

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*: Queer Ecogothic Africanfuturism



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Africanfuturism: A Model for Change

Around and below him the clear ocean waters roiled with strange, impossible sea life. What looked like a giant bright-red-and-white flat snake undulated by not three feet below. ‘What have you done to the ocean?’ Agu asked the manatee. Were the monsters attacking the oil rig and the supply vessel, too? These were Ayodele’s people and earthly allies? Ayodele was not only a shape-shifter, she was a liar. She hadn’t come in peace at all. He heard the sea cow’s response in his head, like a child’s voice through a mobile phone. ‘You will see,’ it said. (100)

The passage above is from Chapter 21, “The Sea Cow,” of Nnedi Okorafor’s 2014 novel, *Lagoon*. It is a short half-page chapter that utilizes the gothic trope of the monster to draw attention to an issue plaguing the Anthropocene. Agu asks why monsters are attacking an oil rig and supply vessel, an indication of the pollution threatening the Atlantic Ocean’s ecosystems off the coast of Lagos, the Gulf of Guinea. ‘Lagos’ is Portuguese for lagoon and refers to the body of water that flows into the ocean in the Nigerian capital city’s harbor. While Lagos’s lagoon is a habitat for a plethora of aquatic organisms, it has an infamous history of being polluted by urban and industrial waste. Pollution is at the root of the conflict of the novel. Extraterrestrials that appear monstrous to Lagosians have in part come to remedy this pollution. The so-called monsters in *Lagoon* appear as queer hybrids and sometimes shapeshifters, lifeforms produced via alien sea life evolutions, and sometimes mythological beings that manifest themselves in and interact with the material world. Led by the shapeshifting alien peacekeeper, Ayodele, who calls herself a space ambassador, a marine biologist (Adaora), Nigerian soldier (Agu), and a Ghanaian hip-hop artist (Anthony) collaborate to awaken the humans of Lagos to their monstrous treatment of one another, other lifeforms, ecosystems, and their endangerment of the Earth. These extraterrestrials seek symbiosis with Earth’s lifeforms to correct humanity’s unsustainable ways of living and being. This imagined future thus demands significant adaptation and change for sustainability, a society cognizant and respectful of biodiversity, and the dismantlement of distinctions and boundaries. Importantly, this futurity is steeped in Nigerian culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view. *Lagoon* is part of a genre Okorafor calls Africanfuturism, a term coined in her 2019 blog, *Africanfuturism Defined*. There, Okorafor writes,

“Africanfuturism is similar to ‘Afrofuturism’ in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture,

history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa” (qtd. in Talabi).

Okorafor’s Africanfuturism puts Nigeria’s capital Lagos front and center as the setting for a story that challenges readers to ponder fears about both difference and the future, a future escalating towards unsustainable ecologies. Through an examination of the way that the novel utilizes a queer ecological framework, I argue that Okorafor’s *Lagoon* can be read as an ecogothic text in the way that it utilizes the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural to resolve pressing environmental crises. *Lagoon* offers a rich commentary on queer agency, Gothic ecologies, and Africanfuturism—what I call queer ecogothic Africanfuturism. Before turning to my critique, I will first provide a brief overview of the queer Gothic, the ecogothic, and queer ecology. The intention is to clarify how these theoretical frameworks inform my analysis of queer ecogothic Africanfuturism.

Queer (Gothic) Ecologies

In *Queer Gothic* (2006), George E. Haggerty reminds readers that the Gothic “offers a historical mode of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology” (2). The Gothic is political. The Gothic is often queer. Gothic tropes have been used to explore fears and anxieties not only about queer difference but also ecologies and Nature. Though there are literal queer characters in *Lagoon*, ‘queer’ also acts as a metaphor for the monstrous Other. The Gothic trope of the monster (and monstrosity itself) has a long history with not only human and nonhuman ecologies, but also with queerness and queer identity in the ways that the monster and monstrousness work through fears and anxieties. Okorafor’s protagonists’ supernatural powers are in part queered as the novel’s plot evolves to resolve its conflict. Alien lifeforms are also queered as both Other and hybrid lifeforms that Lagosians perceive as a threat. The novel moreover literally showcases queer characters being subjected to hate and violence, such as the eventually murdered cross-dressing character, Jacobs, as well as other members of the LGBT student group called The Black Nexus. Many of the fears and anxieties permeating Lagos are rooted in what is different, what is unusual, and what is queer, and this perspective offers rich possibilities for a queer Gothic critique of the novel.

