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The Aquatic Turn in Afrofuturism: Women and Other Critters in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi* (2010)*

Abstract I: Il recente profluvio di narrazioni e opere artistiche divenute oggetto di studio di Blue Humanities (Mentz 2009), Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2019), Hydro-Criticism (Winkiel 2019) o New Thalassology (Horden & Purcell 2006) testimoniano una svolta culturale che dalla terra sposta lo sguardo verso il mare. Nel presente articolo l'idrosfera è analizzata in due opere afrofuturiste – il romanzo *Lagoon* (2014) di Nnedi Okorafor e il cortometraggio *Pumzi* (2010) di Wanuri Kahiu – con l'intento di affrontare il globale ordine capitalista e immaginare un'estetica acquafuturista multispecie nata dalla contromemoria del Middle Passage con i suoi miti sottomarini.

Abstract II: The recent efflorescence of fictional writings and artistic works examined under the rubrics of Blue Humanities (Mentz 2009), Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2019), Hydro-Criticism (Winkiel 2019), or New Thalassology (Horden and Purcell 2006), testify a recent cultural shift from the land to the sea. In this article, the hydrosphere is analysed in two female Afrofuturist works – Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2010) – to address the global capitalist order and to imagine an aquafuturist multispecies aesthetics that springs from the countermemory of the Middle Passage and its undersea myths.

Keywords: Blue humanities, Afrofuturism, gendered water imagination, multispecies, humanArboreal.

The exploration of the ocean, which we are invited to consider not as a "blank space or *aqua nullius*" but rather as a "viscous, ontological, and deeply material place, a dynamic force, and unfathomable more-than-human world" (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020: 133), is at the core of a new efflorescence of fictional writings and artistic works that prove a shift in attention from the land to the sea, from the soil to the water. This shift has been theorised under the rubrics of Blue Humanities (Mentz 2009), Critical Ocean Studies (DeLoughrey 2019), Hydro-Criticism (Winkiel 2019), or New Thalassology (Horden & Purcell 2006) and invests several disciplines simultaneously. In this article I will concentrate on the fortunate encounter of

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Environmental Humanities and Afrofuturism through the analysis of two projects that "think with water" (Chen, MacLeod & Neimanis 2013). Oceanic imaginaries and aquatopian futures intersect posthuman feminism in Nnedi Okorafor's petronovel *Lagoon* (2014) and Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2010) to address the global capitalist order and to imagine an aquafuturist multispecies aesthetics that springs from the countermemory of the Middle Passage and its undersea myths.

On the one hand, the oceanic expanse has been crucial in the process of mercantile expansion with its circulation of goods and capital (slaves and oil included), so that the sea is "discursively constituted by sociopolitical systems of capitalist regimes" (Opperman 2019: 445). On the other hand, despite the pervasive mediation and endless production and diffusion of images in our culture, the deep sea is still conceived as an inscrutable, unfathomable abyss (Konior 2019); within this mysterious, dark void, oceanic degradation and plastic pollution, the rising of waters, and species extinction remain unseen, so much that the sea is often compared to outer space, crowded with alien creatures (Helmreich 2009). As Bogna M. Konior asserts: "The oceans are not only blue – they are also *black* and as such non-perceptible both in their figuration of the colonial-capitalist history of slavery as well as in the blackness and invisibility of their depths" (Konior 2019: 57, emphasis in the text). What I call "the aquatic turn" in Afrofuturism thus reflects a critical shift in the perception of the ocean and a serious attempt at probing both its material and metaphorical blackness. As a form of environmental speculative fiction, it participates in the challenge to replace dominant human perspectives with an alternative field of vision where interconnected networks of multiple subjectivities exhibit what Rosi Braidotti calls "multiple transversal alliances across communities", which may recompose the human and contemplate "new ways of becoming-world together" (Braidotti 2017: 41).

The first significant signs of this new interest in the ocean from an Afrofuturist perspective dates back to the late Nineties, when a visionary Detroit-based house band named Drexciya imagined an underwater world to provide an origin to people of color who had been deprived both of their own history and of a possible future. The elegiac tale of this mythic population relates to the African voyage towards the Americas and gives voice to aquatic spirits (the slaves that were tossed in the Atlantic waters when ill or somehow undesirable) and to urban ghosts (their descendants, the invisible people of problematic areas in Detroit). Legend has it that some pregnant black women who jumped or were thrown overboard gave birth to amphibian critters in the abyss, a liquid environment that soon became the arena of a new mutant species. This was, in short, the beginning of an underwater epic aimed at recuperating both the drowned history of African women and the cosmogonic myth of the water of life, here articulated according to indigenous paradigms.

