

O'Connor, Robert ORCID logoORCID:

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Dr Rob O'Connor
York St John University, York, UK.
r.oconnor@yorks.ac.uk

“There weren’t many Google hits for ‘telepathic octopus’”: The ‘realism’ of the non-human in Ted Chiang’s “The Story of Your Life”, Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* and Doug Johnstone’s *The Space Between Us*.

In her 2016 work *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway posits a new epoch; the Chthulucene. For Haraway, the focus must shift away from an anthropocentric centre towards a more nonhuman and multispecies narrative as a counterbalance to the inevitable climatic and environmental collapse which faces us: “Specifically, unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet. We are at stake to each other” (55). In times of existential, environmental crisis, it becomes more important to interact with narratives of the nonhuman to form new methods of connectivity with the natural world and understand our own place within the biosphere.

Speculative fiction is uniquely positioned to present these core values of the Chthulucene. For instance, we are recently seeing a new interpretation of alien visitation – moving away from marauding colonisation and destruction of key landmarks – which imagines them as, arguably, more “realistic” biological entities. Speculative fiction writers are beginning to realise that the mysterious creatures of the deepest oceans could hold inspiration for how extraterrestrial life could realistically look and interact with us.

Ted Chiang’s “The Story of Your Life” (1998), Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* (2015), and Doug Johnstone’s *The Space Between Us* (2023) all present a more realistic interpretation of alien visitation, one which is not only engaged with aspects of interspecies communication but also environmental commentary. This paper will demonstrate how these works, by moving away from the westernised anthropocentric imagining of extra-terrestrial bodies, are exemplars for a new generation of speculative fiction writers who are choosing to reframe the alien contact story. The results are not fables for capitalism and colonialism, but instead are narratives that depict interspecies existence whilst, in turn, presenting us with speculative scenarios and solutions regarding environmental concerns. (350 words)

Biographical Note: 1st and 3rd person.

I am a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and Creative Industries at York St John University, UK. As well as leading the MA Publishing programmes at York St John, I also teach on the undergraduate creative writing programme, focusing on genre fictions and practical vocational projects with the students. In April 2020 I completed a PhD in Literature Studies at York St John University, focusing on the work of China Miéville and the depiction of monsters as motifs for social commentary within Miéville's work. My areas of research and interest include publishing and literary communities, science fiction and fantasy, contemporary literature, weird fiction, psychogeography, genre theory and creative writing pedagogy. I have had articles on science fiction and fantasy published in *Vector* and *Fantastika* as well as presented at several conferences on subjects around science fiction, fantasy, horror, psychogeography, gothic fiction, myth and folklore and creative writing. I am also the chair of the York Literature Festival board of trustees and have worked in literary events for twenty years. (169 words)

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Keywords: Chthulucene; Speculative Fiction; Haraway; multispecies; nonhuman; environmental.

"There weren't many Google hits for 'telepathic octopus'": The 'realism' of the non-human in Ted Chiang's "The Story of Your Life", Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* and Doug Johnstone's *The Space Between Us*

In Doug Johnstone's 2023 novel *The Space Between Us*, one of the protagonists, Lennox, when trying to process the existence of their alien visitor, frantically turns to his phone for answers: "There weren't many Google hits for 'telepathic octopus.'" (Johnstone, 86) Despite being a slightly absurd image this does have a strong sense of contemporary realism in regard to how twenty-first century humans would react to an alien visitation. We would turn to Google for answers! What this wonderful scene therefore depicts is a fresh and more thoughtful - what can be described as "realistic" - depiction of alien contact.

(SLIDE) The idea of alien contact is a very recognisable staple within popular culture. Memorable examples include the marauding tripods of H.G. Well's Martians in *The War of The Worlds* (1898), the alien ambassador in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), the myriad of aliens within the Star Trek and Star Wars universes, and Will Smith proclaiming "Welcome to Earth!" before punching a humanoid, albeit tentacular, alien in the face in *Independence Day* (1996). Alien contact narratives have always been associated with colonial rhetoric and militaristic superiority, with the world's greatest landmarks being destroyed by huge, malevolent alien spacecrafts and their out-of-this-world weaponry. Fuelled by real-life socio-political concerns, the alien has historically been viewed as an anthropocentric manifestation of our greatest fears, and alien contact as an invasion by the "other", threatening to disrupt the balance of a capitalist world. As Rob Latham points out, "even invasion stories that valorize human (that is, Western) cunning and bravery may be troubled by doubts regarding the susceptibility to external incursions" (Latham, 489)