Additionally, *Lagoon* can be read through an ecogothic lens because of the ways it mitigates anxieties about sustainability. Andrew Smith and William Hughes posit in their introduction to *Ecogothic* (2013) that the Gothic appears to be a form well placed to provide a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory, and political processes because of the Gothic’s ability to capture and reveal human anxieties (8). Writing about ecofeminism in this volume, Emily Carr argues that “women’s Gothic fiction has undermined fictions of the human and nonhuman, the natural and unnatural by creating worlds in which the everyday is

collapsed with the nightmarish” (qtd. in Smith and Hughes 12). Carr posits that in much Gothic fiction written by women, “distortion, dislocation and disruption become the norm, and [in] the domestic and grotesque, the alluring and terrible coexist” (qtd. in Smith and Hughes 12). Okorafor’s *Lagoon* uses an alien invasion plot to not only undermine fictions about the human and nonhuman (via the monstrous) and the natural and unnatural (via the concept of queerness) by collapsing the everyday with the nightmarish, for instance, in the ways that the novel uses the Gothic motifs of terror and horror to showcase corruption, violence, patriarchal hypermasculinity, and the exploitation of resources as problems plaguing Lagos, but the extraterrestrials also importantly come to Lagos to offer the Earth solutions to these problems that are reminiscent of queer ecologies, namely to embrace difference through coalition, symbiosis, transformation, change, and adaptation.

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2016) notes that queer ecology aims to “reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, and environmental politics in light of queer theory” to highlight “the complexity of contemporary biopolitics” by drawing “important connections between the material and cultural dimensions of environmental issues” and insisting “on an articulatory practice in which sex and nature are understood in light of multiple trajectories of power and matter.” Put simply, queer ecology asks us to abandon biophobia and embrace biophilia, or what Edward O. Wilson defines as “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (85) in order to understand interconnections that include but are not exclusionary to sexual, gender, and racial diversity. In sum, queer ecology insists that life is sociobiopolitical and further emphasizes that coalitions are urgent for sustainability. Queer ecology offers a unique lens through which one can examine the Gothic in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*. For example, though most humans in *Lagoon* see the alien invaders as monsters, and, in turn, fear and persecute them for their queerness, it is the aliens who offer humanity sustainable ecologies. By embracing difference and respecting interconnectivity, the novel’s aliens posit that humans can best learn to empathize with and sustain life. A framework of queer ecologies might then examine symbiotic relationships through the ways that biodiverse lifeforms realize interdependent, empathetic coalitions based upon affinity, adaptation, and collaboration to sustain ecosystems. Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, I posit, showcases solutions invested in both an ecogothic and queer ecological framework that work in tandem. The monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural, for instance, act as plot devices that resolve the novel’s conflict of unsustainability as the novel features extraterrestrials that offer coalitions, symbiosis, transformation, adaptation, and change as solutions. *Lagoon* is a novel that leads readers to ponder a need for sustainable ecologies, and it does so with Gothic tropes often used to examine queerness (the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural). It is to these Gothic tropes I now turn.

Gothic Monsters, Symbiotic Becomings

“Here there be Monsters.”

