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## "Refuel your future": Asphalt Afrofuturism and the Slow Violence of Water and Oil in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* by Gemma Field

**Abstract**

This paper outlines a petrocritical reading of Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, an Afrofuturist tale of alien invasion of Lagos, Nigeria. Petrocriticism, originally the study of the oil encounter in literature that has widened to include all aspects – political, economic, aesthetic, phenomenological, etc. – of its representation, is helpful in discussing Nigerian texts. Nigeria is one of the world's biggest producers of oil, and like many other countries endowed with black gold, has a dubious colonial history has become in the postcolonial present what Rob Nixon refers to as the ―resource curse‖. Beyond the adverse environmental consequences of oil, it is implicated in political trickery in the West and despotism elsewhere, what Timothy Mitchell describes as ―carbon democracy‖. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to everyday life, so Imre Szeman uses the term ―petromodernity. *Lagoon* problematises this condition from its first page when a swordfish imbibed with alien powers attacks an offshore oil rig, a tension that culminates in the Bone Collector, the man-eating motorway – the physical manifestation of the text's preoccupation. Alongside the novel's aliens are elements of urban fantasy – the road monster predates the aliens (and Lagos) - and mythology, utilising icons from Nigerian folklore. The Bone Collector is only sated when it consumes an alien, pointing to the impossibility of an indigenous solution to the issues raised by the text. Okorafor's combination of these elements attempts to resolve the text's oil-based anxiety - to imagine what Gerry Canavan calls ―petrofuture speaks to Nigeria's political difficulty in extricating itself from the iniquitous structures of petro-imperialism.

*Lagoon* tells the story of an alien invasion, not in New York or Los Angeles or London or even Johannesburg, that unfolds onto the shores of Lagos, Nigeria's largest city. The novel playfully subverts the tools and tropes of the alien invasion branch of the science fiction genre; rehashing a narrative we have come to expect from *War of the Worlds* to *Independence Day* to *Pacific Rim*, in short, a tired trope, through an Afrofuturist framework that synthesises West African history and myth with fantastic futurism. Against the ultra-urban, albeit dysfunctional backdrop of her native Lagos, Okorafor employs this framework to draw attention to the consequences of neo-imperial developmentalism in Nigeria, chiefly, the deleterious, even poisonous, politics surrounding the country's involvement oil industry that Rob Nixon (2011) refers to as "slow violence".

*Lagoon* follows the alien ambassador Ayodele as she establishes contact with an assortment of aquatic and terrestrial earthlings; the various intersecting plots that comprise the novel following characters (human, animal and supernatural) who undergo fundamental changes because of the "radical new possibilities" (269) that Ayodele and her people bring. Ayodele promises that her people have no malevolent designs for Earth, asking only to assimilate and offering miraculous technology. The aliens are a catalyst for change in the city of Lagos and its waters, plunging both into chaos while bringing forth new forms of life. Agu, Anthony and Adoara, three humans with extraordinary powers, are thrown together by indigenous supernatural forces. They discover Ayodele's nature and determine to get her to the President of Nigeria, overcoming a variety of fantastic and institutional obstacles to achieve their goal.

The reader also meets non-human characters with rich histories, quirks, and agendas, including a "monstrous" swordfish determined to destroy an offshore oil rig that is given the power to do so by the aliens, and a sentient, predatory highway that calls itself the "Bone Collector". This analysis will employ close reading of the rig and the road to demonstrate the political and environmental dimensions of the oil crisis have been radically re-envisioned in the novel.

Afrofuturism is a broad category of aesthetic and intellectual projects that take as their frame of reference the cultural products and history of the African diaspora, alongside African history and iconography, undertaking to envision and realise ideas of the future.

In her seminal text on the genre, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Ytasha Womack defines the project as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (23). She defines it in terms of content and epistemology, cultural production that takes indigenous mythology and cosmology alongside present and future technologies to envision, describe and realise the future. It "combines elements of science-fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magical realism with non-Western beliefs…re-envisioning of the past alongside speculation about the future" (24). Academic study of the named field began with Mark Derry's 1994 essay "Black to the Future", Womack traces the aesthetic and ideology to jazz and funk pioneers like Sun Ra, George Clinton and P-Funk, who employed space age theatrics (that we would now associate more with Lady Gaga) and political lyrics with a cosmic theme to conscientise African Americans, tapping into the collective sense of alienation.

