

# AUDACIOUS BLACK FEMALE HEROES IN SPECULATIVE AND AFROFUTURIST FICTION FROM THE NIGERIAN DIASPORA

by  
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## ABSTRACT

In four recent speculative novels from the Nigerian diaspora, *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi (2013 [2005]), *Who Fears Death* (2018 [2011a]) and *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor (2015), and *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018), the main characters are represented as displaying audacity and courage. These qualities have aspirational value for young black women in particular. The genre of feminist Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist fiction has extended the repertoire of its relevant womanist concerns since its origins, demonstrating the developing emancipatory potential of the genre, as portrayed in the analysed novels. Speculative fiction generally allows the reader to imagine a future where oppressive structures are overturned, and more specifically, Afro-Gothic fiction foregrounds the predicament of the black protagonist overcoming otherworldly dark forces, while Afrofuturism liberates the black protagonist by presenting her as the hero; in the selected novels she is represented as the literal and metaphoric bringer of light. The thesis employs close textual analysis in applying its focal theories of speculative fiction and womanism, based on Alice Walker's emphasis on the audacity exhibited by young womanists. The womanist hero in Afrofuturist texts paves the way for a future when the young readers of these novels are encouraged to become the strong, audacious leaders of tomorrow through engaging with narratives exploring such possibilities. Similarly, Afro-Gothicism has expanded the genre of the Gothic, which originally presented Africa one-dimensionally as a dark continent being conquered by a white male hero, to explore the experience of young people of colour in the diaspora, navigating and reconciling the tension between African and Western cultural conventions that create cultural dissonance. A just ending is evident in each novel, with the womanist hero emerging as redeemed, and as the saviour or hero figure. Encountering these novels enables young black women to see themselves as heroes, and overthrows the single story that the literary canon often perpetuates, not just for these young women, but for other readers as well.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Declaration .....	iv
Introduction to Audacious Womanist Heroes .....	1
Chapter 1: Womanism and its Relation to Feminism .....	22
Chapter 2: Speculative Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist fiction .....	48
Chapter 3: Origins of Feminist Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist Fiction .....	67
Chapter 4: Flight from the Wilderness .....	98
Chapter 5: Journey through the Wilderness .....	123
Chapter 6: Beacon of Truth .....	154
Chapter 7: Quest for <i>Alâfia</i> .....	177
Conclusion .....	197
Bibliography .....	207

## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Bernice Borain, declare that:

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
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Bernice Avery Borain

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Signature

10 June 2021

Date

Professor Cheryl Stobie

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## INTRODUCTION TO AUDACIOUS WOMANIST HEROES

The aim of this thesis is to use a womanist lens to foreground the liberatory and social significance of diasporic African speculative and Afrofuturist books with audacious black heroes in a genre that has historically seldom portrayed them as such. The three Afrodiasporic authors provide a new myth with a black female hero, akin to a womanist, whom Alice Walker defined as revelling in “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Each protagonist’s audacity and wilfulness is central to this thesis. The strong protagonists are Jessamy in *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi (2013 [2005]), Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death* (2018 [2011a]) and Phoenix in *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor (2015), and Zélie and Amari in *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018). There have been other studies that have examined how African American writers, such as Toni Morrison, and African and Nigerian writers, such as Ben Okri, have employed speculative fiction to reimagine black culture and power. Still lacking in critical scrutiny is a study of *audacious* and *wilful* womanist heroes in speculative and Afrofuturist novels of the Nigerian Afrodiaspora who reconfigure the future for black women. Afrofuturism, in particular, has the potential to liberate readers from an oppressive present by reimagining the future for those oppressed because of race and gender, in this case, by reading them as womanist texts. This study will foreground the value of these aspirational Nigerian diasporic speculative and Afrofuturist fiction novels as womanist texts, and contribute to the field through an analysis of future or imagined places with a black hegemony with the focus on audacious black female protagonists as heroes. In a 1981 paper entitled “Science Fiction Women Before Liberation”, Eric S Rabkin wrote that “science fiction needed, and may well still need, liberation” (Rabkin, 1981, p. 9). While he was not directly referring to these diasporic Nigerian writers’ novels, they certainly are liberating the genre, and young black women readers are now able to imagine heroes who look like them as the liberators.

It is incumbent on me to begin by recognising my position is as an etic observer of these Nigerian diasporic texts, and to state that I am not reading these texts as a critic of African culture, but my position is rather an acknowledgement of a cultural aesthetic that reconfigures the future for young black women. In order to gain an emic perspective, this thesis will refer to womanist theory. My personal and professional interest in Nigerian and Nigerian diasporic literature has spurred this study, an interest that was first piqued by novels and poems written

by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri and Wole Soyinka. Issues concerning social awareness are prevalent today, including, but not limited to, issues of race and gender, which is another reason why the liberatory potential of these books with heroic young female protagonists is significant to young women who will hopefully recognise the potential within themselves because of these narratives.

In the paragraphs that follow an overview of the four novels and the aspects that are particularly significant to this study are outlined, namely *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi (2013 [2005]), *Who Fears Death* (2018 [2011a]), *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor (2015), and *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018). Thereafter, relevant speculative fiction definitions, specifically the subgenres of Afro-Gothicism and Afrofuturism, are set out in order to establish the emancipatory potential of these books. A review of relevant literature to date follows. The origin of dystopian speculative fiction by women then precedes a discussion on significant feminist dystopian writing and seminal Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist books by Marge Piercy, Octavia E Butler, Toni Morrison and Nalo Hopkinson. An exposition on womanism and its intersection with feminist theory follows, and finally, an outline of Belsey's textual analysis as the theory that will underpin the study is given.

The Nigerian British author, Helen Oyeyemi, has written an Afro-Gothic fiction novel titled *The Icarus Girl*. Afro-Gothic fiction is a subgenre of speculative fiction, and this is the story of a very young girl, Jessamy, of Nigerian and British descent, and her journey to unearth her Nigerian heritage while she is haunted by a malevolent spirit. Jessamy's relationship with her Nigerian mother is tested as her mother paradoxically both embraces and rejects her Nigerian culture in an effort to be pragmatic about what she views as superstition. One particularly apt example is when her mother encourages her to keep an *ibeji* statue to appease the deceased twin's spirit while simultaneously failing to take her daughter seriously when she is harassed by the malevolent spirit she is trying to expel (or possibly even exorcise). Jessamy has to face the spirit alone, and as she gradually becomes aware of its malicious intentions, is able to be assertive and brave despite her youth.

Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix* are Afrofuturist novels, or more accurately, the author defines them as Africanfuturist, also a subgenre of speculative fiction, by the self-styled Naijamerican (Okorafor, 2011b) author. They are set in a post-apocalyptic dystopia with distinctly Nigerian components to the myth and milieu explored. Okorafor's

novel, *The Book of Phoenix*, is a prequel to *Who Fears Death* but was written afterwards. What seems to be simply a story about an accelerated woman and her liberation from her creators becomes the backstory of the apocalypse for the book that was written before it. *Who Fears Death* follows Onyesonwu, a child of weaponised rape following a genocide, who grows up to be fiercely brave and outspoken and is able to rewrite the future in which she knows she will die. The book celebrates Nigerian spirituality, jujuism and culture through an Afrocentric lens, at the same time as critiquing certain aspects such as female genital mutilation of a group of girls, including Onyesonwu. It explores their reaction to their loss of sexual pleasure, and Onyesonwu liberates the girls using her powers from an act that they come to view as a violation of a sexual right. Like her mother before her, Onyesonwu has special powers, and her destiny also forces her into the desert to confront her fears. While in the desert, she also encounters the spiritual wilderness and learns to traverse this too. There she discerns and awakens her supernatural gifts.

Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* is set in a dystopian world, Orïsha, inspired by her West African origins as a Nigerian American writer. Zélie's *divîner* mother is brutally murdered by an evil king, and like her mother, Zélie has the signature white hair that marks her as a "maggot" *divîner*. Zélie has to learn to channel her awakening power and to realise that there is strength in restraint as she tends to act impetuously. The book comments on contemporary issues; in a recent interview, Adeyemi stated that it is "meant to be this glaring mirror" (Hughes, 2018) that one can hold up to society to reflect its shortcomings.

The books under discussion fall under the broad category of speculative fiction. RB Gill attempts to define speculative fiction in his article, "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction" because to do so would "promote interpretation by suggesting affinities with similar explorations of human imagination and values" (Gill, 2013, p. 71). He concludes broadly, stating that "we come to view speculative fiction as the record of journeys beyond constricted lives" (p. 83), with the proviso that any such amalgamation of "group cultural products [is seldom] pure in any sense" (p. 83). This is what makes speculative fiction particularly useful as a tool to explore a future that liberates "constricted lives" and explores new egalitarian realities for marginalised groups. In each of these narratives, the young black female protagonist demonstrates audacious heroism that is striking for its original perspective and its contribution to a more equal society in the future. In order to foreground the effect of this temerity, the strands of theory that will be utilised are womanism, feminism and

speculative fiction theories, primarily Afro-Gothic fiction and Afrofuturism. As has already been underscored, these novels are all written by black women from the Nigerian diaspora, selected because of their contemporary relevance with regard to social issues and critical acclaim. Concerning the usefulness of the speculative genre in feminist and womanist studies as a tool to escape the current reality, in 1992 bell hooks wrote that colonialism forced black writers to rethink everything. As a result, black writers were “[c]hallenged to rethink, insurgent black intellectuals and/or artists are looking at new ways to write and talk about race and representation, working to transform the image” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). The novels which were written by Okorafor, Oyeyemi and Adeyemi are looking at new representations and include black women in this ideal. Furthermore, they have been able to break with “the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory” (p. 2).

Afro-Gothic fiction is the term used to describe a subgenre of Gothic fiction from Africa and the African diaspora, which is itself a subgenre of the umbrella term, speculative fiction. However useful it is to have a term to describe Gothic fiction from the African diaspora, the concept of Afro-Gothicism is not without controversy, and in fact, according to Esther de Bruijn, “aversion” (de Bruijn, 2013, p. 60):

On the one hand, Afro-Gothic may help draw meaningful connections between the literatures of Africa and its diaspora, as a new lens through which to view shared representations of the *unheimlich* nature of legacies of colonial and racial oppression and with which to consider common religio-spiritual topographies. On the other hand, the Afro-Gothic compound invokes Eurocentric racist writing as it raises the specter of the “Dark Continent” of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its “horror”. As such, the term attracts not only scholarly skepticism, but aversion. (p. 60)

When one considers the history of Gothic tradition, it becomes apparent that blackness has been aligned with superstition in Gothic writing, with the African “figured as an Other at the extreme end of strangeness, as an unpredictable, wild, demonic savage with an insatiable appetite for sex and human flesh” (p. 63). This is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which Chinua Achebe derides as an example of Africa as “the other world” full of “dark places” (Phillips, 2003).



Nonetheless, Afro-Gothicism is being reclaimed “as a mode of rewriting colonial history and its haunting aftermath” (de Bruijn, 2013, p. 63). It is this latter function that will be employed to unearth the usefulness of Afro-Gothicism to explore the postcolonial experience of Africans of the diaspora. The Caribbean Gothic writing of Nalo Hopkinson will be utilised to lay the foundation for Afro-Gothicism that is not related to Western Gothic writing, except insofar as the Afro-Caribbean characters speak English (although it is blended with various Creole languages). Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which is an African American text that examines the disturbing and intense impact of slavery and “countermemories” (Eshun, 2003, p. 287) on mothers and daughters, will also be consulted as a foundational Afro-Gothic narrative, before moving on to the haunting otherworldly experience of Jessamy as the daughter of a Nigerian woman who moves to Britain and raises her daughter there.

In 2001, Gregory E Rutledge proposed that the “link between Otherness and the otherworld phenomenon of both fantasy and futurist fiction is something with which many persons of African descent may identify” (Rutledge, 2001, p. 237). However, he noted that Africans in the diaspora may be “under-represented as FFF [Futurist Fiction and Fantasy] authors” (p. 240) for socio-economic and socio-political reasons. The writing by this project’s selection of Nigerian diasporic women demonstrates that this is undoubtedly changing. Rutledge notes the ascent of black FFF beginning with Samuel R Delany, Jr, whom he names “the Father of Black FFF literature and criticism” (p. 243), and then states that in the “mid-1970s Delany was joined by Octavia E Butler”, who, amongst many other accolades, was awarded a “McArthur ‘genius’ award (1996)” (p. 244) for speculative fiction with strong black female protagonists, such as Dana discussed in Chapter 3, who attempts to ensure her future by travelling back in time.

The term “Afrofuturism” was only coined in 1994 by Mark Dery in an article entitled “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose”, discussing the fact that few black authors appeared to be using science fiction to tell their stories. Dery states that this is:

especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black

bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). (Dery, 1994b, p. 180)

Dery defines Afrofuturism as “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (p. 180).

Ytasha Womack broadened the definition in her 2013 book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, to encompass aesthetic works beyond literature, and she believes that it offers a new way to consider the past and the future:

Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critique. (Womack, 2013, p. 9)

Not only do Afrofuturist authors “reenvision” the past, they simultaneously create a new vision of the future that encompasses a celebration of African mythology and lore. The Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist authors being studied do so by creating young women in their novels who are “womanish” because they are the opposite of what Walker describes as “girlish” (Walker, 1983, p. xi), despite their youth. They are not “frivolous, irresponsible, not serious” (p. xi) as they take on gargantuan tasks that challenge the status quo under patriarchal oppression and/or against malevolent spiritual and magical forces. In particular, they fit the criteria for being “audacious” (p. xi) as they are bold and daring in these Afrofuturist tales that construct a future in which black women are the heroes of the day.

The “future history” that black women can recover is what Marleen S Barr tracks in *Afro-Future Females* (Barr, 2008, p. 127). Before this, in 1981, Barr compiled “the first scholarly essay collection about women and science fiction” (Barr, 2008, p. ix) entitled *Future Females: A Critical Anthology* (1981), but the first text to focus on black women in science fiction is the book she edited, *Afro-Future Females*. The anthology “emphasizes that the black writers who

chart science fiction's newest new-wave trajectory share the enterprise of lauded black great American novelists" (p. ix) like Toni Morrison, Octavia E Butler, Nalo Hopkinson and others. In *Afro-Future Females*, Barr compiles articles and stories that celebrate black speculative fiction. Dr Ph(d)SalvagGIo wrote an article on *Kindred* by Octavia E Butler in 1986 and later went on to publish "Octavia Butler and the Black Science Fiction Heroine" (Barr, 2008, p. 247), which is evidence that black women heroes in literature have indeed received some critical acclaim. Despite these early forays into science fiction writing by black authors, in another essay in the critical anthology *Afro-Future Females*, "Beyond the History We Know: Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Nisi Shawl, and Jarla Tangh Rethink Science Fiction Tradition", De Witt Douglas Kilgore notes that the creative efforts of Nnedi Okorafor and other African American writers are "sometimes brilliant – and sparse" (Kilgore, 2008, p. 119). However, Kilgore goes on to say that "Black women who contribute to SF/F/H<sup>1</sup> have reached the point where the history they recover can potentially become future history" (p. 127). This is the powerful promise that these novels contain for womanist theorists.

Challenging the view that female protagonists are not often the heroes of speculative fiction, Sarah Lefanu's introduction to *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* laments the "male bias of the form" (Lefanu, 1988, p. 4):

The feminist intervention in science fiction has not been an easy one: writers have had to struggle not only against the weight of the male bias of the form but also against the weight of a cultural and political male hegemony that underpins the form itself. (p. 4)

Despite this, during the 1970s a trend began that has gained momentum because of the "plasticity" (Spillers, 2008, p. 5) of science fiction, which has allowed women writers and their female characters to attain agency. She concludes that this is possible because "[f]eminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms" (Lefanu, 1988, p. 40). This gives women writers the freedom to create a future world where nearly everyone has Afro-textured hair and black skin, and the heroes are audacious young women fighting oppressive regimes and triumphing.

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<sup>1</sup> Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror

In a dissertation entitled “Female Perspectives of the Dystopian Novel”, Frans Desmet examines female writers of dystopian fiction and asks the question: “How are women represented in feminist dystopias and, with regard to these female characters, how is language used as an instrument of oppression or liberation in these works?” (Desmet, 2010, p. 6). While this work certainly does examine female characters in speculative fiction, the novels analysed were written in the last century and are not womanist texts. The present study aims to extend this to include audacious black female heroes in the books being studied, as well as their aesthetic and aspirational value for young black women from Africa and its diaspora today.

More recently, the abstract of Kim Myungsung’s thesis entitled “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction and the Reinvention of African American Culture” (Myungsung, 2017), explains how “contemporary African American writers employ science fiction in order to recast ideas on past, present, and future Black culture”. Myungsung considers the prevalence of a white future in science fiction, and how this is being challenged, but this thesis focuses primarily on race and does not address all of the myths and stereotypes that are common, specifically in the predominance of androcentric speculative fiction.

With regard to novels that explore womanism in Afrofuturist fiction set in West Africa, Kola Boof’s *The Sexy Part of the Bible* (2011) is a *Bildungsroman* about a cloned black woman who becomes empowered despite the weight of societal oppression and demonstrates that there are narratives that espouse similar womanist ideals in their plots. While this is interesting to note, the focus of this study will be the phenomenon of Nigerian women authors of these womanist protagonists. Boof’s book, and others like it, support womanist ideals and are thus useful reference tools to corroborate and demonstrate an increasing trend in the creation of womanist heroes by female authors.

It is the “plasticity” of science fiction that enables its core ability to imagine the future, and by so doing, reimagine the status quo more positively. Ursula Le Guin believes the future holds multifold possibilities if we can imagine it into being:

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. But then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. (Quoted in Imarisha, 2018)

Walidah Imarisha deduces that this is why science fiction is vital because it “allows us to imagine possibilities outside of what exists today”. Imarisha paraphrases Le Guin by stating that “[t]he only way we know we can challenge the divine right of kings is by being able to imagine a world where kings no longer rule us – or do not even exist” (2018).

In imagining worlds where power structures are challenged, all three of the Nigerian diasporic authors in this study create strong black female protagonists, notable for their audacious courage and action in speculative settings. However, as discussed previously, they were not the first African American and/or Afrodiasporic women writers to receive critical attention for their speculative fiction that reconfigured the future for women. In the 1970s and 1980s, Octavia E Butler (1970s) and Nalo Hopkinson (1980s) were experimenting with the same genre and grappling with similar concerns shortly after Marge Piercy wrote *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).

The speculative fiction novel by a woman, *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Piercy, is considered to be one of the seminal feminist speculative texts. In the Introduction to the 2016 edition, Piercy reveals that many of her concerns 40 years previously (1976) are still relevant today. Despite the fact that books like hers were part of the momentum created by second wave feminism, she believes that much of the utopian ideals that books like hers predicted and hoped for are at risk four decades after they were won:

Feminist utopias were created out of a hunger for what we didn’t have at a time when change felt not only possible but probable. Utopias came from the desire to imagine a better society when we dared to do so. When our political energy goes into defending rights, and projects we won and created are now under attack, there is far less energy for imagining fully drawn future societies we might wish to live in. (Piercy, 2016 [1976], Introduction)

Fortunately, there are writers who do still have this energy. Piercy hoped that she could write a new future for young girls, like her young self, and this what Okorafor and Adeyemi, in particular, are concerned with in their novels too:

When I was a child, I first noticed that neither history as I was taught it nor the stories I was told seemed to lead to me. I began to fix them. (Introduction)

This is particularly apt today because these young black female heroes are being acknowledged for being similar to Octavia E Butler's female protagonists since the 1970s, who "are remarkable too for challenging the science fictional norm of hero by being Black as well as female and sexually autonomous" (Lefanu, 1988). Another important antecedent to the novels discussed in this thesis is Butler's *Kindred* (1979), which is considered an early example of Afrofuturism by a black woman. Dana is the black female protagonist of the novel, and her character was created nearly half a decade before the contemporary novels this study focuses on, attesting to Butler's concern with depicting heroic black women in speculative fiction. *Kindred* signals an earlier example of the inherent courage in black female heroes as Dana travels back in time from the 1970s to the antebellum South. Even though *Kindred* is retrofuturistic as it examines time travel into the past and imagines the present, instead of the future like the contemporary novels being examined, this retrofuturistic action gives the slave characters in the novel hope for a future where they can enjoy freedom, much as Afrofuturism does today. The novel embodies the writer's hope that in the future women will enjoy even more liberties than they did in the 1970s. Answering this question is not within the purview of this thesis; however, the potential for novels to project the hopes of marginalised people into the future through a narrative is clear.

