



Tropical Eco-African Futurism in Ben Okri's *every leaf a hallelujah* and Ndhlovu and Keokgale's *Zandi's Song*

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Abstract

This article offers a reading of Ben Okri's *every leaf a hallelujah* (2021) and Zandile Ndhlovu and Katlego Keokgale's *Zandi's Song* (2023) as eco-fictional children's books that integrate tropical futurisms, Afrofuturism, environmental consciousness, and magical realism. Situated at the interstice of children's adventure fiction and travel writing, the two books' folkloric resources clearly delineate ecofeminist and eco-critical campaigns against the backdrop of deforestation and ocean pollution. In *every leaf a hallelujah*, the protagonist, Mangoshi, forages in the forest for a leaf that could cure her mother's ailment, while *Zandi's Song* details the adventure of the eponymous protagonist, Zandi, into the ocean. Thus, while *every leaf a hallelujah* is an indictment of human beings' insensitivity to the need of tree preservation for their medicinal properties, *Zandi's Song* draws attention to a heightened awareness of ocean pollution as waste creates a moving depiction of environmental destruction. Mangoshi and Zandi's environmental activism elicits intra-textual initiatives where the boundaries of eco-literature and magical realism are re-contextualized and complexified. In these books, Afrofuturism intersects with tropical futurisms through an enchanting array of visual objects that enrich perspectives of ecofeminism, environmental humanities, and blue humanities.

Keywords: tropical futurisms, Afrofuturism, magical realism, children's fiction, travelogues, ocean pollution, deforestation, eco-literature

Introduction: Afrofuturism and Tropical Futurisms

Bristling with suspense and curiosity, Ben Okri's *every leaf a hallelujah* (illustrated by Diana Ejaita) (2021), and Zandile Ndhlovu (writer) and Katlego Keokgale's (artist) *Zandi's Song* (2023) are embedded in the genre of children's literature; with visual illustrations that blaze new trails in environmental humanities and blue humanities. Within the context of tropical futurisms, the two children's books' narrative structures privilege an unusual juxtaposition of life lived on earth with life lived in the supernatural world. The tropics is commonly referred to in geographical terms as the equatorial region of Earth between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. "Yet it is far more than geographic and needs to be understood through the imaginary of tropicality" (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 2). Anita Lundberg, Hannah Regis and John Agbonifo have defined tropicality to mean "how the tropics are construed as the exoticised environmental Other of the temperate Western world as this is informed by art and culture, and imperial and scientific practices" (2022, p. 2). Given that the cultures of the tropics include numerous indigenous peoples, the notion of tropical futurisms also consider Sophie Gergaud's contestation to the imaginary that "indigenous peoples are often seen as "stuck" in the past" (2021, p. 151). In contrast to this emphasis on the past, Kate Lewis Hood and Jennifer Gabrys assert that for the peoples of the tropics, the "future is a territory to defend" (2024, 255). Hood and Gabrys further argue, that for indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples and lands in Milpamerica¹/ Latin America, and by extension peoples of the tropics, "time does not simply flow. Instead, *how* time is understood and practised shapes what is imaginable and possible in plural 'times of climate crisis'" (2024, p. 255). Obviously, tropical futurisms relate the past with the present, to engage with a reading of the tropics' futures from the pluralities of cultural differences, cosmological backgrounds, ecological complexities, and environmental challenges. Afrofuturism intersects with tropical futurisms, to create new approaches to how the African tropics' cultural, ecological, environmental, geographical, and climatic changes are woven around literary scholarship and theorized. Both tropical futurisms and Afrofuturism engage literary, political, anthropological and cultural studies, digital studies, and other artistic forms like music, theatre arts, and visual arts, in their discourses.

¹ Milpamérica refers to a territory before borders. Milpa is an ancient crop-growing system and culture bases on corn, gourd, beans, tomatoes, sweet pepper, cocoa, avocado, and many other plants. It is one of the most biodiverse territories of the planet. The peoples are likewise diverse and where descendants of the many indigenous peoples continue to defend their territories. (See *Futuros Indigenas*, n.d.)

Understandably, while tropical futurisms map the extensive terrains of the tropics' geographic spaces of natural splendours and ecological problematics, Afrofuturism specifically attends to Africa's continental ecological and environmental complexities and provides us with fresh insights into the emerging eco-disasters like deforestation, water pollution, drought, and flooding. Hence, this article will explicate how magical realism, an offshoot of Afrofuturism, is manipulated in the two children's books, *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*, to bridge the gaps between human and non-human relationships. Magical realism, as read through the two children's books, is artistically utilised to assess recurrent ecological and environmental problematics in Africa. The article analyses how the blended eco-feminist and environmental activism of Mangoshi, the protagonist of *every leaf a hallelujah*, and Zandi, the eponymous protagonist of *Zandi's Song*, inspire confidence that opposes and destabilises the current perpetration of ecological degradation and environmental pollution in tropical Africa, and, by extension, other tropical geographical spaces of the earth. Thus Afrofuturism, in this analysis, adds an important dimension to tropical futurisms.