This phrase appears twice in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, first in Chapter 44, narrated by Udide Okwanka, the giant spider trickster narrator aka master weaver of tales from Igbo folklore, and secondly as the title of Chapter 48, a chapter that showcases a giant alien-swordfish hybrid, among other sea creatures attacking a boat envoy of superhuman ambassadors to the Nigerian President and the alien ambassador Ayodele, as they attempt to meet the alien Elders on the waters (228-229, 241-247). In the first instance, the monsters referred to are sea creatures, alien hybrids, and the humans who perpetuate mayhem above ground and out of the sea. In the second instance, the monsters referred to are solely the angry antagonists of the sea (the creatures of the sea that have endured human toxins and mistreatment). Extraterrestrials are an obvious form of the monster showcased in the novel. However, Nigerian folklore and mythical entities (often read as monstrous, queer figures) also surface to remedy the novel’s conflict, a conflict that has influenced Earth’s unsustainable ecologies. Unique among Okorafor’s monsters are the Road Monster that calls itself the Bone Collector, a sentient stretch of the Lagos-Benin highway that attacks humans; the subterranean Igbo spider narrator, Udide Okwanka; and the Yoruba trickster god of language and the crossroads, Legba, who is recast as a technological 419 internet scammer expert (but also features as the spirit form of Papa Legba from Nigerian folklore). The novel’s four protagonists are also cast as monstrous in that they are supernatural and/or have superhuman abilities not unlike those that characterize Marvel’s X-Men. Ayodele shapeshifts from Nigerian human forms to a monkey, a sea creature, and a miasma, gas, or mist, which is in the end inhaled by the inhabitants of Lagos. The marine biologist, Adaora, who Lagosians often refer to as a “marine witch,” can create a shield around herself and breath under water through gills that form as needed. The Nigerian soldier, Agu, has superhuman strength that can result in an incredible force that can kill upon impact. The Ghanaian hip-hop artist, Anthony, has a voice that can project deadly vibrations and sounds (a gift referred to in the novel as *The Rhythm*). These attributes are used to save Lagos from itself and to realize symbiosis with Ayodele’s alien species.

The novel moreover alludes to several staple Gothic monsters that include witches, zombies, ghosts, vampires, bats, spiders, and sea creatures, some of which are alien hybrid shapeshifters much like the protagonist Ayodele herself. There are clearly Gothic tropes at play in *Lagoon*, many of which one can argue are queered attributes, but the important takeaway from Okorafor’s use of monstrous tropes is that they are used to remedy an ecological crisis and other human monstrosities such as murder, rape, theft, corruption, and further violent acts that are often committed by religious leaders through acts of homophobia or transphobia. Adaora, Agu, Anthony, and, eventually, Nigeria’s president, form a coalition with Ayodele and her alien species. Together, they offer symbiosis and change.

The uncanny is also utilized to draw attention to queered characters that promote adaptation, symbiosis, and change. The Gothic has a long history with the uncanny. There are several uncanny

tropes in the novel varying from the alien invasion trope to human/nonhuman/alien hybrids to shapeshifting lifeforms and animated objects. These tropes evoke a sense of the uncanny while at the same time serving as plot devices that move the story towards the Ecocene. Perhaps the most obvious example is that of Ayodele herself. Adaora notes a physical resemblance between herself and Ayodele, and Adaora's character and identity also bears a striking resemblance to Ayodele. Furthermore, though Ayodele appears in human form as a Nigerian woman, her physical attributes are strangely reminiscent of a spider. In some ways, Adaora and Ayodele are like doppelgangers because of the ways they bear a similar phenotype, possess supernatural powers, and are chastised by Lagosians as demons and/or witches. Ayodele comes as an ambassador for the extraterrestrials that seek to resolve Earth's existential crises set in motion by humanity's violent and unsustainable ways of life, but Lagosians believe these aliens have invaded Earth because they seek harm. This could not be further from the truth.

These extraterrestrials have been watching the Earth and humans for quite some time, living as hybrid creatures beneath the sea and perhaps even producing the shapeshifting lifeforms that the novel showcases in its protagonists, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony. Indeed, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony do not realize their full supernatural abilities until after initial contact, and several characters emerge only as a result of the conflict that these extraterrestrials seek to resolve—that is, the conflict produced by the Anthropocene. At one point, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony are transformed underwater into animal-human hybrids in transit to take the Nigerian President to The Elders (the alien leaders sent to resolve Earth's conflict). These transformed selves are both uncanny and queer, yet are used to realize peace and symbiosis. Moreover, the Bone Collector (constructed of a highway), Udide Okwanka (who resembles a spider), and Legba are uncanny figures whose purpose is to tell the novel's story and see the realization of its plot. The novel insinuates that though the Bone Collector, Udide Okwanka, and Legba have always been watching over Lagos unseen, their purpose has always been for this very moment (to resolve the novel's conflict of the unsustainable present). While these uncanny (often supernatural) characters in the novel are feared as monsters, they actually stand in as metaphors for the real monstrosities perpetuated by human beings, as humans rampage, murder, persecute one another, and pollute the sea with toxins.