Nalo Hopkinson published *Brown Girl in the Ring* in 1988. Ti-Jeanne's role model is her diminutive grandmother, whom she calls Mami, who raised her after her mother was driven out of her mind. Mami is a sage from whom Ti-Jeanne learns courage to face demons, both literal and figurative, but first, she has to accept that these magical arts that she considers superstitious "duppy<sup>2</sup> business" (Hopkinson, 2012 [1988], p. 36) are an inescapable part of herself and her cultural heritage. The book is a work of Afro-Gothic speculative fiction that examines the Afro-Caribbean religion and myth. Ti-Jeanne is the heroic protagonist, and her link to the otherworldly aspects of her culture are transmitted via her grandmother, who practises occult religion. The book allows for an exploration of Gothic allegory at the same time as foregrounding the strength of women as purveyors of their beliefs, originating in Ti-Jeanne's grandmother's formidable strength that Ti-Jeanne then discovers within herself. When Ti-Jeanne starts to see demonic visions, for example, a "[f]ace like a grinning African mask" (p. 18), she is afraid she will be driven insane like her mother, but in the end, Ti-Jeanne

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<sup>2</sup> West African spirit or ghost.

has to accept the mystical visitations as a gift and face her evil father by embracing these to activate her inner strength.

Nnedi Okorafor understands that this longing for a hero that young girls can relate to is particularly pertinent for black girls in the diaspora today. In a talk she gave about her novel *Binti: Home* (Okorafor, 2017a), accessible on YouTube, Okorafor explains her focus on African hegemonies in answer to speculative fiction that does not often even acknowledge Africa's existence (Okorafor, 2017b). There were no people like her in the science fiction books she encountered, except the "bad aliens" (2017b). The genre seemed inaccessible to her, and so she started writing speculative fiction herself, partly because of her trips to Nigeria as a girl. She would spend half of her time in Lagos, which she describes as "modern, fast-paced, full of new and old ideas all at the same time" (2017b). The other half would be in her parents' ancestors' villages, which she describes as "far more rural" (2017b). Going from modern to rural areas "got her wheels turning" (2017b) as she became used to seeing inspiring people using technology in innovative ways despite limited resources. Okorafor remembers the use of mobile phones for intense prayer sessions with the participants shouting prayers enthusiastically into the phone, and the proliferation of portable technology because of poor infrastructure, for example, laptops being more common because they can be charged despite power surges or supply issues in contemporary Nigeria. In her talk, Okorafor goes on to bemoan the fact that Africa is so often portrayed as a place of the past if it is even mentioned at all. This is a problem that her books aim to remedy and that inspired her to write dystopian fiction set in Africa. Post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction goes way back, and she wanted to write books where Africa was portrayed. She wanted to see her Africa as innovative and as part of the futuristic narratives; as a result, she decided that "the best thing to get something done is to do it yourself" (2017b), and that is how she started writing sci-fi. Of primary importance in her novels is the point of view, from Africa, not an outside observer who comes into an African setting and comments on its perceived otherness. Okorafor ends her talk by commenting on how science fiction bridges the gap between the sciences and the arts, and it continues to "evolve and reflect the effects of science and technology and socio-political changes on people in their globalised cultures" (2017b). She states that it is also a way for people who live on the "borders or fringes to explore identity and the fluidity of culture and movement and speculate on the significance and effect on humanity in the future" (2017b). In an interview for the *BBC*, Okorafor contests her categorisation as an Afrofuturist writer, a label she feels is problematic as she states emphatically that her "literary roots aren't here in the United States, they are in

Nigeria” (John, 2018). The post on her Facebook page with a link to the *BBC* article entitled “Black Panther spin-off author Nnedi Okorafor’s African inspiration”, both dated 1 August 2018, states that she prefers the term “Africanfuturist”. In a post on her blog post on 19 October 2019, Okorafor defines Africanfuturism as follows:

Africanfuturism is similar to “Afrofuturism” in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. (Okorafor, 2019a)

Okorafor emphasises that Africanfuturism “is concerned with visions of the future” (2019a) that are “rooted first and foremost in Africa” (2019a). Furthermore, it is “less concerned with ‘what could have been’ and more concerned with ‘what is and can/will be’” (2019a), suggesting that the aspirational significance of her narratives are fundamental. Another pivotal term that Okorafor defines on her blog is “Africanjujuism”, which she categorises as a subgenre of fantasy “that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (2019a). These terms are explored in more detail in chapters 5 and 6.

Of critical importance for all of the novels being reviewed, is the term “womanist”, which Alice Walker and Chikwenye Ogunyemi defined independently of each other in the 1980s. The decade is important because around the same time that Butler, Piercy and Hopkinson wrote their books, Alice Walker’s womanist definition that underpins this study recognised and underscored the audacious and precocious nature of a womanist, as well as the supportive nature of the mother-daughter relationship. This is critical in each of the novels being studied, in particular, the “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (Walker, 1983, p. xi) of the proposed womanist heroes. A full discussion of all four parts of Walker’s definition of a womanist is detailed in Chapter 1.

Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s writing on womanism concurs with many aspects of Walker’s, although there are differences, as while it begins during the same period in which Alice Walker outlined her definition (circa 1984/5), she has continued to refine her analysis of African gender issues. The relevance of her theory as a Nigerian womanist literary critic is particularly



pertinent to this study of Nigerian diasporic writers, as she recognises that “[b]lack women are disadvantaged in several ways: as blacks they, with their men, are victims of a white patriarchal culture; as women they are victimized by black men; and as black women they are also victimized on racial, sexual, and class grounds by white men” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 67). Regarding her own definition of womanism, she states that although she conceived the term independently of Walker, she was “pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker’s” (Phillips, 2006, p. 28).

Walker and Ogunyemi both believe that womanism comes about as a result of a “metamorphosis” that takes place “when she comes to a sense of herself as a woman; involved is [*sic*] what Morrison, with her Pecola, refers to as ‘the little-girl-gone-to-woman’ and Ntozake Shange represents through the maturing Indigo in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*” (p. 28). It could be triggered by a traumatic event or having to take on more responsibility suddenly. Ogunyemi emphasises that:

Many black female novelists writing in English have understandably not allied themselves with radical white feminists; rather, they have explored the gamut of other positions and produced an exciting, fluid corpus that defies rigid categorization. More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a “womanist”. That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy. (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 64)

A womanist lens is thus appropriate because it addresses oppression because of race, class and gender, as “[w]omanism thus makes it clear that the needs of the Black women differ from those of their white counterparts, and by recognizing and accepting male participation in the struggle for emancipation it again differs from feminism in its methodology of ending female oppression” (Ebunoluwa, 2009, p. 230). Womanism “is rooted in Black culture which accounts for the centrality of family, community and motherhood in its discourse and as an ideology has extending [*sic*] beyond the frontiers of Black America to being embraced by many women in and from Africa, and in other parts of the world” (p. 230). Ogunyemi’s womanist discourse specifically investigates the position of African womanists, “[s]ince feminism and African-American womanism overlook African peculiarities” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 114) because an African womanist must also navigate, amongst other issues, “interethnic skirmishes and

cleansing [...] religious fundamentalism [...] the language issue, gerontocracy and in-lawism” (quoted in Arndt, 2002, p. 712).

It is as an ardent student of womanism’s nuanced definitions, as well as womanist texts that resonate with me as a teacher of young women that I propose to use these definitions to gain an emic perspective. My aim is not to appropriate these texts or definitions for any egocentric purpose, but rather as a sincere celebration of these texts for their liberatory power.

Before considering the intersection of womanism and feminism in more depth, it is important to note that there are critics who reject feminism outright for being irrelevant to the concerns of black women, specifically women from the African diaspora. Clenora Hudson-Weems’s *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* expounds upon this perspective and formulates updated theory under a new term to better represent these values: Africana Womanism. This study will concern itself with a broader view of the available theories, which will include Africana Womanism, which considers women from Africa and the African diaspora of the same heritage with a “distinct reality” according to Zulu Sofola (Hudson-Weems, 1995, p. xviii):

As a race, the most painful part of our experience with the Western world is the “dewomanization” of women of African descent. It is true that to successfully destroy a people its female component must be first destroyed. The female gender is the center of life, the magnet that holds the social cosmos intact and alive. Destroy her, and you destroy life itself. (p. xviii)

While I do not wish to undermine this view, the theory that underpins this study is based on a broader view of the structures that contribute to the oppression of black women. These theories include womanism in all of its permutations, as well as feminist and black feminist discourse, as they too have relevance at the point that they intersect, which is the oppression of all women. In particular, when one considers the position of black women’s oppression because of race, class and gender, studies under the bricolage of intersectionality examine how antiracist and antisexist “discourses fail women of color by not acknowledging the ‘additional’ burden of patriarchy or of racism”; furthermore, “the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). In other words, women of colour experience sexism “in ways not always parallel to experiences

of white women” (p. 1246), which means that “dominant conceptions of antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms” (p. 1246). Despite this, there are aspects of feminism that are pertinent to this womanist study, if one is willing to acknowledge that there are places where the concerns of all women intersect, manifestly regarding gender issues:

Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action. (Phillips, 2006, p. xx-xi)

Therefore, even though womanist definitions are focal in this study, feminism is also relevant, because there are certain commonalities in these complementary ideologies. Obioma Nnaemeka is interested in these intersections and advocates for negotiation as praxis. She calls the dynamic space for this intersection the “third space” and has called the feminist theory that has evolved from her enquiries, “nego-feminism”, which stands for negotiation and “no ego” feminism, because this aligns with African cultural principles of “give and take, compromise, and balance” (Nnaemeka, 2003, pp. 337-378):

African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. (p. 378)

Returning to the relevance of feminism, feminist writers in the 1960s were writing about the liberation of women beyond the suffrage movement. They were trying to find the words to describe the emptiness felt by women. Betty Friedan writes that “Sometimes a woman would say ‘I feel empty somehow... incomplete.’ Or she would say, ‘I feel as if I don’t exist’” (Friedan, 1963, p. 20).

Friedan recognised that they “had a hunger that food cannot fill” (p. 26). Likewise, another writer from the 1960s whose theory is particularly apt as a lens for courageous women, hungry for meaning in a patriarchal world, is Kate Millett. Millett’s *Sexual Politics* was first published in 1969, but reprinted a number of times because of its enduring relevance. In Millett’s 2000

introduction to the Illinois paperback version of her book, she addresses force in patriarchy as a “normative element in patriarchal violence” (Millett, 2016 [1969], p. xii) and states optimistically that patriarchy “is ‘in trouble’ worldwide” (p. xii). About patriarchy she goes on to note that “Its dangers and oppression are not easily done away with. But surely the very future of freedom requires it – not only for women but for humanity itself” (p. xiii).

In summary, this thesis will undertake a textual analysis that utilises classic dystopian texts, womanist and feminist definitions, and contemporary theories of speculative fiction. These theories will be employed to examine the increasing prevalence of speculative fiction from the Nigerian diaspora with audacious black female protagonists who reconfigure the future, as womanist texts. The first aspect of Alice Walker’s womanist definition is that she is audacious, and is the focal point of this study. Chikwenye Ogunyemi agrees with this view and states that this audacity comes about as a result of a trial, coming-of-age or otherwise (Phillips, 2006, p. 28), and the implication of this audacity will be considered in each of these *Bildungsromane* about black girls who are heroic in the face of adversity.

The books will be analysed using textual analysis to underscore the womanist and liberatory commentary underlying each narrative. Catherine Belsey illustrates the value of using textual analysis in the theory of criticism by examining the multiple interpretations possible in literary theory using the painting, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, to illustrate her point. Belsey states that multiple interpretations of a text are inevitable in any close reading and that “[n]o text can ever compel its reader to view it in a particular way” (Belsey, 2013 [2005], p. 167). In order to facilitate this, we should “adopt a critical vocabulary which allows the text to ‘invite’ certain readings and ‘offer’ specific positions to its addressee” (p. 167). In the analysis of a text, a dialogue takes place between the author and the reader because the process is one of active participation. This interchange connecting meaning “subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in the *signifiers*, sounds or images” and is “never fixed, single or final” (p. 167). Belsey concludes that meaning is thus “inevitably plural” but “not infinitely plural” (p. 167). Both parties are involved in making meaning, and the reader is thus an active participant in the process of signification. Using the “critical vocabulary” (p. 167) that Belsey proposes is a necessary component of textual analysis “permits us to think with greater clarity, to make finer distinctions” (p. 167). Every time a text is examined, the outcome is different, as in the book *Limited Inc.* by Jacques Derrida (1988), who “makes the paradoxical point that, while a repetition is the same as the original, or it would not be a repetition, it is also the case that the

repetition is never the same as the original, or it would be the original itself” (p. 168). Examining a popular text using a new lens, the result is to “shift its meaning very slightly in the process, precisely by quoting its previous occurrences, as well as changing its setting” (p. 168), and so, “every text breaks with what went before” (p. 168).

Belsey concludes by saying that “changing meanings is not the same as making them up” (p. 168), and thus it is useful to continue to re-examine popular texts already receiving substantial critical acclaim in order to unearth the multifaceted social commentary possible in each analysis. Using critical vocabulary from womanist definitions and dystopian theory to interrogate the contemporary commentary, a textual analysis of each of the novels will be undertaken. The setting in each novel is dystopian or otherworldly, with a distinctly Nigerian or African milieu, for at least part of each narrative, and I argue that they each make observations on aspects of Nigerian culture in a manner that serves to foreground African culture as an aesthetic that abandons “the ethnocentric assumptions of modern Western aesthetics that restrict art and the aesthetic to carefully circumscribed objects and occasions” (Berleant, 2002, p. 24). In particular, the mother-daughter relationship is examined and how a close maternal bond contributes to independence and resilience. Furthermore, allegory is employed by the authors in mirroring contemporary concerns to events in the novel, like weaponised rape, genital mutilation and the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, each young woman protagonist is stigmatised in some way, which instead of being a hindrance, becomes a refining furnace that tempers and moulds each girl.

In *The Icarus Girl*, Jessamy expresses a longing to understand her Nigerian heritage. As discussed, the novel focuses on the tension between her British ancestry and her Nigerian ancestry. Her Nigerian mother compares Jessamy to Nigerian children who would not be so introverted, and would instead be outside getting up to mischief. The strain this causes between mother and daughter creates superstition in the child as she tries to control her environment through obsessive and compulsive behaviour. In Jessamy’s mind, Nigeria becomes “a leering idea of her mother’s” (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 9), and the stress that results from this manifests as an anxiety disorder, as well as a “febrile illness” (p. 9), making her physically sick. This alienation from an important part of her identity is further highlighted by a cab driver who calls her “*oyinbo*”, which means “somebody who has come from so far away that they are a stranger” (p. 16). Her grandfather’s treatment of her is another indication of this alienation as she describes his appraisal of her as “examining for flaws and broken bits before deciding

whether it was worth taking it to be reattached” (p. 21), and her grandfather derides her British father who he says he “knows nothing at all” (p. 27). When a girl befriends Jessamy, it takes the reader some time to determine whether or not the girl is an imaginary friend, a benevolent or malevolent spirit, or her dead twin sister. Yoruba Nigerians believe that twins are powerful, and a dead twin will be restless until an *ibeji* carving is made to appease it. However, in Igbo culture, twins might have been killed, and secret killings still occur in Nigeria because of the belief that twins are very powerful and invite evil into the community. Jessamy has to bravely confront such a spirit. It is never entirely clear whether the spirit is her twin sister or another twin, which is suggested in her mirrored name – TillyTilly – and in the end Jessamy reconciles the different parts of her identity when she confronts the spirit. Jessamy is influenced by her mother, who also has to reconcile her adopted Western worldview with her African beliefs when she recognises that the problems Jessamy is experiencing cannot be explained simply using logic or modern medicine. As a result of the impact this has on her, Jessamy also has to negotiate these two realities, sometimes completely alone with a terrifying spirit that possesses and injures her, and people close to her. The novel comments on identity, coming-of-age, and the mother-daughter dynamic for women of the African diaspora who have to reconcile Western and African ideologies.

*Who Fears Death* tells the tale of a child of “weaponized rape” (inspired by an article written by Emily Wax (2004) in the *Washington Post* entitled, “We want to make a light baby”) who is born into a shunned race (branded with the epithet *Ewu* in the novel to mark her as such) and undergoes female genital mutilation. Her journey to unlock her power sees her confront her rapist father and rewrite the future. Both this book and the prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*, examine the power of storytelling in revising and retelling stories. Like Jessamy, Onyesonwu also has a mother who plays an integral part in her coming-of-age tale. Najeeba is the rape victim, and the deed is recounted in horrifying detail. When Onyesonwu is born she is marked as *Ewu*, because “[t]he *Ewu* are children of violence” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 20). After the rape, Najeeba’s husband is found cowering in their house, and he recoils from the horror of her rape, but Najeeba is resilient “[a]nd because she was already dead, she wasn’t afraid” (p. 23) as she walked off alone into the desert. Onyesonwu is the offspring of this determined woman and her rapist. Her name is the title of the book, “Who Fears Death”, which is prophetic because she sees her own death and bravely walks towards it. Onyesonwu is accompanied by a group of friends, including her lover, another young *Ewu* who also has magical ability. In an

inversion of the biblical portrayal of Eve as Adam's helpmeet, as they leave the safety of their relative Eden, Mwita is her helpmeet and defers to her in many ways, but in others they are partners. He is in no way emasculated by this deference, acknowledging her superior gifts, and this is further evidence that this is a womanist text because the person who leads is the stronger, regardless of gender, and neither person is undermined by this. Central to understanding the origin of Onyesonwu's sorcerer powers are the four Mystic Points, "Okike, Alusi, Mmuo, Uwa" (p. 144). This is Nigerian religious terminology that implies that much of the myth is based on Nigerian culture and jujuism, despite the actual setting being a post-apocalyptic Sudan. This is not the only aspect of African and Nigerian culture that is explored, and the book offers the reader a celebratory appraisal of African culture. Onyesonwu's martyrdom is merely the beginning as she is able to reset the future: "Indeed, Onyesonwu did die, for something must be written before it can be rewritten" (p. 383).

*The Book of Phoenix* is about an "accelerated biological woman" (Okorafor, 2015, p. 48), created aged 40, but in reality only two years old, with the wings of an angel. The book utilises myth to weave a story that comments on racism and sexism and demonstrates that even one single woman can bring about change. The story uses biblical allegory to comment on the oppression and persecution of black people imprisoned by The Big Eye, reminiscent of Big Brother in George Orwell's *1984*. Phoenix is a strong black woman who faces her tormentors and through her martyrdom sets free the captives like her. Another biblical allusion is apparent in a winged black man who helps her and is portrayed as Christ-like, body splayed like a man on the cross, but with "African facial features and a crown of wooly hair" and described as "magnificent" (p. 27). The more Phoenix learns about her predicament, the closer she comes to the "treacherous apple of knowledge" (p. 27). This knowledge awakens her moral imperative, and she realises she is not just the mythical phoenix that burns up and is reborn, but she is a "beacon" (p. 36) of truth. Once again, Okorafor explores the importance of names and their prophetic role in this book. As mentioned above, Okorafor is concerned with the power of storytelling, and about the storyteller (herself) she says: "As long as you listen, she is in charge of your destiny" (p. 61). This is a potent promise to young black readers who will recognise themselves in these characters, as agents of change. The book also celebrates Nigerian culture, referring to one of its own canonical writers, Wole Soyinka, and music by Fela Kuti (p. 114). The question of identity is further grappled with as the book refers to the "colonized mind" (p. 114), and the dichotomy of African American identity: "You are an

American, Phoenix [...] But you are an African, too, so you know it in your flesh, your strange flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world” (p. 116). The novel ends when an old man finds her story and canonises it. It becomes “the Great Book” which is the religious text of the people in *Who Fears Death*: “Then he and his oracle of a wife spread this shit far and wide” (p. 232).

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, Zélie’s mother is murdered in front of her because of her *divîner* powers, and the same powers are awakened in Zélie as the novel progresses. Zélie, marked as a *divîner* by her white hair, is seeking liberation for those like her. This is her stigma as “one look at my white hair, and people avoid me like I’m an infectious plague” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 22). In an article in *The Guardian* in March 2018, Tomi Adeyemi speaks of the journey Zélie is on in the novel as “an allegory for the modern black experience” and says that “[i]t draws inspiration from both West African mythology and the Black Lives Matter movement” (Hughes, 2018). It is a story about liberation from oppressive patriarchal structures, with strong young women at the fore. Zélie is impetuous and unafraid, and her coming-of-age journey entails learning “the strength of restraint” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 16).