Afrofuturism in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*

If a landscape's physicality is validated by identifiable cultural values, these values are essentially shaped by indigenous peoples as living entities. These landscapes constitute the abode of the ancestors, with verifiable codes of communication embedded in myth, legend, and anecdotes. Correspondingly, rituals, chants, verbal formulae, and magical realism will be seen as denotative of the forms of the cultural expressivities (Lundberg et al. 2022, p. 2). Okri and Ndhlovu write in the space between reality and surrealism in the two children's books to accentuate these cultural codes' expressivities. In particular, magical realism highlights the genre typology of *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*, written within an amalgam of Afrofuturism (coda expressivities) and an ecological perspective. The two books plunge the reader into the probity of environmental predation and ecological consciousness as they offer a challenging interrogation of the tense relationship between humans and non-humans. A general overview has been provided by Hodapp, when he defines Afrofuturism to be the totality of the "Black elements of science fiction that have been suppressed, misunderstood, and eschewed by traditional literary powerbrokers. Afrofuturism pushes back against the absence of Black people in much mainstream science fiction, arguing that science fiction can at times appear to be a white fantasy in which Blackness has been erased from the future" (2021, p. 3). A more concise definition of Afrofuturism has been provided by Dike Okoro's (ed.) *Futurism and the African Imagination: Literature and Other Arts*, when Afrofuturism is described as the awakening of cultural aesthetics in its privileging of a re-evaluation of the past and future

“to pave the way for improved conditions for the present generation of Black people and people of African descent through the use of technology, art, literature, and music” (Okoro, 2022, cited in Lin 2024, p. 166). In the collection of works reviewed by Lin, three notable features of Afrofuturist literature stand out:

Firstly, it emphasizes the indispensable role of African indigenous supernatural culture in envisioning black future and reconstructing the identity of the African continent. A fundamental idea within this collection is that Africans can scarcely adapt to the modern world and rebuild their value systems without revitalizing and recollecting African traditional culture, including its ethos, cosmology, myths, and fables. ...Okoro, Utitofon Inyang, and Lauren Beukes, respectively, elucidate how African SF, including African women’s SF, employs the African tradition of speculative narratives to enhance their conflicts and characters’ actions with myths, fables, magic and fantasy as well as other identifiable elements of Afrofuturism.... Secondly, it accentuates the mapping of political agencies within African literature and other arts.... Thirdly, the collection effectively employs an interdisciplinary approach to Afrofuturist research, spanning the fields of African literature, art, philosophy, history, and politics....” (Lin, 2024, p.167)

Within the context of its appropriation of myth, fable, anecdote, and magical realism, Afrofuturism is primarily rooted in storytelling and African cultural expressivities, which significantly impart cultural values to future generations (Wilentz, 1992, xi). If Afrofuturism decentres Western epistemologies to focus on a future that promotes Africa’s intrinsic indigenous knowledge and other forms of artistic values, the contribution of this article is to draw attention to how *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi’s Song*, as children’s fiction with two girl-child protagonists, are situated at the forefront of the campaign against ecological degradation and environmental pollution. This is made possible through the intersection of magical realism and travel writing that also blends ecofeminism and environmental consciousness. The environmental and ecological narratives within the two children’s books provide us with an eco-Afrofuturism that promotes awareness of the problematics of ecocide and ecocatastrophe. This is demonstrated in Ben Okri’s *every leaf a hallelujah* where Mangoshi sets out on a quest for a leaf that could heal her mother, only to become enmeshed in environmental revivalism to protest harm and eco-injustice against the trees of the forest. Similarly, in the travelogue *Zandi’s Song*, Zandi is invited by the water goddess Maya to embark on a bold oceanic adventure to a special place called KwaUmkhomazi in order to witness how the ocean has survived decades of

environmental pollution from the over-profusion of plastics and other human wastes carried by rivers downstream to the sea.

However, it is not just the present that is held in the two books' stories. Oppressed people's literature cannot be separated from the societies' historical and cultural context, including colonialism's destruction of nature and humans. In this regard, critical attention also needs to be paid to literature's oral/folkloric inheritance (Wilentz 1992, xiii). Fable, anecdote, and magical realism, embed this inheritance through Afrofuturism in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*. Afrofuturistic moments in the narratives reach a critical juncture when the authors deploy supernatural aesthetics (magical realism) as a motif to aid interaction and bridge the gap between the physical and supernatural worlds as they are experienced by the characters.