B(l)ack to the Future: From Slaveships to Spaceships and to Water Again

A new wave of black speculative thought has spread as a cultural tendency of historical reclamation that invests the future by allowing Afrodescendant and Afrodiasporic communities to re-invent space and time dimensions. By problematizing the relation between identity, culture, and technology, one that rejects dominant Western paradigms, these

narratives explore innovative expressions in all fields: literature, music, fashion, cinema, design, photography. Even in children and young adult literature a new racial imagery seems to have surged. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas argues that the outset of a new corpus of texts and mediascapes finally resists what she calls a "dark fantastic" (Thomas 2019a), where black girl characters are usually ensnared in roles that portray them as "*monstrous*, *invisible*, and *always dying*" (Thomas 2019b: 283, emphasis in the text) thus repeating, over and over again, the same old story. But the danger of a single story, argues Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is that it "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie 2009).

When in 1994 Mark Dery coined the term "Afrofuturism"[1], the one single story that had been reiterated up to that moment was that science fiction was a "A White Guy Thing" (Dery 2008: 6) despite the fact that "[…] African-American voices have *other* stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come" (Dery 1994: 182, emphasis added). Through the blending of different cultures and traditions, Afrofuturism works on the hybridization of different genres – speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, gothic, magic realism – and combines traditional tropes of sci-fi with non-Western spirituality, ancestral myths and beliefs, so that old African signifiers are englobed in future scenarios. By entwining multiple temporalities, these narrations also reverberate old native prophecies, indigenous voodoo practices, and folklore elements, thus "creating […] bridges from Africa to America to space" through the use of technology practices used as "a time machine to bring the past into the present" (Gipson 2019: 84-85). In this sense, as Michelle Reid argues, the ideals of expansion and colonisation typical of science fiction are counterbalanced by a great potential to imagine and represent alternative ways of being that encompass postcolonial approaches. Yet, she also advocates to expand the possibilities for figuring otherness *beyond* the strictly postcolonial and engage in a deeper examination of "what makes science fiction so strongly identified as a literature of empire and expansion" (Reid 2005). One enduring trope of these stories is the alien Other (or the extraterrestrial) here recast in neocolonial terms.

Even before the inception of Afrofuturism, first contact and invasion narratives from outer space were the craze and outer space itself, with its intergalactic blank zones and interstices, reproduced a geographical map whose empty spots were to be filled through the same colonial patterns of its terrestrial counterparts. However, the technologically superior aliens in their encounters with the white man rarely attempted to overcome the binary logic of the coloniser/colonised and when they did, they often contributed to naturalise it. Several scholars (Rieder 2008; Lathers 2010; Adejunmobi 2016) have analysed the relation between the experience of colonialism, its related plot strategy of abduction and the slave trade, showing how the process of metaphorising race normally generates endless iterations of white privilege and color-blind futures (Lavender 2007). In addition, while much literature

[1] Dery defines Afrofuturism as "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 images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 1994: 180).

of the scattered diaspora has concentrated on repairing the image of the black body from persistent dehumanization, Afrofuturist speculative fiction uses the other-worldly as a way to reclaim traumatic histories experienced in the Middle Passage. These traumas, according to Kodwo Eshun, still persist in our contemporary era, but the ethical "practice of countermemory" in Afrofuturism reorients the "Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective" (Eshun 2003: 289). These countermemories, while contesting "the colonial archive" (288) and "recovering histories of counter-futures" (289) also explore the conjunction of race, gender and sexuality to reconsider a whole set of dichotomies and delineate a new trajectory of female-centered texts. In short, the critique to racialist discourses extends to white heteronormativity, false gender equivalence, and reactionary forms of alterity.

To embrace greater diversity and creative approaches to the unknown, some Afrofuturist artists problematise feminist stories by expanding to water and oceanic forces of nonhumanness. In Allison Mackey's view, these narratives, located at the intersection of environmental and postcolonial science fiction, can "serve as antidotes to complacency in light to the uneven planetary distribution of resources or despair in the face of environmental devastation" (Mackey 2018: 530). Moreover, as we will see in the analysis of Okorafor's novel and Kahiu's short movie, environmental fatalism and necrofuturism are here substituted by the prospect of a systemic change necessary not to merely re-configure the human, but rather to explore multispecies alternatives and encourage ecological engagement with the maritime nonhuman other.