The supernatural is utilized to showcase transformation, but also enables the novel's resolution. Queer agency, coalitions, biodiversity, symbiosis, transformation, change, and adaptation are all aspects of queer ecology that are realized through the supernatural. While Ayodele is frequently admonished for her supernatural abilities and often labeled a witch or demon, she consistently reinforces and promotes adaptation as well as the aliens' purpose as change. When Father Oke, a character who routinely uses Christianity to persecute anyone outside of what he perceives as normative, asks Ayodele if she is a witch, she responds, "I am not a witch; I am alien to your planet; I am an alien. . . . We change. With our bodies, and we change everything around us" (46). The mantras "I am change" and "We are change" are often-repeated phrases in the novel, and these phrases are both literal and metaphoric. Ayodele's shapeshifting

is a literal form of her change, as when she transforms into objects and lifeforms. She says, “We take in matter . . . What we can find. Dust, stone, metal, elements. We alter whatever substance we find to suit us” (38). However, what her species promotes most is overarching change. When Agu asks Ayodele if it is a coincidence that all four protagonists that have been brought together have names that begin with the letter “A,” she indicates that it is not a coincidence, stating, “We are change. . . . The sentiments were already there. I know nothing about those other things” (39). As the novel progresses and Ayodele is endlessly targeted for her queered essence and supernatural abilities, this essence and these abilities are what enable her and the other protagonists to promote transformation of Earth from an age of the Anthropocene to the Ecocene via an alien-human coalition that will value biodiversity. Endangered ecosystems are to be respected. Extinct animals will live once again. Alien-human and alien-nonhuman hybrids will remain. The fossil fuel-driven society that has contributed to much of Lagos’s pollution (and that of the entire Earth) will cease to exist. The extraterrestrials will provide Earth with a new technology to remedy its existential crises. The world must become symbiotic.

Conclusion

Okorafor’s *Lagoon* utilizes the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural to critique the queer, the human and nonhuman, and the natural and unnatural through the ways that it collapses the everyday with the nightmarish to capture and reveal human anxieties about difference, hierarchy, and sustainability. In these ways, *Lagoon* is not only quite Gothic but also traverses the queer ecogothic. Okorafor’s novel juxtaposes queered Nigerian humans and aliens, scientific thought and Christian evangelism, and the Capitalocene and Ecocene in a postcolonial Nigeria brimming with a laundry list of Gothic elements, including power, corruption, patriarchal hypermasculinity, religious violence, terror and horror, the monstrous, the uncanny, and the supernatural, in order to bring to the forefront and remedy postcolonial and ecological crises. Aliens have often been utilized as metaphors for difference, for instance in tales of reverse colonization or as queered characters that challenge humans to change. Yet, Okorafor’s tale utilizes Gothic tropes in a unique way, both to showcase the dangerous future into which humans stray and to offer a solution—symbiosis. Symbiosis is an instrumental tenet of queer ecology. Queer ecologies offer a framework for queering the ecogothic that enable the resolution of issues plaguing the Anthropocene as humans collectively turn toward the Ecocene. Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* utilizes a queer Gothic ecology to showcase an Africanfuturism that moves towards an investment in the Ecocene. *Lagoon* shows how Gothic elements such as the uncanny, the supernatural, and the monstrous can be utilized to imagine positive change. Importantly, Okorafor’s Ecocene envisions a coalitional future of biodiverse, symbiotic becomings that are invested in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view. Here African identity empowers queer agency, which in turn enriches Gothic ecologies. Queer Ecogothic Africanfuturism promotes Ayodele’s mantra, “I am change.” To move towards the Ecocene, humans must not fear but embrace fluidity, queerness, transformation, and adaptation.

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