Feminine-Bodied Voices and the Nonhuman in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*

Abstract:

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) regularly establishes and crosses boundaries. It is a novel of change, from cellular to societal, and those changes are largely sparked and continued by feminine-bodied characters. Because of the interplay between human and nonhuman beings, the term 'women' is too narrow for this novel. The text shows how theories involving feminism and the nonhuman complicate and expand on each other. The idea of 'otherness' is central to the theories and the text, challenging more traditional constructions of mankind, the reader, and agency. Three characters in particular, the swordfish, Adaora, and Ayodele, embody boundary-crossing identities and changes. Ultimately, they represent the three acts of the novel, welcome, awakening, and symbiosis, and they demonstrate that because everything is connected, humanity must be careful to act in harmony with the nonhuman for the sake of all involved.

Feminine-bodied voices play essential roles in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014). It is a novel of change from the cellular to societal levels, and those changes begin and rest on characters coded as women across multiple species. Their interactions across barriers, especially human-nonhuman, are crucial to sparking change and development. In Okorafor's *Lagoon*, feminine-bodied creatures, through their dual otherness and embodying the text's three acts, demonstrate the unavoidable connections between human and nonhuman, as well as the vast changes that stem from attitudes towards those interactions.

My terminology is chosen carefully and with attention to detail, and it deserves some explanation. Traditionally, literature reflects societal anthropocentrism, favouring specifically the European male. As Rosi Braidotti writes, moving beyond anthropocentrism 'is easier done than said

in the language and methodological conventions of critical theory.'[1] Both this novel and theory about what comes after anthropocentrism wrestle with the limitations of language. In *Lagoon*, characters cross many boundaries, including that of species. It would be incorrect to label the swordfish, Adaora, and Ayodele 'women' in light of the fact that none is simply a human woman, and that is a distinctly human term; it does not necessarily apply. Instead, I will be using terms like 'feminine' to indicate that these characters use she/her pronouns and either perceive themselves or are perceived by others as woman-like. Stacy Alaimo writes about the oft-assumed connection between femininity and nature, and how '[f]eminist rearticulations of female natures are […] messy, as they carry with them such overwhelming cultural baggage.'[2] Okorafor grapples with this issue in writing her feminine-bodied characters because they are interwoven with the nonhuman. I argue that this representation gives them more power due to their two kinds of otherness, feminine and nonhuman embodiments, though it does somewhat play into established gendered expectations.

By 'nonhuman' I mean to indicate everything from flora and fauna to the air to the ocean. This language is othering and groups disparate things together, but that is a consequence of where our language is right now. In Eurocentric Humanism, 'sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others […] are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies.'[3] Women, people of colour, and all elements of what we call nature fall into a hierarchy dominated by the white, human man. *Lagoon* moves beyond that mindset, and the term 'nonhuman' is intended to do the same. The swordfish, Adaora, and Ayodele are all feminine-bodied and something other than human, making their otherness double. Gibson Ncube argues that the novel 'collapses all binaries and presents a space of alterity in which difference is welcomed and not denigrated.'[4] While an optimistic conclusion, I argue that employing the 'other' in established binaries is the key to the novel's messaging; rather

[1] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 67.
[2] Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 179.
[3] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 15.
[4] Gibson Ncube, '"Human Beings Have a Hard Time Relating to That Which Does Not Resemble Them": Queering Normativity in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*', *Scrutiny2*, 25 (2020), 69-81 (p. 79).

than ignoring binaries, progress relies on acknowledging them, their effects, and the potential to do better. The swordfish's, Adaora's, and Ayodele's feminine and nonhuman identities are crucial to their roles in *Lagoon*.

The character of the swordfish opens the novel and has the last word, besides the narrator. This foregrounding of a feminine-bodied creature sets a certain tone and expectation of challenging binaries. Alaimo raises the issue that 'speaking for nature can be yet another form of silencing, as nature is blanketed in the human voice. Even a feminist voice is nonetheless human.'[5] The novel is necessarily a human product, so this tension arises as Okorafor writes nonhuman narrators. In the case of the swordfish, the human voice emphasises her feelings about and response to human intrusion, but that does not mean her only purpose is to centre the human. Although Act I is called Welcome, the swordfish is anything but welcoming to humans. 'She is angry' immediately.[6] Humans have come and damaged her home, her domain, '*[h]er* waters' (3). This inner feminine rage pushes her to take action and pierce the oil hose, hoping the humans will go away. That change is not enough, though. She makes contact with the aliens, who welcome her and grant her greatest wish. Her skin becomes 'impenetrable' and 'golden like the light the New People give off'; her spear, eyes, and size change, but most notably she gains the ability to control her spinal cartilage spikes 'as if she is some ancestral creature from the deepest ocean caves of old' (6). She has so completely transformed into a being that belongs outside of the present that '[s]he is a monster' now (6). An overarching story of change begins with an incredible shapeshift that at first seems nowhere near humanity but for the oil hose, which is the catalyst of her change. The novel returns to her in the end, where she is appreciating the patterns of her life without human interference, for she was able 'to make the dry creatures go away for good' (290). Humanity's absence allows her to be free and swim away. She is content. She, an animal presented like a woman, has pushed back against human, male

