

Witches, Monsters, and Questions of Nation:

Humans and Non-Humans in *Akata Witch* and *Trail of Lightning*

Deborah Williams

ABSTRACT

Two very different YA novels – one set in Nigeria, the other on a Navajo (Dineh) reservation in the United States – present similarly paradoxical answers to the question about what it means to be human. Both *Akata Witch* (2011), by Nnedi Okorafor, and *Trail of Lightning* (2018), by Rebecca Roanhorse suggest that in a world reeling from the impact of the Anthropocene, humanity must learn to see itself as a node in a network, rather than as the apex of a pyramid in which everything below it becomes merely a consumable resource. ‘Human’ in these novels, is no longer a category that automatically denotes superiority.

Many scholarly considerations of the post- or trans-human in YA fiction concentrate on how technology has altered human society; the novels I discuss here, however, are more concerned with relationships between the human body and the natural world – or whatever is left of the natural world in the aftermath of the destruction caused by climate change. The heroines of these novels move between the human and the spirit worlds – abilities that cause each of them to be seen as a monster or a freak – and this fluidity becomes an example, I

Deborah Williams is Clinical Associate Professor in the Literature and Creative Writing Program at NYU Abu Dhabi. With Cyrus RK Patell, she is co-editor of *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume Eight: US Literature From 1940*, and *The Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism of American Fiction since 1945*. For the Oxford volume, she wrote the 7,000-word essay on US Children’s Literature; her article about *A Wrinkle In Time* appeared in *Journal of American Studies* (2016); she has also recently published “Cosmopolitan Reading and the Global Classroom” in *ADE/ADFL Bulletin* (December 2018). Her non-academic writing has appeared in such publications as *The New York Times*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Rumpus*, and *The Paris Review Daily*.

argue, of both the power of female agency and the need to reconceptualize our understandings of human society. Through a consideration of these novels, the article also intervenes in the ongoing critical conversation about cosmopolitanism, which I argue is a practice and not a static principle. I suggest that these novels ask us to conceive of a cosmopolitanism that is not solely about our obligation to humanity (over a nation or a tribe) but rather about our obligations to the globe (of which humanity is but a part).

INTRODUCTION

Sunny Nwazue, the heroine of Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch* (2011), confuses people:

I am American and Igbo, Nigerian by blood, American by birth, and Nigerian again because I live there. I have West African features [...] but while the rest of the family is dark brown, I have light yellow hair, skin the color of 'sour milk,' and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right color. I'm albino. (3)

The confusion only increases when she discovers that she is part of a magic race called "the Leopard People" (6): Leopards think she is a genetic anomaly – a "free agent" (96) – because she is a Leopard but her parents are both "Lambs" (18), which is what Leopards call non-magical humans. Sunny does not seem to belong anywhere – neither Nigerian nor American, neither Igbo nor New Yorker, an oddity in the worlds of both Lambs and Leopards. By creating a YA protagonist who is a misfit, Okorafor aligns her novel with a longstanding genealogy that goes back at least as far as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) and has become a staple of YA fiction. It is not a coincidence that when *Akata Witch* was first published, it was known as the "Nigerian Harry Potter" (Alter n.p.), in homage to the best-known misfit of them all.

Okorafor's story resonates on many levels with Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning* (2018), which tells the story of another magical misfit finding her way. Like Okorafor's Sunny, Roanhorse's Maggie Hoskie is also regarded as an outsider: "I'm human," she tells us, "a five-fingered girl. But I'm not exactly normal" (6). She is not normal because she has powers that come from her clans – the "Walks-Around" clan gives her the ability to move "faster than human[s]" (58) and the power of the Living Arrow clan means that she is "really good at killing people" (59). Her powers have earned her the title of "Monsterslayer" (6) and set her apart from the rest of the Dineh,¹ who are "five fingered" but without extra-human powers (6). The people around Maggie "hate [her]" (4) because "she's not right [...] she's wrong, Navajo way" (5). Both Maggie and Sunny collapse the boundaries between spirit and mortal, monster and human; they embody challenges to the conventional narratives that those around them use to define their realities. Even though their non-human selves are rooted in ancient spiritual practices and in the natural world, and thus might be understood as integral

1 Roanhorse uses both "Navajo" and "Dineh" for tribal identification.

to their respective societies, Maggie and Sunny are both seen as frightening, abnormal, other.

Written by women who were born and live in the United States but do not necessarily consider themselves American, these speculative fictions use the form of the YA novel to dramatize a cosmopolitan critique of US identity politics at the outset of the twenty-first century, while also demonstrating the need for a more expansive cosmopolitan theory that can better accommodate both feminism and the idea of non-human agency. Although she herself was born (and still lives) in Chicago, Okorafor draws on her family's Nigerian origins in her fiction: "Almost every story I write is set in the place where my parents immigrated from in 1969. [...] The place where I have experienced my life's greatest joys and greatest terrors. The place where I have never lived" ("Organic Fantasy" 276). Roanhorse, who is of mixed African American and Native (Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo) descent, says that she wrote *Trail of Lightning* in order to create a book that she wanted to read: "a science fiction and fantasy story where Native characters held front and center, where the landscape was filled with the places and the people that I knew from living on the rez, where the gods and heroes were of North American Indigenous origin" ("Debut Author" n.p.). Both writers have worked with the grassroots organization We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), which started in 2014 as a hashtag movement on social media sparked by frustration with the lack of diversity in children's and YA literature (*We Need Diverse Books*). Okorafor participated in a panel at BookCon 2015 organized by WNDB (Zutter n.p.), and Roanhorse is a contributor to the WNDB anthology, *Fantastic Worlds: Impossible Places*, scheduled for publication in 2021 (see "WNDB to Publish a YA SFF Anthology").² In terms of both plot and authorship, these novelists push against the grain of mainstream publishing in the US: drawing on legends from Nigerian and Dineh culture, Okorafor and Roanhorse have written 'post-nation' novels that are different in their surface details but are nonetheless testaments to what Liz Thiel and Alison Waller have called the ability of YA fiction to "engender and perpetuate new ideologies" (v). The narrative arcs of these novels, each of which is the first in a planned trilogy,³ offer 'new ideologies' through sustained engagements with questions about female agency, environmental stewardship, and the nature of home.