Lagoon (2014) by Nnedi Okorafor

In her 2017 TED talk, Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor states that

> Science fiction is one of the greatest and most effective forms of political writing. It's all about the question, "What if?" Still, not all science fiction has the same ancestral bloodline, that line being Western-rooted science fiction, which is mostly white and male (Okorafor 2017).

Relying on both African and Black American oral accounts, myths, and folklore, Okorafor focuses on modes of storytelling that draw heavily on magic realism and animism where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are muddled. Since Afrofuturism has been originally produced and distributed within American culture, she challenges the term and coins the expression "Africanfuturism" (Okorafor 2019) that opens up to black futures where hybrid archetypal figures reflect the Igbo heritage underpinning many of her stories. In "Organic Fantasy" (Okorafor 2009), moreover, she claims that being the world "a magical place" (276) to her, she often explores the messy material sites of the environment by bringing home fragments of nature to observe, for instance "pond water and use my microscope to gaze at the tiny water insects and protozoa" (277). In short, what she writes is "something organic. This type of fantasy grows out of its own soil" (277).

Using the conventional science fiction trope of alien invasion, the first generation of Afrofuturist women writers expressed a lively concern with issues related to race, science,

technology, society, and futurity. In their writings, they imagined new worlds where a more egalitarian future was granted to black or indigenous women at the intersection of cross-temporal colonisation with cultural and technological practices, or through supernatural powers. But *what if* the aliens arrived from the Ocean instead of the space and "invaded" a non-Western city, for a change? *What if* they decided to settle in the ocean abysses of Lagos, Nigeria, a country with a high rate of corruption and criminality, but at the same time one of the most technologised places in the world? *What if* the aliens did not want to "rule, colonize, conquer or take" (220) as in the most conventional tradition of the Empire, but simply "want a home?" (220).

Dedicated to "the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria – animals, plant and spirit", *Lagoon* embeds multispecies agency to epitomise entangled networks that engage plural life forms beyond the human. Within this reassessment of the boundaries of subjectivity, the alterations of humanness contemplate fluid forms of hybridity that involve more capacious temporalities and aesthetics as an alternative to capitalistic culture. This is visible from the very first scene and in the opening of each of the three sections of the book introduced by a different nonhuman animal: "Welcome" (where the marine aliens make contact with the humans in Lagos), "Awakening" (which concentrates on a wave of violence in the city), and "Symbiosis" (an ideal communal form of co-existence aiming to repair what has been destroyed).

The book's prologue features a female swordfish narrator, who is "on a mission" and rages against those humans who brought "the noise and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water's surface" (3). These are "*[h]er* waters," her birthplace, now *invaded* by "the bittersweet-tasting poison" of the "black blood" (4). Her attack to the pipeline reveals the complexities of the environment violated by the "dirty" energy of the abyss, adding to the intricacies of this mixed liquid world where the organic and the polluted share the same space of alterity. It is the presence of the oil that marks Lagos' future by sanctioning its material wealth and all its consequent socio-environmental costs and injustices that demand radical change. The hybrid submerged world reflects the relentless intermingling of the surface, where species, races, languages, views constantly transform, because Lagos "is energy. It never stops" (40).

Ecological reparation and socio-political renewal come with the extraterrestrial species that defines itself as "the change". Their mission on earth focuses on fulfilling everybody's desires (the swordfish included, who increases her size), cleaning the ocean of the spilled oil, and freeing Lagos of pervasive past and present imperialistic dynamics (both colonial vestiges and neoliberal capitalistic greediness) with their undergirding violence: "WE COME TO BRING YOU TOGETHER AND *REFUEL* YOUR FUTURE" (113, capitalization in the text, emphasis added), thus hinting at the need to both dismantle addictive petroculture and revitalise Africa with the same dynamic spirit of the protean waters.

