returns to her human form she reaffirms her desire to change the world through scientific investigation of the alien population. Yet the text intimates that going forward, her scientific approach will be supra-rational as she acknowledges her intuitive as opposed to empirical connection with marine life. *Lagoon* thus brings us to a point where Ayodele and Adaora become mutually affirming identity structures as they assist in their realisation of a complex nexus of amphibian-human embodiment, magical-technical powers and humane-anthropomorphised extensions of the

Florine Démosthène, Facing the Truth (diptych), 2018. Mixed media on canvas. Photo courtesy of Nii Ayitey Tetteh.

self. Consequently, it is difficult not to read the apparition of Donna Haraway's cyborg into these characters.

In her seminal manifesto, "the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between the human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling" and, in addition, "the second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine." This manifesto purports pleasure in and identification with an entity that corrodes the Manichean division between masculine technology and feminine body. It is a non-essentialist, technological triumph that disrupts the ease with which we categorise the human and perceive gender. The cyborg works in "the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end." Herein lies a dream of limitlessness; it is a world of non-dualistic perception that never settles into a form. Overall, Ayodele and Adaora's fusion of magic, technology, science and compassion are features that, as Dubey phrases it, "elaborate an alternative feminist epistemology grounded in empathy and embodiment." Not only do they challenge mundane conventions around femininity through the assumption of superpowers, but they also upset capitalistic, sociopolitical and geopolitical configurations of power by becoming advocates for animal and alien life and seeking its active inclusion within the maritime and nationalistic structures of Nigeria. The massive (particularly masculine) opposition they meet on this journey—at every level of society—serves as a stern critique of the patriarchal and capitalistic values that underpin our understanding of the human and the citizen in contemporary times. Just as the appearance of Haraway's cyborg has delineated in various science fiction narratives previously, the challenges presented by Ayodele's and Adaora's heroic defiance highlights the shrewd limitations of power and the potential for change. Yet, having realised these black cyborg superheroines, *Lagoon* appears to grow self-conscious and begins to turn in on itself. For while the stances offered by Ayodele and Adaora are affirming in the context of science fiction, cyborg identities in the context of black feminist discourse begin to read like a form of historical betrayal.

Looking at the abiding association between black female bodies, the natural environment and magic is central to contemporary definitions of African science fiction, Andre E. Carrington, in *Speculative Blackness*:



**Florine
Démosthène,
Meta, 2018.**
Mixed media on
wood panel.
Photo courtesy
of Nii Ayitey
Tetteh.

The Future of Race in Science Fiction, makes an incisive critique of this valorisation as a form of essentialism by arguing that:

a tendency to presuppose an affinity between Blackness and nature—evocative of naturalism (rather than speculation) in literature, Mammy tropes regarding Black women’s nurturing roles, and “earth mother” imagery associated with all women of color, and indigenous

women in particular—would displace the character from the genre specificity of superhero comics, reinscribing the putative dynamic of alienation between speculative fiction and Blackness...

The grammar of conflating black bodies with animal bodies—hypersexualised, irrational, unintelligent and lacking self-awareness—has consistently served to inscribe white masculinity as the primary subject of ontology. The assertion that a more embodied animal/magical identity is a progressive affirmation of black female bodies is thus a ruse; looking at representations of black heroines, like Marvel Comics’

Blackness, he argues, is often only seen as a magical alternative to the technological efforts that can more easily be produced by white superhero counterparts.

Storm, he opines that they do little to suture the pre-existing alienation of blackness in speculative fiction. Blackness, he argues, is often only seen as a magical alternative to the technological efforts that can more easily be produced by white superhero counterparts. While he acknowledges the value in occupying the margins with regards to technological and scientific discourse, he is equally wary of how it operates as a postcolonial echo whose logic is not only circular, but also defeatist. Arguably, this awareness inscribes Ayodele’s firm resistance that “I am not a witch; I am an alien to your planet” whose collective population recognises that “we are technology.” For despite society’s perception of her, she, at times, wishes to put aside the idea that her powers are supernatural in favour of a more technological and future-oriented identity. Nevertheless, *Lagoon* goes on to portray how technology is yet another means to dehumanise the black female subject even further still.