YOUNG ADULT FICTION AND THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION

YA fiction is a capacious category; it embraces almost every genre and marketing niche known to booksellers and dominates the economics of publishing. According to the Association of American Publishers, children's and YA fiction accounted for 3.72 billion

2 In another challenge to mainstream publishing, Roanhorse became the first Native American to contribute to the *Star Wars* fiction universe when she published *Star Wars: Resistance Reborn* in 2019.

3 *Akata Warrior* came out in 2017 and Okorafor has just signed a contract for a third; Roanhorse published *Storm of Locusts* in 2019 and says she's planning the next novel in the series.

dollars in 2018 publishing revenue; speculative fiction accounted for the largest share of those sales (“Publishing Perspectives” 2019). Roanhorse has said that she did not “write [her] book for a teen audience,” but that “there is some excellent Fantasy being written right now in YA, so perhaps we should stop using YA as a way to dismiss women [science-fiction fantasy] writers and see it as a compliment to our creativity” (“Interview” n.p.) Because of its target audience and its popularity, YA literature – particularly science fiction and speculative fiction – offers a useful staging ground for imagining alternate possibilities about social structures. Popular fiction, as US ecocritic Stephanie LeMenager observes, can “inject certain topics and possibilities into daily conversation so that they are not seen as the province of elites and other supposedly marginal groups” (156): in other words, the cultural work done by YA fiction needs to be seen as a powerful tool that shapes readers’ perceptions. It stands to reason that we should look at YA fiction as we consider structures of cosmopolitan citizenship in the early twenty-first century: the primary readers of these texts are, after all, those who will soon become – or have just become – old enough to participate in the politics of the world.

Working within the realm of the speculative enables these writers to explore facets of cosmopolitanism that might be otherwise difficult to imagine: how better to articulate new possibilities of connection across difference, for instance, than with a story about monsters? We may like to think of monsters as separate from ourselves, but the figure of the monster is in fact a useful tool with which to explore not only the nature of individual identity but also the nature of the relationship between the individual and the community. Even the word ‘monster’ carries didactic weight: it comes from two roots – ‘monstrare’, to demonstrate, and ‘monere’, to warn. Monsters, as Donna Haraway has explained, demonstrate the limits of a community; the monsters in these novels also demonstrate how to create communities that are more capacious (if not in number, then in terms of inclusion) through a cosmopolitan ethos that seeks to bridge difference instead of eradicate it. Okorafor and Roanhorse create novels in which new communities form around non-human female protagonists who are seen as monsters. In both cases, these communities demonstrate the possibility of moving beyond questions of national identity. For Maggie and Sunny and their companions, ‘nation’ is a boundary that ceases to have meaning; it is a vestigial concern and – particularly in *Trail of Lightning* – one that is linked to greed and exploitation of natural resources.

Originally developed as a response to nationalism that offered models for thinking about a global conception of citizenship, cosmopolitanism, in its simplest iteration, sees difference as an opportunity rather than a threat, and asks us all to consider our obligation to others, beyond the ties of family or state. Cosmopolitanism presupposes a willingness to engage with those who are different from us. In his seminal book *Cosmopolitanism* (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah points out that

people are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a

single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way. (xv)

It is important to note that this acceptance of difference may be more difficult than it seems: “cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge” (Appiah xv). How do we put into practice the attitudes that will allow us to find common cause with those who may not share our perspectives or our particular context? Where do we learn these behaviors? Appiah suggests that perhaps we may be more naturally cosmopolitan than we know: “Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more” (113). Intellectually, we may agree with Appiah’s assessment about our cosmopolitan lives, but we need only to glance at the news to see how readily people rally around ideas (however chimerical) of cultural purity and authenticity, with the belief that this ostensible purity confers some sort of cultural power and authority. Again, the question arises: how and where do we learn the practice of cosmopolitanism and, with that, also learn to be wary about narratives of cultural purity?

The concept of cultural purity, against which Appiah approvingly positions “contamination” (101) fuels the fervent drawing of boundaries that position some form of ‘us’ against some form of ‘other’. These boundaries rest on the belief that in homogeneity there is strength. What I suggest here – and what is illustrated in the novels that I am discussing – is that communities are in fact stronger if they form through affiliation. The choice to establish common cause with others, despite (or perhaps because of) difference, can form a stronger bond than a community that is presumed to exist due to some accident of birth or location. Appiah talks about “association” (xix), but that word lacks intentionality; affiliation implies volition, a deliberate decision. David Hollinger uses the term in his discussion of solidarity, which he defines as “an experience of willed affiliation” (24). “How much,” he asks, “do we owe ‘to our own kind’ – whatever that may mean – and how much to ‘strangers,’ the rest of humankind?” (23) Both *Akata Witch* and *Trail of Lightning* engage with these questions of obligation even as they also extend that question outside the realm of the ‘human’. These novels tackle questions of cosmopolitan affiliation in a way that moves beyond metaphor by virtue of situating the ultimate ‘other’ – the monster – at the heart of their narratives.

