

“We are change”: The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*

Hugh Charles O’Connell

Nnedi Okorafor is a member of a growing vanguard of global SF/F authors who challenge the hegemony of SF as a purely Western genre. This decentering of SF foremost demands a critical engagement with its dominant, operative tropes. In this light, Lagoon subverts the stock colonial ideology long associated with the first contact alien invasion narrative. Drawing on Afrofuturist criticism, this essay argues that Lagoon utilizes the figure of the alien in order to examine Nigeria as both an object of the neoliberal futures industry and a progenitor of radical anti-neoimperial futurity. Rather than merely incorporating the predominantly Americentric determinations of much Afrofuturist thought wholesale, however, the novel demands a rethinking of the role of the alien from an African-utopian perspective. Ultimately, this requires a reconsideration of the work of the SF novum itself in line with Alain Badiou’s conception of the event, whereby the introduction of the SF novum of the alien can be seen as a placeholder for the unknowable, unforeseeable eruption of a radical, historical event: the reawakening of a seemingly structurally unrepresentable anticolonial subjectivity that is pitched against the ideological confines of the neoliberal present.

Keywords: Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon*, Afrofuturism, utopianism, novum, postcolonial science fiction, first contact narrative

Nnedi Okorafor is part of a growing vanguard of global science fiction (SF) writers currently challenging the hegemony of SF as a purely Western, metropolitan genre. The 2014 publication of her first contact SF novel, *Lagoon*, accompanied a boom in non-Western and particularly African SF, and fittingly the prologue of the novel, “Moom!,” appeared in *Afro SF: Science Fiction by African Writers*, the first volume dedicated solely to African SF. This growth in African SF is indicative of an uncertainty as well as a sense of possibility in African futurity as the failure of neoliberal developmental policies becomes ever more strikingly clear.¹ As Ivor

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1 Even the IMF is now critiquing certain elements of the same neoliberal economic policies that it enforced upon many postcolonial nations, particularly “removing restrictions on the movement of capital

Hartmann, editor of *Afro SF*, avers, “SciFi is the only genre that enables African writers to envision a future from our African perspective. . . . The value of this envisioning for any third-world country, or in our case continent, cannot be overstated nor negated. If you can’t see and relay an understandable vision of the future, your future will be co-opted by someone else’s vision, one that will not necessarily have your best interests at heart.”²

Okorafor’s novel attempts to imagine just such a new global futurity³ for Nigeria—that is, a condition of radical possibility that breaks with the conditions of capitalist realism—by recasting the ideological contours of the first contact narrative. As Okorafor states in *Lagoon’s* acknowledgments, the novel itself was at least in part motivated by what she and many others found to be the racist portrayal of black Nigerians in another African first contact narrative, Neil Blomkamp’s *District 9*.⁴ Given the long-recognized relationship of the first contact narrative to colonial and neocolonial conquest as well as the slave trade⁵—and the existing racist undertones that persist even when filmmakers like Blomkamp attempt to flip the colonizer/colonized binary that animates many such

across a country’s borders” and austerity. See Jonathan Ostry, Prakash Loungani, and Davide Furceri, “Neoliberalism: Oversold?” *Finance and Development* (2016): 38.

2 Ivor Hartmann, “Introduction,” *Afro SF: Science Fiction by African Writers*, ed. Ivor Hartmann (Story Time Press, 2012), 7.

3 Throughout this essay it is necessary for me to distinguish between a group of terms related to the concept of “the future” as both the temporal and economic valences combine in what Mark Fisher refers to as “capitalist realism”: the sense that although time continues to pass, there is no radical historical progressiveness or sense of a future outside of the conditions of global late capitalism. In the present essay, references to *the future* are meant in the simplest, most banal, quantitative aspect of temporality as passing time, as in tomorrow, or an hour from now. *Futurity* relates to a qualitative notion of the future-as-difference, as opposed to a merely quantitative notion of the future, especially wherein the conditions of capitalist realism reduce any notions of the future to a mere extension or intensification of the conditions of the present. *The futures industry*, a term introduced by Kodwo Eshun, combines the economic aspects of speculative futures trading with the colonization and predation of futurity in Africa by generally Western, capitalist enterprises. This last term is discussed in more detail in the “SF as Historical Intervention” section of this essay. For the origins of the term *Futures Industry*, see Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003): 289–92.

4 Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014), 309. See also Okorafor’s review of the film in Nnedi Okorafor, “My response to District 419 . . . I mean District 9,” *Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog*, August 23, 2009. <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2009/08/my-response-to-district-419i-mean.html>. On the general Nigerian response to the film, see David Smith, “*District 9* Labelled Xenophobic by Nigerians,” *The Guardian*, September 2, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/02/district-9-labelled-xenophobic-nigerians>.

5 On SF’s relationship to colonialism, imperialism, and the Black Atlantic slave trade and the ways in which these impact SF’s racialized portrayal of the other in various iterations of the first contact narrative, see Mark Bould, “African Science Fiction 101,” *SFRA Review* 311 (2015): 11–18; Jessica Langer, *Post-colonialism and Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), especially chapter 2, “Diaspora and Locality”; Patricia Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Greg Grewell, “Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future,” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 55.2 (2001): 25–47; Gregory Pfitzer, “The Only Good Alien Is a Dead Alien: Science Fiction and the Metaphysics of Indian-Hating on the High Frontier,” *Journal of American Culture* 18.1 (1995): 51–67; Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), especially chapter 2, “Meta-Slavery”; Douglas De Witt Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 2003); Rachel Haywood Ferreira, “The First Contact Story in Latin American Science Fiction,” *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, eds. Brian Atterbery and Veronica Hollinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 2013), 70–88; Marie Lathers, *Space Oddities: Women and Outer Space in Popular Film and Culture*,

traditional SF narratives—Okorafor's novel engages with the difficult implications of radically rethinking the alien encounter narrative within the framework of neoliberal globalization as neoimperialism.⁶ At issue is whether such a narrative can be refashioned to imagine a futurity that sunders this conjuncture. In order to do so, I'll argue that *Lagoon's* alien encounter narrative provides an African-futurist intervention into SF that recasts the SF *novum* as a Badiouian event.

From First to Second Contact: SF and the (Post)Colonial Context

The first contact narrative has a long history within SF and takes on a variety of forms. *Lagoon's* first contact narrative borrows most heavily, at least superficially, from the tropes of the alien invasion: the aliens arrive suddenly, with an explosion; they are technologically superior; they enter into conflict with the Nigerian army, which sees them as an existential threat; they can take human form; they quasi-abduct the three main protagonists; they enter into a pact with the Nigerian government to share their technology (which means completely restructuring the economy and social relations); and through their pact with the government and the subsequent transformation of Nigerian society, the aliens can be seen to impose upon Nigeria a peaceful new epoch (impose in the sense that their technological superiority will always remain a threat, but also in the sense that no one except the President authorizes this compact). In many ways, *Lagoon* generically resembles the alien invasion narrative of the recent reboot of the American television show *V* (2009–2011).