Once word about the novelty of Ayodele’s technological power spreads throughout the country, there are a host of characters who try to capitalise on the appearance of the alien. These include Father Oke, who wants to use her to stage a very elaborate conversion on a ‘witch’, Moziz and his band of thugs, who want to kidnap her for a quick buck and the Nigerian Army that wishes to harvest her powerful technology. The text thus registers a complex reality where, according to Isiah Lavender III, the response to technological subjects intersects with the colonial reading of African bodies “as natural machines essential for the cultivation of the physical landscape and capable of producing wealth.” In a fascinating monograph, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender III explores how science fiction writers often use figures like robots to engage with



**Florine
Démosthène,
Mind
Chatter,
2018.** Mixed
media on wood
panel. Photo
courtesy of Nii
Ayitey Tetteh.

slavery in ways that are unconscious and racist or, alternatively, used to reflect on a painful racial history that continues to haunt the national psyche. He probes the seemingly deracialised attitude of science fiction as a genre by arguing that it “uses technology or science to distance and defamiliarise the institution and practice of slavery, resulting in constructions of slavery as neo-slave narratives or *meta-slavery* narratives. Hence, contrary to the ideals of a posthuman cyborg, Ayodele’s potential for technological progress turns her body into a resource to be mined, irrespective of the cost. More pointedly, *The Black Nexus Crew*, which is

an underground LGBTI group, think that they can use her as a perfect marketing tool to break into society; they figure that “the Black Nexus can come out of secrecy for this. Who better to understand than a shape-shifter?” They see the ideal of Haraway’s “post-gender world” in Ayodele, but Okorafor illustrates how interpreting the alien as cyborg leads to what Dubey has correctly identified as “violation, not joyful transgression, of bodily boundaries.” The seeming novelty of her cyborg body is thus burdensome, turning her into something that is readily exploitable rather than empowered. It opens up the possibilities for violation by increasing rather than obviating the pre-existing violence that strips the black female body of its humanity. It is thus key to note that Ayodele’s entrusted protectors, Adaora, Agu and Anthony, are there, always, to insist on her humanity. Unlike those who wish to exploit her, the most dignified address they can afford Ayodele is “not ‘it,’” but “‘her.’” The text, however, presents this as far from a romantic prospect, implying—somewhat ironically—that the more mundane presence of a black female might be the most alien of all.

Toward the end of the novel, once suitable negotiations have been made for better alien-human relations in Nigeria and all physical danger averted, Ayodele climbs out of the lagoon in human form, but a few lower-ranking soldiers spot her and bludgeon her to death simply

She makes a poignant illustration of how her black female body provokes suspicion precisely because the struggle, ultimately, is that of seeing her, and her black body, as simply human.

because they are fixated on the idea of her otherness. This particular scene is graphic; “her white dress was splotted with spreading patches of red as they stamped on her torso, chest, legs, and arms. They crushed bone and muscle and organs. One man brought his foot down squarely on her exposed neck.” Okorafor foregrounds her human and visceral vulnerability that fails to dissuade these men. She makes a poignant illustration of how her black female body provokes suspicion precisely because the struggle, ultimately, is that of seeing her, and her black body, as simply human. As Adaora notes, Ayodele is powerful enough to strike back at the men who beat her but she surrenders and lets it unfold. There is a strong insistence on us witnessing the violence that is inflicted on a body that is allegedly deemed other, but that is, in fact, simply the body of a young black woman.

Like most superheroines, Ayodele has come to deliver a message of peace; in exchange for alien technology, she asks the government to stop polluting the seas so that her community can build a home there. Yet while Ayodele successfully ensures a home for her fellow aliens, she

herself never makes it home and perishes in a state of utter debasement and alienation. Similarly, Adaora, who has come to accept her own “alien” identity through Ayodele also undergoes a social death. At the end of the narrative, she is separated from her husband and children stating that “she wouldn’t be able to stay because she had things to do that went beyond motherhood. She would risk never returning to them, every time she explored the dangerous waters.” While most would read these occurrences as the tragi-heroic trajectory of the superheroine who must suffer because of their exceptionalism, Sandra Jackson opines that they are a cause of despondency.

In her article on *Alien versus Predator*, Sandra Jackson recalls being enthusiastic initially about the fact that a Hollywood franchise made the bold choice to cast a strong black female as a protagonist. And, it is with added glee that she notes:

that the black woman warrior had survived. But I was not so sure that she was in an enviable place. Not sure that her survival was laudatory [...] she was stranded on some uninhabited planet or meteoroid, probably light years away from contact with others or a rescue team. Out of contact with other humans, with only the stars for company.

She condemns the enterprise for its depiction of black female exceptionalism and, as a result, its corresponding sense of profound alienation. She cannot understand why there is no space for the black female lead to return as a social being, and it is intriguing that Okorafor’s narrative also aligns with this idea as Ayodele and Adaora are both left without community. While the narrative may appear pessimistic in conveying this keen sense of isolation, their sacrificial ethic to acknowledge this impasse that governs the representative politics of black superheroines. As I have illustrated, while black writers may seek to introduce African scientific discourse and black identity politics into science fiction, these acts of “making strange” within a popular genre like science fiction can have inadvertent effects for black women by reproducing other forms of historical otherness and dehumanisation. Consequently, *Lagoon*’s representation of Adaora, the alien-human and Ayodele, the human-alien serves to elucidate this difficulty for us as readers and the site of the “alien home” marks the precarious refuge that the black woman must ideally occupy within a science fiction narrative; once at home in its generic lexicon of the superheroine while simultaneously trying to flee from it. 🌐