Rosi Braidotti further extends cosmopolitan thinking by arguing that cosmopolitanism has the potential to resist “the established tradition of methodological nationalism” (“Becoming-World” 24). As she explains it, a cosmopolitan practice trusts “the powers of diversity” and will “enlist [...] the imagination to the crucial task of inventing new figurations and new ways of representing the complex subjects we have become” (“Becoming-World” 24). Braidotti, like most other cosmopolitan theorists, does not discuss YA fiction (or any children’s literature), but as Fiona McCulloch demonstrates in *Contemporary British Children’s Fiction and Cosmopolitanism* (2016), YA fiction offers fertile ground for these discussions. McCulloch argues that “writing for young people is absolutely vital in gauging and steering

the direction of social change” (2), which, in the context of her book, has to do with post-devolution British geopolitics, particularly in terms of Scotland looking “beyond its borders to its wider European and, indeed, global positioning” (6). Drawing primarily on YA texts written by Scottish writers, McCulloch writes that “post-devolution women writers of children’s and YA fiction are precisely rethinking the nation and its citizenship in a globalised world. [They] have envisioned a multiplicity of belongings to a nation that is in transition” (182). Roanhorse and Okorafor go a step further, however: instead of multiple “belongings” to a single nation, their books consider the possibility of escaping the national altogether, which we can see in the way these novels represent relationships between human and non-human. In addition, these novels also offer us representations of the human and non-human within a self: Maggie and Sunny, and others, fuse human and non-human, literally embodying an embrace of difference. The presence of the non-human forces us to reconsider conceptions of both the national and local, and decenters conventional narratives that focus primarily on the human.

Braidotti sees the embrace of the non-human as essential to twenty-first-century cosmopolitanism, which she says must become tolerant of complexity and “the vital processes of transformation alongside and with a multiplicity of human and non-human others” (“Becoming-World” 30). The challenge to cosmopolitanism is the shift from an easy reliance on the human to an engagement with difference that may seem difficult to imagine: how can we ‘be one’ with non-human others? Although Braidotti does not suggest that we do so, reading speculative fiction is one way that we can see these ideas put into practice. Speculative fiction seems equally important in terms of expanding on Appiah’s ideas about cosmopolitanism, which he grounds in the centrality of conversation:

Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own [...] ‘conversation’ not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. (135)

Speculative fiction dramatizes the engagement with otherness: the encounters with monsters in *Trail of Lightning*, for example, are not metaphors but actual moments in which we see how people choose to react to difference. We see these choices unfold, watch the consequences, consider what we might do in a similar situation. And as we read, we may begin to reflect on what Appiah refers to as “habits” (xix) – the ingrained ideas that lead us to formulate our ideas about the local, particularly, Appiah suggests, in terms of gender.

Speculative fiction, like cosmopolitanism, is a term for which people have many different interpretations. I use the term ‘speculative’ to apply to the novels I am discussing here because neither novel is particularly interested in science as such (other than, perhaps, the impact of climate change) and yet neither book is situated in what we would call ‘the real’. Speculative fiction enables us to imagine the ‘what if’ possibilities: what if we could see

ourselves interacting with non-humans; what if the world no longer needed national boundaries; what if there were non-metaphoric monsters in our midst? This form, Margaret Atwood argues, can “explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human in very explicit ways, by pushing the human envelope as far as it can go in the direction of the not-quite-human [and] help[ing] us to understand and navigate differences” (60). This sort of exploration, she points out, cannot happen “within the conventions of fictional realism” (64) unless the realism includes dreams, reveries, or hallucinations. To work within the genre of the speculative, as Okorafor and Roanhorse do, is to “explore a wider range of possibilities for living” which is how the Caribbean Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson defines speculative and science fiction (“Happy That It’s Here” 203).

With its focus on soon-to-be citizens, speculative fiction offers readers the opportunity to re-imagine their own positions in the world – to imagine different ways of narrating their experiences. “We need stories”, Donna Haraway writes, that are “big enough to gather up the complexities, and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (160). The novels I discuss here use the genre of speculative fiction and depictions of monstrosity to gather up the complexities of contemporary thinking about cosmopolitanism in ways that are powerful and often exhilarating. In their weaving together of ancient myths and contemporary contexts, the novels offer surprising connections that ultimately point us towards a new way of engaging with the world around us. Sarah K. Cantrell notes that speculative fiction and its related genres “make us more attuned to the world [... and] warn us of our own limitless consumption of resources. We are invited to imagine new worlds in order to better take care of this one” (235). In Sunny’s story of coming to discover her Leopard powers, she not only battles an ancient malevolent spirit named Ekwensu that draws strength from the destructive Nigerian oil industry, but she also finds the means to resist her family narrative of casual violence. And in *Trail of Lightning*, as Maggie learns to control her own monstrous powers, she confronts the aftermath of climate catastrophe while discovering the power of community. As a result of their magical non-human development, both Maggie and Sunny begin to find new ways to engage with the world around them, a complex and ongoing process that will extend into the other books in each series. The struggles of these non-human protagonists illustrate new ideologies in which we can see possibilities for how we might redefine ‘the local’ and how we might exist in a post-national world.