Every leaf a hallelujah and Zandi's Song as Ecological Children's Literature

Stressing the fundamentals of children's psychological needs for literature, Antony Kamm describes the basic significance of children's literature to embed "security and adventure". He explains further that "the healthy mental growth of a child depends largely upon the proper satisfaction of these two needs which are apparently contradictory, but are in reality complementary" (1971, p. 169). Correspondingly, the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, particularises the importance of fairy tales as they help children cope with their existential anxieties and dilemmas. Bettelheim claims further that children, as they develop, must learn step by step to understand themselves better and thus become better able to understand others and eventually "can relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful" (197, p. 3). Children's literature demythologises apprehensions, delimits stereotypes, and conceptualises misgivings associated with growth experiences. If adolescence is a transient phase in the life of every child, it is also a period that offers children great inspiration from the reading of stories that enable them to adventure in unnatural, unfamiliar, and extraterrestrial places and spaces.

The narratives in both *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song* revolve around ecological [dis]entanglement, and this is tenaciously pursued to reflect both Okri and Ndhlovu's environmental convictions. Entanglement denotes an engagement with a complicated but ensnaring relationship and is a concept that has attracted reactions from historians, literary scholars, anthropologists, and sociologists. Sarah Nuttal argues that "entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited" (2009, p. 1). In a new turn to notions of entanglement, Christian Benitez and Anita Lundberg invite

us to think of the “entanglement of matter—human and nonhuman alike” (2022, p. 3). They emphasise how nature is not inert but is in relation with humans. Their focus on the entangled nature-culture of the tropics also emphasises the role indigenous wisdom plays in this understanding. In *every leaf a hallelujah*, a relatively slim book of ninety-four pages, Okri’s extraordinary envisioning of environmental entanglement is expressed through the condemnation of ecocidal destruction in a world witnessing an unprecedented increase in environmental injustices. If the battles against ecocatastrophes are to be won, nature-culture relations and ecocritical understanding will have to be escalated worldwide. Okri, in *every leaf a hallelujah*, is enraged by the failure of human beings to speak against the indiscriminate cutting down of trees as his children’s literature book recounts Mangoshi’s adventure into the forest that leads to several appalling discoveries. Mangoshi’s interactions with the trees in the forest transform her into becoming an outspoken environmental critic and activist. Similarly, Ndhlovu’s environmental consciousness is evident in *Zandi’s Song*, which is likewise a short book, at only thirty pages. Yet it gives a fascinating account of Zandi’s expedition to the ocean, a place of awesome beauty. Her relation with the ocean endears her access to Maya, the water goddess. Soon after their meeting, the girlchild and goddess both agree that plastic waste materials create a monstrous threat of environmental pollution.

Rooted in what Ezenwa-Ohaeto has described as “child figure/ or childhood symbolism”, the narrative strategies in both *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi’s Song* draw on oral traditions in African literature as they decode, deconstruct, and disambiguate environmental concerns. These narrative strategies are encased in both environmental humanities and blue humanities and are strenuously manipulated to raise recognition of the extent of deforestation and water pollution in Africa. As a child’s meekness symbolises innocence and innocuousness, her/his neutrality exemplifies, reshapes, and enlarges the scope of their non-attachment to life’s complexities or complications. This becomes significant in how the creation of child figures is often noticeable in the works of African writers. Even if not all these novels have the charms, magical realism, hallucinatory impact, and cathartic effects of Okri and Ndhlovu’s books, it is still exhilarating to read how Camara Laye’s *The African Child*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep not Child*, Chinua Achebe’s *Chike and the River*, and Cyprian Ekwensi’s *The Drummer Boy* are intensely crowded with child protagonists. Here, it is important to note S.K. Desai’s explanation of the portrayal of the child figure in African children’s literature:

The concept of the child as manifested in the African stories is, what one might say, modern. The child is no Romantic angel; he is a raw soul, a bundle of impulses, sensations, emotions, and perceptions, facing life,

struggling to comprehend it, trying to piece together his fragmentary experiences; he is a complex being with an unformed mind, often more complex than the adult, subjected to an unpredictable process of growth. (1981, p. 45)

In such works, attention is focused upon the innocence and naiveté of the child protagonists to create some degree of parallelism entrenched in the narratives that reflect a child's unbiased point of view against an adult's prejudiced or preconceived viewpoint. The plots and narrative frameworks in several African fictional and short stories, particularly children's fiction, indicate creative explorations of childhood, the utilization of child figures and characters, and "the symbolic depictions of the interactions of children in the portrayal of reality" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1995, p. 68). Notably, Okri and Ndhlovu's inclusion of Mangoshi and Zandi as girl-child protagonists in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song* is premised on the understanding that African writers are conscious of the relationship of children to their extended family and the community and the genuineness of their empathies, which often manifest when they transcend cultural boundaries and personal individual suffering to help others. This attribute of selflessness is underscored in both books to "envision a broad definition of children", and are "informed by a consciousness of what must be passed on to future generations; the telling of the tale is paramount to the survival of the culture" (Wilentz, 1992, xxxii). If Okri and Ndhlovu's ecological narratives in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song* have engendered commitment to nature's preservation, Mangoshi and Zandi's innocence as the two protagonists of the children's books has been harnessed to demonstrate the need to reassess the ways human beings have [mis]handled and [mis]understood natural agencies like the forest and water. With a view to tropical futurisms, these close entanglements with nature allow the child protagonists to chart critical steps towards the survival of environmental futures.

