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CONVERSATION AND COMMENTARY

Desire and the Politics of Africanfuturism

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> We do not want to rule, colonize, conquer or take. We just want a home. What is it *you* want?
>
> —Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 2014

You know the story, as they tell it. The aliens arrive, bringing confusion and fear in their wake. Between moments of panic, the humans manage to articulate one question: What do you want from us? The aliens desire something; they are here to take that something from us. Even in the most friendly of alien encounters in the West, the focus is on figuring out what, exactly, it is that the aliens desire—see, for example, the film *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016).

In her African-centered retelling of first contact, Nnedi Okorafor (2014) turns this premise on its head. In doing so, she reveals the colonial assumptions hidden in the focus on what invading aliens desire (Rieder, 2008); she also fundamentally reconfigures what the future is—and thus what it can be (Eshun, 2003; Muñoz, 2009). Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* chronicles alien arrival in the ocean outside of Lagos, Nigeria. The story is not about what the aliens want or about conquest but rather revolves around aliens joining an already-vibrant community and activating its latent desires. "*We are guests who wish to become citizens* … here" (Okorafor, 2014, p. 111; emphasis in original), the aliens explain. They ask the beings of Lagos, "What is it *you* want?" (p. 218; emphasis in original).

Lagoon is part of a rising tide of Africanfuturist work. Although *Afrofuturism* is the focus of widespread academic attention and public acclaim, rarely is its genesis or expression traced to the African continent (Samatar, 2017). Rather, Black disaporic visions of the future are often disconnected from African material realities, geopolitical contexts, and life experiences (Mashigo, 2018). For this reason, Okorafor (2019) coined the term *Africanfuturism* to represent science fiction writing emerging from the contexts, cosmologies, and complexities of African continental life. For Okorafor (2019),

> 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 … . Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. This is distinctly different from "Afrofuturism."

Africanfuturism lies at the intersection of Black and African imagining. This may seem obvious, but in many ways Okorafor's work demands attention to how this obvious intersection has been overlooked. On one hand, disaporic Afrofuturism uses the

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African continent "as a costume or a stage to play out … ideas" (Mashigo, 2018), rather than dealing with African materiality. On the other hand, oft-celebrated African science fiction tends to focus on White continental lives (see Blomkamp, 2009; Hartmann, 2012). Okorafor thus began writing *Lagoon* as a direct response to the "abysmal stereotyping" of Nigerians in the critically acclaimed South African film *District 9* (Blomkamp, 2009) and continues to label her work "Africanfuturist" rather than "Afrofuturist" (Tubosun, 2013).

Those who tell the future are creating it. Eshun (2003) details how "science fiction is a means through which to preprogram the present" to draw it toward a "preferred future" (p. 290). To activate liberatory futures, we must intervene in the corporate futures industry, constructing and magnifying alternative timelines that pull us instead toward decolonial justice. And I do mean "we," dear reader—all communication scholars. We must struggle to write a different future as much as any science fiction author does. We must recognize how the "scholarly works … marked as 'origins' and 'early histories' conceal a relationality steeped in coloniality and difference" (Asante, 2019b, p. 487), and how these disciplinary narratives, when unreflected upon, work to maintain the centrality of coloniality to the futures of our discipline (Hanchey, 2018). In the wake of #CommunicationSoWhite (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018), #RhetoricSoWhite (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019), and the controversy over the distinguished scholars (see Calafell, 2019), the future of the field has been blasted radically open. In this moment, "We must fight. We must take a stand. We must have some form of hope that we can break from the modern, Western, colonial, anti-Black, racist structuration of rhetorical studies" (Wanzer-Serrano, 2019, p. 471). We must envision and support Africanfuturisms and their radical decolonial, antiracist, feminist, and queer potentialities.

Desiring queer/feminist Africanfutures

> "Do you think this is the end of days?" Obi asked, wide-eyed.
> "No."
>
> —Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 2014

Here, I examine the intersections of queer and feminist politics in Okorafor's (2014) novel *Lagoon*, underscoring how queer/feminist desire can pull as yet indescribable futures into being—futures too radical to imagine within the contemporary constraints of the present. To map the contingent, shifting intersections of African queer and feminist desire, I draw from Carrillo Rowe's (2008) politics of relation. For Carrillo Rowe, desire is political. If desire is "about where you long to belong" (p. 35), then it is "intimately tied to power. It is an affective force that can be used to reproduce and/or to challenge whiteness as a hegemonic force" (p. 38), as well as coloniality and heteronormativity. Queer/feminist desire describes the longing for Africanfuturist liberation.