THE POSSIBILITY OF ‘POST-NATION’

Akata Witch is set in a magical version of the present and *Trail of Lightning* is set in a post-apocalyptic future, but each novel offers an illustration of the era that Brian T. Edwards describes as “after the American century” (1). Edwards claims that one hallmark of this moment is that the “cultural product – and sometimes more importantly the form it takes – detaches from the source culture from which it comes” (12). As an example of this sort of

detached culture, we could look at the climactic moment in *Akata Witch*, when Sunny's spirit self (Anyanwu) has defeated a demon named Ekwensu. As the demon vanishes, Sunny is reminded of "the Wicked Witch of the West's death in *The Wizard of Oz*. Ekwensu wasn't melting, but she looked like she was" (327). The battle between Anyanwu and Ekwensu – two Nigerian spirits – takes place at a gas station that symbolizes the destructive presence of Western oil companies and invokes the classic Hollywood movie (and L. Frank Baum's books, which had a profound impact on US publishing for children). Referring to *The Wizard of Oz* at this moment, however, does not imply that Sunny's imagination has been colonized by the West or that the US exists as a dominant force in her life or the lives of those around her. Rather, the cultural product to which the phrase refers has been detached from its cultural home; it circulates without an imperial value. Edwards' book takes its examples primarily from Teheran, Cairo, and Casablanca and highlights a paradox: "U.S. hegemony is in decline economically and politically even while the products of American culture are ubiquitous" (2). Detached from political power, the products of US culture can be deployed and recontextualized by their users and consumers around the world. We see this same sort of detached cultural referent in *Trail of Lightning*, when Maggie and one of her companions, Kai Arviso, take refuge in a bar, which is draped with a banner for Budweiser, "the king of beers" – except that the bar's owner "doesn't serve Budweiser anymore since St. Louis drowned along with the rest of the Midwest" (153). The king, as it were, is dead – and there is no replacement.

The worlds of both novels are full of these detached products of US culture, but their dramatizations of what it means to be 'after' the American century vary. In *Akata Witch*, the US still exists, but it is an insular, even toxic, place to be avoided at all possible: Sunny's Leopard friend Sasha says, "y'all don't know what it's like for a black man in the U.S. And y'all certainly don't know Chicago cops on the South Side" (60). Sasha has been sent to Nigeria to keep him safe from American racism, a decision that Anatov, the Leopard teacher assigned to the foursome, agrees with: "I can tell you from personal experience, to be a young black man in America with a hatred for authority is a recipe for disaster" (114). We are never told Anatov's story, but he too seems to have fled the US for the refuge of Nigeria, just as Sunny's family moved back to Nigeria because her parents felt it would be a better place to raise Sunny and her brothers. The novel reverses the pattern of migration that marked much of the twentieth century, in which people come to the United States from elsewhere in search of a better place.

The US fails to keep its inhabitants safe, and it is unable to have cosmopolitan conversations because of its linguistic insularity. The cosmopolitan Library Council members, who forms the Leopard leadership, speak in multiple languages, including French and Xhosa, but when Sunny arrives, Sugar Cream tells the group they must speak English. Another member of the council protests: Americans "don't teach [children] to understand *others*, they teach them to expect others to understand *them*" (303). The US exists, in this novel, as a country that cannot understand anything outside itself. American exceptionalism becomes an obstacle, evidence of the country's unwillingness to engage outside its own

borders. The American insistence on monolingualism suggests an attempt at a culturally pure identity but in the twenty-first century, no one has the luxury of purity (if, in fact, we ever did). Purity is antithetical to cosmopolitanism, which depends on mixing and exchange.

Cultural purity also ceases to have meaning in the world of *Trail of Lightning*, which is set after the American century: the US “crashed and burned” (69) long before Maggie was born. What remains are independent city-states, like Burque (formerly Albuquerque), where water barons rule supreme. The link between the destruction of the natural world and capitalism is neatly summarized by Kai as he and Maggie drive across the desert: “Seems anywhere there’s a natural resource, there’s someone willing to hoard it for themselves to make more money than they can spend” (54). The post-apocalyptic landscape of the novel literalizes the consequences of unchecked resource exploitation and suggests that in the face of climate catastrophe national boundaries seem irrelevant. *Trail of Lightning* seems of a piece with other YA speculative fictions that imagine re-drawn worlds – Panem in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010); the watery worlds of New Mungo in Julie Bretagna’s *Exodus* (2002); the post-apocalyptic New Pretty Town in Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* series (2005-2007). The worlds of these novels, and to a lesser degree the world that Sunny inhabits, offer “the possibility not only of critiquing everything that has gone wrong with humanist society, but also that of providing a way forward [...] not the end of humanism, but a revision or reimagining of it” (Harrison 11). While it is of course true that the writers of these novels inhabit specific countries, their work points to the possibility (perhaps even the necessity) of finding ways to transcend (or erase) these boundaries.

