

## Ben Okri's Eco-Imagination in *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021): An Afropolitan Approach

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### Abstract

There are possibly myriad approaches to an examination of Sir Ben Okri's African folktale, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021), that sings the praises of Mother Nature's ability to transform human nature. Premised on the phenomenology of the eco-imagination that adopts Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka's *Imaginatio Creatrix* as the pivotal force of the genesis/ontopoiesis of human life and reality, coupled with Arne Naess's notion of "deep ecology" that likewise emphasises the intrinsic interconnectedness of all lifeforms and geophysical features on Planet Earth, the discussion shows that *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* implicitly explores the developmental phenomenology of perception via Achille Mbembe's notion of Afropolitanism. It does this through the agency of the innocent prescience of a small Nigerian girl child, the seven-year-old Mangoshi who is attuned to the choral voices of nature. Writing against the rift of the prevalent Western belief in a nature that is utilitarian or where nature serves human needs, this article is embedded in an African eco-critical imaginary that investigates the interrelationship between human nature and Mother Nature from an Afropolitan literary perspective in which there is a mythic conjunction between humans and nature, as well as art and science. Echoing Tymieniecka's phenomenology of life and the human creative condition, the argument concludes that *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* represents a significant contribution to contemporary discourse on conservation for sustainability.

Keywords: Afropolitanism; Arne Naess's "deep ecology"; eco-imagination; *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021); geo-cosmic conservation; Ben Okri, phenomenology; Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka's *Imaginatio Creatrix*

Come, see real

flowers

of this painful world. (Basho 1985, 31)

Basho's seventeenth-century Haiku that combines the ideals of *karumi*—lightness of touch—and oneness with nature captures the very essence of Ben Okri's new African folktale, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021a), his first story for children and the child within us all. Set in the outskirts of Lagos and seen through the eyes of a small Nigerian girl child, this ekphrastic tale explores the phenomenology of deforestation that contributes hugely to climate change, while singing the praises of Mother Nature's ability to redeem human nature when agency is in the hands of a little girl sent by her reluctant father to find a rare forest flower, "a magical flower" (2021a, 22). For if Mangoshi can "bring back the flower, the flower will save the village. And if [she] save[s] the village, the village will save the forest" (2021a, 24), a notion of transformation that encapsulates Okri's ecological imagination "because it has the capacity to

liberate distorted beliefs about our control over nature and our separation from the natural world” (Davenport 2017, n.p.). The flower functions as an interlacertine motif that entwines the narrative thread like ivy clinging to the trunk of a tree.

Premised on the phenomenology of the eco-imagination that turns on Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka’s *Imaginatio Creatrix* as the pivotal force of the genesis/ontopoiesis of human life and reality, coupled with Arne Naess’s notion of “deep ecology”<sup>1</sup> that likewise emphasises the intrinsic interconnectedness of all lifeforms and geophysical features on Planet Earth, the discussion shows that *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* unveils the developmental phenomenology of perception via the “human creative condition” (see Tymieniecka 1999, 8).

Coincidentally, both Tymieniecka’s *Imaginatio Creatrix* and Naess’s coinage of the term “deep ecology” are evocative of Afropolitan epistemology and the ideals of progress that make “possible the manifestation of one’s own power of genesis, one’s own capacity ... for expressing a positive force,” as Achille Mbembe (2021, 3) notes. Mbembe advocates an African perspective, what he calls an Afropolitan one that erases geophysical and intellectual borders “in pursuit of the customary grasp of the history of the present,” to quote John Camaroff of Harvard University (dust cover blurb to *Out of the Dark Night*). Mbembe defines Afropolitanism as “a migrant and circulatory form of modernity.” It embraces a diaspora that is “born out of overlapping genealogies, at the intersection of multiple encounters with multiple elseness.” It is, he says, a “new sensibility ... distinct from Negritude on at least three levels ... self-creation and *selfengendering* and *self-confrontation*” (2021, 210, original emphasis; see Gray 2023).

Mbembe views art as “an attempt to capture the forces of the infinite, an attempt to put the infinite in perceptible form, but a forming that consists in constantly doing, undoing, and redoing, assembling, disassembling and reassembling,” evoking an idea of metaphysical mutable fluidity that Mbembe says is “typically African” (2021, 221). In *The Freedom Artist* (2019), Nigerian-born Londoner and Booker Prize winner, Ben Okri, satirizes twentieth and twenty-first century art, conflating art, politics, and economics a single entity. He portrays the Mammon-worshipping neo-liberal of today that has permeated the global mindset—no nation state is evidently exempt—through the discourse of his money artist: “God left us a long time ago. ... Money is the new imagination. The genie of our age, from the magic lamp of our times, is money. It is the only reliable open sesame” (2019, 85 and 88), as I argued in my 2023 book review (Gray 2023).

