“For me, fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality”[1] – Global Networks and Local Realities of Fantasy World Literature

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[1] Okorafor 2009, 279.

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To my mother who has supported me through the highest flights of fancy and the deepest caverns of Moria.

To my father who discovered The Tales of the Otori when he read it to me and whom I miss every day.

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Abstract

'For me, fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality' - Global Networks and Local Realities of Fantasy World Literature

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This thesis deals with modern fantasy literature and addresses the question whether fantasy novels should be considered world literature and to what extent Western narrative structures are reflected or questioned by contemporary fantasy authors. To achieve this, the concepts of world literature and genre literature will be explored, especially with regards to the intersections between the two. This section is followed by reflections on the role of fantasy literature as a genre of literature: The term ‘fantasy’ is narrowed down with the help of various literary scholars and discussed and negotiated in the light of potential conflicts between the concepts of reality and fantasy that arise from the interplay of different cultures.

Based on these theoretical foundations, the thesis devotes four chapters to individual case studies that illustrate the potential that fantasy offers as world literature. For example, Nnedi Okorafor’s novels are used to work out the extent to which the fantastic elements of her writing grow out of her experienced reality and can thus be considered 'organic fantasy'. In the following chapter, Marlon James' first fantasy novel demonstrates that fantasy literature addressing complex themes and incorporating formal aspects of orality can and should be considered world literature. The final two chapters are devoted to Indrapramit Das's werewolf novel *The Devourers* and Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* and comparable Japanese-inspired fantasy novels. Here, the global networks alluded to in the title of the thesis become particularly evident, as Das's werewolves seem to operate internationally, while Hearn's novels are themselves the result of transcultural contacts.

The dissertation emphasises the need to recognise fantasy literature as world literature and, accordingly, to give it greater attention in literary studies.

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1. Introduction

The award-winning *Lord of the Rings* movie adaptations (2001-2003) are an impressive indication of the global popularity of fantasy; they are widely loved and considered highly influential, having grossed $2.991 billion worldwide and having won 17 Academy Awards. "Books that have stayed with us", an article by Lada Adamic and Pinkesh Patel as part of *Facebook Data Science*, lists *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) as the third most popular named book, closely followed by *The Hobbit* (1937). The survey is based on a popular type of facebook post that asks people to list the ten most important books in their lives – Adamic and Patel took 130.000 status updates to compile their data and while a large percentage of the shared posts is US American in origin – as is to be expected on an American website – there were also 9.3% Indian responses, which at least indicates a more-than-Western interest in fantasy literature. Interestingly, the Top 20 also include the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Trilogy (2008-2010), C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), all of which can be considered speculative fiction, which I consider a useful umbrella term for all genres that play around with perceived consensus reality and deny realism as a literary form in particular, including fantasy among others. The list also contains writers of fantasy literature in particular, such as Rowling and Lewis, who are arguably almost as influential within the genre as Tolkien. The Top 100 list includes even more authors of fantasy and their works, such as Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, Robert Jordan, Anne Rice, and G.R.R. Martin, whose novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-2011) was the source material for the incredibly popular HBO TV show *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), which has fostered a trend within the fantasy genre towards the so-called 'grimdark'[1]. Scholars Christopher Benjamin Menadue and Susan Jacups confirm that "the science fiction and fantasy audience read consistently high volumes, as well as watching genre TV and film" (1), showcasing that the fantasy genre can boast a large and active base of readers to draw from. Critical concern with speculative fiction in general and fantasy literature in particular has also increased as numerous recent publications such as Farah Mendlesohn's and Edward James's *A Short History of Fantasy* (2009), Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2015), Farah Mendlesohn's and Michael Levy's *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction* (2016), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019), Amy J. Ransom's and Dominick Grace's *Canadian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror: Bridging the Solitudes* (2019), and Lucy Armitt's contribution to the Routledge New Critical Idiom series, *Fantasy* (2020), aptly demonstrate.

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[1] 'Grimdark' has become a descriptor for a certain kind of "gritty fantasy, where edginess overwhelms happier elements; high levels of violence and emphasis on the dirtiness – both physical and moral – of the characters and world are defining features" (Polack 2015b, 81).

However, not all recent publications manage to cover the entire extent of recent fantasy literature. Lucie Armitt's *Fantasy*, for example, purports to be "an invaluable and accessible guide to the study of this fascinating field" and "the essential introduction to fantasy" on its back cover. A brief look at the list of primary literature discussed within leads to the disappointing discovery that not a single work by a non-White, non-Western author has made the list with the only even remotely postcolonial texts being Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), which boast a White Canadian background. The diversity of the chosen fantasy films goes not much further than the two versions of Disney's *Aladdin* (1992, 2019) and their relationship to *The One Thousand and One Nights* as well as other Orientalist responses to the collection in various media. It is indeed a rather troubling tendency to associate non-Western pursuits of fantasy with myths from the distant past such as "the *Epic of Gilgamesh*" (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 7) or with 19th-century European versions of non-Western stories, such as "the Japanese ghost stories of Lafcadio Hearn and the Chinese fantasy stories of Ernest Bramah" (13), which are seen as part "of the ever-widening foundation of Western fantasy" (13). Both the introduction and the blurb of *A Short History of Fantasy* do not specify that it is meant to be a history of *Western* fantasy, opting to use phrases like "history of fantasy" or "origins of modern fantasy" (on the blurb), which ought to denote fantasy as a broader concept but are apparently referring to Western fantasy only, which is then universalised to represent fantasy as a whole. Mendlesohn and James do point out that "the emphasis here is on English language fantasy" (6) and that "this will give the curious sense that English fantasy dominates the world but in sheer numbers this is probably true" (6). Granted, my own study is also limited to Anglophone fantasy with the exception of a series translated from the Japanese, but even so, "English-language material" (6) itself contains many more cultures than the Anglo-American ones represented in both of these studies, as my study will show. Works like Mendlesohn's and James's *A Short History of Fantasy* and Armitt's New Critical Idiom volume *Fantasy*, while otherwise interesting and worthwhile contributions to fantasy scholarship, show that much work still needs to be done to reflect the full breadth of fantasy writing, both in the English language, as it is the case in this study, but also in other languages from around the world.

There are, of course, recent publications which do put a particular focus on postcolonial theories and constellations of race and ethnicity within fantasy literature, thus providing this dissertation with a theoretical background to draw on. However, a considerable amount of these studies is concerned with reading Eurocentric fantasies through a postcolonial lens instead of discussing fantasy literature from more diverse and less Eurocentric backgrounds. "King Thorin's Mines: *The Hobbit* as Victorian Adventure Novel" by William H. Green, for example, connects *The Hobbit* to Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. It focuses on structural similarities rather than presenting a postcolonial reading, but the imperialist connotations of Haggard's novel (travelling "across the Dark Continent" (Green 53)) and similar adventure fiction cannot be ignored. These connotations have been commented on by Margery Hourihan in her study *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, which links imperialist adventure fiction and fantasy. Hourihan uses the example of the quest fantasy, which is oriented towards narratives of exploration and conquest. Her findings are relevant to fantasy scholarship in so far as they discuss the traditional quest narrative's structure and characters, which are the basis for much of contemporary fantasy literature. Farah Mendlesohn identifies essentially the same structures when writing on the portal quest fantasy in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and W.A. Senior elaborates on the quest in his article on "Quest fantasies" in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012). Mendlesohn and Senior will both provide the necessary context to Nnedi Okorafor's and Marlon James' explicit subversion and reframing of some of the fantasy tropes identified by the two scholars.

Fantasy races and especially the 'racial enemies' populating so many fantasy texts, especially those following Tolkien's blueprint, can also be considered critically and interrogated for their relation to real-life racism. Thus, Anderson Rearick's "Why is the Only Good Orc a Dead Orc? The Dark Face of Racism Examined in Tolkien's World" discusses suggested racist undertones in *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the core texts of fantasy literature, which has evidently also influenced instances of racism in writing by Tolkien's successors: The connection of the colour black with evil, the Orcs as well as the brown-skinned Southrons as the enemy are examples of this, but ultimately, Rearick attributes these issues to the so-called 'Judeo-Christian' mythology underlying the texts rather than to racial prejudices and thereby seems to defend Tolkien against such criticism. However, it cannot be ignored that the binary opposition between light as good and dark as evil as established by Christian mythology, while perhaps not directly influenced by racial prejudices, certainly continues to propagate them. Christianity has also historically been implicated in upholding both racist structures and colonialist power hierarchies and thus cannot be drawn upon to wholeheartedly excuse the use of black-white binaries to denote the opposition between good and evil. It is noticeable that works by authors of colour such as Nnedi Okorafor and Marlon James do not merely reverse such binaries, but instead introduce much more nuanced depictions of 'good' and 'evil' as well of 'dark' and 'light' – there can be danger in the dark, such as the shadow-like Omuluzu who crawl out of the ceilings to attack, but there are also the evil White Scientists who, while not yet featuring heavily in James' writing, are very explicitly stated to be threatening[2].

A more overtly postcolonial study of fantasy literature can be found in Helen Young's book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature – Habits of Whiteness*. The well-known scholar in the field of postcolonial studies claims that "[c]olonisation and its legacies are not widely addressed in the popular Fantasy genre" (2016, 114) and also mentions the "ongoing legacy of colonialist ideology which permeates the genre" (114). Her chapter on "Popular Culture Postcolonialism" in particular addresses "Orientalist eurocentric discourses and colonialist ideologies […] present in the Fantasy genre for as long as it has existed" (115) and comments on the difficulty of finding mainstream Indigenous authors of fantasy while trying to find answers for the lack of such writings. The study as a whole is concerned with postcolonial readings of mainstream fantasy and, as such, will be a good starting point for my own research project, though I would argue that there are a number of fantasies at this point, which do address 'colonisation and its legacies', both by writers of colour and white writers such as Brandon Sanderson's *The Stormlight Archive* and *The Mistborn Trilogy* or Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor* (2014).

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[2] Ironically, the dramatis personae at the beginning of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* describes them as the "darkest of the necromancers and alchemists" (xv), here clearly following the convention hat declares the dark to be evil.

Crucially, Young does state that fantasy literature, precisely because it is non-mimetic and thus removed from the real world to varying degrees, is "safer for cultural work around fraught issues such as – although by no means limited to – race" and "has the potential to make us look at our world in new ways, to reconsider attitudes and assumptions" (Young 2016, 2). Fantasy literature, thus, is well suited to challenge colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourse as well as other harmful power hierarchies, which might also make the genre appealing for postcolonial writers, who can then use this potential to address topics such as their own historical oppression, marginalisation and similar concerns. Young's article "Critiques of Colonialism in Robin Hobb's *Soldier Son* Trilogy" is an example of postcolonial readings of mainstream fantasy texts by non-marginalised authors. These writers also more frequently attempt to produce 'diverse' fantasy narratives more or less successfully, as (mainstream) Fantasy's previously mentioned "reputation for being a Eurocentric genre" (Young 2016, 1) is increasingly challenged as problematic in cultural discussions and by fantasy writers themselves.

In a similar vein to Young's considerations, *Into Darkness Peering* (1997), a collection of essays on the topic of race and colour in the fantastic, deals primarily with the problematic issues within the field of fantastic literature rather than with postcolonial writing addressing these issues, but prominent authors in the field of postcolonial fantasy, such as Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, are also addressed. The volume explicitly aims at analysing issues of race in *fantastic* writing; however, several of the novels discussed in the anthology could be classified as fantasy or even science fiction. This shows that definitions of genre surrounding the field of fantasy, the fantastic, and science fiction are already highly complex and will need to be negotiated and re-defined for the purpose of this dissertation, even before focusing on postcolonial fantasy within the wider genre of fantasy literature.

Arguably the most relevant and most recent contribution to this field of fantasy scholarship is Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019). Thomas focuses on mainstream fantasy such as *Harry Potter*, *Merlin*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Vampire Diaries* to specifically centre marginalised characters and analyse how they are represented. Her aim is to establish a field called the dark fantastic that not necessarily focuses on fantasy writers of colour but includes a broader range of fantastic writing as well as a corpus of mainstream popular literature and culture to examine the material young people of colour have available at the present time. Intriguingly, Thomas specifically addresses fan cultures, one of the still under-researched areas of literary production.

Various academic articles have also focused on Anglophone fantasy literatures of individual postcolonial countries, thus venturing into the study of national fantasy literatures beyond the Eurocentric perceived 'standard'. However, rather than attempting a broad overview, most studies of this kind are also restricted by the choice of a prominent author as an example or by the further specification of a fantasy subgenre, such as children's fantasy. They are also frequently restricted to one national tradition as alluded to above, and thus they fall short of my dissertation's aim to discuss fantasy literature as a border-crossing literature, which maintains networks across the globe and is best read as a transcultural and, to some extent, world literary genre. Jean-Pierre Durix' "The Status of 'Fantasy' in Maori Literature: The Case of Witi Ihimaera" explores Ihimaera's use of fantasy elements derived from his Māori cultural background, especially in his novel *The Matriarch*. Durix rightly addresses the problematic nature of deciding what is and is not to be considered fantasy if the presence of the fantastic is largely dependent on the response of the reader. As stipulated by Tzvetan Todorov: "a common ground of cultural references or at least a majority of shared values between reader and writer or between the reader and the character who thematises his/her place in the text" (1973, 11) has to be assumed. However, such a shared cultural consensus is not easy to establish when the writer is from a postcolonial background, such as Witi Ihimaera, whose Māori background distinguishes him from potential Western readers or readers of European origin.

Judith Saltman's overview of "The Development of Canadian Fantasy Literature for Children", on the other hand, does not limit the scope of its research to one author, but instead to one genre: children's literature. Nonetheless, Saltman proposes an interesting explanation as to why fantasy literature (not necessarily only those written for children, even though this is what Saltman focuses on) has only slowly gained traction in Canada: a preoccupation of several literary genres with Canada's geographical conditions and the alienation of the European settler culture from its original myths and folktales, which led to a perceived lack "of the magical and the fabulous" (1996, 71) in Canada. Saltman mentions Indigenous legends but adds that they belong to the native people of Canada and that "the power of these tales is difficult to translate into fantasy" (71). Potential fantasy literature written by Indigenous Canadians, however, is not accounted for in Saltman's article, though it certainly exists.

Such Indigenous Canadian writing, which can be positioned within the fantasy genre, at least to a certain degree is an integral feature in Georg Hauzenberger's *It's Not By Any Lack of Ghosts We're Haunted*, which deals with the Gothic mode in Indigenous fiction. While not generally considered as fantasy literature per se, the traditional Gothic genre is certainly related to it and there will always be texts attributable to either or both genres. Hauzenberger applies the term "spiritual realism" (2014, 13) to First Nations writing, which incorporates elements that would be considered fantasy by Western readers, but not necessarily so by Indigenous people. This term may prove to be useful in this study of fantasy literature as well, but whether postcolonial fantasy always needs to be transformed into a modified kind of realism – be it magical, spiritual, or maban – is questionable, especially when taking into consideration authors' self-descriptions as writers of fantasy.

Other studies of Anglophone national fantasy literatures may be found as chapters of larger studies. A chapter on Indian fantasy, for example, can be found in E. Dawson Varughese's *Reading New India. Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* (2013), which focuses on popular literature from the Indian subcontinent. Among chapters on chick lit, crime writing and the graphic novel, there is also one chapter dedicated to "Fantasy and epic narrative". The opening line includes an – understandable – mixing of the terms "speculative fiction" and "fantasy fiction"

(2013, 115), which seem to be used almost interchangeably, while hinting at fantasy's position as a subgenre of speculative fiction as a whole and distinguishing it from the related genre of science fiction.[3] It is Varughese's objective in this chapter to determine whether four non-mimetic texts by Indian writers ought to be categorised as fantasy or not. With the first two examples, Varughese strives to establish in what way the two texts, Samit Basu's *Turbulence* and Usha K.R.'s *Monkey-man*, can be read as fantasy (and, more precisely, as urban fantasy, which, according to Varughese, "share a lot of similarity with the genre of fantasy although their settings are more contemporary" (117)). In contrast, the texts chosen for the second part of the chapter, Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant* and Nilanjan P. Choudhury's *Bali and the Ocean of Milk*, are analysed in an attempt to *challenge* their reading as fantasy, opting instead for a categorization as historical fiction based on their use of "ancient stories and Hindu epics" (116). Interestingly, the justification for this

> lies primarily in the reception of the fiction. The analyses […] demonstrate that an Indian readership (theoretically) find the 'otherworld' of ancient Bharat *possible* (it is, after all, part of this readership's historical and cultural heritage) whereas a Western readership (theoretically) find the 'otherworld' *impossible* as per the Clute and Grant definition […], rendering therefore, this fiction as 'fantasy'. (Varughese 2013, 124)

Concerns such as these are crucial in the study of Anglophone fantasy literatures and serve to complicate the matter significantly. They emphasise the importance of a shared consensus reality in the construction of fantasy recognisable as such to both author and reader, which occasionally serves to disconnect fantasy writers from the non-Western world and the Western part of their readership. Interestingly, Varughese sees Mendlesohn's category of the immersive fantasy as the most likely category if the novels at the centre of his chapter are "to be considered as fantasy" (124), based on the fact "that 'immersive fantasy' does not need the dividing line between real and non-real" (124) – as opposed to Mendlesohn's other subcategories of fantasy.

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[3] Yet again, speculative fiction is employed here as an umbrella term, but it can also be a valid alternative used by some fantasy writers of colour to avoid a term associated with a racist recent history such as fantasy.

Varughese reconfirms her initial hypothesis that the so-called fantasy novels, which are inspired by Hindu mythology and historical writings and which are central to the second part of her chapter on Indian fantasy, are not, in fact, a part of fantasy literature. Crucially, though, Varughese concedes that "[t]he authors of this new body of fiction write within a recognizable Western construct of the fantasy genre" (124), which is perhaps worrisome, considering the implications of non-Western writers being confined to Western genre conceptions. Even so, it opens up possibilities to broaden these previously established genres and adapt them to non-Western conventions and sensibilities, as many of the texts chosen for this dissertation also do. The fact that the kind of Indian fantasy Varughese describes hovers between historical novels and fantasy writing is particularly interesting, not only because she locates the texts in question between two Western literary genres, but also because of the comparison drawn between English readers of Indian fantasy/historical writing and Indian readers of English historical novels. "[W]e might reverse the circumstances," Varughese argues,

> suggesting that an Indian readership of British historical fiction might read such fiction as fantasy on the basis that the historical and socio-cultural heritage presented in the text is 'unfamiliar' [...]. This argument is less convincing. (Varughese 2013, 126)

The reason for this is obvious – Western historical narratives have long been privileged as opposed to non-Western ones and thus the inclusion of characters "that have the ability to fly, the ability to shape shift, hold extraordinary powers of strength or ability and are sometimes hybrid animal-humans" (Varughese 2013, 127) almost automatically leads to a reading through a fantasy lens by a Western audience whereas the same is not true for the implied objectivity of Western history. Additionally, as Varughese also acknowledges, "the impact of colonization and the canon of British literature in India lessen the 'unfamiliarity' of such texts" (127). While this potentially problematises the reading of Indian 'fantasy' epics as fantasy because it further privileges Western epistemologies, Varughese does not discard the descriptor ‘fantasy’ entirely but chooses instead to “move between an analysis based on the historical fiction genre and an analysis based on the fantasy genre” (127).

However, the genre of fantasy itself might be called into question if one takes Varughese’s claim that the reception of a novel determines whether it is fantasy or something else literally. As she states, her argument does not assume

> that all Hindus read this new body of fiction in the belief that all Hindu epics are *real* accounts, this is a particular and personal belief within the Hindu community(ies) inside and outside of India. Thus, the reception of this body of work is various; one end of the spectrum reveals a reader who knows the Hindu epics and *believes* in them – in terms of spirituality – and therefore reads this new body of fiction *outside* of the fantasy genre, as historical fiction per se. The suggestion at its most fundamental therefore, is that one reader’s fantasy novel is another reader’s historical fiction and vice versa. (Varughese 2013, 126)

Fantasy thus lies, so to speak, in the eye of the beholder, a notion that will be revisited in the theoretical groundwork for this study. And while Varughese only ties this finding on Indian literature at the border of historical and fantasy writing, it can be extended to various forms of fantasy literature, including, perhaps, those works by ‘classic’ fantasy authors such as Tolkien – who, after all, is to say that there are not any readers of fantasy who do believe in the actual (or perhaps metaphysical?) existence of dragons and elves. Certainly, some critics of fantasy literature might agree with this speculation as fantasy literature has gained a certain notoriety due to the accusation that it leads to an increasing disconnection with reality in its readers. Varughese’s argument thus complicates an already complex and oftentimes confusing discussion about the “fuzzy” boundaries of fantasy literature (cf. Attebery 1992, 12-13), highlighting perhaps the need for the fantasy genre and genre in general to move away from strict barriers and conventions separating various categories. Varughese ends her chapter by stating that a reading of Indian fantasy epics “as simply fantasy is to ignore the significance of this writing and the strong cultural and philosophical roots from which it draws so extensively” (2013, 136).

This, however, betrays Varughese's Western attitude towards fantasy more than anything else – an attitude which is still dominant within Western academia and which automatically casts the fantasy genre as somewhat lesser than 'literary' writing. Perhaps the inclusion of Anglophone fantasy literatures into the European-dominated – but not European-originated! – fantasy genre will serve to expand the concept of fantasy rather than discard the genre altogether and dispel the notion that fantasy and reality are two clearly demarcated binary oppositions rather than two ends of a spectrum of ways of viewing the world.

In "Reflections on an Australian Fantasy: constructing the impossible", John Ryan writes about the characteristics of Australian Fantasy as well as the problems the genre – similar to other Australian texts – faces, namely a feeling of displacement and alienation from the surrounding landscape and Aboriginal culture. Such a feeling, according to Ryan, results in fantasy literature that either focuses on English (or otherwise European) inspirations or appropriates Aboriginal mythology when written by non-Aboriginal authors. Anne Holden Rønning's "Searching for the fantastic: an Australian case" first discusses the functions and properties of fantasy literature in general and the differences between various genres containing fantastic elements, such as the Gothic, the fantastic, science fiction and fantasy literature itself – a question which might also play into this dissertation project. It then goes on to discuss the anthology *Legends of Australian Fantasy* in depth, focusing on its use of – frequently non-Australian – folklore and myth, especially those of Celtic origin, which seems to be a recurring feature in contemporary fantasy from various parts of the world. Rønning also raises the "question of whether fantasy can be national, or [if it is] always universal, especially in setting" (2016, 58). Her article, while focusing mainly on Eurocentric fantasies by non-Aboriginal Australian writers, concludes with the question "to what extent Indigenous texts can be seen as fantasy" (65) and cautiously answers it positively by suggesting an increased use of Aboriginal myth as the basis of Australian fantasy – by authors of both Aboriginal and European origins, apparently, despite the dangers of cultural appropriation inherent in such an endeavour.

Ambelin Kwaymullina, herself a writer of speculative fiction and fantasy literature, addresses the question where Indigenous writers can position themselves within the related genres of fantasy literature and speculative fiction in her essay “Edges, Centres and Futures: Reflections on being an Indigenous Speculative Fiction Writer”. She specifically focuses on how Indigenous writers of speculative fiction have to negotiate Western notions of reality with their own epistemologies, which necessarily alter their respective relationships to fantasy literature. As an example, Kwaymullina notes that, even though “[o]ne of the aspects of [her] own novels that is regularly interpreted as being pure fantasy, that of an ancient creation spirit who sung the world into being, is for [her] simply part of [her] reality” (2014a, 23), she sees herself as a writer of fantasy. She still positions herself as a writer of speculative fiction because “[i]mpossible things occur in [her] novels” (32) but stresses her focus on the positive messages she can convey through her fantasy narratives. In her blog entry “Walking Many Worlds”, Kwaymullina makes the point that Indigenous writers “clothe [their stories] in forms which non-Indigenous hearts and minds will recognise so that they might understand” them but they “also use those forms differently, and Indigenous work is sometimes criticised for failing to comply with genre expectations or scholarly conventions that were never [theirs] to begin with” (2014b, n.p.), which is certainly important to keep in mind when studying Indigenous writing within a framework of Western genre conventions.

Iva Polak contributes to this debate about Australian fantasy in general and Aboriginal Australian works of the fantastic in particular with her study *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction*. Her findings are of great interest for this book as well, considering that she bases her analysis on various conceptions of the fantastic, most notably Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. However, she also highlights, as is common among scholars of the fantastic, the inherent uncertainties of “terms such as the fantastic and fantasy” (Polak 2017, 41) which oscillate between “genre, [...] mode or [...] impulse” (41). She begins by stating that “Australia is still an ambiguous setting for discussing literary works that depart from consensus reality” (2), which is undoubtedly true for most other postcolonial nations as well, be it settler states like New Zealand or post-independence countries like Nigeria and India. The latter nations’ writers are often especially burdened with the expectation to write realist novels, preferably depicting their struggles and real-life experiences[4], and expected to "explain Africa to the world' (Julien 2006, 695). This expectation applies not only to African authors "as other non-Western authors are also subject to stereotyping" (Le Roux 89) and to "the exoticism, tokenism, and fetishization of minority cultures within the broader global publishing and cultural industry" (Le Roux 89). Their fantasies are read as magic realism just because of their origin (Jemisin qtd. in Miller n.p.) – and also positioned accordingly on the shelves in bookshops, "which means that readers searching the science fiction and fantasy area can't find" (Jemisin qtd. in Miller n.p.) them, thus potentially threatening their popularity and scope, which may also lead to a negligible academic interest in them as fantasy literature. The only exception to this is, perhaps, Canada, where Charles de Lint published his fantasy novels and, as some scholars argue, established the genre of urban fantasy (Ekman "Urban Fantasy" 453). As opposed to magical realism, Australian "SF and fantasy have been around in Australia as long as Australia's realist tradition" (Polak 7) but they are "still only discussed either by specialist scholars in specialised journals and editions, or in the domain of fandom" (Polak 8) – again something that is true for fantasy literature worldwide, but especially for those works not written by British and American authors, who have experienced an increase in academic interest. The dearth in academic study motivates my book about Anglophone fantasy beyond its traditional boundaries as it has motivated Polak to write about the Aboriginal Australian fantastic in particular. Her study aims at examining the fantastic as a device in various novels by Australian Aboriginal writers, which can enhance discussions of the effects of colonisation without favouring Western epistemologies and narrative conventions. Polak's work comes close to the subject of this thesis, and her chapter on "The Postcolonial Turn and the Fantastic" is especially interesting in its focus on magical realism's seemingly natural connection to postcolonialism and fantasy's and science fiction's slow "entry into the critical domain" (78), mostly due to science fiction's colonial baggage and fantasy's perceived lack of seriousness.[5] However, Polak's focus, as hinted at by her use of the word 'futuristic' in her title, lies more on the science fiction end of the speculative fiction spectrum while the novels discussed in this book expand on her findings by analysing novels from Anglophone writers, which can be more clearly ascribed to the fantasy tradition.

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[4] This problematic expectation has been parodied by Binyavanga Wainaina's iconic essay "How to Write About Africa", in which he gives satiric advice to a would-be writer about Africa: "Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress." (2019, n.p.). While Wainaina addresses first and foremost white western writers about Africa, the expectation to write gritty, realist tragedy is certainly also directed at African writers as well as at marginalised groups in general.

Unlike the previously mentioned articles on the fantasy literature of specific cultures and countries, Nnedi Okorafor's chapter on "Writers of colour" in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* focuses on authors of fantasy who can be classified together mainly because of their shared status as marginalised writers. As such, she includes writers of colour who constitute an ethnic minority in the country they live in but also writers who specifically write from a postcolonial background, such as Caribbean, African and Indian writers, who write fantasy in the English language. Okorafor treats the term "writers of colour" with appropriate caution, considering that it does often not only refer to people in the United States who do not identify as white – which is the origin of the term – but also to non-white writers across the globe, even if they are "part of the hegemonic culture in which [they] live[…]" (2012, 179). She introduces a wide range of fantasy literature from the Anglophone world and beyond while discussing its importance as "Big Bang literature" (186) – literature that has a profound and life-changing impact on its readers – as well as some of the core issues of the genre, such as questions of national identity (e.g. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*), complex issues about 'ownership' of Indigenous stories (e.g. Yaritji Green's negotiations with her elders) or "slavery, slavery's consequences and post-colonialism" (184) (e.g. Nalo Hopkinson's work), all of which challenge conventional Eurocentric epistemologies and generic designations of western literary histories.

Okorafor's more personal essay "Organic Fantasy" also provides valuable insights into the author's point of view as to how her Nigerian-American cultural background – with an explicit focus on the hybrid nature of her identity – influences and informs her fantasy writing. She attributes the fact that "magic, mysticism and weirdness burst forth from [her] stories like wildflowers and spawning beasts"

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[5] Polak does not say this explicitly, but fantasy carries the same baggage as science fiction in addition to its own, namely that "its early history often revives the ideology behind European colonization" (78).

(276) to her experiences of being both American and Nigerian, which have "been a series of cultural mixes and clashes" (276) and to her personal perception of the world: "The world is a magical place to me" (276). Okorafor describes how the fantastic elements in her fiction grow naturally – organically, as the title suggests – from her life and her personal experiences of othering, both in Nigeria and in the United States. Poignantly, she claims that "fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality" (279), which may provide a possible solution for the supposedly binary divide between reality and fantasy that is so often called into question by postcolonial fantasy literatures. Thereby, she introduces fluidity around the definitions of both fantasy and reality and thus suggests that fantasy elements are not necessarily unreal nor is reality inherently non-fantastic.

While the publications discussed above do focus on the intersections of fantasy literature, race, and postcolonialism, they tend to either showcase specific regions or, indeed, critically analyse how racial stereotypes are propagated by so-called classic and Western-centric fantasy literature, while potentially ignoring newer and more diverse works within the field. Despite preconceived notions of fantasy readers (and writers) as predominantly "male and Anglo-American white" (Morales Soto 2020, 3), fantasy's appeal is, in actual fact, much broader and considerably more diverse, combining not only multiple nationalities, cultures, and languages, but also multiple notions of reality, which not only complicates but also enriches the genre considerably. It is my aim to focus on fantasy literature as a genre of world literature, which travels widely while still retaining connections to its diverse roots. Rather than viewing fantasy literature as an almost delocalised and at worst Western-centric genre, I will analyse how fantasy literatures from around the world incorporate well-known, perhaps 'universal', tropes, join global literary networks of fantasy, and at the same time highlight and promote their own localised specificities.

The genre of modern fantasy literature is generally thought to have emerged as a response to the European enlightenment and the emergence of the realist novel (cf. Mendlesohn & James 2012 [2009], 3). Consequently, its origins trace back to an era steeped in colonialist thought and imperialist attitudes towards non-European cultures, which has had an influence on the tropes and characteristics of the genre itself. This may explain why fantasy has long been seen as a largely western and generally white genre. This impression is only bolstered by the fact that fantasy's most prominent authors, at least with regards to writing in English, seem to have come from either the US or the UK – or at least, this is what some (scholarly) listings of fantasy titles may suggest – though it is one that I would like to vehemently contradict. One such list, the 'fantasy timeline' in James' and Mendlesohn's edited collection *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, only contains very few non-British and non-US-American and even fewer non-Western authors of fantasy.[6] Such a bias towards Western authors, however, does not do the genre in its current form any justice. Some prominent authors in the field are indeed the often invoked 'old white males' such as J.R.R. Tolkien, often – and not without reason – considered the father of the modern fantasy genre, and George R.R. Martin. Their works *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-ongoing) as well as the respective audiovisual adaptations have served to introduce fantasy literature into adult mainstream culture. There are also ever-growing numbers of literary scholars who are interested in the genre, as a rise in fantasy-focused publications, conferences, and research centres such as the Glasgow Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic indicates. Yet, in some case, scholars still harbor the old prejudices, according to which fantasy is childish and associated with children's literature at best and so-called 'low' or popular culture, unworthy of academic study at worst.

One way in which the quality of modern fantasy literature and the importance of its presence in academic syllabi can be highlighted is to show how fantasy can accommodate some of the most pressing issues in the contemporary study of literature. Far from being formulaic, male, white, heterosexual and western, the genre is diverse and multifaceted, approaching topics as varied as postcolonialism, ecocriticism, intermediality, and more. Fantasy literature addresses these concerns from various viewpoints, which do not indicate a Western-centric set of generic tropes having travelled from Europe towards the rest of the world but rather a transcultural network spanning the globe along multiple lines not limited to North-South relations. The genre has a global reach and is popular in many cultures across the world and thus internationally marketable, but it is not a merely "notional 'global literature' that might be read solely in airline terminals, unaffected by any specific context whatever" (Damrosch 2003, 25), a description Damrosch here denies in the case of world literature in general. Instead, it is "located at the interface of global and local concerns and creates a glocal literary discourse that establishes its very own imagi/Nations" (2005, 14), as Riemenschnieder argues while referring to the so-called "New Literatures in English" (14), or rather postcolonial literature as the texts Riemenschneider refers to are now more commonly called. The concept of a 'glocal literary discourse' is also essential in establishing fantasy literature as a world literature, which has "move[d] into the world at large" but remains influenced by "the shaping force of local contexts" (Damrosch 2003, 25). Unlike Damrosch, however, I do not necessarily assume a distinct national origin for fantasy world literature, but include texts obviously written for the global market, albeit without the lack of 'any specific context whatever' bemoaned by Damrosch. All fantasy texts chosen for this dissertation – and many more, if not all of them at closer inspection – showcase various elements that have been shaped not only by global trends and tropes of fantasy literature but also by their 'local contexts' and sometimes their diasporic origins.

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[6] Interestingly, however, it does include several works which might be categorised as 'magical realism', such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, or as 'science fiction', such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* and *The Salt Roads* – I agree that convincing cases can be made for their inclusion in the genre of fantasy and that they provide more proof for the 'genre's' inherent fluidity.

It could be argued that fantasy has always been a part of world literature and that the perception of fantasy literature as white and western has thus never been correct since non-mimetic writing in general has a long tradition all around the world, predating western Enlightenment processes. The mythologies on which much of modern fantasies are based, for example, can be found in nearly all known human civilisations, as has also been pointed out by Joseph Campbell in his monograph *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). This monograph is still widely read by scholars of fantasy because of the close parallels between the tropes and structures of myth identified by Campbell and the quest fantasy in particular – "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (33), as Campbell puts it. Campbell treats mythology and religions as essentially the same matter and thus his universalist ideas do not respect local beliefs systems and gloss over local particularities. Even so, his observation of the structure of the hero story remains relevant in explaining the similarity of many fantasy stories across cultures without reference to presume western origins. It would also be a mistake to locate the beginning of the contemporary form of non-mimetic writing solely in the west – short stories like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein's "Sultana's Dream" (1905, utopian fiction) and Rabindranath Tagore's "The Hungry Stones" (1916, weird fiction) prove otherwise. Even while considering only the non-mimetic novel, it is clear that such writing can and has come from a wide variety of distinct places whose specificity clearly resonates in the various non-mimetic novels being published worldwide. Salman Rushdie's 1982 novel *Midnight's Children* has contributed to adding 'magical realism' to Anglophone literary scholarship, but as the two previous examples show, there are many more writers from outside of the western centres of cultural production and their input is by no means restricted to magical realism. Fantasy texts or, at the very least, texts which include significant fantastic elements have been written by authors from all Anglophone countries[7]. This includes authors from India, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, various African countries, the Caribbean and many authors writing from diasporic and migrant backgrounds. Occasionally, they still cater to some of the more formulaic Eurocentric genre conventions, but more often than not play with the traditional tropes and reinvent fantasy's traditional categories such as high fantasy or urban fantasy. Recent years have seen fantasy writers from diverse backgrounds rise to prominence, but the academic discussion of such texts has not yet caught up to the vibrant and exciting developments within the genre[8]. With Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death?* (2010) receiving a TV adaptation by HBO in cooperation with G.R.R. Martin, an extensive and highly visible marketing campaign for Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), and Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), the first volume in his *Dark Star* trilogy (2019-ongoing), there is a plethora of new material for scholars of fantasy literature (and, of course, its readers) constantly being published.

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[7] Of course, non-Anglophone authors have also contributed to the corpus of fantasy world literature, often in translation depending on which version of world literature is considered. While the main focus of this dissertation will be on Anglophone examples, I will also briefly discuss the translations of Nahoko Uehashi's wildly popular *Moribito* series from the original Japanese.

[8] Arguably, the academic discussion of mainstream fantasy texts also still has some lacunae, but it is, broadly speaking, more well represented than fantasy from non-Western countries, which is even often incorrectly subsumed under the mantle of magical realism.

It is the aim of this book to examine a sample of modern Anglophone fantasy literature and determine in which ways the selected texts broaden previously established categories of fantasy and to what extent former theoretical concepts have been adapted or changed. Another keen interest is how these factors might instigate new subsets of fantasy literature and affect their formation processes. The concept of fantasy will have to be renegotiated, both as a term for a literary genre, mode, and form, and as an epistemological category, thereby challenging the strict western reality-fantasy binary[9]. Furthermore, the study of fantasy literature will be broadened in order to accommodate global perspectives on the genre and thus this study takes a first step towards a view of fantasy literature as world literature, aided by Susan Stanford Friedman's writings amongst others (cf. Stanford Friedman 2015, 2012) and in opposition to Moretti's argument that

> in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials. (Moretti 2000, 50)

As this dissertation will show, it is by no means true that the postcolonial novel – in this case, the fantasy novel – merely fills western forms with non-western content. While it is true that Nnedi Okorafor, for example, seems to take up the western-centric fantasy quest[10] as a formula to write against in some of her work, Marlon James introduces specifically African forms into his fantasy novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, such as the griot's song and the oshiki. Indra Das' *The Devourers* and Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* and other Japanese-inspired fantasies, on the other hand, showcase how 'local materials' and forms can travel the world, not necessarily always originating from the West, and be adapted to various local specificities.

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[9] It should not be forgotten, after all, that 77% of adults in the US believe in angels and demons according to a 2011 Associated Press-GfK poll, which the remaining 23% may well consider beings of pure fantasy.

[10] Even the quest motif itself cannot truly be considered western-centric even if some of its tropes, at least within the fantasy genre, such as the focus on exploration and the usual threatening East have become imbued with a Eurocentric focus. After all, the quest narrative as such dates back to some of the earliest stories available to humankind, e.g. the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Odyssey*.

The study will largely, though not exclusively, focus on fantasy written by postcolonial writers as well as writers with backgrounds of migration to explore how global fantasy has changed and transformed western generic conventions. It will highlight global fantasy literature's success in transforming the – often imperialist – tropes of fantasy in order to appropriate the genre and create a distance to the more problematic aspects of the genre.[11] The selected texts also challenge western distinctions between reality and fantasy by employing narratives that avoid Eurocentric perspectives, exoticism, and Othering of non-European inspired cultures, which are still too frequently a part of contemporary fantasy writing. However, the study will also take into account how fantasy world literature markets may influence how a fantasy novel is produced and which audiences it is addressed to, identifying potential dangers of self-exoticization and possible catering to western tastes. Additionally, the potential pitfalls faced by western writers appropriating non-western motives into their fantasy writing will be addressed – the appropriation of certain fantasy elements into cultures different from their cultures of origin is an inevitable outcome of fantasy as a travelling genre that depends on global networks of fantasy writers and readers, but it needs to be approached with caution as Orientalist discourse may slip into otherwise sensitive portrayals of other cultures.

The study also discusses fantasy as a genre, which, according to Franco Moretti at least, is a "morphological arrangement[…] that *last*[s] in time, but always only for *some* time" (2007, 12) – Moretti designates the time from 1850-1900 (cf. 19) to the genre or form of fantasy, as he puts it, though it is self-evident that the appeal of fantasy has far outlasted this assigned period. The question whether fantasy is, in fact, a genre is as contested as the term itself, with prominent fantasy and science fiction scholar Brian Attebery claiming that fantasy as genre is always formulaic[12] whereas fantasy as mode is more experimental and, for want of a better word, literary (1992, 1). It then becomes necessary to introduce new concepts of genre, which are not only more accommodating of non-Western forms of literary production but also much more fluid and flexible than a traditional notion of genre may suggest – Attebery's concept of 'fuzzy sets' will be as crucial in addressing fantasy as the various considerations with regards to world literary genres and 'popular world literature' by scholars such as Mariano Siskind, Florian Mussgnug, and Jan Baetens. In addition, Caroline Levine's 'form' is also a useful concept to employ in the context of literature. Levine distinguishes between genres, which cannot "migrate across contexts" (2017, 13), defined by Levine as "customary constellations of elements into historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms" (14), and forms, which afford "repetition and portability across materials and contexts" (14) and "can survive across cultures and time periods, sometimes enduring through vast distances of time and space" (5). Fantasy can perhaps be seen as fluctuating between genre, form, and mode, much like its worlds are fluctuating between consensus reality, fantasy, and the liminal spaces between the two.

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[11] For a more detailed discussions of fantasy's problematic past and the concomitant imperialist plot structures, see, e.g., Helen Young's *Habits of Whiteness: Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* or Margery Hourihan's *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, which can easily be extended towards fantasy literature due to the plot structure of the hero's tale, shared by some fantasy and some children's literature.

[12] Though Attebery does not necessarily consider 'formulaic' a negative descriptor since he states that a "poor non-formulaic story may be far worse than a good performance of the formula" (1992, 10).

Establishing fantasy literature as world literature and perhaps even a world literary genre requires first to define the term as it will be used in this dissertation, especially since it is far from universally understood. For the selection of this study's corpus, I relied on two criteria – recognisable elements of fantasy literature such as secondary worlds, quest narratives, and 'magical creatures', be they wholly imaginary, mythological or simply 'extraordinary', and the authors' self-identification. As the reception of fantasy depends on one's own perception of reality – though fantasy, as Okorafor's powerful essay "Organic fantasy" has shown need not be reality's binary opposite –, it is preferrable to take authors' views on their texts into account. J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" (1939) and Tzvetan Todorov's concepts of the fantastic, the uncanny and the marvelous (1973), which have formed literary discussions of all non-mimetic writing significantly and continues to impact modern scholarship, are good starting points for a discussion of fantasy, though the genre has changed considerably in both scale and quality in recent decades. Crucially, non-western scholars and writers of fantasy, such as Nnedi Okorafor and Ambelin Kwaymullina will also be considered in order to fully grasp what global fantasy literature ought to mean and encompass. In addition, renowned scholars of fantasy such as Brian Attebery (1992), Lucie Armitt (2005), Edward James/Farah Mendlesohn (2009; 2012), and Farah Mendlesohn (2008) will be drawn on to get a grasp on the genre as it is currently perceived and provide a basis for understanding how and why writers of fantasy from diverse contexts may diverge from established generic traditions. Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) in particular will play an important role in this dissertation since Mendlesohn's four subsets of fantasy will provide a foil against which the chosen primary literature can be analysed – both in their similarities and their differences. Most fantasy texts discussed in this dissertation take on some of the 'rhetorical elements' of fantasy Mendlesohn describes while subverting others and adding new elements, often drawn from a culture of origin, which eventually may travel onwards and into different contexts.

The nature of many of the novels to be analysed and the cultural as well as religious backgrounds of the fantasy authors require a closer look at different epistemological systems and their impact on the fantastic content in the novels. As most definitions of the fantastic or fantasy rely on a departure from consensus reality (cf. Attebery 1992, 3-4; Hume 1984, xii; Manlove 1983, 16; Todorov 1973, 54-57), it is imperative to be aware of differing perceptions of said consensus reality depending on the texts' cultural positioning. Several of the novels to be discussed contain elements that the authors have stated belong to their cultures or religious belief systems – yet nonetheless the texts are seen as fantasy not only by their implied, predominantly western readership, but also by the authors themselves, perhaps for differing reasons, as can be seen from essays like Nnedi Okorafor's "Organic Fantasy" (2009) or Ambelin Kwaymullina's "Edges, Centres and Futures: Reflections on being an Indigenous Speculative Fiction Writer" (2014), which focus directly on the enforced binary between reality and fantasy, seeking to subvert or discard it.

In chapter 3, "Beyond Genre Limitations", I will lay the groundwork for the later discussion of the small fantasy corpus used in this dissertation. As the term 'genre' is similarly fuzzy as fantasy itself, a subchapter will be dedicated to elaborating on how the term is to be used in the context of this thesis, followed by a subchapter on the genre of fantasy literature. The meaning of fantasy, as used in this study, will have to be explained as there are a variety of readings and multiple definitions by previous scholars to choose from and adapt to this academic work.

Additionally, I will look at how genres can travel and what is needed in order to transform a 'national' genre into a world literary one by considering critics such as Mariano Siskind, Florian Mussgnug, and Susan Stanford Friedman. These initial considerations will help in showcasing how fantasy texts engage in global exchanges while at the same time foregrounding local specificities.

Chapter 4, "Destabilizing Reality – Nnedi Okorafor's Organic Fantasy and the Postcolonial Apocalypse", will look at the subset of Okorafor's work she considers 'afrojujuism', a subgenre of fantasy. The chapter will discuss how Okorafor deftly adopts, appropriates, and subverts Eurocentric fantasy tropes and uses them to question the previously established rhetorics of quest fantasy. Additionally, this chapter will show how Okorafor's writings challenge the form of the individual fantasy novel and even the fantasy series, creating a fictional universe I – somewhat tongue-in-cheek – decided to call the OkoraVerse. I will also analyse how Okorafor's afrojujuist novels address contemporary ecocritical concerns, especially with regards to the Anthropocene and the looming climate crisis and extrapolate current developments into a post-apocalyptic future – this engagement with contemporary issues and 'serious' topics involving both postcolonial and ecocritical thought among others has often led to a classification of Okorafor's novels as 'magical realist', 'dystopian', or 'speculative fiction' rather than fantasy, a classification I will contest.

Chapter 5, "'Tolkien in Africa' – New Fantasy Impulses in Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*" details how Marlon James takes thematic elements of the quest fantasy and puts them into a new form. Using characteristics of oral storytelling as well as incorporating the dynamic between oral storytelling and writing into the narrative itself, James radically rejects the traditional high fantasy trilogy in favour of a multivocal narrative, which celebrates African imaginaries and excellence. James also revives a vibrant queer past derived from various African cultures and depicts a moving representation of queer love and queer family in the form of an oriki, a Yoruba praise song. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, despite its novel form, also privileges the oral by incorporating untranslated proverbs at the beginning of each part, whose translations are only made available to those English-speaking readers who listen to the audiobook.

"Reconceptualizing Reality and History – Alternate Temporalities, Urban Fantasies and Rural Spaces in Indra Das' *The Devourers*", the dissertation's sixth chapter, revisits the theme of ecocriticism in exploring how the Sundarbans, an important location for Indian writing, is portrayed in this openly fantastic setting. At the same time, it adds themes of alternate histories and the rewriting of western historiography in order to foreground alternative temporalities and realities. The chapter also focuses on Das' representation of the werewolf figure as a figure that travels as much within the narrative as outside of it, forming a global network of were-animals alongside various human cultures.

Networks and border crossings also play an important role in chapter 7, "The Borders of Fantasy in Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori*", which explores how Japanese mythology has entered world fantasy literature written both by white authors and authors of Japanese heritage. The chapter especially focuses on the multiple border crossings within *Tales of the Otori* – between different cultural groups, county lines, and also between the mundane and the fantastic – and concerning the conditions outside the text, which include the almost-but-not-quite reciprocal relationship between Japan and Australia, Hearn's home of choice, and the various constellations of Orientalist discourse, self-Orientalising, and anti-colonial critique from within Japan.

Taken together, all case studies centring around certain authors or certain kinds of fantasy demonstrate how fantasy travels the globe, carrying with itself global or even universal tropes as well as cultural signifiers rooted in local traditions and histories. Fantasy, the four chapters show, has started a glocal literary discourse that allows it to enter the sphere of world literature, rather than remain a purely global and entirely de-localised popular literature. Fantasy literature has managed to circulate around the world without, however, losing the various cultural markers individual authors bring to the genre.

2. Beyond Genre Limitations and National Borders – World Literature Fantasy

2.1. Travelling Texts – World Literature and Global Networks

2.1.1. The Global Networks of World Literature

One of the central claims of my dissertation is that fantasy literature is not Eurocentric despite an ongoing misconception that associates fantasy only with a certain, rather formulaic subgenre, that of medievalist high fantasy. Kim Wilkins, for example, states that "the medieval European past continues to dominate the genre" (135), even in Australia, and Helen Young names medievalism as one aspect of fantasy's so-called "habit of Whiteness" (41). In contrast, however, to such a widespread tendency to equate fantasy literature with Tolkienesque writing evoking the (more or less) distant European past, fantasy literature as a whole travels widely, connecting different national cultures and epistemologies while constantly incorporating new ideas and influences. These travels as well as the ensuing global networks of fantasy allow for a productive reading of fantasy as world literature, albeit one that accounts for more complex relationships between texts than the often-cited centre-periphery paradigm. Such global networks are constituted by multiple fantasy literatures, which can be read together, as I do in this study, but which could also be studied individually as national fantasy literatures or fantasy literature subgenres. The term 'world literature' itself is "a travelling concept, which, in its long and multi-layered history, has been defined in a number of different ways" (Neumann 2020, 134), which necessitates a brief elaboration on which definition is to be used in the context of this dissertation and what kind of world literature fantasy literature is claimed to be. Rather than world literature based on "circulation within the world literary space as a rather one-dimensional process, in which the west imposes its standards on the so-called periphery" (134), fantasy world literature is based on global networks, in which elements of form, style, and generic conventions are shared and exchanged, rather than imposed on non-western writers. Of course, this does not mean that global imbalances and inequalities can be ignored – on the contrary, many texts of fantasy world literature address inequalities along multiple axes directly, thus drawing attention to various postcolonial and transcultural concerns from readers of what is usually considered – rather dismissively – popular culture. According to Damrosch's seminal definition, world literature "circulat[es] out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (Damrosch 2003, 6) – while I would agree that circulation and movement do play an important role with regard to world literature, I also adhere to the notion that "approaches that tie world literature to circulation seem unsatisfactory" (Neumann 2018, 240), not least because of how influential the literary market can be and how intertwined it is with "literary institutions located in the Global North" (240). Market considerations do come into play with regard to fantasy literature in particular as this popular genre is a regular tool for publishers to guarantee sales due to its faithful fantasy fanbase predisposed to give even new titles a chance. As Jeremy Rosen puts it in his study on the genre of 'minor-character elaboration',

> [t]oday's large-scale corporate publishers are highly risk-averse, seeking to maximize profit in the short term. In this milieu, publishers have turned increasingly to genre fiction because works that follow a proven formula and appeal to a preexisting fan base help combat the uniqueness, and hence unpredictable sales, of any new book. (Rosen 2016, 31)

This is not to say that genre fiction only follows formulas or that a formulaic nature is a requirement for success on the global literary marketplace. Fantasy texts, like other genre fiction, do not "slavishly adhere to a formula" (Rosen 2016, 32); instead, "[i]nternal variations and fusion with other genres persist and are always potentials latent in a given kind of literary practice" (32). Fantasy, then, is in an interesting double position when it comes to its status as a world literary genre. As popular genre fiction which almost guarantees to draw a considerable readership, it is published frequently by a variety of smaller or bigger publishing houses in the Global North, thus potentially facilitating its international reach while at the same time ensuring an ongoing dominance of texts from the Global North within the genre or requiring authors from the Global South to publish outside of their regions of origin, as can be seen by authors such as Marlon James and Indrapramit Das, who both emigrated to the United States, not least to facilitate their literary careers. At the same time, however, the genre of fantasy is regularly ignored by 'literary institutions', which distribute prizes and thus prestige to contemporary literature.

It is even seen in direct opposition to 'literary novels', which are considered to be of high quality and thus – allegedly – more worthy of being considered as world literature. Jan Baetens helpfully deconstructs this binary constituted by the "works, themes, and authors that have […] become part of the cultural heritage of all mankind" (336) and those "works, themes, and authors that address a very large audience, and that have often been crafted and invented to cater to the taste (that is the 'bad taste') of the masses" (336). Such cultural snobbery, which upholds "the mythical and mystifying distinction between high art and popular culture" (337) quickly crumbles when the numerous high-quality examples of fantasy literature[13] are studied in earnest by literary scholars. Indeed, if, as Baetens states, "[i]n world literature it is […] *quality* that matters, and its key values are called originality, complexity, closure, autonomy, personality, multilayeredness, timelessness and so on" (337), then certainly all the texts chosen for this study as well as many other examples of fantasy world literature qualify. Baetens considers contemporary world literature to be "a conscious attempt to 'produce,' that is to 'invent,' more or less from scratch, *global hypes*" (337), which attract broad, international readerships and for which fantasy literatures are particularly suited thanks to the already existing fanbase willing to buy new offerings on the market. In fact, it is possible that non-western fantasy novels are being published ever more frequently "thanks only to [the] novelty" (339) they bring to "the very competitive market of popular entertainment" (339). Due to the high competitiveness of the market, there is an urge on the side of the publishers to extract as much income as possible from their releases of popular world literature. In order to achieve this, they employ "two mechanisms that stem from the very first days of industrial literature […]: *serialization* and *adaptation*" (339), which certainly explains the frequency of fantasy series and, more recently, of fantasy series adaptions, fuelled by the enormous success of HBO's *Game of Thrones*.[14] However, the series format does not necessarily coincide with a lack of quality – on the contrary, several of the authors analysed in this dissertation play with the concept of the series, be it through the more or less loosely connected stories of Nnedi Okorafor's africanjujuist novels or Marlon James's subversion of the trilogy format so frequently employed.

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[13] Of course, formulaic and sometimes almost serially-produced examples of fantasy literature also exist, but they do not characterize the genre as a whole and certainly do not warrant fantasy literature being excluded from serious literary study. Such formulaic novels can also be studied to identify generic tropes and popular conventions, establishing a theoretical basis similar to that which exists for other examples of genre fiction, such as detective fiction, which likewise includes trivial series as well as novels (now) considered to be literary.

[14] It is certainly no coincidence that almost every new fantasy series currently in production or planning is touted as 'the next *Game of Thrones*', including Amazon's *Lord of the Rings* TV show, which should be on the opposing end of the vast spectrum of high fantasy from *Game of Thrones*, if the

The aforementioned novelty, seen as a requirement for the publication of popular literature by Baetens, runs the risk of veering into exoticism if non-western fantasies are marketed as particularly strange and other. This potential exoticisation of fantasy authors who are considered cultural others to the Western mainstream cannot be ignored, especially if one considers the controversial history of racially charged villains in fantasy literature. To analyse fantasy literature as something which is "regarded as emanating from the periphery toward audiences who see themselves as coming from the centre" (Huggan 2001, 4) runs the risk of reenforcing the texts' marginality and perhaps unduly highlighting those fantastic elements that are considered 'foreign' to the point of fetishizing their 'otherness' (cf. 10). Though Graham Huggan is, of course, referring to postcolonial literature, those texts in the fantasy world literary corpus which stem from the non-western world are also in danger of being made "into saleable exotic objects" (2001, 10). At the same time, however, fantasy writers from so-called marginalised cultures are not entirely devoid of agency – instead, they can use the exoticisation of their culture strategically to access metropolitan publishing houses and employ what Huggan calls the 'postcolonial exotic'. According to Huggan,

> [t]he postcolonial exotic […] occupies a site of discursive conflict between a local assemblage of more or less related oppositional practices and a global apparatus of assimilative institutional/commercial codes. (Huggan 2001, 28)

Huggan does not propose exoticism as a strategy used by non-Western authors to counter imposed exoticisation and othering as an ideal solution but rather as a question that needs to be posed when considering postcolonial literature and also, I would argue, fantasy as world literature. This is especially so when the focus, as is the case in this dissertation, is largely, though not exclusively, on texts with non-

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source material is to be respected at all, since Tolkien's melancholic epic, bordering on the elegiac, is clear in its disapproval of the gratuitous violence that permeates Martin's work.

western backgrounds. Such backgrounds, while complicating the questions surrounding exoticism raised by Huggan, seemingly confirm Damrosch's definition of world literature as a literature that "circulat[es] [...] beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (6). However, this concept of world literature, seen in connection with numerous of its writers, including the ones discussed in this dissertation, does not hold in so far as it refers to a singular cultural point of origin unless bolstered by certain levelling tendencies. Huggan criticises various "aspects of commodity fetishism" (19) connected to postcolonial criticism but which can be expanded to include a notion of world literature too concerned with identifiable and singular cultural backgrounds. There is, for example, an expectation that one can gain access to 'exotic' experiences "through the consumption of literary works by much-travelled writers who are perceived as having come from, or as having connection to, 'exotic' places" (19). Huggan's choice of words – "perceived as having come from" – already indicates that these writers' cultural points of origin are not easily determined, seeing as they are travelling as much as the texts they read and write.

The fantasy texts discussed in this dissertation, then, also complicate this notion of a "cultural point of origin" since almost all of the authors chosen live partly in the United States, which has most likely contributed to their ability to be published, thus underlining the influence of the Global North on the publishing industry, but also because they all either carry stories of migration as part of their own history, showcase such mobility in their literary work, or demonstrate cultural reference points beyond their own "cultural point of origin" in their fantasy novels. They are all "shaped by a contradictory pull between the local and the global" (Neumann 2018, 243) due to the authors' previous mobility and resulting affiliation with multiple cultures, to the literary market that influenced their publication, and to the authors' ongoing dedication to portray worlds in their novels that are not generalized but decidedly local. It is their 'worlds' in particular that also connect these novels – and perhaps fantasy literature in general – to world literature. 'Worlding', a concept applicable to literature in general, but here associated with world literature in particular (cf. Cheah 2015; Neumann 2018), describes the "capacity to open other, imaginative worlds that cannot be contained by the frequently market-driven world of globalization" (Neumann 2018, 242). Birgit Neumann also calls for

> a move beyond representational models of literature, which, broadly speaking, posit that literature refers to a given world outside itself, a world that exists as an object that may be seen and represented by the symbolic forms available to literature. (Neumann 2018, 242)

Fantasy literature is particularly apt for such a move beyond representational models, considering that it is already widely known for constructing alternative worlds, sometimes in the form of so-called 'secondary worlds', usually "a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" (Mendlesohn 2008, 59). It is not difficult then to see the connection between the construction of secondary worlds in fantasy literature and the worlding inherent in world literature in general. As this dissertation will show, the worlds of fantasy literature share with 'literary worldmaking' "a number of narrative features that cultivate relationality and reach out for transcultural contact, while rendering the inevitable unevenness of global flows visible" (Neumann 2018, 243). Such features include "[t]he transgression of generic boundaries, multiperspectivity, the use of intermedial strategies, non-linear narratives […] and recursive plotting" (243-244) among others. The novels analysed for this dissertation employ several of these features and they predominantly construct their worlds in a way that echoes Pheng Cheah's claim that world literature "is an active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of processes of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes" (2016, 2) because they do not only construct fantastic secondary worlds in the longstanding tradition identified by Mendlesohn. Instead, the novels create worlds that explore non-Western concepts and ideas freely, both from insider and outsider positions, without their (often self-)identification as fantasy hindering their depiction of localised realities in the slightest.

Anglophone world literature, including those texts belonging to the genre of fantasy literature,

> binds diverse places, histories, and languages into networks of mutually transformative exchange, it accentuates the irreducible impact of locality and situated practices. It unsettles the conventions of national literatures by drawing connections between different locally grounded practices and by showing that even the most local experience is implicated on global trajectories. (Neumann 2018, 243)

Following a wide variety of scholars, such as Mignolo, Ette, Müller, and Borsò, Birgit Neumann imbues this network poetics with the power to upend binary oppositions and transcend boundaries, all the while creating liminal spaces and locations for productive entanglements, from which new epistemologies and subjectivies may emerge. Such 'networks of mutually transformative exchange', as this dissertation will show, have informed and continue to inform the genre of fantasy literature considerably on a number of levels as the authors of the selected works are all in some way transnational and their writing benefits from the "transitory spaces, polycentric geographies, and contact zones" (Neumann 2018, 243) experienced and portrayed by the writers themselves. The novels also push "binary oppositions and clear-cut boundaries towards their limits" (243), in terms of their content, form, and generic belonging, as the following analyses will show.

While such literary capacities are not yet frequently acknowledged as being afforded by such a popular genre as fantasy literature and often attributed only to the genre of so-called literary fiction, fantasy literature does make full and innovative use of various literary strategies, including the subversion of generic conventions, use of oral literary practices, the rewriting of history, and the use of intertextuality and intermediality among others. Intertextuality[15] in particular "provides a way of bringing texts of different cultures […] into interaction and of establishing new, hitherto unexplored connections between them" (Neumann 2020, 139). Marlon James' use of the *oriki*, a form or praise song, Indrapramit Das's use of various (albeit fictional) manuscripts as historical sources as well as Lian Hearn's use of the historical painter Sesshu aptly demonstrate that intertextuality provides powerful links that cross spatial, cultural and even temporal boundaries (cf. Neumann 2020, 139). As Birgit Neumann puts it in her discussion of anglophone world literatures,

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[15] I understand intertextuality here as referring to a "network of textual relations" (Allen 2000, 1), in which the 'text' need not refer to a literary text, but may include "cinema, painting, music, architecture, photography and […] virtually all cultural and artistic productions" (174).

> [t]he extent to which literature draws on circulating texts from multiple periods and cultures, across historical, cultural and linguistic borders, is well-documented, and it is clear that intertextuality constitutes an engine for the development of literature as well as the emergence of new genres and literary forms." (2020, 139)

Circulatory processes, which are not restricted to the capitalist market place alone, are thus crucial to genre development, and genres themselves can also play an integral role in the emergence, negotiation, and study of world literature as, according to Mario Siskind, "a compelling travelling vehicle for the realization of world literature as an interpretative project" (2011, 346). It is only reasonable, then, to include genre study as an integral part of this dissertation, since it is not only intertwined with the world literary project but also a significant factor in the study of fantasy literature. Fantasy, after all, is considered part of popular literature, often disparagingly referred to as 'genre fiction'.

2.1.2. Fantasies of Genre Fiction in the World

This dissertation will look at fantasy texts spanning a variety of fantasy subgenres, yet all, in their own way, are recognisable as the same overarching genre, that of fantasy literature, and it is thus necessary to engage with debates surrounding what constitutes a genre, how it may (or may not) travel and how previously stiff genre categorisations can be made to adapt and adopt the fluidity and fuzziness that scholars have recognised not just, but especially so, within the speculative fiction genres. When one considers the New Critical Idiom volume *Genre*, it seems, at first glance, that its author, John Frow, denies the usefulness of his conception of genre to fantasy literature outright, stating that genre in the sense of genre fiction "indicates the formulaic and the conventional" (Frow 2006, 1), a function of genre he regards as irrelevant for his purposes. Rather, Frow focuses on "the extent to which even the most complex and least formulaic of texts is shaped and organised by its relation to generic structures" (1f.), which he presents as a contrast to "genre fiction, meaning for the most part such popular genres as the detective story or science fiction" (1) and undoubtedly also fantasy literature. However, the genre of fantasy literature, albeit often considered genre fiction or popular literature, does include both the most highly formulaic and 'the most complex and least formulaic of texts' with both being impacted by their 'relation to generic structures'. Brian Attebery, perhaps, expresses it best when he states that:

> 1. Fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices – wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil.
> 2. Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth. (1992, 1)

Fantasy as a genre then can accommodate both functions, though usually not as clearly demarcated from one another as Attebery puts it here. Indeed, the examples selected for this dissertation do frequently contain a bit of both, some unironically incorporating bits of formula, some addressing the formula only in so far as is needed to subvert it while others depart from the formula entirely to adopt various "sophisticated mode[s] of storytelling" to "recapture[…] the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth". Despite their differences, all texts used in the four chapters of this dissertation concerned with primary literature are unequivocally considered fantasy by fans, authors, and critics alike.[16] Is it because they all belong to the wide genre of fantasy literature, almost an umbrella term for a great variety of texts? Or is it because they are all written in the fantasy mode? How does the critic decide whether a given text – usually a novel – is fantasy or something else? While the latter question will be more thoroughly explored in chapter 2.2., it is essential to first elaborate on what is meant with 'genre' and 'generic conventions' in the context of this dissertation.

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[16] Nnedi Okorofar's work is, to some extent, an exception here as critics have alternatively called it 'magical realism', 'speculative fiction', 'science fiction' (cf. Burnett 2015; Hoydis 2017; Pahl 2018), or even 'afrofuturism' (a term Okorafor vehemently rejects). Okorafor herself calls *Who Fears Death* and related works 'africanjujuism,' a concept she does, in fact, consider a subset of the fantasy genre.

A genre, according to John Frow, "is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning" (2006, 10), which certainly does apply to both 'versions' of fantasy listed by Brian Attebery. Indeed, Frow does admit that neither the complex nor the formulaic text "'belong[s]' to genre but are, rather, uses of them" (2). Genres are evoked in "the different framing of […] texts – their placing in different contexts – that governs the different salience of their formal features" (9) – it follows, then, that a novel can potentially be read as different genres by different scholars depending on which formal features are to be focused on. This is, perhaps, especially relevant in fantasy studies as the precise location of the fantastic elements lies, to some extent, also in the individual scholar's perception. Frow lists a number of features which can help determine a text's genre, such as formal features, which may refer to certain visual features more common to poems than novels, but also to a vocabulary that is "specific to the genre" (9); in Frow's example, this means specific to the 'headline', but a certain vocabulary can also be observed in fantasy literature – not because many fantasy novels share one set of 'specialist' words but because many employ a set of vocabulary specific to their secondary world or magic system, often requiring a glossary. The existence of such may well serve to point towards a genre affiliation. Other aspects of genre categorisation include, among others, "a *thematic structure* which draws upon a set of highly conventional **topics** or ***topoi***" (9), which, in fantasy literature, would refer to some of the most common tropes whose subversion will be discussed in this dissertation.

As this dissertation is concerned with fantasy literature as a world literary genre, it is important to look not just at generic definitions of genre, but also at how genres become part of the world literary system, what their specificities are in global contexts and how they can be approached without undue Eurocentrism. Mariano Siskind is right in pointing out that

> [t]he making of a new world literature – new world literary critical discussions, new bodies of texts covering a broader and more diverse literary world – calls for a reevaluation of the old categories that have structured our discipline. (Siskind 2011, 345)

One such category is, of course, that of genre, which has long been missing from discussions of world literature, though this has already changed to some degree since Siskind's article "The Genres of World Literature: The Case of Magical Realism", published in 2011. As Siskind argues, a genre of world literature cannot be a simple extension of material, that is "the same traditional genres considered on a global scale" (347), but rather it is defined by "new generic formations, constellations of texts whose identity is defined in accordance with new needs and new critical and aesthetic desires translated into new organizing principles" (347). Siskind does not reject traditional genre categories such as science fiction or fantasy literature completely, however, citing magical realism, cosmogonic epics, the bildungsroman, travel narratives with a focus on local and global displacements, ghost narratives, and ghazal poetry (cf. 348) as his examples for world literary genres, genres that have their origins in national or regional literatures.