As in *Akata Witch*, the cultural referents in *Trail of Lightning* come from many different sources, blurring the question of what it means to be indigenous. *Trail of Lightning* is not about indigeneity; it marks a thematic departure from fiction written by Native Americans in the mid-to-late twentieth century. *Trail of Lightning* does not ignore the violent history of Native Americans in North America, but in the novel’s present day, the US has vanished, leaving monsters and magic to mix with the country’s detritus. For clues to the monsters they need to kill, Maggie and Kai go searching for VHS tapes and DVDs in an abandoned library where they find old magazines and maps from before the Big Water; Kai, who also has clan powers (and a hidden agenda that Maggie discovers only at the climactic last minute), wears an AC/DC T-shirt; the trickster figure Coyote, who sees Maggie as his protégé, hides his animal body in the clothes of a “gentleman scoundrel from some old Hollywood Western” (87); and when Maggie and Kai are on the run from a variety of bad guys, they find refuge at the “All-American Bar” (153) a drinking establishment named for something that no longer exists. ‘All-American’ is as meaningless as the maps that Kai and Maggie find, which document a lost landscape crisscrossed with roads that are useless, given that gasoline is “hard to come by” (21): Maggie has retrofitted her truck to run on “hooch” (21). Given the history of alcohol’s negative impact on Native communities in North America, there is deep irony in both the name of the bar – the All-American destruction of indigenous communities – and in the fact that Maggie has turned alcohol into fuel for her truck. Alcohol keeps her mobile, while most of Anglo America has been destroyed.

The setting of *Trail of Lightning* may initially seem familiar – a Navajo reservation in the American Southwest – but the reservation lands are bounded by a wall, built by the Dineh before the Big Water hit, in order to keep out “the Feds” who want to open up Indian land to prospectors, “multinationals with private armies” (23). The wall built by the Dineh is nothing like what the US government had tried to build along its border with Mexico: “a mountain of gray concrete [with] barbed wire lining the top” (23). Instead, the Dineh build a wall in which “for every brick, a song was sung [...] a blessing given. And the Wall took on a life of its own” (23). The wall, like the Earth, seems alive, and it is “beautiful [...] white shell, turquoise, abalone, black jet” (23); it saves the Dineh because it keeps out the floodwaters. There is no longer any “Fed” (23) to run the country, which now has a coastline that runs from Texas to Idaho. The central plot of *Trail of Lightning* focuses on a search for monsters, but the world in which that hunt takes place demonstrates the uselessness of national boundaries in the face of climate catastrophe. Okorafor and Roanhorse create worlds in which ‘the national’ no longer obtains as a useful marker, while, at the same time, highlighting links between global capitalism and environmental destruction and, in their use of speculative fiction, enabling a critique of the West.

In the figure of the man known as Black Hat in *Akata Witch*, we see another instance of the idea that Western capitalism leads to environmental destruction. Black Hat is also a Leopard witch known as Okoto, whose power has been amplified by the fact that he is a “Nigerian oil dealer who did big business with Americans” (308) and “the United States of America [made him] economically wealthy enough to push his plan forward” (304). Okoto thus becomes another manifestation of cultural mixing – his evil comes from dark Nigerian magic and Western capitalist exploitation, with the West significantly more to blame. Through the nature of his business dealings, Okoto is linked not only with the murder of children but also with the murder of the environment. Okorafor does not give specifics, but a recent CNN report found that there have been more than 12,000 oil spills in Nigeria between 1974-2014, and that more than 40 million liters of crude oil is spilled annually (Adebayo n.p.).

In their blending of Western and non-Western references, Okorafor and Roanhorse give priority to the non-Western, illustrating Hopkinson’s ideas about why speculative fiction is an important tool for writers from historically marginalized communities: “Speculative fiction can offer unique and invaluable opportunities for representing the colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial conditions” (qtd. in Burnett 133). Hopkinson continues this thought in her introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy* (2004), noting with glee that when people of color work in these genres, they

take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee [sic], critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humor, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things. (8)

Okorafor and Roanhorse have found ‘new ways of doing things’ in part by returning to very old ways of doing things, drawing on indigenous legends and stories to fuel their speculative fictions. “You’d be shocked by how much I don’t have to make up,” Okorafor has said, in reference to the magical entities that populate her novel (qtd. in Alter n.p.). Roanhorse, the first Native American writer to win a Nebula award and to be a finalist for a Hugo award, said that *Trail of Lightning* came into being for much the same reason that Okorafor uses to explain *Akata Witch*: to see a world and characters that they could recognize. Roanhorse says, “I wanted to [...] give Navajo readers a chance to see themselves accurately portrayed and centered in Fantasy. There are so many Easter eggs in the book if you’re from the Window Rock/Gallup area, and I put those in for Navajo readers to enjoy and laugh at” (qtd. in Stubby n.p.). In “Organic Fantasy” Okorafor explains that she wrote *Akata Witch* as a partial response to the black schoolchildren she had met, who “very much want to see themselves reflected in these types of books. They want to go on the adventures and perform the magic, too. They want to imagine” (285). Drawing on, and speaking to, cultures that have not historically been at the centers of speculative narratives, these texts root local traditions in new landscapes, changing both ‘speculative’ and ‘local’ in the process.