Mangoshi and Zandi in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song* represent a new breed of African children's literature protagonists, who, weaned on ecological activism, have successfully nurtured eco-feminist engagements with environmental humanities and blue humanities. These eco-virtues are expressed in their daring outspokenness that strives to create advocacy ecology. Strikingly underlined in eco-activism is the protagonists' representations of environmental infractions in the forest and the ocean that indict, as they testify against, human beings' hostile behaviour toward non-human agencies. They reverberate with what Rob Nixon describes as the slow violence encountered through the "representational challenge of brutality and cultural and environmental destruction" (2011, p. 76). Mangoshi and Zandi's contributions to the narratives of bio-preservation

and environmental safety in the children's books draw attention to, and condemn, the negative human practices alluded to in narrative traditions that "subordinate, trivialize, and silence non-human" agencies (Walonen, 2024, p. 115). A takeaway from the didactic lessons derived from Mangoshi's ecological interaction with the trees in *every leaf a hallelujah* and Zandi's parley with Maya the ocean goddess in *Zandi's Song* borders on an environmental activism that recalls what W.J.T. Mitchell vividly describes as an alteration between the illusion of "oral immediacy and direct transmission of speech and the presentation of visual experience (eyewitness testimony about events)" (1994, p. 105). These eco-interactions' position the two children's books as eco-fiction. Furthermore, the eco-feminist activities of the two girl protagonists highlight the questionable attitudes of most human beings who continue to neglect the moral imperative to protect nature. The similarity in strategies and patterns of eco-activism adopted in both *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song* entails eco-empathy, environmental advocacy, eco-bliss, environmental justice, and deification of nature to denote the protagonists' ecological entanglement.

Okri and Ndhlovu have deliberately woven tenets of oral literature traditions into their children's books that incorporate myth, fable, magical realism, and ecological anecdotes to foreground the signification of Afrofuturism. This weaving process interspaces traditional narratives and environmental advocacy into a tapestry to counteract what Etienne-Marie Lassi (following Nixon) has described as "the slow violence of environmental destruction with epistemic violence" (2024, p. 84). Such "slow violence" depicts the occurrences of debilitating and life-threatening illnesses as aftermath effects of ecological degradation and environmental pollution. The impacts of "slow violence" have been referenced by Mangoshi in Okri's *every leaf a hallelujah* and Zandi in Ndhlovu's *Zandi's Song*. "Slow violence" often manifests as innocuous, hidden, and obscure, as it has a capability of silently destroying individual lives, or wiping away the unannounced lives of victims in a whole string of villages. Mangoshi and Zandi's adventure and travelogue in the forest and the ocean have illustrated how their interactions with the non-human agencies in these places have increased their individual environmental consciousness that interlinks with eco-fiction.

Travel Writing in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*

Travel writing, as an enduring literary genre, is situated in the province of tropical futurisms. It has been an important means of transmitting knowledge, ideas, and imaginaries of other places, cultures, and civilizations as experienced by a writer, who shares his/her experiences through memoir, a novel, or a diary (Haas, 2020, p. 9). With

the publication of Pierre Gourou's *Les Pays Tropicaux* (1947) and Aime Cesaire's *Return to My Native Land* (1947), travel writing about the tropics gained further currency. As a literary genre, travel writing has inspired the production of works like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (2005, orig. 1726), Thor Heyerdahl's *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* (1948), and Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (2000). Astrid Haas has defined the travelogue as a hybrid genre that "borders on, as well as incorporates, elements of various other text types such as novels, autobiographies, reports, legends, diaries, letters, tracts, or essays, and may, therefore, be difficult to distinguish from them" (Ette, 2003, pp. 25-26; Guzman Rubio, 2011, pp. 113-114). Travel writing's focus "oscillates between fictional and factual writing, or even challenges their distinction altogether" (Ette, 2003, p. 31; Haas, 2020, p. 1). It is often characterized by thematic and formal eclecticism that renders it "frictional literature" (Haas, 2020, p. 1). It is also closely connected with the blue humanities. Drawing on ocean writing and the awe of sea voyages, the blurb on Serpil Oppermann's *Blue Humanities* describes the blue humanities as an offshoot of environmental humanities that critically examines the planet's troubled seas and distressed freshwater from "various sociocultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical, and theoretical perspectives" (2023). In turn, the blue humanities play a pivotal role in many travel writings as the 'ocean' links communities and countries, and facilitates cultural and political relations among different geographical places around the world. The significance of this 'Blue cultural studies' has been appraised through close readings of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1997), Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki Expedition* (1948), and John Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951). The leitmotif of the ocean in literary works is often cited as the catalyst of navigation, a trope of departure, or a poetics of exile.