Womack's definition of the project is also activist: encompassing "the role of science and technology in the black experience overall" (29), from Jimi Hendrix's aural innovations to the underacknowledged roles of African American women like Katharine Johnson and Henrietta Lacks in the quest for knowledge of outer space and the human body. The parallels between African diasporic experiences and the SF tropes of abduction, alienation and dystopia have also proved generative for critical discussion and cultural production in the field.

Kodwo Eshun's essay "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism", in true SF style, set out as a thought experiment: from a future thousands of years from now where archaeologists from the enlightened and technologically superior African nation exhume and examine the cultural products of our present. "They would be struck", he says, "by how much Afrodiasporic subjectivity in the twentieth century constituted itself through the cultural project of recovery" (287); the need to demonstrate a black presence in culture and society over time and space.

Eshun suggests that the impetus of Black Atlantic intellectual world has been to "establish the historical character of black culture" (288), a status denied by the Western imperial intellectual establish-

ment of our era. "Imperial racism has denied black subjects the right to belong to the Enlightenment project" (288), he argues.

He suggests "situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity" (288): assembling an arsenal of "countermemories" (288) to resist the colonially inscribed past and taking ownership of the future. The psychological dislocation, existential chaos, dehumanization and alienation widely held to be the hallmarks of twentieth century modernism, were experienced much earlier by the victims of the Middle Passage and their descendants: the "founding trauma" (288) of African American subjectivity. These countermemories constitute "an ethical commitment to history, the dead and the forgotten, the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyse and assemble counterfutures" (288) to the hegemonic historical archive that has erased all accounts of that founding trauma.

The emergence of the futures industry, the collective infrastructure that profits from "the envisioning, management and delivery of reliable futures" (289) – from stockbroking to Silicone Valley to election results, has become increasingly prominent in determining the course of development in Africa. Who gets to live in this future, and who is relegated to the past, is a central question of Afrofuturism. The value of information in this future-now is paramount: it "circulates as an increasingly valuable commodity" (290). For Eshun, "Afrofuturism's first priority is to recognise that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futuristic projection" (291), from weather to resources to migration to politics and conflict. There is always a reliable trade in market projections of Africa's socio-economic crises.

The paradoxical "resource curse" that blights oil-exporting nations bestows bountiful mineral wealth on a polity, but undiversified dependence on its revenue weakens the rest of the economy and encourages rent-seeking, as the "highly concentrated revenue stream is readily diverted away from social and infrastructural investments and into offshore bank accounts" (Nixon70, emphasis mine). Political power is predicated on "controlling the central resource [rather than] on strengthening civic expectations"; consequently, "national cohesion and stability may be jeopardized by exaggerated inequalities" (Nixon, 70) as the revenues from the nations natural wealth is siphoned off by Western companies. *Lagoon*'s Lagos is a

prime example of the "soul-crushing corruption" that accompanies oil-fuelled development: the army is a law unto itself, ordinary people eek out a living running 419 scams, but most significantly, the country's roads have been neglected to such an extent that the motorway begins to prey upon living creatures.

The Niger Delta and the coast hold large oil reserves, but Nigeria's mineral wealth belies a "resource curse" of persistent political instability and a legacy of widespread environmental devastation, illness, poor service delivery and corruption concomitant to development and industrialisation that Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence". *Lagoon* highlights the violent dysfunction in two key moments: on the offshore rig, the site of oil extraction, and the predatory highway, a combination of asphalt and oil-powered vehicles. These dramatic moments in the text call attention to the environmental and social problems of Nigeria's oil-based society.