REDEFINING THE LOCAL

Appiah suggests that cosmopolitanism moves between the local and the global and that “loyalties and local allegiances determine more than what we want; they determine who we are [...] A creed that disdains the partialities of kinfolk and community may have a past, but it has no future” (xviii). He also says that our obligations to one another should not preclude anyone from “the right to go their own way” (xv). But what if the local is untenable for reasons of gender or sexuality or any other of a host of possibilities and thus precludes people from “the right to go their own way”? To address this question of the local, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality, Carol Breckenridge and the other editors of *Cosmopolitanism* (2002), suggest that we look to feminist theories, because “feminism has learned to wrestle with problems and attendant possibilities while struggling to keep the situated rather than the universal subject in the foreground” (7). “Cosmofeminism” is the editors’ coinage for a cosmopolitanism that understands how “spheres of intimacy” generate pressure on “any understanding of cosmopolitan solidarities and networks” (Breckenridge et al. 9). Affiliative cosmopolitan communities can be ‘spheres of intimacy’ that are independent from traditional ideas of kinship and domesticity and yet nevertheless engage with the global. And, conversely, engagement with ideas of cosmopolitanism and affiliation can serve to challenge ideas about domesticity and kinship that might be constraining, even repressive.

Motivated by commitments to both indigenous narratives and feminism, *Akata Witch* and *Trail of Lightning* register the possibility that ‘the local’ cannot be a model for the global without revision and re-imagination. The communities that cohere around Maggie and

Sunny ultimately do so through affiliation – by choice, rather than through any assumptions about biological or national affinity. In their abilities to find common cause, despite individual differences, these communities demonstrate a cosmopolitan ethos that embraces otherness – even in the shape of monstrosity – and amplifies women’s voices. These affiliative communities represent a shift away from kinship; they become ‘spheres of intimacy’, which reconfigure local allegiances into more flexible and complex spaces.

Cultures in these novels mix and merge, and although both books are written in English, the use of non-English words – Dineh by Roanhorse and Igbo by Okorafor (although she also incorporates words from other languages, including Efik) – becomes another tool with which to complicate ideas of the local. In *Akata Witch*, Sunny’s spirit name, Anyanwu, for example, comes from an Igbo word meaning ‘eye of light.’⁴ Octavia Butler – to whom Okorafor has expressed a deep literary debt – uses the same name for the matriarch in her *Patternmaster* series. Butler’s Anyanwu explains that when she eats a leopard, she becomes a leopard – a reference that is Butler’s own subtle gesture towards the Ekpe myth of the Leopard people.⁴ Sunny’s spirit name thus links Nigerian spiritual traditions with African American literary traditions, with other speculative fiction about the non-human, and with the queer literary tradition. The subtle intertextuality pushes us towards a more capacious understanding of both the local and the speculative, in a way that is similar to the capaciousness of the affiliative communities portrayed in each book.

These communities resist both hierarchy and homogeneity, and are formed by choice rather than by assumptions about kinship or nation. Sunny becomes a member of the coven despite being an albino and despite the fact that she speaks Igbo with an American accent. The Leopard teacher to whom she is assigned tells the others that “this girl isn’t proper” (147) because of her non-Leopard parents, her accent, and her skin – and then is amazed by her unexpected and innate skill. He tells her friends it is “their job [to] teach her the [Leopard] rules” (54), advice that is echoed by Sunny’s Free Agent training manual, which tells her to “make sure someone is there to help you because you will not be able to help yourself” (96). Sunny’s engagement with the powerful cosmopolitan Leopards helps her to claim agency in a Lamb world that keeps women in circumscribed roles. When Sunny plays in an exhibition soccer match with other Leopards, it is the first time that she has been able to play on a team (with boys or girls): in the Lamb world, she says, “they won’t let me play [...] me being a girl” (3). After the match, a girl whom Sunny does not know tells her that she “always wanted to play, but I didn’t know I *could*. At least the girls who come after you will know now” (265). The simple fact of participating in a game shifts perceptions: Sunny’s presence will help to loosen local restrictions and broaden awareness about what is possible.

Sunny triumphs on the soccer pitch, but she does not have the same confidence in her home life, where her father rules with an iron-fisted double standard. He and Sunny’s older brothers assume that either Sunny or her mother will do all the meal preparation; they do not know how to cook and do not want to learn. “A human being who needs food to live but cannot prepare that food to eat? Pathetic,” Sunny thinks to herself (103). Her brothers are

4 For a full discussion of Okorafor and the Ekpe myth of the Leopard people, see Egbunike.

merely “dumb” (103), but she hates her father, who slaps her whenever he is annoyed and never touches her brothers. Her mother never intervenes, and Sunny never resists – until the day after she has defeated the demon Ekwensu. Her father, furious because she stayed out past her curfew, raises his hand to hit her, but this time, Sunny dodges his blows. She realizes that “her father’s issues weren’t hers” (337). The family narrative of female subservience will no longer be the story that controls her. Bolstered by the connections to a community that embraces her strangeness, Sunny has begun the process of re-imagining the narratives that constitute her local context.