As John Rieder argues, alien invasion narratives from their inception were often a stand-in for fears of colonial blowback, a distorted recognition of the inimical power dynamics of capitalist expansion in which the core is transformed into the periphery. Although such narratives may have raised ethical qualms about colonialism, they often equally served to naturalize it, as Rieder argues in relation to perhaps the best-known first contact novel, H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*.⁷ Marie Lathers expounds upon how this early trope of first contact was utilized to mediate between the transition from formal colonialism to the neocolonial period of postcolonial development and neoliberalism. She notes that these later works popularized the term *alien* by combining its dominant legal, anthropological usage denoting "the Other of the nation—and in particular an illegal or enemy non-national" with the figure of the extraterrestrial.⁸ On the postcolonial recontextualization of the first contact narrative, she writes:

It is no surprise that outer space movies became a popular craze in the 1950s: not only was this decade the first of the Cold War . . . , but it was also the last decade of many of

1960–2000 (New York: Continuum, 2010), especially chapter 6, "Making Contact"; and John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

6 In general, I hold with the assessment that neoliberalism operates as a form of neoimperialism in the postcolonial world. Indeed, to put a finer point on it, as Samir Amin insists, "historical capitalism has always been imperialist, in the sense that it has led to a polarization between centers and peripheries since its origin (the sixteenth century), which has only increased over the course of its later globalized development." See Samir Amin, "Contemporary Imperialism," *Monthly Review* 67.3 (2015): Web.

7 John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 2008), 123–26.

8 Marie Lathers, *Space Oddities: Women and Outer Space in Popular Film and Culture, 1960–2000* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 182.

the west's colonies in Africa and Asia. These colonies, many of which had known their first encounters with "white aliens" from Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were fast moving to independence. By the 1970s, however, it was evident that colonialism was not in fact over, but rather had been extended by another version of itself, called neocolonialism. Outer space became a terrain of post and neocolonialism, with outer space movies that staged "aliens," instead of mere monsters, in novel yet somehow eerily familiar encounters with humans.⁹

If outer space became a site for reviving colonial narratives in the postcolonial era with the discovery of new interstellar blank spots on the map, then terrestrial narratives, following Rieder, often continued as ambivalent projections of colonialism's detrimental effects on the colonized. As such, they recast the historical colonizers in the role of victims-turned-hero, thereby appropriating the role of anticolonial resistance for themselves, as, for example, in the film *Independence Day* (1996).

This alternating role of the alien as both colonizer and colonized, depending on the setting of the narrative, has been taken up and recast in surprisingly original ways by Afrofuturism, which posits that the lived realities of colonialism and the slave trade literalize the metaphor of the SF first contact narrative and its related plot device of alien abduction.¹⁰ From this Afrofuturist view, Kodwo Eshun argues that the figure of the alien goes through a process of "transvaluation," taking on different representational values when looked at through the lens of colonialism and the black Atlantic slave trade.¹¹ On one hand, the alien can appear as the colonizer, the technologically advanced race that comes from the outside to colonize a society or abduct or enslave the local population. On the other, by recasting the alien as the perpetual other to Enlightenment conceptions of humanity, the alien can become a site of identification for the colonized or enslaved. In other words, the figure of the alien shifts from being the representation of the colonizer to the point of identification for the colonized as it moves from the position of technologically superior oppressor, conqueror, and abductor of Africans to that of alien-other, that is, the alienated within the enslaving or colonizing system.¹²

Although this Afrofuturist concept of alien transvaluation provides a sophisticated lens through which to foreground the racialized colonial aspects that undergird Western SF narratives, *Lagoon* forces us to consider it from within African SF itself. Given the complex relationship of first contact narratives with colonialism and slavery, Rachel Haywood Ferreira argues that, due to their experience of colonization, postcolonial SF writers' "own stories of first contact might better be described as stories of second contact due to the degree to which the original historical circumstances and the colonial legacy inform content and perspective."¹³ As such, these second contact

9 Ibid., 183.

10 For example, see Eshun, "Further," 298–99; Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 25–26; Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 32–38.

11 See Eshun, "Further," 299.

12 Shaviro, *Post* 25–26; Eshun "Further," 298–99; Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 32–38.

13 Rachel Haywood Ferreira, "The First Contact Story in Latin American Science Fiction," *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, eds. Brian Atterbery and Veronica Hollinger (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 70.

narratives “rewrite, shanghai, and subvert both historical and science fictional accounts of contact.”¹⁴ *Lagoon*'s contribution to the second contact narrative is to foreground the simultaneity of this dual position of the alien as the colonizer and the colonized. It introduces a certain undecidability that is not only at heart in any utopian revolutionary desire for futurity in which the desired outcomes cannot be guaranteed by the actions taken to achieve them, but perhaps doubly so when that postcolonial vision of futurity is then coded through such a colonially ambivalent figure.

This dual valence and utopian uncertainty takes into account the inherent risks in thinking the unstable dialectic of “Africa-SF.” As Mark Bould recently argued, uncritically hitching African writing to the epistemological and cultural traditions of SF can perform the very annexation that the imperial derived SF form executed for much of its history.¹⁵ I argue, then, that *Lagoon*'s complex intertwining of these two moments of representation of and identification with the alien proves central for its utopian disruption of the present moment. On one hand, the aliens represent such a utopianism as a seemingly benevolent colonialism, or perhaps given the embracing of the alien's promise of change and technology by the Nigerian president, a neo-imperialism in which the structural changes to their economy are induced from the outside and domesticated by political elites (it should be noted that the alien scheme of change and technology is accepted by the President without any input from Nigeria's citizens themselves, a common complaint about the anti-democratic feature of many of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) demanded and enforced by global economic institutions¹⁶). On the other hand, the aliens simultaneously represent the possibility of a radical anticolonial emancipation that subverts this first position by transposing the alien ontology of change and technology to the people of Lagos themselves, in which the awakening of a new radical subjectivity is pitted against the neoimperial conditions of neoliberalism. It is my contention that while the oscillation between both valences underscores the ultimate undecidability of any revolutionary opening to radical utopian alterity, merely representing the alien encounter as a mediated desire for such a radical utopian event confronts the inevitability of and lack of alternatives to the global capitalist world-system from an Afro-utopian perspective.

The Future's Present Interruption: Welcoming Change and Technology

Lagoon develops its second contact narrative across three acts: “Welcome” (in which the aliens make contact with the people of Lagos), “Awakening” (an explosion of violence across the city after contact is made), and “Symbiosis” (a period of utopian transformation, in which the aliens and humans come together to form a new postcapitalist Nigeria). Across these three acts, the novel's primary plot revolves around the alien ambassador, Ayodele, and her interactions with three human protagonists: Adaora, a marine biologist; Agu, a Nigerian soldier; and Anthony, a Ghanaian hip-hop artist. Blending its SF topoi with fantasy and folklore

14 Ibid.

15 Mark Bould, “From Anti-Colonial Struggle to Neoliberal Immiseration: Mohammed Dib's *Who Remembers the Sea*, Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half* and Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia*,” *Paradoxa* 25 (2013): 17.