Ayodele is the aliens' ambassador, who makes contact with three human beings with special powers gathered on Bar Beach – Adaora, a marine biologist who can breathe underwater due to her amphibian nature; Antony, a Ghanaian rapper who can use rhythm to communicate and heal; and Agu, a soldier with supernatural strength – who are suddenly sucked into the ocean by a tsunami preceded by a violent "sonic boom" (10). Since "human

beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them" (67), Ayodele decides to be assimilated in the human world by shifting her shape at will and thus using an alien technology. In the first encounter with the three characters "the strange woman creature" appears in the familiar shape of "Mami Wata" (13), the half-human, half-sea creature of the Nigerian cosmogony, a water goddess who protects the ocean and its marine inhabitants. Only when Adaora takes her to her lab and analyses a skin sample under her microscope, does she find out that her body is not made of cells, but of "tiny tiny tiny metal-like balls" (25). In her study of the novel, Melody Jue argues that the scientist's curious attitude toward the alien places *Lagoon* in a position that is quite far from other science fictions that traditionally posit the ocean as an "unknowable alterity". On the contrary, Ayodele's people are characterised in "familiar terms" and are composed of many "'conscious particles' that also form larger bodies" (Jue 2017: 174) similar to coral reef, eventually showing that these aliens are "ontologically amphibious" (Ten Bos 2009: 74, cit. in Jue 2017: 174). This "storied sea" thus results from the concoction of its own "physicality detailed in scientific research" and "the vast domain of imagination" (Opperman 2019: 446, 452) that both Adaora and Ayodele reflect in the end of the novel.

Soon after her husband Chris attacks her in an outburst of masculine violence, Adaora finds out that she can transform into a mermaid – "I am a marine witch" (280) – eventually concluding that terrestrial and aquatic critters are knotted by invisible genealogies and multiple possibilities of co-evolutionary symbiotic becoming. After the awakening that involves the whole population of Lagos, her adamant desire is to respond to the aliens' "call for change" (122) and with the help of science recast her birthplace as the center of a new futurity that eschews new subjugating forms of colonialism disguised as autonomous progress. *Lagoon* thus articulates "a mode of returning to the people of Lagos their own alienating experience: a recovering of the impossibility of their own history, and of themselves as historical agents" (O'Connell 2016: 310) that also requires, as Ayodele suggests, a help from "within": "I will go within", she says before shifting into a white mist that everybody inhales, "You'll all be a bit … alien" (268). The change, coming from the sea, eventually materialises in fresh air that Africa can finally breathe.

***Pumzi* (2009) by Wanuri Kahiu**

The water crisis has been particularly prominent in recent speculative fiction and cli-fi narratives that typically focus on the hydroform of floods, "the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change" (Trexler 2015: 82). Research on water scarcity and water wars, instead, is still scant in spite of a new crop of novels that may be seen as "harbingers of a world to come" (Boast 2020: 1). Similarly, visual narratives have contributed to the general discussion on hydropolitics and conflicts over water, especially in countries located in the global South and thus more likely to be affected by issues like water rights, water privatization, and corporate surveillance[2]. Since water is the most searing example of a life-or-death matter, the subject of water inequalities evocates global anxieties around access to water

[2] Take, for instance, Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008), Icíar Bollain's *Even the Rain* (2010), and George Miller's blockbuster *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

while emphasising geographical disparities and revealing the neocolonial profit dynamics of late capitalism. A jarring depiction of future hydropolitical scenarios is offered by *Pumzi* (2009), Kenia's first science fiction movie by film director and producer Wanuri Kahiu[3]. In an interview, however, Kahiu explains that her story about "a girl in the future" included both science fiction and fantasy conventions, and that only at the time of the shooting was she prompted to make a choice between the two genres. And yet, she states that

> science fiction has been a genre in Africa that has been used a lot for a long period of time […]. If we think of science fiction as something that is fictitiously science or speculative fiction within a story, then we've always used it. Because we've used botany; we've used etymology; the idea of the study of animals to tell stories or the idea of insects to tell stories or the idea of natural sciences using trees. That's all science fiction (Kahiu 2013).

These African stories have been used to communicate "morality, tradition and a code of conduct", which emphasise the ethical and ecological purposes of Afrocentric narratives that intermingle nature and culture, the past and the future, black human (female) subjectivities and nonhuman creatures.