Place matters in travel writing. The published works mentioned above capture and express experiences anchored in physical presence and accessible geographical locations as they range from country to country. In contrast to these realist adventures, novels such as Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (1938), *Igbo Olodumare* (1949), *Ireke Onibudo* (1949), *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954), and *Adiitu Olodumare* (1961); Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954); and Syl Cheney-Coker's *Sacred River: A Novel* (2015) have successfully pioneered the trajectory of magical realism travel writing in African literature. Just like their African forebears in the magical realist novelistic enterprise that foreground exploration of the intermingling of the humans and supernatural elements in their travel novels, Okri and Ndhlovu and Keokgale have also established a feeling of communion between their protagonists and non-human agencies in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*. In the two children's books, *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*, the travel settings are undoubtedly in Africa. Indigenous cultural reality in the children's

adventure stories underlines the accoutrements of African origin and heritage, such as tropical African trees and plants, as well as beads, braids, and bracelets being repeatedly mentioned to corroborate an authentic ambience. Furthermore, Mangoshi and Zandi as child protagonists typify common names among African children. However, blurring the line between realism and unrealism, the travel experiences in *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song* entail both physical and supernatural movements on earth and in surreal worlds. The physical and the supernatural crossroads are delineated by the forest and the ocean. And narratives of reality and the fantastic are comingled in the plots to evoke a reminiscence of characters' inclinations toward the sublime. This subliminality is witnessed first-hand through Mangoshi in *every leaf a hallelujah*. The elements of realism and unrealism also intersect in Zandi's movement into the ocean, eloquently captured thus:

Zandi was scared at first. How could she be sure that she would be safe?
...Zandi dipped her feet in the water and...
was met by colourful fish and an ocean floor that looked like it was lit from underneath by the brightest lights.
(*Zandi's Song*, 2023, n.p)

As revealed in the above passage, Zandi seeks to understand and adapt to a new littoral environment that demands she learns the strict pattern of movement underneath the ocean, while the readers are left curious to wonder what her next action will be.

In a similar vein in eco-humanities, an encounter between Mangoshi and the trees in the forest reveals a level of esotericism associated with magical realism:

'Before we tell you why they cut us down, perhaps we should tell you who we are.'
'I thought you were trees.'
'But do you know what trees are?'
Mangoshi looked round, at the palms, the irokos, the obeches, the baobabs, the squat trees, the tall ones, the gnarled ones. She thought she knew what trees were. Now she was not so sure.
(*every leaf a hallelujah*, 2021, p.49)

Within the context of Afrofuturism, Mangoshi's interaction with the trees in *every leaf a hallelujah* references African cultural beliefs poignantly rooted in magical realism. As such, a blend of Afrofuturism and other African artistic forms, like fairy tale and mystical narratives, are weaponised in the passage to challenge deforestation as a critical aspect of environmental degradation. In the passage, the trees' anger and grievances are highlighted. Such attribution to the agency of trees articulates non-human aspirations, objections, and a state of consciousness that has been described by Lars Bernaerts et al. as a dialectic of empathy and defamiliarisation, one that actually destabilises anthropocentrism and calls into question conventional ideas regarding "reality, identity [and] existence" (Bernaerts et al., 2014, pp. 71, 74-75 cited in Walonen 2024, p. 115). Walonen agrees that the human representation of non-human points of view in narrative fiction is an intriguing engagement that "challenges the exceptionalist tradition that conceptualizes humans and animals *and trees* [my emphasis] as completely and intrinsically separate and distinct from each other" (p. 115). Attributing human reasoning to non-human agencies does not come without its problematics, and thus magical realism is called upon to facilitate Mangoshi's interaction with the trees in *every leaf a hallelujah* and Zandi's interaction with Maya, the water goddess, in *Zandi's Song*.