16 For example, see Victor Olumide Ekanade, “Dynamics of Forced Neoliberalism in Nigeria Since the 1980s,” *Journal of Retracing Africa* 1.1 (2014): 1–24.

elements, we learn that the three human protagonists have special abilities (Adaora can create a shield around herself and breathe underwater, Agu has superhuman strength, and Anthony can make his voice heard and understood at great distances). Alongside these fantastical powers, the novel also incorporates various Nigerian folkloric and mythical entities, which physically manifest themselves and interact with the material world after being awakened by the aliens in the second act. Such figures include Udide Okwanka, a trickster spider and master weaver of tales from Igbo folklore; Legba, the Yoruba trickster god of language and the crossroads who is recast as an expert 419 scammer, but who also shows up in spirit form as Papa Legba; and new figures such as the Bone Collector,¹⁷ a sentient stretch of the Lagos-Benin highway that attacks humans. It is in this sense that *Lagoon* is an exemplar of the new global SF that Istvan Csicsery-Ronay recently theorized when he states that “as more and more models of the fantastic flow together from different artistic and folk traditions, what will generally be understood as sf will include more and more assemblages involving incongruous ontologies of motivation. Sf will be less a kind of text and more a specific attitude.”¹⁸ This is generally reflective of Okorafor’s own dismissal of the SF/fantasy separation as a particularly Western opposition: “I think also in a lot of ways, [the separation is] culturally specific. . . . In non-Western culture, the mystical coexisting with the mundane is normal. That is a specific point of view; you take it and move it into the future, and you have science fiction with mystical elements in it.”¹⁹

Continuing in this global vein that opens SF up to the influence of other cultural practices, *Lagoon* presents a heterotopic Lagos through a diffusion of Nigerian voices, producing a hybrid English augmented by Nigerian and Ghanaian Pidgin English, and Yoruba and Igbo phrases with an accompanying dictionary as an appendix. This is further fleshed out by a heterogeneous cast of secondary characters that includes a priest (Father Oke) and his parishioners, the President and two of his wives (Zena and Hawra), oil workers, representatives of the transnational business class, journalists, and military personnel. And rather than reducing Lagos simply to the viewpoints of its three main protagonists, there are chapters devoted to the perspectives of 419 scammers; Chris, a Nigerian businessman who earned his MBA in Germany; an unnamed young boy; Fisayo, a woman who is a secretary by day and a sex worker by night; Philo, a house servant; Moziz, Troy, Tolu, and Jacobs, a group of university students “forced to ‘take time off’ because of university strikes”²⁰; Jacobs, Seven, Rome, and the rest of the Black Nexus, “one of the only LGBT student organizations in Nigeria”²¹; Lance Corporal Benson, nephew of the President; and many others.

17 Okorafor conjures the figure of the Bone Collector as a direct reference to the brutal robbery of a luxury bus along the Lagos-Benin highway in the summer of 2009. Due to the horrific nature of the crime, and the government’s seeming indifference to it, it has retained a position in the Nigerian public imagination as symbolic of the dangers of random, predatory violence more generally.

18 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Global Science Fiction’? Reflections on a New Nexus,” *Science Fiction Studies* 39.3 (2013): 480–81.

19 Okorafor quoted in Natalie Zutter, “Masquerade, Initiation, and Sci-Fi/Fantasy: N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor in Conversation,” *Tor.com*, May 9, 2016. <http://www.tor.com/2016/05/09/author-event-nk-jemisin-nnedi-okorafor-brooklyn-museum/>.

20 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 55.

21 *Ibid.*, 71.

Moreover, the novel constantly shifts locations to encompass Internet cafes, churches, restaurants, military bases, highway traffic jams, beaches, and resort hotels. This restless approach creates a kinetic multicultural and global city, crosshatched by the intertwining legacies of colonialism (from the opening gloss on the name Lagos to the continuing impact of Christian missionaries), global capital (through the oil trade, 419ers, and representatives of the transnational business class), and postcolonial national development (largely witnessed in its failures through the corruption of the military and government elites). If this imbrication of historical forces helps to create the conditions that need to be resolved by the novel in order to imagine futurity for Lagos, at the same time this constant cutting across space and perspective short-circuits the reader's easy identification with any one character or space as being representative of twenty-first-century Lagos.

Although the aforementioned elements combine to produce a dynamic and global twenty-first-century city, as a second contact novel it is the aliens that represent what Darko Suvin terms the *novum* of an SF text. Drawing on Ernst Bloch's notion of the novum as the radical interruption of the new, Suvin defines the SF novum as a "totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality. . . . [It is] totalizing in this sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof."²² The novum as the introduction of the new that sets the conditions for the normative reality of the SF setting is also, then, related to the mode of SF. Suvin posits two principal modes, the more mundane extrapolative and the more sophisticated analogical.²³ The extrapolative foregrounds realistic anticipations drawn from the author's current technological, sociological present and privileges realistic prognostications about the future such that the reader can usually determine a straight line of historically and technologically viable cause and effect. Analogical SF, conversely, is "not bound to the extrapolative horizon" and its worlds and *nova* "can be quite fantastic (in the sense of empirically unverifiable)."²⁴

Despite the novel's realistic portrayal of Lagos, its aliens are clearly of the analogical mode. Due to the second contact narrative context, they may appear similar to Portuguese and English colonizers, but only by analogy. Similarly, the change and technology that they promise to deliver upon Nigeria may in some respects resemble the SAPs of neoliberal development or the infusion of foreign capital and investment in Lagos, but again, only by analogy. Describing the potential interplay between the two SF modes, Suvin argues that the "lowest form of analogic modeling is that in which an extrapolation backwards is in fact a crude analogy to the past of Earth."²⁵ *Lagoon* rides this line between the analogic and the extrapolative through its introduction of aliens as a radically new analogic novum that nevertheless, via its second contact narrative and Afrofuturist lens, cannot help but recall the past moments of colonialism and thus the historical extrapolative mode. Much of the significance of Okorafor's intervention in the first contact narrative, then, is dependent on the oblique role that the aliens play and this question of radical futurity or simple reiteration of the

22 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 64.

23 *Ibid.*, 27.

24 *Ibid.*, 29.

25 *Ibid.*

colonial past. Even from within the second contact narrative, can we imagine the aliens as anything other than colonists or imperialists, especially since the very beginning of the novel draws attention to their connection to early colonizers with their arrival through the sea? What is at stake in this uncertainty between the extrapolative inevitability of colonialism and the analogical “fantastic” and “empirically unverifiable” narrative position of the aliens?

In the tradition of many first contact narratives, not to mention the propaganda of so many colonial and imperial narratives, the aliens present themselves in the guise of a civilizing mission, as modernizers and saviors. When first addressing the people of Nigeria, they state, “We come to bring you together and refuel your future. . . . Your land is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart. . . . We do not seek your oil or your other resources. . . . We are here to nurture your world.”²⁶ Consequently, they introduce themselves as the literal embodiment of change, stating explicitly: “We are change.”²⁷ This “change” is so thoroughly connected to the alien’s technology in the novel and really to the aliens themselves *as* technology, given their ability to radically transform themselves and anything else seemingly at the molecular level, such that “change and technology” become an inseparable pairing. It is as the embodiment of change and technology, then, that they promise to transform Nigeria. This transformation entails first, and foremost, putting an end to the oil trade and the rehabilitation of the oceanic environment. This is then followed by the ability to grow new food crops at a massive level with little environmental or labor impact, the end of statist-capitalist corruption, and the restructuring of society in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class.

What we can glean from the novel’s multiplicity of subplots and the undecidability of the alien presence is that, despite the narrative’s diffuseness, or perhaps better yet, because of it, at heart the novel is really focused on the question of who or what gets to narrate Nigeria and its futurity. In this light, *Lagoon* returns us to the central issue of so many anticolonial and postcolonial novels: nation and narration. Not only does the profusion of subplots and secondary characters decenter a singular viewpoint, but it is the very question of narrative control that first emerges as the principal concern of Okorafor’s novel. After three preceding epigraphs that introduce us to three key themes of the novel including the healing power of the salt water, the pride and independence of Lagos’ citizens, and an “American white woman[’s]” fear of the seeming chaos of the city, the narrative provides a welcome to its readers:

Welcome to Lagos, Nigeria. The city takes its name from the Portuguese word for ‘lagoon.’ The Portuguese first landed on Lagos Island in the year 1472. Apparently, they could not come up with a more creative name. Nor did they think to ask one of the natives for suggestions. And so the world turns, masked by millions of names, guises, and shifting stories. It’s been a wonderful thing to watch. My design grows complicated.²⁸

As the passage illustrates, the narrative of this transformation, of Lagos and ultimately Nigeria’s futurity, has been and remains a considerably complicated affair. Although the

26 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 113.