[5] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 182.
[6] Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), p. 3. All further references will be in brackets.

domination. Yet, her story represents the positive effects of one species, the aliens, welcoming another, her. The swordfish-turned-monster defies language, and her full-body transformation is the beginning and end of a novel of change.

Adaora's twofold otherness is not evident from the start. At first, Adaora exists as only one 'other' category: woman. At the core of her mindset, she is a marine biologist, and science is the lens through which she views the world. After her first marine encounter, she immediately brings Ayodele and the men to her home laboratory to run tests. Although many people have some form of office or work area in their homes, there is something striking about how extensive hers is and how she seems to see the lab as her home more than the family setting upstairs, contradicting gendered expectations regarding maternal instincts. She reflects that '[w]hen she was afraid, nervous or uncomfortable, all she had to do was focus on the science to feel balanced again' (23). Unfortunately for her, this refuge fails. She is able to see characteristics of Ayodele, but she cannot label and understand her in the usual categories. Later in the novel, when the cast of characters is out on the water, Adaora 'shudder[s]' because 'what she'd just seen didn't have a name' (239). The encyclopaedic knowledge that is integral to her job is not universally applicable. Her body and mindset drastically change by the end of the novel, but her connection to science is never severed, despite its limitations. Even amidst a series of events that is wildly unlikely according to science, 'logic determined her actions' (158). Up to the moment before her powers come to fruition, the first thing she grounds herself in is '[h]er love of science and logic' (243). This part of her is important and never abandoned, but she must go beyond these boundaries of understanding. Braidotti highlights the fact that '[s]cience itself […] is far from immune from its own forms of dogmatism' and 'the much-celebrated objectivity of science has also been shown to be quite flawed.'[7] Because hard science deals with data and information, the tendency is to treat it as absolute, all-encompassing truth. However, science's compulsion to categorise and define everything rarely reflects daily life,

[7] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 31-2.

and there is plenty about the world that humanity does not control or comprehend. Additionally, as Nedine Moonsamy points out, the lack of visible Black women in the genre of science fiction 'delineat[es] the limits of Adaora's scientism that fails to yield results.'[8] Adaora cannot fully see Ayodele just as readers rarely see those characters. Okorafor is not suggesting that humanity abandon science, but rather expand the scope of what we label knowledge, and that includes shifting focus and research so that the centre is not always white men. Ncube writes that Okorafor is implying that 'humans possess the capacity to change the way they think' and that all that they need 'is simply an ignition.'[9] In Adaora's case, that is true. She experiences many emotions and thoughts around these encounters with the result that she is able to see science as a great tool but not enough on its own. Adaora is an accomplished Black woman in a male-dominated field and society, but she must break even more boundaries set by that society and awaken when she encounters the nonhuman in a new way in order to understand and champion the change coming to and for Nigeria.

Adaora's second layer of 'otherness' is hinted at from the start but takes nearly the entire arc of the novel to become fully embodied. Early in the narrative she thinks about how 'Lagos is in the blood' (64). This comment sounds like a metaphor, but in the context of human and nonhuman interaction, there is some literal truth to it. Physical locations deeply impact bodies and vice versa. Like the act structure of the novel, Adaora must undergo the process of welcoming Ayodele into her life, waking up to the power she has, and embracing all parts of her symbiotically. 'Awake' is the command she hears from Ayodele after the initial water incident (16). This instruction comes when she is not yet ready for it. Not until the end of the novel does Adaora share with her friends and the reader that she was born with strange physical features and the ability to swim, making her 'like a fish' (257). It is this origin that she must come to accept. Her amphibian body returns in her adulthood now that she has made this journey with Ayodele and the men involved. Ncube states that