### *Outline of Chapters*

The first chapter reviews the relationship between feminism and womanism. The chapter lays the theoretical foundation to examine the intersection of these theories in order to apply this lens to the texts being studied to explore how these movements aim to unshackle women, and black women in particular because of oppressive structures within African and African American contexts because of the ongoing impact of slavery, imperialism and racial prejudice, still evident today. The second chapter analyses Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist definitions as emergent genres under the umbrella term, speculative fiction. The implications of these definitions for black women in Africa and the African diaspora will be proposed, and later applied to each protagonist. In the third chapter, the origins of feminist Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist books will be traced by considering the writing of Nalo Hopkinson and Octavia E Butler, two prominent Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist black women writers. Chapter 4 explores Helen Oyeyemi’s novel, *The Icarus Girl*, a contemporary Afro-Gothic novel from the Nigerian diaspora that examines identity and the convergence of Nigerian and British culture from a bold young girl’s perspective. This chapter is titled “Flight from the Wilderness” because



Jessamy has to fight a spirit that tries to possess her. In the title, the “wilderness” is a reference from Nnedi Okorafor’s book *Who Fears Death*. Onyesonwu learns about the “wilderness” from Aro, her teacher. It is a spiritual plane about which he says, “After death, the path leads there” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 139). The wilderness is also a sacred place that Onyesonwu can visit when she accesses her magical power. Thus Chapter 5 is aptly named “Journey through the Wilderness”, as in the novel *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor, Onyesonwu’s is able to traverse the spiritual plane, but also journeys to rewrite her destiny, demonstrating how strong women can change the future. The book engages the reader in the creation of meaning in storytelling and foregrounds the genre’s potential to reconfigure the future. *The Book of Phoenix*, also by Nnedi Okorafor, is the prequel to *Who Fears Death*. This chapter is called “Beacon of Truth” because in the novel she is told that she is “speciMen, beacon, and reaper, life and death, hope and redemption” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 95). Furthermore, the book shines a light on *Who Fears Death* because Phoenix’s tale is the origin story of the African world that Onyesonwu is born into, and in an interesting parallel, we see both women are the heroes who reset society by becoming sacrificial martyrs. Chapter 6, “Quest for *Alâfia*”, makes reference to a Yoruba word believed to be of Arabic origin meaning “peace” or “welcome”. This chapter examines *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi and is the final Afrofuturist book by a Nigerian diasporic writer being examined. It follows young Zélie’s quest to unfetter those stigmatised like her and find peace by seeking retribution for her mother’s death in an oppressively patriarchal kingdom. The book serves as a metaphor for modern debates concerning race and identity.

As outlined above, an exploration of how speculative fiction is used and adapted in the novels by these diasporic Nigerian women will be embarked upon in the chapters that follow using the womanist notion of audacity embodied in the protagonists that will be celebrated. Further, the other liberatory, social, moral or political comments being made through these womanist heroes, and the contribution these make to womanist theory, will be acknowledged. Finally, an appreciation of the contemporary relevance of how these speculative fiction novels have begun to foreground the cultural aesthetic of diasporic African literature by women will be proposed.

## CHAPTER 1: WOMANISM AND ITS RELATION TO FEMINISM

*Ona kan o wo oja* is a Yoruba philosophy meaning there are many paths to the marketplace. (Kolawole, 1997, p. 35)

An eclectic approach, incorporating feminist and womanist strands from complementary theories, is applicable to foreground the liberatory potential of the Nigerian diasporic novels in this study. Critical scholarship on the relevance of feminism, black feminism and womanist strands is relevant for the study of black womanist heroes, in particular, black heroes of the diaspora, such as Octavia Butler's and Pamela Sargent's heroes of the 1970s and 1980s:

A traditional complaint about science fiction is that it is a male genre, dominated by male authors who create male heroes who control distinctly masculine worlds. In the last decade, however, a number of women writers have been changing that typical scenario. Their feminine and feminist perspectives give us a different kind of science fiction, perhaps best described by Pamela Sargent's term "Women of Wonder"<sup>3</sup>. (Salvaggio, 1982, p. 78)

Ruth Salvaggio continues to list Butler's heroines, beginning with the "defiant Amber in *Patternmaster* (1976)", the "confused but powerful Mary in *Mind of My Mind* (1977)", the "compromising Alanna in *Survivor* (1978)", and "Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* (1980)" (p. 78). Before exploring inspiring female heroes created by Butler and others, this chapter will focus quite broadly on a chronological foundation of feminist and womanist theories in order to provide the proper lens for this contemporary study of black heroes from the African diaspora.

First, the origins of second wave feminism will be traced, followed by commentary on some of the theorists who reject the term "feminist". Second, the argument against an outright rejection of feminism, despite the sometimes condescending attitude of Western feminist theories and attitudes, will be proposed. Third, the interplay between feminism, black feminism and womanism will be considered with a view to acknowledging their relevance to this study, beginning broadly with an overview of the significance of feminism and womanism. In particular, the usefulness of African models of feminism, like nego-feminism that concerns

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<sup>3</sup> (Sargent, 1975)

itself with negotiation as praxis, and cameline agency that proposes that women are formidable agents of change, will be acknowledged. Fourth, the relevant strands of womanism, African American, African, and Africana, will be discussed. Fifth, the importance of mothers in each of the novels will be foregrounded as central to each protagonist's strength, and to womanist theory, specifically *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995) by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu. Finally, reciprocity will be reiterated between feminist, black feminist and womanist theories, while still acknowledging the problem of an overarching commonality as an oversimplification, compounded by the sometimes condescending attitude of Western feminist theories and attitudes.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's seminal text on feminist thought, *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 1949) prompted widespread debate on feminist issues by laying the foundation for the second wave feminist movement which can be traced back to the 1960s. Even though de Beauvoir had ambivalent feelings about being seen as a feminist role model, stating that she had a "horror of positive heroes" (Simons *et al.*, 1979, p. 332) because she felt that she did not "have any solutions to give to people" (p. 332), her contribution to feminist theory has been profound. De Beauvoir stated that the "failure to recognize women as autonomous persons is the result of a 'phallocratic prejudice'" (p. 330), and her views on women as the Other, and her criticism of patriarchal structures that subjugated women to such a great extent that women were complicit in this subjugation, were ground-breaking. These views are still helpful today as women continue to struggle against the weight of patriarchy as a societal norm, albeit one that is arguably being acknowledged and addressed more seriously than it has been in the past. De Beauvoir's central premise is that being male is the default or first gender and that being female is thus "second", making women the Other:

If I want to define myself, I first have to say, "I am a woman"; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious. (De Beauvoir, 2015 [1949], p. 250)

In her introduction to the short edition of *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 2015 [1949]), Natalie Haynes states that "[i]t should be disheartening to read this book now, and realise how little has changed since it was first published" (p. 68). Haynes goes on to say that she prefers not to be disheartened because of the progress made since 1949, and that "Beauvoir never resists drawing parallels between racism and sexism, and the world hasn't stopped being racist yet,

either” (p. 68). This attempt at optimism is somewhat ironic, given that it is followed by a pessimistic statement about racism as an ongoing oppressive structure. It is, however, interesting to note this early recognition of the intersection of race and sex in de Beauvoir’s writing when de Beauvoir acknowledges this intersection of race and gender in describing the inequality of “blacks to racist Americans” (p. 292). She refers to this racial oppression specifically in the context of the superior status it offers the oppressor, by comparison, recognising once again the immorality of inequality, not just because of gender:

One of the benefits that oppression secures for the oppressor is that the humblest among them feels superior: in the United States, a “poor white” from the South can console himself for not being a “dirty nigger”; and more prosperous whites cleverly exploit this pride. Likewise, the most mediocre of males believes himself a demigod next to women. (p. 413)

The foregrounding of feminist issues by de Beauvoir resonated with women and put feminist issues on the global agenda. Second wave feminism followed and brought about much positive change, helping women to posit themselves centrally, and not only in relation to men as the Second Sex.

Fourteen years later, in the context of the USA, Betty Friedan’s influential book *The Feminine Mystique* was published. Betty Friedan wrote about the apathy that many housewives felt, feeling irrelevant in monotonous domestic cycles. Friedan recognised that the “chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit” (Friedan, 1963, p. 31), and liberation from these was more important than liberation from “the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife” (p. 31), which she referred to as “the continual demands on her time” (p. 31). Over time, women became more autonomous and found it easier to make decisions on abortion, contraceptives, employment and childcare decisions, equal pay, and many other decisions that they were prevented from having a say about before because patriarchy infantilised them. Decisions regarding women’s bodies and equal pay are ongoing challenges in the world today, as is clear from current affairs and news headlines.

In 1970 another key text of radical feminism appeared in the USA: Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, which provides insights into sexism in literature. In Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, notions of “ascendancy and power” (2016 [1969], p. 23) are interrogated. Millett writes about

“interior colonization” (p. 25) that has been achieved between the sexes and states that “[s]exual politics obtains consent through the ‘socialization’ of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status” (p. 26).

Millett likewise recognises the subjugation because of unequal power relations between races. While she wrote about this in the 1960s, it is with dismay that a contemporary reader is able to relate to what she writes about because it is an ongoing reality today:

In America, recent events have forced us to acknowledge at last that the relationship between the races is indeed a political one which involves the general control of one collectivity, defined by birth, over another collectivity, also defined by birth. (p. 24)

It is clear then that second wave feminist theory is foundational and useful because the comparisons are still relevant, and also because they foreground how the novels being investigated are interrogating and overturning these power structures. In particular, the authors of the Nigerian diasporic novels being examined deliberately upend race and gender power dynamics as they are all books with heroic black women at the fore. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are sound reasons that many theorists reject the term “feminist”. While the question of patriarchal oppression is a common issue affecting the lives of all women and their standing in society, there are black feminists who do not agree that feminism can adequately cater for their experience, even if they recognise that the African ideal which promotes the family unit as a complementary and unified entity is not always realised, which Filomena Steady describes as follows:

African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not “the other” but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own. (Steady, 1987, p. 8)

This brings about its own problems, as in many black cultures, if a woman is unmarried because she wants to be, or is judged as being unsuitable as a marriage partner, her marginalisation is as a result of the weight of both male and female oppression that favours the status of the

married woman as part of this “complement” (p. 8). The source of the oppression is only part of the problem; the fact that women have to contend with this when men are not derided in the same way for similar predicaments or choices indicates that the subjugation of women in the domestic relationship is yearned for, even by the women being subjugated, and this is often where the inequality is at its worst. The alternative is often facing derision, being ostracised or worse, sometimes by other women who support the oppressive patriarchal structures in place. In the foreword to Catherine Acholonu’s book entitled *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, Clifford Nwagu writes:

Acholonu is one of the first to document the fact which feminists refuse to see, that most cases of women abuse in traditional Africa are perpetuated by fellow women. It is well known that in quite a large number of cases women, according to Ishiaku, are collaborators and, in some instances, the “predators”. (Acholonu, 1995, p. iii)

Third wave feminism of the 1990s was influenced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s theory on intersectionality that was proposed in 1989, which states that the oppression of black women needs to take into account the compounded issues of race, class *and* gender. By ignoring this intersection one cannot address the subordination of black women using the existing feminist theories that were justifiably accused of catering predominantly for the experiences of middle-class white women:

Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating “women’s experience” or “the Black experience” into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Crenshaw’s theory is a dismissal of second wave feminist theory as inadequate and even irrelevant for understanding “the Black experience” (p. 140). Another problem is that feminism is often viewed as racist, a view held by bell hooks who feels that it reinforces “white supremacy” (hooks, 1984, p. 3), thus making it impossible for women of different races to “bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries” (p. 3) because issues of race and class are inextricably tied to sexist oppression for many womanist writers:

Many womanist writers even portray racial and classist oppression as having precedence over sexist oppression. This is because the womanists believe that the emancipation of Black womenfolk cannot be achieved apart from the emancipation of the whole race. Womanists therefore believe in partnership with their menfolk. This characteristic distinguishes womanism from feminism which is mainly a separatist ideology. (p. 3)

Sotunsa Ebunoluwa agrees with this view in her 2009 paper entitled “Feminism: The Quest for an African Variant” when she contends:

Although feminism claimed as its goal the emancipation of all women from sexist oppression, it failed to take into consideration the peculiarities of Black females and men of colour. In practice, feminism concentrated on the needs of middle class white women in Britain and America while posing as the movement for the emancipation of women globally. (Ebunoluwa, 2009, p. 228)

Thus, while feminism is a useful point of departure, it is not entirely inclusive and thus unable to adequately describe the experience of black women. Therefore, Alice Walker’s womanist definition will be at the core of this study as it provides the framework for an audacious womanist, outlined in this excerpt from the first part of Walker’s definition that summarises the traits of a womanist as usually referring to:

[...] outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. (Walker, 1983, p. xi)

While the “audacity” that Walker refers to in this first part of her definition of a womanist is the focus of this study, other feminist and womanist theories are also relevant. The intersection of these diverse theories will be approached circumspectly to avoid generalising about the experiences of black women with diverse cultures, countries, and experiences, within Africa and abroad. However, the alternative, which would be to discount the intersection of feminist and womanist thought, is problematic, perhaps even prescriptive, as there are features of feminism that provide a useful foundation for womanist theories, and womanist theories that

can also inform feminist theories, both retrospectively and prospectively. Second wave feminism, principally theorised in terms of the perspectives of liberal, radical and materialist politics, still has considerable merit. It was in response to this earlier wave of feminism that originated in the 1960s that existing definitions were challenged and broadened to describe more fully the experiences of black women, crucially to begin to question the generalisation of the essential similarities of the experiences of all women. However, with any suggestion of the generalisation of the experiences of all women the question of essentialism arises. Rosaria Champagne considered this question in her 1995 paper entitled “Feminism, Essentialism, and Historical Context”:

Since the 1970s, Women’s Studies, the earliest academic manifestation of feminism, has accepted – although not without conflict and turmoil – that Woman is a category and that women, although different and separate (and mediated through categories of class, race, age and sexual orientation) all share a culturally degraded status. Different feminist critical positions have engaged with and debated this issue of essentialism and its place in maintaining the politics of feminism. (Champagne, 1995, p. 96)

It is Champagne’s view that “essentialism has become a weapon and a symbol of intellectual warfare within feminism” (p. 96). Champagne notes that views on the subject of essentialism change and writes that Gayatri Spivak called strategic essentialism “a trap” (p. 96) in a paper entitled “Feminism and Critical Theory” (Spivak, 1978), but later modified this outlook by asking instead “that feminist theorists take the ‘risk’ of essence” (p. 96). Thus, Champagne views essentialism as “neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, and its presence in contemporary feminist discourse and practice cannot be simply embraced or dismissed” (p. 96) because it “saps feminist energy when it becomes a tool feminists use to size up other feminists” (p. 96).

In her book on gender studies, Heidi Mirza is also cautious about a “naïve, essentialist universal notion of homogenous black womanhood” (Mirza, 2004, p. 5). Black women may thus identify in different ways and should explore “this fluidity” (p. 5) to uncover “positive black female identities” (p. 5). By confronting essentialism in characterisation, more positive ideals for both men and women in the books being studied have emerged. Omotayo Olóruntoba-Oj and Taiwo Olóruntoba-Oju discuss the subversion of these roles in their paper entitled “Models in the construction of female identity in Nigerian postcolonial literature”. In the paper, they consider



the subversion of stereotypical gender roles, and novels that construct new identities to counter essentialism in womanist and black feminist studies:

The most important of these is the strategy of inversion, basically by fronting female subjectivity and relegating, even discrediting, the male subject (Stratton, 1994, pp. 62–63). In works employing this strategy, female characters are made the subject of nationalist and other narratives, while male subjects take a secondary role. The trope of wifehood and or motherhood as a “necessary” identification parameter of African womanhood is equally subverted. (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013, p. 9)

The paper also considers the negotiation of this model, which still argues against essentialism, but which includes the ideals of motherhood and wifehood. This refers to the complementary nature of relationships and roles between genders in motherist theory, which is discussed later in this chapter. Another theorist who explores essentialism is Zoë Wicomb, whose paper argues in favour of South African black feminists who propose a “historically specific” (Wicomb, 1990, p. 38) and “anti-essentialist criticism” (p. 38) that “incorporates race and class as interlocking factors” (p. 38). The focus on the intersection of the other factors, such as those that are historically, and I propose, geographically, determined, is critical for understanding why essentialism is problematic in womanist theory that assumes an overarching commonality to suit all contexts, such as Walker’s womanism.

Essentialism is not the only difficulty faced in discourse about the oppression of women. On the other side of the coin, exclusivity is also problematic. Walker’s womanist definition came about as a result of the writing of two colleagues, Patricia Meyer Spacks and Phyllis Chesler, who “rejected the inclusion of African American women writers in their survey of women writers’ history” (Izgarjan and Markov, 2012, p. 308):

When Walker questioned such a stance, Spacks and Chesler tried to justify themselves by saying that they could not write about women whose experience was so different from theirs. That, however, did not stop them from writing extensively about eighteenth and nineteenth century British women writers whose experience was also presumably quite different from that of Spacks and Chesler who are American scholars living in the twentieth century (Walker, 1983, p. 372). (p. 308)

This dismissal of black writers by Walker's colleagues smarted and prompted her to define womanism to describe the experience of black women in her womanist definition. Other problems arise when considering context, and agreeing on a single black feminist theoretical approach has proved challenging because the experiences of African American and other diasporic African women, African women in Africa and other women of colour worldwide, are vastly different, with varying contexts, needs, views, and experiences. It is critically important to state at the outset that womanist and black feminist concerns have been on the agenda for far longer than feminist theory suggests, but because black women were oppressed and concerned primarily with survival and emancipation of the entire race, the theory itself took some time to be expressed as such:

Hence, in this respect for White women, Africana women activists in America in particular, such as Sojourner Truth (militant abolition spokesperson and universal suffragist), Harriet Tubman (Underground Railroad conductor who spent her lifetime aiding Africana slaves, both males and females, in their escape to the North for freedom), and Ida B Wells (anti-lynching crusader during the early twentieth century), were called pre-feminists, in spite of the fact that the activities of these Africana women did not focus necessarily on women's issues. (Hudson-Weems, 1995, pp. 21-22)

These pre-feminists had survival to contend with that naturally superseded other forms of oppression.

Ebunoluwa recognises womanist definitions by Walker and Ogunyemi as being "rooted in Black culture which accounts for the centrality of family, community and motherhood" (p. 230), and while there are differences, there are many ways in which these womanist theories intersect. However, it would also be an oversimplification to assume that womanism can cater to the experience of all black women. Ebunoluwa states that one of the problems with womanist theory is that the term "Black" is used to refer to anyone who is not white, while in reality, womanist definitions are predominantly used to describe the experience of African Americans. Furthermore, Walker's African American womanism mentions same-sex intimacy between women, while the African variant is dismissive of same-sex relationships because of the aforementioned centrality of the heterosexual family and motherhood, according to Mary Kolawole (Kolawole, 1997, p. 15):

To the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their world-view. It is not even an option to millions of African women and can therefore not be the solution as Jill Johnson and many other Western or westernized women propose. (p. 15)

Another problem arises when one takes cognisance of Alice Walker's relationship with her own daughter, Rebecca. While Walker's definition does refer to "Mama", she acknowledges that she may not always have been a present mother to her own daughter when she writes, "I feel a little guilty about the amount of time 'taken from my daughter' by my work" (quoted in Davey, 2001, p. 153). Walker wrote a poem about the conflicting emotions she felt as a writer and mother:

Now that the book is finished,  
now that I know my characters will live,  
I can love my child again.  
She need sit no longer  
at the back of my mind  
the lonely sucking of her thumb  
a giant stopper in my throat. (p. 153)

This poem seems to suggest that while Walker is writing she does not have time to be a mother, and yet paradoxically she felt that she had a duty to be the mother of all women as a womanist theorist. She claimed to see her daughter more as a sister, and wrote in another poem about the various calamities in famous women writers' lives and listed hers as being Rebecca, her daughter. Walker's daughter felt this neglect keenly, and their relationship was acrimonious until recently:

Walker declines to talk about her estrangement from her daughter, Rebecca, who accused her in print of neglect, always putting her needs as a writer ahead of her responsibilities as a parent. The two have also clashed over feminism, "As a little girl", the younger Walker has written, "I wasn't even allowed to play with dolls or stuffed toys in case they brought out a maternal instinct. It was drummed into me that being a mother, raising children and running a home were a form of slavery." (Posner, 2013)

Despite the criticism of Walker's role as a mother, she disputes her critics' view that there is only one way to mother:

I believe you mother everybody, not in a cloying, hovering way, but taking care of what is around you. We have suffered from building a country on the bones of the children of Indians. So true motherhood is accepting that everything needs to be cared for, not just your own child. (Posner, 2013)

These issues around gender expectations, in terms of race, sexual inclination and motherhood are just a few of the problems with trying to agree on a one-size-fits-all theory to describe the oppression of women of colour worldwide when the theories, and theorists, themselves are proponents of complex and unique views.

In an emphatic denial of Western feminism, Indian activist, Madhu Kishwar, describes why she does not call herself a feminist, outlining her reasons, as a woman of colour, for feeling that Western feminism is imperialist. She states that she resists the label "because of its over-close association with the western women's movement" (Kishwar, 1990, p. 3), even though she is "committed to pro-women politics" (p. 3). Kishwar goes on to explain that she rejects this label because of the imbalance of feminist ideology and power that flows from West to East, with these Western ideologies being seen to be paramount and everything else, just an "echo" (p. 3):

However, given our situation today, where the general flow of ideas and of labels is one way, from West to East; in this overall context of a highly imbalanced power relation, feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. (p. 3)

While it is understandable to caution against using feminism to address the oppression of black women for the reasons stated, one might still advocate against an outright rejection of feminism, despite the often quite supercilious Western feminist theories and attitudes. For Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, despite being vocal about her views on Western feminism being incongruous with African concerns, she does not entirely reject the word "feminism". Instead, she states, "I am a feminist with a small 'f', I love men and good men are the salt of the earth (Buchi Emecheta in a 1980 interview)" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 7). What she means

by feminism with a small “f” is unclear, but it does suggest that she does not feel it necessary to entirely discard the label.