In Maggie’s local context in *Trail of Lightning*, violence against women is also the norm, and like Sunny, Maggie starts to re-imagine that context as she becomes part of an affiliative community that is not threatened by her monstrousness. Maggie’s violent abilities, which invert conventional portrayals of nurturing feminine energy, emerge for the first time when she and her grandmother are brutally attacked by a witch and the monsters that serve him (the witch is referred to as “he”). In a terrifying sequence, the witch forces Maggie to cut her own grandmother’s throat and then seems about to rape her: Maggie is knocked to the ground and a “fleshy hand scrapes across [her] face” (106). In mortal peril, she feels the adrenaline of clan power surge through her body. She fights back against her attackers and kills them all, stunned to discover “how terrible [she] could be” (109). Her retaliatory murders turn her into a kind of vigilante, “the person you hire when the heroes have already come home in body bags” (2). In the local world of the novel – and the actual world of Native American reservations – vigilantism may be the only recourse for violent crimes, particularly those against women, whose experiences are often dismissed and their voices silenced.⁵

Maggie has no biological family and she assumes that her monstrousness will keep her isolated and alone for the rest of her life: there is no room in the local community for a monsterslayer. She is surprised when an old medicine man, Tah, takes her under his wing, apparently unafraid of her violent nature. She and Tah “aren’t even in the same clan, but he calls [her] daughter [and] that means something” (25). As her journey takes her closer to a final showdown with the immortal demon Neizghání, she must learn to accept help and to trust the skills and strengths of others. She is joined by the Goodacre twins, mixed-race mortals, “primed for speed and agility” (257); Kai, who has the ability to manipulate the weather; and a motorcycle gang of mortal men called Thirsty Boys. In both *Trail of Lightning* and *Akata Witch*, the non-human women find local allegiances that offer them more support (and of which they can be more supportive) than anything determined by the accident of kinship. At the end of *Trail of Lightning*, for example, when Maggie returns to the dilapidated trailer where she lives, Tah is waiting for her and offers her a cup of coffee. She “takes the

5 Almost 84% of Native American women report being the victim of domestic or sexual violence, according to a 2016 report. Of these incidents, only a very small percentage are ever punished (NIJ). See also: <https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/statistics/domestic-violence-rampant-among-native-americans>. There is a similar epidemic of domestic violence in Nigerian households: see, for example, Udobang.

kindness he offers” (285), a simple gesture that indicates she is no longer alone. The nascent cosmopolitan communities that come together around Maggie and Sunny do not see their monstrosity as a threat but as a source of strength and resilience.

The mixed communities that form around Maggie and Sunny find ways to bridge, rather than erase, their differences. Affiliation – choosing to find common cause with one another – matters more than kinship or cultural purity. Maggie allies herself with the teenage children of Grace Goodacre, African American owner of the All-American bar: her children have brown skin and red hair. Sunny’s *oha* coven is comprised of two Nigerians and another African American; they are taught by a black man with a Russian name, and the person who eventually becomes Sunny’s Leopard mentor is a tiny woman called Sugar Cream, who doesn’t know her parentage.⁶ The Library Council – the governing body of the Leopards – is comprised of human and non-human shapeshifters, a multiply hybrid entity. It is significant that, in order to enter into the city of Leopard Knocks, Sunny crosses a bridge, a literalization of her attempts to link her witch self and her mortal self, the Leopard and the Lamb. Without belaboring the metaphor, it could also be the case that YA fiction serves as a bridge for its readers, bringing them into new considerations of the world and their relationship to it.

Sunny’s bridge brings us to another bridge: Homi Bhabha’s metaphor about the “metaphorical fusion of difference [needed] in order to create hybrid new citizens from Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’” (qtd. in McCulloch 146). We might, in fact, see cosmopolitanism as the bridge, as an active practice that links disparate individuals and communities through conversation, interaction, and a willingness to move – physically, emotionally, intellectually. In order to reach “cosmopolitically outwards”, McCulloch argues, “writers [...] must remap geopolitical borders as malleable and fluid” (8). The local and global borders in both novels are being re-imagined, from the reconfigured continent in *Trail of Lightning* to the complex Leopard world described in Sunny’s training manual, which says that Leopards can be found everywhere in the world, and that Nigeria is “full of groups, circles, cultures [...] add being a Leopard Person to that and your groups spilt into a thousand more groups” (18). This description echoes what Breckenridge et al. write in the introduction to *Cosmopolitanism*: that cosmopolitanism is not “a circle created by culture diffused from a center, but instead, that centers are everywhere and circumferences nowhere” (12). Maggie and Sunny form their communities – their affiliative circles – where they need to, and how they need to. The local, as they redefine it, offers room for difference rather than insisting on allegiances that would stifle or confine.

CONCLUSION: NON-HUMAN AGENTS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

With the strength they gain from these affiliative relationships, which transcend questions of nation or race, Sunny and Maggie each forge deeper connections to the natural world,

6 In *Akata Warrior*, Sunny realizes that she “has no idea if her mentor was Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ijaw, Fulani, or another ethnicity” (92).

reminding us, as Appiah has argued, that cosmopolitanism is “an obligation” that “belongs to anyone who cares about global justice, about the environment, about the alleviation of strife and carnage beyond our immediate national borders” (qtd. in “Mrs May, we are all citizens of the world” n.p.) Appiah made these comments in the wake of Theresa May’s statement that if you are a “citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere,” and went on to say that our human concerns “do not stop neatly at the border” (“Mrs May” n.p.).⁷

Appiah is correct, and yet his statement is also insufficient: cosmopolitanism needs to enlarge its borders beyond just the human. Braidotti insists that cosmopolitanism needs to work “alongside and with a multiplicity of human and non-human others” (“Becoming-World” 30). We see a version of this concept when Maggie, in her monsterslayer mode, thinks the “balance between earth and animal and self feels right. Feels true” (*Trail of Lightning* 8). In another iteration of this relationship between the human and the planet, Maggie reflects on the causes of the Big Water, the catastrophic flood that wiped away the United States in the aftermath of “the Energy Wars”: “The Earth herself stepped in and drowned [everyone] all regardless of personal politics” (54). In this version of climate catastrophe, the sentient planet wreaks vengeance on a humanity that ignored everything except its search for oil-based wealth.