In this dissertation, I argue that fantasy can function in much the same way as Siskind's examples – in fact, Siskind's definition of a world literary genre fits the genre of fantasy especially well, even when previous approaches to fantasy literature are taken into consideration. Genres suitable for discussion as world literature need to be "not an inherited form (as in the case of traditional genres), but one that has to be articulated and argued every time" (354); if traditional genres are to be considered as world literature, they have to be negotiated and my study will show that such negotiation is exactly what is happening within contemporary fantasy literature. Siskind's view of world literary genres is as broad as Attebery's notion of the 'fuzzy set' applied to fantasy literature, perhaps even more so, since he views them as

> textual assemblages with no unified features, prescribing no norms and therefore open to all kinds of formal and historical traditions. Genres as

> floating textual constellations that recreate the field of world literature with every critical intervention. (Siskind 2011, 354)

While I would argue that there have to be some features that still make a genre affiliation possible and thus enable the construction of a genre, in my case that of fantasy literature, that is comprised of texts which are still related and comparable, I would also concede that these features by no means need to be unified or normative. Instead, I follow Siskind's conception of world literary genres as defined by "their instability" and their "open-ended boundaries" (354) – a notion of genre that is, in fact, ideally suited to fantasy literature.

Siskind discusses how genres "go global" (349) with the example of magical realism, beginning with its origins in French and German art criticism and subsequent travels to Latin America, followed by the genre's identification as "a third world genre whose efficacy resided in the adaptability to be articulated in the most diverse cultural locations" (353). As a "transcultural generic formation" (353), it allows for a global spread of novels to be discussed as magical realism rather than as nationally-bound texts – certainly, this is both due to the genre's openness not unlike that of fantasy's as well as due to the fact that the genre has been 'global' from the start, incorporating cultural influences from various backgrounds into its very formation. It is particularly fortunate that Siskind should use 'magical realism' as an example – while I would firmly argue that magical realism and fantasy are not the same, they are certainly adjacent genres and thus offer themselves up for comparison. Some works of fantasy are even falsely attributed to magical realism by literary scholars, ostensibly due to a misguided notion of fantasy as less worthy of academic interest, whereas other publications such as the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* seem to suggest that magical realism is a subgenre of fantasy literature (cf. James and Mendlesohn 2012). While a discussion of the origins of fantasy literature would extend the scope of this dissertation, the case studies do show that the fantasy genre does not unilaterally originate in the West, merging its western form with localised content, as Moretti would have it in the case of the novel in general (2000, 58), but instead integrates influences and ideas, both in content and form, and evolves 'with every critical intervention'.

Florian Mussgnug, following Siskind, even argues that "[g]enre […] is in the process of becoming once again a central critical concept in the arts and humanities" (2018, 1) and attributes it to "a more general fascination with popular genres" (1), which aligns with my aim of demonstrating that genre fiction such as fantasy literature can be a part of world literature in the same sense in which other prominent texts are considered world literature and can be read with postcolonial, queer, ecocritical, and feminist lenses among others. The fantasy genre is not formulaic and prescriptive but marks, as other literary genres do,

> a privileged site of cultural encounter – between past and present, and between national, global and diasporic communities – because of their particular attention to materiality and persistence of historical reference points. (Mussgnug 2018, 2)

Such encounters do play an important role in most, if not all, of the texts analysed in this dissertation, be it through the encounter between past and present enabled by Indra Das's werewolf-like rakshasas and their manuscript transmission on human skin, or through diasporic subjects such as Marlon James's Tracker. Cultural encounters occur at multiple levels in fantasy literature, including, but not limited to, content and form. Generic tropes of fantasy literature travel widely, and not only in one direction – while Nnedi Okorafor may take on Eurocentric quest structures on a superficial level, she also subverts them significantly, not least by reversing the direction of travel so prominent in all kinds of fantasy literature when the journey to defeat the great evil in the East becomes a journey to the West. Indrapramit Das's werewolf figures may nowadays be mostly associated with the European werewolf – and, indeed, the protagonist Ashok does just that when he first questions why a werewolf would be living in India, but that does not mean that the figure has its unilateral origin in Europe. Rather, a significant number of fantasy tropes can be seen as the result of not only generic transfers between cultures, but also parallel developments, which continue to emerge from various directions in contemporary fantasy writing, thus constantly allowing the genre to evolve. The were-animal, for example, seems to have grown organically from reality, to borrow Okorafor's phrasing, since they can be seen “as a tweaked version of a local predatory animal” (Clasen 2012, 225) combined a keen perception of humanity’s dual nature (cf. 225).

While both Siskind and Mussgnug highlight the global mobility of genre, it is worthwhile to consider briefly Caroline Levine’s differing perspective on genre, form, and networks before moving on to the question of how such travels, connections, and networks can be established or discovered without falling into the trap of Eurocentrism once more. According to Levine, there is a difference between form and genre, even though the terms are often used interchangeably, and that this difference lies in the “way in which they traverse time and space” (2017, 13). If genre is seen as a rather strict system of classification, then Levine’s arguments against genre’s ability to travel make sense. Because genre expectations change along the course of literary history,

> any attempt to recognize a work’s genre is a historically specific and interpretive act: one might not be able to tell the difference between a traditional folktale and a story recently composed for children or to recognize a satire from a distant historical moment. (Levine 2017, 13)

In contrast, forms, which can comprise a wide range of literary elements, can travel widely while remaining unchanged and immediately recognisable. In Levine’s words, they “afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts” (Levine 2017, 14) in a way genres do not. While I tend to follow Brian Attebery in viewing the fantasy genre as a ‘fuzzy set’ rather than as a fixed category of texts, as I will explain in more detail later on, Levine’s forms may be used when talking about the generic tropes of fantasy visible in some of the novels analysed in this dissertation.

One particular form Levine talks about, the network, is much grander in scale than tropes, yet both are forms in Levine’s sense of the word and both play a role in this dissertation by helping to understand fantasy as a world literary genre. It is my contention that fantasy operates as a global network in which ideas, tropes, and stories are exchanged freely, though not always equally. Levine describes networks as “sprawling, overlapping, and indefinitely expanding processes of interconnectedness” (129), which cannot be fully grasped at any given moment and which therefore rejects totality. Networks also interact with other forms, such as the generic tropes that may travel along them, but also "territorial barriers, which they sometimes cross and which at other times bring them to a halt" (131). Fantasy literature, more often than not, overcomes such territorial barriers, but such boundary crossing is not necessarily always beneficial as the direction of travel may still uphold power hierarchies that privilege the West and enable Eurocentric structures to persist.

To do further justice to the generic transfers that characterise Anglophone fantasy literatures and to prove that these transfers of form and other fantasy elements are global and multidirectional rather than simply emanating from Europe to absorb non-European content (cf. Moretti 2000, 58), I draw on Susan Stanford Friedman's propositions on how to allow modernist studies to become more global and thus more accurately reflect the various movements of modernisms since her ideas can be translated onto the genre of fantasy literature as well. Re-Vision, recovery, circulation, and collage are her "four potential comparative strategies for reading modernism on a planetary landscape" (2012, 508) and they serve just as well for a reading of fantasy literature on a planetary scale. Re-Vision, the "deformation of the […] canon by bringing new attention to some Western writers who have typically been on the margins of mainstream modernist studies because of ways in which their work illuminates the logics of colonialism" (2012, 510) and by performing "globalist readings of familiar British, Irish, European and US modernist writers" (510) has already been undertaken within the context of fantasy studies by scholars such as Helen Young and, more recently, Ebony Elisabeth Thomas and will thus only feature in the background of my dissertation. It is worthwhile noting that studies such as Young's *Racism in Fantasy Literature. Habits of Whiteness* (2015) and Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019) perform re-visions in Stanford Friedman's sense on several canonical texts and other narratives of fantasy fiction, thereby discovering many of the colonialist and imperialist tropes of fantasy literature that most of the authors, which form the corpus of study for this dissertation, actively work against. Recovery, the practice of focusing on hitherto neglected or forgotten writers (cf. Stanford Friedman 2012, 510-511) will be employed in so far as some of the texts to be analysed are not (yet) part of the mainstream fantasy canon and are not as widely read as their more prominent western counterparts.[17] The

> substantial archaeological work: locating unavailable texts buried in the bowels of libraries and collections; little magazines even more ephemeral than the better known ones; anthologies or catalogues reflecting networks parallel to those in the West; personal papers of forgotten writers, editors, curators and so forth (Stanford Friedman 2012, 511)

in order to uncover early fantasy texts that may predate those known from the western literary history of fantasy unfortunately goes beyond the scope of this dissertation as it would require extensive research stays in various cultural metropoles around the world. Doing so in a meaningful way that reflects the vast spread of fantastic writing worldwide would also require paying much closer attention to translations and also actively seeking out texts in original languages, which are not always accessible to the scholar of Anglophone literatures. However, circulation following Stanford Friedman is a reading practice that focuses on the polycentricity of, in my case, the production of fantasy literature. In doing so, it emphasises "circular or multidirectional rather than linear flows", which "involve reciprocal indigenizations of travelling cultures" (Stanford Friedman 2012, 512). This kind of circulation will inform my readings of the fantasy texts without, however, "forgetting the role of power asymmetries constituted through empires, imperial hegemonies, and local stratifications" (516). My selection of primary literature can also be seen as a form of collage, since it juxtaposes a variety of different fantasy texts from a variety of cultural, regional, and religious origins, but since they are all united by their – perhaps occasionally loose – attribution to the fantasy genre, the effect will not be "bizarre or uncanny" (Stanford Friedman 2012, 517) enough to "defamiliarize and recontextualize what seemed familiar" (517). Instead, it will succeed in providing as broad an overview of the global fantasy genre as possible, showcasing both the broad scope of the genre as well as the global networks that sustain it. Using Friedman's concepts in this dissertation will enable me to make visible the plurality and polycentricity of the fantasy genre. This will demonstrate that fantasy literature is a truly global phenomenon and ought to be considered world literature in various meanings of the word – they span the world in range and scope, reaching readers across the globe, but they also represent a much more varied and diverse group of fantasy writers than the mainstream outsider's view of the fantasy genre might suggest. They also actively make worlds containing cultural elements taken from outside the text and thus manage to represent a wider world to their readers, thus effectively addressing a frequent criticism that world literature has faced in recent years: "that it has not been sufficiently global, but has instead replicated the imperial power of the West […] by asserting Western culture as the measure of all cultures, Western literature as the universal world literature" (Stanford Friedmann 2012, 502). While similar criticisms have often been waged against fantasy literature as well, the analyses of works by Nnedi Okorafor, Marlon James, Indrapamit Das, Lian Hearn, Julie Kagawa, and Emiko Jean will help dispel western misconceptions of the field in favour of a more global view of fantasy literature as world literature.

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[17] This is, however, changing rapidly, especially with regard to Nnedi Okorafor, who has become notable as a phenomenal speculative fiction writer by critics and fans alike and whose work is increasingly of interest to the producers of popular TV shows, as showcased by the planned production of a *Who Fears Death?* series in a similar vein as G.R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones.*

2.2. Indescribable, though not imperceptible" – An Organic and Fuzzy Genre

2.2.1. The Organic Ingredients of Faërie and Other Worlds of Fantasy

Replacing Susan Stanford Friedman's 'modernism' with 'fantasy literature' in her argument in order to use her claims for this study is a relatively simple task of transferral. However, before her notions of circulation can be productively applied to the genre, it is of utmost importance to attempt to approach the question of what is meant when the term fantasy literature is used. Only then can any attempts of analysing a 'representative' batch of world literary fantasy texts be undertaken. Defining fantasy literature has been a notoriously difficult enterprise, to such an extent that multiple scholars of fantasy have attempted to do so via book-length studies, which mostly contain the consensus that the impossibility to produce a clear-cut definition of the genre may be an integral part of fantasy literature itself. It may, indeed, be one of the crucial elements of the field, which scholars call fantasy literature today, that it defies the limits of generic conventions and goes beyond the concept of genre altogether. In fact, the difficulty in establishing a concise definition has already been a part of what might be considered one of the founding texts of modern fantasy literature, Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories". In it, Tolkien explicitly states: "I will not attempt to define that [Faërie], nor to describe it directly. It cannot be done. Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible. It has many ingredients, but analysis will not necessarily discover the secret of the whole" (2001 [1939], 17). Before delving further into the discussion of what fantasy is, it may be worthwhile to briefly address what fantasy is *not*. While this may seem somewhat counterintuitive, the widespread use of the term 'magical realism' for anything and everything that contains magic of non-Western origin necessitates a short excursion to show how magical realism and fantasy can be distinguished despite obvious 'family' resemblances. The choice of words here is not accidental; it references Wai Chee Dimock's concept of genres as more concerned with connections than with categorizations (cf. 86). Dimock describes genres as 'kin', "not necessarily a genealogical relation, but, just as often, a remote spectrum of affinities" (86), and magical realism is certainly connected to fantasy by way of such kinship. It is, after all, not an accident that there is a chapter on magical realism in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, which describes the genre in almost poetic terms as

> two words [that] can contain, capture and project so much in imagination, theory and definition is nothing short of amazing. Critics have researched, written and devoted careers and tens of thousands of pages to getting this definition right, in fact, 'just right', the reason being that we, as a modern reading public, are immediately intrigued by the mystical paradox of the term. While we may argue the genesis and proprietary rights to magical realism, we immediately recognize that magic cuts across national and linguistic boundaries, gender, age and social class and mores, un/natural boundaries of life and death, communicating the territories of this world and the next (or another world), and belongs as a birthright to all peoples. […] Magic belongs to everyone, including those who are dismissive of it. (Sieber 2012, 171)

Sieber's description focuses heavily on the more magical aspects of magical realism, thus highlighting its familial ties with fantasy literature. Her portrayal of magic as a – perhaps natural – part of the universe as perceived by humanity, referring to a "magical connection to the universe" (171), echoes both Tolkien's earlier writings as well as Nnedi Okorafor's later thoughts on 'organic fantasy'. Tolkien's aforementioned essay "On Fairy-Stories" is remarkable with regard to the author's obvious reluctance to dismiss creatures of myth and fable outright, attributing the lack of elves' appearances in history more to their lack of concern with human affairs than to their nonexistence (cf. 2001 [1939], 17). He also explicitly addresses the connection between reality and mythology – one of the precursors or at least sources of inspiration to modern-day fantasy – in his essay, which is, essentially, a deliberation about the nature of fantasy:

> Let us assume for the moment, as this theory assumes, that nothing actually exists corresponding to the 'gods' of mythology: no personalities, only astronomical or meteorological objects. Then these natural objects can only be arrayed with a personal significance and glory by a gift, the gift of a person, of a man. Personality can only be derived from a person. The gods may derive their colour and beauty from the high splendours of nature, but it was Man who obtained these for them, abstracted them from sun and moon and cloud; their personality they get direct from him; the shadow or flicker of divinity that is upon them they receive through him from the invisible world, the Supernatural. There is no fundamental distinction between the higher and lower mythologies. Their peoples live, if they live at all, by the same life, just as in the mortal world do kings and peasants. (Tolkien 2001 [1939], 29)

His choice of words is interesting as it almost indicates that the non-existence of mythological beings is the less likely hypothesis that needs to be 'assumed' rather than accepted as reality – and yet, neither does the non-existence devalue the merits of fantasy nor would the existence of such beings necessarily mean that they cannot be part of the genre nowadays called fantasy literature.

While I would follow Tolkien and Sieber in claiming that fantasy and reality are much more closely connected than one would assume at first glance, the pairing of ‘magical’ with ‘realism’ to form the literary term has often been perceived as a blatant paradox, which, to some critics, defines the genre, though this has been criticised by others for the implications this has for the non-Western epistemologies that often lie at the heart of magical realist texts, namely that they may be firmly associated with ‘magic’ rather than with ‘reality’. Much like fantasy, “[m]agic realism, magical realism and marvellous realism are highly disputed terms” (Bowers 2004, 20) and the familial relations between the two genres elaborated on above may hinder an easy separation of the two, especially when it comes to those subgenres of fantasy closest to magical realism. According to Farah Mendlesohn, magical realist texts “function as immersive fantasies for the Anglo-American reader in two senses: (1) in their insistence that the supernatural is real; and (2) in their trajectory” (107) because they represent a world which is on the decline or at least on the brink of losing the magic inherent in its reality. Mendlesohn vehemently rejects the notion of associating magical realism with intrusion fantasy or “liminal fantasy, those texts in which the fantastic is both accepted and in doubt” (106), two of the categories that form her *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, which will be explained in more detail further on. She states that drawing such connections “wrench magical realism from its context and force it to exist within a genre text in which the Anglo-American world, with its sense of magic as foreign, is the primary world of the story” (106), which is a somewhat confusing take, considering that not only do not all intrusion or liminal fantasies feature the Anglo-American world as their primary setting – Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori* certainly fits a considerable amount of Mendlesohn’s requirements for the liminal fantasy and Indrapamit Das’ *The Devourers* bears a significant resemblance to her intrusion fantasy – but there are also examples of magical realist novels in English, set in the Anglo-American world. Mendlesohn seems to equate magical realism with Southern American heritage exclusively, seeing as she struggles to come up with “an English-language version of magic realism” (110) such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*. Such a claim ignores the trajectories the genre has already followed before emerging in the form of South American literature as well as the developments following on from there, which have led to the genre being a world literary genre with a wide global spread (cf. Siskind 2011). My own interpretation of the relationship between magical realism and fantasy differs significantly from Mendlesohn's – I maintain that the intrusion fantasy, often similar if not the same as the urban fantasy, is, in fact, quite close to magical realism, seeing as urban fantasy in particular often features "a more or less recognizable city" (Irvine 2012, 200), that is, a primary world resembling ours, which could be described as 'realist', and a "contact with the realm of Faerie, or some magical realm" (201). Reality and fantasy seem to clash in similar ways as they do in magical realism since "the tropes and characters of older fairy tales and folklore" (201) exist within "a contemporary urban milieu" (201). Still, the difference between magical realism and urban fantasy is usually 'perceptible', to borrow from Tolkien's definition of Faërie. It is rather the quality of magic, which may refer to "the mystery of life" or "to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science" (Bowers 2004, 20) and is thus more connected to spiritual or religious epistemologies than urban fantasy, which distinguishes the two. Here, I agree with Mendlesohn in stating that "the marvelous takes place within the ground rules [of reality] as they are understood at that place and time" (2008, 107) and thus the 'magic' in magical realism has a much closer relationship to everyday reality as perceived by the writer and their intended readers – in fantasy, the magical is often further removed from reality, though not, as I have stated before, diametrically opposed to it.

Having established what fantasy is not, it is necessary to now return to the still ongoing discussion on how fantasy can be defined, especially when read as world literature. "On Fairy-Stories" treats Faërie as both a physical space where fantasy stories are set – though this does not mean all fantasy stories have to be set in the same location, as the term Faërie is used more as a stand-in for whatever fantasy location is used in any given fantasy text – and as a form of story content and generic element that he calls "Magic" (2001 [1939], 17). Since Tolkien aims at defending the fantasy genre rather than defining it, he provides only a basic definition of fantasy, designed only to give an idea of what kind of stories he is talking about: "a 'fairy-story' is one which touches on or uses Faërie". In addition to calling Faërie the "Perilous Realm", Tolkien also equates it to "magic of a peculiar mode and power" (2001 [1939], 17), which must be a part of a story for it to be qualified as fantasy. The story itself may belong to a different genre as well – Tolkien names "satire, adventure, morality, fantasy" (17) as examples, but other genres such as detective fiction or romance are also conceivable – as long as the fantasy elements within it, the magic or Faërie, are taken seriously and not made fun of. Excluding dream stories, animal fables and tales of the marvelous, Tolkien settles on a fairly broad definition of 'fairy-stories', which allows the modern scholar of fantasy to use Tolkien's concept of Faërie as a starting point for a study of modern fantasy as a genre despite the fact that Tolkien does not use the term 'fantasy' as such. In order to start working on breaking up the view of fantasy genre as Western-centric and allegedly originating in the West, which a sole focus on J.R.R. Tolkien as the founding father of the genre would suggest, it is now necessary to turn back to Nnedi Okorafor, whose essay "Organic Fantasy" has already been addressed as part of the literature review. It is particularly productive to juxtapose her ideas of fantasy with those of Tolkien's when one wishes to establish a definition of fantasy that allows for the inclusion of texts from different epistemological backgrounds than, for example, Tolkien's.

The problematic and complex relationship between fantasy literature and the differing epistemologies of various sets of readers and writers becomes apparent in quotes by Kwaymullina, who, as previously stated, has found that Western readers often interpret elements as fantasy which belong to her view of reality. The same holds true for Varughese's views on Indian fantasy. In her chapter on "Fantasy and Epic Narrative" from her monograph *Reading New India. Post-Millenial Indian Fiction in English*, she states that any given text based on Indian religion and/or folklore may be read as either a fantasy novel or a historical novel depending on the epistemological background of the reader (cf. 2013, 126). Taken to its extreme, this argument would mean that next to no texts could be read as fantasy since even the most outlandish beliefs used as a basis of fantasy will likely have followers somewhere. It would certainly complicate viewing Anglophone fantasy novels, especially those from a decidedly non-Western background, as fantasy for a Western scholar since the Western scholar's epistemology might be so far removed from the author's own epistemology to make an accurate decision whether a given text is fantasy or not nearly impossible. However, much of this problem is caused by the equally Western concept of a strict binary opposition between reality and fantasy, which is simply not present in most fantasy novels nor in Tolkien's fundamental founding text of modern fantasy literature, *The Lord of the Rings*. As Okorafor puts it, fantasy may be "the most accurate way of describing reality" (2009, 279) and, thus, no strict separation between fantasy and reality is necessary for the writing and literary criticism of a fantasy novel – there is, to be sure, a departure from consensus reality as well as a generic difference between realist novels and novels of fantasy. What makes a novel 'fantasy' according to Okorafor is less its non-realistic nature and more its inclusion of "mysticism and weirdness" (2009, 276), which springs forth naturally from Okorafor's 'real-life' experiences. One might argue that following Okorafor's ideas might lead the Western scholar into the dangerous territory of the 'magical negro' by imbuing non-Western writers with an inherently magical worldview as opposed to the 'rational' West, but it is important, in this case, to rely on the self-description of authors as well as on the content of their novels[18]. As Okorafor puts it on her blog, *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, she considers some of her writing "Africanjujuism [which] is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative" (2019, n.p.). This respectful acknowledgement of a 'seamless blend' of spiritual reality and the imaginative world of fantasy perfectly demonstrates how a greater blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality allows for reading fantasies based on different epistemologies than the mainstream of the West or the Global North as recognisable parts of the genre. These fantasies, which sit comfortably in the liminal spaces between 'mimesis' and creative deviations from the mimetic, serve to open up the genre, widening its range and allowing it to become truly global – a fantasy world literature that has gone beyond Westerncentric perceptions and definitions. Though Okorafor's blog post focuses on Africanfuturism instead – undoubtedly because of the greater risk of it being confused with Afrofuturism –, certain extrapolations can no doubt be made to refer to Africanjujuism as well, thus allowing for a somewhat more detailed definition, which will come in especially useful in the chapter revolving around what I have termed the OkoraVerse – several of Okorafor's

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[18] Consequently, the novels chosen for this dissertation have all been described as 'fantasy' by their creators as well as having been recognised as such by their readership, though not always necessarily with all scholars, as the plethora of genre terms attributed to Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* aptly demonstrates.

Africanjujuist novels, which seem to take place in a single, continuous universe. Africanjujuism, then, "is specifically and […] directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora" (2019, n.p.). While Okorafor distinguishes Africanfuturism from Afrofuturism by stating that the former "does not privilege or center the West" (2019, n.p.), she does neither intend it to conflate all of Africa into one category nor to limit its scope to authors writing about and from the continent. On the contrary, Okorafor states: "Reminder: Africa is not a country, it's a diverse continent. I'm also aware that it's a construct (and an ethereal thing who travels across space and time); I'm just rolling with it" (2019, n.p.). Following her lead, this is also how I intend to use the terms 'Africa' or 'African' when referring to Okorafor's and James's works in particular, though I will strive to give more accurate attributions to individual African countries, where the sources of inspiration drawn from by Okorafor and James are clear or explicitly stated by the authors themselves. Okorafor is also one of the authors who make it impossible to still speak of a singular cultural origin when it comes to the authors of novels circulating the world since she considers herself "Naijamerican (Nigerian-American), a Diasporan" (2019, n.p.) and credits her 'organic fantasy' to her hybridized identity, stating that her "complex African experience, which on many levels has been a series of cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian" (2009, 276) has led to her writing organic fantasy. Real experiences – predominantly in Nigeria – are at the heart of her organic fantasies and "the power to make something familiar strange" (2019, 278) is seen as one of the most significant affordances of fantasy literature. Okorafor explicitly argues that Africanfuturism and, by extension, Africanjujuism

> is rooted in Africa and then it branches out to embrace all blacks of the Diaspora, this includes the Caribbean, South American, North American, Asia, Europe, Australia… wherever we are. It's global. Africanfuturism is not a wall, it's a bridge. (Okorafor 2019, n.p.)

To some degree, then, such Africanjujuist texts are world literature in the sense that they branch out from a common point of origin, the African continent, but they are so diverse in cultural backgrounds and diasporic identities that they have to be considered as much more ‘global’ and transcultural than that. It will be interesting to see to what extent Marlon James’ *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, clearly centred around African mythologies and mythological creatures, can also be considered Africanjujuist, especially since James, like Okorafor, is also a diasporic writer.

2.2.2. Blurred Boundaries and Fuzzy Sets

Blurring boundaries between categories like Okorafor does with her concept of ‘organic fantasy’, albeit not usually that between fantasy and reality, has been at the core of fantasy study for a considerable amount of time. The concept of Faërie, or fantasy, as an almost indescribable, but perceptible and thus distinguishable, concept is also inherent in Brian Attebery’s idea of the “fuzzy set” of fantasy literature. In *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), he suggests ways of reading and writing fantasy, the eponymous strategies, which will also prove useful in reading the postcolonial fantasy texts central to this dissertation. Attebery claims “an overriding kinship among fantastic texts” (ix) – here using the term “fantastic” in a broader sense than Todorov’s seminal definition – and argues that all forms of fantasy writing are essentially Other (ix). The relevance to this thesis is clear since Attebery’s assertions of “overriding kinship” have to be tested by focusing on postcolonial fantasy literature and determining whether they, too, are part of the ‘family’ of fantasy literature, to remain with Attebery’s image of kinship. Additionally, the claim that all forms of fantasy writing are essentially Other resonates particularly well with postcolonial theory and may even explain why postcolonial writers are increasingly choosing to write texts that could be classed as speculative fiction, magical realism or other subgenres of fantasy literature. As Attebery states in his introduction, through fantasy literature, “[w]hat seemed necessary becomes contingent; what was excluded or occluded is brought into view” (ix). Attebery here compares fantasy literature with women’s writing, but drawing a parallel to postcolonial writing is equally valid, especially when considering Attebery’s ambition to examine “the space between history and fiction” (xi), which is at the centre of much fantasy literature as it redraws the boundaries between history and romance writing – a distinction which was changed when the realist novel “claimed kinship to history and denied its ties to romance” (x). Postcolonial fantasy literature also challenges distinctions like this, distinctions which construct strict and inflexible boundaries between the real and the unreal, even though such boundaries are valid only through a Western rationalist lens at best and may not have a place in storytelling at all, as this dissertation strives to discover.

Attebery considers fantasy as "both formula and mode: in one incarnation a mass-produced supplier of wish fulfillment, and in another a praise- and prize-worthy means of investigating the way we use fictions to construct reality itself" (1). It is the former category which has led some critics to assess the genre as conservative and nostalgic for a less-than-progressive idealised past. While this may be true for some forms of so-called 'mainsteam' fantasy media, which has rightly been criticised for promoting imperialist thought and a White-washed vision of Faërie – the metaphorical space where all fantasies are set according to Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" -, it is certainly not true for the entire, vibrant genre of fantasy fiction, in which Attebery sees great subversive potential. Neither fantasy-as-mode – which can include such diverse texts as Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Conan the Barbarian* – nor fantasy-as-formula – which is "essentially a commercial product" (2) are a suitable subject for academic study, one being too broad to be meaningful, the other too trivial for serious discussion, at least according to Attebery. Instead, Attebery opts for fantasy literature as a genre, which he finds "varied and capable of artistic development and yet limited to a particular period and a discernible structure" (2) and which will be the focus of this dissertation as well. In *Strategies of Fantasy*, he provides a short history of the genre of modern fantasy, the starting point of which he sets "at the end of the eighteenth century with the first German *Kunstmärchen*" (10) and which he describes as a continuous "narrowing of possibilities" (10). This narrowing has, over time, led to the genre of modern fantasy with its attendant generic limits, restrictions, and conventions. However, Attebery views genres as "'fuzzy sets', meaning that they are defined not by boundaries but by a center" (12): rather than only encompassing texts which follow a very strict set of rules, Attebery's fuzzy set of fantasy literature centres around certain core features of fantasy – some texts, described by Attebery as "*quintessentially* fantasy" (13), are very close to the centre and thus follow the 'rules' of fantasy very closely, while those at the peripheries of the genre only contain traces of what lies at the centre and may be very different from other fringe texts as well. This definition of genre allows for great variation within the body of fantasy literature and will justify the inclusion of very different texts in this dissertation as well. However, in order to delineate the fantasy genre in a meaningful way despite its ‘fuzzy’ nature, it will be useful to take a closer look at how the centre is defined according to Attebery. He uses Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as the centre point, which partly makes sense, considering that it is one of the most important texts of fantasy literature and certainly one of the most influential ones as well. However, it does put an undue focus on the high fantasy quest, thus automatically pushing other subgenres such as urban fantasy to the margins. Attebery’s concept of the fuzzy set is still useful, but the centre of each set may have to be adapted to whatever subgenre is in the current focus of study. Crucially, Attebery does not consider the surface elements of *The Lord of the Rings* as core features of fantasy, meaning that a text may be close to the centre of the genre without containing any elves, dragons or orcs. Instead, he lists the content and structure of the text as well as the reader response to it as crucial features of fantasy. Firstly, a fantasy text must contain the impossible – Attebery admits that the definition of the impossible is in itself difficult enough, as this book will also show; both during the discussion of Kathryn Hume’s *Fantasy and Mimesis* and as part of the in-depth study of relevant postcolonial primary works, but now, Attebery’s own definition, “some violation of what the author clearly believes to be true” (1980, 17), will suffice. Secondly, the fantasy text should follow a certain structure: “[i]t begins with a problem and ends with resolution” (1992, 15) and is thus inherently comic in nature with an upward movement or “eucatastrophe” (2001 [1939], 68) at the end of it. This is directly linked with the third core feature of fantasy according to Attebery: the effect it has on the reader. The reader of fantasy ought to experience “joy and consolation” (1992, 15), but also wonder produced by the mixing of “the familiar and the impossible” (16). Even though the genre of fantasy fiction has expanded significantly in recent years and now includes subgenres which do not necessarily centre around Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* as a core text, such as Urban Fantasy or Fantasy Romance, Attebery’s three core elements – variation from consensus reality, upward movement (though not necessarily an indisputable happy ending) and wonder – can be transferred to other fantasy subgenres and will be considered as defining elements for the purpose of this study.

Attebery references Kathryn Hume's work on fantasy and mimesis in Western literature, and it is indeed worthwhile to include her work as a part of the critical foundations of this study despite her Western-centric focus. Hume contributes important considerations on the relationship between fantasy and reality to fantasy scholarship, where the nature of this relationship is more frequently questioned than a superficial understanding of the genre might suggest. As Attebery puts it, "[i]f the world were a simpler place and its rules less ambiguous, we might say that mimesis tells what is and fantasy tells what isn't" (Attebery 1992, 3). This is already too simplistic for a Western perspective, as Attebery rightly points out, but in a postcolonial context, where the view on "what is and […] what isn't" may already be different than in Western thought, the entire dynamic between fantasy and mimesis has to be reconsidered. Hume's study on responses to reality in Western literature will provide an interesting basis to assess in what ways different epistemologies may lead to different distinctions between fantasy and reality in postcolonial fantasy literatures, which does not, however, mean that non-Western fantasy authors can never be categorised as fantasy writers if that is where their works fit and how they see themselves, even if they do draw from their own cultural and epistemological background. First of all, Hume broadens the spectrum of what transgresses mimetic representations considerably – according to her, "numerous works, past and present, deliberately depart from the norms of what can be called consensus reality, the reality we depend on for everyday action" (xi), while still explicitly allowing for "comment upon [reality]" as one of "fantasy's primary functions" (xii). While Hume regards 'fantasy' more as a type of creative response to reality than as a genre, she makes a number of points that will prove to be useful in my study, even though I do view fantasy literature as a genre here. Hume considers a variety of "reciprocal relationships surrounding any work of literature" (9), focusing especially on author, work, and reader. It is Hume's reader that I would like to focus on in particular, since they may, according to Hume, "introduce one kind of fantasy that is uncontrollable by the author" (12) and is thus particularly interesting, especially in the context of this dissertation, since several of the authors derive from a different cultural background than both myself and a significant amount of their readership, seeing as they are published by Anglo-American publishers for the most part. Once there is such a gap between authors and readers (or scholars), there is a risk that “what the author meant literally may be interpreted as fantasy by readers of different backgrounds and eras” (12) – while Hume cites Beowulf’s monsters as an example, Ambelin Kwaymullina’s “ancient creation spirit who sung the world into being” (2014, n.p.) is a better example when it comes to gaps between authors and readers of different cultural rather than temporal backgrounds. The creation spirit, likely Grandfather Serpent in her *The Tribe* novels, is “regularly interpreted as being pure fantasy” whereas the spirit is, in fact, “simply part of [Kwaymullina’s] reality” (2014, n.p.). Interpreting Grandfather Serpent as fantasy is thus by no means unproblematic. However, the presence of a figure of spiritual belief does also not automatically *preclude* a fantasy reading. While Kwaymullina considers herself a writer of speculative fiction with a focus on the future, her words can be applied to other non-Western, non-mainstream fantasies as well:

> Impossible things occur in my novels – teenagers with superpowers control fire or water or weather, huge lizards stalk the earth, animals communicate telepathically. And something else happens that some might say is yet more impossible than any of this. An alliance of good-hearted people come together to change their reality for the better. Some of these people are among the privileged of their society, and some are among the oppressed, what they have in common is a desire for a world where all life is valued and valuable. I do not believe this alliance to be impossible. (Kwaymullina 2014, n.p.)

Kwaymullina locates the fantastic elements in her novels elsewhere than where non-Aboriginal, western readers would. As I argued elsewhere, when Kwaymullina describes nonhumans who speak, “the speculative element lies not in the fact that animals and trees can speak but more in the way in which these voices become comprehensible to humans” (2021, 314). Readers not well-versed in Aboriginal epistemology may well confuse speaking animals and trees with similar generic figures in Eurocentric fantasy such as the Ents in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, but in Kwaymullina’s writing, they are a fantastical representation of a real and deeply held belief that the voices of other living beings do exist and are as important as human ones (cf. *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* 396).

Similar discrepancies in the perception of fantasy (or the lack thereof) have also been noticed in the context of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ from India. ‘Bharati Fantasy’ is the term used by E. Dawson Varughese to describe “new [Indian] writing in English [which] draws heavily on Hindu epics and literary traditions and interestingly spans the genre labels of ‘fantasy’ fiction, ‘historical’ fiction and for a certain audience ‘postcolonial writing’” (2014, 352). Her article “Celebrate at home: post-millennial Indian fiction in English and the reception of ‘Bharati Fantasy’ in global and domestic literary markets” provides a specific and nuanced example of fiction the affiliation of which with the genre of fantasy depends significantly on the different groups of readers who come in contact with it as it travels within and outside India. Additionally, Varughese’s article also touches the question of markets that has already been addressed in this chapter. The novels she discusses are primarily written for an Indian market, which distinguishes them somewhat from the world literary fantasy the novels studied in this dissertation belong to, but they have nonetheless travelled elsewhere and have thus met with different receptions depending on where they are read. However, the novels’ ‘introvertedness’[19] means that they do not follow the generic, frequently near-orientalist portrayal of India, propagated by some of the most prestigious ‘literary novels’, which now permeates the “global literary marketplace, pandering as it does, to notions of the oriental ‘other’ and more specifically the ‘other’ that is India” (351). Novels such as Amish Tripathi’s *The Immortals of Melua* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013), Samitha Ami’s *The Missing Queen* (2013), Nilanjan P. Choudhury’s *Bali and Ocean of Milk* (2011), and Ashwin Sanghi’s *Chanakya’s Chant* (2010) among others are predominantly geared towards young Indian middle-class readers with some even available in India only while others have been published in UK or US editions as well. Their actual readership is thus diverse, even within India, and, as a consequence, “‘Bharati Fantasy’ for some readers is most certainly fantastical literature, when for others the narratives are real accounts or so much part of their socio-cultural fabric that it is accepted as historical fiction” (355), depending on the level of knowledge about and the degree of belief in Hindu mythology on the part of the readers. Interestingly, Varughese does not see these varying interpretations as a problem; on the contrary, she states that

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[19] I use this term as a counterpart to Eileen Julien’s extroverted novel (cf. Julien 2006), which describes novels that have an “appeal across borders” (681) and that “have tended to explain Africa to the world, and especially, to a hegemonic West” (695) whereas “introversion characterizes novels that lack anxiety about responding to expectations of readers in other [Western] locales’ (Eggan 2016, 1305).

> [b]eneficially, fantasy fiction is able to transcend social and cultural barriers by nature of its 'otherworldliness', and thus, curiously, 'Bharati Fantasy' has the ability to travel outside of its often regional distribution restrictions to move into global markets – European, US and otherwise. (Varughese 2014, 360)

Fantasy, even if it is not universally identified as such, but remains in the eye of the beholder, may then actually not only make travelling easier for a broader range of non-Western literature, but also "buck[…] the trend of the established identity and production of Indian 'literary fiction' in English" (360), allowing access to alternative views of India to global readers. Nonetheless, it is still the responsibility of readers and especially scholars engaging with (fantasy) literature from outside their own cultures to be aware of and respectful to differing epistemologies. Ultimately, fantasy readings of non-western or non-Eurocentric texts are as much the product of the fantasy novelists as they are of the critics – fantasy interpretation can come from all directions, be it from the non-western or non-Eurocentric writer or scholar or from western academia. Gillian Polack discusses these potentially problematic dynamics in her considerations on editing work and literary scholarship when she states that, especially in scenarios where there is a (post)colonial power hierarchy, "any insights a reader has are their own: they cannot speak for writers or discuss the intended cultural outcomes of the work" (Polack 2015a, 25). While it is still possible to create meaningful and valid interpretations of postcolonial writing as, in my case, fantasy, it is of the utmost importance to be aware of "the imbalance of power between critic and cultural owner" (28) and to address this imbalance productively. Polack addresses the imbalance in her writing by specifically paying attention to the "words the writers themselves have used" (Polack 2015a, 25) – and a similar procedure can be used when analysing non-western fantasies, though other strategies are undoubtedly likewise possible.

My selection of those novels whose authors have non-western, often diasporic backgrounds, was indeed based partly on the authors' self-identification with the genre of fantasy literature, but it is also grounded in certain generic features that seem to identify these texts as fantasy novels, features I will elaborate on before moving on to the four case study chapters. Some of the novels are also distinguished by the fact that their authors, Okorafor, James, and Das in particular, do draw from their cultural and spiritual heritage and thus include elements commonly considered fantasy by western readers even though they are still part of consensus reality for at least a certain percentage of people. As alluded to in the introduction, this cannot be seen as a reason to discount any given text completely as fantasy literature – after all, all kinds of beliefs do have believers, including elves and dragons, and so, at first glance, it seems sensible to assume that fantasy is always 'in the eye of the beholder'. However, in cases where there is still a power hierarchy between the readers' and the authors' culture, disregarding the author's perspective completely would be callous indeed. Instead, I would again highlight Okorafor's view of fantasy and reality as much more closely related than usually assumed and affirm that the presence of spirituality within fantasy literature does not constitute a negative statement or a mockery of said spirituality[20]. Additionally, I would like to consider Hume's definition of fantasy as a way of addressing this dilemma:

> We can also include as fantasy those stories whose marvel is considered 'real', although not in the same fashion that a chair is real. Miracles and some monsters may have been thought to exist by their original audience and even their author, but were often acknowledged to be real only in a special fashion: they only enter the lives of the spiritually or heroically elect; they are *miracula* or things to be marvelled at, precisely because they are not everyday occurrences and cannot be controlled by just anybody who has a mind to try. We know we are dealing with a form of fantasy if the rhetoric of the text places the dragonfight somewhere else or once upon a time. Such

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[20] Both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, the heavyweights of British fantasy, would protest if the inclusion of Christian values and ideas in their works were to be taken as an insult to such beliefs, after all.

> distance and time markers commonly denote an awareness of fantasy. (Hume 1984, 21)

Hume then includes texts as fantasy in which it is clear that whatever magic happens is a rare occurrence even if it is assumed to be real. This almost seems to set this kind of fantasy in opposition to magical realism, where the magic is not only accepted as real but also as a regular part of (the novel's) reality. Fantasy, I would argue, exists in some way or another in all cultures, though its precise location will always be different – it is thus not surprising that a multitude of writers from diverse countries do want to contribute to the fantasy canon and for such diverse fantasy to be considered world literature rather than a delocalised 'airport literature', it is crucial that these writers also draw from their own cultures without this fact alone immediately disqualifying them as fantasy writers.

2.2.3. Not Fixed in Stone – Generic Guidelines and Rhetorics of Fantasy

While Attebery and Hume offer critical perspectives and attempts at definitions of the fantasy genre as a whole, which I generally follow and regard as useful for my analyses, Farah Mendlesohn's study *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) manages to identify four distinct subsets of fantasy literature and provide readers with a detailed guide as to what defines those categories. Crucially, Mendlesohn uses 'rhetorics' of the various subgenres to identify the texts she discusses as fantasies – these rhetorical elements could be seen as similar to Caroline Levine's forms, which travel easily across cultural boundaries, as opposed to genres, which, as has been established, may be interpreted in vastly different ways, depending on where the interpretative perspective originates. Mendlesohn identifies the portal-quest, the immersive fantasy, the intrusion fantasy, and the liminal fantasy as the main categories of fantasy and distinguishes them "by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world" (xiv), though there are exceptions as well as cases where the boundaries become blurred – in this study, special attention will be given to the portal-quest, the intrusion fantasy, and the liminal fantasy, whereas the immersive fantasy will be less important, not least because of its close ties to magical realism, which have already been alluded to previously. It would be a mistake to focus on Mendlesohn's subsets as prescriptive subgenres rather than as, once again, fuzzy subsets and regard their characteristic traits as fixed genre markers or generic tropes. In their use for this particular study, they serve to break up an otherwise vast and varied genre – that of fantasy literature – into more manageable parts, which are distinguished by the kind of magic that is depicted and which sometimes correspond to subgenres of fantasy literature discussed by previous scholars. This follows Mendlesohn's intent – albeit not always her practice – that her work should not be seen as limiting and separating fantasy texts. As she puts it herself in her so-called "HEALTH WARNING" (2008, n.p.): Her categories are not meant "to create rules" nor to "fix anything in stone" (n.p.), but rather to provide a way of approaching fantasy with a certain structure to guide both readers and scholars along. Additionally, it is possible for fantasy authors to be aware of the characteristics of each of Mendlesohn's modes and to consequently decide to change the specific tropes in order to subvert the mode itself. This is especially true for Anglophone and, more speficially, postcolonial authors of fantasy since several of the fantasy tropes identified by Mendlesohn contain imperialistic or colonial overtones, thus making it popular for postcolonial authors to subvert them in order to serve their needs as writers of fantasy and perhaps even necessary if they wish to avoid the genre's perceived Eurocentrism. Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death?* is an example of this since Okorafor clearly employs some tropes of the portal-quest fantasy while changing those elements that seem particularly imperialist and thus problematic. However, in order to discuss those changes in detail and thus come to a better understanding of postcolonial fantasy novels such as Okorafor's, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of Mendlesohn's ideas first, which is why a concise overview of Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* is crucial for the purpose of this thesis. Mendlesohn's concepts are also particularly useful in finding a way of defining fantasy that focuses not as strongly on the specific nature of the fantasy elements that infuse a story. Instead, her four categories focus on how these elements enter the text in a variety of ways. Mendlesohn's rhetorics thus allows an inclusion of texts under the label of fantasy literature that defy genre conventions, which is true for many works by Anglophone authors, who live away from the perceived centres of fantasy production – Great Britain and the United States.

The portal-quest fantasy, as specified by Mendlesohn, is a highly popular form of fantasy literature, especially with regards to children's fantasy, but not limited to it. “The portal fantasy is about entry, transition and exploration” (2) and it is often, though not always, connected to a quest plot. They also both follow a similar structure, which Mendlesohn describes as follows:

> Characteristically the quest fantasy protagonist goes from a mundane life, in which the fantastic, if she is aware of it, is very distant and unknown (or at least unavailable to the protagonist) to direct contact with the fantastic through which she transitions, exploring the world until she or those around her are knowledgeable enough to negotiate with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm. (Mendlesohn 2008, 2)

The transition from the mundane world to the magical realm may be literal, in which case there is an actual portal through which the protagonist passes in order to change worlds, or it may be metaphorical, in which case the protagonist merely leaves his mundane home, which is located within a secondary world, in order to explore the yet unknown secondary world in more detail. This metaphorical component to Mendlesohn’s definition of the portal-quest explains why she places Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* in the portal-quest category despite the fact that it is set completely in a secondary world, which is, technically, the home world of all the characters. However, “Frodo moves from a small, safe, and *understood* world into the wild, unfamiliar world of Middle-Earth” (2) and that transition from the Shire to the wider world of Arda functions in the same way as a portal would in a more literal portal fantasy. The move from a safe haven, the well-known home of the protagonist, into the unknown world is what links many fantasies set completely in a secondary world to Mendlesohn’s subgenre of the portal-quest. Portal fantasies and quest fantasies also share a variety of tropes and structural elements, which can also be seen in postcolonial fantasy – both in their original form and as subverted versions of them. They contain “sequenced adventures” and view “journeys as transition” (3) – often from naivety to maturity. W.A. Senior provides a detailed description of a typical quest journey, which fits in seamlessly with Mendlesohn’s view of the category:

> The protagonist, generally an average person with hidden abilities, receives a call to action and reluctantly embarks on the first adventure. […] After the hero and company pass the first test and receive rewards […], a respite, often characterized by feasting and music in a haven under the protection of a wisdom figure, occurs during which the members of the company receive aid and knowledge.
>
> The quest journey continues across a massive wild landscape of forests, rivers, mountains, valleys, small villages and occasional cities. […] The menace frequently comes from a Dark Lord, a satanic figure of colossal but warped power, who wishes to enslave and denature the world and its denizens and who lives in a dead land, often in the east or north, surrounded by a range of forbidding mountains and deserts. During the quest the pattern of an organic, moral world with directive purpose emerges. The final stage of the quest brings the hero into direct confrontation with the Dark Lord, whose defeat is a result of some action or decision by the hero. The conclusion reveals a recovery from the devastating losses that characterize this genre. However, quest fantasies also posit a cyclical history so that the possibility of the reappearance of the Dark Lord, or of another, in the future remains. (Senior 2012, 190)

It would be difficult to define the structure of a typical quest fantasy in a more concise and effective way than Senior. Senior's blueprint together with Mendlesohn's rhetorics already provides ample ground for comparisons between the ways in which mainstream fantasies and postcolonial fantasies both deal with the portal-quest genre, but some of Mendlesohn's other observations are equally crucial in discussing any kind of quest fantasy, be it the mainstream version or the postcolonial variant at the centre of this thesis. Mendlesohn establishes "the figure of a guide to download information into the text" (2008, 13) as an integral feature of most portal and quest fantasies. This 'information download', as Mendlesohn calls it, is "uninterruptable, unquestionable" (13) and it also relates to the way history is viewed in the traditional form of the portal-quest fantasy: "history is inarguable" (14) in that there is only one accepted version of history – often transmitted to the protagonists in the form of the previously discussed information download – and that it is presented as the undeniable truth. Historical scrolls or maps never contain lies, but provide the protagonists with trustworthy information, which denies "the notion of 'history as argument'" (14) and favours the view that history can be conclusively narrated without any mistakes or faulty claims by people who might benefit from an altered version of history. There is no "interpretation, analysis, discovery" (15) in the historical transmission of a portal-quest's secondary world. Finally, there is also no such thing as an incorrect prophecy in a traditional portal-quest fantasy, which represents a blind trust in established authorities and in the written text, subverted, for example, by Okorafor's failed prophecy or Das's rewritten history. Evidently, all tropes belonging to the first of Mendlesohn's subcategories are open to subversion and a close analysis of postcolonial fantasy texts resembling the traditional quest fantasy, such as Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, will show how these tropes are subverted to suit the needs of postcolonial authors as well as how the specific subversions may relate to postcolonial theory.

However, even though the portal-quest fantasy is perhaps the most popular and most well-known form of fantasy, it is by no means the only one and certainly not the only form postcolonial writers have adopted, either. Mendlesohn's second sub-category is the immersive fantasy – a fantasy which is set entirely in a fully developed secondary world without the transition from safety to wilderness that was characteristic of the portal-quest. The secondary world "functions on all levels as a complete world" (59), which also extends to the position of the reader who is assumed to be "as much a part of the world as […] those being read about" (59). This results in a lack of information being given to the reader who has to construct the setting from subtle hints and references. Crucially, it takes the focus away from an intruder into a strange new world and puts it on the world itself instead. This not only allows the immersive fantasy to portray in detail a fantastic world as if it was real, but it also removes "the colonialist rhetoric that reduces the reality of the world by heightening the importance of the intruder" (84). Thus, the fantasy world is taken more seriously as a version of reality, albeit one with fantasy elements, which nonetheless follows an internal logic and seems, for all intents and purposes, 'realistic'. Mendlesohn comments in detail on this relationship between 'realistic fiction' and the immersive fantasy, which is, much like Hume's monograph on the relationship between fantasy and reality, relevant to this thesis because of the implications for postcolonial authors whose relationship to what is considered real and what is not may be different than for Eurocentric authors of fantasy. Mendlesohn sees the immersive fantasy as "both the mirror of mimetic literature and its inner soul" (59), thus already hinting at the idea that the difference between fantasy and reality might be constructed and arbitrary because the genres – if one may call them thus – of mimetic literature and immersive fantasy are so closely related. She states that the immersive fantasy reveals that mimetic literature is equally constructed and imaginary as fantasy literature (cf. 59) because the fantasy of immersion employs the language and the narrative tropes of mimetic literature, thus negating any significant stylistic distance between these two types of literature. Mendlesohn's chapter on the immersive fantasy is strewn with references to the close connection between fantasy and reality, as revealed by the immersive fantasy. For instance, she states that the immersive fantasy does not "need that belief in the dividing line between the real and the not-real to function" (61), at least not within the narrative itself, which may result in the immersive fantasy genre being particularly attractive to postcolonial writers, whose own epistemologies may draw different lines between reality and fantasy than the Western reader is accustomed to. Instead of highlighting a marked difference between fantastic and realistic writing, Mendlesohn claims that the immersive fantasy in particular leads to the "rediscovery of the reality of the fantastic" (61). Other terms she employs to emphasise the realistic nature of the immersive fantasy are "rationalized fantasy" (63), "casualizing the fantastic" (73) and an "assumed intimacy" (75) with the rules and (natural) laws of any given secondary world, which affects the position of the reader towards the novel.

The genre of magical realism and its potential ties, or lack thereof, to Mendlesohn's rhetorics has already been discussed in chapter 2.1.2., if only to explain why it will not be a primary focus of this study. It is, however, important to reiterate at this point that Mendlesohn discusses magical realism within her chapter on the immersive fantasy but raises some important questions as to the nature of fantasy and reality as presented in magical realist works while at the same time denying magical realism's relevance to Anglophone fantasy. Mendlesohn very firmly denies the very existence of Anglophone magical realism, stating that her "book is essentially about English-language fantasy" (105) and that it "would require a real expert in the alternative language to assess accurately whether [her] arguments […] have validity" (106), thus implying that there simply is no magical realist text originally written in the English language, which she might be able to take into consideration for her assessment of magical realism as a possible sub-category of fantasy literature and a potential variation of the immersive fantasy. While there are undoubtedly Anglophone texts that have been considered as magical realism – Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) comes to mind – it is nonetheless worthwhile to examine Mendlesohn's thoughts on that particular category of seemingly fantastic writing. She resists attempts to include magical realism in her own taxonomy, stating that classifying it as either intrusion or liminal fantasy[21] would "wrench magical realism from its context and force it to exist within a genre text in which the Anglo-American world, with its sense of magic as foreign, is the primary world of the story" (106). While this may be true for fantasy novels written by authors with a white Anglophone background, it is arguably more complicated in the case of Anglophone fantasy novels from other parts of the world, where a sense of magic may not seem so foreign, just as it is the case with Latin American magical realist texts. Mendlesohn argues that Latin American magical realist texts are written with the primary world of the author as the basis, but that the world of these magical realist novels may

> function as immersive fantasies for the Anglo-American reader in two senses: (q) in their insistence that the supernatural is real; and (2) in their trajectory, which is firmly aligned with all the other immersive fantasies I have considered so far, in that they emphasize a thinning and thinned world. (Mendlesohn 2008, 107)

The reality of the author and the reality of the Anglo-American readers are disconnected so that a magical realist text is being rendered fantastical in spite of its original intentions. This disconnection may also exist between certain postcolonial writers of fantasy and their readers – although not necessarily all of them, taking into account white Canadian, Australian and New Zealand writers, whose consensus reality may be closer to that of the assumed Anglo-American reader. According to Mendlesohn, these 'fantasies' would not be fantasy texts within their cultural context, but this is markedly different with the texts analysed in this thesis. All authors discussed describe themselves as writers of fantasy or speculative fiction despite the fact that their fantasy worlds are based on their realities – these postcolonial fantasy writers thus question the traditional distribution of mimesis and fantasy in fantasy texts, which tend to favour fantasy as opposed to mimesis.

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[21] See below for a more detailed explanation on both categories.

As previously mentioned, Mendlesohn's categories deal with the relationship the fantasy elements have to the reality of the text they are a part of, i.e. with the way in which fantasy enters the narrative reality, which necessarily may also reflect the author's view on reality and the systems of knowing that define it. This makes Mendlesohn's four types of fantasy an ideal starting point to separate an otherwise broad and varied genre into more manageable subsets while keeping fantasy's relationship to consensus reality in mind. While the fantasy – reality dichotomy may be most obvious in the immersive fantasy, which, after all, according to Mendlesohn, comes close to a mimetic style of writing, it is certainly also an integral part of what Mendlesohn calls the intrusion fantasy. In the intrusion fantasy, the world of the narrative is, at first glance, a representation of the reality outside of the text, i.e. the consensus reality ostensibly accepted as real by the author and, depending on the context in which it is read, by its audience. In the context of postcolonial fiction, this means that it can sometimes be difficult for Western readers to discern what is meant as a fantasy element and what is rather a part of the author's perception of reality. Aboriginal author of Palyku descent, Ambelin Kwaymullin, also notes this difficulty for Western readers to discern what is and is not meant to be a fantasy element in her speculative fiction trilogy *Tribe* – and immersive fantasy of sorts – when she writes that "many of the ideas which populate speculative fiction books – notions of time travel, astral projection, speaking the languages of animals or trees – are part of Indigenous cultures" and that "[o]ne of the aspects of my own novels that is regularly interpreted as being pure fantasy, that of an ancient creation spirit who sung the world into being, is for [her] simply part of [her] reality" (2014a, 4).

Coming back to the rhetorical features of the intrusion fantasy, to borrow Mendlesohn's terminology, the first thing to be noted is the straightforward "trajectory of the intrusion fantasy" (115). First, the normal state of the fantasy's world is interrupted by the intrusion, which “has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came or controlled” (115). This is also the case in urban fantasy novels, such as in Indrapramit Das’ *The Devourers*, where the historian Alok is drawn into a world of monsters by a charming stranger and has to negotiate his own concept of history with the parallel history presented by the supernatural entity. Clearly, then, urban fantasy novels, which combine the modern – and ostensibly very real – structures of urban life with fantasy creatures such as vampires and werewolves (and others) can be classed under Mendlesohn’s intrusion fantasy. Such urban fantasy tales also often include a protagonist who is both naïve and aware “of the permeability of the world [and shows] a distrust of what is known in favor of what is sensed” (115), which enables the protagonist to accept the supernatural intrusions as real rather than identify them as signs of mental illness. At first, protagonists may react with doubt and denial, but eventually they accept the reality of whatever fantasy elements have intruded into the ‘real’ world (115). Mendlesohn also links this trajectory with “a sense of encroaching intimacy” (116), as the fantastic comes closer and closer to both characters and readers and cannot be evaded anymore – this is also why the initial denial becomes increasingly impossible.

Like the portal-quest fantasy, the intrusion fantasy is also linked with “the form of the club story” (116), which cannot be questioned at any cost. Here, it is the world of “consensus reality” (116) that is seemingly unquestionable but becomes unstable as soon as the fantasy is introduced. Considering that postcolonial authors frequently question the uniformity of consensus reality – both historical and contemporary – as presented by Western modes of thinking, it should not be surprising if postcolonial fantasy authors employ intrusion fantasy rhetorics to achieve a similar effect. Questions are, in fact, vital to the intrusion fantasy, both on the level of the narrative, because the narrative itself questions established ‘facts’ such as written histories of the (real-world) countries intrusion fantasies are set in, and on the level of the characters’ individual actions since the protagonists frequently question the events and stories they are presented with – most prominently in examples such as *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) or *The Devourers* which have the questioning format of the interview inscribed at their very core.

Interestingly, the intrusion fantasy is also a "narrative of convincement" (148) and engaged in "the making of history" (122). Established history is questioned and destabilized while alternative versions – here including fantastical elements – are presented. Mendlesohn states that, while the history and reality of the primary world may be challenged, the information on the supernatural never is – much like in the portal-quest fantasy, it is "downloaded from the representative of the intruding world" (148) and eventually accepted by the protagonists as real, even though they may still be confused with regard to the fantastical events taking place (cf. 148). This confusion allows them to "succeed by challenging the rules or changing them – usually in the face of the pessimism of their colleagues from the fantastical lands" (148), which both Mendlesohn and fantasy/speculative fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson identify as "the colonialist fantasy of rescuing the natives from themselves" (148). It seems as if every category of Mendlesohn's that includes a direct meeting, a first contact between the primary 'mimetic' world and the secondary fantastic world is also inherently imperialist. Is it possible that fantasy authors have so far failed to conceptualise a meeting between two vastly differing cultures (the mundane and the magical one) without falling back to colonialist tropes? It is certainly true that both the portal-quest fantasy and the intrusion fantasy can easily be used to present colonialist narratives, but perhaps not exclusively so. It remains to be seen whether postcolonial fantasy writers manage to subvert this tendency while still remaining within the rhetoric parameters of the intrusion fantasy, or whether here, as with the other, previously established categories of fantasy, they go beyond traditional fantasy storytelling, broadening the genre to include more diverse storylines and, indeed, rhetorics that no longer rely on colonialist narrative structures – Mendlesohn's rhetorics would then have to be adapted to include more alternatives, though they may well still have a place within contemporary fantasy scholarship.

The last of Mendlesohn's categories that is particularly relevant to this study is the liminal fantasy. It is "*that form of fantasy which estranges the reader from the fantastic as seen and described by the protagonist*" (182) because reader and protagonist interpret the fantastic events differently. This effect can be achieved through various strategies specified by Mendlesohn. For example, readers can be led to feel doubt as to the veracity of the supernatural events through the narration or made to feel alienated and distanced from the magic because the protagonist's interpretation of fantasy may differ from that of the reader and regard mundane things as magical or vice versa. There is, however, not one way to produce the liminal in a liminal fantasy, and thus, the category is, as Mendlesohn admits, "most susceptible, and perhaps most in need of, Attebery's argument for the fuzzy set" (183). Liminal fantasies, one could say, render the fantasy mundane and the mundane fantastical, thus producing a certain amount of unease in the readers, for whom the appeal of the narrative as a fantasy rests in this liminal space created by the blurred boundaries "between the mundane and the magical" (188). However, what distinguishes the liminal from the immersive in this case is the fact that the protagonist should be just as surprised by the intrusion of fantasy upon his world as the readers – "[t]he moment of doubt is triggered by our sense that there should be some reaction to the fantastic" (191). The limited reactions by the characters towards supernatural events lead to a balance, a state of "equipoise" (199) between the magical and the mundane, as Mendlesohn puts it.

Doubt can play an even more crucial role in the construction of a liminal fantasy. Some forms of this subgenre as defined by Mendlesohn depend heavily on the uncertainty whether magic has actually taken place or whether the roots of the fantastic events in a novel lie elsewhere. As such, it is perhaps the closest to Todorov's conception of the fantastic, which depends, after all, on his "concept of hesitation" (183) and the moment of indecision between various potential explanations for seemingly supernatural occurrences. The reader may wonder whether anything magical has actually taken place and, if so, where the magic is positioned. As Mendlesohn puts it, the "[l]iminal fantasy creates possible readings" (183) without ever confirming any. Multiple readings coexist and allow for ambiguous texts, in which fantasy might take place or it might not, the fantastic may be real or it may be illusion or hallucination. Just as it is with Torodov's fantastic, a conclusion must never be reached or else the liminal, if caused by this uncertainty, ceases to exist. The liminal fantasy is not defined by the degree of magic that actually takes place but by the creation of a sense of potential for magic – it is the "recognition […] of the possibility of the fantastical" (198), not the fantastical itself, which is crucial for the liminal fantasy.

Liminality and the liminal fantasy can also be constructed on the level of plot when it puts the characters in clearly marked liminal positions and has them "keen to adventure but torn by the desire to stay home, […] caught in the liminal moment between the mundane and the magical" (188). One might argue that hesitation is always a part of fantasy literature's protagonists, considering that they more often than not straddle two separate worlds and have to navigate both the mundane and the magical frequently – both Bilbo from *The Hobbit* and Harry Potter from the eponymous novel series come to mind. However, both Bilbo and Harry eventually do decide in favour of adventure, and while Bilbo returns to the world of the mundane in the end, Harry stays firmly within the magical. In the liminal fantasy, the decision is never fully made because fantasy itself "has not been positioned as desirable: it is a place to avoid" (188). Protagonists in the liminal fantasy are reluctant to enter Faërie – be it in the form of a magical otherworld or in its more metaphorical version as magic in general because there is a distinct sense that magic is always connected to danger of some sort. Borders across to Faërie may be traversed in this kind of liminal fantasy, but the tension remains – the fantasy is not fully realized, never entirely embraced and "[t]he boundaries of magic and illusion remain vague, their landscapes indeterminate" (189).

This blurring of the boundaries between magic and illusion, fantasy and reality, depends heavily "on [the reader's] knowingness" (195) of accepted tropes of fantasy, requiring readers to "be steeped in the conventions of fantasy" (244), shared consensus reality, but also mythology which might inform the reading of a text. When the metaphor becomes concrete, boundaries between fantasy and reality are again blurred as the reader cannot decide what is meant to be read as happening and what is purely metaphorical or, in some cases, hallucinatory. Crucially, metaphorical readings are not discouraged but neither are they confirmed. It is here that another complication arises as purely metaphorical readings of elements perceived as fantasy can equally be problematic – while they do not lead to a fantasy reading, they do discount a reading of certain tropes as metaphysics instead – this is because, according to Kwaymullina,

> [t]he centre ground of 'truth' is claimed by Eurocentric knowledge traditions, while ancient Indigenous understandings are labeled myth and legend, the stuff of metaphor rather than metaphysics. (Kwaymullina 2014a, n.p.)

It is at this point, then, that special care needs to be taken with the liminal fantasy as well, though it does allow for metaphysical interpretations as well, being one of the broadest and least easily defined of Mendlesohn's subsets. The liminal fantasy can also be in a state of balance in that it recognises "the significance of the doubled world, both mundane and simultaneously a fantasy" (195). In liminal fantasy, similarities to both Todorov's fantastic but also to magical realism become most obvious – readers are led to remain poised at a moment of uncertainty and hesitation (cf. 1973, 30). This moment relies, as previously stated, on a shared consensus reality and thus it may be particularly hard to find Anglophone examples of the liminal fantasy, both subverted or not, because writers and readers may not always share the same worldviews and perceptions of reality, as elaborated on in chapters 2.1.1. and 2.1.2. Herein lies, however, also the particular strength of Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics* – rather than focusing purely on consensus reality and its fictional denial in order to define what is or is not a fantasy, Mendlesohn highlights the fact that fantasy fiction – in particular liminal fantasy according to Mendlesohn's argument, though this line of reasoning can easily be extended to all other fantasy writing – is "a form of fiction that uses the expectations of genre readers to which the text speaks" (230) instead of particular instances of breaches against consensus reality. In other words, Mendlesohn focuses on the rhetorics, the textual elements and how they introduce the fantastic into a text much more than she does on specific elements of fantasy that may be up for debate depending on both the writers' and readers' cultural backgrounds. It is also possible to take Mendlesohn's claim that a text of fantasy can be recognised by the way in which it speaks to the reader and signals via the inclusion of certain generic and paratextual elements that may or may not be subverted to which genre of texts it theoretically belongs to. In that way, texts of fantasy that do not fall within Mendlesohn's genre boundaries are still recognisable as fantasy because they speak to a certain kind of readers, be it through alluding to previous core texts of fantasy or through the use of tags, blurbs, or content elements that make their novel's attribution to the fantasy genre clear. Such paratextual evidence, which may also include an author's self-identification, is particularly useful when the fantasy may otherwise be in doubt or located elsewhere than is usually the case. Generic markers of fantasy, even in their subversion, may alert us to fantasy and texts like Mendlesohn's, though by no means perfect, make the scholarly reader more aware of which rhetorical elements to look out for in which kind of fantasy. Ultimately, previous scholarship like Mendlesohn's, but also Attebery's, Hume's, and Armitt's, needs to be broadened in order to account for non-western fantasies, but it does provide useful starting points for ongoing study. Genre can be a limiting category due to its Eurocentric origins, but it can also travel along both temporal and spatial lines, which allow it to change and become global. Fantasy literature, then, is still a genre but it is also more than that, transcending generic markers and renegotiating its own limits constantly. Why then is it important to categorise a set of texts as fantasy and call it a genre? Generic markers can help to identify texts as fantasy rather than falsely project another category like magical realism onto them, a projection by literary scholars and critics which can ultimately prove harmful to the texts thus designated. Regardless of whether we consider all genres Eurocentric or whether we allow for the emergence of world literature genres – as I do –, fantasy literature undoubtedly exists as a genre in the literary marketplace and thus non-western authors themselves have a vested interest in being marketed as fantasy authors if that is what they aspire to be and if the readership they target consists explicitly of the fantasy fandom. Identifying a text as fantasy can also alert us to the transformative potential a text might have *because* it is fantasy. As the following study will show, fantasy has the unique ability to offer spaces for imaginative freedom and creative renegotiation of perceived truths and status quos, which may end up influencing reality. Fantasy allows writers and readers to tackle serious subjects and global issues within a frame of playfulness, thus avoiding a certain reluctance among readers to engage with controversial or uncomfortable material in more literary novels. Furthermore, fantasy may just be the best way of describing complex and hybridized realities, especially in a world that seems increasingly strange and hard to navigate for people struggling with culture clashes, traumatic experiences, and economic hardship – topics that are not at all out of place in (fantasy) world literature.