Ama Ata Aidoo, a well-known Ghanaian academic, has also had ambivalent feelings about feminism, and at one point rejected feminism for being unable to speak to the experience of African women:

Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing Western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women (Ama Ata Aidoo, 1986). (Quoted in Phillips, 2006, p. 44)

Aidoo’s rebuttal above may have been tongue-in-cheek, but nevertheless was in response to being called a feminist because her writing dealt with women’s issues. Demonstrating that the position with regard to feminism and its relevance to African women is complicated and dynamic, Aidoo was also quoted before this saying the opposite: “I shall not protest if you call me a feminist” (Aidoo, 1982, p. 41). Aidoo qualified this by saying:

But I am not a feminist because I write about women. Are men writers male chauvinist pigs just because they write about men? Or is a writer an African nationalist just by writing about Africans? Or a revolutionary for writing about poor oppressed humanity? Obviously not... no writer, female or male, is a feminist just by writing about women. (p. 41)

In a subsequent interview with Maria Frías, Ama Ata Aidoo was asked for her views on the supposed fragmentary nature of African feminism, which Aidoo replied that she had not considered before. Aidoo’s response clarifies her position somewhat:

I also suspect that when people do not want to deal with an issue, they look for lack of coherence in the issue itself. This is what in American English is called “nit-picking” – the fundamental issue is, are we going to develop our own feminist consciousness? It does not matter if some of us are womanists. Are we feminist? My point is that with all ideological thoughts there are bound to be disagreements, different shapes. (Frías-Rudolphi, 2003, pp. 27-28)

Aidoo elaborated by saying that if womanists and feminists are trying to gain awareness about the position of women, then that is what is most important. While she might argue with theorists about certain viewpoints and discuss the “validity of the term” (p. 28), womanist, which she did with Alice Walker, this discussion does not mean that she aims to “negate the validity of the term” (p. 28). Aidoo’s concerns are regarding the problem of clarity, but she will never say that “womanists are so different I cannot talk to them” (p. 28).

Abena Busia, another Ghanaian scholar, is more “comfortable with the term ‘feminism’” (Kolawole, 1997, p. 8) because she believes that to “concede the term feminism” (p. 8) would be to lose “the power struggle” (p. 8). Busia’s view is pragmatic:

Feminism is an ideological praxis that gives us a series of multiple strategies (of reading, of analysis) and what those strategies have in common is that the woman matters. (p. 8)

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie agrees with the view that feminism should not be rejected outright, but she acknowledges that the term is like a “red flag to the bull of African men” (quoted in Kolawole, 1997, p. 23). Instead of feminism, Ogundipe-Leslie uses her own acronym STIWA: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (Stiwanism). She feels that the more important concern is that one argues against simplistic ideas about African women, for example, ideas that suggest that they are voiceless and need to be spoken for. Ogundipe-Leslie believes that African women are not voiceless, they are simply not heard:

We neither look for their voices where they utter them nor do we think it worthwhile to listen to their voices. We sometimes substitute our voices for their own and we do not even know when we do this nor are we able to recognise the differences in the mixed or substituted voices. (Quoted in Bhavnani, 2001, p. 139)

It is clear that the position with regard to feminism and the question of labels is complicated, and while the lack of consensus might seem fragmentary, when women of colour can self-define and voice their experiences, this in itself is progress. It is also important to note that there are black feminists who do not entirely reject the term “feminism” and have instead revised it to fit their own views and contexts. Obioma Nnaemeka is one theorist who has adapted feminism for African culture by coining the term, nego-feminism, which stands for

“no ego” feminism and negotiation. Its foundation is based on the “principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance” (Nnaemeka, 2003, p. 377), where negotiation could also mean to “successfully go around” (p. 377). Nnaemeka states:

African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. (p. 378)

Nnaemeka is concerned with a space where this “dynamic process” of negotiation can take place, and she demonstrates her faith in feminism as a useful tool that is intrinsic to African women as this “is what they do for themselves and for others” (p. 378).

For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework. My use of space – the third space – provides the terrain for the unfolding of the dynamic process. Furthermore, nego-feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by evershifting local and global exigencies. The theology of nearness grounded in the indigenous installs feminism in Africa as a performance and an altruistic act. African women do feminism; feminism is what they do for themselves and for others. (p. 378)

Nnaemeka is not the only African scholar who believes in dialogue and negotiation. There are Nigerian scholars who agree and draw on an old Yoruba aphorism about the marketplace being a place for this give and take (*Ona kan o wo oja*). One such scholar is Ropo Sekoni, whose “emphasis on the world as a marketplace where human values are negotiated is very significant” (Kolawole, 1997, p. 35). It is in the Yoruba marketplace where interaction, negotiation, and exchange create meaning and are agreed, through a process of giving and taking.

Nego-feminism is just one of the innovative models of feminism emerging from Africa, and there are other models being explored to address the varying needs of black women. Naomi Nkealah’s cameline agency has adapted Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism to address the post-apartheid survival of women in South Africa. Adimora-Ezeigbo’s snail-sense

feminism is similar to nego-feminism in that it is concerned with tolerance and negotiating around “land mines”, and this ability to discern when to stand and when to go around is an important aspect of snail-sense feminism. Nkealah quotes Adimora-Ezeigbo at the beginning of her paper entitled “Cameline Agency: A New Agenda for Social Transformation in South African Women’s Writing 2012–2014” to demonstrate that she agrees that feminism can be made viable, but that new models are necessary, “especially those that are realistic, practical and functional” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012, p. 26). Snail-sense feminism emerged in Nigeria, making it particularly interesting considering the Nigerian diasporic authors being studied:

The theory derives from the habit of snails which most Nigerian women adopt in their relationships with men. Women in our cultures – from different parts of Nigeria – often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men. This is akin to what the snail does with the environment in which it moves and exists. The snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects .... Moreover, the snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria’s harsh patriarchal culture. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs this theory which I call snail-sense feminism. (p. 27)

While it is true that to negotiate difficult terrain takes strength and intelligence, Nkealah advocates for a feminist model that does not tolerate and accommodate patriarchy but instead asks the question, “Is it not time to find alternative models of women’s survival that actually enforce change within the environments women operate in?” (Nkealah, 2017, p. 122). Instead of a snail, she suggests that the camel is a better metaphor because it can travel great distances with heavy loads, it is quick and formidable in war, it is not easily crushed, and does not endure hardships, like insects, without swatting them away, it is impressive in size and it can survive with little nourishment in adverse conditions (pp. 122-123). Using the word agency is self-explanatory and is intended to convey “the ability of oppressed women to act decisively to change their circumstances and regain control of their lives” (p. 123). Camels have also been known to attack abusive owners, or spit at them, which is similar to what women are capable of doing in the face of male violence, according to Nkealah. They may act to protect themselves or seek retribution, or metaphorically “spit” by speaking out. This spit is not saliva but is instead



their stomach contents, “which is a symbolic act of purging themselves of indigestible food” (p. 125), a powerful metaphor for the retaliation of abused women. For Nkealah, the snail’s focus on self-preservation certainly does take strength but changes nothing. A camel is a better representation of women who are not only concerned with self-preservation but are also active agents for change.

Coincidentally, camels also feature in *Who Fears Death*. The first mention of a camel occurs when Onyesonwu’s stepfather tells the story of his late wife, Njeri:

“I’ve read the Great Book twice!” I bragged. “Impressive,” he said. “Well, my Njeri could speak to camels. Camel-talking is a man’s job, so she chose camel racing instead. And Njeri didn’t just race. She won races.” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 11)

This story tells the reader two important things. First, that women are oppressed under patriarchy, and second, that there are strong women, like Njeri, who challenge this status quo. She may not have been allowed to speak to camels, but that did not stop her from working with them. Onyesonwu’s stepfather goes on to tell her that Njeri was crushed under her camel during a race and that the camel followed her body around after her death. It subsequently died of grief. Later on in the story, once Onyesonwu has left with her friends on her quest to confront her father, three camels decide to join them. The group introduces themselves to the camels ceremoniously as a sign of their respect and to demonstrate their acceptance of their allegiance. These camels are not simply treated as animals and are recognised for their strength and loyalty, and for the usefulness of their milk. They are not beasts of burden in bondage – they arrive of their own accord and leave in the same way. Whether intentional or not, *Who Fears Death* corroborates Nkealah’s view that camels are formidable and deserve respect, like the women in the story who overcome great adversity.

Patricia Hill Collins considers the problem of the labels, womanist and feminist, in her paper, “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond” (1996). Collins considers Alice Walker’s definition of a womanist and states that even though Walker’s definition is “traditionally universalist” (Collins, 1996, p. 10), the definition appears to contradict this by implying that black folk tradition makes black women superior. Collins believes that “Walker constructs black women’s experiences in opposition to those of white women” (p. 10). Whether or not this was Walker’s intention is unclear, but she certainly does foreground the beauty of

women of colour when referring to “the garden where room exists for all flowers to bloom equally and differently” (p. 10), agreeing that there is space for all women of colour, but at the same time acknowledging their differences in this beautiful flower metaphor. Furthermore, when stating that “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Walker, 1983, xii), the implication is that these terms are linked, although they are different hues. While Collins is clear that feminism caters mostly for the needs of white women, she agrees that there is a place for “black feminism” (Collins, 1996, p. 13):

Using the term “black feminism” disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective “black” challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and serves to remind white women that they comprise neither the only nor the normative “feminists”. (p. 13)

Collins concludes her 1996 paper by stating that black women throughout the world, whether under the yoke of poverty, or needing to grapple with privilege, or whatever their particular circumstances are, need to work “through the interconnected nature of multiple systems of oppression and potential ways that such intersectionality might foster resistance” (p. 16) if they want to come to realise Walker’s visionary term, “womanism”. However, it is important to note that these interconnected systems of oppression function differently for women in parts of Africa, especially in places that decolonised in the 1960s, where being defined in relation to whiteness or white privilege is not necessarily apposite.

Nigerian womanist, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, believes that instead of allying themselves with “radical white feminists” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 63), black women writers have “explored the gamut of other positions and produced an exciting, fluid corpus that defies rigid categorization” (p. 63). In the same paper, Ogunyemi expounds upon the reason black female novelists have not aligned themselves with feminists in the same way that white female novelists have:

As a group, they are distinct from white feminists because of their race, because they have experienced the past and present subjugation of the black population along with present-day subtle (or not so subtle) control exercised over them by the alien, Western culture. (p. 64)

Ogunyemi concerned herself with an Afrocentric theory to address this gap in “categorization” and thus her definition began to evolve at around the same time as, but independent of, Walker’s womanist definition. Ogunyemi notes that she “was pleasantly surprised” (p. 62) to find that it overlapped with Walker’s definition in many ways. Ogunyemi’s definition states:

Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a “brother” or a “sister” or a “father” or a “mother” to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (p. 62)

Returning once again to Alice Walker’s definition, it is, in fact, similar in many respects. First, it is concerned with Ogunyemi’s “black womandom” (p. 62) when it states:

From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. (Walker, 1983, p. xi)

This first part of Walker’s definition also concerns itself with what Ogunyemi refers to as “power” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 62), which is more specifically outlined in Walker’s description as “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). This sense of power, embodied in audacity and courage, is called “womanish” behaviour – the opposite of “girlish” (p. xi) or “frivolous” (p. xi) behaviour. As has been previously stated, these womanist epithets are relevant to the heroes in the novels being discussed in this study because they embody these powerful attributes by being “Responsible. In charge. Serious” (p. xi).

The second part of Walker’s definition deviates slightly from Ogunyemi’s as it is more open to same-sex relationships in the first sentence, which is normalised in an African American

context, but, as previously stated, in an African context the heterosexual family and motherhood are considered to be central (Kolawole, 1997, p. 15). This second part of Walker's womanist definition then realigns with Ogunyemi's definition when it calls for "black unity" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 62) that is "mandalic at its core" (p. 62) because Walker's definition has similar concerns – "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. xii):

Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." (p. xii)

The third part of Walker's womanist definition is comparable to Ogunyemi's that promotes the "dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 62). This is so because Walker speaks of loving music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the Folk, and herself. "Regardless" (Walker, 1983, p. xii). This love of self is comparable to "self-healing" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 62), as are the other celebratory actions associated with love and the other womanist ideals set forth.

The final part of Walker's definition states that womanist "is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker, 1983, p. xii), which as has already been discussed, is ambiguous as it appears to simultaneously endorse and contradict a link between feminism and womanism. There is no parallel in Ogunyemi's womanist definition. Both Walker's and Ogunyemi's womanist definitions are relevant to the books being discussed, particularly the ideals promoted, such as courageous and responsible action, audacity, power, self-love, sex and sexuality, survival and wholeness of black people, and a love of "the Folk", which refers to black culture and traditions.

There is another branch of womanism that is relevant to this study. Clenora Hudson-Weems's *Africana Womanism* is a book that "has come as a relief to many Africans who are not at ease with feminism in its diverse shades of definition" (Kolawole, 1997, p. 24). Once again, the focus is on the centrality of family and is concerned with the act of self-naming as a "starting point of African women's consciousness" (p. 24). *Africana Womanism* is similar to Ogunyemi's as it distinguishes itself from Walker's womanism by focusing on African women and their concerns and experiences, as a result of the weight of patriarchal oppression, but also "tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and gender imperialism" (p. 25), and is not a "men-hating ideology" (p. 25). Hudson-Weems discusses the process of defining *Africana Womanism*, which she did shortly after Walker and Ogunyemi's definitions emerged in the early 1980s. Hudson-Weems states that she rejected Walker's womanism because of the ambiguous third part that has been interpreted in different ways by theorists – for some as differentiating the two theories, and for others for linking them too closely with the colour purple for womanism and lavender for feminism. Hudson-Weems's rejection is based on her belief that Walker is linking womanism and feminism as "there is hardly any differentiation, only a slight shade" (Hudson-Weems, 1995, p. 23). Hudson-Weems states that she coined the term, *Africana Womanism*, in 1987, intending to convey "ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity" (p. 22). The definition proposes that a woman's ethnicity is directly tied to her "land base", which some might view as problematic as it does not automatically give access to current realities in Africa, nor does it recognise that these are not homogeneous on the continent:

The first part of the coinage, *Africana*, identifies the ethnicity of the woman being considered, and this reference to her ethnicity, establishing her cultural identity, relates directly to her ancestry and land base – Africa. (p. 22)

The second part of Hudson-Weems's definition, *Womanism*, to differentiate it from Walker's womanism, refers to Sojourner Truth's famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851) in which she questions "the accepted idea of womanhood" (p. 23). Truth was challenging the oppression of black women "who, unlike the White woman, [have] received no special privileges in American society" (p. 23). This second part of the definition is also intended to differentiate it from feminism by using the root word "woman" instead of "female", because "only a female of the human race can be a woman" (p. 23) whereas being female "can refer to a member of the animal or plant kingdom as well as to a member of the human race" (p. 23). In the foreword

to Hudson-Weems's book the Nigerian playwright, Zulu Sofola, re-emphasises the distinction between womanism and feminism:

*Africana Womanism* strongly makes the point that the Eurocentric definition of woman is alien and destructive to the woman of African heritage. Consequently, subscribers to the disparate Eurocentric and Afrocentric definitions cannot share in a common movement whose essential definition and course of action are anathema to the Afrocentric world view. (p. xviii)

While this is an emphatic rejection of feminism, it is not true to say that other African theorists feel there is no place for feminism in African and African American feminist theory, as is being demonstrated by theorists like Nnaemeka, Adimora-Ezeigbo, Nkealah and others, who use the term in their own theories.

Pumla Dineo Gqola addresses the South African perspective and believes that feminist and womanist scholars have “uncovered the highly metaphorised appearances of the category ‘Blackwomen’ in ways which work to erase the heterogeneity which characterises the experiences of Blackwomen subjectivities” (Gqola, 2010, p. 45). One example of the danger of homogeneity that is relevant to this study is the specificity of Nigeria's milieu and culture, meaning that feminism cannot simply be applied without considering this. Yoruba scholar, Nkiru Nzegwu, outlines why patriarchy is a Western grievance that has no equivalent in gender discussions about Yoruba women because it fails to take into account the dual-sex system of the Onitsha:

At its basic primary level, the Onitsha dual-sex political system is underpinned by egalitarian ideas on which citizenship rests. *Nwa onye Onitsha adaro aka ibeya*, (No Onitsha person is greater than another) enunciates the community's position that every man and woman is equal. (Nzegwu, 1994, p. 94)

Despite this, Nzegwu concedes that “feminism has made important contributions towards redefining gender relations” (p. 95), but adds that “its individualistic notion of equality in which sex difference is viewed as inconsequential is problematic” (p. 95). The emphasis on individualism “obscures the in-built power imbalance between men and women, and allows gender inequity to be preserved and reinforced” (p. 95). The irony is that because of this, in

Nzegwu's view, emancipation through feminism becomes "a non-liberatory concept" (p. 95) in the Onitsha context, when it is trying to achieve liberation. The responsibilities for Onitsha women are viewed as being equal in importance to men's but are different. These responsibilities focus on motherhood and family matters, and are briefly outlined as follows:

At the family kinship level, we are mothers, daughters, and wives. With the fathers, sons, and husbands, we hold the family together. We have diverse groups with political responsibilities to regulate different aspects of family life: *umu agbo* for unmarried girls, *umu ada* for daughters, *inyemedi* for wives, *otu ogbo* for age-grade, and *ikporo Onitsha* for all women. Every aspect of our lives is politicized and negotiated. We treat life as political, and organize ourselves accordingly. (p. 79)

This focus on motherhood and being a wife is focal in many African cultures. While there are theorists who "attempt to construct a new female identity that confronts traditional conceptions of wifehood and motherhood as the sole and inescapable fate of African womanhood" (Olórunto-Oju, 2013, p. 9), many black feminists and womanists still do focus on the importance of mothers and motherhood. This is because in many African cultures "[m]other is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women" (Oyewumi, 2000, p. 1096). Catherine Acholonu's Motherism offers an Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism that focuses on motherhood and Mother Earth, without excluding men. In other words, anyone, man or woman, can be a motherist, and in fact, men are seen as a necessary part of the balance required for human existence and the complementary co-existence that many African theorists esteem. Therefore, another key motherist ideal present in most of the novels is the lover or helpmeet. Only *The Icarus Girl* does not have a female protagonist with a male partner or love interest because Jessamy is only a child. All of the other novels have female heroes who fall in love and are complemented by a man, with each of them constituting "the critical half that makes the human whole" (Steady, 1987, p. 8). They are not dominated by the men, and in fact, the woman is the hero who "saves the day" in each book, but the men play an important role as helpmeet and lover. It is a refreshing inversion of the stereotype where the man rides in and saves the damsel in distress because, in these novels, the woman is the heroic saviour.

As aforementioned, Motherism is a relevant theory in these novels as the protagonists all look to strong mothers to shape and guide them, and the centrality of mothers in African culture supports this reading of books written by Nigerian diasporic writers who write about strong

mothers and daughters. Catherine Acholonu's book on Motherism offers a useful theoretical lens because of its focus on the mother-daughter relationship, but also because it recognises that "the role and place of women in Africa differ from culture to culture, ethnic group to ethnic group, and therefore from region to region and from nation to nation" (Acholonu, 1995, p. 2). Acholonu notes that there is no single "mould" (p. 2) for the African woman and that to generalise about the oppression of African women by men is "a dangerous misrepresentation of the true state of affairs" (p. 3) because of the "multifarious nature of the continent" (p. 3). Acholonu notes that the African woman holds a "privileged position in her society, hardly to be conceived by her Western counterparts" (p. 3). This situation is certainly true in *Who Fears Death* where we see the respect shown to Nana the Wise and the other elder women who conduct important rituals.

Acholonu writes about the balance of power in matriarchal and patriarchal systems and states that "there is always *a balance that ensures the mutual distribution of power and roles between the sexes*" (p. 18, italics in original). She underscores the importance of motherhood in African culture, which she says is "revealed in the widespread use of the womb shaped calabash, and the *earthenware* pots in African villages for drinking, cooking and holding medicine" (p. 22). Furthermore, Acholonu identifies "six different faces of the African Eve" (p. 24), as a wife, daughter/sister, mother, queen, priestess, goddess and *husband* (p. 24), discussed above in relation to the various motherist roles that do not exclude men.