In the Leopard world that Sunny inhabits in *Akata Witch*, animals and insects are part of the magic, as are the trees and rivers: Leopards live in a sentient world, where spirits and knowledge can be found everywhere. Sunny must become familiar with “more creatures than [she] can see” (110), including a “wasp artist” (296) that builds something new in her room every day. Sunny calls the wasp Della, “after the famous sculptor she’d read about on the internet named Luca Della Robbia” (296). The wasp is a small iteration of the cultural mixing that is a central theme in *Akata Witch*: the insect-artist with roots in Nigerian myth gets the name of a fifteenth-century Italian sculptor whom Sunny only knows from the borderless realm of the internet.

Maggie and Sunny are human/non-human hybrids whose abilities stem from ancient systems of belief; their hybridity is different from the robots, cyborgs, and clones that populate much recent YA speculative fiction. The rise in popularity of dystopian YA fiction featuring non- or post-human subjects has resulted in a surge of scholarly interest in this subject, which Zoe Jaques sees as a logical connection because children exist, like the posthuman subject, in an “ontologically unstable state” (9). Through the lens of speculative YA, we can explore the instabilities caused by the post-human, which Victoria Flanagan characterizes as rejecting “the classic Humanist divisions of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological that have underpinned Western civilization for centuries” (248). Maggie’s and Sunny’s non-human qualities emerge from ancient belief systems rather than technological advancement, but their cosmopolitan

7 I am revising this essay in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which has put the world on pause by forcing us all into some version of sheltering-in-place. And yet despite the best efforts of nations, the virus moves freely around the world, demonstrating the need to think – and act – globally.

communities nonetheless threaten those who want to maintain rigid narratives about identity, including the anthropomorphic certainty that humankind is the center of the universe.

The idea that humans are at the center of the world has long been served by the conventional narrative that insists on a definitive and absolute border between humans and ‘others’ often constituted as some kind of monster. And yet, as we see in these novels (and others, such as Nancy Farmer’s *House of Scorpion* [2002] and *Lord of Opium* [2013], Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* [1998], or Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* [1993]), the border between ‘us’ and ‘other,’ between self and monster, is flexible, traversable. In *Akata Witch*, for example, the Leopard and Lamb worlds are contiguous: one of the Leopard cities is just across the river from a Lamb town; the evil Leopard Okoto, who preys on small Lamb children, learned much of his wickedness in the Lamb world. In *Trail of Lightning*, the category of monster is similarly porous: the Law Dogs, for example, are a mortal vigilante group whose sadistic behavior scares even Maggie. Her immortal mentor Neizghání tells Maggie that if she gives into killing for pleasure, she “runs the risk of becom[ing] just another monster” (14). Sunny does not confront the same sort of internal struggle that Maggie faces, but she does need to learn about her “spirit face, [which] is more you than your physical face [...] you can control it as it controls you” (65). Looking in the mirror at her spirit face makes Sunny both “scared” and “excited”: she realizes that this spirit self – her Leopard self – is a “separate identity” (93), and yet it cannot exist without her.

In both novels, we see that the heroines become non-human; it is a process and a practice that involve learning how to see self, other, and world differently. These monstrous female bodies demonstrate Braidotti’s point that posthuman feminism serves to “criticize narrow-minded self-interests, intolerance, and xenophobic rejection of otherness” (“Four Theses” 25), a critique that is further enabled by the form of the speculative novel. Fantasy and speculative fiction, says Okorafor, can be “the most accurate way of describing reality” (279). Roanhorse notes that there are issues in her books that are “prominent and important [...] particularly for Native women” and that speculative fiction “allows [her] to talk about these things in a way that maybe wouldn’t work [...] in literary fiction or non-fiction” (qtd. in Stubby n.p.). By moving their stories outside the confines of realism, Okorafor and Roanhorse can, as Nalo Hopkinson has said, “experiment [...] create alternate history” (“Speaking in Tongues” 592). Their novels avoid what Ursula K. Le Guin called “the reality trap” (87), by which she means being unable to imagine a story (or a world) in which humanity is not at the center. Realistic novels, Le Guin said, will never include the non-human as essential: “To include anything on equal footing with human, as equal in importance, is to abandon realism” (87). And yet finding equal footing between humans and the non-human world has never been more urgent. If we cannot find new narratives that enable us to focus on more than just the human then we are doomed. The “reality trap” is created by what Le Guin characterizes as “Man studying Man alone” (87), the opposite of a cosmopolitan narrative.

The speculative fictions of Roanhorse and Okorafor avoid the trap of ‘Man studying Man alone’, however, because of their cosmopolitan embrace of the monster. In these novels, the local has been re-imagined and the boundaries of the national are being re-drawn or erased entirely. When she is in her spirit self, Sunny thinks that “the world has shifted” (327), just as Maggie, having come to terms with her monsterslaying, sees a world where “life can be can be creat[ed] and sustain[ed]” (36). In these re-imagined spaces, monsters engender new communities and shift us away from seeing the human story as the central narrative. And if we can relinquish our sense that the human story is the only story that matters, we can find the full expression of cosmopolitanism and re-align our local allegiances – and perhaps thus, forestall the (further) destruction of the planet.⁸

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