(SLIDE) However, many alien contact narratives produced in the early twenty-first century have begun to subvert and break down this overused trope. This shift coincides with the growing cultural and theoretical movement of the Chthulucene, as posited by Donna Haraway in her book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016): "Specifically, unlike either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet. We are at stake to each other" (55). In these times of environmental concern, it is vital that we begin to understand how humans are intertwined with other species and non-human entities, to make "attachments" and "detachments" and form new pathways of connectedness.

If we consider the alien contact narrative, when framed by aspects of Chthulucene-thinking, it becomes a strong methodology for this kind of inter-species storytelling. In fact, with the presentation of a deeper connectivity between the human and the non-human, the alien contact narrative is now an ideal sub-genre for the communication of the "becoming-with" motif Haraway posits. To demonstrate this potential, three contemporary alien contact texts will each be discussed in relation to how they represent a more "becoming-with" narrative.

Alien Bodies

Firstly, let's consider how these three texts are presenting alien physicality and bodies. The answers lie in the strangeness of our own natural world. The otherworldliness of cephalopods is what makes tentacular beasts so appealing to speculative fiction writers: Lovecraft's Cthulhu, Tolkien's "Watcher in the Water", Jules Verne's colossal squid in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) are all tangible examples of the horror of the alien, the unknown and the "other". The tentacles of cephalopods move swiftly: grasping, constricting, reaching. They contain a sense of uncanniness; an appendage that operates in a familiar manner yet is completely biologically alien to our own.

In an essay on *Weird Fiction*, China Miéville develops his definition of abcanmy monsters. If one evaluates Miéville's description of the abcanmy then the body of the squid or cephalopod (represented by the tentacle) quickly establishes itself as the "avatar of abcanmy", its unique physiological ability to change form, colour and shape reflecting most effectively abcanmy teratology. Cephalopods evade categorisation; their physical form acting as an "oozing gloopyness" as Miéville describes here. These qualities make them perfect avatars to represent the contexts of Chthulucene multi-species narratives. As Haraway herself declares "Myriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene" (31). Cephalopods become a significant motif for considering alien otherness.

(SLIDE) This is beautifully evoked by the alien, Sandy, from *The Space Between Us*. When Lennox, Ava and Heather first find Sandy, they have been washed up on a Scottish beach. The features of the cephalopod are prominent in this initial description, providing some real-world reference points. However, the alienness of Sandy is further heightened by indescribable features, fluctuations of colour and shifting shapes. The fluidity of the squid or octopus is made even more alien in form. The reference to the physiology of the squid is an anchor point for the reader to picture Sandy's physical form, but it is also clear to us that Sandy is alien and not-of-this-world. Sandy also constantly shifts in size, effortlessly expanding and contracting, one moment small enough to fit inside a small sink or rucksack, the next "six feet tall, head distended and glowing green and blue". (Johnstone, 77) The capacity for octopi to fit through impossibly small gaps is extrapolated here, Sandy's fluctuating size and gloopyness reminiscent of the cephalopods in our own oceans. Johnstone is tapping into Miéville's association of the cephalopod's alien alterity and the gloopyness he prescribes to the abcanmy.

(SLIDE) The use of cephalopod physiology is also mirrored in the Heptapods in Ted Chiang's story "The Story of Your Life". What we are given is indescribable; a mix of weird aesthetics and biological mismatch. The individual parts of the Heptapod's bodily construction are logical to Louise Banks – indeed, we all have some conceptual understanding of tentacle-like limbs and eyes – but it is the amalgamation of these bodily parts into one whole that veer the Heptapods into the realm of the alien. The movements of the Heptapods are labelled as "disconcerting" and "eerie", once again confirming their alien nature. The Heptapods

certainly fit Miéville's description of the abcanany very well: non-traditional, bodily constructs which play with the boundaries between horror, fantasy and science fiction. Their bodies remind us of the existence of the cosmic unknown.