27 *Ibid.*, 39.

28 *Ibid.*, n.p.

speaker's identity is initially withheld, the genitive in "My design" refers to the weaver-narrator, Udide Okwanka,²⁹ who we only learn at the end has been the narrator of key passages in the novel. The complication, then, is not only the difficulty of narrating an increasingly diverse and global city like Lagos, but also the challenge of maintaining this narrative between the colonial encounters referenced in the opening welcome and the neoimperial contexts of the oil trade in which the extraction of oil largely benefits outside firms and "is tearing [Nigeria] apart."³⁰

Rather than simply resolving this situation, the arrival of the aliens adds a new layer of complexity. As Udide Okwanka states in the conclusion: "I have watched, heard, tasted, touched these new people. Shape-shifters of the third kind. Story weavers of their own time. I respect them. They brought Agu, Adaora and Anthony together."³¹ The position of Udide Okwanka and the aliens as inhabiting the same role of trickster-narrator is similarly underscored by Adaora, who in her first meeting with Ayodele notes that the latter "had piercing brown eyes that gave Adaora the same creepy feeling as when she looked at a large black spider."³² It is curious, then, how much narrative agency Udide Okwanka gives the aliens, as she makes clear that she can weave anyone present in Nigeria into her own designs. Moreover, it reflects the power outside forces continue to have in determining Nigeria's narration. Ultimately, the aliens and Udide Okwanka become part of each other's narratives as the aliens land within Udide Okwanka's "design," yet it is the aliens that create the utopian rupture and the possibility for a new futurity for Lagos in which Udide Okwanka will "pause in my storytelling. . . and become part of the story."³³ Yet, at least at the outset, this same outside alien context also runs the risk of refolding the narrative within the framework of neoimperial developmentalism, pairing the aliens' gift of "technology and change" with the supposedly benevolent neoimperialism of neoliberalism wrought by the IMF and World Bank. Despite the aliens not presenting themselves as colonizers, the enforced imposition³⁴ of an outside definition of change and technology remains the neoimperial hallmark of neoliberal developmentalism, in which the liberalization of the economy is often accompanied by vast development projects

29 The appellation of Udide Okwanka first appears in Nnedi Okorafor, "Spider the Artist," *People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction*. Special Issue of *Lightspeed* 10 (2011): Web. The narrator of "Spider the Artist" tells us, "In my language, [Udide Okwanka] means 'spider the artist.' According to legend, Udide Okwanka is the Supreme Artist. And she lives underground where she takes fragments of things and changes them into something else. She can even weave spirits from straw." Moreover, as Okorafor herself explains on her Facebook page, "Since I consistently hear this mistake made, I want to put out the correct info: The giant spider who appears in *Lagoon* (and in several of my other stories . . . including *Akata Witch* Part 2) is NOT Anansi. It is Udide Okwanka (Spider the Artist), who is part of Igbo mythology."

30 Okorafor, *Lagoon* 113.

31 *Ibid.*, 292.

32 *Ibid.*, 17.

33 *Ibid.*, 293.

34 As Victor Olumide Ekanade argues, "The post-Westphalian states of Europe treat African states as dependent associates, providing them with financial aid through international agencies such as the Bretton Woods institutions. Nigeria for instance is a subordinate unit responsive to the policies of international organizations, and subject to the imposition of their programs such as the World Bank's SAPs based on neoliberal principles." As Ekanade notes, these policies and their devastating effects were forced upon Nigerian citizens through their own government's compliance, but without citizens' own consent. See Ekanade, "Dynamics," 2.

and foreign technological investment and enterprise. The question thus becomes: Is the second contact narrative's critical and subversive function in relation to historical colonialism itself circumscribed and betrayed by the concepts of neoliberal development? How, then, can we conceive narrative futurity?

SF as Historical Intervention

Although Hartmann presents SF as paramount for creating autonomous narratives of African futurity, a dominant line of SF criticism argues that SF is not about the future at all, but is instead principally about the present. Fredric Jameson, for example, has famously argued that SF seeks to restore historicity to the present by figuring it as the past of some speculative future, and in so doing, it reveals the limits of the present and the reified structures of our imagination that block us from being able to imagine radical futurity.³⁵ The upshot of this is that SF allows us to see that the present capitalist world-system is not the determinate outcome of a teleological historical necessity (that capitalism always was and will be the determinant horizon of social development). Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek following Walter Benjamin argues, the present may actually be the alternate history of the failure of our revolutions. In Žižek's words, the present can be seen as "the reality we have to live in because, in the past, we failed to seize the moment and act."³⁶ The continuing problem, then, to paraphrase Neil Lazarus, is the failure of the postcolonial state to escape, or indeed its complicity with, the continuation of combined and uneven development in the neoimperial age of globalization.³⁷

The Lagos that is under narrative construction in Okorafor's novel bears witness to such failures of postcolonial development and neoliberal predation. Situated in the southwest of Nigeria, Lagos is the most heavily populated city in and the financial capital of Nigeria. These factors have led, however, to its less salubrious portrayal, especially in SF. As Noah Tsika contends, the need to fix Lagos is "a popular plot impetus in Nigerian sf, having generated an array of representations of the urban landscape that link overpopulation to poverty, crime, and corruption, as well as to the dystopian possibilities of violent gentrification, ethnic segregation, and eugenically restricted reproduction."³⁸ For these reasons, Tsika continues, both Nigerian politicians and SF writers turn to Lagos as a site of countervailing utopian and dystopian possibilities: "Lagos is an exciting source of imaginative projections, but it also lends itself to a certain pessimism, particularly amid global discussions of its incipient status as one of the world's most populous and least 'developed' commercial centers."³⁹

In *Lagoon*, Lagos is a city geographically divided across sociopolitical and class lines. The globalized sections of the city, representing the wealth of finance and development, are presented by the Eko hotel complex. The Eko provides a fortified respite, literally a sealed and armed enclave, for the neoimperial transnational business

35 Fredric Jameson, "Progress Versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 288–89.

36 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 87.

37 See Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 180.

38 Noah Tsika, "Projected Nigerias: *Kajola* and its Contexts," *Paradoxa* 25 (2013): 95.

39 Ibid.

class, insulating them from the formally decolonized sections of the city. Here, foreigners attempt to remove themselves from the novel's violence while feigning ignorance of its structural determinants; they present such outbursts as "just the way things are in Nigeria," as a form of naturalized Afropessimism. As one British businessman exclaims of the violence erupting all over the city during the Awakening: "It's a citywide 419! The whole bloody place is fucking itself!" to which "the other businessmen around him nodded in agreement."⁴⁰ The very structures of the hotel seem to confirm this as Agu's battered image is reflected back to him as he first steps into the lobby looking for assistance: "What struck him most . . . was the shiny floor. It was so shiny he could see the terrible state he was in. His fatigues were wrinkled, wet, soiled with sand and spattered with his own blood. His face was puffy and ashy with sea salt, his lip and forehead crusty with dried blood."⁴¹ Against this backdrop of wealth and security, of a fortified indifference and willful ignorance, Agu is made to stand out and to embody the supposedly senseless violence of Lagos and Nigeria more generally. His presence, although he is a native of the city, is the intrusion.