The above sardonic cynicism is in stark contrast with Okri’s avowed eco-critical, African/Afropolitan view. His prescient heroine, Mangoshi, attuned to the choral voices of nature, feels summoned by the trees in the forest to save them from wanton destruction and to put a stop to deforestation. The talking trees, in turn, “gather round her in a dense circle, like elders in a tribal meeting” (8), revealing their “many personalities” to her heightened awareness, ultimately urging her to “Come now before it is too late” (18). The reader is informed that “only a girl of seven years old can find this flower” (22); so, after consultation with the village griot [“wise man” (20)], her father sends her back alone a year later to the now decimated forest (21, 32) to find the flower that she had initially found but had accidentally lost (14). A year earlier, this child of nature had found her way out of the forest and back to her village by listening to nature: to “the birds and the murmur of the leaves when the wind rushed through them” (12), so she trustingly accepts Dad’s injunction to “let the earth guide you” (29), and sets off with some food prepared by her mother, and seven minuscule seeds tied in Dad’s handkerchief (26), which she later plants in the forest. Mangoshi has been told by the village

“wise man” that “only the special flower which lived in the heart of the forest could cure her [terminally ill] mother” (21).

As in all good fairy tales and evidencing Okri’s eco-imagination, resolution comes after a journey above the earth on an ancient baobab—as a magic carpet—to witness global degradation, and another trip below the ground among the lively tree roots, an allusive dichotomy of destruction and hope. Thereafter, heeding the “weeping trees” (61), she stands her ground with arms akimbo and stops any further cutting down by courageously threatening the tree-fellers that she will “tell the world” (87) unless they halt the carnage. Acknowledging the relative smallness of humankind, Mbembe reminds us that “if we must, together, walk anew the paths of humanity in companionship with all species, then it is perhaps necessary to begin by recognizing that at bottom there is no world or place where we are totally ‘at home’, masters of the premises” (2021, 229). “What is proper,” he adds astutely, “always arises at the same time as what is foreign” (2021, 229). “It is obvious,” said Tymieniecka at the turn of the millennium, “that humanity is in disarray. . . . More and more of the race is without a compass, in a state of turmoil” (1999, 8). In Leslie Davenport’s (2017, n.p.) words: “The stakes have never been higher.”

Cultivating ecological imagination has a powerful role to play at this pivotal time in human history, as scientists around the world continue to report the accelerating impacts of climate change. Imagination is the gateway to wisdom, and wisdom is an essential foundation for right action, an internal shift that can steer us towards eco-harmonious living. (Davenport 2017)

Reflecting inter-species awareness, trees—the central trope in *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*—have long inspired writers throughout the world, providing the impetus for poems, idioms, proverbs, koans/traditional riddles, myths, legends, and songs; they are also the habitat for a multitude of earth’s creatures. Okri (2022, n.p.) admits to the generative impulse for *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, acknowledging that he felt “a strong impulse to tell a tale about trees and forests and our relationship to nature,” and in a dream that precedes the end of Okri’s story, we read that,

One night, as [Mangoshi] slept, she found herself in a place where the birds are happy and the rivers are pure.

“What place is this?” she asked.

“This is a paradise of trees. Nothing dies here. Everything lives in simple joy.” (94)

And, “now that they were not going to be cut down the trees were happily sleeping in their own shade” (89), says the omniscient teller towards the end of the tale.

In a comparable acknowledgement of the role of birds and trees, but in a little less poetic mode, South Africa’s Jacklyn Cock (2018, 10) writes:

They give us the space (both psychic and geographical) to think about our place in the world and our relations with the wild creatures with whom we share it. They can remind us of our place in nature, of our ecological interdependence, even of our dependence on the trees which release the oxygen that allows us to live.

The story closes with the baobab rewarding Mangoshi with the “flower that only grows ... when someone has made an act of great courage” (90); and so the brave little girl comes to realise that “All trees radiate love ... and every leaf is a hallelujah” (94), an allusion to Handel’s *Messiah* and to the melodic harmony of regenerative life.