Queer/feminist desire, as I use it, maps the political relations between African queerness and African feminism as they pull us toward Africanfuturistic visions. Asante (2020) defines *queer* as "encompass[ing] the pluralistic African sexualities viewed as discursively mediated, historically situated, and materially conditioned" (p. 3). Like African queerness, African feminism is also "rooted in concerns of the everyday" (Cruz, 2015,

p. 24). Cruz (2015) highlights three facets of African feminism: holism, collectivity, and situationality. Drawing these together, queer/feminist desire is desire for collective sexual and gendered liberation, activated within a situated geopolitical and environmental context, focused on relationality, and rooted in African cosmologies as they are discursively deployed in shifting and contingent ways.

Queer/feminist futurity is "all about desire" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 30). Muñoz describes how "to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer" (p. 26). Any desire that draws us beyond the boundaries of what the normative has sanctioned is queer. In this manner, African feminist desire *is* queer desire. In addition, African feminism calls for holism and collectivity as guiding principles. The liberation of Africanfuturism cannot be for women only; it must be for all (Cruz, 2015). Importantly, queer/feminist desire imagines futures that delink from coloniality as well. As Asante (2019a) explains, "A desire for queer futurity propels the imaginations of this queer world. By locating queerness as a longing, possibilities emerge that resist the tantalizing tentacles of the present and its abstract utopias divorced from its sociopolitical and colonial productions" (p. 159). In the following section, I trace how queer/feminist desire in *Lagoon* produces African futures in two ways: by moving beyond the violence of coloniality and by activating freedom dreams.

Queer/feminist desire in *Lagoon*

> What good questions it asks. She tells it exactly what she wants.
> —Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 2014

Lagoon begins in the sea, with a swordfish that desires to become a monster. The swordfish wants to be menacing, to keep the evil snakes of oil pipelines away from her home. Desire in *Lagoon* is so queer, so based in a feminist ethics of collectivity, that it transcends humanity. As Keeling (2019) explains, "When wrested from human desire, the poetry and poetics of things commingle with desire; and things desire" (p. xiii). The aliens ask the swordfish what she desires; she tells them, and she is changed.

The swordfish's transformation acts as a microcosm of queer/feminist desire in *Lagoon*. Desire, "always directed at that thing that is not yet here" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 26), aims the swordfish at a world without the capitalist fixture of coloniality: oil. She desires a bodily form that will help her combat oil's transport and, thus, the world that revolves around it. In doing so, a new world speeds toward actualization. I trace these two aspects of queer/feminist desire below: rupturing the violence of coloniality and activating freedom dreams.

Desire beyond the violence of coloniality

Lagoon demonstrates how queer/feminist desire produces futures that rupture and move beyond the violence of contemporary heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalistic coloniality. The novel gut-wrenchingly portrays violence against queer and nonbinary Africans, women, people with disabilities, and the environment in a manner that maps the multilevel and varied effects of coloniality. In doing so, it poses "a riposte to those aligned

with the logic of the futures industry that cynically cast the chaos of Nigeria as the constitutional failure of development, blind to … the substantive, concrete violence that is at the heart of capitalism itself" (O'Connell, 2016, p. 306).

Accordingly, queer/feminist desire in the novel is initially met with violence. When the alien presence first becomes known to the Black Nexus, "one of the only LGBT student organizations in Nigeria" (Okorafor, 2014, p. 71), they decide to come out of hiding to meet the alien, recognizing within the shapeshifter a kindred spirit as well as a revolutionary force of change in the contemporary Nigerian context. As Cruz (2017) explains, in African feminisms "visibility constitutes a resource to be manipulated in given situations rather than a constraint" (p. 619). The Black Nexus attempts to respond to a kairotic moment with strategic visibility. However, it is not the only group to seize the moment. The Black Nexus' arrival at the home where the alien is staying tragically coincides with the arrival of a fervent Pentecostal religious group and a large gathering crowd. The crowd uses the recognizable abnormality of the LGBT group as a scapegoat for its deep fear of the unrecognizable abnormality of the alien and unknown. The last we hear of the Black Nexus is that it is "getting beaten to the ground" (p. 169).