Okorafor's aliens are markedly empathetic and considerate towards the natural environment and non-human actors; they "ask such good questions" (6) of the marine life, immediately establishing a rapport with the fish, pointing to an alternative to neo-imperial economics and western philosophy: the agency accorded the swordfish rejects traditional notions of subjectivity, she starts the novel and sets the whole series of events in motion by attacking the oil rig. When she encounters the alien ambassadors she asks for the power to realise her goal of destroying the rig once and for all, and "they make it so" (7).

Ayodele's apposition with indigenous mythology and cosmology suggests that these aliens are people too, not the monstrous extraterrestrial conquerors come to do to humankind what we do to each other best (that is, subjugate, dehumanise and exploit). Upon examining her, Adoara remarks that Ayodele "looked like a member of her own family", and Ayodele's appearance textually references Mami Wata, the "pantheon of African water creatures" (Womack 71), says renowned Afrofuturist Ytasha Womack. Half human and half sea creature, they are "bringers of divine law" in West African mythology. Contrary to what we expect from traditional SF, these aliens offer redemption and renewal: a chance to make a complete break with dirty sources of energy and repair the seemingly irreparable damage done to the non-human world.

There is much to be gleaned from a close reading of Chapter 19, titled "Offshore", in which Agu and the swordfish come to a head in the shadow of the oil rig. By bringing Agu and his fellow soldiers to defend the rig from the sea creatures who have begun to violently resist the human imposition on their world, Okorafor is making a clear link between interests of international oil companies and the Nigerian government. As the swordfish reminds us, the rig is the alien in this ecosystem, an unwanted human imposition on a slick, wet world; a representation that is strengthened by Agu's description of the "decades-old monster, a hulking, unnatural contraption of production facilities, drilling rigs and crew quarters…usually a place of noise and activity" (95). Agu and two fellow soldiers sail to the rig to check for signs of life: the vessel has ceased operation and its occupants brutally slaughtered by alien-enhanced marine life who are reclaimed their territory from poisonous human imposition. Agu's fellow soldiers are ripped apart by the razor-sharp fins of performance-enhanced flying fish, and only his powers save Agu from the same fate.

The oil rig is a site of slow violence brought viscerally to life. Typically, the brutality towards the non-human world is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Invading a country with artillery and military personnel, launching missile strikes or dispersing chemical weapons, are actions easily labelled as violent – such as the Biafran and Vietnam Wars, where the damage done to bodies could be readily linked to military imposition; they have a beginning and an end. But the long-term consequences of Agent Orange and British Petroleum on rural Vietnam and the Niger Delta – poisoned soil and failing crops; undrinkable water and unbreathable air; birth defects and cancers – that have fundamentally assaulted human and ecological matter, are discounted and disregarded; time and remoteness distance consequences from their causes. The textual presence of the rig redresses that displacement in a manner that leaves the international politics of off-shore drilling quite clear: The "spidery structure made of concrete and rusty steel, anchored firmly to the seabed by steel beams" (95) resembles a parasite leeching off a host, or at a molecular level, like a virus clamping onto

the host cell's receptors. Slow violence is marked by displacements – temporal, economic, geographic, rhetorical and technological – that "simplify violence… [and] smooth the way for amnesia", minimizing the human and environmental costs of "turbo capitalism" (Nixon 7). The slippery and unspectacular nature of slow violence poses representational and strategic challenges; Nixon posits that the aesthetic response to the crisis "entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (10); to highlight the "representational challenges and imaginative dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but by the imperceptible changes whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes" (Nixon 11). By making the site of oil extraction a site of swift and dramatic violence, violence against humans by natural forces, the text reframes the slow violence of offshore drilling as inextricably dramatic and urgent crises.

Okorafor makes the aliens' position as the remedy to oil's representation slippage clear through Ayodele's broadcasted speech when the alien says that her people "have come to bring you together and refuel your future…your land is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart" (113). The aliens position themselves in opposition to the oil, the fuel of violence. They are here to "nurture your world" (113) they are going to expunge and redeem the consequences of that conflict – the environmental devastation caused by oil which have been extensively represented in the text, and the corruption and dysfunction that accompanies its extraction.