3. Nnedi Okorafor’s Organic Fantasy – Postcolonial Apocalypse and its Fantastical Consequences

3.1. “To be African is to Merge Technology and Magic”[22]– Playing with Generic Conventions in *Who Fears Death*

A prominent corpus of texts, which can undoubtedly be considered world literature, are the novels of Naijamerican author Nnedi Okorafor, who is widely read internationally, creates vivid African worlds in her writing – be it the “place that used to be part of the Kingdom of Sudan” (*Who Fears Death* 413) or Nigeria’s Leopard community in *Akata Witch* –, and also highlights her own dual cultural backgrounds by including her Naijamerican experiences in her writing. Nnedi Okorafor’s novels seem to exist in a peculiarly liminal space between marketable genre fiction and literary writing. Scholars rarely discuss her in the context of fantasy literature, preferring to use a variety of different labels which are close to but not identical with the genre of fantasy literature. Chielozona Eze, for example, calls Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* a “magical realist novel” (2016, 102) when discussing the depiction of female genital excision. Esther Jones includes the same novel in her analysis of the depiction of medicine in science fiction narratives and calls it a “near-futuristic novel[…]” (186). Undoubtedly, Okorafor is *also* a science fiction writer, though texts like *Binti* and *Lagoon* are more obvious examples of that generic strand of writing, whereas *Who Fears Death* seems more closely aligned to the tropes of fantasy. Other critics, like Julia Hoydis and Joshua Yu Burnett, classify *Who Fears Death* in particular but also Okorafor’s work in general as speculative fiction, with Burnett arguing specifically that the speculative fiction genre is instrumental in imagining a truly postcolonial world, which remains impossible in realist fiction and seems to require radical, almost apocalyptical changes in order to be brought into being at all. He goes on to claim that “Okorafor takes on the project of conducting a postcolonial revision of speculative fiction and a speculative revision of postcolonialism” (Burnett 2015, 133). It would not be appropriate to argue that all of these scholars are simply wrong. *Who Fears Death* as well as other works by Okorafor can easily be read through multiple generic lenses and it makes sense to describe her writing as a blending of genres (Pahl 2018, 208) and acknowledge that few novels belong to one genre exclusively as generic boundaries tend to be fluid and blurry. Speculative fiction, in particular, the term Burnett uses, can also be seen as an umbrella term for such diverse genres as fantasy, magic realism, science fiction and others. Miriam Pahl thus rightfully claims that *Who Fears Death*'s

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[22] Whitted 2016, 209.

> blending of magical realism and science fiction manifests itself as a means to uplift magical realism from a place in literary criticism that is bound to the past and to claim a seat in the white male dominated arena of science fiction. (208)

Pahl describes the novel's mixing of "mythological elements and advanced technologies" (209), which she uses to justify "a categorization of the novel as magical realist" (209).

However, *Who Fears Death*'s "[s]orcery, shapeshifting, and magical creatures" (209) cited by Pahl may just as easily be used to support a reading of *Who Fears Death* as fantasy literature. It is not only these individual elements that mark the text as a possible example of a fantasy novel, but also its reception and further adaptation: *Who Fears Death* is set to be adapted into a TV show by HBO and G.R.R. Martin – the obvious connection to Martin's own *Game of Thrones* and thus the attribution of the novel to the fantasy genre is undeniable as the adaptation clearly aims at filling the gap left by the end of the *Game of Thrones* television series. Furthermore, the author herself has no problem with describing her own writing as fantasy, as she does in her essay "Organic Fantasy", from which this book's title quotation is taken. For Okorafor, "fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality" (2009, 279). She very much sees her work in terms of fantasy – or, rather, at the intersection between fantasy and reality, having resisted attempts by her professors in college "to coax [her] away from writing fantasy" (Okorafor 2009, 276). Rather than joining her academic seniors in their denigration of fantasy literature, Okorafor maintains that "[t]here is a method, purpose and realness to [her] madness" (277), which is how she ironically names her own tendency to include fantastic elements in all of her writing. Unlike many Western writers and especially Western critics of fantasy literature, then, Okorafor does not see a stark opposition between reality and fantasy, and thus has no problems categorising her own writing as fantasy without denying the cultural and spiritual truths embedded within her works. According to her blog, she considers herself both "an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist" (2019, n.p.) and defines Africanjujuism as "a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative" (2019, n.p.). Moreover, she overtly aligns at least some of her works with the common tropes of fantasy fiction, albeit almost always in order to subvert them. In this chapter, I will analyse Okorafor's work to show how a writer of colour can employ the Western-centric form of quest fantasy – and, to a lesser extent, intrusion fantasy – to challenge and subvert its tropes while reconfirming rather than exploiting or devaluing non-Western epistemologies. In order to do so, I will compare Okorafor's adult fantasy novel *Who Fears Death* to Farah Mendlesohn's and W.A. Senior's definitions of the (portal-)quest fantasy to show that Okorafor adheres to the generic conventions just enough to make her criticism of some of its tropes visible. I will then show how Okorafor not only uses her fantasies to critique literary concepts such as Roland Barthes' 'death of the author', but also employs her own notion of 'organic fantasy' to create a narrative that combines reality, fantasy, myth and religion without denigrating either of those ideas. Rather, Okorafor's writing showcases what I consider to be one of my broader arguments with regards to world fantasy literature – that the relationship between reality and fantasy is not so much a binary opposition, but rather a nested one; it is a spectrum on which the exact boundaries remain blurred.

Despite its futuristic setting, *Who Fears Death* corresponds closely to Mendlesohn's category of the portal-quest fantasy in some ways but, at the same time, resists clear association with any fantasy subgenre by overtly deviating from several crucial elements of the portal-quest formula. As established above, this has led several reviewers and scholars to place Okorafor's work within the realm of speculative fiction rather than ascribe it to fantasy literature as such. Yet the portal-quest pattern is so clearly a part of the protagonist's story that the connection to that particular subgenre cannot simply be denied as any deviations from the pattern become obvious as deliberate choices by Okorafor, which serve to place *Who Fears Death* in a position of tension between universal fantasy tropes and intensely local content. *Who Fears Death* follows the typical trajectory of a quest fantasy in some respects, mostly those adhering to a more general structure of the hero's journey, which could also be related to Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* and its claim to universality. On the other hand, it departs from the genre's mappings at critical moments, especially designed to infuse Okorafor's work with cultural and local particularities.

The portal fantasy is about "entry, transition and exploration" (Mendlesohn 2008, 2) and it is often, though not always, connected to a quest plot, which is why Mendlesohn treats both simultaneously. Both portal fantasy and quest fantasy position "both protagonist and reader as naïve" (2). They also both follow a similar structure, which Mendlesohn describes as follows:

> Characteristically the quest fantasy protagonist goes from a mundane life, in which the fantastic, if she is aware of it, is very distant and unknown (or at least unavailable to the protagonist) to direct contact with the fantastic through which she transitions, exploring the world until she or those around her are knowledgeable enough to negotiate with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm. (2)

The transition from the mundane world to the magical realm may be literal, in which case there is an actual portal through which the protagonist passes in order to change worlds, or it may be metaphorical, in which case the protagonist merely leaves his mundane home, which is located within a secondary world, in order to explore the yet unknown secondary world in more detail. The move from a safe haven, the well-known home of the protagonist, into the unknown world is what links many fantasies set completely in a secondary world to Mendlesohn's subgenre of the portal-quest. In *Who Fears Death*, the protagonist Onyesonwu experiences several safe havens at the start of her journey though they all seem to be compromised, which perhaps indicates that it is no longer feasible to introduce places of complete and utter safety into fantasies that strive to portray reality. Najeeba, her mother, has retreated into the desert after being raped and describes the desert as "lovely" (*Who Fears Death* 25). Even though this first description of the desert is strongly influenced by Najeeba's trauma – she constructs the desert as a safe place where "all spirits can live […] in peace" (*Who Fears Death* 25) and in her dissociate state views herself as "an Alusi[23] about to give birth to an Alusi child" (*Who Fears Death* 25) –, the first positive impression is confirmed later on in the novel when Onyesonwu and her friends find refuge among the desert tribes. Thus, Onye's first home is, to some extent, "a place of security and stability" (190), as posited by W.A. Senior. Onyesonwu "loved the sand, winds, and desert creatures" (*Who Fears Death* 30) and she is also enamoured by the land itself so that, as a small child, she "often stood facing the wide open land and sang to it" (*Who Fears Death* 30). However, in an early departure from the usual portal-quest pattern as identified by Mendlesohn, Onye's early desert life can hardly be described as mundane, considering that her "lovely voice" (*Who Fears Death* 30) is capable of "attract[ing] owls from far away" (*Who Fears Death* 30), thus perhaps giving a first indication of Onye's magical abilities, inherited from her rapist father. Onye's singing alerts her mother to her special and unusual nature as well, prompting her to take Onye out of the desert and into so-called 'civilisation', which may represent a first transition in Onye's life, especially since Onye is allowed to 'explore' her new surroundings extensively. However, in comparison to the desert, the town of Jwahir and its market are "small to [Onye]" (*Who Fears Death* 8) and so this step is not a transition "into the big wide world" (Mendlesohn 2008, 3), but rather a narrowing of Onye's living conditions.

Even a cursory glance at the basic plot structure then reveals a clear affiliation with what Mendelsohn describes as the portal-quest fantasy, but which can also be related back to earlier quest narratives and the near universal hero's journey as delineated in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's work is especially interesting as it is in the same Western tradition as the psychological theses "by Freud, Jung, and others" (Estés xxvi) but draws from stories that "belong to gifted, fierce, ethnic, and tribal people from all over the world" (Estés lxv) and so its influences on modern fantasy literature, which are also present in Okorafor's work, already come with both a Western-centric lens and allegedly global – universal? – content, thus complicating the common conception of fantasy literature as essentially Western. Nonetheless, Okorafor's usage of the quest motif undoubtedly is related not only to pre-modern myths with global origins but also tied to Western predecessors such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. As such, Okorafor's work could be considered as 'writing back', that is, belonging to "a body of postcolonial works that take a classic English text as a departure point, supposedly as a strategy for contesting the authority of the canon of English literature" (Thieme 2001, 1). That some readers interpret Okorafor's novels as such becomes obvious through the use of the moniker 'Nigerian Harry Potter' for the children's series *Akata Witch*, a name quoted even by the novels' publisher penguin teen – that this is contrary to how Okorafor perceives her own writing is revealed by her own responses: In an interview, she states that, while she finds the comparisons "understandable" (Whitted 2016, 210), she also regards it as a strategy for avoiding to deal with the unfamiliar by "boiling [her] work down to what is familiar" (Whitted 2016, 310), thus ignoring significant parts of the story. On twitter, the author has come down against such a description much more forcefully, stating that "the Akata series is NOT a 'Nigerian Harry Potter'" and that "[t]hat description feels like erasure" (@Nnedi 2020, n.p.). Okorafor, then, is aware of the dangers inherent in writing back to a Western paradigm, which may lead to postcolonial literatures being perceived as "a mere reaction to imperial textuality" and based on a "kind of second-class creativity that derives its impetus from the Western canon" (Schmidt-Haberkamp 247). It is thus important that any reading of Okorafor's novels as fantasy literature takes into account the "invariably […] complex and ambivalent" relationship "between postcolonial con-text and canonical pre-text" (2), as John Thieme puts it. Certainly, it has to be acknowledged that, while some of Okorafor's oeuvre may resemble the forms of mainstream fantasy, its "foundation and fruition […] is VERY proudly black." (@Nnedi 2020, n.p.).

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[23] Alusi is a term taken from Igbo spiritual beliefs and refers to "Igbo deities" (Ogbuji n. pag.) or spirits. In *Who Fears Death*, Alusi is not explicitly explained until chapter 23 and is instead taken to be a universally understood term, which helps foregrounding the – here – Nigerian tradition underlying the fantasy novel as normality. It is Onye's mentor Aro who ultimately explains: "The Alusi point represents forces, deities, spirits, non-Uwa beings" (*Who Fears Death* 156), citing masquerades and the wilderness as examples for the presence of Alusi,

While Jwahir is the "place of security and stability" (Senior 2012, 190), from which fantasy quests typically depart, it is also deeply rooted in the Sudanese landscape and cultural tradition it takes inspiration from, which is visible through the "cactus candy" (*Who Fears Death* 7) used as currency, the annual celebration of "the Rain Fest Races" (*Who Fears Death* 12), carried out on camels, and the general vegetation, which includes the iroko trees that are so instrumental in Onye's initial introduction to her inherent magical abilities. In some ways, Onye is also an ordinary child and thus corresponds to the quest hero in that she has “hidden abilities” (Senior 2012, 190), though they are revealed both to her and others significantly earlier than the beginning of *Who Fears Death*’s central quest. When Onye is eleven years old, “something strange happened to [her]” (*Who Fears Death* 14) and she ends up “stuck high in the giant iroko tree that grew in the center of town” (*Who Fears Death* 15). This is reinforced at a crucial moment during her so-called Eleventh Rite, which likewise predates the beginning of Onye’s quest. The event can, however, be seen as the trigger that sets the quest in motion and may thus be interpreted as the initial transition from mundane to magical life, albeit spiritual rather than physical at this point in the novel. As a central node in the novel, Onyesonwu’s Eleventh Rite will have to be analysed through various lenses at a later point in this study. Onyesonwu’s character also adheres to a number of other tropes surrounding the generically prototypical quest hero while openly defying others. She may not be the “average person” (2012, 190) Senior envisions as a traditional quest hero nor is she “the symbol of an elite” (1997, 61), which Hourihan considers a dominant feature of a quest hero (though her study is not focusing on fantasy literature in particular), but her status as an (initial) outsider relates her to various modern fantasy heroes and heroines, who only become a respected part of their society once they have transitioned to the magical world, e.g. Harry Potter, who is abused by his Muggle family but celebrated by wizarding society, or Lian Hearn’s Tomasu/Takeo, who grows up as part of a persecuted minority but eventually becomes a part of the nobility. Because of the violent circumstances of her birth, which are immediately visible due to her *Ewu* physique[24], Onye is considered violent and seen with suspicion by the people of Jwahir: They “sucked their teeth, grumbled, and shifted their eyes when [she] passed” (*Who Fears Death* 8) and “shunned [her] because [she] was *Ewu*” (*Who Fears Death* 10). Even Onye sees herself as “a black stain. A poison” (*Who Fears Death* 14), but what others as well as herself see as the burden of birth is soon revealed to be part of her predestined fate. The aforementioned incident when Onye magically transported herself into a tree not only marks the awakening of Onye’s burgeoning supernatural powers, but also “forced [her] mother to finally tell [her her] own ugly story" (*Who Fears Death* 14). Thus, her origins as a child of rape are inherently connected to her fate – fulfilling the novel's central quest – and to her magical powers. Onye is certainly a destined heroine, but her destiny is not only due to the conventions of fantasy fiction – or the rules of fantasyland, as Diana Wynne Jones might have it (151) –, thus suggesting a fixed notion of time and progression, but from the circumstances of her conception, thus intimately relating her role as avenger of her mother and champion of justice to her all-too-realistic violent origins. It is her father – eventually revealed to be her primary opponent – who willed her to become a wizard, and it is her mother who, during her rape, prayed for her to be a woman so she could enact revenge.

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[24] In Onyesonwu’s world, the term ‘Ewu’ designates mixed-race children with both Nuru (roughly corresponding to Arab) and Okeke (Black African) heritage. Since the relationships between Nuru and Okeke are overwhelmingly hostile, children of mixed parentage are always considered to be children of rape, even though this assumption is proven incorrect by the novel’s events.

Onyesonwu's primary opponent, however, is not only her father, but also an almost stereotypical Dark Lord, which both upholds and subverts the rules of the Eurocentric portal-quest fantasy. W.A. Senior states that a quest fantasy's

> menace frequently comes from a Dark Lord, a satanic figure of colossal but warped power, who wishes to enslave and denature the world and its denizens and who lives in a dead land, often in the east or north, surrounded by a range of forbidding mountains and deserts. (2012, 190)

Diane Wynne Jones' more tongue-in-cheek but no less useful definition of the antagonist adds to this that the Dark Lord is "so sinister that he will be seen [by the heroine] only once or twice, probably near the end of the Tour" (50), that is the narrative's quest. Furthermore, the opponent is "black […] and shadowy and probably not wholly human" (50). The 'Dark Lord' of *Who Fears Death* is, as previously mentioned, Onyesonwu's father, Daib, a sorcerer and "military man" (*Who Fears Death* 64), which has almost become a fantastical trope in its own right in recent years – as examples such as Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* or George Lucas' *Star Wars Trilogy* demonstrate – , showing not so much a deliberate closeness to Western fantasy structures, but rather a case in point for the argument that Okorafor is not only a locally inflected fantasy writer with a particular focus on the countries of the African continent, but also at the forefront of a global fantasy market, which she not only participates in but also shapes. Unlike stipulated by Wynne Jones' Guide, Onye encounters her father even before the quest begins – when she is eleven years old, she undergoes the Eleventh Rite and goes into a trance-like state during which she encounters a menacing entity:

> Then I noticed it. Red and oval-shaped with a white oval in the center, like the giant eye of a jinni. It sizzled and hissed, the white part expanding, moving closer. It horrified me to my very core. Must get out of here! I thought. Now! It sees me! But I didn't know how to move. Move with what? I had no body. The red was bitter venom. The white was like the sun's worst heat. (*Who Fears Death* 44)

A year later, Onye has another vision, in which she sees a tall Nuru man speaking to a large group of men surrounding him. He notices Onye's presence and immediately starts attacking her in a way that leads Onye to conclude that he is the "red oval eye [that] belonged to a rapist, [her] biological father" (*Who Fears Death* 75). It is surely no coincidence that he first manifests as a giant red eye – immediately reminiscent of Sauron, the blueprint for every quest-fantasy Dark Lord, perhaps on a global scale. Daib, like Sauron, has extraordinary magical powers, which allow him to "bend time, […] make things appear that should never be there, […] make people think wrong things, and he has a heart full of the most evil stuff" (*Who Fears Death* 199). It is interesting how in this instance his ability to convince people of his evil ideology is equated with one of his magical powers. Okorafor thus draws a line between the magic in her own world and demagogues in the 'real' world, showing once again the close connection between reality and organic fantasy growing from it. Apart from the very real power of effectively using propaganda to further his goals, Daib's other abilities might confirm him as "not wholly human", and Onye is certainly inclined to feel the same way at one point, stating that "[t]he man is no man" (*Who Fears Death* 319), but there are other factors demythologizing Daib as a Dark Lord figure: Sola, arguably a wise and mysterious mentor figure, says that, even though Daib "has grown like a cancer, a tumor" (*Who Fears Death* 340), he is essentially a human man, whose mother "asked for him to be a sorcerer" (*Who Fears Death* 340) – not at all an unusual method of determining a child's future in Onye's world. However, the day he was born in no way indicated his 'evil nature' since, contrary to the most stereotypical fantasy tropes, "[t]here was no great storm or crash of lightning or burning corncob in the sky" (*Who Fears Death* 341). Furthermore, in his final confrontation with his daughter Onye, he is reduced to "a naked human being [lying on the ground], slobbering and shuddering" (*Who Fears Death* 398), a position that most Dark Lords, even in fantasy texts which highlight their humanity and thus humanity's potential for evil only attain in death[25].

Onye's relationship to her father and adversary is also quite interesting in comparison with the usual tropes of the quest fantasy. While many quest heroes (and, lately, also heroines) share some sort of connection with their personal enemy, most of their journeys lead to them actively rejecting the evil their Dark Lord stands for. This is not the case for Onye, who, in her devastating grief over the death of her lover Mwita, leaves a trail of destruction on par with everything Daib has done so far. Not only is "[e]very single male human in the central town of Durfa capable of impregnating a woman […] dead" (*Who Fears Death* 401) but every woman of a fertile age is newly pregnant. Onye considers her similarity to her father – "We both leave bodies in our wake. Fields of bodies" (*Who Fears Death* 401) – but her actual deed seems almost worse than that. She is not only replicating his brutal acts of violence upon Okeke men in war, but also his violations of women since she, just like her father, impregnates them against their will, essentially mirroring her own conception, albeit by accident. The parallel between father and daughter is clearly intentional on Okorafor's part since Onye's act of unconscious violence is followed by her father's deliberate actions as Onye watches a video recording of her mother's rape. During it, Daib sings a song meant to encourage Onye's mother to conceive and to influence the child of this union: "'You'll bear my son. He'll be magnificent.' Another song. 'I'll raise him up and he will be the greatest thing this land will ever see." (*Who Fears Death* 403). Onye, too, uses her powers in order to create a baby and "[a]t the moment of conception, a giant shock wave blasted" (*Who Fears Death* 398) away from her, causing the destruction she later laments. The moment of victory against her enemy, the quest story's primary adversary, then does not result in the fulfillment of Onye's narrative arc – she does not immediately trigger "a recovery from the devastating losses that characterize this genre" (Senior 2012, 190) but instead perpetuates her pain and grief by inflicting the loss of their lovers, husbands or sons on every other woman within the city. The 'devastating losses', it seems, are far from over and the oppression of the Okeke people and especially their women is bound to continue. As Onye and Luyu – the last remaining members of the 'fellowship' – retreat from the place of the confrontation with Daib, Luyu is attacked by Nuru men who "saw a beautiful Okeke woman" and "tore her apart" (*Who Fears Death* 407) and Onye is dragged away "by [her] hair" (*Who Fears Death* 409). It is only after Onye's group has been thoroughly dismantled – her friend Binta killed at the beginning of the journey, Diti and her husband leaving her to return to a relatively safe life back home in the middle of the quest, Mwita dead, and Luyu torn apart – and while Onye is on the run from a violent mob hellbent on executing her that she can finally fulfill her prophesied destiny. Thus, only complete devastation of previous structures can lead to the rewriting of the book that will end Okeke's oppression by the Nuru. As Joshua Yu Burnett argues, "Okorafor uses the post-apocalypse as a way to imagine a new form of postcolonialism" (134), as only a radically changed earth "where juju is reality, reality is shifting, and the very basis of Western rationalism has been undermined" (134) can afford the space for true postcolonialism to occur. However, as Burnett also concedes, the apocalypse that precedes *Who Fears Death* has not led to "a romanticized utopia" (134). Instead, a new situation of oppression has arisen and only another radical change can free the Okeke. The apocalypse has to take place again in order to facilitate the rewriting of the Great Book, though it is no longer a global phenomenon. Instead, it is a highly localized event, causing the (temporary) destruction of Onye and the network surrounding her. This repetition of apocalyptic events, both pre-dating the novel as well as finishing it, hints at a cyclical nature of time, a further destabilization of Western concepts – crucially, however, it is not a complete subversion of the tropes of fantasy since regular "quest fantasies also posit cyclical history" (Senior 2012, 190), indicating a continuing alternation between oppression and freedom. It equally suggests that a radical change, be it a contemporary dismantling of neo-colonialism and capitalism or the ending of violence between Nuru and Okeke in Onyesonwu's future Africa requires similarly radical and violent methods. Intriguingly, the violent ends most of Onye's companions meet suggest a subversion of another feature of fantasy as a whole, namely that it "unlike science fiction, relies on a moral universe" (Mendlesohn 2008, 5), though this is no longer a universal feature, as G.R.R. Martin's Game of Thrones series aptly shows. It is, however, still noteworthy that the deaths of Onye's companions and friends are not typically a result of their own actions, a sort of punishment for a misstep or even a deliberate sacrifice. Instead, their death can be seen as a commentary on violence inflicted on women, especially those belonging to a group already suffering from oppression.

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[25] The most prominent example of this would be J.K.Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, in which Lord Voldemort's inhumanity seems to be a running theme, further emphasized by Rowling's somewhat questionable statement that he cannot love because he is a child of rape, and is then shown to be an illusion, when in death, he "hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snake-like face vacant and unknowing." (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 596).

Onyesonwu's companions and their violent ends deserve a closer look, especially since the fellowship is another staple of fantasy fiction, which Okorafor here takes and shapes according to her own interests and localized needs. Diana Wynne Jones in her immensely useful parody *The Tough Guide to Fantasy Land* discusses this group of characters under the heading "Companions", stating that they usually appear in the narrative "for the first time at the outset of the Tour" (46), that is the quest at the centre of portal-quest narratives, and are more or less expendable because of their frequent deaths (cf. 46). *Who Fears Death* also features a band of companions following and supporting Onyesonwu in her quest and, as suggested by Wynne Jones, almost all of them die along the way. However, they crucially appear long before the quest sets off and are portrayed as fully rounded characters – already defying some critics' definitions of fantasy, which assume the presence of "[s]tereotypical characters rather than individuals" (Holden Rønning 2016, 54) or "stock characters" (1) in formulaic fantasy according to Brian Attebery. Onye's main companions are Luyu Chiki, Diti Goitsemedime and Binta Keita, the three girls who undergo the so-called Eleventh Rite, an initiation ritual, together with Onye. Their individuality is emphasized as soon as they are introduced: Luyu is portrayed as a confident young girl, not only because of her affluent background but because of her strong character, which allows her to look at the older women performing the ritual "with defiant eyes" (*Who Fears Death* 39) without denying her sexual activity despite the "harsh look[s]" (*Who Fears Death* 40) she receives because of it. She is described as "fast and brazen" (*Who Fears Death* 52), which together with her sexual openness not only makes her a less than stereotypical character but also serves to subvert the conventional depiction of women in a quest narrative as "submissive and self-denying" (Hourihan 193). Diti is more self-conscious about her relationship with her schoolmate Fanasi, representing perhaps a more stereotypical form of femininity by being “the princess […] plump and pretty” (*Who Fears Death* 52f). She is perhaps the closest to a stock fantasy princess in character and function since “[w]hen she was around, good things happened to us” (*Who Fears Death* 53) and she seems to be blessed by the Goddess Ani, which is also reminiscent of the female figures in the quest narratives analysed by Margery Hourihan, as her connection to the goddess follows a pattern of “goddesses or goddess-like women” (168) who support the hero in his tasks. Binta, “the smallest of the four” (*Who Fears Death* 40), is shy and sad – she “always had her eyes downcast and spoke little when around others” (*Who Fears Death* 53) because of her history as a victim of incest and sexual abuse, one of the real-world issues Okorafor addresses in her fantasy novel and which will be discussed in more detail in sub-chapter 4.2. The four girls are bound through the ritual to “protect each other, even after marriage” (*Who Fears Death* 40) and are destined to become close friends and companions despite the fact that they were virtual strangers before the rite. It is their bond that prompts Luyu, Diti and Binta to accompany Onye on her journey years later and as such their fellowship is reminiscent of the close bonds between companions Margery Hourihan sees as typical in a quest narrative (cf. 75-87). Hourihan writes that

> [i]n stories in which the hero travels with a band of comrades the bonds between the members of the group are stronger than any friendships with outsiders, especially with women, and are represented as somehow ‘higher’, more pure and more intense than any relationships involving sex. (82)

At first glance, it may appear that Okorafor engages in a clear-cut subversion of the trope, which would, to an extent, make sense as it originates in a quest narrative Hourihan describes as “a story about superiority, dominance and success” which positions “white European men [as] the natural masters of the world because they are strong, brave, skilful, rational and dedicated” (1). After all, their shared experiences “[t]hrough their Eleventh Rite” (*Who Fears Death* 52) have made them so devoted to one another that “[a]ny friends Luyu, Binta, and Diti had before were no longer important” (*Who Fears Death* 52). However, the four women, while indeed having given up previous friends, do not remain among themselves. Their “band of comrades" includes members of the opposite gender as Fanasi, Diti's lover, and Mwita, Onye's lover and male counterpart as a fellow *Ewu* child, join the group in their journey to the West. "[R]elationships involving sex" thus play an active part in this fellowship's group dynamics and complicate their task to no small degree, thus perhaps explaining why such relationships have traditionally been excluded from formulaic quest stories while at the same time rendering Okorafor's narrative more 'real' as it acknowledges sex as a natural activity. It is important enough for the reversal of the Eleventh Rite, that is the removal of the clitoris, to be an important event in the course of the novel. First, Onyesonwu regrows it instinctively during her initiation as a sorceress only to remove it again due to the strong social pressure to be a circumcised woman since "Jwahir's custom's were under [her] skin more than [she] realised" (*Who Fears Death* 150). The Eleventh Rite juju that prevents her from experiencing sexual pleasure before marriage is equally broken through her initiation and when she and Mwita have sex, she first notices the lack of her clitoris and employs her own ability to regrow it. Eze reads the passage as Onyesonwu being unable to "help herself in the area where she needs the most help" (107), instead relying on the (male) Mwita's intervention, which prompts Eze to ask whether "Mwita's help suggests Okorafor's belief that men are needed for the success of women's feminist causes" (107). Yet, the scene can be read altogether differently. When Onyesonwu complains that she cannot release because of her circumcision, Mwita merely tells her: "Do something about it then, Eshu woman" (*Who Fears Death* 140), suggesting that all she needed was a nudge and support from Mwita, not male intervention. It does, perhaps, indicate that Okorafor believes men *should* support feminist causes, but not that they are doomed to failure without them. The importance of sexual relationships and, perhaps more crucially, women's agency over their own body, is taken up again during the hero(ine)'s journey when Onye's friend Diti complains about Onye enjoying sex loudly while her friends are still suffering from the effects of the Eleventh Rite, demanding to know whether Onyesonwu is "the only woman here allowed to enjoy intercourse" (*Who Fears Death* 204). The issue becomes such a burden for the group that it threatens to put the entire quest in danger and the group has to pause in order for Onyesonwu to heal her friends, which shows how Okorafor literally interrupts the fantasy quest journey with very real concerns such as women's desire to have enjoyable sex like men – a desire that is hampered by the cultural practice of female genital circumcision in the first place, a topic that will have to be discussed in more detail later on.

As a female heroine, it is not surprising – at least under heteronormative assumptions, which are still largely in place in *Who Fears Death* – that Onye's love interest should be a man, and indeed Onye and her partner Mwita are the couple at the centre of the story, with Onyesonwu being the lead and heroine and Mwita fulfilling the supporting role. It is, of course, a clear subversion of the usual male-female relationship in quest fiction in that it refuses to portray Onyesonwu as a "helpless and threatened female" (Hourihan 197) – all the characters come under threat but there is no gender difference with regard to how well they deal with it. However, the narrative does not put Mwita in a position of helplessness either. Instead, it explicitly draws attention to the inverted gender roles by acknowledging them, thus indicating that they are also an issue in Okorafor's secondary world, which is, after all, grown from reality like most of her fantasy. Even before their journey, Mwita resents Onyesonwu's success as a sorcerer who was able to pass several tests, one of which Mwita himself failed, which meant that his education as a sorcerer could not be continued. During the so-called respite portion of their journey, the issue is finally addressed when Mwita complains that he "should be the sorcerer, [Onyesonwu] should be the healer", adding that "[t]hat's how it's always been between a man and woman" (*Who Fears Death* 274). Both seem to grapple with their gender roles, as Onyesonwu is herself resentful of having to accept Mwita's help as a healer: "It was always so humiliating. I would do something and I'd always need Mwita to put me back in order. As if I had no control of my abilities, my faculties, my body" (*Who Fears Death* 250) – but while Mwita is angry because of his lingering belief in a binary of gender roles that positions activeness and power on the male side while restricting women to nurturing roles, Onye chafes at precisely those notions of passiveness that would connect her to a more stereotypical female role, which she finds humiliating. The fact that both characters suffer perhaps indicates that a subversion of the binary, as it seems to have taken place with Mwita and Onyesonwu, is not a solution to the patriarchal inequalities that Okorafor's secondary world shares with the 'actual world' and that are part of Okorafor's endeavour to address real world issues in fantasy settings. Clearly, both Mwita and

Onyesonwu are negatively impacted by the gendered stereotypes they subvert. Especially Mwita reacts with irritation and disbelief at their role reversal, stating that "[o]nly Ani knows why she made you a sorcerer instead of me" (*Who Fears Death* 250).

Fantasy's (stock) characters and its (sometimes) formulaic tropes are not the only elements of quest fantasies which Okorafor subverts in order to move away from Western-centric narratives, which seemingly support tales of colonialism and conquest. Morality or the expectation of a moral universe, according to Mendlesohn, is not only reflected by the characters and their fates, but it is also tied to the portrayal of landscape, especially in the quest fantasy. Its "massive, wild landscape of forests, rivers, mountains, valleys, small villages and occasional cities" (Senior 2021, 190) establishes a kind of "moral geography" (Mendlesohn 2008, 4) that, according to Mendlesohn, "associate[s] the king with the well-being of the land, and the condition of the land with the morality of the place" (3), which most often leads to the antagonist living "in a dead land, often in the east or north, surrounded by a range of forbidding mountains and deserts" (190). Landscape, W.A. Senior states, becomes a moral actor and "functions as a character, here endowed with animate traits as the fantasy world itself seeks to heal the rift that threatens its destruction" (190). Certainly, landscape does play a major role in Okorafor's *Who Fears Death,* though it is not morally aligned in the same way scholars like Senior and Mendlesohn would expect in a quest fantasy – or rather, landscape is not at all aligned in a binary fashion with a certain conception of morality, neither positive nor negative. The desert is the place where Onyesonwu's mother Najeeba is raped and can thus be associated with violence and aggression, but it is also a place of worship for the Okeke women. They "walked into the desert and stayed for seven days to give respect to the goddess Ani" (*Who Fears Death* 17) – as Ani is a goddess of nature, this shows that the desert as a natural landscape is highly valued and seen as a place of holy communion. It is also conceived of as a safe place, especially prior to the Nuru's attack on the Okeke; women regularly go there alone, weakened by ritualistic fasting, in order to pray in isolation because the desert provides sanctity, having "erased their trail days ago" (*Who Fears Death* 18). Najeeba has a particularly strong connection to the desert because of childhood memories of travelling through the desert with her father and brothers, thus adding a connotation of 'home' to the religiously charged significance of the desert. Considering that "[s]ince then, she'd love the open desert" (*Who Fears Death* 17), it is perhaps not as surprising as one would assume that, despite her rape[26], Najeeba seeks refuge there with her newborn daughter after having been rejected by her former neighbours. Like her mother, Onyesonwu loves the desert as her childhood home and a place of family and safety – she "was quite happy in the desert" (*Who Fears Death* 7) and felt safe enough to "venture over a mile away from [her] mother on clear days" (*Who Fears Death* 8), indicating early on that the desert can also be a safe haven, which upends common notions of the desert as an inhospitable place. Okorafor's purpose here may be twofold – on the one hand, she is celebrating a geographical landscape that is often connected not only with poverty but specifically brown and black poverty; on the other, she is also resisting a literary pattern independent of the fantasy genre that "equates the violated land to the violated woman" (Thompson & Gunne 2009, 2)[27]. Later on, this re-inscription of the desert as positive is reinforced and combined with another common trope of quest fantasy fiction, namely the "respite, often characterized by feasting and music in a haven under the protection of a wisdom figure, […] during which the members of the company receive aid and knowledge" (Senior 2012, 190). Traversing through a violent sandstorm, Onye and her friends enter a "giant brown funnel of sand and wind" (*Who Fears Death* 270), which acts as a protecting barrier for the Red People, a nomadic culture travelling through the desert. On the first day spent with the Red People, or Vah, there is indeed a feast which Onye and all her companions take part in before spending a considerable amount of time within the eye of the sandstorm, thoroughly protected from outside influence. It is also in the desert amidst the Red People that Onye encounters a creature of spiritual importance not limited to the fantasy world – a masquerade, "tall as a middle-aged tree" and "[w]ide as three tents" (*Who Fears Death* 298) endowing her with a kind of magic that strengthens her connection to the spirit world and prepares her for a meeting with the Kponyungo – another central event taking place in the desert, which will be discussed in more detail in the next paragraph. The encounter with the masquerade is followed by a retreat held together with the Red People, which corresponds to the "feasting and music in a haven under the protection of a wisdom figure" (Senior 2012, 190), one of the nodal points in "the stepped journey" (190) of quest fantasy, as identified by Senior. Onye's magical powers are also strengthened by the stay in Ssolu, the village of the Red People, but her further transformation is not constructed as her having received "rewards such as magic items" (190). Instead, Onye is completely dissolved, hinting at rejection of "western epistemological traditions that imagine the self as an essential, unified being" (Kurtz 2015, 37), that is much more prevalent in works like Okorafor's *Binti*:

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[26] The subject of rape will be discussed on a more theoretical level in the following subchapter. At this point, it suffices to note that Najeeba's retreat into the desert is surprising only because the desert is also the place of her violation. The fact that she separates herself from her community is not only understandable but potentially also the desired effect of the Nuru attack, which can be considered an act of genocide. Catharine MacKinnon describes such rape during conflict and war as "rape under control. […] It is rape as an instrument of forced exile, rape to make you leave your home and never want to go back. […] It is rape to drive a wedge through a community, to shatter a society, to destroy a people. It is rape as genocide" (1994, 11-12).

[27] Thompson and Gunne are referring to Seamus Heaney here, who specifically uses rape as a metaphor "to understand imperialism without considering the violence and violation at the heart of the act or the implications that this has for woman's subjectivity" (2). Okorafor stays clear of using Najeebaa's rape as a metaphor for the Nuru's general treatment of the Okeke and their environment – it may be a part of the Nuru's military strategy, but the significance of the individual act of violence is never minimized for the sake of a broader argument.

> Every part of me that was me. My tall Ewu body. My short temper. My impulsive mind. My memories. My past. My future. My death. My life. My spirit. My fate. My failure. All of me was destroyed. I was dead, broken, scattered, and absorbed. It was a thousand times worse than when I first changed into a bird. I remember nothing because I was nothing. (316)

Onye is eventually reassembled and has gained new abilities, but the constant dissolving and rearranging of the main character is at least partially in contrast with the usual trajectory of the quest fantasy, which is seen as "a metaphor for a coming of age […] a space for the protagonists to grow up" (Mendlesohn 2008, 7). Rather than follow this relatively linear pattern, the narrative itself seems to mirror Onye's experiences in the wilderness in that it occasionally veers away from the quest plot, interrupted by Onyesonwu narrating her own story shortly before her impending death, which could be seen as Onye's final dissembling – and is likewise followed by the construction of a new form of Onye.

The placement of the safe haven in the desert as well as Onye's experiences while flying side by side with the Kponyugo are significant because they counteract the generally “moral significance of landscape” (Mendlesohn 34) in quest fantasy while at the same time re-inscribing desert space, usually connected with lifeless, arid landscapes, and poverty, as a positive space. It is “full of life and Onye is at home there; this is not a story about thirst, hunger, or oppressive heat” (Death 2021, 12). It is a “More-Than-Human Wilderness” (Death 2021, 12), in which human and nonhuman entities interact and where community is not restricted to ‘only’ humans and animals, but includes “sand, winds, and desert creatures” (*Who Fears Death* 30), who are beloved by Onyesonwu. The desert is the space in which Onyesonwu is able to communicate with the wind – she learns “to sing by listening to [it]” (*Who Fears Death* 30) – and with the land itself – “[s]he often stood facing the wide open land and sang to it” (*Who Fears Death* 30). She also attracts owls with her singing and, as a young adult returning to the desert to depart on her quest, communicates with camels, who are “recurring symbols of compassion, intelligence, and bravery” (Death 12). The camels they encounter are immediately portrayed as sentient creatures with plans and volitions of their own – “[t]hey mean to travel with [the group] a way” (*Who Fears Death* 213) and Onyesonwu considers it part of the social rules of desert living to accept them as travel companions. These rules also include

> leav[ing] a bucket of excess station water who might want some. And when people, *any* kind of people, want to travel with you, you don’t reject them unless they’re cruel. (*Who Fears Death* 213)

‘People’, this quote makes clear, do not necessarily have to be humans. Such appeals for communities which span human-nonhuman boundaries tie Okorafor’s novel to current ecocritical concerns (cf. Haraway 2008, 2016; Burger, Liebermann, and Rahn 2021). At the same time, the depiction of the desert as an ecological community consisting of more than just human agents stays well within the potential for ecocritical interventions fantasy literature displays frequently.

After all, the “desire of men to hold communion with other living things” (Tolkien 1975, 22) has been an important aspect of fantasy literature, not just according to J.R.R. Tolkien, but also following authors such as Ursula Le Guin, who states that

> [t]o include an animal as a protagonist equal with the human is – in modern terms – to write a fantasy. To include anything on equal footing with the human, as equal in importance is to abandon realism. (Le Guin 2007, 87)

To be clear, Le Guin does not state that regarding animals as equal to humans is in any way 'unrealistic', but rather accuses realism to be "relentlessly focused on human behavior and psychology" (87) while fantasy may be much more suited to describe the complicated reality of life on earth, echoing also Okorafor's statement that fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality" (2009, 279). Several literary scholars have also noted that "fantasy is indeed uniquely suited to the portrayal of ecocritical perspectives" (Bal 2020, 1284) and that it "serve[s] to remind humans of the essentiality of the non-human and the lost connection between humanity and nature" (Bal 2020, 1295). Onyesonwu and Mwita in particular, both characters who experience oppression themselves, advocate for companionable relationships with their nonhuman fellow creatures. They are the first to hug the camels and greet them politely by introducing themselves as they would with other humans they met in the desert (cf. *Who Fears Death* 236-238). Much like Tolkien's characters, who serve as examples in Gry Ulstein's article on ecocritical thought in fantasy literature, they "see themselves as part of nature and wilderness rather than rulers over it" (2015, 11). The scene also echoes Donna Haraway's insistence on the importance of a "polite greeting [...] where and when species meet" (2008, 19), which shows how well world fantasy literature like Okorafor's resonates with contemporary ecocritical theory.

The contrast between the dry desertscape of Onye's homeland, her father's pleasant surroundings and the fertile green paradise she eventually observes also carry ecocritical meaning, though not as tied to fantasy literature's generic affordances as the interspecies communities delineated above. On the contrary, they further subvert the usual generic tropes of fantasy literature, which dictate that a poor state of the land reflects the evil inflicted upon it by the main enemy (cf. Mendlesohn 2008, 35), thus containing a moral judgment. Instead, Onye feels at home in the desert, which has become a haven for her, while her Daib, the 'Dark Lord' to be defeated as part of the fantasy narrative, rules over an area that is anything but "a dead land" (Senior 2012, 190), in which W.A Senior locates the prototypical fantasy villain. The Kponyugo takes Onyesonwu on a flight "over vast lands; the dryness [she] had always known" (*Who Fears Death* 310). The land Onye comes from consists of "[s]tunted trees" and "[d]ry dead grass" (*Who Fears Death* 310) but flying over it towards the West that is the eventual destination of Onye's quest journey, she notices the land slowly changing – "light brown. Then darker brown. Then…green" (*Who Fears Death* 310). This landscape, "alive with dense high leafy trees" (*Who Fears Death* 310) is "too far to ever get to" (*Who Fears Death* 310) by non-magical means, rendering it utopian for Onye, hinting at a rather moral view of landscape after all since the positive aliveness of the land is seen as a paradisiacal but out-of-reach space, which makes "the violence and hatred between the Okeke and Nuru seem small" (*Who Fears Death* 311). It seems that, even though the contrast between heroes, villains, and their respective landscapes is not as pronounced as that between the pastoral space of Hobbiton and the volcanic wasteland Mordor, hatred and the fertile, lush landscape are still as mutually exclusive, the latter perhaps a reward for the absence of the former. However, even though neither heroine nor villain have access to the utopian landscape, Onye's father Daib does not live in a foreboding, barren landscape indicative of his reprehensible character. Instead, "[p]alm trees, bushes, and other vegetation thrived there" (*Who Fears Death* 191) and the natural environment is considerably more fertile and welcoming to humans than Jwahir, where the free Okeke live since one of the Seven Rivers flows through Daib's land. Rather than reflecting a moral landscape following Tolkien's model (fertile – good, barren – evil), it shows a distribution of territories that is jarringly similar to the contemporary situation in the wake of climate change. The regions most affected by it, suffering from droughts and increasing desertification, are generally inhabited by the least privileged and most oppressed people. Here, Okorafor's ecocritical message is perhaps expressed most strongly, albeit covertly. While the desert is frequently shown to be lovely and peaceful, it can also be harsh and Mwita describes himself and Onyesonwu as "as hated as the desert" (*Who Fears Death*, 210). People in Jwahir rely on "capture station water forcibly pulled from the sky" (*Who Fears Death*, 192), which shows that life in the dryer regions of the East is not easy. The contrast between Jwahir, where the Okeke live, and the wealthier and more fertile Nuru territory is certainly no coincidence. Rather it mirrors the distribution of environmental resources outside the novel since previously colonized nations still suffer from the imposed colonial attitude to nature, which frequently resulted in "damaging established ecosystems, reducing soil fertility, or even, as in the case of the Sahara, [...] in desertification" (Huggan and Tiffin 2007, 1). The novel's prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, even hints at climate change as the origin of the harsher and dryer environments (cf. Death 2021, 9), albeit artificially accelerated by the eponymous Phoenix turning into an all-destroying second sun.

Unsurprisingly, Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* takes a strong stand against such inequality and oppression, structuring the quest around Onyesonwu's desire to not only stop the genocide originating in Daib's fertile lands in the west but also stop the continued exploitation and vilification of the Okeke. As already briefly mentioned above, Okorafor uses post-apocalyptic situations and complete upheavals to facilitate changes in society and a true postcolonial culture – after all, even though there are still stark power hierarchies between the Nuru and the Okeke, there is no mention at all of white people, and the conflict seems to be an entirely African one, with no reference to colonial history. Still, the first apocalyptic upheaval has not been successful in eradicating oppression – perhaps indicating that the struggle for equality has to be a continuing one. The cyclical history inherent to the fantasy genre of the portal-quest thus becomes a powerful reminder for the readers situated in the 'actual world'[28] that any attempt to dismantle colonial and (neo-)colonial structures as well as other oppressive dynamics (for example, a gender-based one between men and women) requires ongoing vigilance. Okorafor showcases one of the strategies employed in the push-back to colonial discourse through Onye's quest to dismantle colonial, oppressive discourse in her own futuristic world – the rewriting of the Great Book, the text that serves as both founding text for the current society as well as justification for the enslavement of the Okeke. In doing so, Okorafor evokes the well-known literary practice of rewriting or writing back to the canon that has been present in postcolonial writing and scholarship since the earliest attempts by colonized people to represent themselves in literature rather than be misrepresented by the colonisers. Through framing her story of rewriting as fantasy story, Okorafor is also able to address a common trope of fantasy fiction, called 'downloaded history' by Mendlesohn, which is one of the reasons fantasy and the quest fantasy in particular are often seen as colonial in nature themselves.

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[28] The term 'actual world' is more controversial as it might at first glance appear. Kathryn Hume describes not one but "two other *cosmoi* [...] - namely, the world surrounding the author (world-1) and that enfolding the reader (world-2). World-1 is everything outside the author that impinges upon him, consciously or unconsciously. It both reflects and shapes his scale of values. The elements an author creates with come from world-1. If the literature is especially successful, it makes its mark not just on members of the audience but, through them, on world-2, everything that impinges on the lives of members of the audience" (1984, 9).

Accordingly, despite taking bits and pieces from canonical fantasy patterns that are all too often deemed as 'Western', Okorafor is far from derivative and certainly does not merely adapt or subvert the Western fantasy narrative – she transforms it, fills it with content inspired by a variety of African countries, most prominently Nigeria and Sudan in *Who Fears Death*, and subverts those tropes, which are most imperialist about it, especially when it comes to the (portal-)quest fantasy. Certain of the elements, which fail to follow Senior's or Mendlesohn's pattern, seem to do this deliberately. At its most superficial level, Okorafor's subversion is as basic as having the heroes travel to the terrible land of West, not the East, as is usual in fantasy fiction, but her challenge to the patterns of typical fantasy goes much deeper than this, from the destined-hero-versus-the-dark-lord constellation to Mendlesohn's "downloaded histories" and "fragments of prophecy" (Mendlesohn 8). Prophecies abound in traditional portal quest fantasies and, according to Diane Wynne Jones' parody text *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, "[a]ll prophecies come true" (Wynne Jones 162). Onye's encounter with her father is also foretold in what seems to be a typical fantasy prophecy and the Nuru-Okeke conflict seems to be due to an ancient conflict, which is transmitted to the characters via the medium of the Great Book, which allegedly tells the story of the world they live in. Both are challenged and neither turn out to be completely correct, as they should be if the novel followed the patterns Mendlesohn has identified for the portal-quest fantasy. The prophecy is revealed shortly before Onyesonwu starts her apprenticeship with sorcerer Aro and is presented by the same storyteller who brings stories of genocide from the West. It goes as follows:

> 'There's a prophecy by a Nuru Seer living on a tiny island in the Unnamed Lake. He says a Nuru man and force the Great Book's rewriting. He'll be very tall with a long beard. His mannerisms will be gentle, but he will be cunning and full of vigor and fury. A sorcerer. When he comes, there will be good

> change for Nuru *and* Okeke. […] So have faith, there is hope.' (*Who Fears Death* 102)

While this prophecy is not entirely false, it is not completely accurate either. As the novel progresses, readers (and characters) realise that the sorcerer who will cause the Great Book's rewriting is, in fact, Onyesonwu – neither a man, nor a Nuru, but fittingly an Ewu woman and thus a person with both Okeke and Nuru blood. "The prophecy was wrong" (*Who Fears Death* 202), which challenges notions of predestined futures and the rigidity of preordained roles – both along the lines of gender and race, which are often upheld by more ordinary fantasy tales. Despite the subversion of the prophecy and the concomitant expectations, Onyesonwu is still confirmed to be "the chosen one" (*Who Fears Death* 252), but once again Okorafor brushes aside generic expectations with a wide stroke – being chosen is not depicted as something glorious or even positive. Instead, it leads Onyesonwu to the rather disheartening conclusion that "[i]t was all [her] fault" (*Who Fears Death* 252).

Of course, the racist structures, which Helen Young sees in popular fantasy literature (cf. 2015, 1-4), are already overturned by the fact that the narrative omits white people almost entirely, referring mostly to the dark-skinned Okeke (likely based on sub-Saharan Africans), the lighter-skinned Nuru (judging by the names and description, likely based on Arab Africans) and the Red People living in the desert. Whiteness is, in fact, so rare that Onyesonwu describes "the whitest man [she]'d ever seen" (*Who Fears Death* 133) in almost exoticising terms. "His wrinkly skin was white like milk" (*Who Fears Death* 133) and Onye finds his "his wet pink flat lips" (*Who Fears Death* 134) unusual enough to describe them in some detail, using three adjectives at once to characterise them. He is responsible for Onye's initiation that will allow her to study the Great Mystic Points and as such has to be a powerful magician – he is so exceptional that his presence may even be seen as Okorafor's way of subverting the trope of the "magical negro" (Hughey 544), a character who is typically "a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers", which "are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people" (Hughey 544). It may seem odd that Sola, Onyesonwu's mentor and powerful sorcerer who seems to preside over the initiation of every sorcerer in the country (and beyond) and who is the narrator of the last two chapters of *Who Fears Death*, thus being granted the final word and in a clear position of authority, should be a white man. However, when put in context of the ‘magical negro’ trope, it becomes clear that Sola merely represents the exception rather than the rule, indicating that white people, in Okorafor’s world, play supporting roles at best. It is a subversion not meant to denigrate whiteness, but to reorient the reader’s perspective into seeing whiteness as ‘other’ – after all Onyesonwu continuously draws attention to Sola’s white skin, “white face” (*Who Fears Death* 173) and other physical features that denote whiteness such as “his wet pink flat lips” (*Who Fears Death* 134) and “his narrow nose” (*Who Fears Death* 173) – and blackness as the norm. In *The Book of Phoenix*, the prequel to *Who Fears Death*, Sola is the last voice presented to the reader as well, though here he openly acknowledges that he is “a white man; [he has and uses] the privilege of unhindered mobility” (*The Book of Phoenix* 272-273), thus putting his apparent authority over the narrative in context.

The prophecy, then, is wrong in predicting Onyesonwu’s gender and race, but accurately predicts the forced rewriting of the Great Book (cf. *Who Fears Death* 102), which is the religious foundation of the world Onyesonwu lives in and predetermines the Okeke’s role as slaves to the Nuru. Its existence as well as its destruction can be seen as a tool to question and challenge fantasy’s “downloaded histories” (Mendlesohn 2008, 8), which cannot typically be questioned and promote a view of both history and religion as something to be received rather than to be argued with. In portal-quest fantasies, “[w]e can no longer debate history, in the sense of interpretation, analysis, discovery; we can only relate the past” (Mendlesohn 2008, 15), a position that is strongly critiqued in *Who Fears Death*, which is, as established above, still recognisably enough of a quest fantasy to allow for interpreting the rewriting of the Great Book as a direct response to Eurocentric quest fantasies to present history as unquestionable and as an attack on the widespread “reverence for the book” (Mendlesohn 2008, 15) as a (quasi-)religious text. Joshua Yu Burnett picks up on this and analyses the Great Book’s symbolic connection to the Christian bible as a religious text that “justifies not only a slavery-based colonialism, but also an active policy of genocide” (Burnett 2015, 142) while also highlighting its position as “the focus and a potential site and source of liberation” (Burnett 2015, 142) as a result of Onyesonwu’s rewriting. More than just an analogy to Christianity, the Great Book also explains the history of Okorafor's secondary world and justifies its present condition with regards to the relationship between the Nuru and Okeke, thus fulfilling the function of Mendlesohn's history download or club story. At the beginning, it seems to be just the type of information download Mendlesohn envisions – the Great Book is presented as a narrative that is "uninterruptible, unquestionable, and delivered absolutely in the mode of the club discourse: the travellers group around the narrator and listen to his (less commonly her) description of great events or political structures" (Mendlesohn 2008, 13-14). Chapter 14, fittingly entitled "The Storyteller", mirrors just such a situation, though it is a traveller who comes to the people of Jwahir to tell her story – perhaps already indicating that Okorafor is not going to leave the conventional tropes unchallenged. The storyteller announces that she will retell the "first story we know from the Great Book" (*Who Fears Death* 99) and which they "retell […] time and time again when the world doesn't make sense" (*Who Fears Death* 99), thus clearly stating the worldbuilding power of the Great Book. Through it, the ancestors of the Okeke are constructed as dangerous and evil scientists, who, because of their desire for 'progress', "bent and twisted Ani's [their goddess'] sand, water, sky, and air, took her creatures and changed them" (*Who Fears Death* 100). Mendlesohn calls this kind of discourse about history "inarguable" (2008, 14), which, of course, goes against postcolonial notions of history that demand that history is still struggled with and potentially rewritten and reclaimed. However, the 'Western' conception of history as fixed that the Great Book embodies is already destabilised at the same time as it is introduced. The storyteller goes on to describe the atrocities that are happening in the West, but claims that the Okeke, forced to suffer by the edicts of the Great Book, "will be saved in the future" (*Who Fears Death* 102) by reciting the prophecy I have already discussed above, which indicates that the Great Book will not stay the downloadable, unchangeable history the characters have so far received. Instead of denying "the notion of 'history as argument'" (Mendlesohn 2008, 14), Okorafor, on the contrary, reinforces it not only through Onyesonwu's resistance to accept the historical narrative that condemns the Okeke to slavery, but also via the (loosely connected) 2015 prequel *The Book of Phoenix*. While most of the novel is set in the near future of the Earth, featuring recognisable city and country names, such as New York or Ghana, its prologue makes its connection to *Who Fears Death* and especially its Great Book abundantly clear: It begins by stating that "[n]obody really knows who wrote the Great Book" (*The Book of Phoenix* 1) and then proceeds to list a number of religious theories as to the author of the religious text before moving on to the, (one assumes) actual answer, legitimised by the homodiegetic narrator of the prologue who tells the story of Sunuteel and identifies him initially as the "very first person to hear one of the many, many entries from *The Great Book*" (*The Book of Phoenix* 7). In the novel's very last chapter, it becomes abundantly clear that the stories of Okeke and Nuru, which, as mentioned above, are used to justify "a slavery-based colonialism" (Burnett 2015, 142) in a similar way to the Bible in actual world history, actually predate The Great Book, which contains, among other, unnamed stories, *The Book of Phoenix*. Interestingly, the first version of The Great Book is not a written book at all but an audiobook, narrated by Phoenix herself, thus privileging the oral tale over the written word – the narrative seems to suggest that this recorded tale has been sent to Sunuteel to rectify the previous oral stories, which constructed "the dark-skinned wooly haired people" (*The Book of Phoenix* 265) as the only descendants of the Okeke, who are being punished for the crimes of their ancestors. *The Book of Phoenix* reveals that these pre-apocalypse Okeke are, in fact, a mixture of people, that is, "everyone, Nuru, Okeke, and even these whiter skinned limper haired people [Sunuteel has] never heard of" (*The Book of Phoenix* 265) and their sins consist of recklessly experimenting with living beings, human and nonhuman alike. It establishes the Great Book, the founding text of Okorafor's secondary world in *Who Fears Death*, which revolves around its rewriting, as a rewrite from its very beginnings. Okorafor thus destabilises not only Mendlesohn's notion of downloaded history in the context of fantasy quest fiction but engages in a more complex discussion about the nature and power of storytelling as well as Western literary scholarship itself. The chapter directly quotes from Roland Barthes' famous essay "The Death of the Author," and in doing so both reconfirms *and* criticises the concept. It is presented as an "essay from over a hundred years ago, translator and author unknown" (*The Book of Phoenix* 266), which Sunuteel has studied in reading class and which has clearly left a deep impact on him. The following paragraph is quoted in its entirety in *The Book of Phoenix*, presumably to highlight its importance as a piece of critical literature underlying Okorafor's writing:

> As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (Barthes, qtd. in *The Book of Phoenix* 266)

Sunuteel uses this quote as a justification for his own rewriting of *The Book of Phoenix* by claiming that, since Phoenix is presumably long dead in the literal meaning of the word, the story itself is "separated from Phoenix as a child separated from her or his dying mother at birth" and "[i]t was up to the reader to *interpret* what the story really was about" (*The Book of Phoenix* 267). Sunuteel's rewriting transforms the Great Book, originally a multivocal narrative comprised of various "[m]emory extracts" (*The Book of Phoenix* 6), that is life narratives and testimonials, likely from the time of the apocalyptic event that brought Okorafor's secondary world into being, into "the story of The Okeke and Why They are Cursed" (*The Book of Phoenix* 270). *The Book of Phoenix* explicitly states that "Sunuteel did not specifically set out to solidify the Okeke as slave and the Nuru as superior" (*The Book of Phoenix* 27), but the world described in *Who Fears Death* shows exactly what can happen to a message that is interpreted by people once it is set loose from the original author. However, even the last chapter of *The Book of Phoenix* read on its own challenges Barthes' notion of the death of the author by showing how an author's identity and background informs his writing and may thus be necessary to accurately judge his messages. The Great Book, as gathered from *Who Fears Death,* promotes oppression of the Okeke as well as considerable amounts of misogyny, and *The Book of Phoenix* shows that both instances of inequality in the by then religious text are due to Sunuteel's own biases. His reinforcement of the idea that the Okeke – his own people after all – are cursed stems from the fact that he has experienced nothing else during his lifetime as he has "lived for a long time understanding his ancestors as slaves" (*The Book of Phoenix* 270). Furthermore, the danger of repeating ideas without knowing their sources – perhaps the most extreme version of the idea that the author is 'dead' and "the voice loses its origin" (Barthes, qtd. in *The Book of Phoenix* 266) – is emphasised through another quote remembered by

Sunuteel, separated from both its author and, perhaps even more crucially, its original context:

> This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility. (Balzac qtd. in Barthes qtd. in *The Book of Phoenix* 266)

Clearly, this remembered snippet of ‘ancient’ literature is what has informed Sunuteel’s rewriting of the Great Book and has led to its many misogynist passages, as pointed out by Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*. It is, however, not any random bit of literature, but is, in fact, another quote from that “essay still on [Sunuteel’s] portable” (*The Book of Phoenix* 266), that is Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author”, though the narrator gives no indication that Sunuteel is aware of that connection. Moreover, the quote itself is taken from a narrative by Honoré de Balzac, which Roland Barthes himself uses to argue in favour of his Death of the Author argument. It is, of course, taken out of context by Sunuteel, but Barthes provides what is missing in Okorafor’s rendition in *The Book of Phoenix*, namely that the quote is “describing a castrato disguised as a woman” (Barthes 1984, 142), thus calling into question whether the quote is meant to make a statement about women at all, let alone encourage Sunuteel in his views that “women more often brought death” and that, if Phoenix “had been a male, she’d have controlled her anger, channeled it into righting the world’s wrongs and probably not sprouted troublesome wings” (*The Book of Phoenix* 266). While the entire narrative of *The Book of Phoenix* preceding this chapter already discredits Sunuteel’s sexist point of view and the epilogue “Sola Speaks” reinforces Okorafor’s critique of the distorted and misogynist Great Book, representing “religious text[s]” and “creation myth[s]” (Burnett 2015, 142) as well as of “[t]hat silly little essay from so many decades ago” (*The Book of Phoenix* 272), the full force of her extended argument only becomes apparent when *The Book of Phoenix*, *Who Fears Death* and Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” are read together, thus highlighting the importance of being aware of intertextual relationships. Additionally, the connections between *The Book of Phoenix* and *Who Fears Death*, established through references to the Great Book, the Okeke and Nuru and recurring characters like Sola enables a reading of *The Book of Phoenix* and *Who*

Fears Death as a pair without explicitly declaring them as part of a series. Instead, Okorafor skirts the usual format of the fantasy trilogy or even the closely connected series by setting the prequel in the preceding novel's distant path. This is a strategy Okorafor employs in several of her novels, directed at both child and adult audiences, thus creating an extended universe of stories, which are all engaged in rewriting scripts and tropes from preceding fantasy stories and which will be covered in more detail in chapter 3.4., where I will discuss Okorafor's writing in terms of form. The complex argument that arises when reading the two adult novels discussed here adds to and complicates Joshua Yu Burnett's insightful reading of Onyesonwu's later rewriting of the Great Book in his article "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction". Onyesonwu's rewriting and reclaiming history is also clearly magical because her rewriting of the religious text does not only change the text itself but also the very fabric of reality – again, this seems only possible on the level of a fantasy text, but here, as so often with Okorafor, we can also detect that her fantasy directly impacts reality. After all, whenever a colonial history is reclaimed and rewritten, the way we view the world is fundamentally challenged and changed as well.

3.2. Organic Fantasy – Depicting Local Realities in the Fantasy Mode

Okorafor then deliberately subverts various elements of the Western-centric portal-quest fantasy but stays close enough to their original pattern for a connection to be drawn and for her intent to be instantly recognisable. Another way in which she disrupts the Western conception of fantasy is her novel's constant mixing of mimesis or 'realistic' writing and fantasy elements, which seem to be outside of consensus reality. Furthermore, the fantasy elements she does employ are drawn directly from her Nigerian cultural heritage and especially from her Nigerian American mixed heritage. This strategy is delineated well in Okorafor's essay "Organic Fantasy", in which she not only openly acknowledges that she does consider her writing as 'fantasy' but also explains what exactly she means when she designates a text as 'fantastic'. The abstract already provides a fascinating insight into Okorafor's own understanding of genre as she acknowledges that "her work is accurately defined as fantasy" (2009, 275) but "emerges as such from a different path than traditional fantasy" (2009, 275). Okorafor then first tells a story she experienced herself as a little girl:

> When my sister and I went to the back in search of a bathroom, we found ourselves on a small adventure, involving bulldog puppies, pink baby chickens, a short short, ancient, very dark-skinned woman with a cleaver, giant vultures, a nasty outhouse, raw meat and many flies. (2009, 275)

All these elements later appear in her short story "The House of Deformities" with one addition: "a black hole in the outhouse, one that led to hell" (2009, 275). Okorafor then cites the real atmosphere she perceived in that place as her inspiration for the addition of fantastic elements Interestingly, Okorafor also credits her identity and "complex African experience" (2009, 276) for her proclivity to write fantasy. The "series of cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian" as well as her "personal world view" (2009, 276) provide her with the kind of material for her writing that is best expressed in the genre of fantasy. Her frequent switching between cultures that blurs the boundaries between them and influences her own mindset is, according to Okorafor, accurately described as "literally changing shape" (2009, 278). She goes on to describe many of her experiences as "fantastical and surreal" and speaks of "Masquerades, ghosts, demons, fairies and spirits mixing with the mundane" (2009, 278). This could, of course, also be taken as a characteristic of magic realism if it were not for the fact that Okorafor follows several generic conventions of the portal-quest fantasy – as delineated above –, describes her own writing as "organic *fantasy*" (2009, 278; my emphasis) and is read by multiple critics and readers as fantasy literature, which makes her inclusion in this study of fantasy as world literature not only relevant and revelatory, but also necessary in order to fully understand global fantasy literature as a genre that can and does take on multiple cultural and linguistic influences from around the world.