Pumzi is set thirty-five years after World War III (also known as "The Water Wars") and whose consequent devastation – provoked by radiological weapons combined with climate change effects – have made the Earth uninhabitable. The first scene, set in the Virtual Natural History Museum of the base, is crucial not only to determine the characters' past and present historical frames, but also to buttress the anthropogenic nature of the environmental destruction that Kahiu amplifies through a bird's eye shot of the compound (resembling a spaceship) encapsulated in a barren desert landscape. She also shows two newspaper articles whose titles – "The greenhouse effect. The Earth is changing" and "Whole day journey in search of water" – interlace lack of water and human accountability. Also exhibited is one desiccated root, whose shape reminds of an embryo, together with the skull of an extinct animal and a "MAITU (Mother) seed" whose label offers the noun's etymology: "Kikuyu language. 1. Noun – Mother. Origin: Kikuyu language from MAA (Truth) and ITU (Ours). OUR TRUTH". The only *false* truth here is that futurity, or the post-Anthropocene era, is a dimension denying alternatives to life extinction.

The few survivors to the catastrophe live in an underground compound and are governed by the Maitu Council whose impositions include forced labor to produce kinetic electricity by exercising on machines and the suppression of dreams through special pills that inhibit both memories of traumatic experiences and nostalgic images of a luxuriant lost world. Water is so scarce that they have to recycle their own fluids (they drink their own filtered and purified urine and sweat) and it is commonly used as some sort of currency.

[3] Wanuri Kahiu (b. Nairobi 1980) is one of the most vibrant contemporary Kenyan artists whose stories and films have received international acclaim. She is co-founder of "AfroBubbleGum", a collective of African artists that promotes "fun, fierce and fantastical African art" (Kahiu 2017), a lighthearted artistic expression with the aim to dissipate the dominant idea that in Africa only dramatic things happen: "war, poverty, devastation, Aids". *Pumzi* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010.

Kahiu seems to ponder on what Astrida Neimanis calls a "more-than-human aqueous ecology", mainly "an ecology in which humans and other bodies of water (animal, vegetable, meteorological, geophysical) are always already implicated, as lively agents, in one another's well-being" (Neimanis 2014: 6), while offering an African posthumanist perspective that intends to overcome the anthropocentrism of the spread discourse on human rights to water. This paradigm generally presupposes a strong commitment to social justice (water as an indisputable right), but what is overlooked here is the wrong hypothesis that water is a resource for human prosperity exclusively, rather than an element needed by all living creatures, which also hosts entire colonies thriving on it. This means to deny "the interconnections between human and more-than-human bodies of water, all bound together in a complexly balanced hydrocommons" (Neimanis 2014: 8). It is this ecological interconnectedness that *Pumzi* evokes by reclaiming water's agency and decentering human prerogative, while offering a critique to "necrofuturism", mainly "the sense of impending and unavoidable disaster that permeates all our contemporary visions of the future" (Canavan 2014: 9), here replaced by multiple alternative "futureS" (Assa 2017).

The main character Asha (interpreted by Kudzani Moswela), a visionary scientist and the curator of the Museum, is awakened from a dream of a living tree and ordered by an automated voice to take her dream suppressant. In the following scene, Asha is depicted while using the restroom, where a female janitor is cleaning the premise. Although no dialogue is ever exchanged between the two women, their binding solidarity is evident: Asha leaves some water for her as a sort of tip, while the janitor will later reciprocate by assuming a key role in the denouement of the story. This is set in motion by the materialization on her desk of a mysterious white box containing a soil sample and GPS coordinates. A quick test reveals that the soil contains great amount of water and no radioactivity, and when she brings some of this soil to her lips, Asha is plunged into another watery vision that also evokes the image of the tree again, thus hinting at the liquid root system of plants and convincing her that life is not completely extinct. A proof of this comes from the budding "mother seed" that Asha plants in the soil and wets with some drops of water. Willing to investigate further, she requests permission to do some research outside of the base, but the Council denies her the exit visa and commands her to get rid of it"[4] (7: 07) since "the outside is dead" (7: 51). Upon her insistence, she is ordered to evacuate and after the Museum is destroyed, Asha finds her way out through the garbage chute, which becomes her portal to a future of symbiosis with the nonhuman: watery and arboreal alike. Walking through a polluted desert where plastic and nuclear radioactivity seem to be the only legacy from a past world, Asha searches for the source of the soil amid stomps of dead trees, eventually deciding to plant her germinated seed, water it with her bodily fluids and protect it with her scarf from the hot sun.