Rooted in the natural world, one could, perhaps, read this folktale with its magic flower, whispering trees, and love of nature in terms of intertextuality, resonating as it does with W. B. Yeats’s “The Song of Vanishing Aegnus,” a poem with its berry plucked from a hazelwood tree, its mysterious female voice that stops the persona from roasting “a little silver trout” that he had caught after the berry had been accidentally “dropped in a stream” (stanza 1). This leads to a lifelong “wandering / Through hollow lands and hilly lands” (stanza 3) in a quest to find the “glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair / Who called me by my name and ran / And faded through the brightening air” (stanza 2). The theme of both texts is oneness with and love of nature; both are nature-centred; both turn on an ecological imaginary. This may seem somewhat tenuous unless one is aware of the fact that Okri invokes the opening lines of Yeats’s poem—“I went into the hazel wood / because a fire was in my head”—as the epigraph to his 2021 poetry collection that I deploy as allusive side references. It is here that Okri demonstrates the power of the mind in our times of climate change crises to find “a new road to the future,” a line from “Closed, Still Open,” a poem from Okri’s *A Fire in My Head* (2021b, 28, stanza 2, line 13).

While acknowledging that Okri’s ontopoietic, eco-imaginative vision in *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* is Yeatsian in its complexity—evocative of the incommensurable that determines the basic issue of experience—this article takes its cue from the outline of the folktale, writing against the rift of the prevalent Western belief in a nature that is utilitarian and where nature exclusively serves human needs. The argument adopts an eco-critical lens that studies literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary viewpoint; where all sciences come together to analyse the environment and to brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. While cognizant of causal laws of science, on the one hand, and the intentionality and consciousness of art, on the other (see Lafuente 2018), I investigate the interrelationship between human nature and Mother Nature from an Afropolitan perspective in which there is, coincidentally, a Tymienieckan mythic conjunction between humans and nature, art and science.

Reflecting ongoing scientific breakthroughs in the study of the human genome, such as the fact that all lifeforms carry DNA and mirroring the intricate veins on the leaves on a tree, I argue that Okri’s eco-imagination eschews binary oppositions, retracing the paths into “the rites of vision and truth” (Okri 2021b, 4, line 30)—against deforestation, and for conservation. In other words, for a sustainable future. In his acclaimed *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson (2003, 493) explains the function of DNA (deoxyribose nucleic acid) that constitutes the human genome, a.k.a. the genes of all lifeforms, with a delightfully pertinent musical analogy:

Genes are nothing (more or less) than instructions to make proteins. This they do with a certain dull fidelity. In this sense, they are rather like the keys of a piano, each playing a single note and nothing else, which is obviously a trifle monotonous. But combine the genes, as you would piano keys, and you can create chords and melodies of infinite variety. Put all these genes together and you have (to continue the metaphor) the great symphony of existence known as the human genome.

Thus, genes, or life itself, must be treated as a meaningful whole. Read metaphorically, one could argue that the cornucopia of trees in Okri's folktale: "the palms, the irokos, the obeches, the baobabs, the squat trees, the tall ones, the gnarled ones" (49), the ancient "sequolas" (54) and "the oldest tree in the world," America's "bristlecone pine" that is "nearly ten thousand years old" (55), plus many more,<sup>2</sup> serves to symbolise the unity of the different cultures that constitute the family of humankind, while subtly providing an encyclopaedic Child's Guide to the trees of the world.

More didactically, on her baobab flight, Mangoshi is apprised of the fact that the Amazon is "the biggest tree graveyard in the world" (60), pointing to paradoxical human behaviour. "Man has a very strong will to live," says Maria Golaszewska (1999, 40), "yet he himself destroys the necessary conditions to live." Such an ontology escapes a complexity of dualisms, evoking an integration of humans and nature. As Douglas Low (2011, 49) sagely postulates: "In the process of treating nature as a mere thing, not only have most inhabitants of the West become alienated from our primordial, sensual and aesthetic connection to the earth, but we have also become increasingly alienated from ourselves and each other."

It is evident that Okri reveals an inner life rather than an external husk. He transforms the raw material of experience into the kind of spirit that he reflects and inflects. This imaginative melding of spirit and matter becomes a direct and immediate revelation of the purest spirit of the world's people. Although such characteristics seem self-evident, their roots lie deeply buried in the early, timeless orientations of the different cultures. In *Ancient Myth and Modern Man*, Gerald Larue (1975, 201) elucidates:

To know to whom one belongs, to sense poetically a heritage, to be linked emotionally and perhaps physically to a tradition rooted in antiquity and marked by beauty and suffering, joy and heartache is to acquire psychic strength to meet the trauma of existence and to answer the absurdity of the human dilemma of man existing briefly in endless time and space. (Cf. Gray 2007)