Okorafor's strategy of "growing fantasy from reality" (2009, 280) is apparent in most, if not all, of her novels, but perhaps strikingly so in *Who Fears Death*. It is almost ironic that it should be the *Washington Post* who, as quoted on *Who Fears Death*'s cover, described the novel as "[b]oth wondrously magical and terribly realistic" since Okorafor herself acknowledges a *Washington Post* article as one of the initial inspirations for Onyesonwu's story. The article "We Want to Make a Light Baby" from 30th June 2004 reports on weaponised rape in Sudan, employed by Arab militias as "a systematic campaign to humiliate the women, their husbands and their fathers, and to weaken tribal ethnic lines" and was read by Okorafor a week after her father's death; both the article and her loss then inspired *Who Fears Death*. The conflict between the African-featured Okeke and the Arab-like Nuru is clearly based on the conflict in Sudan as reported on in the 2004 article. And, indeed, weaponised rape is also one of the Nuru's strategies. During the attacks, the Nuru men sing to taunt the Okeke women and tell them their intent explicitly:

> *The blood of the Okeke runs like water*
> *We take their goods and shame their forefathers*
> *We beat them with a heavy hand*
> *Then take what they call their land.* (*Who Fears Death* 19)

As in the *Washington Post* article Okorafor cites, the Nuru men actively seek to humiliate the Okeke and, in doing so, claim their land through the children they father – as in the conflict in Sudan, the secondary world's "custom [also] dictates that a child is the child of her father" (*Who Fears Death* 21) and thus the Nuru are trying "to destroy Okeke families at the very root" (*Who Fears Death* 21) by fathering *Ewu* children, including Onyesonwu. The patterns of genocidal rape are followed rather closely by Okorafor's narration and the connection between the fictional attacks and various genocides, which have occurred in recent history (or are still occurring) are very overt. The song the Nuru sing directly references the taking of possessions and land, which is one of the motives of rape considered to be genocidal (cf. Pinaud 2020, 673). Moreover, the rapes perpetrated by the Nuru men also fulfil another function that indicates their genocidal intent: According to Robin May Schott, there are three reasons why rape, especially when resulting in pregnancy, can be considered as contributing to genocide:

> (1) forced impregnation reduces the marriageability of victims even more so than rape without forced impregnation, hence it reduces the cohesiveness of the victimized community; (2) forced impregnation occupies the womb of the

> victim, hence interferes with the victim's ability to bear children of her own group; and (3) forced impregnation results in the birth of an enemy […]. (Schott 2011, 9)

While Najeeba, Onyesonwu's mother, is already married, the rape results in her husband rejecting her (cf. *Who Fears Death* 24) and Najeeba herself seeking refuge in the desert. Najeeba is excluded from her community, she is "silenced, traumatized, or stigmatized and hence withdrawn from the public space" (Schott 2011, 14) – even when she enters an Okeke village where she is unknown to ask for help for her baby daughter, she is not only ostracised and attacked, but also literally 'silenced' as she seems to have lost her voice as a result of the rape. The reason for the attack is that Onyesonwu is instantly recognisable as the 'enemy' – Onyesonwu is an *Ewu* child, "conceived through violence" (*Who Fears Death* 26) and her "skin and hair color were the odd shade of the sand" (*Who Fears Death* 26), which means that she looks neither like the Okeke nor like the Nuru. *Ewu* children are universally hated and discriminated against precisely because their violent conception is so visible. They "suffer forced expulsion from the mother's community" (Schott 2011, 14) and are thus also victims of genocide even if they survive into adulthood. They undergo a

> [s]ocial death [which] focuses not on the physical destruction of a group, but it harms the 'social vitality' of the group, the relations of family, community, and intergenerational relations that give meaning to one's identity and links one to both past and future. (Schott 2011, 10)

This social death is not a side effect of the Nuru's actions; it is the express purpose of the rapes as the "Nuru had planted poison" and "sought to destroy Okeke families at the very root" (*Who Fears Death* 21), which is a common theme in genocidal rapes across different conflicts, including the civil wars in Sudan.

Evidently then, Okorafor succeeds in depicting the Okeke-Nuru dynamic as a parallel to "the Sudanese conflicts […] between Arabs and black Africans" (Hale 2010, 105). Interestingly, however, Okorafor simplifies the true complexity of the situation, perhaps in order to adhere to the "discourse […] perpetuated in the international arena" (105) that pits two groups perceived as racially different against each other. According to Sondra Hale,

> [i]n Darfur, the 'Arabs' are indigenous, black, and African, and often cannot be racially distinguished from the 'indigenous people they are portrayed as attacking for racial reasons. (Hale 2010, 105)

In contrast to that, the physical differences between Nuru and Okeke are portrayed as obvious by Okorafor:

> The Nuru people had yellow-brown skin, narrow noses, thin lips, and brown or black hair that was like a well-groomed horse's mane. The Okeke had dark brown skin, wide nostrils, thick lips, and thick black hair like the hide of a sheep. *(Who Fears Death* 26)

Nuru and Okeke are thus markedly different and, additionally, fairly easily recognisable as the alleged opponents in the Sudanese conflicts, lighter-skinned Arabs and dark-skinned Africans. *Ewu* children, the result of intercourse between Nuru and Okeke (both forced and voluntary), *always* look different than either parent, which indicates that not genetics but magic is in some way at play here. It is then conceivable that the appearances of Nuru and Okeke are not meant to be mimetic in the first place but rather serve to make the conflict more obvious while at the same time highlighting the deliberate racialisation of rape in Darfur. Even though the rapist may be "as dark-skinned as she is" (Hale 2010, 111), the "[g]enocidal rape marks difference by attacking the 'other,'" (112) while at the same time allowing for a 'deracination' (cf. 111) of the resulting children and their subsequent perception as 'the enemy'. Indeed, Daib, Onyesonwu's father, was convinced that Najeeba "should have given [him] a great, great son" (*Who Fears Death* 395) instead of Onyesonwu, who thus not only subverts Daib's expectations but also the prophecy that foretells her eventual victory as the deeds of a Nuru man.

Even aside from the real-life connection, the rape of Onyesonwu's mother, which sets the entire, albeit faulty prophecy and the eventual rewriting of the Great Book in motion, exemplifies Okorafor's intricate intertwining of fantasy and reality.

Not only is the entire scenario based on the conflict between Arab Africans and Black Africans in Sudan but the scene itself is described in violent, gruelling terms: Najeeba is "grabbed [...] by her thick black braids and dragged [...] several feet from the others" (*Who Fears Death* 18f.). Before the rape starts, her rapist sets a recording device on the ground beneath the two of them, highlighting not only the reality of what is happening, but also clearly establishing the Nuru man as cruel and proud of his crime. The rape itself is no less gruelling in its description: "He pulled her legs apart and kept singing as he bore into her" (*Who Fears Death* 20) and when Najeeba resists, he threatens her with a knife and "bore more deeply into her" (*Who Fears Death* 20). Her reaction to being raped seems to be drawn entirely from reality as she "went cold, then numb, then quiet" and "became two eyes watching it happen" (*Who Fears Death* 20). This could easily be read as dissociation, a response to a traumatic event, which often features a derealized and depersonalized experience of the world" (Pederson 2020, 223). The subsequent explanation that "her Alusi, that ethereal part of her with the ability to silence pain and observe, came forward" (*Who Fears Death* 20) could simply be construed as a supernatural explanation for a real phenomenon, thus grounding the story in reality and establishing the description of Najeeba's rape as a mimetic portrayal. Certainly, Najeeba's "out-of-body experience" (Pederson 2020, 223) is not at all unusual according to trauma theory, especially when combined with Najeeba's distanced observation, during which "[h]er mind recorded events like the man's device. Every detail" (*Who Fears Death* 20-21), which aligns with the theories of Richard McNally, who, according to literary scholar Joshua Pederson, posits that "the traumatic memory, rather than being unclaimed, is deeply etched and perhaps even preternaturally detailed" (Pederson 2020, 220). However, the novel eventually reveals that what seems to be – and perhaps *is*, to some extent, – dissociative behaviour is in fact indicative of Najeeba's own magic power. As Mwita, Onye's partner, explains, her mother "can travel within, she can *alu*" (*Who Fears Death* 333), that is, her withdrawal into herself, her Alusi, is an actual magical capacity that allows her to exit her body during her rape in a literal sense – thus dissociation, a real-life coping strategy, becomes for Okorafor a mystical means of escaping torture but also, crucially, an empowering ability, which frees Onye's mother from bodily restraints and is explicitly located within an array of 'traditional' fantasy tropes as is established when Onyesonwu encounters her mother during one of her Alusi flights.[29] It makes sense, then, to view Najeeba's behaviour both as an intrinsic supernatural ability – after all, she is able to take flight in non-traumatic situations as well – and as a completely realist depiction of a trauma response.

Another instance during which Okorafor skilfully combines African reality with the magical mechanics of her 'secondary world' is the ceremony of the Eleventh Rite. As Onye informs us, "[t]he Eleventh Rite is a two thousand-year-old-tradition held on the first day of rainy season. It involves the year's eleven-year-old girls" (*Who Fears Death* 34). At this point, it might as well be a regular coming-of-age ritual, common to many fantasy novels – perhaps, the reader might suspect, it involves some kind of magic or a sort of mystical test that the girls will have to pass. But then Onye continues, first stating that her mother disapproves of the rite because of its primitive nature, and complains: "[…] I grew up sure that all the circumcising would happen to the other girls, girls *born* in Jwahir." (*Who Fears Death* 34) The issue Okorafor has chosen to tackle here is female genital circumcision, which she criticizes harshly without, however, portraying the girls as victims. The process itself has been discussed widely in both fictional and critical texts without, however, drawing any consensus. Chielozona Eze, for example, in a chapter on Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Warsan Shire's poetry, calls the procedure "an archaic ritual practiced in most parts of Africa" (95), though she acknowledges African feminist writers like Oyeronke Oyewumi, who "sees some agency in the fact that some African women willfully take part in and even insist on their daughters taking part in the ritual" (100), which corresponds to Okorafor's depiction of the ritual, which is entirely led by women, though Onye's mother's distaste for the ritual, which she deems "primitive and useless" (*Who Fears Death* 34), adds to Okorafor's criticism of the practice, which is most clearly expressed through the means of fantasy elements surrounding the Eleventh Rite.

In *Who Fears Death*, the Eleventh Rite is indeed carried out by women, who are respected in their community and "guard the crossroads between womanhood and girlhood" (*Who Fears Death* 38) – they are the Ada, a priestess, "the town healer" (Who Fears Death 38), the "[m]arket seamstress" (*Who Fears Death* 38), an architect, a respected "[m]other of fifteen" (*Who Fears Death* 38) and "Nana the Wise", an "imposing old old woman" (*Who Fears Death* 38) and they do indeed take on agency through the enacting of the ritual. Chielozona Eze may claim that the rite transforms the girls into "objects and means through which man achieve their ends" (104) and that they are "made ready to be raped" (105), thus denying any possibility of female agency posited by feminist scholars like Oyewumi. However, Okorafor's depiction, though certainly critical, is much more nuanced. It is obvious that the women presiding over the rite are genuinely concerned for the well-being of the girls. In their interaction with Binta, the smallest of the four girls that take the Eleventh Rite, they find out that she has been raped repeatedly by her father and consequently vow that they will "protect [Binta] and [her] happiness" (*Who Fears Death* 41), indicating that it is the Eleventh Rite itself that allows them to "finally do something about it" (*Who Fears Death* 41). While their attempts to protect the young girl ultimately fail, demonstrating that the patriarchal culture they reside in trumps the women's agency, their good intentions and the presumed benefits of Eleventh Rite, which turns the children into "child and adult", "powerless and powerful", whose "words will finally matter" (*Who Fears Death* 41) are an intrinsic part of the ritual and especially the reasoning in favour of it – it is an acknowledgement of the traditions and cultures behind the procedure, which recognizes them as not inherently evil, even though Okorafor ultimately criticizes the practice by writing that Onye eventually "uses her power to reclaim control over her sexuality by re-growing her clitoris" (Hoydis 2017, 184) and also "reverses the other girls' circumcision in order for them to have pleasurable sex before marriage" (184). While not denying the brutality of the Rite and its entrenchment in patriarchal culture, Okorafor also makes an effort to evoke, again and again, the benefits women – after all the primary agents in the ritual as depicted in the novel and often, also, in reality – may derive from it: The Rite allows Binta, Onyesonwu, Luyu and Diti, who "will protect each other, even after marriage" (*Who Fears Death* 40) to form a strong bond of female friendship, which eventually allows Onyesonwu to succeed in her quest to change the culture. At the same time, however, the rite not only stops the girls from experiencing full sexual pleasure, it is also performed with a knife that has been enchanted with "juju that makes it so that a woman feels pain whenever she is too aroused…until she's married" (*Who Fears Death* 82). While juju is a kind of magic that both men and women can wield in Okorafor's narrative, it is the male sorcerer Aro who treats the knife, thus referring back to the fact that "[i]n most African communities, only men are thought to possess the secret of juju" (Eze 2016, 105), which causes it to be employed as a symbol "for the uncontested power of patriarchy" (105), as Eze claims, though, again, Okorafor's depiction of juju is much more nuanced. Nonetheless, the Eleventh Rite is ultimately seen as a violent act with the "goal of controlling women" (104) and Okorafor uses graphic language to emphasise the pain and even danger involved in the practice, stating that "blood spurted" and a "body jerked" (*Who Fears Death* 42). Another girl, Luyu, starts "babbling" and then crying "as she fought with the pain" (*Who Fears Death* 42) whereas Diti jumps up mid-procedure, her face "a mask of terror" and with "blood oozing down her thighs" (*Who Fears Death* 43).

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[29] The following thoughts have previously been presented during the „Mapping the Mythospher", Conference at the University of Glasgow, 23 – 24 May 2019.

When it is Onyesonwu's turn to be circumcised, the detailed description from her point of view enacts an affective power over the reader, forcing them to confront the violence directly. As is typical for Okorafor, she also adds a layer of fantasy to her depiction of FGM, not to diminish it, but instead in order to highlight its gruesomeness. "I almost blacked out," (*Who Fears Death* 43), Onye says.

> Then I was screaming. […] I was still screaming when I realized that everything had fallen away. That I was in a place of periwinkle and yellow and mostly green.
>
> I would have gasped with terror if I had a mouth to gasp with. […]
>
> I looked down at myself. I was only a blue mist, like the fog that lingers after a fast, hard rainstorm. Around me I could see others now. Some were red, some green, some gold. Things focused and I could see the room, too. The girls and women. Each had her own colored mist. I didn't want to look at my body lying there.
>
> Then I noticed it. Red and oval-shaped with a white oval in the center, like the giant eye of a jinni. It sizzled and hissed, the white part expanding, moving closer. It horrified me to my very core. Must get out of here! I thought. Now! It sees me! But I didn't know how to move. Move with what? I had no body. The red was bitter venom. The white was like the sun's worst heat. I

> started screaming and crying again. Then I was opening my eyes to a cup of water. Everyone's face broke into a smile. (*Who Fears Death* 43-44)

The circumcision takes Onye into a different realm of existence, the so-called wilderness where spirits roam and which she here accesses for the very first time. It is not coincidental that she vanishes into this realm while she is cut, and while she dwells there, she is confronted with her enemy, the Nuru magician – and her biological father – she will have to defeat, thus linking the 'real' experience of being circumcised to her role within the quest narrative. While the transgression into the wilderness itself is not necessarily negatively connotated, in this instance, it endangers Onyesonwu by drawing her father's attention to her, which, perhaps, draws a further connection between female genital excision and the patriarchal control of women, as argued by Eze. It is later confirmed that the Eleventh Rite is indeed the cause for Onyesonwu's transgressing of the boundary between life and death, as Aro states that "[t]he clitoris or penis, when put through that kind of trauma, will take sensitive ones there" (*Who Fears Death* 150), which supports Eze's suggestion that Onyesonwu herself may "exhibit[…] symptoms of trauma" (104) and adds to Okorafor's overall criticism of the practice as a traumatic violation of the individual female body. Her use of magic elements in depicting a still contemporary practice that inflicts pain and has harmful effects on female bodies serves to reinforce her argument by linking the procedure to excruciating pain, magnified by Onyesonwu's sensitivity, as well as to the existential threat posed by Onyesonwu's father, thus commenting on the assumed patriarchal nature of the ritual, despite the presence of a council of presiding women.

3.3. Spirits in the Books – The Interaction between Literary Fantasy and Religion in Nnedi Okorafor's Work

The separation of chapters between Nnedi Okorafor's mixing of reality and fantasy and her linkage of fantasy and religious or spiritual ideas is not meant to suggest that the epistemologies arising from the belief systems underlying Okorafor's fantasy are in any way unreal – Okorafor herself is always clear about the fact that the inclusion of certain concepts taken from (predominantly) West African religions in her fantasy novels does not indicate a denigration of those religions as less than real or as unworthy to be believed in. In a way, her use of religious and spiritual material echoes the fantasy writing of Christian authors such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who also incorporate their religious beliefs in their fantasy without thereby challenging their validity. Certainly, a high number of the spiritual aspects so frequently included in Okorafor's novels and short fiction is undoubtedly real in the sense that they are based on real-life practices that are still a vibrant part of contemporary Africa – and it is these practices and traditions that appear frequently in almost all of Okorafor's fantasy novels thus providing a connection between texts that may at first seem unrelated. One good example of this is the script nsibidi, which is a "system of ideograms used in southeastern Nigeria among the Ekoi (Ejeagham), Efik, Igbo, and Ibibio" and "associated with the male Leopard or Ekpe masquerade cult" (Nwosu 2010, 285) with "purposes ranging from romance to magic" (285). Maik Nwosu has identified "poetics of nsibidi" (298) based on the script's "essential character as a language of the crossroads" (287). Nwosu cites a number of dualities as nsibidi's most prominent characteristics – it is a written language that is "deeply concerned with cosmologies or worlds beyond the immediate" (292) and is situated at "the crossroads or the conjunction of the human and non-human world" (292) – since one of its origin myths claims that it was once used to communicate with animals –, in "the zone between the human and the spirit world" (293) and "at the crossroads between the oral and the written narrative" (295). Consequently, Nigerian literary texts, which use a poetics of nsibidi, may simply include the script by naming it – here, Nwosu cites Okorafor's first young adult novel, *Zahrah the Windseeker*, which references nsibidi but whose "structure of narrative" (298) is not affected. He also lists "emphasis on the affective power of the ritual utterance or enunciation" and a "weighty concern with cosmologies or trajectories of origin and the representation or renewal of an existential drama rooted in a myth of the crossroads" (298) as further characteristics of a novel following the poetics of nsibidi. I argue that, rather than merely referencing it, Okorafor's later novels employ nsibidi not only as a 'magical' language and thus a suitable element for a fantasy text but also as a guideline for the narratives' structure and deeper meaning with the idea of a crossroads frequently at the centre of the text. In *Who Fears Death*, nsbidi is first introduced as "an ancient magical writing system", which can be used to "erase a man's ancestors by simply writing in the sand" (*Who Fears Death* 104), which already implies the immense power that is supposed to lie within the writing itself, a message that is central to Okorafor's endeavour of reclaiming various speculative fiction genres as a postcolonial feminist writer. Further on in the novel, Ting, one of the Red People, tells Onyesonwu that

> [t]o mark anything with [Nsibidi] is to enact change; it speaks directly with the spirit. I've marked you with a symbol of the crossroads where all your selves will meet. (*Who Fears Death* 316)

Not only does this passage reference the concept of the crossroads – also reflected in Onye's frequent visits to the wilderness, the spirit world, throughout the novel – but it foreshadows the eventual rewriting of the Great Book, the relevance of which was already discussed above. The importance of the ritual utterance becomes fully clear when Onyesonwu rewrites the Great Book using song, later confirmed as Nsibidi by Sola, thus blurring the lines between oral and written narrative. This blurring of the lines, indicative of the poetics of nsibidi, becomes even stronger when one considers that the prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, states that the Great Book first came into being as an audiobook and has thus always been straddling both orality and written literature. *Who Fears Death* ends with an emphasis on liminality as Onyesonwu is "a fundamental shape shifter" (*Who Fears Death* 415) and thus always already at the crossroads between various forms, human and non-human, bodily and spiritual. The book presents the readers with two endings as a result of Onyesonwu's shape-shifting abilities – either she dies by stoning, her predestined end as seen during her initiation vision, or she "shift[s], sprout[s], envelop[s], stretche[s], and [grows] her body" (*Who Fears Death* 418) into a Kponyugo, a dragon-like creature connected to her through her mother's abilities. The novel thus ends with Onyesonwu both dead and alive, spirit animal and human sorceress, permanently at the crossroads, which leads to an ending that destabilises the form of the quest fantasy, which usually ends positively, and refuses to provide closure.

The masquerade, part of the Ekpè cult connected to the nsibidi script discussed above, also appears frequently throughout Okorafor's writing and – as is so often the case within Okorafor's work – her full interpretation of it only becomes apparent when read across various texts. The masquerade is an important part of various African cultures, “historically associated with religious and political institutions that reinforced social structures” (Lovejoy 2012, 127). In traditional religion, it is considered to “involve the temporary incarnation of certain spirits and/or deities by whom the human host of the mask is possessed, and whose performance is controlled by a spiritual and supernatural force” (Akpome 2013, 139). Contrary to European contexts, in which masquerades or rather the action of masquerading oneself is associated with “pleasure and entertainment” (Akubor 2016, 35), African masquerades are not considered to be merely people behind masks, but instead they “are the dead ancestors among the living, which is hinged on the belief that human life does not end in physical death” (35). This concept is closely connected with the notion of a “spirit world [which] is seen as a duplication of life here on earth” (35), which also contains the idea that spirit can still interact with the living and “transform into persons” (35) under the guise of a masquerade. In addition to the masquerade, the spirit world is also a consistent element of many of Okorafor’s novels, where it appears as “that spirit place where all was colorful light, sound, smell, and heat” (*Who Fears Death* 136) and which is generally referred to as “’the wilderness’” (*Who Fears Death* 136). Masquerades are connected to it in Okorafor’s works as well, but frequently appear outside of it in various forms. In *Who Fears Death*, the first masquerade the reader encounters is when Onyesonwu attempts to receive training for her *Eshu* skills, that is the ability to “shape-shift, among other things” (*Who Fears Death* 59) from the sorcerer Aro. His hut is guarded by a masquerade “a *real* one” (*Who Fears Death* 112), which Onyesonwu contrasts with the “[m]asquerades commonly appear[ing] at celebrations” which are “just men dressed in elaborate raffia and cloth costumes dancing to the beat of a drum” (*Who Fears Death* 112). This depiction seems to differentiate between the fantasy (masquerades as spirits) and the ‘reality’ (masquerades as men in costumes), thus potentially denigrating spiritual beliefs of certain African groups as pure fantasy, essentially dismissing a religion still practiced today. However, as is often the case with Okorafor, turning to some of her other works changes that perception profoundly: In her sci-fi novella series *Binti*, Okorafor also has masquerades appear and fulfil important functions. In the second volume, *Binti: Home*, the eponymous protagonist sees a Night Masquerade from her window,

> a tall mass of dried sticks, raffia, and leaves with a wooden face dominated by a large tooth-filled mouth and bulbous black eyes. Long streams of raffia hung from its round chin and the sides of its head, like a wizard's beard. Thick white smoke flowed out from the top of its head and already I could smell the smoke in my room, dry and acrid. (*Binti: Home* 89)

As with the Kponyugo, only men and boys are supposed "to even have the ability to *see* the Night Masquerade and only those who were heroes of Himba families got to see it" (*Binti: Home* 90), which is, contrary to the Kponyugo incident in *Who Fears Death,* pointed out as something unusual and potentially challenging to traditional gender norms. This is particularly relevant considering that the real life equivalent of Binti's Night Masquerade is "one of several cultural practices that are well rooted within the Yoruba people in the south-western part of Nigeria" (Okeowo 2013, 103) and "women are forbidden from viewing this masquerade and any woman who violates this rule shall be put to death to appease the gods" (103), which has already led to serious consequences for women, whose "freedom of movement is restricted whenever the night masquerade is scheduled to tour the town" (104) and who therefore cannot seek medical help on these nights if needed. The use of the night masquerade as a "cultural genre" (Ezeliora 2009, 43) and as an "aspect of Igbo mythopoesis" (45) not only serves to criticise potentially sexist practices from an inside point of view (after all, Okorafor does not criticise the cultural practice itself, but rather the exclusion of women from it), it also entrenches Okorafor's novels in Igbo mythology and epistemology. Crucially, there are two interpretations of the night masquerade available in Nigeria; either "that the Night Masquerade is a male member of the society and he comes out naked during this festival" or "that it is the ancestors or gods themselves who come down to clean up the land" (Okeowo 2013, 109), which allows for Okorafor's double reading of the masquerade figure. It is understood in most of her work as an important spirit figure whose "appearance signified the approach of a big change" (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 567), but at the same time it is mediated through a "secret society" (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 124), which is embodied by the (male) members of that society, 'speaking' through them. Therefore, it is possible for Okorafor to depict a scene, in which Dele, Binti's best human friend, steals the

> Night Masquerade costume. The moment he put it on, he knew what he was to do. And because when a man wears a spiritual costume, he is not himself, Dele found it easy to go to the Root. (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 125)

The Night Masquerade can thus be both fantastical creature and correspond to actual reality, which is another example for Okorafor's organic fantasy, which, rather than being in opposition to reality, grows out of it.

During one encounter with the masquerade, the entity "introduce[s] something into [Onyesonwu's] body" (*Who Fears Death* 302) that makes her hyperaware of her surroundings and eventually allows her to tap into the 'wilderness', an alternate realm that fluctuates between spirit world and the afterworld. Thus, the masquerade not only facilitates the 'big change' Okorafor associates with it but it also allows Onye to tap into the crossroads between human world and spirit world that nsbidi, connected to the masquerades through the secret Ekpe societies, both part of the actual world and Okorafor's secondary world, signifies. Once in the wilderness, she comes across what she "could only call a *Kponyugo*, a firespitter" (*Who Fears Death* 307) and who are, according to Onye's mother "kind, majestic beings" (*Who Fears Death* 308). The description of the firespitter clearly suggests that a Kponyugo, as Okorafor imagines it, resembles closely the dragon of Western fantasy literature:

> The size of four camels, it was the brilliant color of every shade of fire. Its body was wiry and strong like a snake's, its large round head carried long, coiling horns and a magnificent jaw full of sharp teeth. Its eyes were like small suns. It sweat a thin smoke and smelled like roasting sand and steam. (*Who Fears Death* 308)

The creature also has similar abilities to a dragon since it can fly effortlessly and is "not so different from a bird" (*Who Fears Death* 308). Additionally, Onye describes her later on as a "giant lizard of heat and light" (*Who Fears Death* 319), which is also reminiscent of fantasy literature's dragon, though perhaps more positively connotated. The Kponyugo encourages Onye to change shape to a Kponyugo herself and takes her on a spirit journey, during which she is "no longer human, no longer a physical beast" (*Who Fears Death* 310), which emphasizes the magical nature of Alusi travelling – first, the Kponyugo shows her the previous steps of her journey before moving onward to new places.

> The *Kponyugo* and I flew over vast lands; the dryness I had always known. Sand. Hardpan. Stunted trees. Dry dead grass. […] A long time and a long distance later, the land below suddenly changed. The trees we passed were taller here. We flew faster. So fast that all I could see was light brown. Then darker brown. Then…green.
>
> "Behold," she said, finally slowing down. (*Who Fears Death* 310)

Onyesonwu reacts with wonder and awe to the new landscapes the Kponyugo is showing her, which indicates that even on the level of the narrative, the fantastic elements are still awe-inspiring and arguably a departure from consensus reality in the way Katheryn Hume defines it (31). "Greeeeen!" she marvels, stating that it is as she had "never seen it. As [she]'d never imagined it" since "[f]rom horizon to horizon the ground was alive with dense high leafy trees" (*Who Fears Death* 310), which is a miracle to Onyesonwu, who has spent her life in a dry land ravaged by something akin to climate change. Eventually, the Kponyugo is revealed to be the protagonist's mother, which affords the scene an even greater significance than Onye's marvel alone. Its empowering function – it allows Onye to see the narrative of the Great Book, her society's religious founding text as incomplete[30] – becomes even greater when it is considered that Onye's mother, Najeeba, suffered greatly because of the Book that decrees that her people, the Okeke, are to be used and abused by the Nuru, her rapist's community.

Interestingly, the Kponyugo, despite all her dragon-like features, is never referred to as a dragon. Okorafor eschews the Western term and continuously refers to her "giant lizard" as a Kponyugo. Thus, she firmly roots the creature as well as her story in African stories and mythology, perhaps deliberately eschewing the writing back paradigm by not simply forcing the non-Western mythological creature into the Western dragon mould and instead replacing the figure of the dragon entirely, thus avoiding any danger of being reduced to "second-class creativity" (Schmidt-Haberkamp 2005, 247) that only highlights a text's debt to the hegemonic Western pre-text. More specifically, Okorafor here directly references "[i]mpressive helmet masks [that] abound in the region spanning the present-day national borders of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso" (Met Museum). They are also called Firespitters, which strengthens a certain familial relationship to the European dragons, though they are based on numerous animals. In traditional ceremonies, they can be used "to punish human lawbreakers" (Met Museum) and thus it is perhaps quite fitting that Onyesonwu's mother, who has been deeply wronged, would take the form of one. On the other hand, women and children are typically not allowed to witness Kponyugo ceremonies so it remains debatable whether Okorafor is transgressing a boundary that is not hers to transgress here or whether she is rightfully making a feminist stance in deliberately associating the Kponyugo with her female characters.

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[30] "If a forest, a true vast forest, still existed someplace, even if it was very very far away, then all would not end badly. It meant there was life outside the Great Book. It was like being blessed, cleansed." (*Who Fears Death* 311).

3.4. "Sola Speaks"[31] – Frame Stories, Paratextual Playfulness and the Okora-Verse

"Sola Speaks" is the title for the last chapters of both *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*, firmly connecting both texts together as part of what I have termed the 'Okora-Verse" in allusion to various narrative spaces of connected stories using that kind of terminology, borrowed from the scientific idea of the "multiverse". Already within *Who Fears Death*, the last chapter indicates a refusal of linear narrative structures; Okorafor instead chooses to employ a frame story, which is not restricted to the beginning and end of Onyesonwu's story, but intrudes into the quest narrative at several points throughout the novel. The first chapter along is complex in terms of its temporal structure – it begins seemingly simple with Onye's statement: "My life fell apart when I was sixteen" (*Who Fears Death* 3), which, while intriguing at the level of content, does not yet suggest any non-linear temporality, evoking instead the teenage heroine so common to much contemporary fantasy literature. At the chapter's end, however, an older Onyesonwu starts speaking – in italics to separate frame story from the main narrative –, situating the preceding scenes as having taken place “four years ago” (*Who Fears Death* 6). The following paragraph then establishes the narrative situation as it has Onye speaking to an unnamed listener who “want[s] to know how [she] got here” (*Who Fears Death* 6) and seems intent on recording her “long story” (*Who Fears Death* 6) with his laptop. Other than that, the frame story remains vague, referring only to Onye’s dire situation by stating that “[p]people here […] want to see [her] blood], they want to make [her] suffer” (*Who Fears Death* 6). The frame story next reappears both at the ending of Part II, “Student”, and at the beginning of Part III, “Warrior”, interrupting the narrative at the crucial moment when Onyesonwu decides to depart on her ‘quest journey’, which will ultimately lead to a confrontation with her father. It is Onye who stops her own narration, stating that “[t]hat’s enough for today” (*Who Fears Death* 175) and thus taking control over her own story despite the fact that her current situation within the frame story has her imprisoned with people waiting “to stone to death the one who turned their small world upside down” (*Who Fears Death* 175), characterising those people as “[p]rimitive” and thus “unlike Jwahir’s people who are so apathetic but so civilized” (*Who Fears Death* 175). At this point, the reader is led to believe that the people’s violent reaction is due to Onye’s liberatory act of rewriting the Great Book and thus reflective of people’s resistance to radical change, especially if the affected people are the ones who were previously privileged like the Nuru. This is not directly challenged at the beginning of Part III, though here, the showcasing of Onye’s ruthlessness (“I unplugged all the important circuits in his brain” (*Who Fears Death* 179) – hints at the violence she will ultimately inflict. The main narrative ultimately catches up with the frame story in chapter 60, fittingly named “Who Fears Death?”, and opens with Onyesonwu’s reflection on change: “Change takes time and I’d run out of it.” (*Who Fears Death* 409). This seems to run counter to previous conceptions of change throughout the novel, including Burnett’s reading of the novel, which posits that change is only possible after apocalyptic upheaval, but ultimately, the power of Onyesonwu’s rewriting is reconfirmed when she states that the Great Book “has been rewritten” and the “curse of the Okeke is lifted” (*Who Fears Death* 410). Onye’s own narration ends here, failing to draw the frame story to full circle and lead to Onye’s execution by stoning. Instead, the epilogue has a new heterodiegetic narrator, the Nuru man who was

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[31] *Who Fears Death* 415, *The Book of Phoenix* 272

Onye's audience for the preceding narrative. The epilogue seems to provide the closure one would expect a frame narrative to establish – in it, the narrator positions himself as both Onye's initial audience and the assumed author or rather transcriber of her story, stating that he "sat with her all those hours, typing and listening, mostly listening" (*Who Fears Death* 411). By framing Onye's story as a story ultimately recorded by a Nuru man, the text's reliability is questioned and the assumed closure through the frame narrative is instead unsettled, yet it is not entirely discredited either through the emphasis on the Nuru man's claim to be "mostly listening" (*Who Fears Death* 411) as well as his explicitly state cooperation with his sister, which serves to indicate that female voices are still privileged within the narrative. Despite the instability the closing frame narrative introduces to the narrative as a whole, the epilogue itself attempts to imbue the ending with a strong sense of finality – Onyesonwu is described as "a character locked in a story" (*Who Fears Death* 411) and the two siblings who witnessed her execution "burned Onyesonwu's corpse on the funeral pyre she deserved and […] buried her ashes near two palm trees" (*Who Fears* 413), seemingly confirming a linear view of time and narrative alike.

However, even within the prologue, the reader is prepared through several foreshadowing devices to expect an alternative interpretation for the ending. Something happens to Onyesonwu "when those rock hit her head" (*Who Fears Death* 412), though the Nuru narrator cannot explain it, merely describe that "[t]here was light that flowed from her, a mixture of blue and green. The sand surrounding her body began to melt" (*Who Fears Death* 412). While they are burying Onye, "a vulture landed in the tree and watched" (*Who Fears Death* 413), subtly hinting at Onye's potential survival since the vulture is one of the first animals she transforms into (cf. *Who Fears Death* 59). The two scenes are linked by more than just the vulture – after her transformation and the ensuing realisation that she is Eshu – a shape shifter –, Onye is prompted to think about fate. According to Najeeba, "all things are fixed" (*Who Fears Death* 60), a phrase that is closely tied to the Nuru man's later description of Onye as "a character locked in a story" (*Who Fears Death* 411), but, in contrast to that description, which casts Onye's perceived perception of her fate as "truly awful" (*Who Fears Death* 411), Onye decides that, because Fate is "harsh and cold" (*Who Fears Death* 60), it needs to be resisted rather than "bowed down to" (*Who Fears Death* 60). The implication arising from the connection of these two scenes is that Onyesonwu did precisely that – resist fate as opposed to succumbing to it by shape-shifting and escaping her own execution.

However, the ending nonetheless appears to be final at first glance. Not only is there a direct mention of "Onyesonwu's corpse" (*Who Fears Death* 413), which is typically avoided if the death in question has not really taken place, but the final sentence of the epilogue also suggests a natural endpoint, both through its position at the very end of a double-page spread and through its content: "It was the most we could do for the woman who saved the people of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, this place that used to be part of the Kingdom of Sudan" (*Who Fears Death* 413). The final words can be seen as a surprising reveal as well as another hint at the intricate connection between fantasy and reality in Okorafor's writing, making the aforementioned relationship of the novel *Who Fears Death* with the Washington Post article about weaponized rape in Sudan cited by Okorafor more explicit. As such, those words would, indeed, make a fitting ending for Onye's story, and it is clear from the layout of the book that this is the intended impression on the reader. It is possible to simply stop reading at this point while assuming that the pages that follow will contain nothing else but previews and perhaps an author's note. Upon turning the page, however, the reader is faced first with a Chapter 61 that contains only its own title, "Peacock", and a cryptic symbol, likely taken from the writing system Nsibidi. It is followed by Chapter 62, "Sola Speaks", which I already addressed briefly at the beginning of this subchapter as a first indicator of the connections Okorafor has her readers draw between individual works of hers. It refers back directly to Onye's last words before the epilogue with Sola confirming Onye's promise of the effects her rewriting of the Great Book will have, despite it not being immediately noticeable: "Ah, but the Great Book had been rewritten. In Nsibidi at that" (*Who Fears Death* 415). He also confirms that "Onyesonwu did die" (*Who Fears Death* 415) but only to then specify that her death was also among the things that were rewritten. Explaining the preceding symbol as that "of the peacock" (*Who Fears Death* 415) and giving its meaning as "'one is going to take action'" (*Who Fears Death* 416), Sola hints at a more logical destiny for Onyesonwu, which is then presented in the following chapter.

Instead of remaining "locked in a story", as the Nuru chronicler puts it, Onye uses her powers as Eshu and "shifted, sprouted, enveloped, stretched, and grew her body" (*Who Fears Death* 418) until she turns into the Kponyugo, the mythical creature she encounters earlier in the narrative during a (possibly spiritual) journey to a fertile landscape that clearly evokes paradise and foreshadows a peaceful future as its "vastness made the violence and hatred between the Okeke and Nuru seem small" (*Who Fears Death* 311) and thus easier to overcome[32]. By connecting this early journey with the not-yet peaceful ending of *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor manages to infuse the ending, which might otherwise be seen as rather bleak considering the death of all of Onye's companions as well as her own stoning, with a certain sense of hope for the future. In fact, this second "Chapters 1" forges a number of links with previous scenes from the novel, thus indicating not only the interconnectedness of events but also the impossibility of a purely positive or negative outcome: Onyesonwu's revenge and escape as the majestic firespitter could easily be read as triumphant, but Okorafor does not deny the violence inherent in any act of revenge – through Onye's fireball, the "three remaining men in her cell were painfully scorched raw as if they'd been lying in the desert sun for days waiting to die" (*Who Fears Death* 418), in itself a reference back to Najeeba's experience in the desert and her initial wish to die (cf. *Who Fears Death* 21-23). Onyesonwu's final flight profoundly destabilises narrative linearity, not just through the aforementioned references to earlier points in the narrative, but also through the allusion that her journey "to the green place" (*Who Fears Death* 419) transgresses time as well as space since, even though "the wave of change was yet to sweep by directly below" (*Who Fears Death* 419), the effects of her change would have been already visible in advance:

> If Onyesonwu had taken one last look below, to the south, with her keen Kponyugo eyes she'd have seen Nuru, Okeke, and two Ewu children in school uniforms playing in a schoolyard. To the east, stretching into the distance, she'd have seen black paved roads populated by men and women, Okeke and Nuru, riding scooters and carts pulled by camels. In downtown Durfa, she 'd

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[32] Interestingly, during Onye's first encounter with the Kponyugo, Onye confidently states that she will not be parted from Mwita as the Kponyugo asks "Could anyone take you from Mwita?" and Onye answers with a simple but forceful "No." (*Who Fears Death* 307). Through this scene, Onye's first flight as a Kponyugo is linked with her eventual escape as she flees her execution both to give her and Mwita's child a chance to live and to find Mwita again who she expects to find in the paradisiacal land shown to her by her mother-as-Kponyugo.

> have spotted a flying woman discreetly meeting up with a flying man on the roof of the tallest building. (*Who Fears Death* 418)

Breaking up temporality as well as narrative structure is, perhaps, one of the most prominent features of Okorafor's broader work. It is visible in Who Fears Death not only through the form discussed in this subchapter, but also through its futuristic setting that is nonetheless reminiscent of fantasy's typical historically inspired settings. The destabilising effect is even greater when taking into consideration that some of her other novels seem at least partly to be set in the same continuity as *Who Fears Death*.

Who Fears Death' prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, has already been discussed but Okorafor's *Akata* series can also be connected to Onye's narrative even though this is not explicitly stated at any point, neither within the text or in any paratextual medium. Chapter 13 of Akata Witch has the 12-year-old protagonist Sunny attend the "two hundred and forty-sixth annual Zuma International Wrestling Festivals" (*Akata Witch* 232). She witnesses a fight between the two wrestlers Sayé and Miknikstik – unlike regular sporting events, however, dying is a distinct possibility during the Zuma International Wrestling Festival and indeed, Miknikstik dies when his opponent "drove his ghost hand right through Miknikstik's chest" (*Akata Witch* 238). Sunny, unaccustomed to the Leopard People's[33] traditions, is terrified while witnessing what she considers an atrocity but Miknikstic's role in the narrative is far from over:

> Miknikstic suddenly got up. He gazed up at the sky as brown feathered wings unfurled from his back. He crouched down and then leaped, shooting into the sky like a rocket.
>
> "Oh, praise Allah! What a fight this was tonight!" Mballa shouted. "We have witnessed yet another wrestling competitor become a guardian angel! […]" (*Akata Witch* 239)

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[33] Leopard people in the *Akata* series are beings – not necessarily humans – who are able to use juju. Presumably, Onyesonwu would have been a Leopard person, too, had she lived in Sunny's timeline.

The connection to *Who Fears Death* becomes clear when comparing *Akata Witch* with *Who Fears Death*'s prequel *The Book of Phoenix*: A winged figure going by the name of Seven also appears in this stand-alone novel and acts as a guardian angel to Phoenix and her friends. He remains a mysterious figure throughout most of the book, but eventually tells Phoenix about parts of his life. He joins the Leopard Society after leaving for university – which slightly contradicts *Akata Witch*'s depiction of the society as Free Agents, that is Leopard people without Leopard family, are usually discovered much earlier – and eventually becomes a wrestler. Seven then goes on to state explicitly that he took part in the "two hundred and forty-sixth annual Zuma International Wrestling Finals" (*The Book of Phoenix* 212), that his "opponent punched his fist into [his] chest and smashed [his] heart" (*The Book of Phoenix* 213) and that, according to tradition, he then became a guardian angel (*The Book of Phoenix* 213). The connection between the *Akata Witch* series and the two novels set in Onyesonwu's world, albeit imperceptible if read alone, then becomes indisputable, which adds layers to the interpretation of both sets of novels. *Who Fears Death*'s connection to the real world (Okorafor's 'organic fantasy' used to depict reality), for example, becomes much clearer, considering that *Akata Witch* is set in a world much like ours where Leopard People operate in secret and could theoretically co-exist with the non-magical world that is assumed to represent current consensus reality. In turn, Sunny's prophetic vision at the beginning of *Akata Witch*'s first volume, which shows her the end of the world manifesting in "[r]aging fires, boiling oceans, toppled skyscrapers, ruptured land, dead and dying people" (*Akata Witch* 2), can easily be tied to the inferno caused by Phoenix who "blew across the earth. She burned the cities. Turned the oceans to steam" (*The Book of Phoenix* 260). Even though Sunny at first manages to stop the apocalypse, it can be assumed that it will happen eventually and in the manner described in *The Book of Phoenix* since the books are clearly set in the same universe. Yet the two apocalyptic events are also distinctly different as Sunny's apocalypse is caused by the goddess of chaos Ekwensu, described as "what Satan is to the Christians […] [b]ut more tangible" (*Akata Witch* 311) and as a "demented super-monster" (*Akata Witch* 312) who will reign over the widespread destruction. In *The Book of Phoenix*, it is Phoenix Okore, perhaps enacting righteous revenge and acting as the goddess "Ani's soldier" (*Akata Witch* 259). Again, two different interpretations of, presumably, the same event are offered across two different novels and even series. The link between the two series remains understated and the differing versions of events spread across the novels add to a conscious destabilization of narrative, highlighting the polyphonic nature of storytelling as well as the unstable nature of reality – which is, after all, ultimately no more than another story that we tell ourselves.

Nnedi Okorafor's Africanjujuist novels are undoubtedly both fantasy literature and world literature. Her works take on the quest structure utilised and stylised as 'universal' by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) and show how the quest can be truly global without an undue focus on the West. Okorafor achieves this by grounding all of her works in exceedingly localised settings, not identical with specific African nations or regions, but heavily inspired by them rather than by a vague concept of 'Africa'. This is aided by Okorafor's 'organic fantasy' approach, which allows her to extrapolate from real-life events to construct her various secondary worlds and settings, sometimes reflecting a cruel and violent reality unflinchingly. Reality is destabilised while fantasy is established as firmly grounded in reality – as lived experiences fuel fantasies, fantasies are also able to influence worlds outside the novels from which they stem. Okorafor's novels, for example, allow readers to see extremely serious issues such as war rape, genocide, and female genital circumcision through the magnifying lens of fantasy, thus gaining more empathetic insights that may well influence how they think about these events in everyday life. As has been shown above, Okorafor's novels, especially the quest narrative *Who Fears Death*, contain recognisable elements commonly associated with mainstream fantasy literature, such as the chosen one or the prophecy foretelling his (or occasionally her) arrival, but they are always subject to a clever twist that criticises established fantasy conventions as much as it reconfirms them. Furthermore, Okorafor's engagement with metacritical ideas of narrative and the constructedness of reality as well as with critics held in high esteem by literary theory, such as Roland Barthes, shows that her fantasy novels are just as complex and critically rewarding as so-called literary world literature is. While Okorafor's Africanfuturist works as well as her coining of the category of Africanfuturism have already been discussed in some detail and have entered regular use within academia, the term Africanjujuism is still less widespread and under-researched. This chapter has analysed Okorafor's endeavour to write "a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative" (2019, n.p.), showcasing the intricate relationship fantasy can have with religion and spirituality. While Okorafor's Africanfuturist novels perhaps demonstrate the merging of technology and magic (cf. Whitted 2016, 209) that Okorafor considers essential to her African identity more overtly, her Africanjujuist writing does not ignore technology – on the contrary, it seems to have merged with magic already, thus potentially allowing us to creatively subvert Arthur C. Clarke's famous law to state that 'any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology' (cf. Clarke 2000, 2) instead of the other way around. The following chapter on Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* certainly picks up some of these threads and likewise ought to be considered Africanjujuist, but as a whole, Africanjujuism and Africanjujuist novels by other authors than Okorafor certainly deserve more critical attention.

4. "Tolkien in Africa"[34] – New Fantasy Impulses in Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*

4.1. The Survival of the Author – Marlon James' Pop-Cultural and World Literary Influences

The previous chapter, on Nnedi Okorafor's work and its inherent intertextuality, contained an analysis of Okorafor's criticisim of Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author". Okorafor succinctly manages to highlight the major flaws within Barthes' concept, whose limits imply that, though it may be used to the advantage of an interpretation, it may just as well be discarded if the influence of the author's subject position is clearly visible in the text. Thus, it is only fitting that this chapter should begin with a broader consideration of its central author, Marlon James, as well as the influences that have shaped his fantasy novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* and will likely continue to shape its planned sequels. This strategy is facilitated by the fact that there are considerably more interviews with and articles on James available (both preceding and following the publication of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*) than there are for most works written in the fantasy genre. This is the case thanks to the author's previous perception as a 'literary' author rather than as a genre writer. Yet, with the publication of his first fantasy novel, James has certainly entered the community of fantasy writers and is, undoubtedly, writing so-called 'genre' fiction. While James is constantly engaged in challenging certain generic conventions, there is no doubt that the novel is supposed to be read as fantasy as the author has repeatedly commented on his love for the genre and his intention to write a fantasy with African characters. Interestingly, however, his previous reputation as a literary writer coupled with some critics' persistent refusal to take fantasy seriously has led to a number of mis-readings of the novel, which could be easily avoided if fantasy were regarded as the worthwhile world literary force that it really is. Such a change in the appreciation of fantasy literature is one of the aims this dissertation hopes to achieve – and it is long overdue, considering both the lack of academic response to *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* and the nature of reactions the novel has so far received. A review in *The Guardian* by Sukhdev Sandhu, for example, which calls James' book

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[34] Burnside, John, "Tolkien in Africa: Black Leopard Red Wolf, by Marlon James, reviewed." *The Spectator*, n.p.

"violent and cliched", seems to lack a basic awareness of what fantasy actually is,[35] despite the fact that the review itself has been placed under the category 'fantasy books' by the editorial team of *The Guardian*. Sandhu claims that "[t]he setting is a heady, fever-fabulated version of precolonial Africa" (Sandhu 2019, n.p.) and calls the novel "*Heart of Darkness* for video gamers, a colonial-era catalogue of cliches about Africa" (Sandhu 2019, n.p.), which completely ignores that, while certainly being based on a speculative Africa without colonial influence, the setting of *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is, in terms of the structures characteristic of fantasy, a so-called 'secondary world', which is not meant to reflect a real-world setting in its entirety. Sandhu's unawareness of fantasy tropes, which inform James' novel, is further evidenced by Sandhu's apparent surprise that "James even contributes a few maps he drew" (2019, n.p.), despite the fact that this is a frequent feature of fantasy novels worldwide.

Marlon James's decision to write an epic fantasy as his next project following the Man Booker Prize winning historical novel *A History of Seven Killings* (2014) has been nothing short of a surprise in the literary world. As Olivia Shan writes, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) received an "outpour of mixed reviews" (2021), undoubtedly due to the perceived disconnect between "literary fiction […] as high art" (Michael 2020, 31) and the "'low' cultural ghetto" (Michael 2020, 31) of fantasy fiction, as Rose Michael posits while referring to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015). The reactions to James's first foray into fantasy literature – as a writer rather than as a reader – were dispersed widely, according to Shan: The novel was either seen as an "overly bloated passion project or a genre-defying masterpiece", "bold and exciting to some and overambitious to others" (2019, n.p.). These reactions are comparable to the ones surrounding a similar case of a previously exclusively 'literary' writer 'daring' to try their hand at fantasy, the aforementioned Kazuo Ishiguro. Before publication, Ishiguro himself raised some concerns about the reception *The Buried Giant* might receive:

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[35] None of the other articles by the same author published on *The Guardian* website discuss a book that could be considered fantasy; so it seems apparent that Sandhu lacks experience with fantasy literature, which might otherwise have changed his overwhelmingly negative review.

> "Will readers follow me into this? Will they understand what I'm trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is fantasy?" (qtd. in Alter 2015, n.p.)

Ishiguro's considerations led to a broader discussion of genre, focussing mainly on the question whether writing fantasy ought to be seen as a debasement incompatible with writing literary fiction. Some fantasy authors, such as Ursula Le Guin, immediately took offense, stating that "[i]t appears that the author takes the word [fantasy] for an insult", which "reflects such thoughtless prejudice" (2015, n.p.) that Le Guin felt she had no choice but to respond. Others, notably Neil Gaiman, entered a direct conversation with the famed literary author, in which they spoke about genres as "marketing categories", useful only to "publishers and bookshops" (Gaiman 2015, n.p.) and the undeserved "wall around fantasy […], and a sense of stigma about it" (Gaiman 2015, n.p.). The discussion was also taken up by literary scholars such as Rose Michael, who observes a "current interest in the overlap between literary speculative fiction" (2020, 29) as well as a still upheld hierarchy of genres, in which "fantasy is even more disregarded than science fiction" (2020, 31) – there is certainly some truth to this claim, as is showcased by the fact that even to this day, James's 2019 novel has, to the best of my knowledge, only been covered by two master's theses, Madelon Janse's "African Influences, Dutch Translation – On the Translation of Orality and the Influences of African Languages in Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*" and Masiyaleti Mbewe's "A Comparative Analysis of Afrofuturism, Magical Realism and African Mythology in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* and Marlon James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*: An Afrocentric Perspective", with the latter even shying away from an overt identification of James's novel with the fantasy genre. There have also been blog posts, most notably one by Hugo Award Finalist Fanzine *nerds of feather, flock together*, which covers "The Space between Postcolonial Literature and Epic Fantasy", but apart from a review by Sean Guynes for *World Literature Today* the broader field of academia has been astonishingly silent on James's novel even though, as this chapter will show, there is much to uncover. Rose Michael claims that "Ishiguro's foray failed for many literary readers by being too fantastic, and likely fell short for fantasy fans" (2020, 38), but this seems to be an underestimation of the larger fanbase[36], who has only rarely shied away from deep and intricate fantasies, which are entirely worthy to be discussed and analysed as world literature.

Indeed, it becomes apparent in the various interviews and articles alluded to previously that one of James' aims is to bolster the status of fantasy writing by showcasing its ability to upend its own conventions and create settings, "where geographies multiply and stack up, where the boundaries between the real, surreal and flat-out fantastic seem increasingly fluid", which would allow critics to more accurately assess literary fantasies like James' in the long run. He thus directly addresses the "genre snobbery that we're only ready to acclaim stuff that's of the genre but different in some way", adding that he "didn't want to write a but" (Preston 2019, n.p.). Rather than qualify his fantasy novel as 'speculative fiction', 'magical realism', or 'literary fantasy' in some way, James wanted to write a fantasy that is unequivocally recognisable as such. Additionally, James attempts to establish fantasy not only as a literary genre worthwhile of (academic) discussion but also to highlight the global networks of fantasy, which have marked the genre from its very beginnings. Considering that at the time of writing this chapter, James' *Dark Star* Trilogy is not yet complete, his interviews also provide information about the trilogy's larger structural concept as well as its intertextual references, which significantly contribute to James' attempt to lift fantasy to the sphere of critically acclaimed world literature. Marlon James first announced his new project in 2017 and declared that it was going to be a fantasy trilogy, *The Dark Star* series, containing the novels *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019), *Moon Witch, Night Devil* (February 2022), and *The Boy and the Dark Star* (no release date). Rather than following a three-partite quest structure modelled – as so many fantasy trilogies do – on *The Lord of the Rings*, the Dark Star trilogy is meant to recount the same story in three different versions, narrated in turn by Tracker, the protagonist of the first and hitherto only published novel, and by the titular Witch and Boy of its sequels. This stylistic choice already indicates the author's intention to play with previously established generic conventions not only of the fantasy genre but also of the novel form itself, thus posing a challenge to Franco Moretti's theory that "in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system [...], the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development, but as a compromise between a Western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" (2000, 152). Of course, James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is hardly the first modern novel to arise from his particular part of the literary periphery, that is Jamaica, but it challenges Moretti's claim in so far as it draws upon formal predecessors that originate largely in Africa – though some Western influence is still present[37]. Furthermore, it is inspired by content derived from both mainstream Western literary and, more predominantly, popular media as well as African mythology, culture and orature[38]. James's oral influences are particularly important when it comes to establishing fantasy in general and his fantasy in particular as world literature. Oral features abound in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, as will be analysed in detail in the following subchapter, and they overtly reference what Caroline Levine calls "the 'great unwritten,' the vast quantity of cultural material that has circulated for centuries in oral form" (2013, 219). By drawing upon oral traditions in a variety of ways – being inspired by Greek choruses and African epics alike, but also employing more general signifiers of orality – James highlights two of the main characteristics of world literature, which, as Levine states, cannot be catered to by the written word alone, that is "portability and representativeness" (226). It could even be said that James expands on Levine's plea to include the 'great unwritten' into the world literary system by overtly using interviews to draw attention to other source material for his trilogy, which is not usually seen as literature – such as video games, movies and comics. James thus manages to both criticise and broaden the term 'world literature', which, both his writing and his interviews seem to suggest, is considerably poorer if it only considers literary works in the narrow sense, as valid parts of the world-literary system.

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[36] Of course, there are those fantasy fans who only seek out works following the basic formulas and generic conventions, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that either, but to believe that this is true for all genre fans does a huge disservice to readers of fantasy worldwide.

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[37] This is no doubt related both to market logistics, which demands a certain catering to Western audiences and also dictates what is read outside of the so-called metropolitan centre, as well as to Marlon James's personal reading interests, which include (but are not limited to) Western classics. In an interview with *The Guardian*'s Alex Preston, James speaks about predominantly reading "whatever cheap crap got dumped on the third world" (2019, n.p.), which did not include seminal texts of fantasy literature such as *The Lord of the Rings* but rather comics like Marvel's *X-Men*. Later on, his studies at the University of the West Indies likely included a large number of texts from the Western traditional canon, but his interest in storytelling from around the world seems to have persisted beyond university. He states, for example, that he is "still hugely into Greek drama, along with the poetry" as well as being "a big, big student of Greek and Norse mythology" (Weir 2019, n.p.).

[38] I use the term "orature" as coined in the sixties by Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu to avoid associations attached to the term "oral literature" that "incorporates and subordinates orality to the literary and masks the nature of orality as a complete system in its own right" (Moolla 434).

The variety of resources and intertextual predecessors which influenced James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* effortlessly showcase fantasy as a world literary genre, based not only on its author's positioning as a Jamaican writer living in the US, writing about "an ancient, otherworldly Africa" (Weir 2019, n.p.) but also on the global reach of James' search for inspiration. Multiple articles describe his 'wall of research', which includes images of a variety of places that have served as influences for the locations described in his fantasy novel as well as maps drawn by James himself, "based on kingdoms and cities [he] found in research, whether it's old England or Timbuktu" or a "mountain fortress in Tigray, Ethiopia" (Weir 2019, n.p.). James pulls together "[t]he panorama of sci-fi aesthetics (John Harris' sci-fi landscapes, volumes of Ursula Le Guin) and African grandeur (photos of the Mursi, Nuba, and Masai tribes; cutouts of Ethiopia's ancient castles)" (Reyes 2018, n.p.), *Star Trek* and *Superman* (see Jones 2019, 37), Dogon cosmology, "the *Tale of Genji* and the *Mahābhārata*, through *Beowulf* and the *Kalavela*" as well as "Africa's epics, such as those of Kelefa Saane and Askia Mohammed, of Son-Jara and Njaajaan Njaay" (Reyes 2018, n.p.) and more into the sprawling narrative that is *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. James' project is thus demonstrably global but also aims at highlighting and reclaiming localised particularities – a part of his work which becomes especially explicit through interviews in which he talks about his African influences, particularly, as James states, that places like the aforementioned "mountain fortress" serve as reminders that there are "buildings of such magnificence in Africa" (Weir 2019, n.p.). As such, James' fantasy is simultaneously similar and different from Tolkien's project "to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own" (Tolkien 2006 [1981], number 180, paragraph 1) despite being "cut off from all oral tradition" (number 163, paragraph 4). James' fantasy does not so much create such a mythology than it reclaims it from forgotten history and literary (predominantly oral) sources. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* draws on historical research on African urban and rural spaces, making them more widely known through its status as mainstream fantasy, but it also renders visible mythologies previously underrepresented on the global stage of world literature. As James draws from various African mythologies in particular, it would not be amiss to describe his writing as africanjujuist – as explained in the previous chapter, africanjujuism is, according to Nnedi Okorafor, who coined the phrase, “a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (2019, n.p.). As a Jamaican writer from the wider African diaspora in the Caribbean, James embodies exactly what Okorafor envisions when she talks about the spiritual as well as historical and biological connections between African diasporic writers, which allow them to draw from “African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora” (2019, n.p.) while refusing to focus on the Eurocentric West in any way. Indeed, the only reference that may be construed as related to Western-coded characters at all is Tracker’s encounter with the “[w]hite scientists” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 448), who allegedly gained their name not because of their white skin but “because they made wretched things out of nothing, and nothingness is white” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 448) – they also proceed to treat Tracker in a dehumanizing manner, which strengthens the association.

Additionally, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* can be seen as an attempt to highlight alternative gender and sexual identities, which likewise draw on older African concepts. Mixing African elements with a mainstream version of fantasy, marketed towards Western audiences, James has indeed written a “genre-defying masterpiece” (cf. Shan 2019, n.p.), which deserves more academic attention than it has so far received. While playing with different media, such as the oral epic as well as the novel, James succeeds in transforming fantasy as a world literary genre by localising the genre and its undeniable global appeal through deft allusions and intertextual references to non-Western, predominantly African, cultures and literatures.

4.2. Smelling of the City, Living with the Ku - Urban and Rural Spaces

One way through which James localises the fantasy genre and highlights the ‘Africanness’ of his work is the novel’s depiction of urban and rural spaces. Even though its associations with oral epics as well as its pre-modern setting may suggest that *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* belongs to a Tolkienian ‘fuzzy set’ of high fantasy, there are also a number of features that indicate a more complex affiliation within the broader fantasy genre. While high fantasies are especially well-known for their use of maps as "a frequent complement to the texts" (Ekman 2013, 14), which illustrate the "long journeys, majestic settings" (Ekman 2016, 466) and sprawling landscapes that are characteristic of fantasy, James' maps are different. Instead of having the more frequently employed individual map at the beginning (or end) of the novel, the maps in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* all indicate the beginning of a new part within the book: the North Lands (Part 1), Malakal (Part 2), Kongor (Part 3), Dolingo (Part 4), and The Ten and Nine Doors (Part 5) – only the last part, "Death Wolf", is not preceded by a map, which may indicate Tracker's renewed unrootedness following the death of his family. The first map shows the landmass on which the quest takes place, as would be expected in a high fantasy or quest fantasy novel, and the last shows a number of portals which allow for transport across the North Lands, in which *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is set. These maps then serve as "traveling aid[s], a tool for exploration" (Ekman 2013, 37-38) that helps the reader navigate the often sprawling landscapes of fantasy. However, the journey mapped by the two illustrations is not as linear as a typical quest journey but the portals shown in map 5 crisscross the map in a confusing pattern that reflects the irregular travels of the novel's characters as well as the danger involved in traversing James's map. Ekman also states that fantasy maps often contain a clear demarcation between "civilization and goodness" and "wilderness and evil" (Ekman 2013, 60), which is, however, not true for James's maps. Advanced cities, such as Dolingo and Malakal, are placed next to ominous areas like the Bloody Swamp or the Darklands. The remaining maps show the three main city settings of the novel, Malakal, Kongor, and Dolingo, but each has so-called 'wilderness' encroaching into their alleged civilisation, with Malakal city walls breached by the Old Malakal ruins outside the city proper, Kongor containing a flooded quarter and Dolingo being built on trees. All maps, however, remain conventional in that "they follow the modern convention of placing north at the top" (Ekman 2013, 25) in spite of the novel being set in an ancient past and – presumably – in the southern hemisphere. This modern convention and its continued adherence in fantasy novels unthinkingly follows a mapping practice that still centres Europe and the Global North despite the geographical inaccuracy that this usually entails. James here follows rather Eurocentric fantasy and mapping conventions, which is most likely due to James's education in a still British-influenced Jamaica.

City maps like the ones employed by James are so rarely seen in fantasy literature with its stronger focus on that which lies outside the boundaries of 'urban' civilisations that they – and the cities they portray – warrant further discussion[39]. The cities of Malakal, Kongor, and Dolingo are important enough to warrant full-page maps preceding Parts 2, 3, and 4 respectively, in which they feature most prominently, and their presence in James's novel fulfils an important function within his explicit aim to write an African fantasy – as such they also deserve closer consideration when it comes to determining how *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* endeavours to be a part of the world literary market while not sacrificing its local inflections or, perhaps worse, depict its mythologised Africa with the "colonial-era catalogue of cliches about Africa" (Sandhu 2019, n.p.) some reviewers see in the novel. Instead, it is Marlon James's declared goal to highlight "the great African empires such as Mali, Songhai, First Ghana, Second Ghana, great cities like Timbuktu and Djenné" (Frostick 2019, n.p.) by evoking similar grand empires and cities in his fantasy novel.

The city of Malakal is depicted on a map, drawn by James himself, as having four concentric city walls with forts or barracks erected in every direction to protect the settlement from enemies. While there is no scale for the map, the city's size in comparison to the nearby ruins of a previous settlement suggests enormity. Additionally, the ruins already visible on the map suggest the long tradition that already predates the city as it is depicted in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* since there are "ruined stumps of the old towers that stood long before Malakal was Malakal" (117) just outside the city limits, which "were from people who discovered the secrets of metals and could cut black stone" (117), which suggests that they were a fairly advanced 'civilisation'. The city is a wealthy, commercial centre, which contradicts stereotypes of Africa as mostly rural and poor. Furthermore, it is surrounded by grand, albeit decaying architecture: as a meeting place – and thus a catalyst of the quest ahead – the collapsed tower or rather towers occupy a non-negligeable role in the narrative and thus their surrounding mythology deserves some attention. The towers were built “when this was not yet a city” (149) and thus belong to the city’s mythic past, during which its first builders tried to construct “towers tall enough to get back to the kingdom of sky and start war in the land of gods” (149). The myth is specific enough to be adapted to Malakal’s history as a military fort and thus is a part of James’s creative fantasy world building, but it also mirrors well-known myths such as the building of the Tower of Babel – a story that has not only become global itself by the spread of Abrahamic religions but that is also an origin myth for the existence of different global languages – and thus different global cultures – in the first place; certainly, the inclusion of the myth hints at a shared repertoire of stories that can be seen as an early version of world literature as we understand it today.

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[39] Of course, the focus is markedly different in texts belonging to the urban fantasy subgenre, and in some regards, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* contains some elements of the urban fantastic. Maps are less frequently employed in urban fantasy, although there are some notable exceptions such as Trudi Canavan's *Black Magician* Trilogy or Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series, in which maps are a prominent feature on each of the covers, highlighting one of the usually urban areas that are centre-stage in the book in question.

The city also plays an important role because it is the first larger settlement that Tracker lives in after having always been “an edge man, always on the coast, always by the boundary” (132) but rather than showing Malakal as the metropolitan contrast to Tracker’s existence at the peripheries, it is depicted as a liminal space itself. “[P]eople are always coming and going” so it is possible to “stay in the center that never moves and still vanish” (132). It challenges the idea of a metropolitan centre and instead focuses on Tracker’s migratory lifestyle, which is represented in the novel not only through the quest Tracker takes on but also through the fact that he has no stable home at the beginning of the quest that he might aspire to return to. On the contrary, even when Tracker mentions the city of Malakal as a place he once lived in, the focus is not on the city itself but rather on Tracker’s eventual moving on: “One year I lived in Malakal, before I moved to Kalindar” (105). As is the case with many of the themes and concepts in James’s writing, urban and rural spaces in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* also exists on a complex spectrum, on which they enter various entanglements with one another, rather than being completely set apart by fixed boundaries.