Eco-fiction, Environmental Humanities, and Blue Humanities

Shedding light on eco-literature, A. E. Copenhaver reminds us in his analysis of climate change that "contemporary eco-lit seeks to bear witness to the gravest atrocities our civilization can imagine, link and intertwine their histories to the present, and offer up transformative bright spots—visions and whispers of new ways of being" (2023, p. 23). Kate Smith, paraphrasing Denis Cosgrove, argues that "environment is not merely the world as we see it, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Environment is a way of seeing the world" (Smith, 2024, p. 527; Cosgrove, 1984, p. 13). Smith further argues that "the cultural geography of the environment has long been concerned with the social construction of what the 'environment' is, how it intersects and interacts with climate/climate change, and how ideas about all of this are contested and re-created through political and cultural discourses" (Eden 2005, p. 58 cited in Smith, 2024). A condemnation of the destruction of the environment, specifically through water pollution and deforestation, is likewise heightened in Okri's "Shaved Head Poem":

We're at such a turning
point in human history.
it was always coming for us.
disaster was always

coming for us.
we've overdrawn
on the bank
of our futures.
it's time to ask questions
that go all the way down...
the life of the species
The life of the earth.
(*A Fire in My Head*, 2021, p. 104)

Expressing dismay regarding global ecological degradation in the above poem, Okri issues a warning cry that does not exaggerate environmental threats. The ecological crisis points towards an impending apocalypse, whereby, in the event of final doom, nobody would be able to escape anywhere. Eco-literature, in its varied genres, bears witness to ecological chaos as it writes about the complex relationship between the environment and what “it means to live an earthly experience” (Copenhaver, 2023, p. 22). As Sophia David explains, climate literature has its foundation in science fiction, with which it shares many features (2016, p. 22). An early example of climate fiction is J.G. Ballard’s trilogy: *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1964), and *The Drought* (1965). These novels depict climate catastrophes in pseudo-scientific ways. A magnitude of these catastrophes is underscored in my observation expressed elsewhere that “ecological threat as an unimaginable horror currently constitutes a much-debated global topic. Its continued attraction to different disciplines has often generated shifting, fragmentary, and contrary ideologies to complicate the world environmental disorder” (Akingbe, 2024b, p. 185). Literature and literary writers have increasingly exhibited a profound interest in environmental concerns. Lawrence Buell has provided the most apt reason for this focus when he states that “as the prospect of a sooner-or-later apocalypse by unintended environmental disaster came to seem likelier than apocalypse by deliberate nuclear *machismo*, public concern about the state and fate of “the environment” took increasing hold, initially in the West but now worldwide” (Buell p. 4). Thus, the perpetual problematics of environmental threats emanating from human recklessness has been on the increase in discourses instigated by the environmental humanities. These discourses have “systematically generated global intellectual awareness to demand a relationship between the scientific, the technical disciplines, and the humanities all in an attempt to solve critical crises created by the industrial society” (Emmett & Nye, 2017, p. 4 cited in Akingbe, 2024, p. 91). Furthermore, I have argued that environmental humanities “dictates that we understand environmental issues from the perspectives of humanities and the social sciences for the deconstruction of continued

interactions between the human and non-human” (Akingbe 2024, p. 91). Looking at the intrinsic interconnectedness of all lifeforms and geophysical features on Planet Earth, Rosemary Gray contends that *every leaf a hallelujah* “implicitly explores the developmental phenomenology of perception via Achille Mbembe’s notion of Afropolitanism” as it contributes to a vibrant “discourse on conservation for sustainability” (2024, p.1). On a similar note, the two children’s books, like other eco-literary works, abundantly demonstrate an understanding of the deep psychological interdependence between humans and non-humans encapsulated in symbiosis.

It is no coincidence that within the context of tropical futurisms and Afrofuturism, ecological awareness is heightened in the children’s books, *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi’s Song*, through girl-child protagonists, thus articulating the significance of ecofeminism. Sayed Youssef argues that ecofeminist thinkers insist on going beyond the tasks and boundaries of their predecessors to defend the “rights of women, the physical environment, indigenous peoples, animals, and all oppressed and wronged minorities on earth” (Youssef, 2024, p. 127).

Providing a graphic magical-reality interface, Mangoshi, in *every leaf a hallelujah* extra-terrestrially saunters into the forest to procure a very special flower needed to heal her ailing mother and simultaneously demonstrates concerns of environmental humanities. Far from serving merely as a utility for wood, trees are enriched with ingredients that heal human ailments. In the book’s introductory page, Okri makes an excellent appraisal of the indispensable benefits of trees as they honestly shape human existence:

...when I was young I thought the beauty of the forest would last for ever. Now I’m not sure...when I was a child I knew that trees were more important than money. Trees make us happy. Can you imagine a world without them? ...They are not what they seem. They are magic and they touch our lives with magic too’. (*every leaf a hallelujah*, 2021, n.p)

This magic-real interface is likewise present in *Zandi’s Song* as it draws its inspiration from African oral tradition to foreground blue humanities. Refusing to give up her quest to discover the truth, Zandi’s adventures into the ocean to meet Maya, the ocean goddess, who invites her to witness the insidious effects of environmental injustice created by plastic pollution, recount amazing, bizarre discoveries. The environmental narratives in the book blend blue humanities, mysticism, ecological consciousness, and eco-fiction to condemn humans’ negative treatment of the aquatic realms. Tons of plastic waste scattered on the ocean bed emblemise how human actions have destroyed the environment. Unmasking the dangers implicit in environmental insensitivity, *Zandi’s Song*

reiterates that plastic waste, including plastic bottles, are already implicated in polluting the rivers, seas, and oceans with toxic effects creating a “slow death”.