[8] Nedine Moonsamy, 'Fish Out of Water: Black Superheroines in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*', *Transition* 129 (2020), 175-189 (p. 180).
[9] Ncube, p. 77.

the novel 'presents the destabilization of the established order through an obscuring of the lines between the human and the non-human.'[10] Adaora is the clearest example of that blurred line because she is distinctly human at the start of the novel and only later is the complicated truth revealed. She is both human and not, making her category-less. While this supports the theme of feminine-bodied characters demonstrating the change that comes through positive interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman, it is not a representation without fault. Moonsamy declares that '[t]he assertion that a more embodied animal/magical identity is a progressive affirmation of black female bodies is thus a ruse.'[11] In furthering progress toward a better relationship with the nonhuman, Okorafor others the central Black, human woman in yet another way. Moonsamy sees this as damaging because it enforces the existing gender and racial binary and power system. Both the positive and negative aspects of this representation have to be acknowledged. Moving beyond anthropocentrism should not cause harm to anyone, particularly already othered groups.

The combination of her scientific background and science-defying body makes Adaora a crucial intersection of the topics of the novel and an embodiment of the concept of awakening. She has these abilities inside of her, but she needs prompting to understand and embrace herself. When her husband calls her a '[m]arine witch,' he intends for it to be a searing insult (31). Adaora returns to this idea herself later in the novel, conceding that '[m]aybe I am a witch' (78) and '[m]y idiot husband is right' (142). Although she gradually awakens to her true self, she does not spin it in a positive light until the end when she speaks aloud that 'I am a marine witch' (280). Her awakening is not instantaneous but on-going. Moonsamy notes that Adaora's '"powers" as scientist and "witch" are never seen as mutually exclusive.'[12] Her transformation is not rejecting one version of herself in favour of another; instead, she expands her sense of self due to her expanded worldview. Hugh

[10] Ncube, p. 73.
[11] Moonsamy, p. 186.
[12] Moonsamy, p. 183.

Charles O'Connell writes that '[t]he Awakening becomes the moment for producing the new radical subjectivities that fully come into being in the Symbiosis.'[13] Adaora's character arc is centred around awakening, and her subjectivity in the end is certainly radical. Adaora's scientist, "witch", human, and amphibian skins unite in her feminine embodiment to demonstrate the importance of awakening to all elements of ourselves and the nonhuman world we inhabit.

Ayodele, the central alien character, is a complex, nonhuman creature sent to spark change. Yet, she spends most of the novel presenting as a Black, human woman. As she says, '[h]umans have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them. It's your greatest flaw.' (67). This is a commentary on humanity's deliberate as well as subconscious ignorance and dismissiveness towards the nonhuman, but it also informs her choice of body. Ncube explains that 'the human form that [Ayodele] adopts means that she is not entirely alien or foreign.'[14] Because of this, Adaora, Agu, and Anthony have an easier time accepting her. As soon as Adaora sees Ayodele, she must make a language choice: 'not "it", "her"' (16). This again highlights the limitations of language built on binaries; Ayodele does not fit. Moonsamy articulates that this 'semantic shift' shows that '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.'[15] Adaora does not shy away from the alien side of Ayodele because her physical presentation is comforting. While she appears human, her body is composed and functions differently. When she gets shot, Adaora notes that '[s]he wasn't just melting, she was *disintegrating*' (135). Later, Adaora sees that 'Ayodele blew into billions of molecules' and 'looked like she became […] mist' that 'smelled like the sea' (192). These descriptions sound different from the common science fiction tropes of computers and metals determining technology. As Moonsamy summarises, Ayodele's powers have 'a distinctly organic as opposed to mechanical quality.'[16]

[13] Hugh Charles O'Connell, '"We are change": The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 3 (2016), 291-312 (p. 310).
[14] Ncube, p. 77.
[15] Moonsamy, p. 178.
[16] Moonsamy, p. 179.

Humanity's discomfort with that puts her in danger. Ncube points to how her 'shapeshifting capabilities blur the lines of heteronormativity's stable binaries.'[17] In fact, throughout the novel she blurs several binaries: male-female, human-nonhuman, scientific-unscientific, organic-manmade. She does not fit into any categories comfortably, based on humanity's worldview. Because of this foreignness, several human men treat her as an object and cannot see her value as a being, human or not. Moonsamy also says that 'Ayodele's entrusted protectors […] are there, always, to insist on her humanity.'[18] The other lead characters must step in to protect her from danger. In the end, however, they cannot protect her from the soldiers who attack. The scene is gruesome and disgustingly human; she could change her form, but she does not. Moonsamy sees this writing as 'foreground[ing] her human and visceral vulnerability that fails to dissuade these men […] because the struggle, ultimately, is that of seeing her, and her black body, as simply human.'[19] Although for the majority of the novel Ayodele chooses a human body to be more relatable, it does not protect her because Black women are not safe, human or not.