The second city that is prominent enough to give the title to one of the novel’s parts is Kongor, where the child who is the ‘object’ of the quest was stolen. Kongor is described in overwhelmingly negative terms – its houses are “six floors high” (247), which highlights Kongor as a space that is both urban and strikingly ‘modern’ in its construction, though “the side wall looked like the face of man who suffered pox” (247). It is also a

> city with a most brazen love for war and blood, where people gathered to see man and animal rip flesh, still shuddered to see anyone bear it. Some say this was the influence of the East, but Kongor was far west and these people believed in nothing. Except modesty, a new thing […]. (254)

The passage refers to and rejects Orientalist as well as islamophobic stereotypes by denying any 'Eastern' influence on Kongor's violent tendencies. Moreover, the islamophobic bias towards the East is also dismantled as Tracker meets Mossi, a swordsman and the "third prefect of the Kongori chieftain army" (290), who is not originally from Kongor but from the "[n]orth, then east" (325), who is an intelligent and kind man and who eventually becomes Tracker's husband. It is a further indication that nothing in James's world is clear-cut and that he favours hybridised people, cultures, and locations. Thus, despite all its violence and brutality, Kongor is also a city where "even the poorest house […] had two floors" (255) and where even the 'lone wolf' Tracker can find love. Additionally, James also uses Kongor to reject other connections made by numerous fantasy novels, namely those between night, darkness and evil[40] "for in Kongor it is noon that is the witching hour, the hour of the beast, when heat cracks the earth open to release seven thousand devils" (315). The subversion here is certainly deliberate as James himself states:

> One thing that's different, for example, is what we associate with night: the witching hour, midnight, darkness is scary. These mythologies lead into troubling perceptions in the West that have spilled over into everything from race to how we look at evil.
>
> None of that exists in African mythology. In African mythology, it's high noon that's the scariest time of day. Vampires have no problem killing you in the daylight. It's like a Western—it's high noon that's deserted, it's high noon when people don't go out. (Vangel 2019, n.p.)

James's words are further testament to the multiple connections between different cultures and cultural narratives that become apparent in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* and contribute to an assessment of the novel as world literature. Kongor's witching hour at noon is not only deeply rooted in African localisation – it is after all the fierce midday heat that prompts the demonic danger – but also alludes to western narratives, a genre as Eurocentric (and western) as possible.

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[40] He does reconfirm them, however, when he portrays the so-called 'Darklands' as an uncanny space which is invariably threatening to all who enter it.

The last major city and location in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is Dolingo, a city ruled by a Queen rather than a king and perhaps the most otherworldly and 'fantastic' of the three cities discussed here. It is built on "[t]rees as tall as the world itself" (409) and looks so magnificent that Mossi believes it to be the home of gods. It may seem somewhat cliched that the city with a female ruler is also the one closest to 'wilderness' as it risks confirming the 'woman-nature' association that posits women as closer to nature than to 'civilisation' and thus establishes a hierarchical binary with women seen as being inferior to men. This dualism posits a number of binary pairs, such as "male/female, mental/manual (mind/body), civilised/primitive, [and] human/nature" (Plumwood 1993, 43), which uphold the characteristic hierarchy which favours the 'male' side of these opposites and "naturalise[s] gender, class, race and nature oppressions respectively" (Plumwood 1994, 43). However, this is swiftly subverted again as the city is also full of technical equipment such as "pulleys, platforms, and suspended wagons" (410) as well as "cogs, and gears, and wheels" (410)[41] used to navigate the city in the treetops. However, despite its natural beauty, Dolingo is shown to be even more corrupt and 'evil' than the other cities in what may well be seen as an indictment of so-called modernity, which, much like the combination of orality and writing discussed in chapter 5.5, "disrupts the generalized dichotomy of 'oral-traditional-old' versus 'written-modern-new'" (111). The city that initially seems to be the most technologically advanced turns out to be the most 'barbaric' in exploiting the most vulnerable members of society, as Mossi and Tracker realise when they find a boy inside a wall whose "[e]very limb – legs, feet, toes, arms, hands, neck, and each finger was tied to, and pulled, a rope" (434), thus making the city's many pulleys and other 'automated' contraptions move. Interestingly, this contrast within Dolingo also relates to the novel's fantasy content, potentially indicating that fantasy narratives can be more liberating than narratives dedicated to realism and modern technology – it is not magic, but exploitation that makes Dolingo work, and the supernatural monsters having abducted the child they are looking for may be less dangerous than all the violent and brutal deeds they are witnessing humans commit (cf. 435).

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[41] Interestingly, these lists of mechanical equipment are somewhat reminiscent of Tolkien's critique of the industrialised goblins in *The Hobbit*: "It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them [...]" (*The Hobbit* 74). While 'wheels' and 'engines' sound as neutral as 'cogs, and gears, and wheels', both are eventually associated with a heavy critique of the increased reliance on machinery.

4.3. "Blaspheming means you believe"[42] – Religion, Mythology and Fantasy

Religion and fantasy have long been connected in the Western tradition of contemporary fantasy novels, though this connection is frequently ignored when it comes to questioning whether the inclusion of still active religious ideas in fantasy precludes it from actually being considered fantasy literature; the question is usually only asked when it comes to non-Western fantasy, which then often find themselves designated 'magic realism', but no one has ever doubted that *The Chronicles of Narnia* are simultaneously fantasy *and* respectful towards Christianity despite the almost painfully obvious and fantastical allegory of Lion Jesus. The relationship has, in fact, been recognised for such a long time that even in 1975, Assistant Professor of Religion at Lafayette College, John E. Zuck, attempted to "clarify the proper connections between religion and fantasy" (587). While Zuck's article refers to Christianity in particular, his insights into "literary fantasies which communicate a religious vision" (588) can to some extent be transferred and adapted to non-Christian religions and belief systems. Zuck states that "fantasy can enlarge our sense of what is actual, possible, and valuable" as well as "revivify our capacity to experience the sacredness that is in and with our world" (589), which is certainly also contained in Okorafor's concept of 'organic fantasy' as it, too, can show the world as we know it through the lens of fantasy, thus reintroducing awe and fascination. Fantasy, rather than being diametrically opposed to reality, "can enlarge our sense of what is 'real'" (590) and thus allows for elements taken out of existing belief systems to be seen as both part of the fantasy and of certain, in this case non-Western, epistemologies that should not be dismissed. On the contrary, the use of religion and myth in fantasy can lead to "timeless and cosmic truth" (595), which, for Zuck, is undoubtedly Christian, but which we can redefine as plural and claim that fantasies may use pre-existing myths to highlight a truth and epistemology among many. A fantasy novel like James's then uses African mythological creatures not to dismiss them as purely fantastic but to reconfirm that fantasy can revivify non-Christian epistemologies as well. That is, of course, not to say that the Impundulu should necessarily be taken at face value, like an Irish writer using a banshee in their fantasy writing is equally not necessarily a firm believer in banshee lore but does engage in revivifying elements of their own culture.

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[42] *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 65.

Certainly, then, James uses figures from African myth to create a fantasy world that reflects not a Western secondary world but a distinctly African one. To this end, he introduces a number of different mythological creatures originating in various African countries. Some are only mentioned once or twice, arguably to add to the 'fullness' of the secondary world, whereas others take on more significant roles within the narrative. Early on, a description that contributes to establishing the setting as fantastic contains references not only to mythical creatures that do not seem to be very geographically bound, such as "creatures with grass hair, and horses with six legs" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 11) but also to "packs of abadas with zebra legs, a donkey's back, and a rhinoceros's horn on the forehead" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 11). While the description is detailed enough to function without a further explanation of the word 'abadas' – and, indeed, none is given –, readers who look up the term will discover that 'abada' stems from the "Kongo language of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)" (Wilson-Max 2013, n.p.) and that it refers to "a mythical animal not unlike a unicorn" (Wilson-Max, n.p.). Unlike James's version, the one portrayed by the children's book illustrator Ken Wilson-Max as part of his series on African mythical creatures has "two crooked horns as opposed to a unicorn's single one" (n.p.) and accordingly Wilson-Max's depiction resembles an antelope more than James's rhinoceros. Regardless of any discrepancies between James's mythical creature and a supposedly 'correct' version of the abada[43], *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*'s variant is firmly rooted in African realities. Another staple of Western literature has also been translated through the use of an African equivalent. Described in the novel's dramatis personae as "bush fairies and guardians of children", the yumboes are creatures from Wolof mythology, who are "said to be about two feet (60 cm) in height, and of a pearly-white colour with silver hair" (Wilson-Max 2013, n.p.). Wilson-Max, a Zimbabwean children's book illustrator dedicated to making African mythological creatures more well-known worldwide, acknowledges strong similarities between the yumboe and the fairies of European mythology, stating that they "come out to dance in the moonlight and feast on large tables, served by partially invisible servants whose feet and hands are the only part visible" (2013, n.p.) and who are sometimes called "the 'Bakhna Rakhna' (good people)" (Wilson-Max 2013, n.p.), just like the Scottish fairies called Good Neighbours, highlighting a locally inflected universality when it comes to some mythical creatures. In James's novel, the yumboes are mentioned only briefly as little people hiding under leaves with "skin like […] ash, hair like silver earth, but no taller than your elbow to your middle finger" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 37). They take care of children considered 'mingi' – children who were born with either physical or supernatural peculiarities and have therefore been abandoned in the bush. Interestingly, they here seem to be a much more benevolent form of fairies when compared to the fairies and elves of Western lore – rather than stealing children and replacing them with changelings, who are most often identified by just the kind of 'weirdness' that marks a child as 'mingi' in James's novel, they take care of children already abandoned by their parents. More or less brief references to mythological figures from African folklore that also find resonances in European folklore, such as the abadas (unicorns) and yumboes (fairies), serve as reminders of the similarities between various world mythologies and add strength to the argument that *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* can be seen as an example of fantasy as world literature, strongly tied to global mythologies, yet locally inflected. At the same time, the abadas and yumboes are not the same creatures as the unicorns and fairies of western mythologies, but they are distinctly different from what western readers are used to as the above descriptions have also shown.

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[43] It is unlikely that there is such a thing as one correct version of a mythical creature, considering that it may be a part of various cultures' imaginaries. Even Wilson-Max lists two additional names for the abada, "'Nillekma' or 'Arase'," (2013, n.p.) which indicates that there are already multiple versions predating James' reinterpretation.

In addition to these more or less brief references to various mythological creatures from a variety of African cultures, intended to aid James's worldbuilding, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* also features a number of such legendary beasts and entities more prominently. The antagonistic Zogbanu, the vampiric Ipundulu (Zulu, Xhosa, and Pondo) and Adze (Togo and Ghana), the tokoloshe (Southern Africa) (cf. Wilson-

Marx 2012, 2013, n.p.) as well as the eaters of human flesh, Asanbosam and Sasabonsam (South-central Ghana), are all derived from legends told in different parts of the African continent. Some have even been taken up by so-called international cryptid hunters, who posit that legendary creatures may in fact be simply as-of-yet undiscovered animals or even living relics of prehistoric beasts – Sasabonsam, for example, has found its way into George M. Eberhart's *Mysterious Creatures – A Guide to Cryptozoology* (2002, 473) and is there proposed as a possible surviving pterosaur. Using beings from folklore and mythology in fantasy literature is by no means a new development; it is a staple of the genre as even Tolkien's supposed "subcreator employs a number of various sources: elder fantasy, other literature, folk stories…" (Leppälahti 2011, 169). Merja Leppälaahti comments on this kind of intertextual strategy not only by analysing the two Finnish fantasy novels that form her article's primary material but by also listing a number of creatures that have already been translated into fantasy literature: "Celtic fairies, East-Asian dragons, Nordic dwarfs, East-European vampires… we can find all them [sic] on the pages of fantasy books" (169). With the exception of 'East-Asian dragons', Leppälahti's list is predominantly Eurocentric, which undoubtedly represents popular but misguided perceptions of the fantasy genre as heavily slanted towards Western cultures and norms. James's inclusion of a variety of folkloric 'monsters' then serves to introduce African elements to the landscape of fantasy – he is by no means the only writer belonging to the African diaspora to add to the fantasy genre in this way, but his previous prominence as a literary writer certainly helps to broaden his audience and make Western readers more aware of this lesser known but nonetheless vibrant segment of fantasy literature.

One of the most central creatures in James's narrative, the Ipundulu, is first introduced in a manner that mirrors early ways of sharing folkloric tales. It is a singer who first whispers "Lightning bird, […] [l]ightning bird, lightning bird, woman beware of the lightning bird" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 383) to initiate the sharing of information crucial to the quest at the centre of the narrative. At first, he insists that he will just be talking, not singing, starting with a rather neutral statement in the manner of a dictionary definition – "The Ipundulu is-" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 384), only to be interrupted by the witch Sogolon, who insists that he tell the tale as a song, "[i]n the way you raise to do" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 384).

Two pages follow on which he mourns the decline of griots while ironically employing one of the oral narrative strategies, that of the narrative detour, in his tale, oral on the level of the story, but written as part of James's novel. It is only then that he continues his description of the lightning bird, starting with a description of the gruesome results of his destructive powers, rather than with the bird itself:

> All around the hut death be stinking, but the foul coming from dead beasts, from cows and goats slaughtered not for food but for blood and sport. The fisherman, his first wife and second wife, and three sons dead but they did not smell. How to describe a sight strange even to the gods? They were all gathered around like worship fetishes, piled up as if about to burn. They have skin like tree bark. Like the blood, the flesh, the humors, the rivers of life, something suck it all out. The first and second wife, both of them chest cut open and they heart rip out. But not before he bite them all over the neck and rape them, leaving his dead seed to grow rot in they womb. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 386)

The passage is rife with James's characteristic, often sexualised violence towards women – an element of his writing that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter – but there can be no doubt that the chapter evokes the lightning bird vividly. The passage that follows confirms that crucial parts of the Ipundulu myth are left intact by James: the Ipundulu is "a white bird" and "handsome" (386), which serves to lure some people into thinking that he is harmless. He is, however, highly aggressive, especially when untethered from the "with who control him" (386). This corresponds to folkloric descriptions of the lightning bird which describe him as beautiful when in human form and vampiric in nature (Hammond-Tooke 129). His bloodthirsty brutality is also not an addition by James but instead is rooted in traditional folklore as the Ipundulu "attacks both cattle and humans, drinking their blood and consuming their flesh" and "enjoys the pain and torment it causes" (Bane 77). James's narrative can thus be considered as a means of reviving such African stories by bringing them into the contemporary world of literature – following Merja Leppälathi then, folklore such as that of the Ipundulu but also with regards to the other 'mythical' creatures depicted in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* can be seen as a "process" going through different life stages (170). Lauri Honko, who Leppälathi draws ideas from, identifies two 'lives' of folklore; the first, in which folklore is still lived and believed in, and the second, in which "folklore is used, for example, in folk festivals" (Leppälathi 2011, 170) and "can be related in emancipation, cultural politics, commercial use, and so on" (170). James's novel can be seen partly in that light as it certainly does not only employ African folklore for commercial use but also within the context of cultural politics when it comes to an increased focus on African sources for mainstream fantasy.

4.4. Not All Over the Place, Just Fluid – Gender and Sexuality

As scholars of James's other novels have stated, his "works of fiction cannot be said to focus on women overall" (Shoemaker 2018, 31) and the same can be said for *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. Nonetheless, women do feature, albeit in predominantly negative roles – so much so that various reviewers have commented on the lack of positive female representation, with the *Guardian*'s Sukhdev Sandhu arguing that James's first fantasy novel presents "a colonial-era catalogue of cliches about Africa – a continent where life is cheap, the women sexual commodities, the inhabitants duplicitous, all values negotiable" (2019, n.p.). Albert Williams from the internet platform Black & Bookish states that *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a work of

> blatant misogyny. A search for a positive depiction of a female character in Black Leopard, Red Wolf will be futile. Witches, irresponsible mothers and harlots are littered throughout the novel without much effort in developing these women beyond this one-dimensional view. (Williams 2019, n.p.)

It would seem, then, that these two reviewers view *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* as no different from Western fantasy novels with regards to how it treats its female characters, perhaps, as White male authors so often claim, for the sake of historical authenticity. In James's case, this fantasy misogyny may even be worse than in White authors' works – as problematic as this unfortunate consequence of a lack of diversity in mainstream fantasy is – because it then risks spreading just such a "colonial-era catalogue of cliches about Africas" (Sandhu 2019, n.p.) among the broader, global fantasy readership.

Thus, it is important in the context of this study to analyse the actual depiction of women in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* and establish how James's female characters may interact with the demands of a global literary market, which may still expect a certain violence when it comes to African or African diasporic writing, and the localised foundation of James's fantasy as well as his previously established tendency to challenge established heteronormativity and gender expectations. The first female character of any greater significance in Tracker's life and narrative is undoubtedly his mother, whose first appearance is during an incident of domestic violence as Tracker's father "pulled her by the hair [and] slapped her twice" (7). Eventually, Tracker kills or heavily injures his father when he accuses him of being a "[c]oward like [his] mother" (8) – Tracker then presents two outcomes; one in which his father dies and he "looked at her and spat" (8) before leaving and another in which his father lives and his mother gives him some currency and food before sending him away for his own safety. Tracker grows to hate his mother when he learns that the man he thought was his father is actually his grandfather who took both mother and son with him when he left his ancestral village (cf. 30). It is clear that this sexual transgression enrages Tracker to the point that he "wanted to kill him. And [his] mother" (31) and makes him oblivious to the possibility that his mother may have been forced into the sexual relationship by his grandfather, who has already been established as violent. It would thus be easy to argue that Tracker disregards women's suffering and oppression, especially since he also casually refers to rapes and other violations of women he knows or has heard of frequently. His hatred of women and his mother in particular is also commented on by other characters, notably by his then future lover Mossi, who asks him if the witch Sogolon is his mother:

> 'The old woman, is she your mother?'
> 'Fuck the gods, prefect. Is it not clear I despise her?'
> 'That is why I asked.' (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 349)

Mossi clearly not only recognises Tracker's hatred for women but also disapproves of it as can be seen in his later attempt to reconcile him with his mother – it is only one of several hints that Tracker's narration is not meant to be taken at face value and that his 'blatant misogyny' is an aspect the novel is subtly trying to criticise. Additionally, despite his hyper-misogynist posturing, it is made clear very early on that Tracker *does* feel sympathy for women who are victims of domestic abuse. The very first story he tells the Inquisitor at the beginning of the novel revolves around a man "who said he lost his wife" (5) and who hires Tracker and his superior olfactory skills to find her. The wife has made a considerable effort not to be found again, placing lookalike servants in "a hut in three villages" (6), one of whom offers Tracker poisoned Masuku beer – he violently confronts her and forces her to lead him to her mistress. There, he learns that her husband "beat [her] so hard [her] child fell out" (6), and though he does take her back to the husband in order to be paid for his services, he also advises her "to have the woman from the third hut make him masuku beer" (6), that is, poison him.

There can be no doubt that there are very few if any "positive depiction[s] of a female character" (Williams, n.p.) but not only may the same be said about most of the male characters, including the abrasive protagonist; the female characters that do come into focus are also often as strong and compelling as they are 'evil' and violent. Tracker's early encounter with "an old woman by a river" (9) serves as a foreshadowing of his future interactions with other powerful and magic-wielding women. The tales told about the old woman already make evident that she is a mythological being of some sort, representing the human aging process within the span of a day:

> The stories say she rises each morning youthful and beautiful, blooms full and comely by midday, ages to a crone by nightfall, and dies at midnight to be born again the next hour. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 9)

Though Tracker disparagingly calls her a 'crone', he fulfils her request to sleep with her, is "hard for her and full with vigor" (9) and does not become angry when "[s]he was still a crone" (10) after intercourse has finished, indicating that he accepts and respects the old woman's need for sexuality. When he encounters her again, she has indeed regained her youth, proving that she is a supernatural being – and only the first of Tracker's many encounters with women who may not be likeable but are intriguing characters in their own right nonetheless.

There are, in fact, numerous women who play important roles in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, one of whom is the witch Sogolon, also an old woman, but despised by Tracker. However, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is Tracker's narrative and therefore biased according to his prejudices, which means that his assessments of all the female characters need to be taken with a grain of salt. Interestingly, the next novel in the series, as of yet unpublished but expected in February 2022, is entitled *Moon Witch, Spider King* and will focus largely on Sogolon so that readers may expect a more positive portrayal of the witch to become available. In *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, Tracker assumes, soon after meeting her, that

> [s]he must have been a witch. She had the air and the smell of witches – lemongrass and fish, blood from a girl's koo, and funk from not washing her arms or feet. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 155)

While this is hardly a flattering description, it does not significantly differ from many of Tracker's often crude observations and is in line with his general distrust of witches. And even though Tracker openly despises Sogolon, her character seems to come to the fore despite the biased narration. While Tracker somewhat bitterly remarks that the witch "had already decided that no man was smarter than she" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 204), it is to highlight that he is annoyed by her, but at the same time it indicates at her confidence and independence – after all, she is several centuries old and has good reason to assume that she is wiser than most of her companions. Later on, when they encounter a girl that is to be sacrificed to the Zogbanu, "[t]rolls from the Blood Swamp" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 216), the supernatural encounter is used to incite a feminist exclamation, as Sogolon equates the trolls with men and states that "[n]o woman is raised for man to use" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 216), thus criticising not only the magical event but also the more general expectation that women are supposed to cater to men's desires. Even his prejudices towards witches in general are, to some extent, contradicted within the text. Tracker assumes that "Sogolon would need help mounting a horse" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 203), presumably because of her age and, perhaps, gender. The scene also shows further proof of Tracker's disdain for witches in general, as he speculates "whatever it was witches carry, maybe the leg of a baby, shit from a virgin, the hide of an entire buffalo stored in salt, or whatever she needed for conjuring" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 203). Sogolon, however, upsets his expectations considerably as she "strapped a deerskin bag over her shoulder, grabbed the saddle horn with her left hand, and swung herself up, right into the saddle" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 203). In spite of these scenes calling Tracker's negative portrayal somewhat into question, Sogolon remains more antagonist than ally throughout the narrative. Still, she is almost as much a shaping force of the tale as its narrator Tracker – so much so that the novel ends with a direct hint at the next novel in the series, told from her perspective. "I know you've heard her testimony" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 620), Tracker tells the Inquisitor and prepares both him and the readers for the next instalment in James's epic fantasy trilogy by asking if she has already told the Inquisitor "not [to] trust one word coming from Tracker's mouth" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 620). Sogolon's crucial role within the narrative is reconfirmed and the novel *Moon Witch, Spider King* already promises to add to James's play with the narrative form of the novel and especially the fantasy trilogy since the linearity often expected from such a format is clearly broken with here as Tracker assumes that his tale, the first one James's readers have seen, is, in fact, the second one presented to the Inquisitor. The second novel is almost certain to be a more nuanced exploration of Sogolon's character and her role as an old woman, the stereotypical old crone of witch that is detested by men like Tracker. Described as "[p]art adventure tale, part chronicle of an indomitable woman who bow to no man" (Eddy 2021, n.p.), *Moon Witch, Spider King* will add additional sides to the analysis of gender in Marlon James's fantasy writing.

James also frequently uses his female characters to question certain perceptions of gender, often with reference to non-Western realities. A minor example of this is Bunshi, who, according to the list of characters at the beginning of the novel, is a "river jengu, mermaid, shape-shifter" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* n.p.) and thus connected to Cameroonian mythology (c.f. Wilson-Max 2013, n.p.). She first appears as a puddle which starts growing and changing form until it

> shaped itself, sculpted itself, curved herself into wide hips, plump breasts, the legs of a runner and the shoulders of a thrower, and a head with no hair and

> bright white eyes, and when she smiled, bright white teeth. She seemed to hiss. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 157-158)

The description of Bunshi's transformation is particularly interesting because she seems to 'adopt' a gender during it. Even her 'female' form still suggests fluidity, however, as she consists of water droplets that could separate from her at any moment. "[S]he moved as if underwater, as if our air was water, as if all movement was dance" (158), which indicates the ease with which she may use her shapeshifting powers. Her identity is not at all fixed since she not only has several names ("'I am Bunshi in the North. The people in the West call me Popele'" (158), but Tracker also uses various terms for her, accusing her of being "one of the lower gods. A godlet. A bush spirit. Maybe even an imp" (158) and even associating her with the dangerous Omoluzu. Tracker's perception of Bunshi shows that he implicitly views her identity as inherently unstable. He constantly refers to her as "the woman" (158) in his narration and remarks on her sitting "in the slaver's chair as men do" (159), clearly regarding this as a transgression of sorts, but when Bunshi reports hiding the child at the centre of the novel's quest in her belly, speculating that "maybe every woman is a mother" (165), Tracker vehemently disagrees: "You are not a woman" (165).

Significantly more interesting and complex than Bunshi are the Bultungi. They are a tribe of shapeshifting hyenas who defy gendered norms, both physically and in terms of behaviour. During Tracker's first encounter with them, he is not aware of their shapeshifting abilities, seeing them as wild beasts he has to chase away from a camp in which he has been living with a number of *mingi* children who are outcasts like him and who he therefore feels connected to. While fighting, he kills a hyena and severely injures another, which ultimately leads to his encounter with the Bultungi since they are out for revenge. Once delivered to them, the possibility that his assailants might be women seems to be outrageous to Tracker – his "mind went wild, thinking of three men or four, or five" (176) who may want revenge for his part in revealing their extramarital love affairs, even though he has already heard that there are laughing "women in the dark" (176). They first reveal themselves in their animal forms as hyenas, "scowling, growling, barking" (177), but the most detailed description is dedicated to their human forms, which hold a kind of fascination for Tracker:

> The three came out of the dark: a girl, a woman older, perhaps her mother; and a still older woman, thin, with her back straight. The girl and the old woman wore nothing. The girl, her breasts like large plums, hips spread wide; her nana, a sprout of black-haired bush. The old woman, her face mostly cheekbones, her arms and frame thin, and her breasts lanky. The middle woman, her hair in braids, wore a red boubou tunic with rips and smudges. Wine, or dirt, or blood, or shit, I didn't know; I could smell all of them. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 177)

The description indicates Tracker's preoccupation with the women's naked forms as well as with their physicality, which he finds disgusting. He then continues his observations by including the one physical element that contradicts their previously established femininity:

> I looked into the dark for the male who pissed on me, but no man came. But the two naked women came in the little light, and I saw it on both of them. Long cocks, or what looked like cocks between their legs, thick and swinging quick. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 177)

The Bultungi, much like real-life hyenas, have penis-like appendages, which they use here not only to humiliate Tracker but also to mock him in a clearly gendered dynamic by telling him to "[l]ook at hyena womankind, longer and harder than you" (177). They also use gendered insults like "comely bitch" (178) on Tracker and subvert the usual assumption that men are always perpetrators and women always victims by assaulting him brutally. Their actions towards Tracker are undoubtedly vile, considering that they eventually have him raped by male hyenas. However, this can be seen as a broader trend in James' writing with which he challenges the idea that men and women constitute two poles of a binary opposition, which "suggest[s] that women are soft and will shy away from violence" (Sangeeta 2018, 16). The portrayal of women as the initiators of violence thus subverts a gendered expectation of women as soft and gentle counterparts to men's violence, but the novel also highlights the Bultungi's unique and fluid – shapeshifting – identity by highlighting their more traditionally female-coded features as strengths. While they are easily irritated and can "flip[…] to fury" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 179) within seconds, they are also – self-identified – "[w]omen doing what they do. Protecting their young. Nurturing, providing –" (180), though their caring behaviour is clearly restricted to their own community. Their society is one in which women rule, which is also how they explain their physical feature by saying that "since men have made it that the biggest cock rules ground and sky, does it not make sense that woman should have the biggest cock?" (180), thus effectively uncoupling physical features from gender and re-attaching them to power hierarchies. They themselves portray their society as near-utopian since "[t]here is game, there is bush, there are rivers without poison, and no child starves because of the gluttony of his father, since we put men in their place, and the gods willed it" (180). However, this changes drastically from the point of view of Tracker, who has been trapped by the hyenas and is "down in a hole full of man bones, and the smell of children you murder" (181). They are shapeshifters in every sense of the word, oscillating between human and hyena, benevolent matriarchs and violent torturers.

Tracker is, in fact, surrounded by shapeshifters, though he is not one himself. Apart from the shapeshifting women, there is also the Leopard, one of Tracker's many lovers throughout the novel, who is perhaps closest in nature to the more well-known werewolf-like figures of mythology as well as to Indra Das' shapeshifters; in both novels, there seems to be a pattern connecting shapeshifting with sexuality and gender fluidity. While the Leopard is not overtly associated with gendered or sexualised shapeshifting, his character still destabilizes notions of identity defined by binary oppositions, in this case referring to the strict separation of human and animal, similarly to the Bultungi. Tracker questions whether the leopard is "a Leopard that changes to man or a man that changes to Leopard" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 64) and while he is denied an explicit answer, the Leopard does state that he sometimes "forget[s] to change back" (64) – to a Leopard, which is, he thus indicates, his primary form. The Leopard also voices a distinct preference for his animal form, declaring that the human side is "[s]maller. Slower, weaker" (64) and less desirable. Yet he does stay human longer than he intends too, which can only mean that there is a certain attraction to this side of his personality as well. His identity remains fluid, shifting constantly between leopard and man, as he retains human intelligence while being a leopard and neither eats nor attacks his allies and he maintains some leopard-like characteristics even while in human form since he "did not sleep on the house floor, not even when he was a man" (53). While the Leopard's shapeshifting is not explicitly connected to gender and sexuality, the main concerns of this subchapter, there are some allusions that connect his shapeshifting to both sex and gender, especially when relating to his status as a cat, an animal often associated with femininity rather than masculinity by Western readers, and yet the status is entirely accepted and even embraced by the Leopard. The following conversation, tellingly about a previous sexual encounter, shows not only his pride in being a cat but also the ease with which both Tracker and the Leopard talk about gay relationships. Tracker has asked about the Leopard's newest lover and his conspicuous absence:

> 'Tried to rub my belly last night. Fuck the gods, I would never believe it. Who would rub a cat's belly?'
> 'Mistook you for a dog.'
> 'Do I bark? Do I sniff men's balls?'
> 'Well…'
> 'Quiet yourself right now.'
> I could hold laugh no longer.
> The Leopard frowned, then laughed. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 133)

The Leopard seems to embody full acceptance of a whole range of fluidity when it comes to his identity, which includes allowing Kava to "fuck[…] him with fury" (60), an act that Tracker seems to associate with femininity as he attributes his jealousy to "the whole of the woman at the tip of [his] manhood" (60). Additionally, he has no qualms about inhabiting the liminal spaces between human and animal as Tracker notices that, during the act, he is "not a man; his skin was black as hair and his tail whipped the air. He was not Leopard; his hands grabbed a branch, and thick buttocks slapped against Kava" (60). Shapeshifting in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* closely intersects with gender and sexuality and thus also evokes the idea of "[g]ender-shifting" which "brings into focus the question of what constitutes a person's identity" (Kachuba 2019, 138), especially since James's main character has a rather fraught relationship to his own gender and sexuality at the start of the novel.

Tracker's sexuality has been described by literary critics as "all over the place" (Sandhu 2019, n.p.), "seemingly bisexual" (Evaristo 2019, n.p.) and "ambivalent" (Wolfe 2019, n.p.) respectively, and his relationship with the enigmatic Leopard has been called "Achilles and Patroclus with more fur and fury" (Charles 2019, n.p.). Far from being unrelated to James' broader aim to establish fantasy as both global and local – African, in his case – alike, gender and sexuality are also being reclaimed from African histories and cultures and added to the worldwide corpus of queer narratives, which are resoundingly not a modern European phenomenon as has been asserted by many – crucially in the aftermath of colonisation, which has "shaped gender and sexual subjectivity, through extensive material upheaval, through the imposition of shaming colonial ideals of heteronormativity and elite responses to them, and, more formally, through law" (Meghani and Saeed 2019, 293). In a Q&A session with the online publication Five Dials, James states that "[g]ayness, queerness, non-binaryness, gender plurality, plural pronouns – Africa got there two millennia ago," which is also confirmed by academic research into the "long history of diverse African peoples engaging in same-sex relations" (Amory 1997, 5). There are certain groups of queer people mentioned in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* taken directly from history: Tracker refers to queer men as "shoga men" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 60), 'shoga' being a term taken from Swahili and referring to feminine qualities, but also currently in use as a slang word for homosexual or effeminate men according to the "Gay Dictionary" for Swahili (n.d., n.p.). Tracker provides both poetic and vulgar descriptions of these men, reflecting different attitudes towards homosexuality, by calling them either "men with the first desire […] [l]ike the Uzundu warriors who are fierce for they have eyes for only each other" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 60) or "Mugawe men who wear women's robes so you do not see the hole you fuck" (60-61). Tracker also lists a number of cultural functions the shoga fulfil in society:

> Shoga fight your wars, shoga guard your bride before marriage. We teach them the art of wife-being and house making and beauty and how to please a

> man. We will even teach the man how to please his wife so that she will bear him children […]. Sometimes we will play tarabu music on kora, djembe, and talking drum, and one of us will lie as woman, and another will lie as man and we show him the 109 positions to please your lover. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 61)

These are descriptions, which, according to James, match real African history since “there was a band of gay men who had a specific role in weddings” (*Five Dials* 2015, n.p.) and were respected for their role in teaching newlyweds about intimacy.

Queer themes are, however, also treated on a more personal level and without leaving out instances of queerphobia where they do happen. While critics like Sandhu describe Tracker’s sexuality as ‘all over the place’, which is undoubtedly an exaggeration, there is a remarkable amount of gender fluidity and sexual flexibility surrounding Tracker, who seems to combine so-called feminine and masculine qualities. When he meets an uncle he had not previously known about, he is first told of a ceremony during which “the female [is] cut off from the male” and “the man deep inside [a girl] is cut out of her neha for her to be a woman” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 25), likely a form of circumcision. Tracker is then told that because he was not circumcised, he “will be both man and woman” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 25), which is a thought that haunts him throughout the novel and possibly causes him to react with hostility towards women since he “has been ashamed of the feminine part of himself and tries to mitigate this shame with aggression and hatred toward every woman, every feminine aspect of the external world” (2019, n.p.), as C.H. Lips puts it in a review of the novel that focuses in particular on James’s subversion of both “Genre and Gender Tropes” (2019, n.p.). This casual observation is indeed borne out by the novel as Tracker’s first reaction to learning that he is considered both male and female, at least according to the beliefs of the village society his father came from, is to “wish to be cut now” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 26), i.e. undergo the painful, violent process as soon as possible to get rid of his perceived femininity. He is, however, refused because of his age, and his uncle tells him that he “will be one always on the line between the two. [He] will always walk two roads at the same time. [He] will always feel the strength of one and the pain of the other” (26), thus constantly blurring male-female binaries, though this is still seen as negative at this point of the narrative. It is interesting to note that Tracker's uncle does not specifically assign strength to the male and pain to the female part – though this is likely how Tracker interprets it – and it could be read as an open and fluid statement, which may attribute different strengths and different pains to the male and female genders. It is quite interesting that here James only seems to consider gender as a binary in spite of his acknowledgement of gender plurality elsewhere, though this may reflect the society of the Ku more than anything else – after all, James is careful not to show his Africanised secondary world as a monolith and so it makes sense that, next to progressive cultures, there are also those who still uphold stricter binaries. This can also be seen by the fact that Tracker's attitude towards his own gender and sexuality, influenced by the societies he has grown up in, has changed dramatically by the time he recounts his story to the inquisitor because he openly refers to himself as belonging to a community of shoga men, with the term 'shoga' incorporating both femininity and gay sexuality.

The origin of Tracker's changed attitude can be traced back to the griot's song previously covered as part of the novel's focus on features of orality. In it, Tracker seems at first still reluctant to claim a queer identity for himself, complaining that "*the gods curse [him] and make [him] a mother*" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 525), only to be corrected by his husband Mossi, who calls it a blessing. Tracker then decides to be circumcised to get rid of his own femininity, though at this point, he no longer connects it to his love for Mossi as he tells him that "*[e]verything between me and you, eastern man, is not down there, but up here […] and point to his heart*" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 527). But when the time for his circumcision arrives, Tracker "*look down at him maleness / crowned at the top by femaleness*" (530) and rejects the notion that his feminine side, symbolically represented by his foreskin, is a flaw. This moment of rejection comes with such conviction and strength that not only the narrative but also the fictional onlookers confirm that Tracker's masculinity is not lesser for the acknowledgement of so-called feminine aspects to his characters.

> *and with this he get up*
> *and with this he leave the knife*
> *and he walk away*
> *and the people silent for he still a fierce man* (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 530)

His eventual rejection of simplistic toxic masculinity is, however, no surprise: Throughout the novel, Tracker refuses to accept simple binaries, criticising the reliance on them by stating that "[e]verything in the world cooks down to two. Either-or, if-then, yes-no, night-day, good-bad. You all believe in twos so much I wonder if any of you can count to three" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 352), indicating that the breaking apart of binaries should be no more difficult than counting beyond two. Additionally, this scene harks back to the significance of the number three in mythological recounting, thus implying potential for an even more intricate connection between fantasy and progressive values and plurality. After having accepted his own femininity, Tracker is then able to forgive his mother and reconcile with her, indicating perhaps a changed attitude towards women as well and an increased acceptance of his own femininity.

By centring queer experiences in his novel, James does not only add to an increasing trend in fantasy publishing that introduces more and more queer stories into a previously heteronormative genre. He also adds to a long tradition of queer literature stemming from the Caribbean and can be seen as part of a 'queer black diaspora'. Although James uses terms derived from African cultures rather than from Caribbean ones, the way in which Tracker discusses sexuality is reminiscent of other Caribbean authors such as Makeda Silvera and Wesley Crichlow, who are engaged in "recuperating indigenous terms of sexual and gender identification in order to make visible an alternative culturally specific archive of narratives" (Cummings 2011, 326). Terms like the aforementioned 'shoga' or 'basha' are used, which are both still part of Swahili LGBT terminology, but there are also numerous references to other queer practices in African history. It is also noticeable that *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* rejects the idea that "migrant Other from the former colonies are now constructed as particularly homophobic and repressive of women" (Meghani and Saeed 2019, 293). And while there are no colonies in James' pre-colonial secondary world, Tracker is certainly a migrant Other, who starts out accepting his homosexuality as a matter of fact and having at best a complicated relationship to women. Eventually, though, he learns to embrace all the facets of his gender and sexual identity while also taking a first step towards a reconciliation with his mother and thus a greater understanding for women in general.

4.5. Orature and the Fantasy Novel – Features of Orality in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*

Features of orality are often a part of African or African diasporic novels and have thus been frequently discussed in this context but rarely so in the context of fantasy literature despite the fact that even the most Eurocentric medievalist fantasies do in fact take a great deal of inspiration from Europe's own oral history and a tradition of oral stories and poetry – as Paul F. Bandia states, "[o]ral literature has persisted in written literature in postcolonial as well as metropolitan cultures" (29), and perhaps nowhere more so than in fantasy novels, which are not only often seen as a descendant of epic narratives such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or *The Odyssey* (cf. Mendlesohn and James 2009, 7), which originate in orally told tales, but also frequently include allusions to orality in their discussions surrounding the importance of storytelling[44]. It is thus perhaps doubly interesting to analyse how *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, a novel that features orality explicitly within its storyline, engages with oral literature and oral literary features. Postcolonial studies have frequently asserted that the impact of colonisation on 'oral' cultures has been extensive but while most cultures did adopt writing in some shape or form, most did not discard orality entirely. As Chantal Zabus states, it

> makes sense to view them as hosting multiple worlds and syncretic phenomena existing side by side: the old and the new; the industrialized cities and the traditional rural areas; the oral and the written; the mother tongue and the 'stepmother tongue'; along a continuum, as it were. (Zabus 1996, 29)

Such 'multiple worlds' are clearly present in Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* – not only do both industrialised cities and rural areas co-exist in his secondary world, but English co-exists with multiple African languages as well as Caribbean patois, which he employs frequently throughout the novel. Orality is still very present within the written word, especially, but not exclusively through James' reclaiming of "ancestral genres like the epic, the initiation story, and the fable" (Zabus 1996, 30). As the Jesuit linguist Walter Ong states, the transition from orality to literacy changes the thought patterns of humans to such an extent that "it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication of thought except as a variant of a literate universe" (Ong 2002 [1982]) and that therefore oral storytelling has distinct characteristics not easily reproduceable in writing. Ong even claims that "[o]ral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche" (14) and so writing such as James' which endeavours to reclaim some of the oral past can only "reconstruct this consciousness pretty well, though not perfectly" (15), using certain strategies and contents. This is reconfirmed by Paul F. Bandia, who states that "expressing the realities of an oral culture through a written medium" (25) is "fraught with difficulties" (25), but also a necessary endeavour for the purposes of using "erstwhile imperial languages in such a way as to attempt to re-establish that intimate relationship between language and culture" (25). In order to imbue literary texts with features of orality, a writer may include "proverbs in a novel" (Zabus 1996, 32) or mirror a narratorial situation where "the readership is also an audience" (32). Additionally, "post-colonial language variants from the 'margin' or 'the periphery'" (34) may be inscribed into a text by following different linguistic rhythms, adding non-English vocabulary and phrases, "[w]ord-repetition" (36) or "convey[ing] indigenous concepts, thought-patterns, structures, and rhythms, and even linguistic features of the mother tongue" (36). In addition, studies on works by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe provide further insights into the inclusion of oral features in novel writing, which are often similar to the features found in James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. A polyphonous narrative such as wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* – and, indeed, James' fantasy – can serve to highlight "that there are many voices contributing towards the story" (Osaaji 2010, 108) as it would have been the case with oral narratives, which are not only being shaped by speaker and listeners alike but also by various speakers. Additionally, the listeners or rather, in the case of the novel, the readers are drawn in by "injecting the reader into the heart of the matter" (109) through the use of the personal pronouns "you" and "we".

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[44] After all, *The Lord of the Rings*, most non-fantasy readers' first association with the genre, is known for its inclusion of numerous songs, often telling of epic tales themselves, and one of its most moving scenes directly refers the telling of tales as Samwise Gamgee wonders "if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: 'Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!'" (*The Two Towers* 932).

Furthermore, oral narratives may be embedded within the novel, using “the story-within-a-story stylistic choice” (112), which is “not only digressive from the mainstream plot, but also illuminates and comments on the larger story” (112) – apart from a literal story-within-a-story, riddles and songs may also serve the same purpose. Jarica Linn Watt’s study on Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* confirms the use of similar devices to denote orality such as “integrat[ing] folklore, proverbs, tribal customs, and the performance of oral storytelling” (2010, 65) as well as continued repetition, which abound in oral storytelling because it lacks “the materiality of the printed page” (Watt 2010, 67) and thus needs repetition to keep certain themes and topics in the listener’s mind. Last but not least, Ong also includes a particular narrative structure as a feature of orality: Instead of “a climactic linear plot”, characterised by “an ascending action […], […] a climactic point […], which is followed by a dénouement or untying” (Ong 2002 [1982], 139), the oral poet “will report a situation and only much later explain, often in detail, how it came to be” (139); a structure to which James’ novel corresponds closely.

Indeed, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* starts in medias res with the stark pronouncement: “The child is dead. There is nothing left to know” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 3), a statement that seems to be in stark contrast with the continuation that follows since Tracker, the novel’s main character, is about to recount what happened to an unseen audience, indicating that there are other things “left to know” (3), which will make up the ensuing narrative and, as Ong puts it, “explain […] how it came to be” (139). Much like Onyesonwu in Nnedi Okorafor’s novel discussed in the previous chapter, Tracker is also in a cell, “larger than the one before”, which smells of “the dried blood of executed men” (3), and thus he is potentially in the same situation as Onyesonwu in that he may be facing execution himself. The first chapter in particular contains many elements that highlight the orality of James’ narration – for example, after presenting the unadorned facts of the child’s death, Tracker digresses from the story itself by explaining both his innocence and his ill will toward the dead boy at length. Interestingly, this first digression also contains two phrases which resemble sayings and thus allude to another sphere of orality: “Truth eats lies just as the crocodile eats the moon” and “Bi oju ri enu a pamo”, which is immediately translated as “Not everything the eye sees should be spoken by the mouth” (3). The phrase is also the epigraph for Book 1 “A Dog, a Cat, a Wolf, and A

Fox", where it is presented without any sort of translation, highlighting a certain inaccessibility to Western readers. Even the translation given in Tracker's narration is not unambiguous – the two sentences both stand on their own, one below the other, as opposed to being part of a larger paragraph, but there is no textual hint that the second one is supposed to be the translation of the first. It may be assumed from the positioning of the two sentences, but the widely differing length of the two phrases may also indicate that they are not in fact equivalent to one another. No glossary is given that could provide information outside of the narration – which is heavily hinted at being unreliable by the following narrative and also the planned structure of James' narrative –, but further research reveals that there is at least a similar proverb in Yoruba, which reads as follows: "Bí ojú bá rí, ẹnu a dáke" (Owomoyela 2008, 61). It translates as "When the eyes see, the mouth remains quiet" (61) and thus contains no moral direction as in James' version, which dictates what "*should* be spoken" (3) – or rather what should not be spoken.[45] Taken together with the first proverb of the passage, the two create a complex message, which is not easy to interpret and certainly carries no one true meaning. "Truth eats lies just as the crocodile eats the moon" references "an African tribal belief" (2007, n.p.), as the *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani puts it in rather vague and unspecified terms, whereas *The Spectator*'s Anthony Sattin attributes it to "Zulu lore, which states that solar eclipses are caused by a celestial crocodile eating the sun" (2007, n.p.). Both critics make these statements in reference to a Zimbabwean memoir, Peter Goodwin's *When The Crocodile Eats the Sun* – the tale, then, is popular enough to have inspired the memoir's title, but James plays with it from the start, exchanging the sun with the moon and thus destabilising fixed meanings. Not only do lunar eclipses occur more often, indicating a far less special occasion, but the moon does not actually disappear during a lunar eclipse like the sun would; it turns bloodred instead. If "[t]ruth eats lies just as the crocodile eats the moon" then it may not eat lies at all and thus what seems to be a confirmation that the story to be told must be true becomes a subtle warning not to trust the narrative even if the "witness is the same today as it will be tomorrow" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 3). The crocodile adage in combination with the proverb, which suggests that the narrative may not be complete since not everything witnessed is appropriate enough to be told thus questions the reliability of narrator and narrative. The two proverbs and especially the fact that one of them precedes the entire first part by way of an epigraph may allude to “the tradition of Anansi stories, folktales that end with a disclaimer that nothing can be taken at face value” (Tolentino 2019, n.p.) – the fact that the disclaimer here precedes the narrative may perhaps indicate that James has an international audience in mind, who do not generally expect a tale “suffused […] with doubt and misdirection” (n.p.) as part of a literary tradition that is not widely known worldwide.

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[45] Google translate, while obviously not a very reliable source, translates "Bi oju ri enu a pamo" as "As the eye sees the door is hidden" while the website www.wordhippo.com translates it as "As the door was saved", so perhaps all translations, including Tracker's, ought to be taken with a grain of salt.

Contestation of truth occurs again and again in the first chapter, e.g. when Tracker casts doubt on some elements of the story by adding modifying fragments such as “[i]f you believe in devils” (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 3) or by presenting two different versions of a story. The entire first chapter can, in fact, be seen as an indication as to how the rest of the narrative will play out, with the destabilization of truth being only one of the features that will re-occur throughout. As previously mentioned, Tracker is situated in a cell, face-to-face with an unnamed listener, who he eventually refers to as “Inquisitor” (5). This speech situation implies that the listener is there to hear the protagonist confess, likely for the event mentioned in the very first sentence, the death of the child. Indeed, at first, it seems like this is exactly what Tracker will tell when he asks “when I give word of the boy’s death, do I write my own death with it?” (3) and later continues to ask the Inquisitor: “Shall I give you a story?” (3). This is, however, not how the situation proceeds – first, Tracker verbally attacks the Inquisitor, essentially calling him a paedophile “who delights in a patch of boy skin and the koo of a girl who should be no man’s woman” (4). Then he provocatively narrates a much more recent crime, which he actually admits to while still avidly denying being responsible for the murder of the boy. The passage is infused with violence, which, likewise, foreshadows the majority of the narrative still to come. Immediately afterwards, Tracker addresses his audience, the Inquisitor, again, stating that he has “come for a story and I am moved to talk, so the gods have smiled on both of us” (5).

He then proceeds to tell three stories, which narrate Tracker’s life more than they refer to the quest at the heart of James’ fantasy trilogy. In a way, this mirrors the "episodic structure" (Ong 2002 [1982], 141) of oral storytelling and, to a lesser extent, the "distractions" (162) from the main story that may occur – though here, it is almost certainly a deliberate ploy by Tracker to postpone the telling of the failed quest's story. Tracker is also remembering his own past here "in a curiously public way" (142) – he may not be a singer, as Walter Ong envisioned when he wrote about this kind of remembering while storytelling, but his situation is nonetheless similar as he recounts stories of his past, which are not directly related to the quest, but which explain his character. This structure is repeated when Tracker moves on to tell "[t]hree stories about the Leopard" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 59), which explain Tracker's association with him as well as the reason for their collaboration on the futile quest of the novel. The three-partite structure evidenced by these two instances is repeated both on a macro-level, since James' proposed series is meant to be a trilogy, as well as on a micro-level as the number three is repeated at various points in the novel: "[T]hree Leopards ran alongside" (45) the group, they "pass[…] three owls standing on a branch" (46) on their way to "three houses, all wood and clay with thatch roof" (46) in an enchanted wood, the emblem of the Chief of Malakal is "three snakes, each eating another's tail" (147) and when they travel through the so-called Darklands, "three elephants blare[…] and startle[…] the horse" (230). More importantly, the boy at the centre of the quest was kidnapped three years ago.

The dense first chapter also includes another curious paradox, which relates to the nature of storytelling. It contains, as I have already alluded to in the paragraph above, an episode, which has two versions (cf. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 8): Tracker describes a fight with his father which results in his banishment from home, but the actual ending of the fight is not fixed, since "[t]here are two endings to this story" (8): one, in which Tracker's "legs locked around his [father's] neck and broke it" (8), and another, in which he "do[es] not break his neck, but he still lands on his head, which cracks and bleeds" (8), leaving the father alive but "an imbecile" (8). Both stories, however, have the same outcome: Tracker's mother gives him "five cowries and a sorghum wrapped in banana leaf [or palm leaf respectively]" (8) and tells him to leave. The details again do not match, but Tracker's exile remains the same. At the end of the chapter, he claims that "all stories are true" (15), which seems to be a general statement that includes the various versions of his past but is extended to be a comment on all storytelling. It may hint at the fact that James's novel as well as

Tracker's storytelling carry a certain truth that does not depend on the accuracy of details. It equally attests to what James has already stated in various interviews, namely that trying to find an objective truth in any story is not only misguided, but "a very European thing" (Vangel 2019, n.p.). "[A]ncient storytelling," James says, "didn't look for truth in that way" – instead, the stories told are "all true and they're all false" (n.p.). This understanding of truth and storytelling is highlighted repeatedly throughout the novel as various characters tell their story adjacent to the quest told by Tracker – it will undoubtedly be further highlighted when Tracker's tale itself is retold in the two following volumes of the trilogy. Considering James' statement that the multiple truths of the stories in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* are a direct rejection of a European conception of storytelling, it can be seen as a distinctly non-European contribution to the world literary scene.

Black Leopard, Red Wolf also achieves "[t]he fictionalization of African orature" through the inclusion of "[t]raditional narrative devices such as oratory, proverbs and aphorisms, as well as other ethnocultural discourses" (Bandia 2014, 53). The six epigraphs, written in various African languages and matching each of the six parts, all take the form of proverbs. The first epigraph has already been discussed in some detail, as it is the altered Yoruba proverb that is also employed in the first chapter to cast doubt on the veracity of the narrative that follows. "Bi oju ri enu a pamo", presumably translating to "Not everything the eye sees should be spoken by the mouth" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 3). Part 2's epigraph reads "Gaba kura baya siyaki", which is Hausa for "A hyena ahead, a striped hyena behind" and which is a proverb, meaning "making decisions in a difficult situation" (Zajac 2019, 189). The third epigraph is "Ngase ana garkusa ura a dan garkusa inshamu ni" meaning "If one hides fire, he or she cannot hide its smoke", the fourth "Se peto ndwabwe pat urfo", meaning "Everything that enters the net is a fish", the fifth "O nifẹ oṣupa. Idi ti o n bikita nipa awọn irawọ", meaning "He loves the moon. Why are you caring about the stars", and the sixth "Mun be kini wuyi a lo bwa", meaning "You brought weeping into the house of death". None of the epigraphs is given a translation immediately, though three of them are provided with one within the text. However, the audiobook version of the novel does translate the epigraphs, which is where the translations used above are taken from, except for the second one, "Gaba kura baya siyaki", whose translation in the novel differs from the one above taken from Zajac's "Metaphorical mapping of LIFE in the Hausa proverbs with regard to their cross-linguistic equivalents". With the knowledge of the translations taken from the audiobook, it becomes clear that "Gaba kura baya siyaki" is used again in the text itself, where it is rendered only in English as "Forward is the hyena, backward is the fox" – the change from the original is perhaps catering to a Western audience, who may be confused by the use of "hyena" and "striped hyena" and the fact that both are translated by two entirely distinct words in Hausa. "Mun be kini wuyi a lo bwa" is also used within the narrative in both English and in the original. Though not all of the six epigraph-proverbs seem to correspond to real proverbs, they all emulate the typical style of a proverb, "characterized by a compressed and allusive phraseology usually in metaphorical form" (Bandia 2014, 73). Like traditional proverbs, they are

> concealing deeper meaning as they present ideas in a simple and straightforward manner. They can be cast in various forms, and can be used to accomplish several aims. (Bandia 2014, 75)

They also fulfil a function identified by Bandia as "stand[ing] out as cultural markers in Euro-African texts, constantly reminding the reader, by its very own displacement of its status as a translated discourse" (2014, 74), not only as untranslated epigraphs but also when used 'in translation' within the text as they frequently bring in African realities and ways of thinking that are not immediately accessible to all readers.

Another feature of orality that remains largely undetected, and in some cases misinterpreted, in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is its often violent and 'vulgar' language. While his style has been described as "language [that] is meant to shock" and as "bloodletting and muscle-bound prose" (Sandhu 2019, n.p.), "poetic language" (Guynes 2019, n.p.), "rich and descriptive" (Mowbray 2019, n.p.) and is generally often remarked upon, it is not typically listed as one of the features that make the novel "resonant of oral storytelling" (Murad 2019, n.p.). Yet, according to Bandia, an "abundant use of sexual and scatological material to express what could be described in some instances as obscene or grotesque humour" (2014, 91) is an expected and accepted part of "discourse considered to be highly artistic in the oral tradition" (92). That James' often crass language is not only 'meant to shock' but also to add to the humour of the story in a way that resonates with oral storytelling techniques, is recognisable in multiple scenes – two scenes that show Tracker with his lovers show this well. The first has already been discussed in context with the novel's queer themes – Tracker and the Leopard are discussing the Leopard's newest relationship when the Leopard denies any doglike quality by saying "'Do I bark? Do I sniff men's balls?'" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 133), which Tracker turns into a sexual double-entendre that makes both men – and presumable the reader – laugh. Later on, his partner Mossi, half joking, half irritated suggests

> 'Maybe we should make as if we are fucking like violent sharks, to give them something to listen to. Uncock me at once, with that battering ram of yours! My hole, a chasm now it is!' (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 419)

Tracker immediately responds with "How learned you, the ways that sharks fuck?" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 419). The humour in the scene is evident not only through Tracker's sardonic response and Mossi's literal appeal for Tracker to smile, but also through Mossi's initial comical exaggeration and hyper-dramatic phrasing.

In addition to the various individual linguistic features of oral storytelling as well as in addition to the multiple stories interspersing the main plot – "each character has a backstory of their own, each place they travel through has a history that must be told, each kingdom it's [sic] politics" (Murad 2019, n.p.) – there are two overt inclusions of (West) African oral traditions, namely that of the griots: one a short song, the other a longer song of praise, which also functions as a story-within-a-story. The word 'griot' is usually associated with an "African storyteller" who is the "main conveyer of the collective wisdom of the tribal peoples of Africa" (Henrich 2001, 24), especially within academia, but according to a less generalised definition, it is "a regional descriptor for a certain kind of West African bard" (Hale 1997, 249) – they are a caste of storytellers, who can both be reviled and revered" (cf. Hale 1997, 249-250) and often perform a service of singing praise. It is in this context that the introduction of a griot in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* has to be seen, and indeed Tracker does allude to the normal function of a griot as a singer of praise (cf. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 523) and also questions the assumed truth of the song considering that a griot – after all, often a singer for hire – would not "make[…] a song before you pay them" (524) and thus would likely tailor any song to the tastes of the person paying them. However, griots are also being portrayed as voices of criticism towards authority, which also mirrors real-life practices. "Singer men don't sing songs no more," says the griot Ikede, who is one of the last griots still alive after a purge by the King. Sogolon, the witch, blames the griots for their fate, saying that they "speak against the King" (384), which Ikede counters by saying "Southern griots speak the truth!" (384) – the ensuing discussion revolves around the nature of truth and also the power of oral storytelling, which can be used for truth-telling as well as for propaganda when "them who rule send poison griots to spread lie till they take root in every man's heart" (384), but they also explicitly address the transition from an oral to a written society "[f]or the age of the voice is over and we in the age of the written mark" (384), which "may kill the griot" (385) but not the word, that is storytelling itself. Shortly after, the griot sings a song that also fulfils Osaaji's stipulation that such digressions from the main plot comment on the narrative – the song on pages 396 to 398, set apart from the main text through use of italics and its organisation into stanzas, seems to be 'only' a song, not commenting on politics or other stately affairs. Instead, it is a lament of the inevitable losses of life. "Time make every man a widow / And every woman too" (397) serves as a foreshadowing of Tracker's loss of his husband. The phrase "[a]nd the biggest hole in the world / Be the hole of loneliness" (397) also seems particularly apt to describe Tracker's emotional state, which he, however, vehemently denies, even leaving before the song is finished because he "was a man, and string and song should never affect [him] so" (398). The griot's song, however, affects Tracker profoundly, causing him to profess his hate for the song and for the mingi children he eventually adopts, which highlights that Tracker's aggressiveness stems primarily from his attempts to repress all emotions.

Before addressing the second oral performance included in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, it is of interest to first focus on a play on form that is almost a counterpart to the first griot's appearance.[46] As if to support the claim that "the age of the voice is over and we in the age of the written mark" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 384),

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[46] The passage precedes the two oral songs in terms of the narrative structure but is, in fact, chronologically later due to *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*'s narrative complexity, which contains several frame stories encapsulating the various events constituting the plot.

Tracker's interrogation – certainly an oral way of communicating – is interrupted by an account of Tracker's testimony that Tracker is supposed to read. The account is presented as "written witness, given appeal to the gods of sky" (97), which seems to support "the implied superiority" (Bandia 2011, 110) of writing, but is in actual fact just another contribution to a "creative blend of hybridity" which "disrupts the generalized dichotomy of 'oral-traditional-old' versus 'written-modern-new" (111), which Bandia sees as one of the hallmarks of postcolonial writing that combines features of oral and written storytelling. The testimony itself is clearly meant to represent a (written) report of Tracker's oral account, which is made clear through the way in which Tracker's story is characterised: it "*continues to perplex even those of uncommon mind*" because "*[h]e travels deep in strange lands as if* ***telling tales to children*** *at night, or* ***reciting nightmares*** *to the fetish priest for Ifa divination*" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 97) [emphasis mine]. Furthermore, the 'introduction' to the actual testimony includes numerous verbs of utterance: the elders demand that "a man should speak free, and a man should speak till the ears of the gods are filled with truth" (97), Tracker "says nothing" (98) of a certain period of time he is asked about, but he "has spoken in detail of his upbringing, and with clear speech and fair countenance has recounted a few details of the first search" (98) – a passage, which even provides some detail as to *how* Tracker speaks. The actual testimony is then presented in the form of a dialogue – thus highlighting intricate entanglements between orality and writing as the testimony itself is one of the few written texts mentioned in a novel where "the age of the written" has come but still contains not only numerous references to speaking but is itself a close replication of actual dialogue. Of course, the entire testimony-interrogation-dialogue complex is even further embedded in the larger entity of the written novel, thus playing with multiple levels of oral and written narratives. The interrogation ends with another discussion of oral forms of storytelling as Tracker demands the inquisitor to tell him "how you wish this story to be told. From the dusk of it to the dawn of it? Or maybe as a lesson or a praise song," (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 100) to which the inquisitor replies that "this writing" will be regarded "as [his] very own speech" (100), further emphasising this "interweaving practice of oral and written texts" (Phalafala 2020, 193), which is present throughout James' book and, presumably, the planned trilogy. Taken this overt mixing of oral and written features into account, it also becomes clear that James also plays with form in a way that only written literature affords right from the start as the entire novel begins with a dramatis personae ("Those Who Appear in This Account"), which potentially refers to the Greek dramas James read as part of his research. At the same time, the list of characters preceding the narrative also connects the novel to a number of other works of fantasy, which utilise this device due to the often exorbitant casts.

The second griot song is positioned towards the end of the novel and takes up almost the entirety of part 5. Tracker refuses to continue his own story, claiming that what he has told previously is "all and all is truth" (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 523) and at the same time criticises the inquisitor's desire for so-called truth as morally questionable, likening him to "men coming from the West for they heard of slave flesh, men who ask, Is this true?" (523) without realising that "[t]ruth is just another story" (523). However, the inquisitor is intent on hearing the rest of Tracker's testimony and thus engages "a griot with a song about [Tracker]" (523). Following this brief introduction of the griot figure, the majority of part 5 is then dedicated to the griot's song itself. It is set apart from the regular narration both through its italicisation and through its presentation in the form of a poem with several stanzas of varying lengths. There are 20 stanzas in total, the shortest one consisting of only four lines and the longest one consisting of 36 lines. It contains many of the previously discussed features of orality in condensed form. The griot speaks in first-person and tells Tracker's story from the point of view of a close observer. He employs a number of repetitions that serve to inscribe a rhythm to the poem – the most noticeable pattern of repetition is the frequent use of "And" as a line starter, which imbues the poem with a certain easy flow. At other points, repetition is used for emphasis, for example, when the griot describes how the usually grumpy Tracker softens for the children he is raising with his husband Mossi ("[…] *and the Wolf Eye scowl / And scowl, and scowl, and scowl into a laugh*" (525)) or when he movingly describes Tracker's longing for his mother when they finally reconcile:

and what come out of his mouth was a wail
And he wail for his mother
And he wail for his mother
And night come for day

And day come for night
And still he wail. (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* 532)

The griot's song is, to an extent, a digression from the main plot, since it does not at all refer to the quest for the missing child, but it is also considered crucial enough as testimony for the inquisitor interrogating Tracker employ the griot in the first place. It can certainly be seen as illuminating with regards to the larger story, but more importantly concerning Tracker's character as the song tells of several significant moments, which change and influence Tracker's view of himself as well as the reader's impression of the often abrasive and violent protagonist. The song is in direct contrast to the violence which permeates the novel, and while it is a song of praise, it praises neither great leaders nor warriors but instead the love and community Tracker has surrounded himself with. It covers Tracker's family life and explores his eventual acceptance of both his queer sexuality and his femininity as well as his aforementioned reconciliation with his hated mother. Presenting Tracker's domestic happiness in the form of a song both highlights it due to its special position within the story and its form, which stands out from the rest of the narrative, while also segregating it from the violence-infused main story.

Certainly, Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is not only an innovative contribution to the fantasy genre but also an important piece of world literature. Its dedication to both African[47] local particularities as well as its global appeal and readership, thanks both to James' previous fame as a literary writer and to the worldwide popularity of fantasy literature, clearly mark it as a novel that should be recognised globally and that shows in what ways the fantasy genre in general can and should be considered a part of the world literary field. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* uses its affiliation to the fantasy genre to present African mythologies to a broader audience while adapting them to the fantasy genre in a way that does not repress their localised inflections but instead gives them a new, more global audience. In addition, the novel presents gender and sexuality in a way that highlights cultural views from various African cultures on these topics and elevates them to a broader recognition within world literature thanks to the widespread readership of fantasy. Additionally, James succeeds in his goal of making African excellence more visible by presenting and African-influenced fantasy world that shows numerous civilizations as co-existing and thus cleverly rejects any perceptions of African traditions as uniformly backwards or outdated. By incorporating and showcasing oral features at various points in the novel, James highlights "the serious artistic value of oral expression" (Levine 2013, 217). Combining a large range of inspirations and influences from a global repertoire of sources, as becomes clear not only throughout James' interviews but crucially also through the text itself, he manages to show that

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[47] I use the general descriptor 'African' here because James, as a diasporic writer from the Caribbean, is drawing from a variety of African cultures without, however, referring to specific African countries. This makes sense in a number of ways: Not only are most African countries not organic formations, but instead have grown from the influence of imperialism on the continent, but James himself does not set out to portray specific African countries, but rather *African-inspired* countries in his secondary world based on a varied and diverse Africa. Even though, James draws from multiple cultural sources, there is no risk that his readers may understand Africa as a monolith; after all, he depicts, among others, the very distinct cultures of Ku, Dolingo, Malakal and Kongor in detail.

> Not only written words can become worldly and influential but that oral traditions may travel and transform each other and written texts, creating complex hybrid cultural formations across the world. (Levine 2013, 231)

Black Leopard, Red Wolf is thus undeniably an important contribution to world literature, which shows that fantasy itself, rather than merely a popular, perhaps commercially driven genre, can be a useful tool of promoting non-Western concepts and cultures and deserves to be addressed more explicitly as world literature by literary scholarship – if fantasy – or the broader genre of speculative fiction – is paid more attention in world literary spheres, not just as isolated incidents or literary 'exceptions' such as magic realism – the representation of different literary traditions becomes broader and more diverse as a result.

5. Indrapramit Das's *The Devourers* – Exploring Ways of Re-Conceptualising History and Mythology

5.1. Werewolves Writing History – Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Artifice of History" and Indian English (Urban) Fantasy Writing

Indrapramit Das's explores the dynamics between 'real' locations, mythologies, which are still actively believed in, and fantasy in a way that is reminiscent of Marlon James and especially Nnedi Okrafor's concept of 'organic fantasy', which allows for a more flexible view of the fantasy genre as much more closely aligned to reality as previously thought. Like Okorafor, he cites a real-life event as the initial inspiration for *The Devourers*:

> [B]eing stoned at a baul mela (a music festival for a rural sect of bards in West Bengal called bauls) at night, protecting a kitten from encroaching stray dogs. I imagined what that might feel like if the dogs were monsters, like, say, werewolves. But then, this is India, so why werewolves, a European myth? Novel partially born, right there. (*The Quillery* 2016, n.p.)

The quote not only indicates the almost hallucinatory quality of *The Devourers* but also foreshadows its profound interest in cultural mixes and clashes when European myths inspire non-European fantasies in addition to the mainstream Western-centric ones.