As the current swept Zandi along,
she noticed trash everywhere.
‘where does all of this come from, Maya?’ she asked
‘Most of the trash is carried out to sea by streams and
rivers, and the plastic can stay here for thousands
of years. Sea animals can become entangled
in it or eat it, causing injury and even death.’
Maya looked very sad. ‘This is why I need your help.’
(*Zandi’s Song*, 2023, n.p)

Human interaction with the ocean is problematized in the above passage when Zandi is exposed to the magnitude of the pollution. Steve Mentz in *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* argues that within oceanic writing, blue humanities is an undercurrent of thinking and writing that responds to the aesthetics of water. Therefore, the core intellectual challenge of the blue humanities revolves around the imaginaries of how water functions in and across multiple scales to account for the capturing of its flow in our “environments and memories” (2024, xiv). In *Zandi’s Song*, as human waste in the form of plastic bottles and other plastic wares devolving from the rivers and streams end up in the seas and oceans, these wastes pose existential threats to the well-being of the aquatic creatures that reside in the sea—and further to terrestrial humans. As articulated by Ravi Shanker, “the sea is where life came to be, and the sea is where all will end” (2023, p. 70).

Magical Realism and Aquapoetics as Overriding Motifs

Rather than being an escapist venture, magical realism offers us abundant opportunity to see the fantastic at play in daily life. This is the point emphasised by B.J. Geetha when he argues that magical realism is a literary form in which “odd, eerie, and dreamlike tales are related as if the events were commonplace. Magic realism is the opposite of the “once-upon-a-time” style of storytelling in which the author emphasizes the fantastic quality of imaginary events. In the world of magic realism, the narrator speaks of the surreal so naturally it becomes real” (2010, p. 345). While the physical (realism) and the supernatural (unrealism) overlap in the two children’s books, magical realism as a derivative of Afrofuturism delineates the liminal state between the physical and supernatural worlds in both *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi’s Song*. The forest and the ocean sit in-between the sacred and secular, natural and supernatural, realism and

magical realism, to constitute a place of liminality. Within the context of tropical futurism's landscape aesthetics, the forest leitmotif is appropriated in *every leaf a hallelujah*—forest in the book boasts an array of horticultural exotics from Africa and from other parts of the world, and their herbal extracts are often utilized for medicinal purposes. Again, within the locale of blue humanities, water is the overriding leitmotif in *Zandi's Song*. Water is indispensable to human needs, and its ecological variables and symbolic importance in the book are all-encompassing. I have described elsewhere that "aquapoetics would always describe water's natural beauty and the allures located in its organic constituents as manifested in different waterbodies of seas, lagoons, rivers, and lakes. As a genre, aquapoetry highlights the connection between earth, environment, and ecological biodiversity" (2024, p. 94). Hence, within the perspective of the blue humanities, the poetics of oceanic writing influences the narrative structure of *Zandi's Song* to illustrate how water shapes human and non-human interactions. Poetics has most relevance in the need to interpret literary texts, as it refers to the study of literature within the scope of concerns regarding the use of structure, form, type, and the overall deployment of language established within the locale of words and expressions used in literary criticism. Beyond the simple stylistic appeals embedded in their narratives, the two children's books smoothly interpolate fragments of reality and magical realism to encase a distinctive diction that flows quickly to pick through the striking, mysterious, exotic flavours of different trees in *every leaf a hallelujah*:

One day a little girl called Mangoshi went into the forest on an errand and got lost.

As she tried to make her way back home she found herself among strange-looking trees. Something about the trees worried her at first. They seemed to be whispering. She was not sure where the sound was coming from. It sounded like a river nearby, like the murmur of insects, but no insects ever sounded like this.

It came from high up among the treetops and low down among the lower branches.

Then sometimes it sounded among the roots. She presses her ear to the earth and thought she heard the roots whispering. All this puzzled her. She had to get back soon, for it was getting dark. Her parents would start to worry about her.