Ifi Amadiume, a Nigerian anthropologist, has found that African women's power stems from the "sacred and almost divine importance accorded to motherhood" (Amadiume, 1997, p. 147):

In my research I have found that the traditional power of African women had an economic and ideological basis, and derived from the sacred and almost divine importance accorded to motherhood. This has led me to argue that the issue of the structural status of motherhood is the main difference between the historical experiences of African women and those of European women. (pp. 146-147)

Amadiume's view of women and motherhood has two implications for this study, which dovetail with Acholonu's Motherism. First, Amadiume refers to "power", which is demonstrated in each of the novels through mothers, motherhood and/or mothering. Second,



she refers to motherhood as “sacred” and “almost divine”. This power and sacred divinity are evident in each of the books.

In *The Icarus Girl*, Sarah is Jessamy’s Nigerian mother who is married to a British man. It is evident that Sarah is a formidable woman who tries to balance her adopted Western life with her Nigerian heritage. Sarah is often the decision-maker in the novel, slapping Jessamy if she misbehaves (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 114), and early on in the novel, Sarah slaps Jessamy out of her “febrile illness”, which to the reader appears to be a seizure or panic attack (p. 9). In contrast, her husband is a mild-mannered man, and although affectionate, somewhat ineffective overall. The family is led by Sarah, and the family’s trip to Nigeria to visit family there is difficult for both Sarah and Jessamy because of Sarah’s father who derides her for adopting Western ways. It demonstrates Sarah’s strength that despite her traditional, equally formidable father, she forges her own path and ensures that Jessamy is familiar with both her British and Nigerian heritage. In the end, it is Jessamy’s mother who takes her back to Nigeria to help her to find a way to release her from the malicious twin spirit.

In *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu finds out that her mother is the reason she was born a sorcerer and is told, “Your mother knew exactly what she was doing when she asked that you be a sorceress once you were born and a girl. It was her revenge” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 308). Onyesonwu discovers that her mother also has supernatural abilities and can “travel within, she can *alu*” (p. 308). This means that she can take on another shape and travel through the wilderness, the sacred spiritual plane that one goes to after death. Her mother’s magical gifts are bestowed on Onyesonwu, as is her mother’s plan for revenge.

Phoenix’s mother, Vera, in *The Book of Phoenix* is an ordinary African American woman who gives birth to her alone because the Big Eye is afraid she will “blow up... or something” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 206). When Phoenix finds her mother, Vera is dying, and Phoenix realises how much her mother loves her when she is able to speak to her for the first and last time before dying:

“Phoenix,” she whispered. She coughed as she spoke. Her file said that she was catatonic, brain-damaged, nearly a vegetable. It said she’d lost her ability to speak long before arriving at the facility. The radiation I exuded as a baby in utero for nine months damaged her beyond repair. The file said. (p. 205)

The Big Eye took Phoenix from Vera as soon as she was born even though they had promised Vera that she could raise her. Carrying Phoenix eventually killed her, and her dying words to Phoenix are “Phoenix, give ’em hell. You hear me, girl? Give ’em *hell*” (p. 206).

For Zélie, her mother is the reason she seeks revenge. Zélie’s quest is also for revenge and redemption after her Reaper mother is dragged out and strangled with a “majacite” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 78) chain, which is the only weapon that can be used against *divîners* like her. Zélie has inherited the *divîner* gift from her mother and is in mortal danger because she sets into motion events that will bring back magic and topple the tyrannical king who ordered her mother’s death.

In each of the books, it is evident that the female hero protagonist is guided or inspired by a strong mother, each of whom is powerful and audacious in her own right. Not only are they powerful, but there is a sacred bond between each mother and her daughter that compounds this power and inspires each girl to overcome nearly impossible odds. Because of this, the girls are empowered to become “womanish” (Walker, 1983, p. xi) and demonstrate “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (p. xi). They want “to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one” (p. xi) and are “[i]nterested in grown-up doings” (p. xi). They are “Responsible. In charge. Serious” (p. xi). The interplay between Motherism and womanism broadly is also complemented by the interplay between feminist, black feminist, and other womanist theories, which all concern themselves with the emancipation and recognition of powerful women. While it is imperative to acknowledge the problem of suggesting an overarching commonality in the diverse theories that challenge the oppression and marginalisation of women, specifically women of colour, it is helpful to concede that there are areas that intersect and have the liberation of women as a common goal.

The theoretical standpoint that will be given the most attention in this thesis is womanism, in particular, Alice Walker “audacious” and “willful”<sup>4</sup> (Walker, 1983, p. xi) womanist, Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s womanist metamorphosis in novels that function as the “contemporary woman’s *ofò*” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90), and Catherine Acholonu’s Motherism. In her paper, “The African Femme Fatale: Reappropriation of a Mythical figure in *White Men*

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<sup>4</sup> See also Sara Ahmed’s *Willful Subjects* (2014).

*are Cracking Up* (Ngozi Onwurah, 1994)”, Emily Herbert posits that Ogunyemi “praises black women writers’ use of magical realism as a way to transcend the boundaries of gender and race but also class” (2020, p. 52). Furthermore, Herbert states that for Ogunyemi the “post-womanist heroine” (p. 52) is an “‘astute woman’ who seduces men through both physical and intellectual exchange, and actively works to shatter patriarchy” (p. 52). Each of the characters in this study are the embodiment of this astute post-womanist hero.

## CHAPTER 2: SPECULATIVE AFRO-GOTHIC AND AFROFUTURIST FICTION

Black to the future, back to the past  
History is a mystery, cause it has  
All the info  
You need to know  
Where you're from, why'd you come  
And that'll tell you where you're going

(We gotta unite  
We gotta work together in unity and harmony)

Black to the future<sup>5</sup> (Quoted in Dery, 1994b, p. 8)

Defining Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist branches of speculative fiction is undertaken in this chapter. This is necessary to clarify the relevance of speculative settings for black women in Africa and the diaspora, as well as the liberatory potential of each novel. Analysing speculative fiction allows the reader to imagine a future where oppressive structures are overturned, and more specifically, Afro-Gothic fiction foregrounds the predicament of the black protagonist overcoming otherworldly dark forces, while Afrofuturism liberates the black protagonist by presenting her as the hero; in the selected novels she is represented as the literal and metaphoric bringer of light.

Speculative fiction, as the term suggests, allows the writer to speculate about events and settings, whether completely imaginary or only partially so, “that contrast with their audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (Gill, 2013, pp. 72-73). This lack of empirical knowledge in fiction is useful as it reveals that speculative fiction has the potential to liberate oppressed groups (historically sidelined and treated as different or “alien”) through this reimagining of reality. RB Gill believes that these narratives go beyond “counterfactual and uchronian narratives” (p. 73) to embrace “a wider, more radical vision of alternative conditions” (p. 73):

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<sup>5</sup> Def Jef, 1989.

Transcendental interventions, idealistic and artistic creations, dreams, and the fulfilment of impossible wishes and fears come within its scope: all go beyond versions of the standard procedures of this life. (p. 73)

Essentially, narratives that deviate from the expected reality into otherworldly settings, characters or events, fulfil the criteria of speculative fiction as they “go beyond versions of the standard procedures of this life” (p. 73).

Science fiction is arguably the most readily identifiable subgenre of speculative fiction. Darko Suvin’s view is that science fiction entails “cognitive estrangement” (p. 73), which he expands upon as follows:

S[cience] F[iction] is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.<sup>6</sup>  
(Quoted in Gill, p. 73)

Most will agree that one can recognise science fiction because of the alternative “empirical environment” (p. 73); however, there is no consensus regarding the requirement for estrangement. On this point, Gill emphasises one important distinction between his definition of speculative fiction and Suvin’s requirement for estrangement. Gill believes that “some speculative fiction is intended to bring recognition better characterized by engagement than by the distance caused by estrangement” (p. 73). Instead, Gill concludes that what is pivotal is that “we come to view speculative fiction as the record of journeys beyond constricted lives” (p. 83), and this serves to address the apparent contradiction between “estrangement” and “engagement” that he discusses. In other words, oppressed groups who recognise these “constricted lives” as metaphors for their own will readily engage with the subject matter, despite a sense of estrangement framed by otherworldly milieux. With these differences in mind, Gill proceeds to caution that “group cultural products [are seldom] pure in any sense” (p. 83), which is particularly true of speculative fiction as it encompasses an array of seemingly disparate subgenres, joined together because they have these “journeys beyond constricted

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<sup>6</sup> Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP.

lives” (p. 83) in common. What is clear is that these journeys allow the writer (and through her, the reader) to imagine a future where the past has been rewritten, reinterpreted or even erased. This is particularly useful for the writers of the books in this study, as Afrofuturism allows for an alternative future where the hero is a young black girl who brings light to these “constricted lives”. This ability to reimagine and reconfigure reality is powerful and is the reason Ursula Le Guin believes that with science fiction “[a]ny human power can be resisted and changed by human beings” (quoted in Imarisha, 2018). Le Guin’s belief that science fiction can be used to highlight the misuse of power advocates for a focus on “genuine humanity” (Gunn and Candelaria, 2005, p. 57) in science fiction because the characters and the challenges they face are at the centre of “good literature” (p. 57).

While science fiction is the most readily recognised subgenre of speculative fiction, Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist fiction are closely related because of similarly otherworldly settings, but what is unique to Afro-Gothicism and Afrofuturism is the Afrocentric milieu and characters. Tracking Afrofuturism’s trajectory (even before anyone called it anything other than black science fiction), the name that frequently appears is Samuel Delany, who wrote *The Jewels of Aptor* in 1962, and is often cited as the father of Afrofuturism. It is unlikely that anyone would dispute that if Delany is the father, it is apt that Octavia E Butler is viewed as the mother, as they are often named together as being two of the first to write Afrofuturist fiction:

For at least five decades, writers such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, among other leading figures of the movement known as Afrofuturism, have worked African traditions into their prize-winning science fiction and fantasy. (Newkirk, 2018)

Also worth noting around the same time as *The Jewels of Aptor* was being written in the 1960s, Stan Lee added the Black Panther comic hero (1966) to his pantheon of Marvel heroes, who has recently become mainstream, and certainly not coincidentally given her focus on strong black characters, is now being penned by Nnedi Okorafor. About the recent revival and commercial success of Black Panther, Tomi Adeyemi notes that it is important because black audiences will finally be able to imagine themselves in the role of the hero:

That’s why the success of [the recent Marvel film] Black Panther has been so significant – black and marginalised audiences have the chance to see themselves as heroes

depicted in a beautiful and empowering way, and white audiences get to see new stories told, and it becomes easier for them to picture a black superhero. Imagination is a funny thing – we sometimes need to see something before we can truly picture it. (Hughes, 2018)

Of even greater historical significance for this study are the writings of female Afrodiasporic writers, like Toni Morrison, Octavia E Butler and Nalo Hopkinson, writing in the late 1900s, because their protagonists are strong black *women* in Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist narratives by black female writers. Despite the fact that it was only in 1994 that Dery coined the term Afrofuturism as speculative fiction that addresses “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery, 1994b, p. 180), many Afrodiasporic texts were written before then. Kodwo Eshun clarifies this liberatory potential in Afrodiasporic writing by defining Afrofuturism as follows:

Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of interventions within the current political dispensation may be undertaken. (Eshun, 2003, p. 301)

Thus, when considering this Afrodiasporic projection onto the histories of racism, slavery and colonialism, the context for the emergence of the genre becomes apparent. Therefore, when Delany argues that in order to understand science fiction as a genre, the reader has a crucial role in “constructing the fictional world” (Gunn and Candelaria, 2005, p. 57), the same is true for readers of Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist texts. Delany believes that science fiction allows redundant, meaningless or metaphorical sentences to be read literally. In other words, meaning can be created in speculative fiction where metaphorical interpretation can become literal through imagining new, liberatory vistas and futures, thus “allowing a greater range of expression” (p. 57). While this form of expression is liberating and allows for authentic social commentary in imaginary places, Delany concurs with Le Guin that one cannot ignore good storytelling in the process, and in fact, perhaps it is even more difficult to write speculative fiction because it still needs to be credible, despite not necessarily having a realistic setting, plot and, sometimes, even characters. He encourages writers of science fiction to “always aspire to the heights the genre is capable of, rather than allowing it to lapse into subliterate” (p. 57), no doubt so that these new aspirational futures created be compelling enough to make

the intended comment to an audience beyond the writer. It is self-evident that for these narratives to make an impact and attract this audience, they need to do so through good writing and relevant social commentary, and not fall into the category of “subliterature” that Delany warns against. Regarding social commentary, in a dialogue during which Delany and Joanna Russ attempt to define science fiction, they struggle from the outset to agree in every respect; for example, one point of contention is whether or not HG Wells belongs in the genre, but they do not hesitate to agree that the genre helps to place the marginalised centrally. Delany expresses the view that “it has always been easier to appropriate the margin; it always has been for blacks and women, for anyone who is in a marginal position” (Delany and Russ, 1984, p. 29). He states that what “causes the problem of course, the conflict, is when people in a marginal position try to appropriate the center” (p. 29). Russ concurs and states her belief that science fiction is “natural, in a way, for any kind of radical thought” (p. 29), or as aforementioned, social commentary:

It’s very fruitful if you want to present the concerns of any marginal group, because you are doing it in a world where things are different. I was talking to an ex-Mormon, and she said it was science fiction that had gotten her out of the ethos she had been born into, and she said it was not the characters but the landscapes, which of course was the *piece de resistance* of the ’30s or in the ’40s – those landscapes made her understand that things could be different. (p. 29)

This view that “things could be different” (p. 29) is relevant for specific social concerns, like the marginalisation of women, and more specifically in this study, black women. As previously outlined in the Introduction, Sarah Lefanu’s view similarly holds that the plasticity of science fiction allows feminism to question oppressive structures “in imaginative terms” (Lefanu, 1988, p. 40). This plasticity allows feminist writers to posit their black female protagonists centrally as bringers of light, both literally and metaphorically, instead of the usual white male heroes. However, Lefanu makes the salient point that:

In literature, it seems to me, an act of revolution can be achieved only through a subversion of the narrative structure that holds the protagonist in place: a gender reversal is not enough. (p. 35)



Lefanu believes that Russ is skilled at subverting the genre because she does not simply rehash the usual tropes with swords and sorcery but instead offsets these with her protagonist's "strong vein of rationalism and scepticism, which makes her a peculiarly modern heroine" (p. 35). Furthermore, this female protagonist is "strongly gendered, that is, her femaleness is shown to be quite specifically constructed within the parameters of difference" (p. 35) infused with "a real sense of sexual politics" (p. 35) that are both "subtle and strong" (p. 35). They are "heroines" because they are "tough, clever and independent" (p. 36), and it is this subversion in a literary tradition that has traditionally favoured male heroes that makes them "feminist heroines" (p. 36). Lafana also praises Butler's heroic protagonists, who are the precursors of the black female heroes of this study, one of whom will be discussed in the following chapter:

These latter, like all Butler's heroines, are remarkable too for challenging the science fictional norm of hero by being Black as well as female and sexually autonomous. (Hogle, 2002, p. 24)

Lefanu's discussion is not limited to feminism's breakthrough in science fiction. She also recognises the "female Gothic tradition that has allowed women to re-enter a field that for many years was closed to them" (Lefanu, 1988, p. 36). Like Gill, Lefanu recognises that Gothic fiction and science fiction are related, but Lefanu extends this by noting that they both allow for powerful breakthrough narratives by female authors writing about female heroes.

Returning to the first of the subgenres of speculative fiction that are relevant for the selected novels, Afro-Gothic fiction is a branch of speculative fiction that encompasses both the Gothic and horror traditions. Afro-Gothic fiction is the term used to describe a subgenre of Gothic fiction from the African diaspora. The reclamation of black Gothic fiction under the term Afro-Gothicism is now helping to classify "a mode of rewriting colonial history and its haunting aftermath" (de Bruijn, 2013, p. 63). As is the case for Afro-Gothicism antecedents, RB Gill explicitly includes Gothic tales in his definition of speculative fiction. Gill's discussion corroborates the link between the Gothic genre and speculative fiction's "idealistic artistic creations" and "transcendental interventions", when he states:

Gothic tales fit into this definition if they portray worlds notable for their differences from the operations of the ordinary world rather than just fictional events that function within normal parameters. (Gill, 2013, p. 73)

It is this latter function that will be employed to unearth the usefulness of Afro-Gothicism to explore the postcolonial experience of Africans of the diaspora. Defining Afro-Gothicism is not without its own problems due to the problem of Gothic fiction historically viewing Africa as “the dark continent” and black characters as dangerously evil:

The genre often turned the colonial subject into the obscene cannibalistic personification of evil, through whom authors could bring revulsion and horror into the text, thereby mirroring political and social anxieties close to home. (Hogle, 2002, p. 231)

While Afro-Gothic fiction helps us to “draw meaningful connections between the literatures of Africa and its diaspora”, Esther de Bruijn proposes that the root of this historical “revulsion” towards Africa as “the dark continent” in Gothic fiction is racism, which has led to an “aversion” to the term Afro-Gothicism:

On the other hand, the Afro-Gothic compound invokes Eurocentric racist writing as it raises the spectre of the “Dark Continent” of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its “horror”. As such, the term attracts not only scholarly skepticism, but aversion. (de Bruijn, 2013, p. 60)

Nonetheless, Afro-Gothic fiction has contemporary usefulness, specifically in this study that includes Helen Oyeyemi’s novel, *The Icarus Girl* that explores gothic elements. Afro-Gothic fiction from Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora also includes elements of magic realism and jujuism. Mark Mathuray’s paper discussing “*The Famished Road* After Postmodernism: African Modernism and the Politics of Subalternity” considers the relevance of magic realist characters, and believes that they offer theorists avenues to address the “colonial domination of the postcolonial world by the West” (Mathuray, 2015, p. 1100). Mathuray observes:

The deconstruction of the “transcendental signified”, the unified subject, and the metanarratives of History opened up a space for postcolonial theorists to explore the radical potential of hybridity, provide a comprehensive critique of Eurocentricism, debunk essentialist notions of nation, race, ethnicity etc., and address the ongoing neo-colonial domination of the postcolonial world by the West. (p. 1100)

Arguably the most acclaimed example of magic realism from Nigeria is *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, although defining this as a genre in itself is not without difficulty. Brenda Cooper offers the following definition:

Magic realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, the precolonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death. (Cooper, 1998, p. 1)

Stemming from the significance of magic in literature, Zora Neale Hurston points out that “Belief in magic [that is, juju] is older than writing [and so] nobody knows how it started” (Hurston, 1990, p. 183) (quoted in Ogunyemi, 2007, p. 10). In fact, Ogunyemi, writing about the novelist, Adaora Lily Ulasi, recognises that it is through the juju novel that the writer “plumbs the mystical depths to uncover the Nigerian collective dreamscape” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 192) and “introduces us to the fears, uncertainties, and mystifying claims that are part and parcel of Nigerian daily life” (p. 192). In this way, Ogunyemi states that Ulasi, and, I propose, the Nigerian diasporic writers in this thesis, make “use of efficacious juju and the supernatural to represent the undercurrents of a tumultuous existence, the marks of Nigerian angst” (p. 192). Of even more critical significance is Ogunyemi’s belief that the juju novel “appears to be Nigeria’s answer to the gothic and magic realism” genre (p. 193). Extrapolating from this assertion, Nigerian Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist novels certainly can be expected to contain jujuism, which the novels examined here do. Furthermore, the female protagonist in Gothic and Afro-Gothic novels is a fruitful study because when facing these supernatural forces, she is able to demonstrate her womanist temerity, as do Denver in *Beloved* and the Caribbean protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, in *Brown Girl in the Ring*.