While the gruesome scene on the rig dramatizes the slow violence of oil extraction, the predatory highway that calls itself the "Bone Collector" calls attention to the serious consequences of social dysfunction in an oil-powered society. Public roadways enable mobility, but it is the responsibility of the state to maintain them to keep them safe for motorists and pedestrians. The Lagos-Benin Expressway is "full of ghosts", a "death-trap" (189), a symptom of corruption and inequality, in contrast to the 'Angelic' roads in affluent Lagosian suburbs.

This "Road Monster", like the swordfish, is based on actual events. Okorafor was inspired to write about the crisis of Nigeria's roads after a horrific accident on the Lagos-Benin Expressway, the

city's major thoroughfare. The hijacking of a luxury bus gone horribly awry, which is retold by a fictional eye-witness. He describes "mangled, twisted bodies all over the goddamn road…[it] reeked of blood and fouler things…torn up bodies littering the roads, blood, intestines, skid marks of skin, twisted torsos, body parts torn off…a brutal scene" (204). His account drives home a visceral quality that slow violence typically lacks; the vessel of human subjectivity deconstructed into its meaty components by the unstoppable velocity of the motor-industrial complex.

This portion of the Lagos-Benin Expressway "has named itself the Bone Collector…it mostly collects human bones, and the bones of human vehicles" (120). The title is ominous, the Road does not find throwaway bones, it actively accumulates them through accidents and negligence.

The predatory representation of the road is emphasised by its carnivorous greed as it "grumbled like an enormous empty stomach", and uttered "a deep, guttural growl that intensified into a roar…the angry roar of a creature denied its meal" (171). Here again the novel destabilises traditional subjectivity in according a dangerous agency to this element of the built environment that is typically taken for granted. The antagonism of this man-made creature towards its creators speaks to the text's petro-anxiety – the dangers of oil to the environment – all the environments – has been made abundantly clear. But it is the Bone Collector that emphatically dramatizes the dangers of the oil industry to humans, the fact that we are using it to destroy our true habitat is not sufficiently upsetting to make us desist – the environment actively preying upon us is much more effective at driving the message home. The slow violence of oil – the extreme weather conditions accompanying global warming are not threatening enough, so the hazards of the petro-discourse are radically re-envisioned as the monster turned on its makers as an irrefutable and immediate danger.

Shortly after Ayodele heals the president, she allows herself to be killed by a mob and disintegrates. By "inhaling her essence" (271) all of humanity becomes "a bit…alien" (268) and the novel ends on a utopic note, with the waters reclaimed and revitalized by their denizens, the president decides that oil will be expunged from the Nigerian economy, because the aliens will replace it with something

cleaner and more powerful. Ayodele's sacrifice infects the humans with a new way of thinking, an Afrofuturist epistemology, that the President's speech makes clear. Nigeria has "rolled through decades of corruption and internal struggle" (277) that could only be addressed because of the alien "tipping point" (277). "This kind of transitional shift", that has come about as a result of the alien arrival and the proliferation of changes they bring, is a "cause for celebration, not panic" according to the President. The President tells his people that the aliens bring with them "new technology…[and] fresh ideas that we [Nigeria] can combine with our own" (277). He concludes that Nigeria "will be powerful again" (278), although if oil is removed from the equation, the form and structure of the power he hopes for is completely unknown.

Utilitising traditional African iconography and mythology in concert with radical futurity, Okorafor has produced a remarkable novel that challenges the assumptions and tropes of mainstream SF. *Lagoon* draws attention to political, social and environmental conditions in Nigeria. The intense, visceral quality of the two moments in the text I have mentioned establish strong textual links between oil and violences fast and slow, and the consequences of developmentalism. Dramatically re-envisioning the conditions of Nigeria's social, political and economic present to make connections between environmental devastation enabled by international corruption, and the silent trauma experienced by humans and animals in the Global South.

Eshun makes clear that envisioning the future is the first step to claiming a stake in it. If he is correct that "SF is now and research and development for the futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow" (291), then *Lagoon* can be situated within the catalogue of African Diasporic counterfutures. It comprises part of the intellectual and aesthetic project that seeks to redress racial and imperial imbalance in the future and the present.

**Works Cited**

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