(*every leaf a hallelujah*, 2021, p.1)

Underscoring Afrofuturism's artistic expressions, the passage provides a convenient backdrop for the depiction of Africans in communion with the supernatural. Magical

realism, as an integral part of African culture, distinguishes it from other world cultures, and its perplexities usually enthrall outsiders who encounter it. Offering a robust expression on cultural identity as a product of social practice, Paulin Hountondji describes cultural traditions as emanating from a complex heritage, yet open to options, while the culture's sustainability "offers potential benefits for the society" (Hountondji, 1977, 161). Hence, African cultural identity unambiguously resonates through the mystical narratives of both *every leaf a hallelujah* and *Zandi's Song*. Simultaneously horrifying and intriguing, Mangoshi's interaction with the trees in *every leaf a hallelujah* startlingly references Okri's evocation of the supernatural/magical realism to offer further dimensions to reality. This is captured in his own words:

Everyone's reality is superstitious. It's a simple fact you can't get away from. The scientist's view of the world is superstitious because it is provisional and a description of reality. The atheist's is superstitious, just the same way because it excludes. The person who has got a very strong religious belief is superstitious because their belief constructs the universe. Everyone's universe, everyone's perception of the world and of time is unique to them. It's a world in itself. It's a complete world. (Okri, radio interview, cited in Ogunsanwo, 1995, p. 40)

Likewise, the supernatural and natural are comingled and interpolated in *Zandi's Song* to "textualize the shared heritage of the folktale, of course with the creative refashioning that naturally accompanies artistic transmutations from the oral into the written literature" (Ogunsanwo, 1995, p. 46). Entrenched in blue humanities, this stylistic interpolation is utilised to account for narratives of the aquatic spaces filled with the flotsam of plastic waste. Consequently, if Okri's *every leaf a hallelujah*, stands out in its lamentation of a haunting sense of loss associated with the indiscriminate cutting down of trees that has rendered the forest vulnerable, *Zandi's Song* relies on an abundance of allusions to the imagery of water infused with the strong underpinnings of aquascape and aquamarine visuals to illustrate the risks inherent in plastic waste pollution. This is evidenced in the following passage:

Zandi was always thinking about the ocean. At night she would dream about big waves rushing towards her, pulling her to lands unknown. During the day she could hear it whispering, telling her that it was time... that it had always been waiting for her.
'Your life is here,' it said. 'This is your home.'
(*Zandi's Song*, 2023, n.p)

The passage appropriates the leitmotif of oceanic writing grounded in the blue humanities to affirm the relevance of magical realism as a narrative strategy in *Zandi's Song*. Sadeghi contends that magical realism creates a fantastical, mystical space that does not fully belong to the realm of the imagination or to the realm of reality and experience; rather, "it has an independent feature" (Sadeghi, 1998, cited in Akingbe, 2023, p.17). Ayyub Rajabi et al. also comment that in magical realism, "the elements of reality and imagination are so elaborately interwoven that the reader simply accepts them, in such a way that all artificial and imaginary incidents in the storyline seem completely real and natural" (2020, p. 1). The magical realism narrative strategy is further strengthened in the book when Maya gives Zandi a magical bracelet:

'There is one more thing...' the ocean said.
She placed a beaded bracelet in Zandi's hand.
'This is a reminder of your lineage, in the water and
on land. When you miss your home on land, tap
your bracelet twice and it will transport you back.'
(*Zandi's Song*, 2023, n.p)

The passage contextualises what Kate Smith has described as the concept of 'symbolic eco-symbiosis' between humans and the aquatic ecosystem to assess the interaction between the natural and supernatural as it alludes to the ominous qualities attributed to lakes, rivers, and wetlands for the illustration of a profound connection between "human culture and the environment" (Smith, 2024, p. 528). Hence, the beaded bracelet serves as a memento derived from Zandi's adventure to the ocean, and it is perhaps more quintessentially a *magical* boon than that of being an ordinary gift.

Conclusion: Towards an Ecocultural Future

The article has mapped the intertwining of tropical futurisms, Afrofuturism, environmental humanities, and blue humanities, through the narratives of Ben Okri's *every leaf a hallelujah*, and Zandile Ndhlovu and Keokagle's *Zandi's Song*. While tropical futurisms concern the past problematics (colonialisms, destroyed ecologies, climate trouble, slavery) and possible futures of the tropical regions of the world, Afrofuturism specifically engages with Africa's ecological and environmental complexities involving deforestation, drought, flooding, and water pollution. Afrofuturism also intersects with magical realism to affirm the place of humankind in the cosmos in what Wole Soyinka has described as the "ritualistic sense of space" (Soyinka, 1976, p. 39). The article shows how the two children's books interweave magical realism and travel writing to draw attention to ecological degradation and environmental crises as they affect Africa, the Tropics, and

the world. Through environmental activism, the two children's eco-fiction books condemn the deforestation of trees and the plastic pollution of the ocean. Recognising children's innocence, neutrality, and unconditional empathy as virtues of humanity, the image of the girl-child protagonist has been evoked by Okri, and Ndhlovu and Keokgale, to call for sustainable environmentalism and advocate for ecological justice. Emphasising the bond between Mangoshi and the trees in *every leaf a hallelujah*, and Zandi and Maya, the goddess of the ocean, in *Zandi's Song*, not only pays respects to ecofeminism and eco-criticism but importantly reveals recognition and collaboration between human and non-human agencies as the necessary path towards environmental survival and ecocultures of the future.

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