In *Every Leaf*, Okri is at pains to transcend the time/space continuum. As the oldest tree in her forest, the ancient baobab tells the child that to understand the nature of trees "we have to take you on a journey round the world and through time" (49). And it is the ancient bristlecone pine that shares with Mangoshi the secret that "time does not really exist" (55). Scientifically, the contiguity of time and space and the seasonal cycle of life are endorsed by today's knowledge of the ubiquitous double helix, a strand of the DNA in biochemistry. And in a botanical allusion to rhizomes, the fallen tree explains to Mangoshi, who has heard the great cry and weeping of the iroko trees (33–34), that "we are all connected. ... If one suffers all suffer. ... We are all linked by our roots" (35). This kind of ontological integration "will hopefully lead us to a more reflective and democratic guidance of the relationships between them" (cf. Low 2011, 49–50).

In a conversation with Ainehi Edoro pertinently entitled "Giving the World a New Kind of Literature," a title which in itself invokes a global eco-phenomenological aesthetic, the Nigerian-born Londoner, Sir Ben Okri, asserts his Afropolitan worldview saying that, in terms of the trajectory of literature, he has

watched a literature rise from protest and self-definition, from anti-colonial, Africanist dimensions to satires and cries against the failures of independence, from prison writings and social realisms into something altogether different but into which all that

has gone before has played a part. Now the literature is international. (Edoro 2020, n.p.; see Gray 2020, 35)

In contrast to a structuralist/neo-Marxist binary world-view, Afropolitanism, as Sopeleakai Maithufi (2020, 2) observes, “does not have any oppositional ideology.” Philip Aghoghovwia (2020, 23) indicates that Afropolitanism concerns itself with “the agential utility of an intersubjective consciousness” in which Black diasporic intelligentsia are in conversation with their “external surroundings and a sense of presence and belonging as a modern subject in the metropolitan centres of the world.” Okri states that “as the story grew, I felt the need for nature” (2022, cover page), and in lines from his “Notre-Dame is Telling us Something” (2021b, 12–13) poem following the lightning strike, we read:

We fight over cabbages while  
Our spirit perishes in open view.  
In alchemy it’s when things burn  
That they’re made true and new.  
Orioles are weeping  
For the dwindling of our souls  
And the smallness of the goals  
...  
O the orioles are weeping  
For the wars that will be fought  
Because of the simple things not taught  
Like the underlying unity  
And our fundamental trinity  
And how when the way is lost  
Good things perish  
And we never know the cost.

(Stanza 1, lines 24–30; 37–44)

In further evidence of Okri’s eco-imagination, on her peripatetic oneiric world flight, Mangoshi is given a lesson in “deep ecology,” instructed by the ancient baobab that, “We are not just trees ... we hold the earth together. We are the link between heaven and earth. We give the earth the air that humans breathe. We make the environment stable. We have great healing powers. We are older than the human race” (52). The excerpt echoes Cock’s scientific observation on the production of oxygen by trees although she neglects to mention the crucial capacity of trees to absorb carbon dioxide, implicit in Okri’s trees making “the environment stable” and “having great healing powers.” Here, Okri’s ontopoietic awareness apprehends Tymienoiecka’s concept of the interrelationship between science and art. Transcending time and space, it is embedded in Naess’s notion of “deep ecology” which emphasises the basic interconnectedness of all forms and natural features, and presents a symbolic and holistic world-view rather than an anthropocentric one, to invoke Mbembe (2007). The argument is, in addition, informed by Achille Mbembe’s concept in *Out of the Dark Night* (2021, 2) of rewalking the paths of humanity to remake community in our troubled age, already alluded to.

The eco-imagination presupposes an ability not only to identify with and internalize the biospheric processes but also to understand that human reflective awareness is a manifestation of the biosphere as argued by Mitchell Thomashow (2021b). His is a place-based environmental view akin to Okri’s project in *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, one that functions as a guide for understanding the ecological and existential aspects of global environmental change,

while deep ecology is an “environmental philosophy and social movement based on the belief that humans must radically change their relationship to nature from one that values nature solely for its usefulness to human beings to one that recognizes that nature has an intrinsic value” (Thomashow 2021a).