Ayodele serves as the embodiment of change in *Lagoon*, which further pushes her into an 'other' category. She makes two important declarations that define her and her people: 'We are change' (39) and 'We *are* technology' (220). They have come to Lagos with the express purpose of interacting with the humans and nonhumans there. Unlike colonisers, they mean it when they say that they want 'to bring you together and refuel your future' as well as 'nurture your world' (113). They do not come to extract and exploit; they come to improve the lives of everyone and everything. She explains that they 'just want a home' (220). She has to specify that they are not conquerors because humans instinctively fear that the aliens will do to them what humanity already does to itself and everything around it. But that is not her goal. She grows irritated enough with the violence inflicted on and around her that she says, 'I hate humans' and 'I want nothing to do with you' (140).

[17] Ncube, p. 73.
[18] Moonsamy, p. 188.
[19] Moonsamy, p. 188.

She reflects the swordfish's frustration here, but Ayodele is won back by the humans she has gotten to know. Actually experiencing other beings shows her the complexities of them, just as it does in any relationship. After the final brutal attack inflicted on her, Ayodele tells Adaora that with her death, '[y]ou'll all be a bit…alien' (268). Ayodele becomes a fog that reaches far and wide, bringing about the change she intended through her body.

Ayodele's complex physical presentation and mutually beneficial intentions demonstrate the transformative capabilities of the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman. O'Connell argues that 'the most important utopian changes in the novel come from within the humans and their potential utopian relationship to the other elements of their world.'[20] This is an oversimplification of the event and contradicts the central message. Yes, the humans change after Ayodele's death, and that change rests on an awakening of something inside of them. However, without Ayodele's sacrifice, it would not have happened, at least not in the same way. O'Connell's perspective gives humans the ultimate power, but the text shows that change requires interaction and symbiosis. Although the act titled Symbiosis includes Ayodele's death, it shows the culmination of her efforts and paints her as the definition of symbiosis.

The swordfish, Adaora, and Ayodele are feminine embodiments of the three acts of the novel. The swordfish shows unwelcoming behaviour towards the humans due to the damage they have done, but Ayodele's people treat her well, showing the power of being welcoming to other species. Adaora shows what it means to be awakened to what is already present, as she embraces her connection to the water alongside her scientific tendencies. Ayodele brings about symbiosis in Lagos through her death and body. Alaimo states that '[w]e need not take an imaginative leap into science fiction in order to realize that we inhabit a corporeality that is never disconnected from our environment.'[21] While it is true that we do not require fiction to understand reality, fiction is a

[20] O'Connell, p. 312.
[21] Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 156.

vehicle for telling truths about reality, so the lens of science fiction can help us to understand. The various narrators in *Lagoon* show what Braidotti calls the 'structural interdependence among species.'[22] Ncube describes it as '[t]he narrative technique shapeshift[ing].'[23] Humans, animals, bodies of water, and everything else under the category of the nonhuman all have a voice because they all necessarily interact and depend on each other to varying degrees. That cannot be ignored. The question that repeatedly comes up is how we should handle this. According to O'Connell, 'rather than a reconciliation, the novel perpetuates an agnostic relationship in which all life must be regarded as such, and the subsumption of one level by another amounts to a form of neocolonialism.'[24] The novel challenges power dynamics and ends before portraying a fully realised utopia. The swordfish is happy now that the water is '"[c]lean" for sea life…which mean[s] toxic for modern, civilized, meat-eating, clean-water-drinking human beings' (248). Humanity no longer gets to control everything through colonisation of peoples and waters. Adaora learns that the line between herself and what she studies is blurred. Ayodele forms a deep-rooted connection between her people and humanity, improving both societies. These three feminine-bodied characters tell the stories of welcome, awakening, and symbiosis, communicating the message that because everything is connected, humans must be careful to act in harmony with the nonhuman for the sake of all sides.

Word Count: 3396

[22] Rosi Braidotti, 'The Contested Posthumanities', in *Conflicting Humanities*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), pp. 9-46 (p. 22).
[23] Ncube, p. 76.
[24] O'Connell, p. 306.

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