Though not without certain similarities, *The Devourers* plays less with form than the previous examples of Nnedi Okorafor's novels and Marlon James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, even though the novel does take on several generic tropes of both urban fantasy and the gothic in its endeavour to destabilise concepts of history as well as of identity. However, his contribution to a global world literature of fantasy lies more in the way in which he addresses the travel of mythological figures such as the werewolf – or the shapeshifter – both literally and metaphorically. Additionally, he juxtaposes universal themes revolving around identity and queer love with highly localised settings, which serve not only to render the narrative vividly localised and specific, but also to allow for broader ecocritical discussions that resonate with prominent concerns within literary studies. The rewriting of history, a central theme in *The Devourers*, addresses hierarchical structures between global players which have been set in place by the colonial and imperial past and continue into the present through historical imbalances, which have led to the "great inequalities built into the global context of climate change" (Sen 2021, 189) among other things.

History, then, undoubtedly plays an important role in the novel, but it does so in a way that is markedly different from the predominant use of history in mainstream, Western and Eurocentric fantasy narratives, in which history is traditionally a given background to the story, always to be trusted. Fantasy history and historiography have already been indirectly addressed in Nnedi Okorafor's writing through two tropes common to fantasy literature, that of the prophecy and the 'Great Book'. Okorafor uses these to connect her novel *Who Fears Death?* to the prominent subgenre of the quest fantasy only to subvert those tropes fundamentally, as my analysis in the previous chapter has shown. Both tropes, which, according to Mendlesohn, require a view of history and knowledge being transmitted rather than negotiated, are thoroughly destabilised due to their portrayal in *Who Fears Death*. Indrapramit Das's *The Devourers*, however, addresses historiography much more directly and without reference to Western-derived fantasy tropes such as the prophecy; fantasy does play a role in destabilizing established notions of written history, but it is through the hybrid figure of the 'global werewolf' and the protagonist's position as a university professor of history that conventional notions of history are questioned. Furthermore, the preconceptions about the fantasy genre are challenged because the novel not only showcases fantasy's global nature through the use of a local setting combined with a global scope, but also moves away from any escapist tendencies, which typically still underlie even those numerous fantasy narratives that feature social criticism, by eschewing the distance usually provided by the fantasy elements. Instead, it directly addresses issues of colonialism, the British Empire, and Western historiographic narratives imposed on non-Western worlds, the latter of which *The Devourers* poignantly criticises. In this, the narrative can be seen as alluding to various scholars' insights into the relationship between history, historiography and postcolonialism. The most famous and influential of these studies is undoubtedly Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincialising Europe* (2000), which will provide an important theoretical background to my analysis of *The Devourers*, but writings by

Dave Kennedy and Theo D'haen on history and postcolonial theory will also be considered in order to better demonstrate how the two interact with the fantastic elements in Indrapramit Das's urban fantasy.

The novel's plot is narrated through a frame narrative set in contemporary Kolkata, in which the novel's protagonist, Alok Mukherjee, meets with a mysterious stranger intent on telling him a story. This story-within-a-story is narrated via two manuscripts, allegedly dating back to the 17th century and handed over to Alok by the stranger for transcription, as well as through the stranger's supernatural version of storytelling that resembles hypnosis and forces the listener to identify intensely with the narration to the point of taking on the role of the narrator. The first narrator is Fenrir, allegedly a Norse werewolf, who relates his obsession with the human Cyrah, culminating in her rape and impregnation. The second manuscript is narrated by Cyrah herself and follows her attempt to free herself from Fenrir's prediction, given after the rape – that she will carry his child and love it. It also contains her account of growing intimacy with another werewolf called Gévaudan, originating from France. The last part of the story is told to Alok by the stranger, who is revealed to be Izrail, Cyrah's and Fenrir's son. This narrative situation connects the novel to another speculative fiction genre, that of the Gothic with its endemic "trope of the found manuscript, and by extension the frame narrative" (Southward 2015, 45). In early Gothic novels, such as Frankenstein, the "finding and framing of the story" (Southward 2015, 46) serves to assume "power over the truth and a control over those represented" (Southward 2015, 46). According to Southward, frame narratives in Gothic tales contain the main story "as a means of establishing their [the story-tellers'] own self-narratives" (Southward 2015, 52) – this, however, is markedly different in *The Devourers*. Rather than "control the representation of others" (Southward 2015, 52), Alok, the protagonist, slowly loses control over his own "specific representation of self" (Southward 2015, 52). The story culminates not only in Alok's and Izrail's sexual union – in itself at least a symbolic dissolution of self –, but also in the eventual convergence of the multiplicity of narrators within Alok as he takes on the identities of the various characters whose story he has been told, not controlling them, but rather being overwhelmed by their individual stories as he experiences them as if he had lived through them directly.

The novel's preoccupation with history is immediately apparent through the protagonist's profession: Alok Mukherjee is a professor of history, teaching at the University of Calcutta, which was established in 1857 during the height of the British Empire and is, to this day, considered a Western-style university. It can thus be assumed that Alok's education has been Western-centric and it seems likely that his view on history is equally dominated by a Western perspective. Fantasy and Western-centric historiography have always had an uneasy relationship – history, as a genre "grounded in realism and historically accurate events" (Schanoes 2012, 236) seemingly stands in contrast to "fantasy, with its explicit rejection of consensus reality" (236). Despite, or perhaps even because of this, "fantasy represents the ways of knowing and making sense of the world that are excluded by the dominant discourse of history" (237). Alok's Western values when it comes to the concept of history, for example, are not central to the text; rather, they are established early on so that they can be constantly destabilised throughout. Consequently, it seems more than appropriate to read *The Devourers* alongside Dipesh Chakrabarty's attempt to destabilise Western historiography and historicism, *Provincializing Europe* (2000). It is also crucial that Alok is an Indian historian – not because of Das's own background as he freely draws from different cultural backgrounds for the creation of his main characters, but because of observations such as the one made by Dane Kennedy that postcolonial theory has had a "transformative effect on colonial Indian historiography" (2012, 470) in particular. Surely, it is no coincidence that Alok is depicted as a historian whose "specialization is late modern, colonial India mainly" (*The Devourers* 33) and that his development is reminiscent of many historians coming into contact with postcolonialism, as they first perceived it as a threat to their discipline which ought to be treated with "suspicion and antagonism" (Kennedy 2018, 468) before accepting it as a useful tool to uncover "a much more comprehensive and diverse [historical] reality than we ever knew – or were willing to acknowledge – before" (D'haen 1997, 211). Reading *The Devourers* alongside Chakrabarty, Kennedy and D'haen will help to show how the novel still upholds certain historicist assumptions that Chakrabarty criticises, but also contains criticism of Western historiography that mirrors the aforementioned scholars' findings on a postcolonial refashioning of history. The novel even comes close to advocating for Ranajit Guha's radical notion of a specifically Indian version of historiography that, according to Kennedy, identifies "western-style history as an innately imperial system of thought" which ought to be rejected "in favour of stories that recover some of the wonder evoked by traditional epics like the *Mahabharata*" (2018, 479).

Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses historicism as a mode of thought that "enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century" (2000, 7) because it implemented a "'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global historical time" (7), which states that all major political and historical developments originate in Europe and subsequently spread out to different parts of the world[48]. This mindset permanently delegates 'third world' countries to a state of "not yet" (2000, 8), as Chakrabarty puts it, during which they remain dependent on European guidance in order to achieve the same 'level' as an idealised Europe. This kind of historiography, which privileges a narrative of gradual but linear progress, tends to "portray[…] the peasant's world, with its emphasis on kinship, gods, and the so-called supernatural, as anachronistic" (2000, 10). Chakrabarty juxtaposes Hobsbawm's idea of the 'prepolitical' peasant whose "actions [are] organized – more often than not – along the axes of kinship, religion, and caste, and involving gods, spirits and supernatural agents as actors alongside humans" (12) and who had thus "not quite come to terms with the secular-institutional logic of the political" (13) with Guha's notion that "practices which called upon gods, spirits, and other spectral and define beings" (2002, 14) are reconcilable with and indeed part of political negotiations and struggles in India.

History in Indrapramit Das's *The Devourers* is shown to encompass both versions of the past – one profoundly secular, as exemplified by Alok Mukherjee, and one infused with supernatural events, as reported by Izrail and his ancestors. As mentioned before, Alok is a professor of history, as he informs the werewolf Izrail upon their first meeting, which influences Alok's entire stance, especially with regards to his belief or disbelief in Izrail's stories. His historical education seems to be Western in nature, based on facts and 'objectivity', which explains why he challenges Izrail when the werewolf claims that “Stories are fiction” (*The Devourers* 12) by saying “You told me that story was true” (*The Devourers* 12), to which Izrail then replies, “It is.” (*The Devourers* 12). This exchange emphasises the fluid boundary between fact and fiction that define a history that is less wedded to Western notions of accuracy and objective reality in historiography. It is also reminiscent of Okorafor’s notion that ‘fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality’ in that it also shares the view that a story need not be factually true in order for it to contain truth. Furthermore, Izrail here rejects the need for a strict distinction between what is considered real and what is considered fantastic by emphasising that a story can be both fictional and true. History, according to Izrail, consists of “[t]ales. The weaving of words” (*The Devourers* 6), which immediately hints at the idea that history, rather than being an objective science, is fiction, which allows for several versions of it to exist. It is also reminiscent of Ranajit Guha’s demand “that historiography would pay heed, get rid of its statist blinkers and emulate literature to look afresh at life in order to recuperate the historicality of what is humble and habitual” (2002, 94). In *The Devourers*, this is achieved through choosing Cyrah, a subaltern woman – poor, likely illiterate –, as one of the focalisers. At the same time, the novel also uses fantasy elements to evoke the sense of wonder, which Guha wishes to be reintroduced into Indian historiography as one of the “principal elements of traditional Indian aesthetics” (62), which may help scholars learn “how to contemplate the world and by contemplating understand it” (65). The idea that history and storytelling are related and should be more closely connected is reinforced when Izrail tells Alok “You’re not a professor of literature, but you are a professor of history. History has all the stories. Make it up. Guess.” (*The Devourers* 12). Not only does Izrail combine literature and history once more, but he also hints that historical writing, even at the academic level, is mostly guesswork.

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[48] "In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment. These 'events' in turn are all explained mainly with respect to 'events' within the geographical confines of Europe (however fuzzy its exact boundaries may have been). The inhabitants of the colony, on the other hand, were assigned a place 'elsewhere' in the 'first in Europe and then elsewhere' structure of global historical time." (Chakrabarty 2000, 7).

History continues to be at the core of the novel and at the centre of several discussions between Alok and Izrail. Their debates are a suitable frame narrative for the actual (fantasy) plot of the novel, which is told via two manuscripts and a kind of oral re-telling of events. The manuscripts are, of course, exemplary for the regular historian’s toolkit and as such they give rise to another negotiation of the role and nature of history and historiography between the human and the so-called werewolf. Izrail introduces the manuscripts with an intriguing description, saying that “[t]his is history. History most people – humans – aren’t aware of, in particular” (*The Devourers* 31), adding that they might be of special interest to Alok because of his profession. Alok is, of course, intrigued, but also immediately sceptical as he opens the “plain black hardback notebook, filled with slanted handwriting” (*The Devourers* 31). His minute observations on the materiality of the book, which include comments on the “[b]lack ink [and] the smudged gray of pencils” (*The Devourers* 31f.), lead him to the conclusion that “[t]his doesn’t look very old” (*The Devourers* 32). Alok questions the authenticity of the manuscript based on what he has learnt in the course of his studies – he is interrogating the manuscript’s material to draw conclusions on its origin and age. Izrail, however, stops these endeavours early on. He explains that he has “translated them from the original source” (*The Devourers* 32) because he does not think that Alok understands the languages of the original, nor does he feel inclined to pass out valuable historical documents to strangers. This alludes to the fact that all history is mediated; there can be no immediate ‘objective’ access to what has transpired in the past and all endeavours to recover history must, by necessity, be subjective and personal. Furthermore, Alok’s commentary on the writing he observes hints at the fact that all history is also fragmentary (cf. *The Devourers* 32), while the comment itself – “I catch fragments, written in English” (*The Devourers* 32) – only refers to the manuscript as casually glanced at by Alok, but can easily be extended to history as a practice.

Despite Izrail’s continuous attempts to reframe history as a version of fiction writing and guesswork, Alok still remains sceptical and relies mainly on his training as a historian, asking for the sources to validate the authenticity of Izrail’s claims:

> “And the sources? Do I get to see them? The actual historical documents. Surely you realize that if you actually have such things, I’d be very interested in seeing them, rather than this. I am a historian, after all. What period is this from? My specialization is late modern, colonial India mainly, but obviously, I’d be interested in any kind of text from the past.” (*The Devourers* 33)

Izrail’s reply to this is just as telling. He suggests that there is a possibility that Alok may see the originals if he proves himself “interested enough. Worthy of it” (*The Devourers* 33). This suggests that not just anyone is allowed to penetrate any given history, in this case the history of werewolves in India. Alok's Western education is not seen as a reason for him to have access to this secret history – it may even prove to be an obstacle. It is thus only when they have left 'civilisation' behind entirely that Alok is permitted access to the scrolls themselves. In the middle of the jungle of the Sundarbans, Izrail presents him with "two bundles of brown parchment tied together into fat rolls" (*The Devourers* 260f.), which Alok describes as "thick and tough, and so dark a shade of brown that [he] can't make out the inked black script very well" (*The Devourers* 261). Alok proceeds to describe the manuscripts, his "source documents", in elaborate detail, still in keeping with his profession. However, it is only after he has accepted fully that Izrail's stories are true, as indicated by the fact that he simply "realize[s] that [he is] holding scrolls of ancient human skin […] unwrapped and taken from people who lived their lives four centuries ago, inscribed with the stories of their killers" (*The Devourers* 261), rather than challenging this interpretation.

Alok's Western historiography does remain an important part of the novel throughout, despite his eventual acceptance of the shapeshifter narrative as truth. He approaches his transcription as a professional historian would when faced with a handwritten document, which is to be prepared for publication. He attaches a footnote to the title, "First Fragment", explaining that this segmentation has already been introduced by the stranger, that is Izrail the half-werewolf, and must refer to the "original scroll mentioned within the text" (*The Devourers* 37). The footnote can be seen as a sort of disclaimer, in which Alok admits to "attempt[ing] some formatting of [his] own by dividing the two fragments further into sections where it seemed appropriate" (37), thus alerting the readers that, while he has tried to transcribe the document as it is, he has introduced changes of his own. While this is an accepted practice among historians, it also draws attention to the fact that the scroll has been mediated and thus cannot present a single, objective version of history. This further ties *The Devourers* to its Gothic precursors as the inclusion of manuscripts frequently includes a "dependence on scientific references and lexis" (Sawczuk 2020, 225). Further footnotes include information on words, places or characters that are not necessarily known to modern readers, which is, again, accepted practice for editors of historical texts, but there are also footnotes which actively challenge the veracity of the account. These footnotes destabilise both the notion that a historical document can present a truthful account of a given event as well as the fantasy elements that allow *The Devourers* to be read as an urban fantasy or intrusion fantasy novel. When a hunt is described in the manuscript, Alok adds a footnote, which does not provide any additional information, but speculates that the content of the transcribed text is not a faithful depiction of a past event but the fact that "the narrators and his companions clearly share [Izrail's] delusions/predilections" (*The Devourers* 44), which leads them to hunt and eat (other) human beings. His comment vacillates between believing the supernatural explanation, stating that "one needs to be more than human to survive eating raw human flesh like this" (44), and interpreting it as something else, reminiscent of non-fictional Western-centric historians interpreting non-Western people's accounts of incredible events as either metaphor, (mistaken) religious beliefs or misinterpretation of more mundane events. The reference to "various examples of ritualistic cannibalism among human cultures all along the historical record" (44) may well be another reference to previous historiographies that frequently characterised non-Western cultures as cannibalistic and savage.

The second scroll, addressed to Rakh'narokh, contains, among others, two footnotes, which also explicitly address questions of historiography and Western versus Eastern historiography. Attached to the first sentence, a footnote challenges the identity of the alleged narrator of the scroll. As the narrator is Cyrah, "a young Muslim woman, homeless and poor enough that she chooses a transient lifestyle" (*The Devourers* 91), Alok speculates that she "would probably be illiterate" (91) and further suggests that the narrative may have been "orally transcribed at some point" (91). Not only does this footnote introduce yet another level of mediation through which the narrative has supposedly passed, thus further obscuring its ties to historical reality, but it also seems to allude to questions about the subaltern's ability to speak (cf. Spivak 1988). In Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the critic claims that "there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself" (1988, 285) and that the 'true subaltern' represents "an irretrievable consciousness" (287). Her prime example is *sati*, the ritualistic self-sacrifice of widows, and thus a case of violence on women's bodies where the female victims (or participants?) have no chance of representing their own point of view. To an extent, this silencing of subaltern women in modern historiography is replicated by *The Devourers*. After all, the rape victim Cyrah can only 'speak' to the reader after her presumably oral narrative has been written down on the scroll and then transcribed by the male historian Alok. Outside the story, it has been further mediated by the likewise male author Indrapramit Das. Nonetheless, Cyrah's first line is a powerful refusal to be cast as the victim: "In Mumtazabad I first saw him, that rapist, that coward monster, that filthy dog-man, that self-pitying deceiver, your father" (*The Devourers* 91). When faced with her rapist again at the end of her journey, she forcefully challenges his attempts to frame not only her, but all human women as prey of both supernatural and mortal men, calling Fenrir and the other werewolves "scared little boys […] hiding under the armor of a man's body" (213) since none of them "wear the shape of human woman" (213) despite being theoretically able to do so. Cyrah also refuses to be seen as a "human idol, [a] little goddess of suffering" and exclaims "I am *not* all human women" (225), thus denying any reading other as a symbol or stand-in for others like her, that is, other subaltern female voices. Moreover, in the novel's final pages, as Alok's individuality is dissolved for a more open and flexible subjectivity, Cyrah becomes a part of him and he starts speaking not for her but in her voice, as he claims "I am Cyrah of Lahore" (302) and "I become a goddess among my fellow humans" (302) among other sentences spoken from her perspective.

Cyrah's narrative also contains further footnotes, which are less concerned with her gender and ensuing subaltern subjectivity, but with the continuing destabilisation of a Western historiographic tradition. The second footnote relevant to this provincializing of Europe as the subject for a universal history follows the description of a massacre, but in order to understand the importance of the footnote it is necessary to analyse the preceding scenes as well. The human Cyrah and the werewolf Gévaudan are pursuing Fenrir through India and have decided to join a human qafila or caravan under the assumption that "Fenrir will not attack [them] in the midst of so many humans" (*The Devourers* 175). The caravan is led by the Englishman Edward Couten, who is as intrigued by Gévaudan's savageness as he is by Cyrah, who he regards as "an exotic ornament Gévaudan was carrying around, albeit one gilded with poison" (173) in a clear instance of the male colonial gaze, made more poignant by the fact that it comes well within the narrative of a subaltern woman who is asserting her right to speak, albeit through levels of mediation.

During the travel sequence, the tone of the novel shifts to that of a horror story, as the entire group becomes "uneasy from the distant, dreadful howling that had plagued [them] all night" (184) and camel drivers go missing during the night. The text itself already has the characters discussing the nature of these events – while Cyrah and, of course, Gévaudan, are aware that a supernatural shapeshifter is on their tracks, Courten himself, likely a man steeped in European enlightenment thought, assumes that the missing man has merely run away. Gévaudan tells Cyrah of how the Englishman interprets Gévaudan himself; since he sees the bones stitched into this skin and has already been made aware that Gévaudan is allegedly a 'pagan', he "thinks that [Gévaudan] is a warlock on the run from Europe" (*The Devourers* 189), yet clearly views this as Gévaudan's personal delusion rather than as a matter of fact. Gévaudan goes as far as to state that "he has no belief in magic, except that of his religion" (189), which raises a rather complex issue about the fantasy genre itself that many of the works that could be considered Anglophone fantasy literature do not fully solve: When does an actual belief become a fantasy element and can this moment be determined precisely? Or is the term 'fantasy' always reliant on both the writer's and the reader's epistemology, thus rendering the generic term at best problematic and at worst unusable? The footnote mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph takes up this question of 'reality' and 'fantasy' again, as Alok tries to connect the events in the narrative with his 'primary world' history. Referencing his own research, the historian states that "Edward Courten of the British East India Company did actually visit India as a factor (a trader)," (204), thus lending further credibility to the manuscript, especially since the fictional Edward Courten left his post earlier than planned because of a supposed attack on his caravan by demons. He is then, "incarcerated at Bethlehem Royal Hospital (also known as Bedlam) of London in 1650, where it is presumed he died" (204). The footnote thus reiterates the previous strategy of both confirming the fantasy and contesting it by means of providing a more rational explanation, thus introducing an element of hesitation in a Todorovian sense. Additionally, the fact that Edward Courten is *not* a 'real' historical figure, though most likely based on Sir William Courten, an English trader heavily involved in the colonial system, contributes another layer of fantasy and reality superseding each other while maintaining a continuous thread of criticism of the British Empire running throughout the entire novel.

The depiction of Edward Courten is striking, too, when it comes to the representation of India's colonial history. While the two 'main' werewolves are both of European origin, neither of them is part of the colonising effort in South East Asia – Fenrir because he is from Scandinavia and has thus not even any hereditary ties to an overtly colonising power with an Empire that stretches beyond Europe, and Gévaudan because he was 'born' as a more-than-human shapeshifter long before France ever engaged in Empire-building abroad. Furthermore, as werewolves or shapeshifters, both of them are completely ostracised from their original societies – the fantasy aspect of their natures thus allows them to distance themselves from humanity and its crimes entirely while viewing their own violence as part of a natural order.[49] Courten, however, is an obvious representative of the British Empire and while he does enact the colonial gaze on Cyrah, fascinated by what he perceives as her exotic nature, he is, in all other respects, a minor figure in the narrative. Rather than being a central figure, he is relegated to the margins of the story, in one instance literally so as his eventual fate after the events narrated by Cyrah is only given in one of Alok's footnotes. He may look at the Indian women as if he possessed them, as highlighted by Cyrah's narration when she states that "he looked at [her] as if [she] were an exotic ornament" (*The Devourers* 173) and that he is "observing [a group of female dancers] like a hawk" (182), but Cyrah herself turns this dynamic around by gazing at him instead and often removing herself from his view. She describes his "strange-cut coats and breeches in dull colours" (173), which highlights that he looks out of place in India, and comments on the fact that he wears several 'Indian' clothing items which clash with the dull English clothes, such as "a white shash that looked a little ridiculous wrapped around his puffy pink head" (173). By making fun of his appearance, Cyrah manages to assume a certain kind of power over Courten. Later, when she is in Courten's tent, she recognises his fascination for her and Gévaudan, but turns the curious gaze back on him, thus becoming a sort of invader "inside his private space" (188) herself. She leaves on her own accord when the two men start conversing in English, which she does not understand, and ignores Gévaudan's look while not mentioning any reaction on Courten's part at all. Cyrah refuses to imbue the Englishman with undue importance; her curiosity does not extend to the conclusion of his part in her narrative – they do not find Courten's body and "Gévaudan chose to assume that the Englishman had escaped" (*The Devourers* 204). Cyrah, however, matter-of-factly states that "it's possible he simply missed Courten if he lay dead somewhere" (204). Courten's unclear fate and especially the way it is narrated through the pseudohistorical manuscript via a historian's footnotes also serves as a subversion of Western colonial historiography. Theo D'haen describes the kind of history that is used as a tool in legitimizing the Empire as follows:

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[49] This could also be interpreted as the shapeshifters actually being supernatural stand-ins for colonial powers instead of being entirely divorced from colonial history as the actions of colonisers were frequently justified by casting the colonized as inferior and not-quite-human.

> Two moves are involved: Firstly, the received history of the vanquished themselves is un-written as fiction, i.e. as legend or myth, and therefore as less than 'history' in Western eyes. Secondly, the history of the vanquished is re-written as subsidiary to the history of the victor with the latter henceforth providing the telos for the former. (D'haen 1997, 213)

Courten is shown, through Alok's footnote, to have accepted the 'supernatural' version of events presented by his native companions and identifies his attacker as a demon (*The Devourers* 204), but his narrative is clearly dismissed as "legend or myth" by his contemporaries, who take his acceptance of the 'mythical' native version as an indication of insanity. The narrative itself, however, takes the accounts of shapeshifters haunting the Indian countryside at face value and legitimises it through its acceptance by Alok in his capacity as historian. Furthermore, the treatment of Courten also subverts the second strategy identified by D'haen: It is not "the history of the vanquished" (1997, 213), i.e. the history of Indian people like Cyrah, that is "subsidiary to the history of the victor" because Courten is, as mentioned before, relegated to the footnotes and thus quite literally subsidiary to the main narrative of *The Devourers*. Rather than "providing the telos for the former" (1997, 213) as D'haen puts it, there is no glorious endpoint at all as Courten's fate remains essentially unsolved. The only closure his narrative receives is through the footnote, in which Alok reports his flight to England and eventual death in an asylum, though the latter part is mere conjecture, thus further destabilizing the boundaries between history and fiction.

5.2. Werewolves and Rakshasas – The Travelling Form of Evil Incarnate

The relationship between fantasy and reality, or, more precisely, religious or spiritual reality, which has already been touched upon in the previous subchapter, is explored in more detail through the figure of the werewolf itself. Its connection to religious and folkloric beliefs worldwide becomes particularly clear when Cyrah describes Fenrir's 'second self', that is his wolf persona, during the attack on the caravan:

> The beast was like no animal I'd ever seen on this earth. Glowing red in the flickering light of rain-swathed fires, with its war paint of blood and tattered flesh, which hung like ragged pennants off its spines and slicked fur, it was rakshasa of the Hindus, it was asura, lord among their demons. It was glowing, infernal ifreet of the djinn, it was Iblis made incarnate, rising from cold wet earth instead of the arid sand of the desert. It was a towering impostor god of Europe resurrected in this empty stretch of Shah Jahan's empire and worshipped with fire and violence. (*The Devourers* 199)

The animal in front of Cyrah is undoubtedly supernatural and as such a clear fantasy element within the novel – it is the 'intrusion' into the real world that Mendlesohn sees as the integral part of the subgenre 'intrusion fantasy'. As such, it fits Mendlesohn's definition remarkably well in that it is an "escalation of threat" (2008, 117) and Cyrah feels "repulsion of the horror" (117) that the shapeshifters in their second selves represent. However, the description contains more than the simple hostility of the Mendlesohnian intruding fantasy. Cyrah compares the werewolf in turn to evil entities from Hindu – the rakshasas and asura –, the Muslim devil and, perhaps most interestingly, "a towering impostor god of Europe resurrected in this empty stretch of Shah Jahan's empire and worshipped with fire and violence" (*The Devourers* 199), which might be a reference to the pagan religions Gévaudan claims to be a part of in front of other humans, but could also well be hinting at the violent form of Christianity that missionaries brought into the British colonies worldwide.

By means of these comparisons to the various religious adversaries, the narrative blurs the boundary between religious belief and fantasy, indicating, perhaps, that nearly all fantasy is inspired by 'real-life' mythology, but taking away a false separation of Western religion from non-Western, and thus exoticized belief systems, by clearly stating that *all* religions can also become inspiration for fantasy tales. This conflation of supernatural threat and fantasy elements with religious beliefs is further emphasised by Edward Courten's interpretation of events as given by one of Alok's footnotes. After he had attempted to burn his journals, fragmented and burnt pages were salvaged from the fire – thus hinting once more at the fragmentary nature of historiography –, which contained references to an "ambush by a 'demon' that the Hindoos call rakshasa" (*The Devourers* 204) and which Courten allegedly conflated "with the Christian figure of Satan" (204).

These quotes show not only the close relationship between religion and fantasy worldwide but also establish the werewolves – or rather, and the distinction is important, shapeshifters and were-*animals*, as a global concept in the same sense in which Stanford Friedman sees modernity as global. Neither ideas arise in Europe and then spread around the world, but they develop in different parts of the world at an equal rate and then influence each other without any superiority or primacy on either side. *The Devourers* depicts the were-animal figure as global, thus rejecting the idea that this particular myth originated in Europe and has become a global fantasy trend with European origins. This can be extended to the fantasy genre as a whole and, thus, Das's werewolf mythology could well be seen as a metafictional comment on the fact that fantasy literature is seen as Western-centric, even though it is a mode of writing that has decentralised, worldwide origins. Alok even challenges Izrail on the use of the word 'werewolf', claiming that he is "the first Indian werewolf [he has] ever heard of" (*The Devourers* 13), which is testament to the fact that the term and concept of the werewolf is strongly associated with European fantasy rather than a global genre of fantastic literature. Izrail immediately emphasises the global nature of the predatory shapeshifter figure, for which 'werewolf' is merely a localised term, "one word. A European one" (13). The concept itself, however, "is a common thing in the end, and [the] stories are told here [in India] as everywhere else" (13), which mirrors an early study of 'were-animal' tales explaining that "metamorphosis into the animal most prominent in any locality itself acquires a special prominence" (Stewart 2013 [1909], 3). Despite this, Izrail does use the European word, which Alok rightly criticises. Izrail's reaction is visible discomfort, which might be a nod towards the undeserved – and often critically unremarked – European omnipresence in the fantasy genre as it is represented on global literary markets today.

The metafictional dimension of the werewolf tale is made most explicit in an early interaction between Alok and Izrail. They first discuss the nature of storytelling – perhaps especially fantasy storytelling – itself in a way that is reminiscent once more of Nnedi Okorafor's organic fantasy. "Stories are fiction. Made up," Izrail claims, while simultaneously insisting that the "story was true" (*The Devourers* 12), which negates the idea that fantasy and reality are in any way binary oppositions rather than a spectrum. Alok then likens Izrail's potential backstory to a trope familiar to most fantasy readers: "This isn't too far from a story about a chosen one rising to lead his tribe to salvation, is it? Lone exile, wandering into the future, unable to die, shifting between shapes, all that" (13).[50] Essentially, Izrail agrees with that assessment, suggesting that his story can be read alternatively as "[r]omance, fantasy, horror, realism, moralistic fable, history, lies, truth" (13) and evidently seeing no great contradiction between 'fantasy' and 'realism' both being used to describe the same story.

The notion of a global network of werewolves, or rather shapeshifters, remains a common theme throughout the book. For example, the three werewolves who are initially travelling through India together, while all from Europe, hail from various nations, which are reflected by their names. Makedon is presumably from Greece, while Fenrir is from a Norse kingdom and his name reflects yet another mythology once universally believed in in its respective region, which has turned fantastical for most modern readers.[51] Gévaudan is clearly from France and his name mirrors a 'historical' instance of werewolf attacks or rather a werewolf panic, which was spurred by a man-eating animal terrorising the village of Gévaudan from 1764-1767. The events to which Gévaudan's name refers, however, come chronologically after the events narrated in *The Devourers*' two scrolls, which further highlights that history's linearity and progressiveness is a Western construct. Alok, in his footnotes, also comments on the globality of shapeshifters, noting that, while they share a culture due to their "shared word" (*The Devourers* 47) for 'humans', which is 'khrissal', and "other shared language (ghost fire), they seem to hail from different parts of the world and have different cultural influences" (47). Another footnote delineates several, very different European terms for 'werewolf', which already hint at the universality of the concept – be it a 'real' entity as is the case for the world of Das's novel or a mythological creature people of various regions used to believe in:

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[50] The narrative trajectory, when put in those specific terms, is not far from the life narratives of many religious leaders, either, as an astute reader will note, thus once more blurring boundaries between religious beliefs and fantasy.

[51] The name Fenrir refers to Norse mythology, where it designates a gigantic wolf whose appearance foreshadows the end of the world, usually referred to as 'Ragnarök', which is also alluded to by Cyrah, who addresses her own son as 'Rakh'narokh'.

> Lycaon is a mythological Greek king who was turned into a wolf, while *loup-garou* is a French word for "werewolf". *Kveldulf* is Old Norse for "evening wolf." *Vukodlak* is a Serbian word that refers to a type of folkloric ghoul that can have shape-shifting abilities. It, too, can apparently mean "werewolf." (*The Devourers* 53)

While these terms all derive from European contexts, the presence of werewolves in India is also confirmed very early on in the novel – the first of them is, of course, Izrail, who is perhaps not the best example. He is, after all the son of the European werewolf Fenrir, who raped his mother Cyrah, and thus a hybrid figure. Moreover, he inherited his supernatural abilities from his European ancestor, which can be read as a metafictional reference to the (mistaken) belief that fantasy is a Western genre superimposed on non-Western narratives. Fenrir himself, however, mentions the other 'tribes' of shapeshifters first, referring to the "dust-clad second selves of the djinn tribes, hunched and lapping the ruddy peaks of a charnel ground in the Sindh" (*The Devourers* 75) in Pakistan. Later on, Gévaudan tells Cyrah about shapeshifters in other countries "with names in the languages of these lands" (124). The lengthy discussion of Eastern tribes that follows as well as Cyrah's reaction to it deserves closer analysis:

> "On the outer edges of this empire, past the Indus and beyond, in Khorasan, the land of the Afghans, the tribes of our kind call themselves djinn. They are

> numerous. There is the tribe of the ifreets, who shape their second selves with great flightless wings, which they flap to make storms of desert dunes, who strike fear in the hearts of their enemies by setting their oily hides on fire. There is the tribe of ghuls, who stalk their prey with stealth, and enjoy mingling often with khrissals in cities to lure prey to death, and sometimes take the hyena as a totem for their second selves." As I listened, I felt again the ache in my chest, to hear these familiar words – *djinn, ifreet, ghul* – in a voice not my mother's. (*The Devourers* 124-125)

The function of this short paragraph is twofold. Firstly, the enumeration of various tribes of shapeshifters like Fenrir and Gévaudan living in "the land of the Afghans" highlights once more that werevolves, in the narrative world of Das's novel, are a global phenomenon. Considering earlier indications of possible metafictional readings of *The Devourers*, this can once more be interpreted as a subtle comment on the nature of the fantasy genre itself. Secondly, the connection between contemporary fantasy and folk tales, often older parts of still lived religions, is emphasised again as Cyrah feels an intimate, almost positive connection to the terms with which the shapeshifters describe themselves because she has heard them as stories from her mother.

The shapeshifters living in the Sundarbans are also briefly described – they call themselves 'rakshasa', a Hindu word for demon, and "worship the Lord of the South, the shape-shifter king Dakkhin Rai" (*The Devourers* 246), likewise an actual figure from Indian mythology, which continues the theme of conflating fantasy shapeshifters with real-world mythology – this is, of course, a strategy adopted by many fantasy novels. After all, werewolves themselves used to be an accepted part of medieval and early-modern Europe and are now a staple of fantasy literature. Here, however, an Indian writer is using his own mythological background for his fantasy tale without necessarily denying its validity as a still practiced belief. This seems to indicate a tradition within non-Western fantasy that allows non-Western writers to adopt several tropes of mainstream fantasy literature – thus undoubtedly gaining them a more widespread commercial success – without upholding the modern West's strict separation between fantasy and reality. The localised nature of Das's fantasy becomes clear through the fact that, in the Sundarbans, the rakshasas take the form of tiger-like creatures so that the human population makes no difference between the man-eating supernatural monsters and the man-eating animals native to the region. Cyrah herself also enters the mythology of the place by becoming “Banbibi, who is worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans” (*The Devourers* 247). Banbibi is traditionally depicted as a goddess riding on a tiger with a boy in her lap and Alok, when visiting the Sundarbans, encounters a shrine with an image just like that. It is only later on that Das’s reframing of Banbibi as Cyrah “riding through the forest and rivers on the back of a great beast” with Gévaudan as “her vahana, her animal vehicle” (247) is revealed. Das thus once more conflates the boundaries between fantasy and real-world epistemology/mythology, which will also be touched on in the next subchapter.

5.3. Location, Location, Location – *The Devourers*’ Rootedness in India

Das’s amalgamation of various ‘supernatural’ traditions that span the entire globe is not in itself an innovation within the fantasy genre, nor does it vary all that much from the Eurocentric genre conventions that have dominated the academic study of fantasy for quite some time. After all, even Tolkien includes the Southrons, “swarthy men in red” (*The Two Towers* 863), albeit as hostile invaders, and Ben Aaronovitch’s *Rivers of London* series includes an entire host of – positively connotated – fantasy creatures and humans who have global origins (the eponymous river spirits, for example, are almost entirely made up of Nigerian or Black British women). However, most mainstream fantasy narratives, even if they include a global cast of characters, are still set in the Western, often decidedly European world and thus still uphold a certain Western hegemony as the preferred locus of fantastic action. In contrast to that, the setting of *The Devourers* is undeniably Indian and it is the European characters that are, more often than not, described as threatening outsiders.

To that purpose, the novel begins with an atmospheric description of Kolkata, where the first encounter between Alok, the historian, and Izrail, the werewolf, takes place: “December mist [is] clinging to the streets of Kolkata” (*The Devourers* 3) and the “full-moon night [is] so bright you could see your own shadow on an unlit rooftop” (3). Already, the narrator subverts potential reader expectations of an exoticised, colourful India by describing a winter night “before winters started getting warmer” (3) that is cold and colourless under the moonlight casting shadows.

The homodiegetic narrator further engages the reader in the construction of the storyworld by drawing her into it through direct address:

> Think of a field breathing the cool of nighttime into the soles of your shoes. A large tent in front of you – cloth, canvas, and bamboo – lit from within. Electric lamps surrounding a wooden stage that creaks under the bare feet of bright-robed minstrels. This tent is where the rural bards of Bengal, the bauls, gather every winter to make music for city people. It's raw music, at times both shrill and hoarse, stained with hashish smoke and the self-proclaimed madness of their sect. A celebration of what's been lost, under the vigil of orange-eyed streetlights. (*The Devourers* 3)

The world established here is both a distinctly Indian and a distinctly modern place, combining the "wooden stage" of Bengal tradition with the "[e]lectric lamps" and juxtaposing "rural bards" with the "city people". It is a contemporary India, though the time frame is not entirely fixed and the phrase "this story began the winter before winters started getting warmer" (*The Devourers* 3) may suggest a temporal positioning slightly before global warming became an obvious and universally known problem. It is certainly interesting that the narrative refers to climate change so early in the text but then does not heavily feature climate crises as the narrative progresses. The novel does have a global scope, which can be seen in the global spread of were-creatures, but also in scenes in which Alok or Izrail feel the boundaries between themselves and the world dissolving as they – in the quoted instance Izrail – "become part of the planet, […] feel the vibrations of other lands and kingdoms and empires across the orb of the world" (285), but global warming stays at the margins of the narrative. This is especially surprising given that one of the main locations, the Sundarbans, is also a region of the planet that is particularly affected by climate change. As Malcolm Sen puts it, "[t]he obituary for the Sundarban islands and its communities has been written many times over" (2021, 178) and the region sees "the effects of anthropogenic climate change [which] are increasingly and alarmingly visible" (178), yet this is not focused on at all, neither with regard to Kolkata nor with the Sundarbans themselves, which Das frames with a different kind of human precarity in mind, as the end of this chapter will show.

The distinctly local dimensions of the Kolkata setting continue to emerge throughout all narratives, both historical and contemporary, while employing almost identical methods of reader engagement. The first intratext, the historical narrative conveyed to Alok via Izrail's hypnotic storytelling, also begins with a direct address to the reader that draws him into the storyworld, notably repeating the first line of the earlier instance of this kind of setting up of locality almost verbatim:

> Think of a field. A swamp, rather. This is a long time ago. Kolkata. Calcutta, or what will be Calcutta. Maybe it is this very field, this very ground. It is different then, overgrown and marshy, the hum and tickle of insects like a grainy blanket over this winter night. It is cloudy, the moonlight diffuse as it sparkles on the stretches of water hiding under the reeds. The darkness is oppressive. There is no blush of electricity on the horizon, no vast cities for the sky to reflect. Somewhere beyond the dark, there are three villages: Kalikata, Sutanati, Gobindapur. They belong to the British East India Company. They are building a fort known as William. Things are changing, a new century nears. It will be the eighteenth, by the Christian calendar. (*The Devourers* 8-9)

The detailed description refers potentially to the same place as the first paragraph of the kind, but here a temporal displacement has taken place as the setting is now a "swamp", where Kolkata will one day be. The past is here not a fixed point but intricately linked to both (our) present and (the field's) future – the developments of modern India are hinted at ("blush of electricity", "vast cities") but so is the encroachment of the British Empire on India as the three surrounding villages do not belong to the Indian people anymore, but to the British East India Company. "Things are changing" predicts the advent of British India as a colony, a past made present by the various narratives throughout the novel. This instance of geographical description also serves to break up the colonial view of "space and time as binary opposites" (Thieme 2016, 5) and instead "foregrounds the dynamic interconnectedness of time and space in the formation of social relations" (5) – a strategy that Thieme finds "particularly pertinent in postcolonial societies" (5) and which is here facilitated through the fantasy element of Izrail's hypnotic narration.

Perhaps paradoxically, at least while still reading through a Western lens, which demands a strict demarcation between fantasy and reality, the fantasy allows Alok's immersion into the different timelines to be inherently plausible and coherent within the structure of the narrative.

Das's interest in Kolkata is not bound by a linear time frame as the two parallel descriptions of "Kolkata. Calcutta, or what will be Calcutta" (*The Devourers* 8) succinctly show, but it is not limited either to the past or the present. While *The Devourers* contains only a passing reference to future changes ahead of the city, Das's short stories also show an interest in the form of Kolkata as continuously changing. In an interview with *The Hindustan Times*, Das states that "Kolkata will always play a huge role in [his] writing since [he] grew up [t]here and live[s] [t]here" (Ronnie 2021, n.p.), which shows how 'localised' particularities influence the writing of a transcultural, perhaps global, writer, who "divides his time between India and North America" according to the author biography in *The Devourers*. Moreover, Das's work showcases that speculative fiction genres such as fantasy and science fiction can engage just as deeply with localized specificities as so-called literary fiction and are perhaps even more suited to ecocritical readings focusing on changes in the city's environment. After all, even *The Devourers,* which mostly avoids discussion about climate change, very clearly shows how significantly humans have changed the environment already by draining the swampland experienced by Izrail in the past and building Calcutta, which eventually becomes the modern Kolkata Alok inhabits, on top of it. His flash fiction short story, "The Kolkata Sea", first published on *Flash Fiction Online* in 2010, shows the city as submerged by rising sea levels – interestingly, the short story is more accurately described as science fiction or climate fiction than as fantasy, thus perhaps supporting the idea that fantasy is turned towards the past while science fiction is turned towards the future. However, Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* as well as several of Indrapramit Das's more fantastically inclined short stories aptly prove that future fantasies are equally possible.

The next location described in some detail is Mumtazabad, again during a narrative set in the past, though this time from Cyrah's point of view. The setting serves to unsettle the reader, who undoubtedly will first think of the Mumtazabad that is situated in present-day's Pakistan rather than the settlement Mumtazabad built for the workers building the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal, better known as the Taj Mahal in modern times – at this point, most readers will likely have forgotten the third footnote Alok employs on page 38, which explains the history behind this Mumtazabad. The physical and arguably temporal distance between the two narrative instances may also highlight the artificiality of the tale itself as well as that of Alok's historiography. Cyrah's frequent repetition of phrases like "Shah Jahan's subjects" (*The Devourers* 92) and "Shah Jahan's lands" (119) reference the Mughal Empire, rather than the modern nation of India. Interestingly, the description here is somewhat less detailed, which indicates that Cyrah, a native of her region, perceives no need to describe her surroundings to her son, at whom the manuscript was initially directed. Interestingly, a direct comparison between Cyrah's and Fenrir's manuscript respectively highlights Cyrah's familiarity with her surroundings. While Fenrir describes the Taj Mahal as an "unfinished palace" and Alok is required to explain its true function as a tomb in a footnote, Cyrah immediately describes it as "the great tomb that was being built for Shah Jahan's dead wife" (92), which she clearly regards as being beyond the need for an explanation.

Despite the focus on a few select urban locations, such as Kolkata and Mumtazabad, the novel's main emphasis is on the journeys that the characters take. The shapeshifters Fenrir, Gévaudan and their temporary companion Makedon have "recently completed a trek across the region of the Middle East" (*The Devourers* 45), when they encounter Mumtazabad. Fenrir's narration also hints at the fact that he has seen various lands across Europe and Asia, as he knows the "nobility and peasantry in the Holy Roman Empire", "[f]ishermen roaming the shores of the Black Sea", and "the watered edge of the Ottoman Empire" (*The Devourers* 46) among other locations. When questioned by Cyrah, Gévaudan explains that the shapeshifters are on an "exodus" (175) due to increased superstition and consequent persecution in Europe and that they are trying to reach "a vast jungle at the mouth of the River Ganges, a land between the river and the sea, where many tribes of our kind dwell in solitude" (175) – thus, their destination has always been the Sundarbans, here described as a liminal place that is ideally suited to the shapeshifters. However, Fenrir does not frame his own journey as that of a refugee like Gévaudan seems to do. Instead, he tellingly cites Columbus as "the more accurate precursor of [his] journals" (47), including the violent aftermath of his so-called explorations, thus complicating the status of the shapeshifters as both the maligned Others *and* the colonising oppressors, which is further explored in the following subchapter. Thus, it is more likely Cyrah's journey, which also culminates in the Sundarbans, that can be seen "as a trope for a mobile postcolonial geography" (Thieme 2016, 6), especially since her journey leads her away from civilisation – both Mughal and British – into a perceived wilderness, where she experiences relative safety instead of danger and where she ultimately gives birth to her half-human, half-shapeshifter child. Her journey is later repeated by Alok and Izrail – Izrail plans to consume Alok once they reach the place of his birth, but instead the two metaphorically consume each other through their sexual encounter. Their voyage can be seen as a "journey into a heartland [which] is centrally concerned with disrupting the power/hegemonies of colonial cartography" (Thieme 2016, 16), which it does because civilisation and Empire(s) are left behind in favour of 'wilderness'.

As a large area of mangrove forests with four UNESCO World heritage sites, including wildlife sanctuaries, in which wild tigers roam, the Sundarbans have been the source of both indigenous creativity as its representation in songs and stories shows and touristic fascination with what is perceived as a wild jungle. To some extent, Das caters to a Western fascination with the so-called exotic – after all, the Sundarbans in his novel are a place where man-eating shapeshifters and forest goddesses roam – but transforms it in a distinctly Indian fascination with the place, which is also visible in so-called literary novels like Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, to which *The Devourers* bears at least some formal parallels. As in Ghosh's novel, it is a young, urban Indian professional, Alok, who visits the jungle for the first time and is thus both in awe and in fear of the place. Consequently, its description takes on a quasi-mythical tone:

> When I wake, everything has changed. The gray world gleams with sunlight, and the dull earth around has sprung to green life. On either side of the rippling silver sheet of the river is the mangrove forest. The ends of their roots stick up out of the muddy banks like groves of little stakes, waiting patiently for high tide to cover them with water so they can breathe again.

> Pale, pink-faced rhesus monkeys frolic among these stretches of vegetative fingertips as if they were fields of tall grass. The forest shimmers surreal and bright, the short mangroves hugging the edges of the banks and allowing no glimpses into the swampy forest beyond. Immediately I start looking for tigers amid the trees. […] We are in the Sundarbans. (*The Devourers* 232-233)

It is not only Alok's fascination with the place that makes this passage stand out, but also the way in which the nonhuman actors around him take agency. The roots of the mangrove trees are described as "vegetative fingertips", which are "waiting patiently" for the water that is coming with the tide. Here, it is not the mixture between mythology as well as religion and contemporary reality that constitutes the fantastic, but it is nature itself, which becomes an element of fantasy, similarly to the liminal nature fantasy of Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series, which will be discussed in the next chapter. This particular scene takes place on a boat and is thus still part of a journey, which unsettles "notions of linear time, discrete identity and even the distinction between people and place" (2016, 16), as Thieme puts it in a different context. Alok sleeps and wakes up already at the destination, the Sundarbans, yet still in motion and distanced from the actual location by his position on the moving boat. He is, however, still an outsider and his exoticising fascination with the place is highlighted through an intertextual reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): Alok feels "predictably like Conrad's Marlow about to journey down the Congo River" (*The Devourers* 231), which indicates that he perceives the Sundarbans as a dangerous wilderness. This perception aligns with a public perception of the area as "of great biodiversity value to both regional and planetary ecologies" (Sen 2021, 181), perpetuated even by reputable sources, such as the UNESCO website, where the Sundarbans have been represented as a World Heritage site since 1987. Just like the UNESCO, Alok's description of the Sundarbans likewise "glosses over lived human experience" (Sen 2021, 181), at first, focusing only on the wildlife like the "pink-faced rhesus monkeys" (*The Devourers* 231), "[a] great estuarine crocodile" (234), "[a] grey monitor lizard" (234), "[a] brown-and-white hawk" (234) and the tigers, with which the Sundarbans are primarily associated and who, in *The Devourers*, are overshadowed by the shapeshifting rakshasas. The predators' presence is evoked through Alok's aural perception and imagination as he hears a rustling noise and "imagine[s] it to be the sound of great paws treading on the undergrowth, bright patterned sinews brushing against the mangroves and low palm leaves" (234-235). When Alok does mention other humans, he characterizes them as out of place, a disturbance in the seemingly untouched wilderness, as they scare the wildlife away with their "gaudy red-and-white tour boats" (234) and "the sound of their engines" (234). He sees them – and himself – as a "glittering human scab on the water" (235), indicating that he perceives the human presence in the Sundarbans as the ugly remnants of an injury.

Yet the Sundarbans are clearly "inhabited by approximately five million people" (Sen 2021, 181) and the two travellers are planning to stay in a guesthouse that is "very close to the riverbank, reachable by a brick path laid down in mud, crossing through a narrow fringe of forest separating village from river" (*The Devourers* 237), which highlights the closeness of the various habitats of village, river, and forest. Sabine Lauret-Taft writes about *The Hungry Tide* that,

> [w]hile Ghosh questions the way people, both outsiders and locals, relate to a hostile environment, at the heart of the novel lies another narrative, the legend of Bon Bibi, which brings to the fore the role of folktale in the appropriation of space and in communities. (Lauret-Taft 2018, 196)

While *The Devourers* focuses more on other issues such as the rewriting of history and the complicated construction of the queer self, it does share some of these concerns with *The Hungry Tide*. Part Six, "Sundarbans", revolves entirely around this location, discussing the relationships between humans, tigers, and rakshasas in Das's version of the delta forest, showing the intense entanglement of reality, myth, and fantasy in the narrative. Humans are seen edging out a living amidst the dangerous forest, where shapeshifters and tigers lurk, and next to the river, where crocodiles prowl, adopting several behaviours meant to ensure their continued survival. They worship the juxtaposed figures of "Banbibi and Dakkhin Rai" (*The Devourers* 256) for example, which is a practice that exists outside of Das's novel as "Bon Bibi is part of locals' everyday life, part of their rituals and celebrated in their entertainment" (Lauret-Taft 2018, 200) because she is seen as a protective figure warding off tigers (or rather the shapeshifters in Das's version of the myth). Despite

Bon Bibi's or Banbibi's ability to grant protection to humans in the Sundarbans, her story is nonetheless one "in which man is the prey, not the predator" (200), which is reflected in Cyrah's transformation into the novel's version of Banbibi. The humans living in the Sundarbans start seeing her as "an incarnation of the divine guardian of the forest, Banbibi" (*The Devourers* 247) because they glimpse her riding through the Sundarbans on the shapeshifter Gévaudan's second self and they consider her "their only protection against the demon king Dakkhin Rai" (247). The humans are very aware of their vulnerability as prey of both tigers and shapeshifters and "[a]voiding man-eaters has long been a way of life in these parts" (247), which indicates that the humans are hyper-aware of their precarious status as prey in the Sundarbans. Moreover, Cyrah herself, despite becoming a goddess in the eyes of the locals, remains vulnerable, only safe from predation through Gévaudan's protection and the treaty made with the pack of rakshasas. Her fate is particularly interesting because it crosses boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, not through actual transformation, as is the case with the shapeshifters – who, much like European werewolves – were humans once, but through forging affiliative relationships with Gévaudan and her son Izrail. Eventually, she is perhaps able to cross species boundaries precisely because she accepts that she is Sundarbans as she "is the first and only human […] who has asked to be killed and eaten by [Izrail's] kind" and "this gave her power over [him]" (*The Devourers* 282).

The notion of the Sundarbans as "a palimpsest country" (Lauret-Taft 2018, 202) is one that *The Devourers* also seems to support. "The constant reshaping of the land through the tidal movements" (202) is only hinted at through the frequent references to the Sundarbans as "the country of eighteen tides" (*The Devourers* 226, 250, 269, 279, 285, 288, 301, 302), but the idea that the tidal mangrove forest is a liminal space "where myths and stories are constantly rewritten" (Lauret-Taft 2018, 201) is omnipresent. The Sundarbans make Cyrah's transformation into a demigoddess and Gévaudan's into "her vahana, her animal vehicle" (*The Devourers* 262) possible and it is also in the Sundarbans where Cyrah's son first becomes a shapeshifter, rather than a human, only to recover his human side through devouring Cyrah and, no longer in the Sundarbans but still upon liminal swampland, accept his European heritage by adopting "the colors of the great wolf" (291). Thrice overwritten, he becomes Izrail, a liminal, hybrid character, who he sees himself as destined to be exiled. In the Sundarbans, even Alok becomes “a character in myth, in folklore” (262), further blurring the boundaries between Alok’s former life as a historian without knowledge of the supernatural and the intrusion of ‘magic’ through Izrail and the various scrolls and tales he shares with Alok. Even the eventual dissolution of Alok’s identity, which sees him overwritten multiple times as he assumes the identity of the various characters whose stories he has ‘devoured’, has its origin in the palimpsest country because it is Izrail’s “kiss, his saliva and semen and sweat” (302), given to Alok in their Sundarban guesthouse, which allows him to ‘shapeshift’ and ‘become’ a multitude of characters in stories, which are constantly rewritten and reshaped (cf. *The Devourers* 302-303).

It is not only a dissolution of identity which takes place in the Sundarbans and throughout the novel (and which will be discussed in more detail further below), but also the dissolution of any “distinction between people and place” (Thieme 2016, 16), further hinting at *The Devourers*’ ecocritical angle. This dissolution is not only present in Alok’s anthropomorphising descriptions of the jungle and the inevitable entanglements associated with living in the Sundarbans discussed above, but also in Izrail’s past immersion into the world of the Sundarbans as he becomes “part of the planet” (*The Devourers* 285). His supernatural abilities allow him to dismantle “discrete identity” in a very literal way as he “digest[s] the memories of all the khrissals [he has] devoured” (285), taking over part of their former identities – a fact that Alok also remarks upon in the present, saying “he is again Izrail and Cyrah both” (*The Devourers* 285) while they have sex. “Notions of linear time” are similarly subverted, “on a formal as well as a thematic level” (2016, 16), as Thieme has stated for postcolonial narratives in general. Chapter nine starts with Alok as the focaliser in the present, sharing a bed with Izrail, but then switches, after only a paragraph, to Izrail in the Sundarbans of the past, “the country of eighteen tides, [his] home” (*The Devourers* 279). Chapter ten follows the exact same pattern, but here Izrail’s narration continues over to chapter eleven, spanning several centuries. Increasingly, the pace of the various time jumps within the narrative picks up speed as it approaches the end with Izrail starting one four-line-paragraph with the “Mughal Empire […] dead, and Hindustan […] under the British Empire” (292), whereas the next, almost equally short paragraph already has him “in a Hindustan now independent, a nation and republic known to the world as India" (292), holding Alok in his arms.

5.4. "I am the great wolf at Ragnarök"[52] – Werewolves as the Ultimate and Monstrous Other

As the previous subchapter has shown, Das mostly conflates his supernatural beings with evil entities, adversaries and enemies from religions and mythologies worldwide. It is thus apparent that the shapeshifters are not primarily positive characters but seem to fall mostly in the category of the antagonistic Other, and indeed the Other has been a staple figure of fantasy literature throughout the literary history of the genre, be it in its early embodiments as fairy or folk tales or in its contemporary form as the fantasy novel or short story. Helen Young, in her study *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* discusses the figure of the Other in context with Tolkien's orcs, which become a stand-in for a generalised "monstrous Other constructed through racial discourses" (2016, 89). Orcs, according to Young, can frequently be read as a demonized race in opposition to the usually white-coded heroes and heroines since they are "commonly Othered by the following: their skin colour, be it green, brown, or black; their extreme aggressiveness and irrationality; primitive, disorganized cultures; and homelands which are outside the borders of civilization" (89) – the dynamic is similar to what Bhabha explains in *Location of Culture*: "[W]hite heroes and black demons are proffered as points of ideological and physical identification" (Bhabha 1994, 108), not only in children's literature but also in fantasy literature. The orcs, or similarly generic antagonists, who represent pure evil and for whom no redemption is possible, permeate contemporary Western (or perhaps more specifically *white*) fantasy literature and their connection to the racialised Other of colonial discourse cannot be denied, especially since their foundational figures, Tolkien's orcs, who are, again following Young, "inflected by nineteenth- and early-twentieth century colonialist concepts of race and racist stereotypes" (2016, 108). To a certain degree, Indrapramit Das' story is no exception as his shapeshifters certainly belong to a specific race set apart from (the rest of) humanity by their appearance, culture and behaviour. Similarly to the stereotype of colonial discourse identified by Homi K. Bhabha, they are seen as "loyal servant[s] of Satan" (1994, 113) by most humans who know of their existence and they are also caught within the ambivalence stipulated by Bhabha: They are something "already known" (95), as Bhabha puts it with reference to a more generalised figure of the Other, in that humans recognise them under various terms such as werewolves, rakshasas, ifreet etc., which have become so familiar to them through stories told by family members that there are an almost reassuring presence, a rigid and unchanging concept (cf. Bhabha 1994, 94), albeit one of evil incarnate. At the same time, they are also unpredictable and threatening, representing "disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (94). However, Das seems to be well aware of the explicit Othering of his characters and intent on challenging this particular construction of fantasy enemies throughout his novel. It is even possible that a particular aspect of Das's werewolf characters may be a deliberate reference to Bhabha's conception of the Other, as they quite literally perform a split of the self when their "soul [is] bifurcated" (*The Devourers* 191) at the moment of their transformation into a shapeshifter and they become beings with a first (human) self and a second (monstrous) one, reminiscent of Bhabha's "mimicry or 'doubling'" – the shapeshifters' first selves mimic human appearances – "that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego" (Bhabha 1994, 107).

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[52] *The Devourers* 303.

However, the relationship between humans and shapeshifters is not a strictly binary one, nor is there an explicit superiority on either side of the opposing 'races'. While humans seem, at first, to be morally more grounded and more capable of love than shapeshifters, shapeshifters also experience feelings of pity and love, albeit being discouraged from expressing them by their repressive and violent culture. Any superiority in bodily strength is offset by the humans' determination, represented by Cyrah's insistence on enacting revenge on her supernatural racist. And yet, this is not the only way in which Das destabilises the strict binary opposition between fantasy's heroes and fantasy's Others. He uses narratorial perspective to show that there is no universal Other and that all such constructions are based on the point of view; reliant, therefore, on the positionality of the one who is allowed to look at the others and describe them. As the first part of the framed narrative is narrated through the werewolf Fenrir as its autodiegetic narrator, his point of view and opinions are given precedence and constitute, for a long part of the narrative, his as the only perspective that the reader has access to. As such, it is not the shapeshifters who are seen as others, but the humans, despite the fact that Alok, arguably the novel's main character, is human himself and also the main addressee of the narrative within the novel. The werewolves' non-human nature is emphasised again and again, much more so than in mainstream werewolf novels, where, usually, the werewolves struggle with the duality of their humanity and beastliness. Here, the narrator never hesitates to make the difference between him and humanity clear – he describes the werewolves as "for all the world like three men camped under the starlit sky" (*The Devourers* 44), which highlights that they may be *like* men, but they are not men at all. They regard themselves as so radically different that another of the werewolves, Makedon, compares Fenrir's rape of Cyrah to "a farmer [who] in boredom and loneliness fuck[s] a dumb calf fat for his plate […] The calf is his prey, and below him, and a carnal act with it is vulgar" (61). Gévaudan in his interactions with Cyrah also insists on his non-human identity, stating that he "cannot know what it means to be human any more than [Cyrah] can truly understand what the worlds of [her] dreams mean" (191). In a way, Cyrah accepts this version of the werewolves as entirely non-human and Other, repeatedly describing them as "utterly foreign" (91), "ugly" (92) and "monstrous" (92). It is worth noting then that the evil other in this case, while coded as savage and irredeemably evil, is not "non-specifically non-White" (Young 89) but explicitly White and European, hailing from France, Scandinavia and Greece respectively, thus subverting previously employed racialist tropes of fantasy literature.

Nonetheless, Das is not interested in providing a mere reversal of a binary opposition, which metaphorically characterises the colonised as wholly good and the coloniser as wholly evil. On the contrary, throughout the novel, shapeshifters take on human attributes while humans can become more 'god-like'. Fenrir states that

> I have known love, Gévaudan. I have kept it locked away, but I have felt it. I believe others of our kind feel it, have felt it, but hide it as well. You. You know this. There is more than anima and lust in me, in all of us. But that is all she saw in me. A creature less than both animal and human. (*The Devourers* 73)

Thus, Fenrir insists that shapeshifters like him are not wholly other, yet Cyrah continues to see him as monstrous. However, this perception is not due to his species or race, but due to his violent behaviour towards her since he raped and impregnated her through use of force. In contrast, Gévaudan becomes a trusted friend to Cyrah so that even his animal form is not terrible to her, but "beautiful like nothing in the world" (*The Devourers* 225). His difference is not denied, he is still a shapeshifter who is different from his human ancestors, but he is not Othered as savage or dangerous, instead becoming Cyrah's "most loyal friend" (302).

Cyrah's own development also negates the possibility that either humans or shapeshifters in Das's *The Devourers* can be construed as wholly other. Through her friendship with Gévaudan, her close bond with the non-human agency he represents, she becomes, in a sense, more-than-human because she transforms into the goddess figure Banbibi, who is able to coexist with the shapeshifters and is seen as a protector figure by the local humans. Izrail, her son, without yet knowing that she is his mother, describes her as "sit[ting] atop her vahana, a beast that looks both similar and different from [their] second selves", as "both human and unafraid" (*The Devourers* 250), beautiful, and even capable of frightening shapeshifters. She has "become a goddess among [her] fellow humans […]: Banbibi, Bandurga, Bandevi" (302) and "a khrissal [human] turned Valkyrie" (303). While Gévaudan has taken on 'human' characteristics, such as the ability to feel love and loyalty for another human, Cyrah has incorporated the shapeshifters' pride and courage into her being, so that both become hybrid figures. Moreover, by the end of a novel, a literal hybrid between human and shapeshifter exists in the form of Cyrah's and Fenrir's son Izrail, who may have grown up among the rakshasas, but has learnt more human behaviours and feelings through reading the stories of his father and mother, thus embodying the product of 'miscegenation' between human and shapeshifter, which mirrors Bhabha's considerations on interracial relationships and the concurring "fear/desire of miscegenation" (Bhabha 1994, 99). However, rather than being threatening to either human or shapeshifter world, he becomes a liberatory figure who allows Alok not only to fully experience his own sexuality but also break out from the enforced singular existence as a stable individual rather than as a fluid collection of various identities and viewpoints.

5.5. Destabilising the Myth of the Individual Self in Indrapramit Das's *The Devourers*

Dipesh Chakrabarty writes about the constructed individual of Western historiography as a "modern individual […] whose political/public life is lived in citizenship" and who "is also supposed to have an interiorized 'private self' that pours itself out incessantly in diaries, letters, autobiographies, novels" (2000, 35). He then claims that "Indian novels, diaries, letters, and autobiographies […] seldom yield pictures of an endlessly interiorized subject" (35), which, he suggests, may have to do with different constructions of "self and community" as well as with "subject positions and configurations of memory that challenge and undermine the subject that speaks in the name of history" (37). Indrapramit Das's *The Devourers* seems to counteract this to a certain degree, seemingly privileging a more Western conception of the individual as all three semi-historical narratives are told by first-person-narrators – Fenrir's narrative in particular seems to be a precise example of "autobiographies in the confessional mode" that Chakrabarty considers "notable for their absence" (2000, 37) in the corpus of Indian historical material since he even refers to himself as a "confessor, eager to let [his] words fall on human ears" (*The Devourers* 68). However, the traditional boundaries of individual selfhood are gradually being eroded throughout the novel. At first, fluid and flexible identities are only depicted as a part of the nonhuman shapeshifters' natures and as such could be seen as a mere fantasy element rather than as a comment on the instability of fixed identities. Fenrir, for example, refers to humans as "you of one self and one soul" (38), at once seemingly confirming the individuality and inflexibility of singular human selves and distancing himself and his fellow shapeshifters from such an experience. Shapeshifters take on parts of the personalities of their victims including acquiring the ability to speak foreign languages, gaining access to the victim's memories and even taking on the physical form of their prey for their so-called first selves, that is their human form. This becomes most obvious when Fenrir accuses Gévaudan of wanting "to devour Cyrah, and undertake the long sleep of ekh'du, to shape [his] first self into her form" (*The Devourers* 202). This is also the first hint that the gender binary is undermined by the shapeshifter's ability to shift identity as well as bodily form since they can relatively easily switch from male to female and back.