The domestic sections of the city are likewise described as defenses against the encroachment of the deleterious social conditions caused by the twinned forces of neoliberalism and corruption. While contrasting the wealth of Father Oke's home with that of his parishioners, Adaora's husband Chris reflects, "On both sides of the wall were tiny houses where most likely ten times as many people lived. Poor people. These homes were surrounded by walls, too, though the walls were really just the walls of the much larger home boxing them in. *Lagos is like a big zoo. . . . Everyone is contained by lots of walls and lots of gates, whether you like it or not. It's secure but there is no security.*"⁴² The walled-off and walled-in spaces of the city, including the Eko hotel, then, are seemingly made necessary by the insatiably violent spaces of the streets, where lacking the protection of their walls, the citizens of Lagos are left vulnerable to all forms of predation. It is on a highway, for example, where soldiers rape women during routine traffic stops and criminals kill tourists and other travelers during a raid on a bus.

Rather than simply equating the problems of contemporary Lagos with the horrors of colonial rule, the emphasis on violence and instability noted previously in the spatial divisions highlights the structural failures of neoliberal developmentalism and the political failures of the postcolonial nation-state. It is these very problems that result in the widespread feeling of Afropessimism as the block to imagining radical futurity as Jameson suggests, and the subsequent transformation that the novel works to subvert with its Afro-utopianism and the intervention of the alien. Outlining the failures of developmentalist ideology in Africa, James Ferguson argues that not only were the goals of parity and socioeconomic convergence not met, but disparity has actually been exacerbated.⁴³ Given the failures of developmentalist policies, but not the end of their imposition, Ferguson instead argues that the very understanding of developmentalism and modernity has shifted, veering away from a parity to be

40 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 148.

41 *Ibid.*, 147.

42 *Ibid.*, 33.

43 See James Ferguson, "Decomposing Modernity," *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, eds. Ania Loomba, et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 172.

teleologically attained and instead becoming an ontology, a Western birthright from which “others remain simply, but unequivocally, excluded.”⁴⁴ Consequently, Africans are seen and often even see themselves “not as less developed, but simply as less” and thus, “as naturally, perhaps even racially, *beneath*” those of the developed world. This results in an Afropessimism that ferments a counter-ontology of an African lack. The consequence is a popularly held first worldist perspective that “treat[s] the economic and humanitarian crises in Africa as just more evidence of the way ‘those places over there’ *are*,” that is then replicated in the sentiments of many Africans themselves.⁴⁵

It is precisely this form of Afropessimism in the face of the failure of modernization and developmentalist policies that leads to a new form of development and modernization that Eshun calls the “futures industry.”⁴⁶ At stake in the futures industry is no longer a sense of bringing the third world in line with the first, but instead viewing it as the generator of a perpetual set of crises that need to be forever managed by the confluence of outside capitalist developmental projects, technoscience, and speculative investment. The futures industry thus acts as a form of neoimperialism and as a form of predation on futurity itself as Africa becomes a permanent site of dystopian calamity *and* investment and speculation, in which “accumulation by dispossession”⁴⁷ never ends and where the only future possible is that being imparted upon it.⁴⁸ Herein lies the danger of Okorafor’s second contact narrative and the alien’s promise of change and technology as the outside force that can heal Nigeria’s problems.

In order to understand how *Lagoon* confronts such Afropessimism through its second contact narrative, we need to consider its intervention in Afrofuturism. Originally coined by Mark Dery in 1994, Afrofuturism denoted a specifically Americentric experience, referring to “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates

44 Ibid., 177.

45 Ibid.

46 See Eshun, “Further,” 290.

47 David Harvey argues that the processes of primitive accumulation, highlighted by Karl Marx as the necessary set of conditions for transitioning into a fully capitalist economy, rather than being displaced by capitalism actually continue apace as an ongoing process of “accumulation by dispossession.” This is especially characteristic of (neo)colonial and (neo)imperial relationships. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145–52.

48 What is revealed here, however, despite this language of historical change or ideological outlook, is less a determinant change in the relations of capital between the core and periphery than what the Warwick Research Collective have argued is the changing dynamics of combined and uneven development within the capitalist world-system’s shifts in the mode of production. Rather than a failure to properly transform colonial “immiseration” to teleological development and convergence, what this registers is the nonsynchronicity that capitalism necessarily perpetuates as a global world-system: “‘Modernity’ does not mark the relationship between some formations (that are ‘modern’) and others (that are not ‘modern,’ or not yet so). . . . To grasp the nettle here involves recognizing that capitalist development does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course” [Warwick Research Collective, *World Literature in the Context of Combined and Uneven Development* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 12]. Although the political discourse changes over time, from colonialism to postcolonial developmentalism to contemporary Afropessimism and the futures industry, what does not change are the capitalist relations of accumulation by dispossession that mark the processes of combined and uneven development underwriting all of these discourses.

images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.”⁴⁹ More recently, Ytasha Womack has extended the concept in ways that align with Csicsery-Ronay's formulation of a more properly global SF: “Both an artistic aesthetic and framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs.”⁵⁰ In other words, Afrofuturism developed as a mode of intervening in the SF discourse by interjecting African and Afro-diasporic concerns and desires into the narratives of futurity, as well as by turning to certain SF tropes as a means of identification and radical possibility.

Yet as Steven Shaviro suggests, it is in the very terms in which Afrofuturism initially sought resistance in the 1970s that it falls prey to the ideology of the futures industry today. Drawing on Eshun, Shaviro claims that the rapacious drive of capitalism outstrips the radical potential of Afrofuturist appropriations of SF tropes of posthumanism and cyborgs, arguing, “now that the posthuman future once prophesied by Afrofuturism has actually arrived, it no longer works as an escape from the domination of racism and of capital.”⁵¹ In other words, what were once fanciful and transgressive technological tropes that could be imbued with emancipatory desires appear today as the actual existing means through which neoliberalism is propelled. To put it in terms of Okorafor's novel, the radical change and technology once identified with posthuman cyborg SF tropes has been absorbed and colonized by neoliberal capitalism. This accords with Eshun's critique that the role of “science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present.”⁵² According to Eshun, rather than creating emancipatory visions of futurity, Western SF colonizes the future and produces visions that further capitalist investment in the present, creating default futures that privilege a contemporary neoliberal agenda. Although such a totalizing claim that undercuts any oppositional stance for SF is difficult to maintain, the genre's long association with colonialism and the techno-imperialism of the futures industry is equally difficult to dispel wholesale.⁵³

Pitted against this bleak assertion in which SF works as an adjunct of neoliberalism that swallows all forms of opposition, repackaging and returning them as so many inuring shock absorbers and future-capitalist midwives, Eshun still holds out hope for an Afrofuturist SF, arguing that its opposition to such Western-derived

49 Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180. Since the coining of the term, a longer history has been traced from the nineteenth century to the present that initially parallels and eventually conjoins with principally American mainstream SF. On this last point, see Lisa Yaszek, “Afrofuturism in American Science Fiction,” *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction*, eds. Gerry Canavan and Carl Link (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58–69.

50 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 9.