The Heptapods are gloopy in their constitution, shifting between different forms which at some points seem very familiar to us, but at others beautifully encapsulating the speculative biology of what an alien species could realistically *look* like. They float through their enclosed, misty, atmospheric containment cell with a ghostly movement of tentacles, before whipping away into the gloom with a squid-like propulsion of appendages. Our cultural reference of the alien has been so imbedded in an anthropocentric, colonial view of ourselves as a species when, in reality, the likelihood of an alien species looking like us is infinitesimally small. Chiang recognises this absurdity and, instead, offers something which is inherently formless and slippery in its classification.

(SLIDE) In *Lagoon*, Okorafor's aliens are also described in abcanany terms, with similar significance placed on the cephalopod and tentacles. The first miracle act we witness because of alien contact is the repair of an octopus arm. The opening moments of the novel are narrated from the point-of-view of a swordfish, which is the one of the first beings to have contact with the alien. With regards to Haraway's concept of Chthulucene-thinking, the fact that the alien's first contact in *Lagoon* is with marine life is a significant one. It is not coincidence that the aliens have landed in the ocean. Indeed, Ayodele confirms that "our ship is not broken" (Okorafor, 68). They have chosen to land in the ocean as it forms the largest percentage of the planet's surface and contains the largest quantity of lifeforms. Humans are not the centre of their attention. One of the aliens rises to greet the creatures around it as a "golden blob" (Okorafor, 6) rather than in some anthropocentric form. Able to shape-shift their bodies, in a similar but more advanced fashion to Sandy, these aliens choose to resemble the abcanany entities of the ocean, mirroring the gloopy form of the octopus it has just communicated with. Upon greeting these marine entities, it symbiotically joins with them, enhancing their natural form. As the non-human narrator highlights: "Now she is no longer a great swordfish. She is a monster." (Okorafor, 6)

This shifting body is further emphasised by the fact that the alien ambassador, Ayodele, takes on a human form when coming ashore. However, it is revealed that it is advanced technology which allows the aliens to adopt any chosen shape. As Adaora confirms: "'She's made of tiny, tiny, tiny, metal-like balls. It's got to be metal. Certain types of metal powders look like that at two hundred times. I think that's why she can...change shape like that.'" (Okorafor, 25) Even though Ayodele is humanoid in shape, this is only possible due to their alien, technological physiology. It is this ability to manipulate shape and assimilate with lifeforms that allows the alien to communicate effectively. (SLIDE)

Alien Communication

All three of these texts effectively portray plausible methodologies of communication between humans and non-humans. In *The Space Between Us*, Sandy communicates with the

other human protagonists through a form of shared telepathy. This is most prominent with the character of Lennox, who becomes Sandy's first form of connection. When Lennox touches Sandy's tentacles – creating a physical and *literal* interspecies connection – the two of them become telepathically and symbiotically linked. Lennox grants permission and Sandy leaves a part of themselves behind in Lennox's ear, allowing them to communicate more effectively and over longer distances.

This represents a utopian union of alien non-human and human. Indeed, shortly after Sandy declares that: <We are connected. New partial Sandy-Lennox> (Johnstone, 109) and it is through this psychic connection that our human protagonists discover what Sandy is and how they can help reunite them with the rest of their kind. Even though this is a clever narrative device for Johnstone, it also represents a strong vision of the “becoming-with” motif central to Chthulucene-thinking. Sandy continues to connect in similar ways with the rest of the protagonists. Perhaps the most moving example within the novel is seen when Sandy connects with the pregnant Ava. Wanting to make sure that her baby is okay, Ava asks Sandy to speak to the foetus through psychic connection. After granting permission, Sandy uses their tentacles again to connect with Ava, enveloping her tenderly as she rests in a water-filled bathtub.

Sandy is communicating affection and love through interspecies connectivity here. The simultaneous coming together of Sandy, Ava and Ava's unborn child is a moment of joy and understanding between the alien and the human. It is a powerful moment in a novel that portrays alien contact as something positive and utopian, allowing humans to view their existence with a different perspective. Sandy's identity is through connectiveness: Lennox quickly understands that Sandy is one of a vast network of beings which share a consciousness. It is significant, therefore, that Sandy identifies with the pronoun “They”. Communication here is not achieved through written language, but through something much more sensory and beyond normal human comprehension – a non-anthropocentric approach.