The novel's shifting and unstable identities become most interesting, however, when they are not restricted to its non-human characters. As has been mentioned in a previous chapter, Cyrah herself shifts from a normal human woman to the elevated position of a demi-goddess, worshipped by humans and at least respected by shapeshifters, but it is Alok who undergoes the most striking transformation, from Westernised individual convinced of his own subjective interiority to an amalgamation of identities containing multitudes. His transformation is first hinted at through Izrail's first hypnotic narration, during which Alok becomes so engrossed in the story that he takes on the role of its protagonist. The story-within-the-story, though officially given to Alok by Izrail, remains a seemingly unmediated I-narrative with – presumably – Alok stating that "I am the beast he sees in himself, hot and rank and vast, bear and wolf and man" (*The Devourers* 17). Whereas at first, Alok sees himself as "an anthropologist who has made an astounding discovery" (59), thus framing himself as an objective outsider-scientist, after immersing himself in Fenrir's scroll and half of Cyrah's narrative, he begins to identify more and more deeply with the characters whose stories he transcribes. Thus, his "dreams, ever faithful, are filled with terrible monsters and skewed, magic-haunted worlds from the past. In them, I often find that I'm a woman" (166). In the end, Alok has been changed and transformed by the stories he inhabited so that he feels that "Izrail is inside [him] and so is Cyrah, because I am him, he is me, that he devoured me that night as I devoured him and I am secretly a shape-shifter" (302). The final long paragraph of the novel consists of a range of sentences, all of which begin with the personal "I" but all of which have Alok speaking from different perspectives, alternating between Cyrah, Fenrir, Izrail and himself. The paragraph begins with several declarations of identity, such as "I am Cyrah of Lahore. […] I am Izrail of the Sundarbans, […] bastard khrissal-werewolf-rakshasa. I am Alok of Kolkata" (*The Devourers* 302), then moves on to different actions performed by the individuals in question with the most startling switches being the ones between Cyrah and her rapist Fenrir, as can be seen in the short passage "I walk beside a djinn from France, and realize that he has become my most loyal friend" (302), followed by Fenrir's disturbing line of thought: "I rape the woman I love, the khrissal I love, the prey I think I love" (302). Eventually, the sentences become shorter, which shifts the rhythm of narration into a faster space, ending with an almost programmatic succession that may well represent the novel's final declaration on the fluidity of identity:

> I am male. I am female. I am neither. I am rakshasa. I am djinn. I am werewolf. I am not a khrissal. I was once a human, I want to be a human. I want to love a human. I am a human.
> I love you. (*The Devourers* 303)

Of course, these final lines also reiterate the novel's concern with queer themes, which resurface at multiple points in the plot and link the fantasy storyline to the social-cultural conditions of queer people in India. On the one hand, there is Alok who clearly initially struggles with his queer identity as his failed engagement with a woman and his attempts to conceal his queer desire from Izrail initially show (cf. *The Devourers* 86-87). As Bernhardt-House states,

> [t]he werewolf figure is generally seen as a 'hybrid' figure of sorts – part human and part wolf – and its hybridity and transgression of species boundaries in a unified figure is, at very least, unusual, thus the figure of the werewolf might be seen as a natural signifier for queerness in its myriad forms. (Bernhardt-House 2008, 159)

And indeed, Das's werewolves are inherently queer as one of their supernatural abilities is the transformation into differently sexed bodies, which also seems to include a change in gender identity, as the switching of pronouns indicates in the case of Fenrir, who "(as him) swallow[s] Fenrir (as her)" (*The Devourers* 290). The idea of mutual devouring as a kind of metaphor for queer sexuality also runs throughout the novel, both in a negative sense when it comes to the semi-abusive relationships between werewolves, especially between 'newborn' werewolf and imakhr, who "fucks the new shape-shifter" (*The Devourers 193*) despite their near-paternal relationship, but also positively with regard to the relationship between Alok and Izrail. When they engage in oral sex, Alok "feel[s] consumed, so divinely vulnerable, exposed like a deer in the mud […] ready to be torn and eaten" (242) and eventually he feels "a part of [himself] spatter into [Izrail's] mouth liquid and alive"

(243). Towards the end of Izrail's tales, Izrail asks for Alok, the human, to devour him in turn (cf. *The Devourers* 284) and Alok consumes Izrail's semen, which "burns in [his] throat, [his] gut, like alcohol, like acid, like the blood of some prophet imbued with divine flame" (284). This exchange of bodily humours allows Alok to claim a multitude of identities, as "someone who is not a man, is not merely Alok" (301) and accept his own gender fluidity,

Indrapramit Das's *The Devourers* is, on many levels, a novel of queerness and destabilisation. It challenges notions of Western historiography that rely on allegedly objective documents and sources as well as on individualised interiority for research. Individuality and stable personal selves are equally challenged as identities blur and merge, masculine and feminine selves are shown to be interchangeable and the boundaries between human and non-human beings are eliminated. Thus, it highlights India's own multiplicity, fashioned by imperialism "into a modern and unified European colony" (D'haen 1997, 215). It is certainly worthwhile to follow D'haen's example here and also refer to Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, in which he addresses "the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One" (Rushdie 1995, 408) – a lasting result of the British Empire, which led to India being constituted as a single, supposedly homogenous state. This fantasy of homogenous purity is here broken apart through Das's fantasy of the multiplicity of identities converging within Alok, which, despite its fantastic nature, seems to be a more apt description of reality than the fiction of the separated individual. Through the final dissolution of self and the concomitant subversion of unity enforced by the British, Das's novel also reveals fantasy's potential for postcolonial critique. Its rewriting of history is not only connected to writing werewolves into non-magical historiography – it also makes the broader point of history as a mutable entity, open for negotiation, which has often been a concern for postcolonial writers and critics.

Das manages to incorporate a metafictional critique of the contemporary fantasy genre into his urban fantasy novel by not only emphasising the global nature of fantasy through the means of a global werewolf figure, but also by subverting and toying with the racialised Other that permeates Western contemporary fantasy. *The Devourers* turns the simplistic good-versus-evil dichotomy, which many readers and, occasionally, many researchers still associate with fantasy literature, into a much more complex dynamic that competently demonstrates how fantasy literature can challenge harmful societal structures and comment on contemporary race relations without necessarily having to rely on bleak realism in order to do so. Das grapples with an Other that is, at first glance, radically different and even nonhuman. In many ways, the shapeshifters in *The Devourers* are literal monsters, denying any connection to humanity vehemently. However, the novel slowly reveals that while Fenrir, who is seeking connectedness with humans, can never reach it, Gévaudan, just as much an Other and nonhuman as Fenrir, does form a meaningful bond with Cyrah. Das thus destabilises notions of the Other as monstrous, perhaps exposing the Other as a myth intended to justify fear and aggression in multiple directions. Here, the novel also resonates with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses of monster culture, in which he states that

> [a]ny kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (Cohen 1996, 41)

Indeed, almost all of these areas of difference are addressed in *The Devourers*, though first and foremost are clashes along the lines of cultural, economic, and sexual difference as this chapter has shown. Combined with the novel's distinct situatedness in India, its liberal mixture of fantasy and reality and its reference to global myths, *The Devourers* takes part in a global fantasy network, while challenging both the global and the fantastic, thus perhaps challenging readers and scholars alike to find new frameworks (as opposed to Western-centric 'fantasy') to read fantastic texts with.

6. “There was something almost supernatural about the scene”[53] – The Borders of Fantasy in Lian Hearn’s *Tales of the Otori*

6.1. Traditions of Japan – Intertextuality and Intermediality in *Tales of the Otori*

As the previous chapters have shown, Indian and African cultures have had a considerable impact on the fantasy genre – not just during recent developments, which have brought these non-Western authors to the attention of the global markets, but even before the fantasy genre as such was properly established. Fantastic tales and subject matters, after all, often provide the raw material for contemporary fantasy and have always travelled between cultures. One of the most prominent examples of this is, perhaps, the world literary classic *Arabian Nights*, which were translated into French in 1704 by Antoine Galland. His work went beyond being a translation of the original, however, since he added some stories to the collection, which have become some of the most well-known tales of the classic, even travelling *back* to the original context. Such travels, however, do not occur without friction – the *Arabian Nights* is, in fact, one of the examples used by Edward Said in his seminal book *Orientalism* to show that the travelling text has only been admitted into the world literary sphere by denying its very origin (cf. 2003 [1978], 193). It is these uneasy journeys of stories or, in my case, fantasy motifs and settings, that I will focus on in this chapter. While the previous chapters have dealt with texts that have themselves travelled and thus added worlds based on their cultural roots to the ever-growing canon of fantasy, this chapter considers East Asian cultures in particular as they travel from East Asia – or more specifically Japan – to the Anglophone context. It explores how they become the inspiration for a variety of fantasy authors, both with and without an East Asian background, and how cultures, settings, and motifs are handled when transformed into literature. Drawing from East Asia as inspiration for fantastic text is a wide-spread phenomenon not limited to traditional literature, but including movies, games, and TV shows – *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is perhaps the best example for this practice. It is a fantasy series for children set in an identifiably Asian world and it has received both praise and criticism for its portrayal of cultures that its creators do not share. Such practices are visible throughout the English-speaking world, but it is perhaps most pronounced within Australian and Canadian contexts, though the range of texts discussed in this chapter will mostly focus on British-Australian writer Lian Hearn while looking at Japanese and Japanese-American fantasies for comparison. In Canada, several fantasies drawing upon East Asian contexts have been published in recent years, most often written by Canadian authors with East-Asian heritage, which inform texts such as Hiromi Goto's *Half-World* (2009) and Michelle Sagara West's productive fantasy output, which includes *The Sundered* series (1991-1994) and the *Chronicles of Elantra* (2007-2012). (White) Australian fantasy writers in particular seem to be enamoured by East Asian mythology and themes: Traci Harding's *The Time Keepers* trilogy (2013-2015), whose first volume, *The Dreaming Zhou Gong* (2013) already evokes its East Asian inspiration, Kylie Chan's *Dark Heaven* series (2006-2007), which takes place in modern Hong Kong, featuring a White Australian protagonist, Jay Kristoff's Japan-inspired *Stormdancer* series (2012-2013), and last but not least Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series (2002-2020), which is set in a secondary world inspired by feudal Japan and which will be the main focus of this chapter. The series initially follows the lives of Otori Takeo and Shirakawa Kaede as they enter the feudal society of the Japanese-inspired Three Countries from their respective positions of marginality before branching out into an intergenerational narrative about the Otori clan. In addition to Hearn's primary trilogy, I will also at certain points refer to Nahoko Uehashi's *Moribito* series, Julie Kagawa's *Shadow of the Fox* trilogy, and Emiko Jean's stand-alone novel *Empress of All Seasons*.

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[53] *Across the Nightingale Floor* 270.

Lian Hearn's fantasy series is particularly liminal, following Mendlesohn's rhetorics established earlier on in this study, and thus, it is only fitting that it should be the main work for a chapter focusing intensely on border crossings of various sorts. The series, and to some extent others like it, hover between the fantastic and the real, nature and the supernatural, writing and visual art, visual art and nature, religion and make-believe as well as between cultural appreciation and appropriation, orientalism and genuine interest. This chapter takes Hearn's first trilogy, consisting of the novels A*cross the Nightingale Floor* (2002), *Grass for his Pillow* (2003), and *Brilliance of the Moon* (2004), and analyses such moments of border crossing for their effect within the broader fantasy narrative of the series.

Intermittently, comparisons will be made with Uehashi's, Kagawa's, or Jean's work in order to show where they either remarkably resemble or drastically differ from Hearn. These three others have been chosen because their general subject matter – Japanese-inspired feudal fantasies – are suitably similar, but their subject positions as authors are markedly different. Uehashi is a Japanese author, whose texts will be discussed here only in translation, but she does have a surprising connection to Australia, which will be covered in more detail later on in this chapter. Emiko Jean and Julie Kagawa are both Japanese-American authors, who are both inspired by their heritage, but are still removed from Japan as they are both second generation Americans. In an interview, Emiko Jean states, for example, that she does not "speak any Japanese, other than the phrases my father yelled at me when I was young" (Hong 2021, n.p.) and highlights the importance of fantasy in allowing her "to explore [her] heritage (in a magical way)" (n.p.), which she describes as "an incredibly enriching experience" (n.p.). This chapter's focus on East Asian inspired fantasies – and the concomitant constellations of Orientalist portrayals, mutual inspiration, and self-Orientalism – means that a discussion of Orientalist discourses is a necessity. As a consequence, Orientalism will be addressed throughout, but it will be most focused on when discussing Hearn's situation as a transcultural writer, who travels even further and across stricter ethnic and cultural 'boundaries' than that between Australia and Britain in the chapter's last subsection.

Considering the importance of Orientalism throughout, it makes sense to start with a brief summary of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, even though it will only be the main focus of my analysis later on. Crucially, this chapter will also draw from further studies in the field of Orientalism, which argue that Orientalist theories can also be applied to East Asian countries in addition to Said's conception of the Orient, which is

> not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. (Said 2003 [1978], 1)

This evidently distinguishes the 'Orient' Said predominantly writes about from the East Asian cultures at the heart of this chapter, though Said does refer to "the Far East (China and Japan, mainly)" (Said 2003 [1978], 1) when explaining how European and American notions of the Orient differ. Ostensibly, Said also considered his Orientalist theory to be applicable to the 'Far Eastern' countries as he states that the USA's then "recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochine adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic 'Oriental' awareness" (Said 2003 [1978], 2). The facts remain, though, that Said mentions the 'Far East' only twice more and only briefly discusses the "wide variety of hybrid representations of the Orient [that] now roam the culture" (Said 2003 [1978], 285), which include "Japan, Indochina, China, India, Pakistan" (Said 2003 [1978], 285). In spite of Said's differing focus, it is almost self-evident that Orientalist approaches also work well with Western depictions of East Asian characters, countries, and cultures and it therefore makes sense to look at Said's descendants in order to be able to refer to East Asia and Japan in particular in this study. Even a very early review of Said's *Orientalism*, a piece published in 1980 in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, discusses Orientalism's applicability to the study of Japan as opposed to Said's frequently more narrow view of the East. Richard H. Minear explores the resemblances that Japanese studies bears to Orientalist studies and thus the ways in which it also needs to be reconsidered according to *Orientalism*'s observations (cf. Minear 1980, 507). While "Japan is the remotest segment of the 'Far East' and was unknown to the West until Marco Polo's tome" (Minear 1980, 514) and thus has none of the close connections Said lists for the Orient and Europe, Minear still identifies a number of core aspects which indicate that Japan has nonetheless been treated similarly by western scholars: He asserts that a clear division between East and West is also present in Japanese studies (cf. Minear 1980, 508), that Japan is construed as a "dying civilization" (509) and as inferior to the West (cf. 512). Certainly, Japan and the broader region of East Asia are also subject to many of the same prejudices that are routinely part of Orientalist discourses since, according to Rebecca Suter, "when the European colonial enterprise extended to East Asia, Orientalism often became the primary mechanism to confront the non-Western Other" (2012, 238). Nishihara Daisuke lists some of them in his article on "Said, Orientalism, and Japan", including associations with "dictatorship, fanaticism, and cruelty" (2005, 246) and "the gratification of sexual pleasures" (246). Such Orientalist elements of discourse will be analysed further when addressing the complex relationships between Japanese, Japanese diasporic, and non-Japanese writers of Japanese-inspired fantasy literature and the relationship of these constellations to world literature.

However, before analysing Orientalist depictions of Japanese-inspired settings and characters, it makes sense to first look at which elements are chosen for integration into fantasy narratives by Japanese and non-Japanese writers. Some of the most popular figures of Japanese history, which continue to be portrayed in Western and Japanese media alike are the samurai and the geisha, which also seem to run a particular risk of being Orientalised – though this risk extends to Japanese writers and creators as well, as Ma Sheng-Mei has stated (cf. 2013, 168). This will be taken up again later on in this chapter, where the focus will lie on the difficult balance between a global exchange of ideas, necessary for productive cultural appreciation and development, and a predatory Orientalist appropriation of exoticised novelties. In order to effectively assess when and where Lian Hearn may stray into Orientalist territory – and where fellow fantasy writers with East Asian heritage may or may not avoid such pitfalls –, it is necessary to focus first on those elements of Japanese culture, history, and mythology which are used in fantasy. Nishihara Daisuke, for example, claims that "[t]he representation of Samurai," which are the obvious model for Hearn's ruling and warrior classes, are often based on "Western discourse on Japan" (2005, 245), but also acknowledges that "Japanese intellectuals themselves contributed to these representations" (246), citing Inazo Nitobe, who, in his 1900 *Bushido, the Soul of Japan*, "depends on the Samurai image in order to proclaim the greatness of Japan" (245) according to Nishihara. There can likewise be no doubt that samurai as well as their code of honour were a part of Japanese history and that Hearn's usage of them and other Japanese cultural and historical elements is based on profound research – also with regards to *Japanese* discourse on its samurai history – and not merely on traditional Western depictions of Japan. In her acknowledgments to *Across the Nightingale Floor*, Hearn states that, while her novels do not correspond directly "to any true historical era," they echo "many Japanese customs and traditions" while being "set in an imaginary country in a feudal period" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 293). Because of these echoes, the novel abounds with intertextual and intermedial references to Japanese art, literature, and history, which transform the narrative from simple YA fantasy trilogy into a complex and rich narrative that echoes both Western and Eastern literary traditions. In an interview, Hearn mentions not only Arthurian sagas and *The Lord of the Rings* as important influences but also "the novels of Yukio Mishima" and "*The Tale of Genji*, *Tales of the Heike*, and *Tale of the Soga Brothers*" (Kang 2019, n.p.). Her Japanese-inspired fantasy can be seen as the result of a reading practice that is not solely focused on Western literature and thus prompts creative writers to draw from global sources of inspiration regardless of their country of origin. But one needs not look to interviews with the author to appreciate the intertextuality that is interwoven into *Tales of the Otori*. Each novel starts with an epigraph in the form of a short poem, which also inspire some of the volume titles. The first novel, *Across the Nightingale Floor*, begins with an excerpt from the *Man'yōshū*, the oldest collection of Japanese *waka* poetry, *Grass for His Pillow* cites Yamanoue no Okura, a Japanese poet particularly known for his works on children and commoners, and *Brilliance of the Moon* to the Noh play *The Fulling Block (Kinuta)* by Zeami. The later novels, *The Harsh Cry of the Heron* and *Heaven's Net is Wide* refer to *The Tale of the Heike* and the poetry of Lao Tsu, a Chinese philosopher, whose Taoist philosophy has had a great influence on Japan as well.

In addition to these literary allusions, there are also visual references to Japanese arts and aesthetics. Painting plays a role literally as well as in the visually highly evocative descriptions of nature – both are explicitly rooted in local Japanese realities and thus help to establish a "transcultural aesthetics", as highlighted by Birgit Neumann in a different context, "which lives on routes, trajectories, transfers and exchange rather than roots and origins" (2016, 448). Hearn's evocation of paintings references a specifically Japanese artistic tradition that is, however, recognised and appreciated worldwide; she thus manages to position her fantasy series within a pre-existing framework of global exchange. The first encounter with a painting within the series happens in the very first volume when Takeo enters the Otori residence in Hagi for the first time after having been rescued by Shigeru:

> A scroll hung in the alcove with a painting of a small bird on it. It looked like the green-and-white-winged flycatcher from my forest. It was so real that I half expected it to fly away. It amazed me that a great painter would have

> known so well the humble birds of the mountain. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 33)

Hearn is, of course, alluding to traditional Japanese ink paintings, or *sumi-e*, which are renowned for their vivid appearance. Through this evocation, these images have literally travelled "from one social sphere to another, from high art to popular culture, between places and virtually across the globe" (Horstkotte 2012, 291), moving from the sphere of high (visual) art to that of fantasy writing and from an Eastern context to an ekphrastic description by a Western writer. Only a little later, landscape is described as if it were painting when Takeo and Shigeru are looking out of the window to watch the river and "its grey-green waters filled the opening like a painted screen" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 34). The passage subtly hints at the fluidity between art and nature and, perhaps, by extension fantasy and reality. Indeed, this scene in particular is also picked up by Ma Sheng-Mei as sitting in the liminal space between not only fantastic and realistic writing, but fiction and reality itself. Ma focuses on the sentence Shigeru utters immediately after the description of the natural 'painted screen', as he states that, "just as the river is always at the door, so is the world always outside. And it is in the world that we have to live" (34), which Ma interprets as Shigeru "seeing through self-deluding fantasy, the genre of fantasy notwithstanding" (167), but which I would argue is only further pointing towards the liminality already hinted at by Hearn's intermedial constellations and which I will focus on in more detail when it comes *to Tales of the Otori*'s status as a liminal fantasy. At this point, it will suffice to say that the interaction between painting, nature, and – potentially – the genre of fantasy as well as the "affective engagement with visual artefacts" (Neumann 2016, 449), here with the scroll and the landscaped garden, "give expression to otherwise unspeakable experiences, intractable desires and projections" (449). Crucially, Neumann refers to these instances of interaction between visual art and writing as "moments of enchantment with aesthetic worlds" (449), making such moments perhaps particularly interesting for fantasy literature such as Hearn's.

Chapters focusing on Kaede as a focaliser also include references to painting. For example, when she first encounters Lady Maruyama in the Noguchi reception room, she remarks on its decoration in "the mainland style," which, while also covering natural motifs, is “flamboyant and ostentatious” *(Across the Nightingale Floor* 92) rather than natural or lifelike. This is contrasted with the image “of two pheasants, so lifelike that they looked as if they might suddenly take flight” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 92). The image of birds taking flight not only connects her early on with the Otori, who are associated with the heron but also other birds, as shown by the scroll in Shigeru’s home; it also foreshadows Kaede’s desire for freedom and her eventual empowerment. The idea of paintings of such a vivid quality that they seem to take on a life of their own permeates the narrative and may also contribute to the landscape descriptions bordering on the magical, which will be in the focus of the next subchapter.

Additionally, these paintings are an homage to the Japanese painter Sesshu, who, according to Hearn, “seemed impossible to recreate” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 293) and has therefore been incorporated directly into the narrative. Hearn goes to great lengths to introduce Sesshu and emphasise his importance as an artist throughout the trilogy. In *Across the Nightingale Floor*, Takeo visits the Buddhist temple Terayama, where “[t]he great painter Sesshu lived […] for ten years” (*Across* 181). Even though Takeo’s persona is a student of art is merely a disguise, he

> was genuinely awed by the work before our eyes. The black horse, the white cranes, seemed to have been caught and frozen in an instant of time by the consummate skill of the artist. You felt that at any moment the spell would be broken, the horse would stamp and rear, the cranes would see us and launch themselves into the sky. The painter had achieved what we would all like to do: capture time and make it stand still. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 182)

The reference to the real painter is here used to emphasise the fluidity between art and reality as well as highlight the almost magical properties of art. Takeo reflects upon the similarity between “the skills of the Tribe” – after all, the most supernatural and therefore fantastic element of Tales of the Otori – and “the skills of art” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 183). Takeo then reflects on his relationship to the great painter, stating that he “felt that Sesshu’s spirit had indeed touched [him] across time, and maybe that had reminded me that when illusions are shattered by truth, talent is set free” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 183). It would be difficult not to draw a parallel between Takeo and the author Lian Hearn, who has undoubtedly been inspired across time and culture by Japanese art like Sesshu's and literature like *The Tale of Genji* or *The Tale of the Heike*. The inclusion of ekphrastic descriptions of real Japanese art thus certainly promotes the "connectivity and polycentric networks of aesthetic exchanges and transcultural linkages" (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 3), in this case referring to the traditional linkage between Australia and Japan as already mentioned earlier on while referring to Alison Broinowski's article. The novels' engagement with Japanese art not only puts the historical artist Sesshu to the front and introduces him to a readership – YA and fantasy audiences – who would not necessarily come in contact with his work. It also "establish[es] both connections and ruptures between the verbal and the visual, past and present, here and there, same and other" (Neumann 2016, 451) by bringing into conversation the Australian fantasy novel and Sesshu's visual masterpieces, the Sengoku Jidai and the sometimes modern attitudes expected by readers and often displayed by the characters, the white British-Australian author Hearn and Japanese culture, art, and literature as well as her Japanese characters.

Intermediality in connection to Sesshu and the ensuing echoes of Japanese art are not the only extratextual references that add to the complex layers of Lian Hearn's YA or rather crossover fantasy. *Tales of the Otori* also abounds with echoes of Japanese history, most prominently surrounding the era of the *Sengoku Jidai*, the Age of the Country at War. This establishes *Tales of the Otori* firmly in "a new facet of the fantasy genre that has much in common with historical fiction" (Beckett 2011, 142) but allows for a certain distance from historical reality that enables such novels to include contemporary values without being overly anachronistic. Historical fantasies are "hybrid[s] of two seemingly opposed modes, fantasy, with its explicit rejection of consensus reality, and historical fiction, a genre grounded in realism and historically accurate events" (Schanoes 2012, 236) – as such, they implicitly question the strict boundary between fantasy and what is generally considered consensus reality, as has already been shown with Indra Das' *The Devourers*. *Tales of the Otori* follows a similar pattern because it is certainly grounded in Japanese fantasy and culture despite being set in a secondary world, unlike Das' novel.

Otori Shigeru and his adversary Iida Sadamu, who presides over the Tohan clan, find their equivalents in Toyotomi Hideyori (associated with the Western

Army) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (associated with the Eastern Army), though actual history saw Tokugawa Ieyasu start the Tokugawa shogunate, which became a feudal military government dominated by daimyo and samurai. The Battle of Yaegahara is likewise based on the Battle of Sekigahara as it is portrayed as such a decisive military clash that even Tomasu – Takeo's former self in the remote village of Mino – knows that the Otori "had been defeated by the Tohan at a great battle ten years earlier on the plain of Yaegahara" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 10). Clearly, the battle has left a deep impression in the society of the Three Countries and takes on a similarly important cultural role as the Battle of Sekigahara, which is "[c]onsidered by many to be the most important battle in Japanese history" (Swope 2012, 1) as it ultimately led to the unification of Japan. In *Tales of the Otori*, its significance – despite the eventual diversion from history – is highlighted not only by how much the event still seems to haunt the present day of the text, but also by the descriptions of it. It is "the scene of the Otori's worst defeat" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 24) where "the blood of ten thousand men [is] soaking into the earth of Yaegahara" (24). The historical connections combined with the depicted society, which centres around regional lords waging warfare due to a far-distant Emperor, suggests meticulous research – it would thus be reasonable to argue that Hearn's depictions of samurai and their warrior's honour are based on history as well as on, to some extent, Japanese self-representation rather than Orientalist clichés as proposed in a different context by Nishihara Daisuke. Indeed, Ma Sheng-Mei argues that "[i]nsofar as samurai tales are concerned, there is neither inherent virtue in a Japanese imaginary nor inherent vice in a Western imaginary. To argue otherwise would be reductive and ethnocentric" (2013, 168). However, it is important to note that the Samurai and the Sengoku Jidai in particular are both very popular elements when it comes to Western interpretations of Japanese history and culture. Thus, a comparison between Hearn's work and fantasy texts from Japan and the Japanese diaspora will be useful in showing how Japanese culture may be interpreted in various fantasy novels worldwide. Some writers belonging to the Japanese diaspora, such as Julie Kagawa and, to a lesser extent, Emiko Jean, draw on similar subject matter as Hearn, focusing on 'heroic' battles between warring samurai factions or the nobility of samurai in general, but they do not draw as heavily from specific history such as the Sengoku Jidai per se, which is why it makes more sense to discuss them in context with questions of Orientalism and Self-Orientalism during the latter part of this chapter. Instead, it is more illuminating to study an author like Nahoko Uehashi, who still resides in Japan and who relies heavily on Japanese history as a source of inspiration for her fantasy work.

Nahoko Uehashi's *Moribito* series thus seems to be an apt series to use for comparison when it comes to the usage of historical and cultural sources as inspiration for fantasy, considering that it is likewise set in a fictional feudal country that does not directly represent Japan but is heavily based on its history. Additionally, the cover of the English version employs similar visual cues as the newer versions of the *Tales of the Otori* series. Even the more peripheral paratexts, such as the promotional quotes on the back of the book, link Uehashi's work to Hearn's since the latter is quoted there as saying that Moribito is "[h]aunting and original, and full of wisdom and compassion". Uehashi's protagonist is a skilled warrior woman and the illustrations hint at a similar time frame to Hearn's series. Allusions to real Japanese history are also present but they do not predominantly refer to the Sengoku Jidai. Instead, Uehashi specifically addresses Japan's own colonial history by looking at the fraught history of the relations between the Yamato Japanese and Japan's indigenous population, the Ainu. Early in the first book of the series, *Moribito – Guardian of the Spirit*, the reader is given two origin stories for the country of New Yogo, a land clearly based on Japan: The founder of New Yogo, Yogo Torugaru, arrived by boat – mirroring, perhaps, journeys of colonization – in what he perceived as "a peaceful paradise on a green and verdant peninsula" (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 26). This 'new world,' however, is far from empty; there, the Yogoese encounter the indigenous Yakoo, who are likely the fantasy stand-in for Japan's actual indigenous population, the Ainu. The official origin myth of New Yogo states that

> *Torugaru was a peaceful man, [and] he had no intention of overcoming the indigenous Yakoo by force. The Yakoo, however, frightened by the arrival of strangers from a foreign land, abandoned their villages and fled into the mountains.* (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 27)

Scholars of postcolonialism will in all likelihood immediately interpret this description – taken, after all, from what the narrative refers to as *The Official History of New Yogo* – as a deliberate construction by the 'strangers from a foreign land' to justify their occupation of a country that was already populated. And indeed, the account is called into question soon afterwards, though not in direct reference to a potentially violent occupation of the Yakoo's homeland. Instead, it is the Yakoo's belief systems that are obviously misrepresented in the official history, which eventually endangers the entire country. The official narrative states that Torugaru fought an evil demon who was threatening the New Yogoese and the Yakoo alike by possessing and devouring a child every hundred years, which then presumably poses a great danger to the population. In contrast, the Yakoo believe that the entity, Nyunga Ro Im, is in fact, a beneficial entity, using a child as a guardian for its own offspring, but ultimately intending no harm and bringing rain clouds to the land. To highlight this discrepancy, the official version is integrated into the narrative in full:

> *Torugaru realized the evil creature had reassumed the boy's appearance. Undeceived by its words, he swept Star's Heart from its scabbard. The boy transformed into the slippery water demon and attacked him. For three days and three nights, Torugaru and his eight mighty warriors fought the demon. At last, they severed its head and let the blue blood that gushed from its neck pour into the spring. A flash of lightning split the heavens and struck the spring, filling it with light, and the water burst up into the sky. Purified by the heavens, it turned to rain, which fell upon the earth and cleansed it of the demon's influence.*
>
> *Thus Torugaru brought bountiful harvests to the land and became its first Mikado, our divine ruler.* (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 29)

The story the Yakoo tell is, however, "very different from the legend of Mikado Torugaru conquering the water spirit" (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 90). Instead of being a monster to be conquered, the water 'demon' is rather seen as a benign spirit and the child that carries the creature called Nyunga Ro Im is "always protected very carefully" (90). Uehashi does not hide the political and historical implications of these two versions of a myth, as she has Balsa, the main character, explain to the prince that “people in high position like to make themselves look good” (90) and that “the strong [the Yogoese] usually manipulate the legends of the weak [the Yakoo] to fit their own wishes, not the other way round” (91). It is clear that the Yogoese are the ‘stronger’ of the two groups in the sense that they have overpowered the Yakoo – even though the legend of the first Mikado has them fighting the water demon together, the Yogoese are clearly prejudiced against the Yakoo in a way that mirrors relationships between colonizer and colonized in the primary world outside the novels. Chagum, the Yogoese prince, for example, expresses great surprise when he hears that his protectors are trying to contact a Yakoo elder for advice, saying that he “heard the Yakoo were illiterate. How can someone who cannot read possibly be wise?” (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 93). This kind of prejudice is reminiscent of early Japanese maps referring to the Ainu homelands as “’barbarian land’” (Brett 2001, 1); the fact that the fabricated origin story only dates back 200 years also mirrors the Japanese conquest of Ezo or Hokkaido, as it is now known, since

> [i]n the space of about two centuries, the Ainu degenerated from a relatively autonomous people, willing to spill blood for their land and way of life, to a miserably dependent people plagued by dislocation and epidemic disease – viewed by later Japanese and foreign observers as in dire need of benevolent care (*buiku*) or even as a dying race (*horobiyuku minzoku*) – and hence easily manhandled by the late-Tokugawa and early-Meiji states. (Brett 2001, 11-12)

The parallels between Ainu-Japanese relations and the postcolonial situations in Anglophone countries addressed elsewhere in this dissertation are obvious – and it is certainly interesting that it is the fantasy novel translated from the Japanese that highlights Japanese history as a colonizer, whereas Hearn’s series draws inspiration from earlier periods in Japan’s history. This is not to say that Hearn’s portrayal is inherently more problematic or less ‘authentic’ due to her being a cultural outsider as Hearn similarly approaches complex issues such as religious diversity in Japan with great care, but it is certainly an interesting observation with regards to what is or is not represented by writers from different cultural backgrounds and how these backgrounds may influence that. The lack of racial or ethnic diversity (with the exception of the long-nose Portuguese) in *Tales of the Otori* coupled with the persecution of the Hidden and their 'Western' religion may hint at a "Eurocentric approach" that "led to the false impression that Japan was a closed country," (Brett 2001, 12) whereas the *Moribito* series more openly acknowledges the complex make-up of the Japanese population as reflected in (socially progressive) Japanese fantasy.

The *Moribito* series also highlights the cultural changes and hybrid identities that emerge from such (violent) contact between two different groups as the Japanese and the Ainu or, in the fantasy context, the Yogoese and the Yakoo. The restructuring of Ainu rituals and legends to "strengthen their claim to administrative suzerainty over Ainu lands" (Brett 2001, 16), or rather Yakoo lands in the context of Uehashi's secondary world, has already been addressed above, but the cultural impact on the Ainu/Yakoo themselves is also addressed. The first novel's main conflict seems to centre around a shift with regards to the perception of the natural world (cf. Brett 2001, 14), albeit heightened by its fantastical content and context. Tanda, one of the Yakoo characters, explains that "the Yakoo were losing their lore with the years" (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 120) and cites the intermarriage between Yakoo, Yogoese, and Kanbalese as a reason for that (cf. *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 93). The denial and transformation of ancient Yakoo knowledge and traditions is framed as a potential cause for environmental disaster, as the spirit Nyunga Ro Im cannot be saved without crucial Yakoo information and thus its death may cause a devastating drought.

Thus, the Japanese fantasy novel also draws extensively from Japanese cultural history and, much like Hearn's *Tales of the Otori*, depicts a feudal country based on historical Japan, though with a greater focus on an Imperial family. However, rather than focusing on the Sengoku Jidai, the *Moribito* series focuses on lesser known aspects of Japanese history and highlights not only civil strife within an ethnically identical and only culturally diverse society as in Hearn's Three Countries but also the conflicts Japan has had with its East Asian neighbours and, crucially, within its eventual borders but targeting an ethnically different culture – Uehashi quite overtly uses the Yakoo as a fantasy stand-in for the Ainu, as the previous paragraphs have shown. While both Hearn and Uehashi challenge the “common myth of Japan as a monocultural / monolingual society” (Sakurai 2015, 141), Uehashi does so in a more overtly political way by including societal conflicts that are still relevant in contemporary Japanese society as

> it presents an unconventional critique of many Japanese ideologies and national institutions, drawing attention to the limitations inherent in dominant understandings of, for instance, Japan’s emperor system and power politics, past and present. (Kilpatrick and Muta 2013, 81)

It is crucial to note that Uehashi, in her fantasy novels, criticises ongoing problems in Japanese society despite the semi-historical setting. It was, after all, only in 2019 that “the Japanese government officially legally recognized the Ainu as Indigenous people” (Komai 2021, 1) and even an article published in 2021 states that “[b]ecause of the discrimination experienced due to their Ainu identity […] the number of Ainu is hard to estimate” (4). Advocating for a greater acknowledgement of indigenous Japanese identity and a concomitant rejection of “widely held notions of Japan as ethnically homogenous” (Siddle 2003, 447) is thus certainly an overtly political use of fantasy literature even today and perhaps more so in 1993 when the initial volume of Uehashi’s *Moribito* series was first published. Hearn’s series can be interpreted as political in different ways, raising, for example, questions of gender roles and sexuality, but it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, more focused on general, ‘universal’ concerns than Japanese-specific ones. Still, Hearn does draw attention to the Hidden (Christians) in Japan, which is indeed a fascinating and not widely known yet important subject, with “Christians in contemporary Japan still fac[ing] many challenges” (Ghanbarpour 2015, 2036), though no longer persecuted. Hearn’s inclusion of Christianity is thus not a sign of Hearn being “[t]he real Hidden, […] the white Australian mastermind, along with her Christian sensibilities, behind this samurai masquerade” (Ma 2013, 161) nor are Christianity and other religious beliefs “meticulously censored” (161), but an engaging fantasy take on real history, which certainly contributes to readers’ desire to learn more about Japan, though the samurai imagery and plotline is certainly favoured (cf. 161) as opposed to Uehashi’s work, where the feudal society is but one aspect among many.

6.2. Border Crossings in Lian Hearn's Liminal Fantasies

Both Uehashi and Hearn have crossed borders – and incidentally, both have crossed the Australia-Japan border, albeit in opposing directions – and thus it is no surprise that literal and metaphorical border crossings feature in both series. As previously mentioned, Hearn herself has crossed borders by moving to Australia in 1973, which set in motion a deep interest in intercultural exchange that ultimately led to the publication of *Across the Nightingale Floor* in 2002. On her website, Hearn credits this move across borders as one of the key factors in her decision to write about Japanese imaginary worlds rather than British or even Australian ones.

> Coming to Australia brought me closer to Japan, a country I had been interested in for many years. Australia has many links with Japan, and is in the same time zone, though a different hemisphere. Being an Australian means being between West and East and living in a society that has formed itself out of many different and contradictory elements. I identify with this. (Hearn n.d., n.p.)

Hearn here draws a connection between Australia and Japan that is based on their relative geographical proximity – a connection that has by no means been unobserved by academia. Alison Broinowski, in her article "Contested Civilizations", has mostly examined the issue chronologically by providing a kind of survey of the various literary relationships between Japan and Australia, but there are other writers who have explored reasons for such productive border crossings. Koh Tai Ann highlights the longstanding literary tradition of Australian writing set in Asia by stating "that in fact, since the late nineteenth century individual Australians (albeit to a much lesser extent than the imperial British) have been travelling to Asia and writing fiction set in various Asian countries" (1993, 22). Early on, these fictions were rooted in British and imperial adventure fiction, but Koh Tai Ann charts a development in Australian writing that "began to reflect a changing sense of geopolitical realities which thoughtful Australians could not […] ignore any longer" (24) as an awareness of "the Australian situation in a postcolonial Asian world" (27) grew. The article is not uncritical of this phenomenon, stating that in some of those Australian-Asian novels

> the Australian characters are allowed to have it both ways, despising what they perceive as the sociological reality of the place even while using the orient as erotic adventure playground to act out their fantasies; but it is ultimately a place not really to be taken seriously and to be abandoned once the imagination cannot bear the reality. (29)

Crucially, this is not the case in Hearn's *Tales of the Otori*, not only because it contains a predominantly Japanese cast of characters whose environment is portrayed as neither all good (exoticized) or all bad (degenerate), but also because the very few and far-between European characters that are shown are decidedly put in a marginal and decentralized position. Takeo, when faced with the decapitated head of one of them, remarks "with distaste" that the man's "skin was white as pearl and the hair yellow like the yolk of a bird's egg. The features were large, the nose hooked," even wondering whether it is "a man or a demon" (*Brilliance of the Moon* 289) and referring to them as barbarians constantly. Ann ultimately asks the question whether "the Australian imagination can do without Asia as the exotic Other, and whether Australians can become Eurasians, thereby becoming as well, through hybridity, 'oriental'" (31), but ultimately concludes that "[t]hat gap with Asia will take a while to bridge" (31). Considering the increasing popularity of Australian fantasy fiction, both by White Australian and Asian Australian authors, Ann's question remains relevant and perhaps ultimately hinges on the question whether fantasy is always also suggestive of the 'unreal' and exoticised or whether it can, quite on the contrary, be considered one way to bridge such cultural divides creatively.

Hearn's main character, Otori Takeo, reenforces the theme of crossing borders as he is himself composed, as Ma Sheng-Mei puts it slightly derisively, of "multiple postmodernist identities," (2013, 161). Ma claims that even though "[c]apitalizations of 'Otori,' Hidden,' and 'Tribe' establish Takeo's tripartite identity," (161) Hearn focuses predominantly on the 'Otori,' that is the 'samurai' part of Takeo's hybrid identity. However, Takeo's in-betweenness remains a recurring feature throughout most of the initial trilogy. At the end of the first novel, for example, Takeo is torn between his duty towards his late adoptive father and his "oath to the Tribe," (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 284) which seems to affect him emotionally as well since "something in [him] was drawn to them" (284). While he ponders his "nature [that] had responded to the dark skills of the Tribe" (285) – it is those references to Takeo's apparently inherent nature that Ma Sheng-Mei attributes to a worrying "deployment of blood [that] is revisionist, regressive, and essentialist" (2013, 162). However, in the same paragraph, Takeo also acknowledges that he is "all too aware of the deep divisions within [him]," (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 285) which do not rely solely on blood but also on nurture (as he has grown up in a Hidden community and has thus deeply internalised their "commandments" (285) and on love (as he feels a profound connection with Shigeru – though he does attribute "the bond with Shigeru" (*Grass for his Pillow* 232) to their relation or indeed his "Otori blood" (231), which might support Ma's argument as well as various references to his Otori or Tribe blood by himself and others, which seems to draw him in opposite directions. However, his blood does not always take centre-stage. When it comes to the Hidden religion, Takeo specifically refers to still praying "after the manner of the faith [he] was raised in, to the Secret God that my mother worshipped," (*Grass for his Pillow* 48) which highlights nurture and culture much more than it does biological relationships.

Hybridity not merely manifests itself in Takeo's character, nor only in the cultural boundaries crossed by the author in the writing of the series. Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* is also an interesting specimen of fantasy literature avoiding the near omnipresent European medievalist setting that has dominated the fantasy literature canon since Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* while at the same time following at least some quest tropes. It also combines fantastical and realistic or even mundane elements, blurring the lines between the various categories, which makes it possible to categorize it as liminal fantasy – a type of fantasy in the interstices between reality and fantasy. On the surface, the series seems to follow many tropes first outlined by Tolkien and his successors, which are now seen as indicative of the so-called quest narrative (or, following Mendlesohn's rhetorics, the portal-quest fantasy). Takeo, the hero, is an adolescent boy who appears to have humble origins – he lives in "the remote mountain village of Mino" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 1), which is "too isolated to be touched by the savage battles of the clans" (2) and as such, seems unlikely to become a key figure in a quest to change the political landscape of the (fantasy) kingdom in question, much like most heroes of fantasy literature, who almost always start as insignificant outsiders only to then move on to become the saviours of their respective fictional worlds. A first hint at Takeo's future greatness is provided in his physical description since he is said to have features which are "finer [than his mother's], like a hawk's" (1) – a so-called 'noble' physique is quite often the first indication of a less humble origin than is originally assumed, and this is the case with Takeo as well. The second hint follows soon after: during the attack on Takeo's village, which ultimately forces him to leave his comfortable, peaceful and haven-like home, Takeo comes face to face with the tyrant Iida Sadamu. The encounter is crucial and deserves close attention. Iida's appearance is foreshadowed both for the reader and for Takeo, connecting the figure right away with the supernatural: "As the hoof beats drew nearer", Takeo narrates, "I had the sense of forward memory that comes to you in dreams. I knew who I was going to see, framed between the shrine gates." (6). Not only does Takeo have something of a premonition before actually meeting his archenemy, he also first sees him "framed between the shrine gates", thus seemingly connecting the encounter to the culture's animistic religious beliefs, which closely mirror Japan's Shintoist tradition. The connection to the supernatural is upheld throughout the encounter – even though Takeo has never seen Iida, his mother "held him up to us as a sort of ogre with which to frighten us into obedience: *don't stray on the mountain, don't play by the river, or Iida will get you!*" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6) and thus he recognises him immediately. Iida is on horseback when first meeting Takeo, highlighting his physical advantage over the young boy:

> The horse reared and whinnied at the smell of blood. Iida sat as still as if he were cast in iron. He was clad from head to foot in black armour, his helmet crowned with antlers. He wore a short black beard beneath his cruel mouth. His eyes were bright, like a man hunting deer.
>
> Those bright eyes met mine. I knew at once two things about him: first, that he was afraid of nothing in heaven or on earth; second that he loved to kill for the sake of killing. Now that he had seen me there was no hope. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6)

Iida is described in almost non-human terms, "clad from head to foot in black armour" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6), which is reminiscent both of the Black Knights of Arthurian romance – itself a root text corpus for modern fantasy – and the traditional dark lords typically fought in fantasy fiction. His bright, perhaps manic or obsessed, eyes and his lust for murder further mark him as non-human or perhaps rather *in*human. Yet it is made clear he is just that – "man hunting deer" (6). In fact, Iida Sadamu is not a supernatural entity at all, but rather a realistically portrayed warlord, who would not be out of place in a historical novel. Ironically, it is during this encounter with the seemingly ogre-like villain Iida that Takeo first displays a sign of his actual magic abilities, though it is neither highlighted nor focused on. Takeo only briefly expresses a vague sense of surprise when stating that he "was aware of the Tohan all around me" and that "[i]t did not seem possible that they could miss me […]" (3). It is at this moment that he feels "as if I had split in two. I saw Iida's sword fall on me, yet I was untouched by it" (3). Attentive readers will realise that this is the first time Takeo creates a double of himself, thus using the Tribe's magic abilities to defend himself, but the narrative does not highlight this instance at any point. There is next to no comment on the extraordinariness of the event when it occurs nor does Takeo reflect upon it in retrospect when he already is aware of his powers, including the ability to conjure up a doppelganger. Clearly it is the human villain Iida and the terror he induces, which are the focus of the scene, not any supernatural element or departure from consensus reality.

Despite Iida's lack of magic, he is very much constructed to be the main villain and Takeo's antagonist. The structure of the novel seems to imply the typical course of a revenge story within the fantasy quest narrative paradigm: *Across the Nightingale Floor* begins with Takeo's expulsion from the place of safety by the brutal attack on his village and the violent murder of his entire family, followed immediately by a first encounter between Takeo and Iida, in which their enmity and eventual confrontation is set up. Takeo has "unhorsed the lord of the Tohan. There would be no limit to the torture and pain to atone for such an act" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 7) and because of it, tradition demands that Takeo should ask to be killed. However, Takeo becomes defiant as "[s]omething stirred in [his] blood telling [him he] would not die before Iida" (7), which establishes the two as mortal enemies in the manner of so many previous fantasy novels that pair of a young hero with a dark lord. This scene is constructed in a way that stirs expectations in the reader for Iida to be the final obstacle to be overcome at the end of the trilogy, though here, too, Hearn subverts traditional fantasy tropes by having Iida killed at the end of the first novel and not through the hand of the hero avenging his parents' and adoptive father's deaths, but by the female protagonist Kaede. This thwarting of reader expectations is acknowledged within the novel when Takeo reacts to the discovery of the blood-covered Kaede and the corpse of Iida with something akin to disappointment, stating that he "felt cheated of [his] revenge" (271).

Fantasy tales often lead up to the final confrontation between hero and villain through a series of developments, which allow the hero to gain all the necessary experience to defeat his enemy as well as to grow emotionally, thus putting the fantasy novel in close proximity to the bildungsroman. Here, Hearn follows the stereotypical format, if only during the first novel of the series, and it is through Takeo's training that the most obvious element of 'fantasy' enters the text: Takeo is a member of the so-called Tribe, a group of highly-trained assassins with special skills that, to all intents and purposes, are magical in nature. This includes heightened physical senses and abilities, the power to put other living beings into a deep sleep, from which they cannot be awoken, and the ability to create a second self with which to fool enemies. Throughout *Across the Nightingale Floor*, Takeo receives training not only in the traditional martial arts styles and sword fighting skills associated with the warrior class of his new adoptive family, the Otori, but also in the Tribe's specific skills. However, it is not by means of the overtly magical abilities that he is supposed to kill Iida, but through his heightened sense of hearing, arguably the most 'realistic' or at least theoretically possible component of his skill set. This is a recurrent motif throughout the series: magic is present, but it is never the centre of attention, treated instead as an everyday occurrence and even as a morally questionable and repulsive element of the novel's reality, thereby subverting fantasy literature's predominant trend of portraying the fantasy as appealing and attractive even if it is dangerous.

Despite this lack of focus on supernatural elements, which, though present, are not the centre of attention and are, in fact, treated by most of the characters as a nuisance rather than as an asset, Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* is unmistakeably a fantasy trilogy – the fantasy, however, seems to lie elsewhere than might be expected. The location of the fantasy is most clearly visible in a scene at the end of the first novel, *Across the Nightingale Floor*. Takeo has just crossed the eponymous nightingale floor in order to kill Iida and is faced with the previously describe scene of Kaede sitting next to Iida's corpse, obviously having killed him. Hearn's choice of words here is crucial:

> Her eyes were dilated with shock, and she was trembling. There was something almost supernatural about the scene: the girl, so young and frail; the man, massive and powerful, even in death; the hiss of the rain; the stillness of the night… (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 270)

What is supernatural and thus among the most distinctive elements of the fantasy genre are not actual incidents of magic being performed – seeing as the magic of the Tribe is treated matter-of-factly, even as some revolting, unfortunate aspect of reality – but in the descriptions of atmosphere and natural surroundings, sometimes also in the descriptions of cultural elements, which mark Hearn's setting as a sort of 'fantasy' Japan. The problematic Orientalist associations of this will be discussed in detail presently. First, however, it is important to identify the scenes, in which either nature or culture become the locus of fantasy as well as those in which fantasy becomes demystified.

Another non-magical element that is introduced early on in the novel and that crosses boundaries in more ways than one is, of course, the nightingale floor itself. Its inclusion in the title not only suggests its importance for the narrative, but also tempts the reader to expect some magical component due to its obvious prominence in a text that is marketed as a fantasy. The nightingale floor is first introduced when Shigeru, Takeo's adoptive father, becomes interested in carpentry and construction while having a tearoom built for his house. The process of building itself is described in near magical terms. The carpenter

> Shiro, a man who seemed to be fashioned from the same material as the wood he loved so much, brother to the cedar and the cypress […] spoke of the character and spirit of each type of wood, and what it brings from the forest

> into the house. 'Each wood has its own sound,' he said. 'Every house has its own song.' (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 100)

The idea of a house with a song – an idea which also leads to a distinctly magical feel of something not inherently supernatural, namely the house – leads on to the topic of the nightingale floor. The antagonist "Iida has ordered a floor to be made that sings like a nightingale" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 101) and that is intended to warn him about any potential assassination attempts. The concept of a floor able to sing already seems fantastic enough, and the fact that Takeo's supernatural skills are later used to defeat it might also hint at its fantastical nature. It is even overtly alluded to in the text, when Takeo inquires after it at Iida's castle and exclaims that "[i]t sounds like magic," (200) upon receiving an explanation. But Takeo's credulity is only feigned – he already knows that skilled carpentry lies beneath the mystery of the nightingale floor since he has seen "every board laid, every joist and every peg" (102). What seems magical and would not have been out of place as a fantasy element in any other fantasy novel is actually based on the mastery of the exact science of carpentry – the relation between the potential magic and its basis in science is reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke's 'law': "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke 2000, 2), which not only explains the closeness of the two genres fantasy and science fiction, but also – together with its practical application in *Across the Nightingale Floor* – supports one of the central arguments of this thesis, namely the need to discard a strict reality vs. fantasy binary in literature, which would strengthen the case for fantasy literature as world literature in the sense that it is a high-quality, literary art form.

The nightingale floor as an object at the border between fantasy (in its description and function) and reality (in its origin and construction) is crucial for classifying Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* as a liminal fantasy. However, it is also exemplary for Hearn's at times uneasy balance between a productive and respectful creative relationship with another culture based on meticulous research on the one hand and an unfortunate tendency to exoticise the results of said research on the other. Far from fantasy, the nightingale floor is an invention of Japanese architects, originally called uguisu-bari (鶯張り) and found primarily in temples and palaces. Shibatani Masayoshi cites the uguisu-bari as an example for a specific type of compound and adds a brief description of it, stating that "its meaning is something like: 'the boarding of a floor such that when people walk on it the boards squeak, emitting sounds like the singing of a nightingale as a warning of their (enemies') approach'" (2010, 242), adding rather laconically that "the sounds of the uguisu-bari floors, found in castles and temples, are more like the squeaking of mice" (242). The floors, named after the uguisu, the Japanese bush warbler, thus function exactly as they are described in Hearn's novel and were apparently used for a similar purpose, if the linguist Shibatani is to be believed. Other references to the nightingale floors in Western academia are hard to find, though Stephen Turnbull's *Ninja – Unmasking the Myth* (2017) contains a brief description of the floors, together with a small illustration. The equation of the historical architectural feature with the supernatural through its description and the association of the two through Takeo's attempts to best it with magic may be seen as problematic because this exoticises a feature of Japanese culture and history for a mostly global readership. It is, however, worthwhile noting that Hearn, as much as she establishes the nightingale floor as extraordinary and marvellous, takes great care to emphasise again and again that the floor is not magic at all but an extraordinary result of human ingenuity, thus perhaps prompting readers to question what we perceive as magical in the first place.

Hearn's fantasy series also describes nature and natural phenomena in fantastic terms, thus further questioning the boundaries between fantasy and reality while also following Tolkien's stipulation about the use of fantasy in re-fashioning ordinary reality to be arresting and fascinating once more (cf. 2001 [1939], 57-60). During the first novel's narrative, for example, weather, rain and water in general also play an important, often near-magical role. While the – often lengthy – descriptions of the weather may also be seen as simple metaphor and poetic device, they certainly resemble a myth-like register and conjure up equally lengthy weather and nature descriptions in fantasies such as *The Lord of the Rings*, which, though Western-centred, is still one of the core texts of the fantasy genre. The importance of weather is already apparent from the very start of the narrative when, just before Takeo finds the massacred villagers of his home, "[i]n the distance, the thunder echoed round the mountains. The air was heavy and humid" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 3), creating an oppressive atmosphere that provides a perfect stage for Takeo's initial, fateful encounter with the warlord Iida Sadamu. When he flees, "darkness was falling. So was the rain, heavier now, making the steep tracks of the mountain slippery and treacherous" (7). While in these instances, weather descriptions might simply be a narrative tool to create a certain atmosphere, Hearn's poetic descriptions serve to heighten the significance of such passages and allow for the blurring of boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. The liminality Hearn's fantasy resides in reenforces the idea that fantasy world literature does not uphold strict boundaries between reality and fantasy but rather opts for permanent ambiguity.

Uehashi Nahoko, whose Moribito series is once again the appropriate text for comparison when it comes to border crossings and liminality, has likewise crossed borders because of her profession by researching Australian Aboriginal cultures in her role as an anthropologist. While Broinowski states that there is a certain "asymmetry – or […] hierarchical distance – between these two cultures" (Broinowski 2011, 37), which leads to many more texts of fiction from Australia depicting Japan than vice versa, there can be little doubt that, at least in the case of Uehashi, Australia, though it does not feature explicitly in her fantasy writing, has influenced her depiction of marginalised, indigenous identities. Uehashi is undoubtedly also inspired by Japan's own indigenous people, the Ainu, but her anthropological research on Australian Aboriginal cultures has most likely influenced her writing to some extent as well, giving it a decidedly "postcolonial, antinationalistic stance" (Kilpatrick and Muta 2013, 81) and inspiring her to put a special focus on her secondary world's indigenous cultures. Uehashi's work as a volunteer teacher "in an elementary school in Western Australia where half the students were Aboriginal" (Yokota and Nakano 2014, 83) led her to "realize how difficult it is for indigenous populations to retain their cultures" (83) – consequently, she frequently includes storylines in which a minority group, often the first inhabitants of the countries in question, are pushed to the margins of their society, in danger of losing their own culture, until their ancestral knowledge turns out to be the key to solving whatever magical problem the volume in question presents. Such productive cross-inspiration as occurred between Hearn and Japan as well as between Uehashi and Australia will be taken up again in the subchapter focusing on such travels of fantasy across countries, but is certainly relevant here as well, as it highlights and perhaps explains both writers' tendency to cross borders in their fiction as well as in their lives.

Uehashi's work features border crossings in a very literal sense from the very first novel onwards. The series' protagonist Balsa has no permanent residence as she is a wandering bodyguard and is "not native to this country" (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 2), that is New Yogo and the setting for the first novel in the series. Her first appearance not only marks her clearly as an outsider but also already hints at the many other moments of liminality in *Guardian of the Spirit*. She is "crossing the commoners' bridge downstream, the Aoyumi River visible through gaps between the planks" (1) with the gaps indicating a certain blurring of the boundaries between land and water. This is further reenforced when she has to jump into the river to save the Second Prince of New Yogo from drowning, which is intricately tied to the novel's foremost fantasy element, the prince's possession by a supernatural creature, and which also sets the ensuing events in motion. As a result of her heroic act, she is employed by the prince's mother to be his bodyguard and protect him from assassination by his own father, a crime planned to avoid the disgrace of the imperial lineage. The plot involving the water spirit Nyunga Ro Im has already been explained in its most basic terms when discussing Uehashi's inspiration drawn from the Ainu-Japanese relationship, but it is worthwhile to analyse the spirit more closely when it comes to its border crossing tendencies. Uehashi's secondary world actually consists of "two worlds, the one that we can see, called Sagu, and another invisible world, called Nayugu" (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 89), representing the more mundane and the more fantastical world respectively. In the novel, the two worlds interact frequently and the event at the centre of *Guardian of the Spirit* is marked by the crossing of boundaries between Sagu and Nayugu since it revolves around "a creature capable of changing the weather in both worlds" (*Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* 89) who reportedly "lays its egg in a creature of Sagu" (89) despite its origins in Nayugu. Chagum, the second prince and vessel to the egg of Nyunga Ro Im, frequently finds himself at the threshold between the two worlds, which always manifests as a difference between two natural landscapes. The first time Chagum finds himself in the liminal space between two worlds, he perceives himself to be standing in thin air, above "a deep valley" (170) instead of "at the entrance to the hunting cave" (171), which shows the reality Chagum inhabits to be unstable and multiple. Often, the difference between Sagu and Nayugu lies is that Sagu's natural features are supernaturally magnified in Nayugu – a pond becomes "a body of water as big as a lake" (190), Chagum gains supernatural powers, which enable him to navigate the natural space of the forest by "flying from branch to branch with incredible agility" (199), the forest turns into "a river […] so broad that he could not see the opposite bank and so deep that he could not see the bottom" (220) – border crossing between realm thus leads to a blurring of boundaries between nature and the supernatural in a way that is reminiscent of Tolkien's call for fantasy make us "look at green again and be startled anew" (Tolkien 2001 [1939], 58), which can be achieved by the supernaturally enhanced descriptions of nature in *Guardian of the Spirit* and also, as the next subchapter will show, in *Tales of the Otori.*

6.3. Nature and Religion as Sites of 'Real' Fantasy in The Three Countries and Other Fantastical Japans

This blurring of the lines between what is considered nature and what is not – be it supernatural or simply human – is an overarching theme in Hearn's work that is established early on and reiterated most often in its depiction of religious practices, which seem to sit in a liminal space between 'real' and 'fantasy' or 'magic' without, however, denying their spiritual truth and in the form of gardens – themselves often connected to Japanese spirituality and particularly the concept of Zen. During Takeo's first stay at the Otori house in Hagi, which will become his home, he and his adoptive father Shigeru sit inside the house, watching the garden:

> The rain fell more heavily, and the house and garden began to sing with water. It overflowed from the gutters and ran down the chains and into the stream that leaped from pool to pool, every waterfall making a different sound. The house sang to me, and I fell in love with it. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 34)

The poetic description foreshadows the singing of the Nightingale Floor – both 'singing entities,' the house and the floor, appear supernaturally heightened and personified through their association with singing and music despite both being entirely natural. The description continues:

> In the last of the light, Lord Otori pointed towards the end of the garden. The stream that cascaded through it swept under a low opening in the tiled roof wall into the river beyond. The river gave a deep, constant roar and its grey-green waters filled the opening like a painted screen. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 34)

Here, the natural space of the garden is associated with the artificial beauty of a 'painted screen,' yet at the same time, its continuity with the river outside – perhaps untouched by artificiality, is highlighted. The scene ends on a statement by Shigeru that Ma Sheng-Mei describes as "koan-style" (2013, 167): "It is good to come home […]. But just as the river is always at the door, so is the world always outside. And it is in the world that we have to live" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 34). Ma considers this statement "ironic" in that "Shigeru appears to endorse seeing through self-deluding fantasy, the genre of fantasy notwithstanding," (166) which says likely more about Ma's reductive view of fantasy than it does about *Tales of the Otori*. Shigeru's statement, if applied metaphorically to fantasy literature, at worst suggests a kind of temporary escapism within the confined comforts of home, which is, after all, not something he criticises at all – he merely acknowledges that it is not always an option. The statement mirrors Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories", in which he states that escape and consolation are indeed features of fantasy literature, but they are not to be seen negatively as they fulfil very important functions, which are especially necessary for adult readers (cf. 2001 [1939], 57-68). Furthermore, if we do apply Shigeru's statement on fantasy literature – which, considering the close connection between nature and fantasy in Hearn's work, is certainly not without merit – we cannot ignore that the boundaries between house, garden, and the world outside or rather between fantasy, escapism, and reality, are inherently blurry. Shigeru and Takeo sit by the open window, as close to the garden as they can be, and the garden itself is directly connected to the river, which here represents 'the real world.' The urge to live in the real world "in contradiction to the genre of fantasy literature, a dream world of samurai and Ninja" (Ma 2013, 167) is not a contradiction at all as the lines between fantasy and reality, as shown in this dissertation, are notoriously porous. This, in fact, also fits remarkably well with general Japanese attitudes towards nature, which is likewise defined by the blurry distinctions drawn between nature and its assumed opposite culture. Nature and culture "rather form and integrated whole", and there is no "sign of a dichotomy of man (culture) and nature" (Kyburz 1997, 259), which leads to a perception of magic – according to Tolkien the one defining feature of fantasy – as an intrinsic part of the nature-culture environment with "magical thought act[ing] at the interface between culture and nature" (261). *Tales of the Otori* supports this interconnection between nature and fantasy, where the borders between them become porous, whereas Kagawa's fantasy novels promote a much stricter boundary between nature/magic and culture, ultimately favouring the magical-natural side of things. Thus, the landscaped garden in *Shadow of the Fox* is described in markedly different terms than in *Across the Nightingale Floor*. The imperial garden visited by the main characters is "a beautiful garden" but "about as lifeless as a sakura painting on a hanging wall scroll" (381). While *Across the Nightingale Floor* accentuates the very vividness of Japanese art as almost magical, *Shadow of the Fox* portrays its artifice extended to landscaping as fundamentally dead, only to be revived by the intrusion of fox magic.

One of the first scenes in the second novel in the *Tales of the Otori* series, *Grass for his Pillow*, shows an even closer connection between the novel's actual fantasy elements and nature. The novel starts with the female protagonist "Shirakawa Kaede […] deeply asleep in the state close to unconsciousness that the Kikuta can deliver with their gaze" (*Grass for his Pillow* 1). The induced sleep is due to Takeo's magic powers, but the effects of the dream are, at best, in the liminal zone of fantasy and appear at first glance closer to natural occurrences and developments. Kaede dreams that "she had been turned to ice" (*Grass for his Pillow* 1) and is "held by something cool and white in a world that was silent, frozen and enchanted" (1) – the silent, frozen qualities of ice are here associated with enchantment, close, perhaps, to Tolkien's interpretation of the concept, in that it produces a secondary world within Kaede's primary world, that of the icy world, which then "produces, or pretends to produce, and alteration in the Primary World" (2001 [1939], 54). The sleep is, of course, magical by virtue of its origin and also in the way that it ultimately produces a change within Kaede, but this does not change the obvious equation of nature and magic at play here. Moreover, the effect on Kaede is decidedly realistic and much closer to mimetic literature's character development than to a magic transformation. She now has a "new-found strength that the icy sleep has given her" (*Grass for his Pillow* 8), but it manifests in heightened confidence and the decision "to take control of her life" (8) rather than any mystical powers. Additionally, even though Kaede herself attributes her new strength to the magical sleep Takeo subjected her to, it is just as likely that it was the experience of killing Iida Sadamu on her own that has given her trust in her own powers. This interpretation is supported by a scene in which Kaede contemplates the power relations between men and women in her homeland:

> Arai's physical size and strength made her quail inwardly, reminding her of that moment of helplessness in Iida's arms, of the strength of the men who could force women in any way they wanted. *Never let them use that strength*, came the thought, and then, *Always be armed.* A taste came into her mouth, as sweet as persimmon, as strong as blood, the knowledge and taste of power. Was this what drove men to clash endlessly with each other, to enslave and destroy each other? Why should a woman not have that too?
>
> She stared at the places on Arai's body where the needle and the knife had pierced Iida, had opened him up to the world he'd tried to dominate and let his life's blood leak away. *I must never forget it*, she told herself. *Men also can be killed by women. I killed the most powerful warlord in the Three Countries.* (*Grass for his Pillow* 10)

Kaede's earlier statements about the "strength that the icy sleep has given her" (*Grass for his Pillow* 8) is here subtly contradicted as it is clearly the realisation that "*[m]en can also be killed by women*" (10) and her own powerful action of defiance, which has given her both the confidence to meet the physically superior Arai as an equal and the wisdom to "pretend that all power lay on his side" (*Grass for his Pillow* 13) in order to reassure Arai that the patriarchal power dynamic between men and women has not been disturbed by Kaede. Yet despite these effects being realistic in nature and possibly not due to Takeo's magical sleep at all, Kaede "sometimes […]

thought she was bewitched" (2), which shows that fantasy and reality are not separate entities but entangled in Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori*.

Despite the mundane, if powerful, result of the icy sleep – or perhaps the result of the much more mundane and brutal killing of Iida Sadamu – there are also distinctly fantastic consequences of Kaede's encounter with Kikuta magic, though they are, again, closely associated with nature. When Kaede gazes out towards "the ancient trees of the shrine" with the "air smell[ing] of cedars and dust" (*Grass for his Pillow* 3), she observes a remarkable apparition:

> a spirit, she thought, yet not only a spirit for it had substance; it was there, undeniable and real, gleaming like fresh snow. She stared, half rose, but in the moment that she recognized her, the White Goddess, the all-compassionate, the all-merciful, was gone. (*Grass for his Pillow* 3)

Kaede's brief encounter with the White Goddess also seems to mirror Takeo's encounter with his archenemy Iida Sadamu, not only because of their respective positions at the beginning of *Across the Nightingale Floor* and *Grass for his Pillow*, but also due to the colour imagery underlying both scenes. Kaede sees a figure that is "gleaming like fresh snow" (*Grass for his Pillow* 3) and its encoded purity seems to be confirmed when she recognises the figure as the "all-compassionate, the all merciful" (3) deity. This is in stark contrast to Takeo's meeting with the warlord, who seems set up as the main villain in the first novel of the trilogy. As mentioned before, he is described as being dressed in all black, but at this point it is certainly useful to re-visit the scene and pay closer attention to his appearance. He is associated with "the smell of blood" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6), which emphasises Iida's association with death and destruction.