There is evidence that early Afro-Gothic fiction originated in the Caribbean “as the premiere [*sic*] site of the colonial and postcolonial Gothic since the early nineteenth century” (Hogle, 2002, p. 233). This Caribbean Afro-Gothic fiction allowed for a postcolonial dialogue with this subgenre of speculative fiction in the “mesmerizing figure of the zombie, the living/dead creature deprived of its soul and thus a Caribbean version of Frankenstein’s monster” (p. 238). While the next chapter will examine these Caribbean origins in Nalo Hopkinson’s book, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, writing about black characters in African American novels is just as relevant, for example, in the novels of Nnedi Okorafor and Tomi Adeyemi who are both African

American writers of the Nigerian diaspora like Helen Oyeyemi. As in the Gothic genre, writing about black protagonists, particularly in American texts, has also not been without its problems, or what Toni Morrison refers to as American Africanism, in the context of what she calls an “invented Africa” (Morrison, 1992, p. 7):

Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on the palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. (p. 7)

According to Morrison, this has led to racism being treated as “a ‘natural’, if irritating, phenomenon” (p. 7) in earlier novels featuring African American characters. Eshun expands on Morrison’s views and states that “Afrofuturism can be understood as an elaboration upon the implications of Morrison’s revisionary thesis” (Eshun, 2003, p. 297). Morrison’s thesis is based on the argument “that the African slaves that experienced capture, theft, abduction, and mutilation were the first moderns” (p. 297) and that this is “important for positioning slavery at the heart of modernity” (p. 297). Prior to this, Eshun expounds upon early efforts at assembling “countermemories” (p. 288) aimed to challenge “imperial racism” (p. 287) and unearth a “substantive historical presence” (p. 287) for diasporic African people, particularly slaves, which again is relevant to African Americans and the ethnically African Caribbean characters in Hopkinson’s novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*. The purpose of these countermemories is to situate “the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (p. 287). Eshun states that this is what Afrofuturism aims to do, to “extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective” (p. 289). In 2001, Gregory E Rutledge proposed that the “link between Otherness and the otherworld phenomenon of both fantasy and futurist fiction is something with which many persons of African descent may identify” (Rutledge, 2001, p. 237). This is indeed what has been happening since the late twentieth century, and the momentum is rising since “the latter half of the twentieth century, [because] the black womanist has been experimenting with old forms used by her predecessors, male and female” (Phillips, 2006, p. 32). Evidence of this experimentation is evident in “some parallels to Jane Austen’s clever exploitation of the gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, [demonstrating how] Head manipulates the mystique of gothicism in her psychological portrait of the mad Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*” (p. 32). These efforts have been celebrated, particularly in the critically acclaimed books by the Nigerian diasporic writers being foregrounded in this study writing about heroic

young women who emerge as the liberators, staking a claim in a literary tradition that aims to liberate and elevate heroic black protagonists.

Rebecca Duncan's chapter in the same handbook entitled "Gothic Supernaturalism in the 'African Imagination'" states that Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, and a novel by Nuzo Onoh, *The Sleepless* (2016), demonstrate an "emerging gothic impulse currently animating strands of literary production within (to borrow F Abiola Irele's term) 'the African imagination' (Irele, 2001, p. 4)" (Duncan, 2019, Chapter 11). The chapter interrogates the use of the term "gothic" in contemporary African horror and concludes that "the aesthetic departures entailed in the gothic form respond to conditions in African postcolonies at the historical juncture of the millennial present" (Chapter 11). Duncan reiterates David Punter's finding that the element present in all Gothic writing is "fear" (Punter, 1996, p. 18) because they "are invested in sensations of anxiety" (Chapter 11). Duncan states that "the supernatural, when it is handled in the gothic mode, is a site at which this anxiety is concentrated" (Chapter 11). Furthermore, Duncan marks the distinction between Gothic and magic realism (or "animist realism"); where "animist logic is vividly discernible as the interweaving of magical episodes, drawn or adapted from indigenous folklore or cosmologies, with those that speak of (colonial) modernity" (Chapter 11). Gothic fiction is contrasted with animist realism as follows:

If in animist realism there is a horizontality or equivalence between the magical and the historical or 'real', then in gothic it might be said that this relationship is vertical, and – further – that the magical or supernatural is loaded with a disproportionate and anxious weight as it threatens to disrupt the 'reality' above it. (Chapter 11)

This anxiety in postcolonial Gothic fiction, or Afro-Gothic fiction for the purposes of this study, comes about because of the tension between Western and African culture, which Duncan states is created because Oyeyemi "reflects colonising cultural transformations as a kind of repression" (Chapter 11). This is evident in *The Icarus Girl* because of the tension between Jessamy's British upbringing and her Nigerian heritage:

Nigerian-British Jessamy's hauntings are strongly linked to her Western upbringing, which means that she cannot speak Yoruba, and that she does not know its cosmology. She is thus terrorised by spirit manifestations connected in the narrative to a Yoruba

world, which – at times – explicitly signal their association to that for which her diasporic education has not accounted. (Chapter 11)

Oyeyemi corroborates this view in an interview about *The Icarus Girl* in 2004. As a British Nigerian herself, there are some elements of Jessamy’s character that Oyeyemi identifies with. Oyeyemi explains that she blended what she knew about her Nigerian heritage with Gothic and horror influences from her own reading:

Although she is making use of traditional Nigerian beliefs, Oyeyemi has given the material a horror twist that is all her own, she explains. She likes horror, particularly Stephen King and Edgar Allan Poe (“I love him so much – he’s the master!”). (Oyeyemi quoted by Page, 2004)

While writing the novel, she remembers, she was apprehensive about its reception, particularly the anxiety she creates in the novel by foregrounding the belief that a dead twin might return as a malevolent spirit if it is not appeased:

She explains: “It was run [*sic*] doing it, but at the same time, it was a little bit ‘Oh no!’, because people might get mad at me for making it [the Nigerian custom for a dead twin] seem like a scary cult that has to be obeyed. It’s not like that at all, it’s quite gentle. If one twin dies, you make a carving, and you give a party on the twin’s birthday, and give sweets to the children in the area.” (Oyeyemi quoted by Page, 2004)

In Lisa Yaszek’s 2006 paper entitled “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future”, she notes that the three decades preceding the twenty-first century have seen Afrodiasporic scholars “become increasingly interested in what Sheree R Thomas calls “speculative fiction from the African diaspora” (Yaszek, 2006, p. 41):

Leading science fiction journals such as *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Studies* regularly include essays about black authors in their pages, and as early as the summer of 1984, *Black American Literature Forum* devoted an entire special issue to the subject of race in science fiction. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was little discussion of this fiction as a literary mode with its own distinct themes, techniques, and relations to other kinds of black cultural production. (p. 41)

Yaszek corroborates the view that Afrofuturism “is closely related to science fiction as an aesthetic genre” and names the authors “whom critics such as Dery, Tate and Rose identify as Afrofuturist (e.g. Samuel R Delany, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson) [who] explicitly identify themselves as science fiction authors” (p. 42). The latter two authors are particularly noteworthy as female authors of Afrofuturist texts, already noted as two of the founders of the genre. Aside from the inroads made by these two women, Yaszek also references sociologist, Alondra Nelson, whom she names as “instrumental in developing Afrofuturism as a coherent mode of critical inquiry” (p. 42). Yaszek quotes Nelson who believes that it is up to the Afrofuturist scholar to “explore futurist themes in black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture” (Nelson and Miller 2006<sup>7</sup>) (p. 42).

Nelson is credited with founding the website named Afrofuturism in 2000 with Paul D Miller. In Nelson’s interview on 1 January 2011 on the website, she gives her insights into what she believes Afrofuturism is. Speaking in the interview she says:

It’s a way of looking at the world. It’s a, sort of, canopy for thinking about black diasporic artistic production. It’s even an epistemology that is really about, sort of, thinking about the future, thinking about the, sort of, subject position of black people and about how that is both alienating and about alienation, right? And so that the alien becomes to figure quite centrally in Afrofuturism, the outsider figure. It’s also about aspirations for modernity, and about having a place in modernity. And you know, it’s about speculation, and utopia, and about – you know, I think part of why it’s Afrofuturism in particular is that, you know, part of the resilience of black culture and of black life is about imagining the impossible, imagining a better place, a different world. (Nelson, 2011)

This concept of feeling alien, or an outsider, is also reflected in the jazz music of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s by Sun Ra and Lee “Scratch” Perry, “who depicted themselves (and by extension all Afrodiasporic people) as the descendants of aliens who came to Earth to prepare

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<sup>7</sup> Nelson, Alondra and Miller, Paul. D. 2006. About Afrofuturism. *Afrofuturism*. Available at: [www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html](http://www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html)

humanity for its eventual destiny among the stars” (Yaszek, 2006, p. 46). In this manner, “these artists projected noble pasts for people of color while carefully crafting a heroic black face for the future as well” (p. 46). This alien concept is undoubtedly intended to be interpreted metaphorically, symbolising hope that the future will no longer feature black people (and women especially) as outsiders. This metaphorical beacon of hope is central to this thesis because it provides a vision for the future where black women are saviours.

Since then, Afrofuturism has “evolved into a coherent mode not only aesthetically but also in terms of its political mission” (p. 47) that “combat[s] the erasure of black subjects from Western history” (p. 47). Furthermore, they show “how African slaves and their descendants experienced conditions of homelessness, alienation, and dislocation that anticipate what philosophers like Nietzsche describe as the founding conditions of modernity” (p. 47). Eshun makes a similar point when speaking of the “collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (Eshun, 2003, p. 288). Nelson ratifies this view when she states that Afrofuturism provides “apt metaphors for black life and history” (p. 47).

Another important Afrofuturist scholar, Ytasha Womack, claims that she was an Afrofuturist before the term existed (Womack, 2013, p. 6). Womack writes about being a little girl imagining that she was Princess Leia, but at the same time wishing that there were dark-skinned heroes like her on the screen:

I wished that when Darth Vader’s face was revealed, it would have been actor James Earl Jones, the real-life voice behind the mask, and not British thespian David Prowse who emerged. (p. 5)

Womack was not only interested in seeing black heroes, but she also wanted to see more female heroes, so that she could carry the lightsaber at Halloween, “instead of my brother’s wooden sword” (p. 5). She notes that the whitewashing of history has finally been acknowledged, and fortunately “teams of dedicated historians and culture advocates have chipped away at the propaganda” (p. 7) to “eradicate that glaring error” (p. 7), and this correction is becoming more apparent in literature and film:

But when, even in the imaginary future – a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and



time machines – people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down. (p. 7)

Thus Womack also recognises that Afrofuturism is a powerful tool that re-envisions “the past” (p. 9). In other words, Womack reframes what has gone before in order to redefine narrative histories, or provide counter-memories, as well as provide “speculation about the future rife with cultural critique” (p. 9). Womack is also an ardent admirer of Butler and writes about her as “Sci-fi vanguard and writer Octavia Butler, who authored the famous Parable series and laid the groundwork for countless sci-fi heroines and writers to follow” (p. 11). Butler bemoans the fact that she would often be confronted at conferences by someone who would ask, “Just what does science fiction have to do with black people?” (p. 11). This narrow view of science fiction does not take into account the potential that it has to emancipate the reader, because as Womack puts it, “Afrofuturism unchains the mind” (p. 15). Womack also suggests that forms of oppression faced by black people were captured in science fiction long before anyone consciously made the link when she asks, “Were stories about aliens really just metaphors for the experience of blacks in the Americas?” (p. 32). Dery framed this similarly when he stated that “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees” because “they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare” of intolerance, rewritten history and other injustices (Dery, 1994b, p. 180). This “rewritten history” is being rewritten by Afrofuturists, who are challenging the past and changing what the future might look like – a future in which young, brave women are the bearers of light and hope for their readers.

It is noteworthy that the growing number of Afrodiasporic women writers over the past decade have enabled the genre to become more mainstream. As Madhu Dubey notes in her chapter, “Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction”, included in Marleen Barr's collection (2008a):

Until recently, the very presence of women writers within the genre of science fiction was seen as something of a contradiction in terms, given that the field of modern Western science has historically been constituted as a masculine preserve from which women have been both actually and symbolically excluded. (Dubey, 2008, p. 31)

This is how Afrofuturism unlocks the “future history” for black women that Womack is alluding to. This future history is tracked in the essays and stories compiled in Marleen S Barr's

*Afro-Future Females* (Barr, 2008). As outlined in the introduction, *Afro-Future Females* “emphasizes that the black writers who chart science fiction’s newest new-wave trajectory share the enterprise of lauded black great American novelists” (p. ix) like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson and others. De Witt Douglas Kilgore corroborates the view that “Black women who contribute to SF/F/H<sup>8</sup> have reached the point where the history they recover can potentially become future history” (Kilgore, 2008, p. 127). The novelists in this study are indeed creating this inspiring “future history” through their audacious womanist heroes. According to Barr, “female-centered Afro-Futurist texts are part of science fiction’s newest new wave, the Afrodiasporic, fantasy-infused, magic-centered science fiction” (Barr, 2008, p. xvii). What sets these novels apart from other science fiction, aside from the stated fact that they are written by Afrodiasporic women, are these fantastical and magical elements:

In its casual incorporation of magical and supernatural phenomena and its flouting of the norms of realism and rational explication, speculative fiction by black women writers can be said to exemplify the “counterculture of modernity” that Paul Gilroy considers to be distinctive of Afro-diasporic culture. (Gilroy, 1993) (Quoted in Barr, 2008, p. xvi)

Essentially, what sets these Afrodiasporic writers apart is that instead of recreating science fiction that adheres strictly to a Western milieu and scientific theory (with white, often male, heroes), they have extended “definitions of science so as to include bodies of knowledge, such as herbal medicine, midwifery, or magic, which have been dismissed as unscientific because of their association with women” (Dubey, 2008, p. 32). They do this by deploying “magic in strikingly convergent ways to reevaluate a whole set of gendered and racialized dichotomies” (p. 35). Kilgore, in a chapter included in *Afro-Future Females* entitled “Beyond the History We Know: Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Nisi Shawl, and Jarla Tangh Rethink Science Fiction Tradition”, considers the construction of Africa in Western fiction set in Africa when he states that “these writers, in essence, reveal the truth behind complacent histories or futurist fiction that presupposes white and/or male superiority” (Kilgore, 2008, p. 121). Furthermore, Kilgore assesses Western fiction that is set in Africa as “a place of masculine adventure, an exotic proving ground for white male virtue and black male impotence” (p. 122). This is exactly what these novels challenge by creating heroic black female protagonists in Africa, but crucially it

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<sup>8</sup> Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror

is now a less forbidding Africa being evoked, one where the protagonist is at one with nature and knows how to survive. In other words, Africa as a wild and unwelcoming series of vistas to be tamed and conquered by a white adventurer is overturned. Many African and African diasporic writers are attracting considerable critical acclaim because of this shift in focus. Recently, all three of the authors in this study were mentioned together for this reason in *The Routledge Handbook of African Literature*:

With the emergence of a growing number of writers of non-realist fiction in the early twenty-first century (Nnedi Okorafor, Lauren Beukes, Helen Oyeyemi and Tomi Adeyemi among a crowded field), theorizing and interpreting the diverse forms of non-realist African and African diasporic fiction clearly represents an important area of growth for scholarship in African literary studies. (Adejunmobi and Coetzee, 2019, Chapter 1)

Oyeyemi elaborates on the Nigerian traditions and superstitions that her mother alluded to when she was growing up, often saying things like “Don’t whistle in the house, because the spirits will come” (Oyeyemi quoted by Page, 2004), leading to a young Oyeyemi wondering what would happen if she were to break this rule. These were the childhood memories that fed her fascination with her Nigerian heritage and inspired her to include these intercultural tensions in her own novel, written and published when she was just eighteen years old. In the character of Jessamy, we see Jessamy battle with a deceased twin’s spirit and overcome these tensions, bringing light not just in the novel, but also to the experiences of other young women of the African diaspora who can relate to these conflicting feelings.

Okorafor’s novels also grapple with postcolonial and diasporic concerns about forgotten histories as “she engages the spirit of precolonial Africa and establishes that a powerful place for women is essential to its endurance” (Kilgore, 2008, p. 122). One of the ways that she achieves this in her story “Asuquo or the Winds of Harmattan”, and in *Who Fears Death*, is to erase the past:

In her “Asuquo or the Winds of Harmattan” the past has been forgotten, deliberately erased by a people whose understanding of their history has been corrupted by an invading culture. (p. 122)

This is an effective strategy for rewriting the future as Okorafor can then use “realist strategies of modern science fiction and fantasy to position her story as a forgotten history that should change our view of past and future” (p. 123). Aside from a forgotten or recreated history, another parallel between Asuquo and Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death* is that they both die in the end, but what changes is that instead of retribution in the form of an impoverished life after they upend the natural order with Asuquo’s death, Onyesonwu has to die in order to rewrite the ending. This mimics how powerful black women who write about these audacious female heroes themselves rewrite history (in science fiction) and change the future, for narratives like this, but also for the young readers themselves who recognise the metaphor and hope contained in the open-ended resolution.

Adeyemi can relate to Okorafor’s desire to write books with protagonists “for black teenage girls growing up reading books they were absent from” (Hughes, 2018), as that was her experience too growing up. Adeyemi sees *Children of Blood and Bone* as “a chance to address that” and “say you are seen” (Hughes, 2018) to the young black girls like her, longing to see heroic protagonists like themselves on library shelves. Adeyemi tells the story of Zélie “on a quest to reawaken magic in the country of Orisha” (Hughes, 2018). Adeyemi intends it to be read as “an allegory for the modern black experience” (Hughes, 2018) and says that “[i]t draws inspiration from both west African mythology and the Black Lives Matter movement” (Hughes, 2018). Adeyemi explains:

“Every moment of violence in the book is based on real footage,” she says, explaining that an early scene in which Zélie is attacked by a guard was inspired by the notorious video of a police officer pushing a teenage girl to the ground at a pool party in Texas. “It’s not my intention to be gratuitous but I want people to be aware that these things are happening and that the actual videos are much worse.” (Hughes, 2018)

While Adeyemi, as well as Oyeyemi and Okorafor, were preceded by great writers like Butler, Hopkinson and others, and cannot be viewed as pioneers of the genre, “her high-profile debut calls attention to an underheralded tradition” (Newkirk, 2018) which this study aims to address. Adeyemi’s novel is anything but the “subliterature” (Gunn and Candelaria, 2005, p. 57) that Delany cautions against as she is conscious of the potential in her novel beyond the fantastical elements that designate speculative fiction. In his article about the book entitled “Where Fantasy Meets Black Lives Matter” in *The Atlantic*, Vann R Newkirk II writes:

More recently, legends of the orishas – divine spirits of the Yoruba brought to the New World by slave ships centuries ago – have found their way into YA fare. They have been put there by black writers well aware that speculative fiction has always been about more than magic and clever devices. Explorations of social power and possibility drive its plots and shape its characters, and young-adult fiction in particular has thrived on instruction through enthrallment. (Newkirk, 2018)

This instruction is intended to reach the young readers through the character of Zélie, and to a slightly lesser extent, Amari. It aims to help readers to challenge their view of the social injustices being committed against black people in contemporary society, but particularly in America:

Adeyemi focuses on the obstacles to Zélie’s mission, staging scenes that obviously parallel the spectacle of police brutality and black death in America. True to the genre’s cinematic conventions, sabers gleam, unlikely paths converge, guardsmen give chase, and close calls follow in quick succession. But Adeyemi also probes beneath the surface details of contemporary American flash points to address the complicated, intersectional nature of domination. (Newkirk, 2018)

By challenging the oppression and subjugation reported in newspapers by giving the victims the face of a young black fictional character who fights systematic oppression despite unbelievable odds, Adeyemi, and others like her, envision emancipation from these powerful adversities beyond the page as they “wield a magic beyond the imaginative spells they cast” (Newkirk, 2018):

Their work illuminates the ways in which speculative fiction has in a sense been about the stories of people of color all along. Such narratives may have been historically excluded from mainstream science fiction and fantasy. But take a second look at the dystopias and fantasy horrors created by white writers. So many of those tales are hauntingly alien to their white readers. To people raised in America’s ghettos, by contrast, the grim futures featuring slavery, tiered citizenship, eugenics, and police states that prevail in so much YA science fiction are all too familiar. And the stories of

rebellion, youthful protest, and unlikely quests to overthrow tyrants – fantasy trademarks – are hardly outlandish for readers of color the world over. (Newkirk, 2018)

Newkirk ends his review of Adeyemi's book by reiterating what is at the core of Afrofuturism, in these novels and beyond: "the recognition that reimagining oppressive pasts and envisioning far-off futures are closely linked revolutionary acts" and more importantly that "meditations on the nature of power that can revive the creative potential of speculative fiction" (Newkirk, 2018). This sentiment echoes Yaszek's definition which is that "Afrofuturism is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well" (Yaszek, 2006, p. 47).

Returning then to the claim that the plasticity of science fiction allows us to revisit the past and reimagine the future, even today reparation for slavery is an ongoing debate. According to Hortense J Spillers, novels like Butler's *Kindred* ensure that we are "forced from our slumber of feigned innocence" and "we awaken here to full consciousness and its blasts of discomfort" (Dery, 1994a, p. 5). This begs the question that Mark Dery asks:

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? (p. 8)

All the evidence in the selected novels presented by these authors proves that this certainly is the case, as they present the characters Jessamy, Onyesonwu, Phoenix and Zélie (as well as a few other minor characters who will also be considered) as the heroic bringers of light. Furthermore, these heroic young black women shed light beyond the dark forces in the novel on contemporary issues and reconfigure the future for the young black women who read these books.