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* represents a significant contribution to contemporary discourse on conservation for sustainability, be it geocosmic or literary. This ekphrastic folktale from Africa, enchantingly illustrated by Diana Ejaita, is seen through the eyes of a small Nigerian girl child, Mangoshi, whose intimate awareness and intuition enable her to practise daily observation of the world around her, and to instruct the would-be tree-fellers on the import of conservation: “The trees are guardians. It is because the forest is being destroyed all these bad things are happening to us” (93), she informs them with the knowing ingenuity of a child. An intrusive authorial voice adds to this deliberately childlike cognition with words that encapsulate a Tymieniecka epistemological ethos of onto-poietic consciousness: “After that the village took up the fight to save the forest and the magic flowers of healing that it contained” (93)

Axiomatic to my argument has been that Okri moves beyond the often preferred gospels of neo-Marxist structuralism or indeed of the postcolonial/decolonial ideologies in which history is a facile dialectic and past conflicts have led to present dichotomies, a view that has, in turn, engendered identity crises, notions of alterity, and nationalism, standpoints that are often foregrounded in literary criticism as authentically African as opposed to that of communal unity embedded here. In Stuart Crehan’s (1993, 4) evocation of an African renaissance, he observes that “African national identity is not just a new birth but a rebirth. From history we glide into myth: deep inside the bud of radical change is a very conservative worm” as I argued in “‘Spirit of Place’: Mungoshi’s Rolling World” (Gray 2007, 195).

I have striven to show that Okri’s eco-imagination propounds a mythic conjunction between humans and nature, art and science. His is a vision that penetrates deeply within—for the spirit that is wiser than the conscious self, as I argued in an earlier paper on Zimbabwe’s similarly imbued writer (Gray 2007, 195) to whom Okri seemingly pays tribute in the choice of his protagonist’s name. I refer to the late Charles Mungoshi, whose short stories in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World* (1972) and his novel, *Waiting for the Rain* (1997), resonate so harmoniously with Okri’s folktale.

In order to effect a rebirth of philosophical thought, Tymieniecka advocates “the phenomenology of life and the human creative condition” (1999, 6), a renewal of “the passions of the soul (1999, 8). Both Tymieniecka and Okri share an eco-imagination which coheres their thinking and focuses the reader’s attention on the urgency of saving our planet from ecological devastation. More importantly, Okri’s first children’s story reflects a Husserlian intuition of essences. Golaszewska articulates the interrelationships among art, ecology, and society, saying that “ecology may be an inspiration to art, which in turn may enliven pro-ecology social behaviour” (1999, 48). In turning back to nature, “Artists, through their words, stress the importance of being conscious of ecological threats (and their new aspects)” (1999, 48).

As I argued in a review of Mbembe’s *Out of the Dark Night* (Gray 2023, 18), Mbembe observes that, “‘culture’ and ‘identity’ have not lost their affective, auratic, and expressive potentials. But maybe more than ever before, marks of otherness (now called culture, identity, and

authenticity) and even meaning itself are more and more exchanged, valued, and allocated as a function of the market” (2021, 25). But he is quick to add that “the hypertechnological enframing of the life world and the growing implication of art and culture in global systems of militarization of consciousness represent major challenges to critical arts practice” (2021, 25).

What then of the real, of truth, of the creative imagination? Mbembe points to the inherent aporia and to “the troubling psychic presence of the image to the real, its capacity for double reality, its power to replace the inanimate with the animate, and its anarchic unruliness” (2021, 24). The inherent polemics are a little akin to imagining three gifted intellectuals at the Tate in London, or the Metropolitan Museum in New York, viewing the same artistic artifact—be it an impressionist Monet or one of the Benin bronzes—and coming up with diverse or even diametrically different yet equally plausible interpretations about what constitutes the real, or the truth, or the imaginary. The consequence of sustaining the metaphorical integrity of a work of art is that different readings are, to some extent at least, both manifold and valid (Gray 2023, 19).

Usefully summarising the ethical value of Okri’s folktale for, as in Aesop’s fables, all folktales are moralistic, Cock (2018, 144) observes: “Rethinking our relationship to nature involves building on Darwin’s insight that we are all connected in an intricate web of life, all part of a single ecological community.” To adapt Tymieniecka’s words (1974, 18), Okri’s phenomenological eco-imagination and sense of moral rightness evinces the subliminal passions of the *Imaginatio Creatrix* that shine a glaring light on human genesis and the crucial role of the imagination.

*Professor Emerita*

## Notes

1 A term coined by Arne Naess to describe the philosophy of ecology.

2 Commencing with mahoganies, flame trees, and jacarandas (8), we encounter, in addition to those cited, sycamores (44), conifers (45), ube and teak (46), England’s oaks (56) and the hundred-year-old ash (67), the sacred “dragon blood” anunuebe tree, and the Congo’s afrormosia (70).

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