> He was clad from head to toe in black armour, his helmet crowned with antlers. He wore a short black beard beneath his cruel mouth. His eyes were bright, like a man hunting a deer. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6)

A black-and-white binary, which posits darker colours firmly on the side of evil permeates a large part of the fantasy literature canon and is even described by Helen

Young as so entrenched in fantasy fiction that it has become a "habit of binary identity construction – White and non-White" (2016, 13). This binary is visibly at work in the parallel beginnings of *Across the Nightingale Floor* and *Grass for his Pillow*, which pit the black-clad monster and the shining white goddess of mercy against each other in a striking contrast. The connotation between blackness and evil in particular is well rooted in modern fantasy literature due to its prominence in one of its foundational texts, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – "[i]t is undeniable that darkness and the color black are continually associated throughout Tolkien's universe with unredeemable evil, specifically Orcs and the Dark Lord Sauron" (Rearick 2004, 862). The association of darkness with evil and light with goodness is often seen as a binary that is also transferred to skin colour and rooted in racism, but as valid as this observation is, it is also worthwhile pointing out that Tolkien's colour codings originate in "[t]he text of the Bible [which] is filled with light and dark images having nothing to do with race" (Rearick 2004, 870)[54] and that the ensuing light-dark binaries in later fantasy texts do not intentionally promote racism. It is likely that the same is true for the light-dark contrast within the *Tales of the Otori* series, especially since the description of the White Goddess can also be contributed to religions origins and the description of Iida Sadamu seem closer to the series' overall strong emphasis on descriptions of nature, which sometimes border on the magical, thus making a case for considering Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series a liminal fantasy, in which the distinctions between what can be considered real and what fantastic are even fuzzier than is typical for most fantasy fiction. In this instance, Iida is described as having antlers on his helmet, which, while based on historical artefacts of Japanese armour, associate him with a brutish animal nature. However, while the human-animal binary is often used to reinforce the white-black hierarchy and dehumanize the other, Iida's description is more complex than that – even though his lust for blood as well as his animal-like experience may well suggest that he is more beast than human, but his violent tendencies are here clearly attributed to his humanity since "[h]is eyes were bright, like a man hunting a deer" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6). This goes together well with the series' overarching theme that the monsters are neither supernatural nor animal in nature, but human – in Iida's case, there is even a hint of the cannibalistic since he wears antlers, thus associating him with the very deer he hunts (if only metaphorically).

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[54] Of course, Christianity's implication in justifying the racist ventures of the British Empire (and other empires like the Spanish one) through said colour-coding cannot be denied, but it is equally obvious that the religious imagery of a text originally written by predominantly brown-skinned people was not intended as a racist manifesto in the modern sense.

The importance of nature within the series, both in supernatural and near-supernatural circumstances as well as in mundane ones, is even more pronounced during Kaede's encounter with the goddess. The apparition of the goddess is connected simultaneously to nature and the supernatural through the icy sleep, which Kaede has just emerged from. The Goddess is described as "gleaming like fresh snow" (*Grass for his Pillow* 3), which already hints at the icy, wintery nature of the Kikuta sleep, but the connection is made even more apparent by Kaede, who associates the two directly by saying "I have slept in ice. I have seen the White Goddess" (4). Neither the close association between magic powers – such as the Kikuta sleep – and nature nor the appearance of a White Goddess are coincidences, however. They are far from random fantastic elements to denote the genre affiliation of fantasy that Hearn clearly has intended for her series, but they are evidence of Hearn's research into Japanese culture as well as her usage and, perhaps, appropriation of it. They are, on the contrary, direct references to one of Japan's most prominent religions, Shintô, which incorporates a "close relation between an aesthetic appreciation of nature and the religious" (Kalland and Asquith 1997, 2) since

> the *kami* (divinity) is believed to have taken abode in natural features that give people a feeling of awe or spirituality, such as the sun and moon, rocks, streams, old trees, caves, flowers, animals and people of special character or standing. Indeed, according to Japanese mythology, natural phenomena are themselves the offspring of deities. In a sense then, nature is divine and represents *kami.* [...] Nature and the spiritual world are inseparable. (Kalland and Asquith 1997, 2)

The White Goddess, then, is more than just a deity invented for a fantasy world. She is clearly based on the goddess Amaterasu-Ômikami, who is "a solar female deity" (Picken 2011, 36). The myth itself goes back to the *Kojiki*, one of Japan's oldest books and also one of "the principal repositories of the earliest

Japanese myths and legends, history and […] poetry" (Borgen and Ury 1990, 61) and is closely associated with Shintoist beliefs. Shinto

> is primarily a religion of nature centered on the cultivation of rice, one with which the Western world is not familiar in terms of either its annual cycle or the lifestyle it generates. The roots of Shinto reflect an awareness of the natural order. The oldest shrines are located in places that created a sense of awe and wonder in their observers, such as majestic mountains or the great Fall of Nachi in Kumano. (Picken 2011, 2)

Thus, Hearn's fantasy-infused vividness of landscape takes on a more religiously inflected tone. Shintoism is reflected in references to "the shrine of the mountain god" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 2) in the multireligious village of Mino as well as in descriptions of "trees in the sacred grove [that] must have been four or five hundred years old, their huge trunks rising up into the canopy, their gnarled roots clinging to the mossy ground like forest spirits" (179). Belief in Shinto gods and spirits is depicted as ordinary, even among characters who do not seem to be very spiritual – thus, Yuki replies in surprise that, of course, she prays to "[t]he Enlightened One, in all his forms" as well as to "[t]he gods of the mountain, the forest, the river: all the old ones" (*Grass for his Pillow* 62).

In a sense then, the close entanglement of descriptions of nature and evocations of fantasy as well as the appearance of the White Goddess in Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* is rooted in Japanese culture and would point towards the author's intense research and respect for the culture she takes inspiration from. However, the author's British-Australian identity also justifies seeing her as a cultural outsider who employs a spirituality distinctly not her own in order to evoke magic, thus exoticising the culture by likening it to fantasy. This shows that elements of fantasy do not always travel easily from culture to culture and that questions of authenticity as well as differing definitions of fantasy and reality complicate the concept of fantasy literature as world literature. Japanese conceptions of nature are also present in Emiko Jean's *Empress of All Seasons*, in which, unsurprisingly, the four seasons play a significant role. According to Peter Ackermann, nature in Japan is frequently conceived of as "part of the universe that in turn is understood as a great principle of orderly movement" (2004, 38). This principle is reflected by the four seasons, which "are one way of *visualizing* order" (40) in their continuous repetition. In Empress of the Seasons, the seasons are likewise used to confirm and strengthen order as they are part of a challenge that a marriage candidate for the imperial crown prince and thus a future empress has to win in order to prove her suitability. The central character Mari faces the seasonal challenges in the form of four magically enchanted doors that all marriage candidates have to enter. Like Takeo, Mari is an outsider to feudal society hailing from a remote mountain village and belonging to a tribe of female shapeshifters. She is a yokai, which means that she belongs to a group of beings that are severely oppressed by the feudal society and thus her very act of attempting to win the fight against the seasons and her co-competitors is an act of subversion – her oppression is part of the fantasy layer of the story, but it still works as commentary on real-life dynamics of oppression, as is so often the case in fantasy literature.

The four seasonal rooms that make up the challenge meant to uphold the feudal system are described in realistic detail; at the very start of the chapter, with which the Summer Room challenge begins, there is an entire paragraph that establishes the summer atmosphere:

> A wet blanket of thick, hot air wrapped around [Mari]. Sweat coated her face and neck. Above, a sun blazed in the cloudless sky. Ahead stretched a field of yellow and orange sunflowers. And beyond that, a white birch forest flanked a dry, dusty mountain. (*Empress of All Seasons* 127)

The fall room is equally vividly described as Mari is astonished by the "[n]eat rows of hundreds of maple trees tunneled before her. Trees on fire. Each crown was tipped in red" (*Empress of All Seasons* 163). This pattern continues with the Winter and Spring Rooms, highlighting the importance of the seasons within the narrative. However, unlike Ackermann's assumption that the seasons as symbols for a greater principle may be used "in creating pliable and dependent personalities" (2004, 52), Jean constructs nature as enabling an upheaval of pre-existing power structures as Mari becomes a venerated Empress whose "reign was known as the Golden Age" (*Empress of All Seasons* 366) and the two title "Empress for All Beings" and "Empress of All Seasons" (366) are shown as being equivalent to one another, thus implying that the close connection to nature's cycle is also an indicator of just and noble rule.

It is worth mentioning, though, that while nature is used as a location of supernatural beauty and Shinto is strongly alluded to in both Emiko Jean's and Lian Hearn's work, its associated kami, yurei (ghosts), and yokai (demons) are not. Hearn refrains from drawing too much from Japanese mythology and uses historical and cultural referents as the basis for her secondary world, introducing fantasy elements that, while fitting to the Ninja stereotype, are also a general staples within the broader genre. This is, however, not the case with the two Japanese-American authors, Emiko Jean and Julie Kagawa. Both *Empress of Seasons* (2018) and *Shadow of the Fox* (2018) feature a variety of entities derived from Japan's vibrant mythology as well as underlying tensions between the novels' humans and their supernatural counterparts. *Shadow of the Fox* in particular contains a glossary that also explains some of the beings encountered throughout the narrative, which are usually referred to by their Japanese names and then further explained either as an epithet or in said glossary: It contains, for example, "amanjaku: minor demons of Jigoku," (455) "gaki: hungry ghosts," (456), "jorogumo: a type of spider yokai," (456) "kamaitachi: yokai, sickle weasel," (457) "kitsune: fox," (457) "kodama: kami, a tree spirit," (457) "nogitsune: an evil wild fox," (458) "omukade: a giant centipede," (459) "onikuma: a demon bear," (459) "oni: ogre-like demons of Jigoku" (459) as well as the more general terms "kami: minor gods," (457) "yokai: a creature with supernatural powers," (461) and "yurei: a ghost" (461). Each of the following novels contains largely the same list of supernatural creatures, usually adding a few more with each sequel. *Empress of Seasons* also has a similar, though significantly shorter, glossary, containing some of the same creatures as well as "*futakuchi-onna* – *yōkai*, a two-mouthed woman," (369) "*hari-onago* – *yōkai*, Hook Girl," (369) another "*jorōgumo* – *yōkai*, arachnid woman," (369) "*nure-onago* – water girl," (370) and "*yuki-onna* – *yōkai*, snow woman" (371). Not mentioned in the glossary are the "vengeful ghost mother" (43) of one of the protagonists as well as the "Animal Wife *yōkai*," (17) the community of female shapeshifters the main character Mari belongs to. While *Empress of Seasons* does contain non-female supernatural beings, its abundance of female entities hints at the feminist concerns Jean's novel addresses. Interestingly, both Mari (*Empress of Seasons*) and Yumeko (*Shadow of the Fox*) are female shape shifters – animal wife and kitsune, who are both known to fool humans and especially human males. Both characters are also hybrids, torn between the human world and the world of the yōkai, and the fact that these two liminal characters are the creations of two writers from the Japanese Anglophone diaspora in all likelihood is no coincidence. Reminiscent of Indra Das' shapeshifters, who also travel widely across not only human-animal boundaries but also literal borders between countries, Mari and Yumeko in their hybridity and in-betweenness may also reflect their authors' transcultural identities. Mignotte Merkuria establishes the

> concept of the shapeshifter, not as a literal mythical creature, but as a human being who defies simple categorisation (even on the basis of citizenship) and instead exists in the nuances 'between' [which] also lends a new dimension to the studies of autoethnography, collective memory, and nostalgia, especially as they relate to an author's creative work where often the duality and even multiplicity of the shapeshifter is enacted, befuddled, and revealed. (Merkuria 2014, 153)

While Merkuria rather assumes a shapeshifting author, whose identity is not necessarily reflected as a literal shapeshifter in their literary texts but may just as well manifest as more 'realistic' hybrid and liminal characters, it is not too far-fetched to reverse her argument and take the multitude of shapeshifters in the fantasy works of transcultural authors as useful tool to express in-betweenness and hybridity in an estranged context, which allows for a freer conversation as well as for a broader audience in front of which these transcultural concerns can be negotiated.

Lian Hearn, while not using as many figures from Japanese mythology, does address various religions and spiritualities in the context of her fantasy series, thus equally alluding to transcultural realities. In doing so, she does not restrict her treatment of the religion/worldview-fantasy constellation, which is potentially fraught yet still frequently occurring in fantasy literature, to the non-Western epistemology; Christianity also features in the novel and is not described in noticeably different terms than Japan's Buddhism and Shintoism respectively. In fact, the Hidden religion, Hearn's equivalent to Christianity, is, in some ways, the most exoticised religion with "mysterious beliefs" (*Brilliance of the Moon* 126). It makes Takeo "sound so different" (*Grass for his Pillow* 62) and is also associated with the Othered barbarians who "share the beliefs of the Hidden" (*Brilliance of the Moon* 291). Nonetheless, the three religions are often practiced peacefully together, sometimes by the same practitioners, which reflects, to some extent, even religious reality in contemporary Japan. In Mino, Takeo's original village, "the Hidden lived alongside everyone else, looking the same, acting the same, except for [their] prayers" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 5) and some, like Takeo's mother, even partake in the other religion's rituals by "[lighting] incense in the shrine and [taking] offerings to the god of the mountain" (12). In the same way, the Buddhist temple at Terayama "was built on the side of the mountain, next to a shrine of great antiquity," (179) indicating the close ties between the three religions, which are frequently highlighted, as all three value compassion highly – the apparent poly-religious society is a reflection of Japanese sensibilities, not, as Ma Sheng-Mei, suggests, an imperialist insistence of Western-centric universality and "multicultural hodgepodge [that] transcends differences among belief systems" (2013, 163). Neither of the three religions is ever prioritised and the only religion that is in any way 'confirmed' by the narrative is Shinto as showcased by Kaede's sighting of the White Goddess.

The significant role that religions play in *Tales of the Otori* thus enables readers to realise the ubiquity of religious representations in fantasy literature worldwide, which includes but is not limited to 'strange' religions – either because they are wholly imaginary or based on different cultures – and which certainly also contains depictions of 'mainstream' religions such as Christianity. Such fantastical representations of religion only very rarely attempt to make any actual statements with regards to the 'reality' of any given religion just because they are being associated with the fantasy genre, and *Tales of the Otori* is no exception. Contrary to Ma's statement that "Western religion and Orientalist imagery are meticulously censored" (2013, 161), all three religions are readily recognisable, especially for readers with at least a minimal knowledge of Japanese pronunciation and culture. Hearn does not add Christianity where there was none but, as Ma rightly states, references the kakure kirishitan (Hidden Christians), "crypto-Christians in medieval Japan who veiled their Christian faith in Buddhist sutras because of persecutions"

(161). As such, Hearn's novels represent the complex situation in Japan, which continues up to this day. Much like Uehashi, Hearn thus highlights Japan's connections to the surrounding countries and to countries which were further away such as Portugal by way of the religions imported from these countries – the 'censoring' referred to by Ma is rather the necessary transformation to the secondary world Hearn uses as a setting for her series, which is similar but not identical to Japan and which therefore contains similar rather than identical religions. The presence of the Hidden and the later appearance of "barbarians" (*Brilliance of the Moon* 291) – pseudo-Portuguese missionaries – hint at the larger global networks the series' Three Countries are a part of – they are not primarily used as an outlet for "[t]he real Hidden," that is, "the white Australian mastermind, along with her Christian sensibilities" (Ma 2013, 161). Instead, the various spiritualities alluded to in the novel are shown as being inherently equal since Takeo notices that "people when they pray look and sound the same" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 181). The nuanced and layered inclusion of a variety of religions inspired by their real-life counterparts is a common element of fantasy literature and does not imply any judgment on any given religion's supposed basis in reality. The novels so far discussed all show a varied approach to religion and spirituality, independent of the writer's origin or cultural background. Thus, Hearn addresses the co-existence of Japan's three main religious traditions, albeit leaving out Japanese Muslim identities, Kagawa focuses predominantly on the Shintôist kami populating Japanese nature.

6.4. Orientalist Exploitation or Global Exchange of Ideas?

Despite *Tales of the Otori*'s embeddedness in Japanese cultural ideas and concepts, the identity of its white British-Australian author Lian Hearn still raises questions of orientalism, which cannot be ignored, especially when considering strong criticism by literary scholars such as Ma Sheng-Mei, who considers *Tales of the Otori* as part of "the fantasy-historical-samurai-Orientalist genre" (2013, 160)[55]. Yet, at the same time, the authors are well within an Australian tradition in writing about the physically relatively close and culturally relatively distant East Asian neighbour. As Alison Broinowski states in her article “Contesting Civilizations: Literature of Australia in Japan and Singapore,” that (literary) “[i]nteraction between Australia and Japan is more than 150 years old” and “characterized by concerns about cultural superiority and inferiority, and by complex contests over the deference due to civilizations” (2011, 37). She names Lian Hearn specifically as an author who “has immersed herself in Japanese language and history and, with nine novels whose characters are all Japanese has established herself as Kata’s successor” (37) – the author here referenced is Australian-born writer Elizabeth Kata, who lived with her Japanese husband in Karuizawa and, “[f]eeling more Japanese than Australian,” (37) devoted herself to writing fiction with exclusively Japanese characters, as is the case with her saga *Kagami* (*Mirror* 1992), in which she discusses “the impact of Westernization” (37) on Japan. It is thus not far-fetched to choose Lian Hearn as an example for a very particular type of Australian fantasy fiction as well as a prominent fantasy novel inspired by East Asian cultures. This particular approach is even more compelling because Broinowski, in her otherwise very informative article, neglects to make clear that the vast majority of Hearn’s Japan-inspired work belongs to the fantasy genre. It is thus especially interesting to view a literary exchange as described by Broinowksi through the lens of fantasy literature as well as broaden the scope to include other examples of fantasy inspired by Japan or Japanese culture, both from English-speaking countries and in translation from Japanese. This will help to determine whether the overwhelming popularity of this theme ought to be considered an example of genuine cultural exchange, enabled by processes of global modernity, or whether it is closer to an Orientalised fascination with the so-called exotic and the perceived ‘magic’ of East Asia. Considering the fantasy genre in particular also allows for finding more connections between Japanese and Australian fiction than anticipated by Broinowski, who states that “[t]he output has never been equal: fewer Japanese write fiction of Australia than vice versa” (40) and while this is likely still true in principle, Broinowki’s lack of attention to fantasy literature means that she missed at least one prominent case of Australian influence on Japanese literature, already partly addressed earlier on in this chapter. Nahoko Uehashi, one of the most well-known Japanese writers of YA – or rather crossover – fantasy, consistently features minority characters, who are in similar positions to Indigenous peoples in the primary world, in her writing, often highlighting their voices as the ones which will bring balance and positive outcomes to the narrative, which can likely be attributed not only to her awareness of indigenous positionalities in her own country, but also to her interest in Australian Aboriginal cultures. This assumption is not far-fetched, considering that the connection between Ainu and Aboriginal Australians has also been made by other scholars, such as Okano Kaori, who Cultural cross-inspiration does occur frequently within fantasy literature, and while there is always a danger of culture appropriation, cultural appreciation and exchange are vital parts of the field and contribute to its world literary status. As one example of a fantasy literature set of tropes travelling the world and influencing a number of fantasy literature traditions, I will explore how East Asian motifs and settings are employed in various fantasy texts, focusing in particular on Lian Hearn as her position as a British-Australian writer inspired by the East Asian neighbour Japan makes global networks of exchange particularly visible. This part will focus especially on questions of Orientalism in Japanese-inspired fantasy tales, comparing the Hearn with the previously addressed authors Kagawa, Jean, and, to a lesser extent since her work has already been analysed in previous subchapters, Uehashi.

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[55] Though it is important to note that Ma Sheng-mei does not consider there to be "inherent virtue in a Japanese imaginary nor inherent vice in a Western imaginary" (168), when it comes to the depiction of feudal Japan – or settings inspired by it.

Taken into account that Orientalist appeal may play a role in the marketing of ‘East Asian’ fantasies, it makes sense to look at paratextual evidence. The covers of Hearn’s novels, for example, regardless of publishing house and edition, highlight their Japanese inspiration and ‘Otherness’ – Young Picador’s editions from 2004 to 2005, which I am working with, for example, put Asian faces in the foreground, but never completely. Instead, features which are perceived as foreign and exotic are particularly highlighted, such as dark, almond-shaped eyes, extremely pale skin and deep red lips reminiscent of the stereotypical image of a geisha. The second novel, *Grass for His Pillow*, only shows an eye with a dark iris and the epicanthal fold typical for people of East Asian descent – the rest of the face is obscured by a red scarf-like textile, presumably meant to evoke the ninja-like assassin characters from the novel, but certainly implies both threat and a certain degree of dehumanization for the unidentifiable figure. All three covers of the original novels also include Japanese characters, both in the hiragana and the kanji writing system, which are almost transparent and only visible when the light reaches the covers in a certain angle, thus adding to the orientalised mystique. The newer editions, also published by Picador, show stylised illustrations of certain characters or scenes, which mirror the style of Japanese woodcut artworks, which undoubtedly still highlights their exotic settings, but does so in a manner that seems more appreciative of Japanese culture and art and may also be seen as a sort of homage. Clearly then, Western writers' work about non-Western cultures carries with it a danger of exoticisation and orientalism – orientalist tropes in Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* will certainly need to be discussed, especially in combination with Daisuke Nishihara's application of Edward Said's ideas to Japan in his 2005 essay "Said, Orientalism, and Japan". However, it needs to be said that covers alone should not be taken as a sufficient hint of a damaging kind of orientalism within. Novels by Japanese or Japanese-diasporic authors, for example, also often show the same visual tropes, which are most often determined by the publishing houses, not by the authors themselves. Uehashi Nahoko's *Moribito* series, Kagawa's *Shadow of the Fox* trilogy and Emiko Jean's *Empress of All Seasons* are no exceptions to this. The two volumes of the Moribito series that have been translated, for example, show obvious similarities to Japanese woodcuts, with the first novel's cover clearly referencing Hokusai's famous image of the *Great Wave off Kanagawa* whereas the Japanese cover art is much more ornamental and reminiscent of more recent Japanese art such as the internationally known Studio Ghibli movies. The covers for Julie Kagawa's novels feature Japanese wave patterns, circular structures evoking either the Japanese flag or more mystical associations such as dragons, and Japanese iconography including samurai swords as well as seemingly inked cherry or plum blossoms. Jean's *Empress of All Season*'s cover shows a rather unusual Japanese weapon, the naginata employed by the novel's main character, and stylised flowers and patterns reminiscent of floral patterns used for kimono cloth or origami paper. All covers thus rely on distinctly Japanese imagery in order to engender sales, potentially playing with readers' outright desire for and fascination with the exotic Other.

In order to explore Orientalism and self-Orientalism in these fantasies, it is necessary to briefly return to Said's notion of Orientalism and Nishihara's adaptation of the theory to Japan in particular. Since Said's seminal text defines "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 2003 [1978], 3), it is undoubtedly a useful lens with which to approach Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series as well as other works of fantasy by Western authors, which focus heavily on (East) Asian influences and inspirations. In Said's work, the 'Orient'[56] is a construct that "has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (2). It is, as Said puts it, "almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1). Already, a potential link between Orientalist practices and East Asian inspired fantasy can be established. After all, "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" and "remarkable experiences" are frequent features of fantasy literature, which leads to a certain dilemma: Is the mixing of fantasy and East Asian influences bound to inadvertently reenforce Orientalist stereotypes and tropes, especially when written by writers of different cultural backgrounds? In order to see whether *Tales of the Otori* reconfirms Orientalist perspectives or whether the series manages to steer clear of them, a brief discussion of Said's main arguments as well as the aforementioned adaptations by Nishihara Daisuke is certainly necessary. There are a number of qualities ascribed to the 'Orient' that are being constructed as binary oppositions to the qualities of the West: As Said famously established, the West sees the 'Orient' as connected to "[s]ensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy" (118) but also seen as "the passive, seminal, even silent and supine East" (138) that often needs to be spoken for. In his article "Said, Orientalism, and Japan," Nishihara Daisuke addresses not only Japan's overwhelmingly positive reception of Said but also its complicated relationship to the tenets of Orientalism. Geographically, there can be no doubt that Japan is "situated in what is known as the Orient, but in a political sense it has tried to become a 'Western' nation" (Nishihara 2005, 244), which has put it in a highly ambivalent position as it is at once considered "as an 'Oriental' country" (244) – and treated as only that by Said – and as a modern, Westernised country on par with the Western colonial powers. Of course, Japan also has its own history of being an imperial power, which has allowed it to orientalise other Asian countries and demand an equal position among other Western countries – as such, it is much more likely that Japanese mythologies and cultural specificities have entered a near-mutual – though not entirely non-hierarchical – cultural exchange with other nations such as Australia and thus their respective writers. Still, it is worthwhile to consider those Orientalist stereotypes that are frequently applied to Japan. Nishihara lists "dictatorship, fanaticism, and cruelty" (245) as some of the concepts associated with Japan in Western discourse and also connects them to the almost mythical "representation of Samurai warriors" (245), though one that is often not only mirrored but enthusiastically accepted by Japanese people as well. He also includes the "tradition of harakiri suicide and even the kamikaze attack during World War II […] as evidence [used by Western powers] of the barbaric characteristics of the Japanese," (246) which may well find its fictional counterpart in the romanticisation of death seemingly practiced by the warrior class in *Tales of the Otori* (cf. *Across the Nightingale Floor* 289). Nishihara also mentions the "imposed sensuality" (2005, 246) that posits Japanese women, especially geishas, as objects for "the gratification of sexual pleasures by Western men," (246) which is both reflected and subverted in Hearn's description of female beauty and character.

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[56] While Said posits a difference between an American conception of the Orient, which includes "the Far East (China and Japan, mainly" (1), whereas the European meaning of the word Orient seems to be more connected to North Africa, the Middle East, and India, it is reasonable to broaden the meaning to include all of Asia. This not only reflects current perspectives, but also does justice to the various aspects of Orientalism people from East Asia have indeed been subjected to.

Even a superficial look at *Across the Nightingale Floor*, the first published volume in Lian Hearn's fantasy series, though not the first one chronologically, shows some elements of what Nishihara considers Orientalist images of Japan, namely the association with "dictatorship, fanaticism, and cruelty." Very early on in the first novel, readers are introduced to the almost nightmarish figure of Iida Sadamu, the head of the Tohan clan who rules the East from the capital Inuyama. Iida is clearly a violent and cruel leader as is shown by his hatred for the Hidden and the massacre in the mountain village Mino that sets the events of the entire series in motion. His brutal nature is further emphasised through Takeo's early assessment of him as a man who "loved to kill for the sake of killing" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 6). Later on, Takeo and his adoptive father Shigeru travel through Tohan land, which leads to a more detailed discussion of Iida's despotic rule. Shigeru notes Iida's "cruelty and double-dealing" (150) as well as "the devastating effect of their [the Tohan's] rule on the common people" (151), though it is worthwhile mentioning that Iida Sadamu's reign of terror is not represented as admirable or normal in Hearn's narrative. As Shigeru explains,

> I believe the test of government is the contentment of the people. If the ruler is just, the land receives the blessings of Heaven. In Tohan lands the people are starving, debt-ridden, harassed all the time by Iida's officials. The Hidden are tortured and murdered – crucified, suspended upside down over pits of waste, hung in baskets for the crows to feed on. Farmers have to expose their newborn children and sell their daughters because they have nothing to feed them with. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 151)

The attitude taken by the inhabitants of the Three Countries, Hearn's secondary world based on Japan, is rather ambiguous. As mentioned above, the narrative itself certainly questions this idea of power, but at the same time it is stated that "[p]ower brings its own legitimacy" and that "[m]ost people believe any lord has the right to do as he pleases in his own clan and his own country" (151), which is apparently consistent with the way in which members of the warrior class – as represented by Hearn – are raised so it could be argued that Hearn does draw a connection between Japan or rather her 'Japanised' secondary world and dictatorship as well as cruelty.[57] Even as this idea is criticised in the novel, it is still upheld by many of the characters within – this may suggest that while Hearn, the Western author, has distanced herself from such feudal and absolutist notions of rule, while the Japanese inhabitants of her secondary world have not, indicating perhaps a certain backwardness that is most prominently opposed by the Hidden, notably a Christian sect.

Violence and brutality do play a particularly important role in *Tales of the Otori*, especially considering that it is usually marketed as YA (young adult) fantasy and thus not typically part of a genre with extraordinary amounts of bloodshed. Iida's torturous treatment of the Hidden, for example, is described in excruciating detail and Hearn uses fantasy to emphasise the brutality by making use of Takeo's supernaturally heightened senses in order to more graphically describe the suffering and the violent actions that occur throughout the series. Once he knows about Iida's prisoners being tortured, he "could not stop hearing them: at times a quiet groaning, at other times a thin screaming, accompanied in daylight by the constant cawing and flapping of the crows" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 164) who are eating them alive. Approaching them in order to perform a mercy killing, Takeo also smells the "stench […] of human corruption, of living bodies rotting slowly" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 171) as well as "[t]he smell of blood, piss, and shit" (171), which gives a certain materiality to the human suffering imposed by a tyrannic (Orientalised?) ruler. Interestingly, however, this excess violence, potentially fuelled by notions of a violent Orient, is not only present in Hearn's work, but also in works by writers of Japanese descent, such as American author Julie Kagawa. Kagawa's work is by far the closest to Hearn's, as it also features a secondary world based on Japan in addition to a cast of samurai, assassins, and religious orders, but also, in contrast to Hearn, various yokai – demon-like creatures from Japanese mythology. As such, it is a valuable text to use for comparisons with Hearn's series. In the first novel of Kagawa's trilogy, *Shadow of the Fox* (2018), the male protagonist, Tatsumi, 17 years old and at times a merciless killer much like Takeo, albeit mostly in battles against otherworldly creatures, wields a sword possessed by a demon and is thus prone to use extreme force while fighting. The descriptions and event in Kagawa's trilogy are by no means less violent and brutal than in Hearn's – there is, for example, a very early scene in which a young woman is literally ripped apart and devoured by demons, which is described in some detail:

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[57] Hearn's depiction is, of course, based on real Japanese history, most prominently the *Sengoku Jidai* (Age of the Country at War) between 1467 and 1638, during which time "Japanese warfare was carried out between the armies of rival *daimyō* (feudal lords) who competed for dominance" (Turnbull 2007, 7). As such, it is unlikely to be purely Orientalist rather than factual, though, of course, her choice of period for her Japanese fantasy is significant.

> Clawed fingers closed around her neck, and she was lifted up to face the oni's terrible, hungry smile. Its hot breath smelling of smoke and rotten meat, blasted her face as the demon opened its jaws. Mercifully, the gods decided to intervene at that moment, and Suki finally fainted in terror, her consciousness leaving her body the moment before it was torn in half. (*Shadow of the Fox* 27)

The main attacker is an Oni, a powerful creature from Japanese mythology, but the actual instigator is Lady Satomi, a beautiful but cruel noble woman who fits the counterpart to the submissive Asian woman stereotype – "the hypersexual Dragon

Lady who seduces and then destroys" (Rajgopal 2010, 154) here blurring the boundaries between Orientalist caricature and a female villain figure with the capacity to be as intriguing as her male counterparts.

Tatsumi, a ninja-like warrior, also commits several acts of violence that mirror the exaggerated violence of ninja movies, anime, or manga; this is most noticeable in scenes in which his demon-possessed sword is used to accomplish otherwise near impossible goals, such as when his companion Yumeko witnesses him kill a man with a "thunderous crash" and leave the corpse with "a line of crimson splitting his face nearly in two" (*Shadow of the Fox* 209) and while he may not be a villain, he is certainly not dissimilar to Takeo in his actions as he, too, "takes lives with no reason other than Tribe allegiance" (Ma 2013, 168). Granted, these lives are those of demons and otherworldly creatures and he is strictly forbidden to even attack ghosts as they represent human souls – the narrative, however, supports the idea that the nonhuman creatures from Japanese mythology cannot all be reduced to evil entities and therefore the lives taken by Tatsumi are not inherently different than those taken by Hearn's Takeo. This is not to say that both Hearn and Kagawa are necessarily guilty of Orientalising their characters – it is more indicative of both authors drawing from a similar pool of inspiration, namely that of the samurai story, which has, in fact, travelled widely in various forms[58], carrying with it a cast of "good samurai, evil bandits, and vulnerable farmers" (Ma 168). Ma Sheng-Mei, who identified these tropes, claims that Akira Kurosawa "offers subtle depictions beyond types" (168) but denies such subtlety in Hearn. Ma does, however, state that "[i]nsofar as samurai tales are concerned, there is neither inherent virtue in a Japanese imaginary nor inherent vice in Western imaginary" (168). I would argue that both Kagawa and Hearn occasionally "lapse[…] into Orientalist kitsch, which could befall Japanese texts as easily as non-Japanese" (168) through the use of "stylized violence and stereotypes" (168), but more often than not they depict their characters with the subtlety demanded by Ma.

Ma also associates the depiction of violence, especially in combination with the aesthetics of swordplay, with Orientalism and cites Takeo's and Kaede's practice swordfight as an example in Hearn's work. "The dance of swordplay or the aesthetics of violence," according to Ma, "[…] energizes the action or romantic genre, which is but acting, posing, and stylising to invoke, among other things, an alternate state of consciousness" (166), which trigger the "letting go of rationality, allowing one to be taken over affectively," (166) thus suggesting the a highly emotional Orient as the counterpart to an allegedly enlightened and rational Occident. However, the scene Ma uses as an example for her claim, which does depict swordplay as a sort of dance, does not actually show any violence – rather it showcases the art of sword fighting, perhaps similar to the martial arts practice of Kendo as it is still practiced today, both in Japan and worldwide. The eventual climax of at least the first volume in the trilogy specifically denies protagonist Takeo his expected duel with the villain Iida – instead, Kaede kills him by attacking him with a needle – a woman's weapon – and a knife, with which Iida is stabbed through the heart. There are a number of sword fights later on in the series, but they are not fundamentally different from other battles in fantasy worlds based on pre-industrial settings – though it is true that, due to its obvious connections to feudal Japan and its associated samurai imagery, there is a certain aesthetics accompanying each instance of sword fighting since most readers will approach the text with at least some background knowledge surrounding the figure of the samurai precisely because it has travelled so widely along with Japanese popular media gaining prominence in the West. This romanticised notion of samurai culture, especially the concomitant code of honour, is subverted in Lian Hearn through the use of a complex political system, involving far more players and different sets of morals than just various warring factions of samurai. A significantly more effective subversion of Orientalist, exoticised and romanticised notions of (Japanese) swordsmanship can be found in Kagawa's series, in which she directly addresses and upends such expectations. Kagawa's protagonists are faced with a "stranger […] in the center of the bridge, the moonlight blazing down on him, a shining katana held loosely at his side," (303) a description which seemingly could not be any more drenched in romantic exoticism. The stranger is a samurai who challenges anyone attempting to cross the bridge[59] and who seems obsessed with the samurai code of honour. He also praises the art of sword fighting to such an extent that 'aesthetics of violence' is, indeed, a fitting description, as he describes his own sword skills as an artistic endeavour:

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[58] A famous non-fantasy example would be Akira Kurosawa's film *Seven Samurai*, which had a significant impact on the Western genre, most notably through the classic Western *The Magnificent Seven*. Both movies contain a cast of samurai/cowboys, bandits, and villagers, much like Hearn's and Kagawa's fantasy series.

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[59] Of course, the strange knight challenging the heroes before they are allowed to pass is a downright Arthurian trope, which shows that East Asian themes within fantasy literature have not only travelled widely but are also interacting with other traditions productively.

> '[…] I am no demon. I am merely an artist who, for years, had no canvas to practice upon. I dedicated my life to swordplay, to perfecting the balance between myself and the blade. But dueling with wooden swords, or being forced to stop at first blood – that is like painting a picture with only half the colors. The 'safe' duels I fought hobbled me and told me nothing. The only way to truly test my skills is to fight with no limitations. Only then will I know if I have achieved perfection.' (*Shadow of the Fox* 307-308)

Certainly, this praise of a fight to the death fits not only with the idealisation of violence criticised by Ma, but also with a more general conception of the Orient as obsessed with death. The novel *Shadow of the Fox* thus sets up reader expectations for an exciting battle, which may indeed lead to "a hypnotic, trance-like suspending of disbelief in spectators" (166). However, before the duel can actually take place, the two opponents are interrupted by "a huge serpentine creature burst[ing] out from under the bridge, rising fifteen feet into the air between" (*Shadow of the Fox* 311) them, which turns out to be "the omukade, a giant, man-eating centipede" (*Shadow of the Fox* 312). The sudden appearance of the monster not only surprises the fighters but also effectively disrupts any notions of noble – but Orientalised – swordplay in the readers.

Another potentially Orientalised villain in Lian Hearn's series is the "sadistic, fetish-loving, Fu-Manchu-style homosexual Lord Fujiwara" (Ma 2013, 169), which Ma Sheng-Mei sees as the second-volume replacement for "Takeo's Hidden innocence and passionate love in *Across,*" (169) despite the fact that Takeo, while perhaps no longer innocent, is certainly still present and just as motivated by his love for Kaede (and father figure Shigeru) in the *Grass for his Pillow*. Fujiwara serves Ma as evidence for Hearn's alleged "Orientalist exoticism, which invariably smacks of eroticism" (169), and indeed, he is not a likeable character, with a tendency to "feel the desire to add [beautiful women like Kaede] to his collection" (*Grass for his Pillow* 93). He is also presented as rather feminine and even decadent; he is "tall and slender, his face white and sculpted like a mask, […] [h]is clothes were subdued in colour, but elegant and made of exquisite fabric" (90). His mouth is described as "sensuous" and his fingers as "delicate" (97). Additionally, he is frequently said to be using "courteous, flowery language" (90) to the point that he is not easily understood, which is likely another hint at his affectation. It is later confirmed that "Fujiwara prefers men to women [, but] he seems to have become obsessed with Lady Shirakawa" (212) – a detail that is also highlighted when he orders Mamoru, a young actor in his employ, who is "as fine boned and as delicate as a girl" (97) to emulate her. Despite this obsession with female beauty and femininity, Fujiwara is also a misogynist, viewing women as beautiful objects to be possessed (cf. *Brilliance of the Moon* 185-186) and maintaining that "educating a girl was something of a mistake" (188). Taken on its own, he may well be read as a sign for Hearn's use of the "[t]heses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality" (2003 [1978], 206), but neither is his sexism supported in the text as something that is ubiquitous (or at least not any more ubiquitous than in fantasies set in Western locations) nor is he the only queer character to be portrayed. There is also Makoto, a young monk, who becomes one of Takeo's firmest allies and with whom Takeo also has a consensual intimate encounter. Makoto is "young, stern-faced and muscular" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 179) and Takeo, who is generally a reliable narrator, "felt an instinctive liking for him – more than liking: trust" (186). Makoto is a monk and thus highly educated as well as artistic, but he is not portrayed as frail – instead, he is clearly a warrior monk, a category of Japanese warriors, whose "loyalty was nor to the emperor, a clan leader of a daimyo, but to their temple and to the particular sect of Buddhism to which they belonged," (Turnbull 2007, 42) which counteracts Ma's claim that "Hearn favors *samurai* medieval Japan […] to accentuate the timeless mythical tenor" (161, my emphasis). His caring nature comes to the forefront at the end of *Across the Nightingale Floor*, when a traumatised Takeo seeks refuge at Terayama and is comforted by flute music, which "pierced [his] heart" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 282) while he is grieving for Shigeru. The musician turns out to be Makoto, "accompanying [Takeo] in [his] sorrow" (283). Makoto comforts and hugs Takeo while letting him cry; eventually the embrace becomes more intimate as the two men share a sexual encounter:

> His affectionate words, his touch, made the tears flow again. Beneath his hands I felt my body come back to life. He drew me back from the abyss and made me desire to live again. Afterwards, I slept deeply, and did not dream. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 285)

While this has been read as a religious experience (cf. Sly 2004, 47), it is abundantly clear that the scene carries sexual implications, especially when considering Makoto's whispered "'I notice everything about you'" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 284) just a page prior to this – a phrase, which, in its context, cannot be read other than romantically connotated. Though, in the aftermath, Takeo sometimes refers to Makoto's love as "obsession," (*Brilliance of the Moon* 200) but when gripped by physical desire, he contemplates that he "could have lain with Makoto and so eased it," (200) which seems to indicate that he has bisexual tendencies himself. All in all, Makoto's portrayal is then a positive one, seeing as he is one of Takeo's closest and most trusted friends, but he is also prejudiced towards women, which does indicate that the society Hearn depicts is, at large, a patriarchal one.

Towards the end of the first volume of the trilogy, Iida Sadamu is also shown as a patriarchal aggressor towards women, which might have played into the stereotype of 'Oriental' and especially Japanese women being depicted as "submissive, subordinate, oppressed and passive" (Hsia and Scanzoni 1996, 309). Indeed, the narrative situation of *Across the Nightingale Floor*, which is continued in the following volumes, seems to support that kind of reading. Takeo, the male hero, is the autodiegetic narrator of his point-of-view chapters and is thus not only the character through whose eyes the reader experiences the narrative but also the narrating voice, which automatically seems to imbue him with at least some agency and power. Kaede, however, is the focaliser of her chapters but not the narrating voice and may thus be perceived as more distanced and passive. This particular narrative constellation seems confusing at first but there is ample textual evidence that Kaede's peculiar narrative situation actually serves to present women's vulnerable position while at the same time empowering her and highlighting the contrast between a *perception* of women as fragile and passive and the actions Kaede takes throughout the novels. While she is subjected to sexualised violence throughout the narrative, she is also shown early on to be resisting actively. She is well aware of the restrictive and vulnerable position due to her gender and has come to the conclusion "that all women should use every weapon they had to protect themselves in the battle that life seemed to be" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 37) but rather than being a helpless victim, Kaede, when faced with a man who is "pushing one leg between hers, forcing her thighs apart [….], jabbed the knife into his neck" (40). She is then framed as a cursed woman by the predominantly patriarchal society around her which is reconfirmed when her proposed fiancé Otori Shigeru also dies. Rather than passively accepting this role, Kaede instead forms strong relationships with other women and learns how to defend herself. Lady Maruyama, who oversees a domain in the West where women are given more freedom[60], decides that Kaede is "to start learning the sword" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 126) to defend herself, especially because she is next in line to inherit the matrilineal Maruyama estate, if something were to happen to Lady Maruyama and her daughter, and thus ought to know how to defend herself. The maid and secret assassin Shizuka teaches her not only how to fight openly but also how to "kill someone with a needle" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 217), which eventually allows her to kill the tyrannical ruler Iida:

> With her left hand she found the needle in her right sleeve. As he lowered himself onto her she drove the needle into his eye. He gave a cry, indistinguishable from a moan of passion. Pulling the knife from beneath the mattress with her right hand she thrust it upwards. His own weight as he fell forwards took it into his heart. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 266)

This not only subverts the expectation set up by the narrative situation that Takeo will be the most agentic protagonist of the two by allowing Kaede to take a part in what has been set up as Takeo's so-called hero's journey.[61] It also contributes to Hearn's nuanced depiction of women – especially since Kaede has been set up as a stereotypical 'exotic' and fragile female with "pale skin, delicate limbs and thick hair"

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[60] This, of course, could be seen as another instance of a fantasy narrative placing the heroes in the West and the villains in the East (cf. Ekman 2013, Young 2016, Ma 2013, 162) and thus reenforcing Orientalist ideas, even though the entire novel is set in a world that is heavily coded as Eastern.

[61] In so doing, of course the narrative also subverts the quest storyline that seems to have become an almost formulaic part of fantasy literature.

(*Across the Nightingale Floor* 81) and Takeo remarks on her "pale face, the fragile bone of her wrists, the black mass of her hair" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 205). The focus on her pale skin and black hair is especially indicative of Orientalist stereotypes and therefore especially powerful when contrasted with "Kaede, sword in hand, […] covered in blood" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 270).

Hearn's depiction of women is sufficiently diverse to counteract the few instances in which she does seemingly include some Orientalist features. Often, her female characters are superficially stereotypical, either following Orientalist or sexist conceptions of women, only to challenge them in some ways. A good example for this technique is Shizuka, who is first introduced as Kaede's flirtatious maid, but is eventually revealed to be a member of the Tribe, the clan of supernatural and highly-skilled assassins. When she starts to teach Kaede in self-defence, she first shows incredible skill and then "giggled again, changing under Kaede's eyes from concentrated warrior to scatterbrained servant" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 127), showing that the women in Hearn's novels may simply assume stereotypical guises to hide their true abilities from the men surrounding them. Another female character in Hearn's series that stands out as challenging expectations is Yuki, another Tribe member, who eventually fights side by side with Takeo and whose equality with the male hero is highlighted on multiple occasions to the point of both moving in unison when "Yuki and [Takeo] leaped silently on to the roof of the wall and merged into the tiles," (252) and "Yuki and [Takeo] crept along the tiled roof to the south-east corner" (253). Yuki is also frequently shown taking the initiative when she leads Takeo as well as her father and Takeo's mentor Kenji "into [a small canal] where it disappeared into a drain beneath the road" (252) or ordering Takeo to proceed with a plan.

The most Orientalised woman in the first novel of the trilogy is most likely Lady Maruyama; ironically, also "the most powerful woman in the Three Countries" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 142) as well as most likely Christian and thus associated with a seemingly more Western philosophy. Yet, as Dorinne Kondo points out, "[i]n Western eyes, Japanese women are meant to be sacrificed" (1990, 9) and her most prominent example is the near infamous Madame Butterfly, another instance of a white author depicting a Japanese woman who "sacrifices her 'husband', her religion, her people, her son, and, ultimately, her very life" (10). While

Lady Maruyama is, of course, not involved with a non-Japanese man but with tragic hero figure Shigeru, she still ends up losing everything as “[a]ll three women [Lady Maruyama, her daughter, and her servant] threw themselves into the water. The lady and her daughter drowned […]” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 247). However, it is worthwhile mentioning why the Maruyama women did choose to die; their initial plan was to flee as they had “bribed some boatmen to take her across the river” (247) and presumably to safety. Furthermore, her death is more likely to be seen as a parallel to the death of her lover and ally Otori Shigeru. Shigeru’s death does follow another stereotypical trope, namely that of “most Japanese created by Westerners […] [being] concerned with ‘honor’” and the impulse to commit suicide to preserve it (Kondo 1990, 10) as he asks to be killed by Takeo with his own sword after being freed from captivity by the Tohan, which is later described as “an honourable death” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 284). The format of the fantasy series, however, allows Hearn to provide both Lady Maruyama and Shigeru – two characters who die relatively stereotypical deaths in book one of a trilogy – with an extensive backstory in the form of a prequel, *Heaven’s Net is Wide*.

The notions of sacrifice and honour are already challenged within *Across the Nightingale Floor* as is shown by the development of the relationship between Takeo and Kaede. After Shigeru’s death, which reenforces Kaede’s reputation as a cursed woman, Kaede “knew there was no other choice but to kill herself” and “[s]he thought about dying with the same intensity she brought to everything” (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 259). The act of suicide is connected to “protect[ing] her family’s name” by “act[ing] with honour herself” (259). She even proposes a double suicide to Takeo by almost casually suggesting “Why don’t we just die together now? […] While we are happy?” (272) while still in Iida’s castle and even repeats this desire when they are already in safety:

> ’There are worse things than death! If they kill you, I will kill myself and follow you.’ She took my hands in hers and leaned towards me. Her eyes were burning, her hands dry and hot, the bones as fragile as a bird’s. I could feel the blood racing beneath the skin. ‘If we can’t live together we should die together.’

> Her voice was urgent and excited. The night air seemed suddenly chill. In songs and romances, couples died together for love. I remembered Kenji's words to Shigeru: *You are in love with death like all your class.* Kaede was of the same class and background, but I was not. I did not want to die. I was not yet eighteen years old. (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 289)

It is worthwhile quoting this passage in full because it highlights that the obsession with this kind of 'honourable' stereotyped death (cf. Kondo 1990, 10) may be either related to class or perhaps even just to romanticised notions of lovers' suicides promoted by 'songs and romances,' which unduly influence the fifteen-year-old Kaede and not to some Western idea of Japanese conceptions of honour. Takeo's reaction can then be seen as a much more natural response to deadly danger.

Takeo is, perhaps, the best example of a character defying multiple stereotypes at once. He is very clearly set up as the opposite to Iida's dictatorial impulses and ends the first trilogy as an ideal ruler who has ensured "nearly fifteen years of peace and prosperity" (*Brilliance of the Moon* 349) for the Three Countries and he "control[s] all these [threats] with a mixture of strength and diplomacy" (349). While he is a skilled warrior and potential assassin, he frequently shows mercy even when he is berated for it or when it may threaten his own life, which sets him apart from the Orientalist perception of Japanese rulers as "dictatorship, fanaticism, and cruelty" (Nishihara 2005, 245), which was exemplified by the trilogy's first antagonist, Iida Sadamu. Nor is Takeo unduly feminised, another association that may be made if following Orientalist paradigms, which presupposes a "passive, seminal, feminine, even silent and supine East" (Said 2003 [1978], 138). While he does have certain characteristics that might make him seem like a feminised male, since he can be "quiet, outwardly gentle, an artist, somewhat bookish" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 80), he is simultaneously capable and has enough military competence to have eventually "taken the impregnable castle [of Hagi], kept the bridge whole, pacified the men" (*Brilliance of the Moon* 326). Furthermore, his mercy and kindness, while seen as a weakness by other characters, is never portrayed as negative in itself and even seems to follow the Otori principles as the "Otori clan welcomes the just and the loyal" (*Across the Nightingale Floor* 27). Additionally, Shigeru is also shown to have an interest in life affirming activities such as “improving [his] land and […] the seasons, crops and irrigation” (151) to the point where he is called “Shigeru the Farmer” (151).

While the interest is a good cover for traveling country, it is also heavily hinted at to be a genuine passion of his. It could be argued that the positive sides of both Shigeru and Takeo are derived from their connections to the Hidden, which mirror the real-life *kakure kirishtan*, that is the Hidden Christians of Japan, and which would therefore highlight a western centric ideal. As shown in the previous subchapter, however, the presence of the Hidden and their values, based on Japanese history, is not, in fact, highlighted as inherently better than any of the other religious and cultural traditions depicted in Hearn’s series. Western ideas may have entered Japan and the fictional world of Hearn’s pseudo-Japan in the form of the Hidden but that is not necessarily a bad thing, especially since they are depicted as open to equal dialogue with the Buddhist and Shintoist traditions already present before their arrival. Perhaps this is an apt metaphor for the way fantasy elements may travel back and forth in this case study focused especially on ‘Japanese’ fantasy. Hearn employs Japanese imagery despite her identity as a white British author, and while this act does carry the risk of transgressing into the realm of Orientalism, it becomes clear that Hearn is no more prone to using Orientalist stereotypes than her counterparts from the Anglophone Japanese diaspora. While Orientalism has certainly been a central concern in this chapter, it is also important to consider that the conversation of different fantasies surrounding East Asian motifs may enable a more respectful interaction between East and West instead of an overpowering dominance of the West through its Orientalist discourse. It may seem counterintuitive that a chapter that opposes Orientalist notions should focus mainly on a text by a white writer, but I argue that it is, in fact, very productive to compare Lian Hearn’s Tales of the Otori to other Japanese-inspired fantasies. In a way, the Japanese fantasy has become the norm against which *Tales of the Otori* has been measured, thus turning around the more typical centre-margin dynamics, which always centre on the West. Here, the centre is, instead, the East, and Hearn is merely a new arrival to the eastern sphere from the margins – Britain – and engaging in a creative conversation that easily crosses borders and allows for the creation of new centres. This is facilitated by the popularity of Japanese-inspired motifs in contemporary fantasy – Japanese fantasy elements have long since entered non-

Japanese popular culture through various media such as samurai movies, manga, anime, light novels, but also more traditional fantasy novels such as Uehashi'strope. As such, it is only natural that these well-travelled motifs have been adopted and adapted by a variety of authors of diverse backgrounds. A global exchange between ideas and narratives is clearly noticeable and, while it has to be carefully navigated to avoid harmful stereotypes and Orientalist tropes, the exchange may also lead to more transcultural media expressions and mutual respect – after all, Hearn states on her website that it "helps us to understand other nationalities if we try to make an imaginative leap into their world" (n.d., n.p.) while also acknowledging that it is "a dangerous undertaking" because writers "run the risk of distorting someone else's culture, patronising it and belittling it" (n.d., n.p.). The novels discussed her have certainly shown that it is possible to be inspired by other cultures and to creatively depict transcultural linkages respectfully, as Hearn has done with her treatment of Japan and Uehashi with her subtle inclusion of (fictional) Indigenous knowledges. Likewise, it has been shown that portrayals of 'fantasy Japan' can be remarkably similar even across borders when comparing Hearn's work with Japanese-American author Julie Kagawa's trilogy, which is, after all, written from a decidedly transcultural subject position. The linkages between East Asian, particularly Japanese, cultural and mythological elements in Western fantasy literature and the *reverse* – Japanese perceptions of Western cultural and mythological elements in Japanese fantasy media – could likely be more extensively analysed if a broader selection of Japanese media – translated and untranslated, in novel or graphic novel (manga) form – were to be taken into consideration. Even a cursory look at Japanese manga production that employs Western motifs shows, after all, that many Japanese writers and manga artists have no qualms employing and manipulating feudal Europe as their setting, but this, albeit interesting for a consideration of fantasy as world literature, goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

7. Conclusion

As my study has shown, contemporary fantasy literature has long since left behind the formulaic medievalist trilogy format, if, indeed, it was ever restricted to that. Far from Eurocentric, the fantasy genre takes inspiration from sources around the world, sometimes risking exoticisation, but often with a deep respect or even reverence for the cultures they draw from, which may or may not be their own. Of course, it is not only white western authors who extend their net to cover a broader area in their search for 'ancient' mythologies to convert into fantasy fiction. That would ultimately provide only outsiders' views on mythic and fantastic traditions worldwide, which would heighten the risks of exotic exaggerations and superficial stereotypes filling the genre once more. Writers of colour, writers from the non-western world, writers from the Global South all produce high quality fantasy novels that are read by a diverse audience worldwide.

The texts chosen for my analysis all demonstrate in different ways that fantasy truly ought to be considered world literature, just as its predecessors, ancient epics and romances, have been for a long time. After all, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Beowulf*, the *Kojiki*, the *Mahabarata*, the Arthurian legends, and the *Nibelungenlied* among others do not usually raise a single eyebrow if they are spoken of as world literature or as "part of the cultural heritage of all mankind" (Baetens 2011, 336). Contemporary fantasy literature likewise fulfils various requirements to be considered world literature – it is circulated widely, and not just radiating outward from a western centre. As my study has shown, fantasy literature also has the potential to tackle difficult subjects and present them in highly complex and literary forms, incorporating orality, intertextuality, and intermediality, all of which can be uncovered through careful literary analysis. Additionally, fantasy literature appears to be especially suited for discussions of queer identities, which is certainly deserving of further study. Non-western fantasy literature also frequently engages with notions of hybridity, transculturality, and orientalism, among others, which shows that it could provide fertile ground for postcolonial study – more and more literary scholars do, indeed, approach fantasy literature with a postcolonial lens, but the field would certainly benefit from even more widespread consideration. Marlon James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a particularly striking example of the lacunae that still exist at the intersection of fantasy and postcolonial scholarship: Despite being the most recent work of a queer Jamaican Booker prize winner, who has otherwise attracted a lot of scholarly attention, and also a novel which contains a plethora of themes that hold academic interest, only very little research has been done on the 2019 novel as of now. Nnedi Okorafor's works have received considerably more attention than James's foray into fantasy, but they are not always read as fantasy – instead they are alternatively called magical realism, science fiction, or afrofuturism (much to Okorafor's chagrin since the writer prefers her own term, africanfuturism). While not wrong, these descriptors ignore Okorafor's contributions to and inspirations by the fantasy genre, which she herself very explicitly acknowledges. Her concept of organic fantasy is, in fact, essential in establishing fantasy literature as world literature. As Okorafor explains, her organic fantasy "grows out of its own soil" (2009, 277), which is evident in the rootedness of her fantasy novel in various countries of Africa, most often her own native Nigeria but also Sudan and Namibia among others. By making her fantasy so intensely local and decidedly non-western, she takes a prominent fantasy formula, the quest narrative, and returns it to its originally universal nature without, however, reducing this 'universal' aspect to the meaning 'European'. Furthermore, her writing draws directly from her own transcultural experience, which Okorafor chooses to express via fantasy as a means of appropriately describing her lived reality – and this may, in fact, be true for many people living in the current unpredictable and often strange times. Her coinage of the term 'africanjujuism' also ought to be adopted and researched by more literary scholars, as it holds great potential for the study of fantasy world literature – James's *Dark Star* Trilogy is but one example of africanjujuist writing by somebody other than Okorafor herself. Fantasy literature can also be used to explore a variety of identities as well as the dissolution of some aspects of the individual self, thus, for example, engaging in queer or gender discourses that can be expressed more aptly in the language of fantasy. Both James and Das present touching portrayals of masculinity and romantic relationships between men – both writers certainly belong to a tradition of homosocial and homosexual writing, but they also go beyond the texts of the past in expressing their own queerness through fantasy. They alter the understanding of the self in ways that are extremely relevant to current discussions about the bounded individual versus the more complicated entanglements surrounding entities previously thought to be independent.

There can be no doubt, then, that fantasy novels contribute to a corpus of cultural heritage – and, indeed, certain classics such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* are increasingly considered as such. However, if more contemporary works continue to be largely ignored by world literature scholars, the field will be considerably poorer for it. Reading fantasy novels as world literature allows scholars to unearth global networks as well as local realities, which engage in similar discussions as so-called literary literature, covering topics as varied as ecocriticism, gender, the aforementioned postcolonial concerns, and many more. Global networks within fantasy literature can be observed on a textual level when a werewolf novel like *The Devourers* portrays the shapeshifter as a travelling creature with multiple origins as well as outside text when writers such as Lian Hearn, Uehashi Nahoko, Julie Kagawa, and Emiko Jean travel beyond their culture of origin, taking some of their cultural ideas with them but also adopting the cultural ideas of their host or neighbouring countries. Furthermore, fantasy literatures also 'world' more generally, that is they are engaged in building alternative worlds, not necessarily ones that is synonymous with the well-known secondary world of fantasy scholarship, but always worlds that present opportunities to imagine differently and to consider new ways of being.

Global fantasy networks – the ongoing exchange of ideas, the critical influence and conversations between authors and cultures, the movement of transcultural authors across the globe – continue to keep the genre of fantasy vibrantly alive and productive, allowing for spaces, in which authors and readers do not only seek escape (cf. Tolkien 2001 [1939], 58, 60-61), but also regain a sense of wonder that may have been lost due to the mundane nature of everyday life. Global fantasy literature helps us to imagine a world that is different – one in which every being, human or nonhuman, may be depicted as carrying the same value, thus implicitly or explicitly carrying ecocritical messages, one in which there are multiple truths, conveyed to the audience by trickster figures, one in which history is not written by the victors but by an illiterate Muslim woman living in the Sundarbans, one in which *kami* and *yokai* accompany heroic or not-so-heroic quests and swordfights instead of dragons and elves.

My analysis has also shown that fantasy literature, especially if we consider the genre's global reach, contains a number of productive paradoxes. Real issues and real beliefs are respectfully combined as in Nnedi Okorafor's organic fantasy and africanjujuism. Reality and fantasy are much more intertwined than is usually acknowledged – the distinctions are still there and thus the need for the separate category of fantasy as a particular type of story still exists, but the relationship between these two poles is complicated and intricate, ever-changing and perhaps rather located on a spectrum and not at one extreme or the other. Perhaps it could even be argued that reality begets fantasy as in Okorafor's case, but fantasy may also beget reality in the influence it wields over its dedicated audience. Fantasy literature is supernatural but at the same time it is super-natural and deeply interested in ecocritical concerns, as my various observations with regards to the depiction of nature in several of the works analysed in this study. It is both a genre and, in a sense, more than that, because it is all together more malleable and transportable, akin to Levine's category of 'forms' – its generic aspect, however, still remains important as the genre label itself draws attention to the works that can be found within it. Especially young people are drawn to fantasy literature and often engage with it passionately – this is by no means a sign of wilful escapism but rather a way of interacting differently with reality and imagining change from a current state of affairs that often seems unsatisfying.

All that said, fantasy literature remains in a state of denied interest from literary scholars at large, perhaps due to misconceived notions of popular literature as less complex and less interesting to study. Yet, it is fantasy's very popularity that allows it to be as widely distributed as it is today. It is received by a more numerous and varied readership than many 'literary' novels could ever hope to achieve. Fantasy world literature is read and written in English but also in a variety of local languages, which are increasingly frequently also translated into English or other European languages, thus allowing white western readers to access other cultures' fantastic imaginations. While this carries a certain risk of exoticisation, orientalism, or perhaps cultural appropriation, when elements from non-western fantasy are incorporated into western fantasy writing, the advantages far outweigh the risks. A free exchange of fantasy ideas – as seems to be slowly developing when it comes to East Asian motifs and has been happening with European themes taken over by non-

European writers for some time – may ultimately lead to cultural appreciation and respect instead. Fantasy literature's popularity also leads to fan translations that may actually have a wider reach than officially published stories. Far from Jan Baetens's claim that

> even more striking example of non-translation is fandom fiction, where no one any longer considers the possibility of translating the overwhelming production that takes place outside the traditional publishing circuits, (Baetens 2011, 342)

fan vigour and enthusiasm actually leads to more translations being available worldwide. While it would, of course, be impossible to translate all fan-produced media, the popular fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own* contains a number of examples of translations from Chinese to English, Russian to English, etc. or vice versa, many of which fall into the realms of fantasy or speculative fiction. In their eagerness to develop global fantasy reading habits, fans have also been known to make available translations from novels that would otherwise not enter the western, Anglophone market; to be sure, the legality of such endeavours is, at best, questionable. However, there can also be no doubt that access to fantasy novels such as Tanaka Yoshiki's *Arslan Senki* (*アルスラーン戦記*) or to fantasy light novels, an incredibly popular genre in Japan, virtually untranslated by western publishing houses, except for the rare cases, in which there is a globally best-selling anime such as *your name* to accompany them, changes readers' outlooks on fantasy literature as a global genre. Fantasy world literature, either originally written in English or published in English through translation, allows previously marginalised writers to become more widely and more globally known and it enables contact between readers and cultural influences Eurocentric readers were previously unaware of and are now learning about through the medium of fantasy literature.

Fantasy literature, and especially fantasy world literature, is a vibrant field that is constantly changed and negotiated by its writers and readers. My study covered a number of fascinating examples of fantasy world literature and offered some insight into how they may be studied, but it has not yet exhausted the full potential for scholarship that lies within fantasy world literature. Far from it; there are a number of angles and approaches that could not be covered within this book, but that await further discussion and urgently need to be researched. Children's and young adult fantasy fiction, for example, is full of untapped potential when it comes to the study of world literature. While I touch upon this slightly through my discussion of Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series, which is usually considered young adult Literature despites its dark themes and graphic violence, and through my references to Nnedi Okorafor's children's novel *Akata Witch*, I have not nearly covered all there is to study. In recent years, there have been a considerable of publications that fall into either children's or young adult (world) fantasy literature. Publishers have clearly become much more willing to take on novels that go beyond formulaic fantasy material and there is an increasing number of young writers of colour who have grown up with mostly Eurocentric fantasy and who now strive to write themselves into a genre that has long captured their attention despite the lack of representation. Roshani Choksnhi's popular *Aru Shah* series, for example, "tackle[s] the huge, incredible world of Hindu mythology" (2018, n.p.), as the famous children's author Rick Riordan tells us in the introduction to the first volume of the series, all the while making "it so fun and reader friendly" (2018, n.p.) while writers like Rebecca Lim and Shirley Marr tackle the Asian-Australian second-generation experience through their fantasy novels for children.

Of course, achieving a fuller understanding of fantasy world literature would require scholars to cast their net more widely. Researchers ought to take non-Anglophone texts into account in order to cover a more representative sample of fantasy world literature, either in translation or in their original languages. Japanese fantasy literature, for example, would be an excellent starting point as there is certainly a large corpus that scholars could draw from, though most Japanese fantasy literature has not yet been translated and would have to be studied in the original. From Japanese fantasy literature scholars might also progress to approach other media such as mangas or animes, which frequently contain innovative and original fantasy narratives but also those that adopt the visuals of the world of European fairy tales, thus providing a fascinating insight into Japanese perceptions of a highly romanticised European past. Globally, scholars may pay attention to graphic novels, video games, TV shows, or movies, all of which are common outlets for global fantasy and may inspire further relevant research on fantasy networks and localisations.

This study has shown that is a necessary addition to the canon of world literature. Not only is it popular on a planetary scale and thus has a demonstrably wide reach; it is also far from insular within the literary field. While I have sufficiently shown that fantasy literature can be complex, literary, and multi-layered, its popularity alone means that literary scholars cannot afford to turn away from the genre. Fantasy is being read in high numbers by ardent fans and thus has considerable social power – not studying it at all would quickly lead to a further distancing between academia and actual reading communities. Bridging that gap between scholarship and fandom can only benefit both parties and lead to richer, more detailed engagement with an ever-growing corpus of literature that only seems to become more popular and more numerous, as even 'literary' writers embrace the fantasy genre. Additionally, fantasy narratives frequently draw from non-fantasy literature and to pay attention to such intertextual connections will enrich fantasy scholarship as well as the broader field of literary studies since analysing the dynamics between fantasy fiction and literary fiction will lead to a more nuanced understanding of both. A less academic, but perhaps no less important argument for the academic study of fantasy literature is the undeniable fact that fantasy literature simply is a source of fun for a lot of writers and readers. It provides spaces for flights of fancy that open up new worlds and enable positive transformations that may not be possible in genres more restricted to what seems possible in contemporary life. Fantasy world literature has the potential to connect very different localities through its global networks, and while there are always risks for texts that travel to clash with the cultures they come in contact with or draw from diverse fantasy traditions in a way that borders – or transgresses into – cultural appreciation, the advantages of a global network of fantasy literature and its concomitant study in academia far outweigh the negatives. My study has shown that fantasy literature is world literature and fantasy scholarship is thus a natural subset of world literature scholarship. Hopefully, my work will inspire more scholars to engage with fantasy literature as well, venturing out into field that has much left to uncover.

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PUBLICATIONS

With Gillian Polack. “"Jewish Speculative Fiction in Australia and New Zealand." *Jewish Fantasy Worldwide: Trends in Speculative Stories from Australia to Chile*, edited by Valerie Estelle Frankel. Lexington Books, 2023, 1-18.

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