Although the novel is rightly criticized for participating in the "bury your gays" trope (Underwood, 2017), the queer/feminist desire of the Black Nexus still demonstrates an important rupture in coloniality. As one of the members reflects, "Now an alien had come to Lagos. It wasn't just the Black Nexus who were unsafe or at least vulnerable now. It was everyone. In his heart, he knew that if that alien was in the house, it was time. It was time for a change" (Okorafor, 2014, p. 92). The Black Nexus members recognize the "infinite possibilities" (p. 75) of the alien arrival before others do and desire to actualize them. In the face of infinite possibilities for desires, for futures, for breaking free of restrictions, no one is safe or invulnerable. In fact, "the radicality of the utopia promised by the arrival of the aliens has to initially be felt as loss" (O'Connell, 2016, p. 307), particularly for normative subjects. At the same time, such queer desire for "another time and place" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 26) where the Black Nexus achieves liberation is the linchpin that secures what Keeling (2019) refers to as the "antifragility" of freedom dreams (p. 22).

Desire activating freedom dreams

The aliens in *Lagoon* activate freedom dreams by giving beings whatever they desire. Freedom dreams are radical paths for the future that "do not need roads even though it could be said that they make the roads as they move" (Keeling, 2019, p. xv). Queer/feminist desire produces the possibility for freedom dreams by imagining them—and articulating them. Ayodele, the alien representative, says simply, "We give them whatever they want" (Okorafor, 2014, p. 24). The aliens ask what we want; we must be able to articulate our desires.

The aliens then serve as tools for making freedom dreams real. That is, the aliens serve as a medium through which queer/feminist desire can be actualized, rather than as the actors that actualize it themselves. Importantly, the agency for change remains with the Nigerian people. As Agu, one of the main characters, realizes, "[H]e could feel the potential inside him" (Okorafor, 2014, p. 114). In another example, when a little girl

named Kola is shot, Ayodele turns part of herself into a mist that infuses Kola's arm. Ayodele tells a concerned Kola not to worry, saying, "It is me. I am *speaking* with you. Rebuild yourself, Kola" (p. 139). Ayodele is a technology through which Kola is able to rebuild herself, but it is Kola who is the agent of change. The novel thus poses a counterpoint to the way Black bodies have historically been rendered as media for the actualization of White colonial agency and humanity (Towns, 2018).

The aliens can serve as tools to activate freedom dreams because queer/feminist desire is alien, in a sense. It opens what was previously unthinkable. One character, Adaora, reflects on what makes Ayodele alien:

> If there was any strong hint of the alien in Ayodele's appearance, it was in her eyes. When Adaora looked into them, 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 … . Now, she understood. (Okorafor, 2014, p. 37)

The alien is that which is outside of the human realm of knowing, which is analogous to the (im)possible futures imagined by queer/feminist desire, outside of and contrary to the normative. Being "unsure of everything," then, is necessary to demolish colonial structures and activate freedom dreams that are "unforeseeable from within Euro-American conceptions of the world" and "emerge as the result of planning, visioning, risk-taking, and radical love rooted in another conception of the world" (Keeling, 2019, p. 23). This queer/feminist conception of the world makes free Africanfutures "no longer unthinkable" (p. 23).

Alien desires in communication studies

> *How would you have felt?*
> —Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 2014

Okorafor asks the reader—asks *you*—what you would have felt on the day that the Nigerian president met with aliens, if you had responded to the aliens with violence when the aliens began to activate change. But you already know what it feels like; you feel it now. You feel the potential of a feminist and queer of color future; you feel it gaining material substance; you feel time veering off from the linear expectations of capitalistic coloniality that have tried to determine future paths. You feel the pressure of normative structures that desire you to respond with fear. You do not fear. You are part of communication studies at a time when it desires change—when desire is change. You feel the immanence of freedom dreams. You desire change. You are change. "*So, what will you do?*" (Okorafor, 2014, p. 113).

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