### CHAPTER 3: ORIGINS OF FEMINIST AFRO-GOTHIC AND AFROFUTURIST FICTION

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” (Morrison, 1994)

Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist womanist fiction with audacious young black heroes have the potential to enlighten and empower marginalised young black readers can be traced back to Octavia E Butler’s novels. Through a chronological exposition of a judicious selection of audacious womanist heroes from the 1970s and 1980s, a synoptic foundation will be laid for this study of contemporary Afro-Diasporic novels. The first novel explored is Marge Piercy’s seminal text, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (2016 [1976]), focusing on the liberatory potential of futuristic fiction. Piercy’s protagonist is a useful example of an audacious female heroine, Consuelo who, although not of the African diaspora, is an early example of a marginalised woman of colour who is enlightened by a visitor from the future, Luciente. Similarly, Octavia E Butler’s Dana in *Kindred* (2018 [1979]) time travels, but she travels into the past as she attempts to cast light on her ancestor’s detestable racism. Toni Morrison’s Denver in *Beloved* (2007 [1987]) has to illuminate Sethe’s darkness by having the courage to finally leave the house when Sethe becomes obsessed with the malevolent spirit of her Beloved. Likewise, Nalo Hopkinson’s Ti-Jeanne in *Brown Girl in the Ring* (2012 [1988]) is enlightened at a critical point in the final battle when she channels spirits to conquer her evil grandfather. All of these texts are ground-breaking in their own right and are thus useful in order to lay the foundation for this study of contemporary light-bearing heroes in the Nigerian diasporic Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist novels. These torchbearers demonstrate audacious womanist strength as an example for young readers today.

In Marge Piercy’s introduction to the 2016 edition of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, she states that her novel is not trying to predict the future but rather to “influence the present by extrapolating current trends for advancement or detriment” (Piercy, 2016 [1976], Introduction). Piercy emphasises this point by saying:

The point of creating futures is to get people to imagine what they want and don’t want to happen down the road and maybe do something about it. (Introduction)

The title of the book, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, can be interpreted in multiple ways. In one sense, Consuelo Ramos (or Connie as she is referred to in the book) is a marginalised Chicana woman who lives on the fringes of society, or in other words, on the *edges*, on welfare in a small apartment in New York City, 1976, at a time when she would have been viewed as the Second Sex. In her youth she is presented as optimistic and tells her mother that she will never be like her, to “suffer and serve” (Chapter 2), but her mother knows that this is impossible because “[t]here’s nothing for a woman to see but troubles” (Chapter 2).

Connie emerges from her suffering full of despair that had “stained her with its somber wash and leached from her all plans and schoolbook ideals” (Chapter 2). Connie is first introduced to us as a depressed and pessimistic 37-year-old woman, with no voice or agency in the oppressive patriarchal setting of the novel. Before this, Connie’s bright future was derailed after a series of tragedies: an affair, an abortion, the murder of her first husband, spousal rape and abuse, being “spayed” (Chapter 2), the death of her lover, Claud, the removal of her daughter, Angelina, and a stint in an asylum to eradicate violent tendencies. Connie is once again committed to an asylum after standing up to her niece’s pimp when he tries to force her niece, Dolly, to have an abortion. The hospital does not question the pimp because of Connie’s prior committal, and it is evident that as a woman her attempts to defend herself are unheeded because they view her as “human garbage carried to the dump” (Chapter 1). While in hospital, she is selected for an experimental treatment that aims to curb her supposed violent tendencies, and the doctor becomes yet another man in Connie’s life who subjects her to inhumane treatment, disregarding her wishes and nullifying any say Connie ought to have in her own life and autonomy over her body.

In another sense, this exposition is the foundation Piercy lays to write about a future that Connie visits on the *edge of time*, where patriarchal structures have crumbled, and women are no longer viewed as the Second Sex. As Piercy notes, “feminist utopias were created out of a hunger for what we didn’t have at a time when change felt not only possible but probable” (Introduction). Piercy was also “weary of affluent white males hogging the genre [time travel]” (Introduction), because she noted that “neither history as I was taught it nor the stories I was told seemed to lead to me” (Introduction). This observation is reminiscent of second wave feminists’ desire to posit themselves centrally, and not continually in relation to men.



Connie is contacted by Luciente, an androgynous woman from a eutopian future (2137 AD). Luciente is a Spanish name which means “lucid”, clearly intended to be read as a metaphor for enlightenment. This is further emphasised when we learn that she once called herself White Light, which has similar connotations associated with Connie’s light of knowledge and wisdom. It is never entirely clear whether Luciente is a product of her oppressed mental state or a concrete visitor from the future. The implication of using the term *eutopia* to describe this future, instead of a *utopia*, is that the future that Luciente inhabits is a version of the future that is good or better, and it is also possible, unlike a utopia that is so perfect that it renders it unrealistic or impossible to achieve. What is clear is that these astral visits are a means of escape for Connie as they come as a relief to the reader between the depressing conditions of her incarceration in the asylum. Present-day Connie is a drab failure, but in an inversion of society’s view of Connie, Luciente views her as unique because she has a receptive mind as a “top catcher” (Chapter 2) and “would be much admired” (Chapter 2) in her time.

What is noteworthy is that Piercy has taken a woman from the fringes of society and placed her at the centre of the narrative. Connie is extraordinary; she is someone receptive to messages from the future because of her fragile emotional state, not despite it. Furthermore, Luciente does not hold the same view of mental breakdowns that Connie has come to accept. Instead she believes that “madhouses are places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves – to collapse, carry on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the walls, relive infancy – getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind” (Chapter 3), and that it is a time “to disintegrate, [and] to reintegrate” oneself (Chapter 3).

The novel is written in the third person, limited to Connie’s perspective. The fact that Connie may thus be an unreliable narrator is not necessarily as problematic as it appears, because it is the “plasticity” of science fiction that allows us to imagine a better future that is at the novel’s core, no matter whether we believe it or not. For Ursula Le Guin, the future holds multifold possibilities if we can imagine it into being (quoted in Imarisha, 2018). Therefore, if this future world is a figment of Connie’s imagination, it is one in which she has been able to escape her oppression because of race, class, and gender into a world in which she is someone special, on whom the hope of this future eutopia rests. That said, to accept that Mattapoisett, the future place she visits, is purely a figment of Connie’s imagination is to underestimate the narrative as it is difficult to believe that Connie can imagine a future this progressive for two reasons. First, it is entirely foreign to the experience of a woman who has very little education and has

spent her life trying to survive, and so it would be difficult for her to imagine the complex society of Mattapoisett. Second, there are times in the story when Connie seems genuinely shocked and repulsed by the ideas she is presented with, and so it seems unlikely that she might conjure these complex systems and practices herself.

Nevertheless, whether one decides that she has simply managed to escape into a creative space in her mind, or whether she has literally time travelled, escape she does, and the future that the book speculates about does “contrast with [the] audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (Gill, 2013, pp. 72-73). Connie is the unlikely hero in a book that foregrounds the predicament of both genders in 1970s patriarchal society when it was written (more than forty years ago) and sadly, given that little has changed, still today.

The searching critique of patriarchy in the novel is striking for feminist readers. Connie notes that Luciente takes “up more space than women ever did” (Piercy, 2016 [1976], Chapter 3) and she “squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed” (Chapter 3). Later Luciente is described as “too confident, too unself-conscious, too aggressive and sure and graceful in the wrong kind of totally coordinated way to be a woman: yet a woman” (Chapter 5). This is not the only way that the influence of second wave feminism is evident in the novel, and it is clear that Piercy deliberately created a future where women can take up as much space as men do, and no one lives “piled together” (Chapter 3). Instead, they all have their own space to “meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study” (Chapter 3). However, Connie is dismayed at what she views as their rural peasant lifestyle and thinks that humanity has gone “[f]orward, into the past” (Chapter 3). Luciente tries to explain that they have indeed progressed:

“Think of it this way: there was much good in the life the ancestors led here on this continent before the white man came conquering. There was much brought that was useful. It has taken a long time to put the old good with the new good in to a greater good...” (Chapter 3)

The irony is that Connie is missing the point. In this advanced society regression is an ideal future, because there is clean air and ample time for study and reflection, what Jackrabbit later refers to as being “socially sophisticated” (Chapter 6) because they see themselves “as partners with water, air, birds, fish, trees” (Chapter 6). Connie holds the view that their rudimentary

lifestyle is unsophisticated or less civilised. However, it is evident to the reader that in Connie's reality, humanity is less civilised living in cities of filth and depravity. In the future, everyone is equal, and one only needs to lock the door from the inside if one needs privacy. They even share all of the children and dress them in genderless rompers. Theirs is a society that is characterised by freedom and innocence, which Connie's reality lacks.

Back in the asylum, the reader is jolted back to Connie's harsh reality. Connie describes the horrific torture that women are subjected to in order to subjugate them. After injecting them with a muscle relaxant so powerful that they are a hair's breadth from death, they are given a "little brain damage to jolt" (Chapter 4) them into behaving, thus returning them to a life of oblivion or subservience:

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes a woman forgot what had scared her, what she had been worrying about. Sometimes a woman was finally more scared of being burned in the head again, and she went home to her family and did the dishes and cleaned the house. (Chapter 4)

This passage is in stark contrast to the bucolic setting of Mattapoisett, and the juxtaposition makes it clear that Luciente's future is indeed more progressive, even if it seems to Connie to be the opposite. In the future, women are equal to men, and technology is not employed to enfeeble and subjugate them. Equality is evident across races too, with engineered gene diversity viewed as positive, instead of opting for "a melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel" (Chapter 5). Connie appears to find this concept difficult to grasp and somewhat problematic as a woman of colour, as she holds the view that hardship strengthens a person, just as "[p]ain honed Claud keen" (Chapter 5).

Connie also struggles with the concept that mothering could be shared with men, but Luciente insists that it was "part of the women's long revolution" (Chapter 5). Luciente explains that by giving up the power to give birth, neither sex is "biologically enchained" (Chapter 5), and men were thus "humanized to be loving and tender" (Chapter 5). In this way, everyone can mother, and each child has three mothers, to "break nuclear bonding" (Chapter 5). Connie cannot agree that anyone who has not carried a child for nine months can ever indeed be a mother. She wonders what it is to mother a child one has not carried for nine months or never to have "borne a baby in blood and pain" (Chapter 5). Connie is dismayed by the concept of taking a baby

“out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood” (Chapter 5), referring to the adoption of her daughter, Angelina. Connie’s aversion to these engineered babies is because she views their version of motherhood as artificial and sterile, but her reaction is also confusing as she appears to view the marks of shame and disgrace that racism and sexism have awarded her as central to being human:

She hated them, the bland bottleborn monsters of the future, born without pain, multicolored like a litter of puppies without the stigmata of race and sex. (Chapter 5)

Connie views motherhood as a sacred bond between mother and child, something unassailable from which men ought to be excluded because of their many other advantages by simply being born male. Connie is further dismayed and angry when she sees Barbarossa breastfeeding a baby and feels that “they had let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk” (Chapter 7).

Connie is also confused by their coming-of-age ritual when they release one of their children into the wild, which seems dangerous to Connie. When Innocente is released, Bee is distraught, and his honest and open distress surprises Connie, who is used to a more toxic version of masculinity where tears are viewed as weakness:

Big fat tears rolled down Bee’s broad face. Imagine Claud crying! Even when they sentenced him, he had grinned and shrugged and said out of the corner of his mouth, “Shit, could be worse. Time’s hard, but you do it, and it’s gone.” Once again they reminded her of children, even the men. (Chapter 6)

Connie’s views on masculinity become more lucid the longer she spends with Luciente, and she sees the futility of things as they are in her time. Connie sighs wearily when she starts to realise that being macho is not the best version of masculinity when describing what macho men like her brother Luis are like:

“But to be a good man, for instance, a man is supposed to be... strong, hold his liquor, attractive to women, able to beat out other men, lucky, hard, tough, macho we call it, muy hombre... not to be a fool... not to get too involved... to look out for number one...

to make good money. Well, to get ahead you step on people, like my brother Luis. You knuckle under to the big guys and you walk over the people underneath..." (Chapter 6)

Conversely, Connie realises that it is pointless trying to be good or bad as a woman. Her mother was good, and Connie bemoans the fact that her reward was to "bleed to death at forty-four" (Chapter 6). Connie's suffering as a woman is contrasted starkly with the women in the future who have more agency over their lives and their choices. After hearing the aspirational names that people in the future choose for themselves, Connie can articulate her struggle with her identity as a woman in her time. First, she is Consuelo, who has no voice because she is the silent servant who suffers:

"Anyhow, in a way I've always had three names inside me. Consuelo, my given name. Consuelo's a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay. The woman who suffers. Who bears and endures." (Chapter 6)

Second, as Connie she is the younger version of herself with aspirations and, perhaps, an audacity to hope for a bright future, but who could not escape the inevitable because of her race and gender:

"Then I'm Connie, who managed to get two years of college – till Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs from time to time and fought welfare for a little extra money for Angie. She got me on a bus when I had to leave Chicago. But it was her who married Eddie, she thought it was smart." (Chapter 6)

Finally, she is Conchita, the jaded and worn down woman who realises the futile and absurd dreams of her younger self, and is ground down by society and her suffering until she became someone she does not recognise:

"Then I'm Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets by in jail, in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter..." (Chapter 6)

Unlike the present day when she is committed for this aggressive side of her personality, Luciente responds without judgement and says, "Maybe Diana could help you to meld the three women into one" (Chapter 6). Luciente acknowledges that these three women are all integral

parts of Connie and that to try to expunge any one of them would be to deny a part of herself, even the part of herself that society considers to be violent and mentally unstable. Connie is resentful of this seemingly casual attitude towards mental illness because it is a third way that she is persecuted in her time, aside from race and gender, as she “lugged that radioactive fact around New York like a hidden sore” (Chapter 6).

Connie suffers further anguish when she sees a child who she believes is Angelina, and when she cries her name, it jolts the reader into wondering whether anything in the visit to Mattapoissett is real, or whether these visits are just drug-induced hallucinations. This uncertainty is not resolved for the reader and, at this point, she has to concede that despite her reservations about progress, motherhood, and sexuality, this future is better than her present. In this future, Connie’s daughter could grow up free of the yokes of patriarchy and racism Connie has suffered under:

She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden, like that children’s house of many colors. People of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I give her to you! (Chapter 7)

Luciente is one of the child’s mothers, and the child’s name is Dawn. This name, too, can be interpreted as meaning light, enlightenment, and perhaps also, realisation. Connie realises that this future might seem less progressive, but it is kinder than her present, and she releases her child, Angelina (her angel), to this more enlightened future.

Connie grapples with another judgmental view when she encounters the healer Erzulia, whom she labels a witch doctor. Luciente is quick to note that she does not mean that as a compliment. Once again, Connie fails to recognise her more familiar modern methods are not always progressive, especially if one considers her predicament in the future, and conversely, Erzulia’s traditional methods of healing are not necessarily as rudimentary as they seem. These traditional methods used by the, often female, healers in the Afrofuturist novels being studied, demonstrate that traditional healing and magic both have their place:

“Erzulia’s skilled! Person has trained hundreds of healers and pioneered new methods of bone knitting and pain easing. There’s a way of setting pelvic fractures in the aged named after per.” (Chapter 8)

The genderless pronoun, per, is also noteworthy because it comes from the word “person”, which could be a man or a woman. In a future where the domestic load is shared and not gender-specific, the use of a genderless pronoun removing identification by gender, as the honorific of “mother” for men and women, neutralises gender ideology. With equality no longer an issue, the focus is not competing for resources, because, as Luciente says, “Nobody born now anyplace on the whole world, Connie, is born to less in any areas we control” (Chapter 9), and to eradicate envy over material things, ownership of beautiful objects is fluid.

Connie begins to realise that hating people is not her problem; the problem is the unequal power structures that subjugate people like her, and she realises that “the power they have is just power over me” (Chapter 9). This seemingly contradictory view of power structures is further conveyed in the belief that Connie can help them “to remain in existence” (Chapter 10), despite her protestations that they “picked the wrong savior this time!” (Chapter 10). Sojourner tells her that “The powerful don’t make revolutions” (Chapter 10). Her name is apt considering Sojourner chose to be named after an African American hero, Sojourner Truth, to whom the second part of Hudson-Weems’s definition of Womanism is attributed. As previously stated, this part of the definition relies on Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1851), which questions “the accepted idea of womanhood” (Hudson-Weems, 1995, p. 23). Sojourner Truth would have been one of the disenfranchised, but this did not stop her from being a staunch abolitionist and suffragist.

Connie rallies and attempts an escape from the asylum, and when she enlists Sybil’s help, she says to Sybil, “Don’t let them wear you down!” (Piercy, 2016 [1976], Chapter 11). It is difficult to let this pass without comment as it is similar to the mock Latin phrase in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, “Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (Atwood, 1998 [1985], p. 52), which roughly translates to “don’t let the bastards grind you down” (p. 186). While this latter book was written ten years after *Woman on the Edge of Time*, it is evident that the weight of patriarchy has been wearing women down through the decades. Speculative fiction, like both of these books, aims to correct this by holding up a mirror to these injustices using uchronian narratives like this one to reconfigure the future.

When Connie has a strange hallucination about fighting the doctors and social workers in Mattapoissett near the end of the novel, there appears to be a blurring between the realities, and while this might seem problematic, Connie's experiences, whether real or imagined, spur her on despite impossible odds. Connie can finally see herself in the role of the agent, instead of the passive recipient of dehumanising treatment, and she exacts revenge on the doctors who treated her like "human garbage" (Piercy, 2016 [1976], Chapter 14).

In summary, Connie's experiences with Luciente do enlighten her to some extent, but once again, the difficulty of the limited third-person narration makes it difficult to be sure of anything. Without this balance, Connie's perspective is the only possible one, and when she realises that she can act, Connie finally dares to push back. All of the pain that she has suffered over the indifference of the people who held power over her life culminates in her taking revenge. For Connie, the war in her mind is still real, and she is fighting the doctor-thieves in the green masks who have stolen her identity and autonomy from her when she returns from her visit with Luis and his family. Connie poisons them "because it is war" (Chapter 19). Connie realises that even though this means she is a "dead woman" (Chapter 19), she has fought back and is no longer ashamed. She thinks to herself, "I tried" (Chapter 19). She can no longer reach over to Luciente, but "At least once I fought and won" (Chapter 19), she tells herself. Connie is free in the only way that will ever matter to her, as the novel demonstrates more than once that death is one way that one can be truly free, and this concept is mirrored in both of Okorafor's novels in chapters 5 and 6. However, Okorafor focuses on redemption and rebirth through death, which foregrounds a more hopeful vision of empowerment for women. For Connie, she can never be free of the shackles of oppression that have hindered her throughout her life, but the novel demonstrates the power of being able to speculate about a more enlightened future with strong women who can act against tyrannical power structures, and win. Connie is thus an apt forerunner of the heroes in this study even though her audacious courage leads to her destruction, but it was an act of liberation that also destroyed her persecutors in the process.

Octavia E Butler's novel *Kindred* (2018 [1979]) was published not long after Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* with this remarkable similarity: it is a speculative fiction novel that utilises time travel to remove the protagonist from the 1970s. However, Dana travels back



in time, instead of into the future like Connie. Hortense J Spillers notes this reversal in her paper entitled “Imaginative Encounters”:

[...] perhaps the writer’s best-known novel, *Kindred* (1988), belongs to the same period, as it reverses the logic of futurism and time travel by taking us backward in time, or, more precisely, back to the future. (Spillers, 2008, p. 4)

This aspect of time travel, regardless of the direction, is of critical importance in this study as it sets *Kindred* firmly within the genre of science fiction. In the Prologue to *Afro-Future Females*, Marleen Barr notes:

I now situate Octavia E Butler at the productive intersection of the intermingling between science fiction and Afro-diasporic fantasy [...]. She participated at once in female Afro-Futurism fantasy and in conventional American genre science fiction traditions. Butler’s *Kindred* is the time travel great American novel descendant of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and *Orlando*. (Barr, 2008, p. xviii)

Furthermore, Barr’s review of Butler positions her as a “no crap-producing, marginalized, science fiction genre writer” (p. xviii) and, pertinent to this study, on a par with Toni Morrison. Morrison is another novelist whose influence and literary inroads have significant ramifications for the contemporary Afro-Gothic writer, like Helen Oyeyemi in particular. About Butler, Spillers states:

Among black women writers in the genre of science fiction, Octavia E Butler has created entire alternative worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it at the same time by generating subjects who improve on the available human models; in that regard, science fiction puts into play something that we know, that is rather familiar, while it so rearranges the signposts that the outcome is strange and defamiliarized. (Spillers, 2008, p. 4)

Both Butler’s and Morrison’s narratives reflect female heroes in black African American writing. In addition, both explore the predicament of the slave, who has been likened to aliens and the displaced protagonist in Afrofuturist texts. This displacement foregrounds the issues

around race and gender, and in this case, juxtapose contemporary concerns like the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as slavery in the antebellum South. Spillers comments on the conflict that this creates for the reader as he/she is forced to consider how slavery and racism function across time:

That Butler indeed thought it, plucking this contemporary character out of a world that parallels our own and from the nesting place of an interracial marriage, inscribes the most daring of fictional moves with a result that is profoundly disturbing: if fictional time lays claim to plasticity, then it can retrogress as well as progress. (p. 5)

In other words, we are forced to confront the horrors of slavery and the cost of being here for many people of colour in contemporary society. Spillers believes that *Kindred* reveals that we “do not want to know that the cost of our being here has been inestimable and that the way to our current peace swims in blood and the truncated bodies of the violent dead” (p. 5). The novel emphasises this cost, at the same time as it highlights contemporary concerns. Dana recounts a time when her mother, despite being slight and middle-aged, is treated as suspicious based entirely on her race when her car breaks down, and the police are called because she is viewed as a “suspicious character” (Butler, 2018 [1979] p. 119). Dana’s aunt also foregrounds contemporary issues around skin tone when she accepts her choice of a white husband, Kevin, even though she “doesn’t care much for white people” (p. 120) because “she prefers light-skinned blacks” (p. 120). Any children they will have are likely be light-skinned, and Dana’s aunt believes this to be an advantage because with her darker skin tone she believes Dana is “a little too ‘highly visible’” (p. 119). One might posit that it is still challenging to be “highly visible” (p. 119) in America today, as is evident by current news headlines of unarmed black youths being shot by policemen, or for allegedly appearing to be suspicious, as Dana’s petite middle-aged mother is in her broken-down car.