51 Shaviro, *Post*, 32.

52 Eshun, “Further,” 291.

53 For a more nuanced view of this relationship, see Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, “Science Fiction and Empire,” *Science Fiction Studies* 30.2 (2003): 236, and Andrew Milner “Where Was Science Fiction,” *Locating Science Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 155–57, especially the sections on “Postcolonial Theory and Science Fiction” and “World-Systems Theory and Science Fiction: The Anglo-French Core.”

futures takes the form of a “chronopolitical intervention”⁵⁴ that pries open unseen and unpredictable visions of futurity outside of the purview of the futures industry. Although Eshun turns largely to Afrodiasporic music to develop this argument, Lisa Yaszek looks to African apocalyptic SF to examine how many African SF authors and filmmakers turn the animating ideology of the futures industry against itself.⁵⁵ This switch in emphasis and location from the largely Americentric Afrofuturism to something that really needs to be considered as an African-futurism, or even more radically, African-utopianism, begins to take seriously Noah Tsika’s contemporaneous claim that “Afrofuturism’s roots in decolonization are rarely recognized.”⁵⁶ Tsika’s emphasis on the elision of anticolonialism in the foundations of Afrofuturism echoes Okorafor’s own misgivings about the Americentrism that reduces “African artists as an afterthought” to their black American contemporaries.⁵⁷

Thus, despite or perhaps because of Okorafor’s own reservations, *Lagoon* actually begins to broaden the lineages of Afrofuturism to incorporate a particularly African-futurism that draws on an Afro-utopianist vision. From the outset, it appears that the aliens as change and technology can only replicate the neoimperial drive of neoliberalism, reducing the second contact narrative to the same problems of neoliberal reappropriation that Shaviro diagnoses with earlier Afrofuturism. Therefore, in order to restore the deep-seated utopianism of Afrofuturism, the citizens of *Lagoon*’s Lagos must learn to embody and radicalize the concepts of change and technology as a form of anticolonial subjectivity, rather than merely accepting change and technology as foisted upon them from the outside.

From Welcome to Awakening

This Afro-utopianist intervention in the second contact narrative is borne out by the three-act structure of the novel. The first act, “Welcome,” replicates the colonial encounter by presenting the aliens in the form of a banal techno-utopianism closely aligned with the futures industry. The second act, “Awakening,” conversely radicalizes the utopian promise of the first by casting the aliens as a means to reawaken radical anticolonial subjectivity. In a rather sophisticated manner, this second encounter narrative is utilized to reimagine the present itself as neocolonial context. Rather than the mere repetition of colonialism, the alien arrival functions as a stand-in for the utopian event that otherwise seems impossible to imagine from within the conditions of the futures industry and capitalist realism: revolutionary change and the unpredictability of its results. Here, rather than lamenting the failures of developmentalism, *Lagoon* has something far more radical in mind by utilizing the second contact narrative as a means to create the space from within SF narrative to consider the possibilities for Afro-utopianism. I’ll return to its moment of resolution, the third act of “Symbiosis,” following.

The radicality of this vision is witnessed by the new social spaces that it opens up in relation to the heavily segregated and fortified spaces referenced previously. Within *Lagoon*, the desire for narration, for a role in the novel’s utopian future, necessarily

54 Eshun, “Further,” 292.

55 Lisa Yaszek, “Rethinking Apocalypse in African SF,” *Paradoxa* 25 (2013): 55–56.

56 Tsika, “Projected,” 100.

57 Okorafor quoted in Zutter, “Masquerade.”

demands greater parity for the LGBTQ community and for women particularly along with familiar calls for the reform of the corrupt government and military, and the greed of the bourgeoisie and elites. Yet *Lagoon* further complicates the question of narration and national space, widening its net to include not only the human victims of capitalist subsumption, but also the larger biome. Foregrounding this move, the novel opens with a section entitled “Moom!” onomatopoeia for two submerged explosions that are heard across all of Lagos and continually referenced throughout the narrative. The chapter is told from the point of view of a swordfish, who, angered by the polluted ocean-ways it must traverse, pierces an underwater oil hose to produce the first explosion. The second explosion is created by the aliens, who upon landing their ship in the ocean make “first contact” with the oceanic wildlife, prior to their “second contact” with the Nigerians. The aliens remove pollution from the sea and transform various ocean-dwellers into monstrous *kaiju*-like forms of their own choosing so that they can attack the humans responsible for polluting the ocean-ways and thereby defend their new utopic environ.

The novel makes clear, then, that this is no simplistic reconciliation between human and animal: “Despite the FPSO Mystra’s loading hose leaking crude oil, the ocean water just outside Lagos, Nigeria, is now so clean that a cup of its salty sweet goodness will heal the worst human illnesses and cause a hundred more illnesses not yet known to humankind. It is more alive than it has been in centuries and it is teeming with aliens and monsters.”⁵⁸ The healing of the ocean is not a return to some dehistoricized, pure natural state. The transformation belies a larger recognition that humans will no longer simply be able to subsume nature as means to dominate both it and themselves, in the manner criticized by Horkheimer and Adorno in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*.⁵⁹ As such, *Lagoon*’s radical stance recalls Sherryl Vint’s exhortation to “recontextualize orthodox Marxism’s labour theory of value by exploring the homologues between capitalism’s alienating reduction of people to labour-power and its exploitation of the environment in general (and other species in particular). These concerns should not be seen as competing priorities for the left, but as parts of the “*laws of motion* of capitalism.”⁶⁰ The socially utopic conditions perpetuated by the aliens to heal Lagos from the vestiges of colonial and neocolonial rapaciousness also simultaneously account for these other ecotopian conditions often left out of anticolonial struggle by highlighting animal alterity. Okorafor dedicates her novel “to the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria—animals, plant and spirit.”⁶¹ Although simultaneously gathered under the collective term of *people*, the novel doesn’t fall back on a simple equivalence. If neoliberalism functions through the accumulation by dispossession of natural resources, such as oil in the case of post-independence Nigeria, then the same attitude toward plant and animal life, which Horkheimer and Adorno categorize as the instrumentalization of nature, needs to be

58 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 6.

59 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2–7.

60 Sherryl Vint, “Species and Species Being: Alienated Subjectivity and the Commodification of Animals,” *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, eds. Mark Bould and China Miéville (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 119.

61 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, n.p.

accounted for in a renewed anticolonialism that challenges the continuation of neoliberal practices concerning both the ecological and the animal. Therefore, rather than a reconciliation, the novel perpetuates an agonistic relationship in which all life must be regarded as such, and the subsumption of one level by another amounts to a form of neocolonialism.

The transformed sealife continuing to attack not only the machinery of the oil industry, but also any humans that come near the sea brings us to another key concept that the novel wrestles with: the role of violence within radical change. What's at stake here is less the productiveness of oppositional violence so much as its embeddedness within the structures of the colonial-*cum*-neoimperial condition. The novel is saturated with violence across multiple sociopolitical levels prior to the landing of the aliens: the swordfish attacks the oil lines; Agu had been beaten by his fellow soldiers for attempting to intervene in their raping of a woman during a traffic stop; Adaora has been struck by her husband; and tourists are killed by highway robbers. These particular moments then blend in with the pervasive undergirding violence of the oil trade in the Niger-Delta, a violence that haunts the novel throughout. As Kenneth Omeje explains, the alignment of postcolonial elites with the foreign Transnational Oil Corporations (TNOCs) results in a complex, exploitative, and explosive set of conditions, in which "the key stakeholders, clients, and partisans of the political economy seek to pursue, fast-track, secure, protect, and defend oil-related accumulation by desperate measures that may include the use and threat of violence, extortion, and outright plunder—not to mention traditional practices like witchcraft."⁶² In other words, protecting the elite's extraction of rentier capital from the TNOCs leads to a "fundamentally compromised and dysfunctional state conducive to high-stakes accumulation."⁶³ And as Omeje lays out, these conditions themselves were exacerbated by the long period of military rule from 1979 to 1999 and the 1986 SAPs levied by the IMF and World Bank in order to accrue a higher balance of interest payments, which meant severely cutting social programs, ultimately leading to widespread poverty and deprivation. In other words, the chaotic violence of the novel is directly in relation, although disproportionately so, to the very real violence of the maintenance of the capitalist world-system.