Most critics have interpreted the last scene as the compassionate sacrifice of a human individual for the sake of a nonhuman Other (Durkin 2016; Assa 2017; Rico 2017; Mackey 2018). This reading, however, reframes the whole discourse on water and extinction in anthropocentric terms, completely neglecting the fact that nature does not need human

[4] *Pumzi*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlR7l_B86Fc (consulted on 29/05/2021).

intervention to be "saved", and that both the hydrosphere and the arboreal worlds have intricate lively communal behaviors even when they appear dead to human eyes. As a matter of fact, in the contemplation of imperiled biomes and multiple entanglements, the encounter of humans and nonhumans corresponds to the intersection of completely different life-forms, scales, and temporalities, although this gap may dwindle when recognising water, animality, and traces of the inorganic world in human beings, even in their clandestine existences. What has been interpreted as Asha's death responds to Claire Colebrook's search for another "mode of reading the world, and its anthropogenic scars, that frees itself from folding the earth's surface around human survival" (Colebrook 2014: 23). What humans are requested to do is to imagine a post-Anthropocene world, whose narratives cannot be "human-all-too-human" (Colebrook 2014: 25). After all, *Pumzi* is an exercise in imagination, the hypothesis of a post-Anthropocene, and if Astrida Neimanis demonstrates that we are all "bodies of water", also "humanArboreal perspectives" are deemed possible (Concilio & Fargione 2021). As a consequence, human beings need to start contemplating that

> In the era of extinction, we can go beyond a self-willing self-annihilation in which consciousness destroys itself to leave nothing but its own pure non-being; we can begin to imagine imaging for other inhuman worlds. That is to say: rather than thinking of the posthuman, where we destroy all our own self-fixities and become pure process, we can look positively to the inhuman and other imaging or reading processes (Colebrook 2014: 27-28).

In the last scene, the critter laying on the ground and ready to sprout in its woman-water-tree configuration proves how *Pumzi* has embraced this route, rooted as it is in material and cultural histories with their submerged memories and traumas, systemic violence on the black body[5], elemental experiences, and discursive figurations of aquatic life.

Conclusion

By overlapping the theoretical frames of environmental humanities and feminist posthumanities, Afrofuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor and artist Wanuri Kahiu contribute with their works to the current debate on water as a conceptual, material, ethical and political subject. Instead of considering the ocean as a blank ("aqua nullius") and black (in its double meaning of "unfathomable" and "racially marked") space, their works erode the dichotomic thinking that separates humans from other living creatures, eventually proving human embeddedness (and responsibility) within a larger multispecies aquatic system whose aesthetics and temporalities differ from other spaces (namely terrestrial and interstellar).

In a recent article, Astrida Neimanis reaffirms the vital relation of humans and nonhumans with water: "We are the watery world – metonymically, temporarily, partially, and particularly. Water irrigates us, sustains us, comprises the bulk of our soupy flesh"

[5] "Pumzi" means "breath" in Swahili, thus evoking George Floyd's and other victims' cry "I can't breathe!" and recalling *Lagoon*'s final scene.

(2021: 27). Yet, she also argues, "[…] it isn't easy to begin with a 'we'", since that 'we' not only encompasses nonhuman creatures, but also "hydrophobic substances" (27), such as oil, that cannot be flippantly assimilated in a too general pronoun. As we have seen, human dependence to petroculture as one consequence of a capitalist order, is at the core of Okorafor's Lagoon whose shape-shifting invaders coming from "the alien ocean" (Helmreich 2009) represent "the change" as much as tradition. In short, Okorafor's oceanic Afrofuturism, through a "material-semiotic characterization of the alien" (Jue 2017: 175) incorporates elements of the African folklore, indigenous practices and cosmologies, while recuperating the drowned histories and muted stories of the transoceanic slave trade. At the same time, the novel posits Nigeria as an unusually powerful locus for fictional speculations about possible post-petroleum futures.

On the other hand, Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* acquires special value in the current debate on oceanic degradation, climate-induced unsustainability and water shortage. While confronting the impending extinction and the spread anxiety about the finitude of the planet, *Pumzi* offers alternatives to a common passive stance through the action of politically situated female humans embedded in a very complex system of multiple entangled ecologies. Moreover, it also contributes to bridging the science/technology-arts divide by opening up to a transformative theorising that implies accountability, social justice, and more equitable forms of human and nonhuman hydrocommons. In this way, Kahiu's African posthumanist perspective finally overcomes various forms of anthropocentrism and the postulate that "the outside is [already] dead" (7: 51)[6].

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[6] *Pumzi*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlR7l_B86Fc (consulted on 29/05/2021).

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