(SLIDE) This is further highlighted by the portrayal of the Heptapod language and communication in “The Story of Your Life”, produced by squid-like inky secretions and consisting of pictograms and visual stimuli rather than words. Once again, an acknowledgement that first contact communication would be a matter of decoding sensory cues, rather than the translation of spoken language. Dr Banks makes progress in trying to communicate with this alien species and Chiang speculates, correctly, that trying to establish common linguistic links would be an extremely difficult process. This in itself is an interesting concept for a story, and is one valid reading of Chiang's text. However, the other aspect of the narrative creates a much more interesting interpretation.

As Dr Banks becomes proficient in the Heptapod language, her perception of time begins to dramatically alter as she becomes more attuned to Heptapod consciousness. Dr Banks' memories become *re-arranged* and *re-transcribed* by being exposed to Heptapod language, allowing her to achieve a new stage of consciousness development. Memory and

temporality are no longer linear but are a series of interweaving moments from past, present and future, constantly overlapping and affecting one another. The recollection of the alien encounters become interspersed with perceived “memories” of her daughter: moments from her life, her eventual death and reflections on things said or done.

However, after the final revelation that Dr Banks can experience past and future events simultaneously thanks to Heptapod B, these memories of her daughter are brought into sharp focus. The reader’s perceived linearity of time is completely shattered and we are forced to reassess everything we have read before. The “present” for the character of Dr Banks is actually the day her daughter is conceived, and the “memories” of her daughter are actually “afterwards” glimpses of what is to come. This is the emotional core of “Story of Your Life”. Even knowing that her marriage will ultimately fail and that her future daughter will die young, Louise Banks accepts this pre-ordained destiny at the end of the story. Alien communication in “Story of Your Life” results in a dramatic recalibration of memories and time for their human counterparts, changing their perception of reality.

(SLIDE) In *Lagoon*, the aliens send forth an ambassador Human Avatar for the purpose of communication. This decision is a tactical one to remove language and physiological barriers between Ayodele and the other human characters. Whereas the communication methods of the Heptapods prove difficult to decipher but, ultimately, unlock tremendous power, the aliens in *Lagoon* do not trust the human species’ ability to fully understand. This is beautifully evoked when Ayodele is faced with the innocent inquisitiveness of the children Kola and Fred. These are powerful words from Ayodele. The aliens realise the inability of humans to engage with interspecies communication. They understand that to make us fully comprehend their message, they need to become us and use our means of communication. A damning message.

Conclusion.

What these three novels show is a depiction of alien contact which is moving away from an anthropocentric depiction of alien life to something embracing the strangeness of our own natural world. The alterity of the cephalopod form is an ideal avatar for this new popular culture icon. By using tentacular motifs as a methodology for exploring aliens, science fiction writers can encourage their audience to consider interspecies connectivity as a result. In *The Space Between Us* and *Lagoon* it is no coincidence that significant moments of contact take place in bodies of water. In Johnstone’s novel, the connectivity between Lennox and Sandy reaches its pinnacle when they become symbiotically conjoined whilst swimming in a Scottish Loch: “He couldn’t make out where Sandy stopped and where he started, his eyes still worked, but all he could see was opaque blue-green light, as if looking out from inside them.” (Johnstone, 127) This is the ultimate moment of alien-human symbiosis within the novel, reminiscent of the alien and swordfish merging together at the beginning of *Lagoon*. Both Okorafor and Johnstone are showing how the human, non-human and the natural world can exist in harmony. Alien contact narratives become metaphors for positive climate

considerations, they do not have to be a destructive endeavour. By communicating with one another through non-verbal means, such as the Heptapod's inky secretions in "Story of Your Life", the telepathic union of Sandy, progressing to the verbal communication of the human avatar of Ayodele in *Lagoon*, these three narratives consider the importance of interspecies connectivity to establish clarity of communication when facing climatic change.

Donna Haraway's Chthulucene-thinking and concept of "becoming-with" is a fresh and contemporary methodology for approaching ideas of alien contact narratives. Not only does this way of thinking provide alternative and more "realistic" interpretations of alien physiology and communication, but they also allow the alien to become an important motif in contemporary debate. By utilising more tentacular forms, embracing the abecanniness of cephalopods, science fiction writers can present the alien as the ideal avatar for representing otherness within a culture dominated by environmental concern.