The violence of the novel can be seen as 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 what Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee has termed *necrocapitalism*⁶⁴ and the substantive, concrete violence that is at the heart of capitalism itself. What is clear from the novel is that any radical futurity, any instantiation of a utopian desire from outside of the seeming ontological condition of capitalist realism, is a violent reaction in

62 Kenneth Omeje, "Oil Conflict and Accumulation Politics in Nigeria," *European Center for Sustainable Development Report* 12 (2011): 46.

63 *Ibid.*, 47. In this light, the novel's preeminent condition for utopia is the end of the oil trade: "All the offshore drilling facilities would be destroyed by the people of the water. Even in the delta, all was lost. Oil could no longer be Nigeria's top commodity. It could no longer be a commodity at all. 'But we have something better to give you all,' the Elders had said. Their technology," Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 273.

64 Working from Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, necrocapitalism is defined by Banerjee as "contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death." There is little better explanation of the oil trade in Nigeria. See Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, "Necrocapitalism," *Organizational Studies* 29.12 (2008): 1541.

relation to the contemporary limits of politics. The ensuing violence of the novel is not the nihilistic abdication of politics *tout court*, but of liberal, progressive politics, as it recognizes the limits of such politics as the outcome of a particular mode of production. And as the novel makes clear, this, of course, is neither to suggest that every act of violence is politically progressive or politically regressive, but must instead be read within the constellatory conditions from which it arises. Hence, the violence found in *Lagoon* can also be read as an allegorical registering of the totalizing valences *and* violence of neoliberalism in its global determinations and local instantiations, which, as I've noted, the aliens can at least initially be seen to represent. This is to recognize, then, that the easy castigation of violence and revolution as the Manichaeian opposite of reasoned politics is an ideologically false, pernicious opposition that supports only neoliberal orthodoxy around poverty and development. And this, in many ways, is what the alien Awakening engenders.

Ultimately, then, if not every instance of violence in the novel is revolutionary, it is the collective violence wrought by the imposition of the aliens that opens up the space in which the desire for change and difference can be registered. As Phil Wegner has argued in a different SF context involving revolutionary violence, "Arguments against the morality of radical or revolutionary action often betray a deeper anxiety produced by the undecidability of change: when we act in the 'moment' we know things will change, but whether for the better or worse cannot be known in advance. However, . . . it is only in that undecidability or incalculability that a free and, in Badiou's terms, the only truly 'human' act can occur."⁶⁵ It is in this register that the alien arrival is explicitly connected with violence as radical change. Not only is the alien landing accompanied by an explosion and a tidal wave that wracks the beach, but also later in the novel as Agu watches the aliens walk out of the water he links them with death: "As he sat there facing the ocean, his back to Lagos, he felt present at the death of something. The death of Lagos. The death of Nigeria. Africa. Everything."⁶⁶ Here the radicality of the utopia promised by the arrival of the aliens has to initially be felt as loss.

Indeed, the violent response to the aliens is totalizing, encompassing the entirety of Lagos and, as we've already seen, connecting the animal, human, and spirit realms. At the same time, the violence that the aliens themselves enact is similarly all-encompassing. In a confrontation with a group of soldiers, Ayodele literally eviscerates them, spreading their gore and remains, soaking the landscape and bystanders. Moreover, "All the car and building windows in a one-mile radius shattered; birds, insects and bats fell to the ground, dogs barked, cats hid, lizards scurried, several forms of bacteria died and others germinated. The noise this time was so profound that many of the weaker multi-cellular organisms in parts of the ocean closest to the source were obliterated."⁶⁷ The effect of the violence is terrifying and not simply localized.

Each period of violence, however, becomes then dialectically bonded to a period of transformation. Indeed, directly after the evisceration previously referenced, we see this radical transformation from life to death to renewal: "But the wet piles of meat,

65 Philip E. Wegner, *Shockwaves of Possibility: Essays on Science Fiction, Globalization and Utopia* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2014), 190.

66 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 193.

67 *Ibid.*, 114.

the scattered clothes, even the spattered blood [of the soldiers] were gone as though they never had been there. In their place was a plantain tree, heavy with unripe plantain. Adaora stared at it, understanding what had happened. She felt like both vomiting and sighing with relief.”⁶⁸ It's a powerfully utopian vision in which the violence of the alien revolution is recast into the production of new life. Yet to return to Wegner, something remains structurally undecidable from this change as captured by Adaora's response, as it is suspended between vomiting and sighing. Indeed, this suspension recasts Adaora's first reaction to meeting Ayodele where she notes: “There was something both attractive and repellent about the woman, and it addled Adaora's senses.”⁶⁹ As the novel's three-act structure affirms, there must be some form of resolution for this violence, some arresting point, in which the codetermining violence of the aliens' arrival and citizens' reaction to it coalesce. In *Lagoon*, this is achieved through a simultaneous act of alien sacrifice and human symbiosis that constitutes the novel's third act.

Symbiosis: From Postcolonial Novum to African-Utopian Event

Symbiosis, as a form of dialectical sublation, necessarily shuttles across the moments of undecidability in the utopic form between technocratic neocolonialism and anticolonial awakening. That the aliens through the Afrofuturist second contact narrative necessarily inhabit both poles in the end provides the greatest utopian challenge to the novel. Even if we align the aliens entirely with the analogical mode and novum, we still end up with an outside context problem, a utopian solution that can only come from elsewhere through the introduction of alien technology. That is, it presents us with a traditional messianism. This would seem to be at the point where the more sophisticated form of the analogic novum is entirely sundered from the more mundane extrapolative form and stretched to its limit.

With this in mind, it is easy to imagine collapsing the dialectical tension figured by the aliens to the extrapolative mode and thereby reading the aliens as merely benevolent colonizers. In this light, the novel's narrative solution can potentially be seen as falling back on the ideological formal devices of the SF first contact narrative that reconstitute colonial logic in an unintentional neoimperial guise: yes, the futures industry is shifted away from the west; however, it is only done so to then be imparted by a new benevolent, yet ultimately imposing force. But this would be to arrest the possibility of the utopian moment under the baleful logic of capitalist realism and reveal just how beholden the postcolonial imagination is to the futures industry and its attendant ideology of capitalist realism. Rather than SF's utopian vocation, we end up in a mythic eternal cycle, where the alien returns in the extrapolative mode merely as proof of the inescapable history of imperialism rather than representing the possibility of futurity. Instead of resting here, though, working through this ambivalent textual nexus allows for further engagement with the relationship between SF form and postcolonial narrative. What *Lagoon* posits, then, through its rebooting of the first contact narrative as second contact and the Afro-utopianist view of futurity is a reconceptualization of the work of the novum within SF itself. If the function of the

68 *Ibid.*, 137.

69 *Ibid.*, 17.

extrapolative novum was originally geared toward a techno-utopic ideology comfortably nestled within Western Enlightenment rationality, here the extreme form of the analogic novum can be rethought through recourse to Alain Badiou's concept of the event.

What I have in mind is something slightly different than (although not strictly in opposition to) Wegner's own powerful account of the relationship of the event, novum, and utopianism. Although it deserves more nuance than I can give it here, Wegner posits the radical newness of the event as a further instantiation of Suvin's novum. Thus, for Wegner, the utopian instantiation of SF is where the text leaves off, the new utopian promise that takes hold after the textual resolution, which he posits as an evental utopia.⁷⁰ Instead, I'm positing the relationship differently. If the event cannot be known ahead of time, how can its desire be articulated as a novum from *within* the SF text? For this desire to be registered, it needs an impossible undecidable placeholder as some form of textual marker for that which cannot be named or known: something like a novum that evinces its own structural absence. Hence, my tentative positing of "alien" with its coeval yet diametrically opposed valences as the novum-as-event—the unknowable unforeseeable eruption of history through the reawakening of a seemingly structurally unrepresentable anticolonial subjectivity for the present.

To put it differently, what happens if we consider the aliens not as aliens, but conceptually as the placeholder of the event, as that which is alien, unknowable, or unlocatable to the ideology of the contemporary world-system, or to use Badiou's terms, that which is "un-presented *within the situation*"?⁷¹ The aliens thus become equated with the "evental site" as they are presented as that which cannot be represented by the regulative state or its discourse.⁷² The inexplicability of the alien is thus recast as the very condition of the event, its "*absolute contingency*,"⁷³ hence the impossibility to narrate it within the governing ideology of the present. As Badiou makes clear, "The negative aspect of the definition of evental sites—to not be represented—prohibits us from speaking of a site 'in-itself.'"⁷⁴ Although the introduction of the alien might seem to leave off Badiou's insistence that the event must come from within and not without the historical situation,⁷⁵ the aliens act within this text to reawaken and reveal the revolutionary possibilities that lie dormant within Nigeria and the people themselves: they bring the principal actors together and inaugurate the evental interruption. The Awakening caused by the eruption of the aliens within the neoliberal-determined state—that is, as constitutive of the evental site—thus becomes productive of the truth of that event: "A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture which opens up truths 'the event.'"⁷⁶ It is in this sense, following the logic of the second contact narrative as recast through the dual Afrofuturist lens of representation of to identification with the alien, that the aliens of the novel represent the

70 See Wegner, *Shockwaves*, 51–52.

71 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham. (London: Continuum, 2005), 174.

72 *Ibid.*, 175.

73 *Ibid.*, xxvi.

74 *Ibid.*, 176.

75 See Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003), 116.

76 Badiou, *Being*, xxii.

return of Nigerians' alienated, seemingly structurally and historically impossible anticolonial subjectivity to themselves.

The Awakening becomes the moment for producing the new radical subjectivities that fully come into being in the Symbiosis. As Badiou attests, "A subject is nothing other than an active fidelity to the event of truth. This means that a subject is a militant of truth."⁷⁷ With this in mind, we can reread the inaugural moment of the Symbiosis. At this point, Ayodele seemingly sacrifices herself in the narrative, but rather than die, she disperses her bodily materialization of change and technology into the air that is then breathed by all of Nigeria (and even by some in neighboring Ghana). When Femi, a journalist, reflects on the experience, he notes that "He'd inhaled the fog like everyone else and he'd immediately felt a shift. In perspective; in memory."⁷⁸ Consequently, the aliens can be seen within the narrative as a sudden epistemological awakening and transformation within the populace itself that brings them together.

Given the complex identification that Afrofuturism posits with the figure of the alien, in *Lagoon* the alien narrative as second encounter is thus restructured as a return through the three-act structure of "Welcome," "Awakening," "Symbiosis." The aliens become the impossible mediated images of the Nigerians and their own radical possibility as the technology to effect radical change. That is, if the first encounter, the first representation of the alien in the Afrofuturist sense is as the colonizer, the idea of second encounter in *Lagoon* is extraordinarily and originally recast as a mode of returning to the people of Lagos their own alienated experience: a recovering of the impossibility of their own history, and of themselves as historical agents. Moreover, such a revolutionary awakening has global implications in line with Badiou's argument that the raising of the "inexistent" to the "becoming 'all' presupposes, then, a change of the world, which is to say a change of transcendental. The transcendental has to change in order for the assignation to existence."⁷⁹ The raising of the Nigerians from minimal to maximal within the world-system will necessarily entail the very transformation of that system itself.

As a complex mediation of colonial past and neoimperial present, the second contact narrative in *Lagoon* thereby reimagines the experience of reciprocity that never came and the promise of decolonization that never fully materialized by opening a radical space in which Nigerian liberation sets the conditions for global futurity and post-capitalist development, which comes in the third Act of "Symbiosis." Hence the President announces, "For the first time since we cast off the shackles of colonialism, over a half-century ago, since we rolled through decades of corruption and internal struggles, we have reached the tipping point. And here in Lagos, we have passed it. Many of you have seen the footage on the Internet or heard the news from loved ones. Last night, Lagos burned. But like a phoenix, it will rise from the ashes—a greater creature than ever before."⁸⁰

This desire to recast the postcolonial nations as the bearers of a new global futurity that confronts Afropessimism and the neoliberal futures industry is then seen

77 Ibid., xiii.

78 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 287.

79 Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 61–62.

80 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 277.

as being both necessarily global in scale *and* paramount to their own survival *because* the conditions of the event that set radicality and revolution in motion are also threatened by becoming the unfulfilled conditions of another false alternate history (this is the pall cast so heavily by the initial valence of the alien as representing neocolonization). As Badiou warns, "One of the profound characteristics of singularities is that they can always be *normalized*: as is shown, moreover, by socio-political History; any eventual site can, in the end, undergo a state of normalization."⁸¹ Accordingly, the novel ends not by resolving the contradiction and thus as the utopian closure of history, but instead as the more radical utopian promise of opening from its neoimperial capitalist realist enclosure. As such, history becomes sentient as Udide Okwanka moves from writing history at a remove to entering it fully and properly. In Udide Okwanka's final words of the novel she warns: "But there is a problem. Other people in other parts of the world—they see what is happening here. And they fear it. They are agreed. Lagos is a cancer. They wish to cut the cancer out before it spreads. I will not let them. . . . For the first time since the birth of Lagos, my glorious city, I will pause in my storytelling. I will leave my web. I become part of the story. I will join my people. And we spiders play dirty."⁸² The radicalness of this desire to narrate, then, is the very radicality of imagining historicity and futurity, of a movement beyond the confines of the futures industry and capitalist realism.

The "Symbiosis" of the third act can be seen as the reuniting of contemporary Lagos with its moment of radical history. In this sense, we should remember that it is the aliens that bring the various constitutive elements of Lagos together in one space, that give them a vehicle for imagining radical change, and that ultimately awaken their own knowledge of themselves as change and technology. They are, then, the figuration of that which can't be thought. Ultimately, it is the second valence of radical futurity, which the novel leans toward and which then signifies what Wegner would term the unknowable eventual utopian aspects that may cohere past the point of its narrative closure. This attests to Udide Okwanka's final words that this radical alterity, this opening to and of history, must be fought for to be preserved and not "normalized" by the neoliberal present, which is presented as near global conspiracy in her terms in the sense of Badiou's normalizing, regulative state: "I don't know who will launch them but these people are all in communication, so all are involved in the decision"⁸³ to fight the change that has taken place in Lagos.

What's crucial is this sense of awakening a memory, a sense of a possibility of what could have been but wasn't. The novel gives form to the desire for a new form of anticolonial and socialist collectivity through the population's reawakening of an idea thought dead, recasting change and technology from its colonial/neoliberal mooring and transforming it into an evocation of autonomy and radical futurity through a new radical subjectivity that can confront the Afropessimism and futures industry. The alien-other appears not to bring decolonization itself, but to invest its spirit in the Nigerian population by offering a powerful image of itself as alien-other, as the aliens dislocated from the history that should have been. Hence, despite all the trappings of

81 Badiou, *Being*, 176.

82 Okorafor, *Lagoon*, 293.

83 *Ibid.*, 292.

the colonial first contact narrative and its update in the future's industry, 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. In other words, it is a different kind of ambiguity than that often found at the level of postcolonial critique whose ambiguity seems to be forever pitched at what it sees as the always already failed moment of nationalist decolonization and thus the instantiation of Afropessimism. Instead, it is the ambiguity of the utopian event.