Dana is the protagonist in *Kindred*, and like Luciente, her name is significant and illuminating. “Edana” (p. 26) is an elemental Irish name meaning fire. Her name foreshadows her strength and the force of her light that ultimately incinerates her ancestor, Rufus, who leaves her little choice when he tries to rape her at the end of the book. She is also metaphorically the flame on a candle, trying to educate other slaves and even reading to Rufus. Ironically, her story begins with her trying to cast light upon him in a more literal way, by saving a young Rufus from drowning.

After this first trip back into the past, Dana realises that the hours she has spent in the antebellum South, crossing both time and distance (p. 19), number mere seconds in her present time (p. 10). Dana may have travelled backwards in time, but she is the same person and takes her modern education and confidence as a comparatively free American (when contrasted with the slaves in the nineteenth century) with her. This creates tension for Dana, who thinks of herself as a castaway when she reads *Robinson Crusoe* to Rufus. The concept of the castaway emphasises the power of narrative to transport the fictional character and the reader beyond their circumstances, much like the novels that Butler and other Afro-diasporic novels do for their readers who see themselves in the protagonist. This helps the reader to imagine a fictional world where they are not being persecuted. Like Robinson Crusoe, she views herself as “a kind of castaway [...] happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else’s trouble” (p. 91).

Dana rescues Rufus from drowning by resuscitating him and later learns that his mother almost intervened when she saw her helping her son, until she remembered the story in the “Second Book of Kings” (p. 19) when “Elisha breathed into the dead boy’s mouth, and the boy came back to life” (p. 19):

“Mama said she tried to stop you when she saw you doing that to me because you were just some nigger she had never seen before. Then she remembered Second Kings.” (p. 19)

Comparing Dana with a revered Old Testament prophet foreshadows her prophetic role in the novel as she attempts to ensure her future (in a sense, prophesy it), and she brings a liberal message (or prophecy) from the future about equality and freedom to her ancestor. Dana’s task is not an easy one, and she is immediately distressed by the use of the epithet “niggers” and asks, “Your mother always call black people niggers, Rufe?” (p. 19). Calling a black person by this derogatory term in the antebellum South was pervasive, but according to Rufus, it is oddly impolite to do it in company (p. 19), and Dana begins to challenge this racist slur, telling him to say “black people” (p. 21) instead. For Dana, this is a critical aspect of enlightenment that she tries to impart to Rufus. Dana believes that as a child, he is potentially malleable, and she realises that she may be able to be a positive influence on him. Dana also realises that Rufus draws her to him across space and time when he gets “himself into more trouble than he could handle” (p. 21) and finds out that the period she has travelled back to is “eighteen fifteen” (p.

23). It dawns on Dana that her role in the past is not only to “insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family’s survival, my own birth” (p. 24), because she needs Rufus to father Hagar, her ancestor, or she “could not exist” (p. 25).

When Dana first leaves Rufus, she encounters the appalling reality of slavery beyond racial slurs, which is far worse than anything she has seen on television with the “too-red blood substitute” (p. 33) and “well-rehearsed screams” (p. 33). What she could never be prepared for was their “pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves” (p. 33). A slave man is broken in front of his family in excruciating detail, and his wife shows admirable fortitude as she faces the white attackers, impotent in the face of their evil cruelty, but not without dignity:

Behind him, his child wept noisily against her mother’s leg, but the woman, like her husband, was silent. She clutched the child to her and stood, head down, refusing to watch the beating. Then the man’s resolve broke. He began to moan – low gut-wrenching sounds torn from him against his will. Finally, he began to scream. (p. 32)

Dana’s reaction is understandable, and she notes that she is as affected as the young girl as her “face too was wet with tears” (p. 33). Dana realises that they are her ancestors as Rufus and Alice become Hagar’s parents, but at the time her more pressing problem is how to return to the future, which is solved when a man tries to rape her outside the cabin. Her imminent death is what sends her back to her time, with the clear understanding that as a black woman in 1815, her predicament is an unenviable one.

Dana learns that “Rufus’s fear of death calls me to him, and my own fear of death sends me home” (p. 49). She quickly realises that she needs to shore up her strength if she is going to survive in the past and that her ancestors are better placed to do so because their persecution has strengthened them. Kevin tells her that she has more advantages than the slaves do, but Dana believes that they are the ones better placed to survive because to “survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could” (p. 49).

When Dana returns to the past, her plans to guide Rufus solidify as she hopes to “keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come” (p. 69). She naively hopes she might be

“making things easier for Alice” (p. 69), her other ancestor if she stays and can educate and enlighten Rufus about equality. Kevin feels that she is “gambling against history” (p. 86). Dana’s gamble against history is an audacious one, with some success, but she cannot “go through this whole experience as an observer” (p. 107) not only because of the practical considerations upon which her existence depends, but also because of her moral convictions.

On her next trip back, Dana meets up with an older eighteen or nineteen-year-old Rufus and realises that she may be able to “bluff and bully him a little” (p. 131) because he is injured after raping Alice and being beaten by her lover, Isaac, and thus may be more receptive to her advice than he is typically:

I could hear his increasing desperation. He was hurt and alone except for me. He couldn’t even get up, and I seemed to be abandoning him. I wanted him to experience a little of that fear. (p. 132)

On the surface, Dana appears to be acting for the greater good by stopping Isaac so that he cannot be convicted for murder, but it is difficult to forget that she has a vested interest in Rufus’s survival as he has not yet conceived her ancestor, Hagar. Rufus’s feelings are also dubious; in particular, his love for Alice is a paradox. The rape was the only way he could have her, but in his eyes, the real shame lies in the fact that he loves a black woman:

I said nothing. I was beginning to realize that he loved the woman – to her misfortune. There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one. (p. 134)

Dana has a “compact paperback history of slavery in America” (p. 123) with her because the map and dates might be useful, but it also recounts the deeds of well-known and heroic slave women, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, amongst other heroes against slavery. Rufus forces her to tear the book up and throw it into the fire because of the risk that his father might find it:

The fire flared up and swallowed the dry paper, and I found my thoughts shifting to Nazi book burnings. Repressive societies always seemed to understand the danger of “wrong” ideas. (p. 154)

Books are powerful tools for change, and stories about strong women, like Dana, are dangerous in a society that oppresses marginalised people like her because of her race and gender. Like Butler, Frans Desmet is interested in women's representation "in feminist dystopias". Desmet looks at "how is language used as an instrument of oppression or liberation in these works" (Desmet, 2010, p. 6). This is an apt parallel to Butler who also foregrounds these issues in Dana's story of oppression and (partial) liberation, not only for herself, but for the present, and hopefully, the future. Unfortunately, this makes little difference for Alice, who will never be free. After Alice is badly beaten and Isaac is sent away, Rufus still will not give up his pursuit of her. Dana tries to reason with him, and he unwittingly foreshadows his own murder:

"If I ever caught myself wanting you like I want her, I'd cut my throat," he said. I hoped that problem would never arise. If it did, one of us would do some cutting all right. (Butler, 2018 [1979], p. 180)

At this point, Rufus berates Dana and says, "You think you're white!" (p. 180); moreover, he tells her that she does not know her "place any better than a wild animal" (p. 180), but admits that he needs her help. By admitting this, Rufus recognises that Dana is confident and intelligent, but is also vexed that she refuses to be subjugated. Rufus needs Dana's help because his attraction to Alice has become an uncontrollable compulsion, but what is noteworthy at this point in the narrative is that Dana's daring plan to influence him may have a chance of success. For Alice, however, there cannot be a happy ending as she knows that he owns her and can do whatever he wants to her, "whether it's right or wrong" (p. 183). Alice also knows that she cannot run away, and eventually bends to his will because she cannot face the dogs again, but she wishes she could kill him instead:

She went to him. She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little. (p. 185)

The horrors of slavery are also emphasised for Dana after she suffers a savage whipping and is unsure that she will ever be able to try to escape again. Despite this second whipping, Dana knows she will try again, and with more courage than she feels, she says so through her swollen face, her mouth distorting her speech (p. 196). Only after Hagar is born is Dana's future secure and she can act more decisively against Rufus's increasing bullying. Dana thinks Hagar is "the

most beautiful name I had ever heard” (p. 260) because it means that she is “almost free, half-free if such a thing was possible, half-way home” (p. 260). Hagar is a biblical allusion to Hagar in the Bible who was the slave woman who was set free with her baby boy, Ishmael, when she is banished from Abraham’s protection:

Alice shrugged. “If Hagar had been a boy, I would have called her Ishmael. In the Bible, people might be slaves for a while, but they didn’t have to stay slaves.” (p. 261)

Sadly, Alice never feels free and tells Dana that she is “tired of havin’ a bit in [her] mouth” (p. 263). Dana tries to ensure that not all of the children are restrained by offering the only freedom that she can by educating them. The neighbours recognise the power of education in liberating oppressed people and voice these concerns:

Some of his neighbors found out what I was doing and offered him fatherly advice. It was dangerous to educate slaves, they warned. Education made blacks dissatisfied with slavery. It spoiled them for field work. (p. 264)

Despite this modicum of success, Rufus soon reverts to slave master when he sells Sam for being friendly to Dana, and this is when she realises that all of her efforts with Rufus have come to naught:

“Please, Rufe. If you do this, you’ll destroy what you mean to preserve. Please don’t ...” He hit me. It was a first, and so unexpected that I stumbled backward and fell. And it was a mistake. It was the breaking of an unspoken agreement between us – a very basic agreement – and he knew it. (p. 266)

Dana has to risk her own death to get home to the twentieth century after this, and when Rufus asks her how she managed to get so near to death to get home, her bravery is foregrounded once more when she tells him, “There’re worse things than being dead” (p. 282). Dana displays dogged resolve when she takes a knife out of her bag and cuts her own wrists (p. 268) so that she can go back to the present day, away from her increasingly sinister ancestor. Dana has not had the success that she had hoped to have with Rufus, and this does indeed appear to be because of the weight of history against which she gambled and lost. She feels this most keenly on her next visit when she discovers that Alice has hanged herself after Rufus lies to Alice and

says that he sold their children to keep her from running away. Dana makes one last attempt to, at least partially, mitigate Rufus's wrongs and insists on "[t]wo certificates of freedom" (p. 281) because he "deprived them of their mother" (p. 281). In this manner, Dana is once again not entirely fearless, but she does act in the face of considerable adversity and pain.

In the final pages of the book, it becomes increasingly apparent that even though Dana has managed to avoid being raped throughout the novel by her ancestor, Kevin is aware that Rufus seems too attached to Dana. Dana interprets his belligerence as victim-shaming when she tells him, "You mean you could forgive me for having been raped?" (p. 273). Kevin sees the rape as inevitable, and in this at least he is correct, as Rufus eventually does try to rape Dana. He sees her and Alice as two halves of the same person, or as "[t]wo halves of a whole" (p. 287). Minutes before this rape attempt, Rufus admits that it was his father who recognised that Dana is a force to be reckoned with. Dana's strength stems from her intelligence and courage, which again demonstrate the power of education in liberation struggles:

"Daddy always thought you were dangerous because you knew too many white ways, but you were black. Too black, he said. The kind of black who watches and thinks and makes trouble. I told that to Alice and she laughed. She said sometimes Daddy showed more sense than I did. She said he was right about you, and that I'd find out some day." (p. 285)

Dana certainly does prove that she can be dangerous when tested sorely enough. She is not only dangerous but bold and courageous too. The ordeal that ought to have killed her, at least mentally and spiritually, does scar her. Dana loses her arm, and at the end of the book, her guilt motivates her to try to find out what happened to the slaves with whom she lived. There are no easy answers, and the book ends with this loose end, because no one can live happily ever after in a slave narrative, least of all the person who manages to escape to the freedom the future offers while the others are left behind to suffer. What is evident is that Dana lives up to her elemental name, fire, as she takes her past and future into her hands in a bold move to guarantee her existence, incinerating the evil in her family history. Dana is thus a paragon of Walker's capable womanist ideals, even if she feels as though she fails in the end. Most notably, Dana inspires others by existing on the shelves in libraries and bookstores for young black women to read about and be inspired by her courage and audacity. Nnedi Okorafor corroborates this boldness in Butler's characters, and her as a writer:



A friend of mine who is an African-American fantasy writer summed it up best when she said: “What do I love about Octavia Butler? She dared. She dared to create characters who had the audacity to be black and female and exist in the future, with aliens at that! She dared to be powerful, to create nations, and birth religions. She is an unapologetic writer. And she succeeded.” (Okorafor, 2008b, p. 242)

Butler’s seminal Afrodiasporic text featuring the womanist hero, Dana, and her audacious temerity in the face of both antebellum and contemporary racism, is particularly apposite in this study. The novel explores the predicament of the female slave, as well as the challenges Dana faces in the present as a black woman, many of which are still relevant today.

In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (2007 [1987]), set later in the nineteenth century than *Kindred*, Denver is the young heroic protagonist whose courage illuminates the darkness that threatens to engulf her family. While this book is not an Afrofuturist text, it does feature a “cognitive estrangement” (quoted in Gill, 2013, p. 73) and “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (p.73), which is a noticeable element of both science fiction and Gothic fiction. The book itself was conceived when the author took the bold step to leave her editing job to concentrate on writing. Instead of the serene calm she had anticipated, Morrison felt overwhelming panic, and she began to probe this surprising reaction to her liberation from salaried work. Morrison realised that it “was the shock of liberation” (Morrison, 2007 [1987], Foreword) and “that drew my thoughts to what ‘free’ could possibly mean to women” (Foreword).

Morrison writes about women’s struggles for equality and for “choice without stigma” (Foreword) regarding marriage and children in the eighties. This led her to reach back into the past when having a child was required, but being a parent “was as out of the question as freedom” (Foreword) and “[a]ssertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal” (Foreword). This is the same landscape that Butler’s *Kindred* is set in. Morrison decided to tell the story of Margaret Garner, “a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner’s plantation” (Foreword):

She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners. Her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers. She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments, she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom. (Foreword)

Like Dana in Butler's novel, one of the heroes in Morrison's novel is Sethe, a woman who has experienced the horrors of slavery first hand. Sethe kills her baby and plans to kill the others, to liberate them from the approaching yoke of slavery. Morrison uses Margaret Garner's story as inspiration to "invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place'" (Foreword). Morrison would use this template to create a hero who would "assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom" (Foreword) and "pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (Foreword). While Morrison states that her intended hero is Sethe, for this study, Denver is the more interesting character because the example she sets for young black readers is most pertinent. It is Denver who, like Jessamy in *The Icarus Girl*, has to fight a malevolent spirit to illuminate the dark forces that threaten her life and her family.

Morrison deliberately throws the reader into the text, wanting the reader to be "kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment" (Foreword) to achieve the abovementioned cognitive estrangement. Like a slave, she wanted the reader's "first step into a shared experience with the book's population" (Foreword) to feel "just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense" (Foreword). These are the opening lines:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. (Chapter 1)

Into this setting, Paul D arrives, with the spirit of the baby who harbours "so much rage" (Chapter 1). This is the baby whom Sethe murdered and who is tormenting Sethe and Denver. Sethe's tenacity is outlined as she recounts how she was beaten when she was pregnant, had

her milk taken, and was left with a “chokecherry tree” (Chapter 1) on her back where the scars covered over the wounds:

“I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much.” (Chapter 1)

The cost was her daughter’s life, the daughter who lives in the house and haunts them. Despite this, Sethe is indefatigable, and instead of becoming weak, having encountered so much suffering and pain in her life, nothing frightens her. Denver, however, is afraid, and Paul D recognises how hard it is for “a young girl living in a haunted house” (Chapter 1). Denver is tired of being ostracised by the community and is afraid of her mother. Sethe fails Denver in many ways, but critically she fails to see how much Denver needs her. Sethe recognises that Denver has a tenacity of her own and believes that she is impregnable, “a charmed child” (Chapter 3) for having survived and remained through all of their shared hardship:

“Uh huh. Nothing bad can happen to her. Look at it. Everybody I knew dead or gone or dead and gone. Not her. Not my Denver.” (Chapter 3)

This is not what makes Denver impregnable. Her true mettle is only tested near the end of the novel, but up until this point, she and Sethe had merely lived from day to day, and “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (Chapter 3). Paul D brings change when he chases the malevolent spirit out of their house, and the three of them start to feel like a family – “all three of them were gliding over the dust holding hands” (Chapter 4). However, this is merely the exposition, and these changes herald Beloved’s return to seek retribution for her death:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. (Chapter 5)

Beloved’s rebirth is announced by Sethe’s apparent incontinence, but this is, in fact, the breaking of Sethe’s waters for Beloved’s rebirth. Sethe does not make it to the outhouse and “in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless” (Chapter 5). Incontinence of this sort is also a common reaction to fear, making Beloved’s rebirth more ominous, but Sethe cannot see that. All she remembers when she hears her name is that “the

remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kindly toward her” (Chapter 5). Denver’s reaction is also curious because she “was shaking” (Chapter 5), which is also often a reaction to fear, but is described as wanting more of this infant-like woman who also suffers from incontinence and has the skin of a newborn (Chapter 5).

The only outwardly menacing sign is her laboured breathing, pointing to having had her throat slit in her life. Beloved is immediately obsessed with Sethe and wants to hear her stories, and Sethe “learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling” (Chapter 6). Beloved wants to know more about the mother who cut her throat, possibly because she wants to understand why it is that she was the only one who was murdered, or she wants her mother to repent.

On the other hand, Paul D no longer feels he belongs in the house. Beloved disrupts the home and immediately senses that Paul D is a threat to her, so she confuses and seduces him:

Paul D had the feeling a large, silver fish had slipped from his hands the minute he grabbed hold of its tail. That it was streaming back off into dark water now, gone but for the glistening marking its route. (Chapter 7)

The fish complements the water motif (extended through the water rebirth, the incontinence and the breaking of Sethe’s water) and is a play on the word tail/tale, which he almost “catches”, but it gets away. It suggests that Paul D is close to understanding who or what Beloved is, but cannot quite grab its tail. He questions her about her name, and her cryptic answer is eerily accurate: “In the dark my name is Beloved” (Chapter 8), referring to the grave. Beloved tells Paul D that she came back, “[t]o see her face” (Chapter 8), referring to her mother, Sethe, which Denver is hurt by as she longs to be the reason for her return (Chapter 8). Nevertheless, Denver does not want her to leave, even though Beloved tells her that Sethe “is the one” (Chapter 8) and that Denver can go “but she [Sethe] is the one I have to have” (Chapter 8).

The story of Sethe’s persecution and liberation is recounted, and she remembers how long it took for her to be truly free, because “[f]reeing your-self was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Chapter 9). Denver is also trapped and oppressed by the weight of their shared history and is desperate to be accepted by Beloved. Contrary to this, Beloved is

only interested in Sethe, and she needs to rid herself of Paul D, whom she views as a challenge to her, and so she seduces him asking him to “touch me on the inside part” (Chapter 11). Paul D finds himself “[f]ucking her when he was convinced he didn’t want to” (Chapter 12). The situation is untenable and becomes even more so when Paul D learns what Sethe did to try to save her babies from slavery when the four riders of the apocalypse came to take her back to Sweet Home: “schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher, and a sheriff” (Chapter 16):

Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four – because she’d had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one [...]. (Chapter 16)

Schoolteacher thinks that Sethe looks “blind” (Chapter 16), but she was only blind to a life in bondage. She cannot envisage life in chains for her or her babies, and it drove her to do the unthinkable. Sethe is taken by the sheriff, the embodiment of strength and pride as she walks past the crowd in silence, her head held high (Chapter 16).

Sethe could not let her children “live under schoolteacher” (Chapter 18), and her violent action is thus paradoxically the action of a loving mother. By sacrificing her baby, she is saving her from bondage, and Sethe sacrifices herself too as she can never emerge unscathed from putting her “babies where they’d be safe” (Chapter 18). Paul D does not view this as a loving action, and says, “Your love is too thick” (Chapter 18). He views what she did as wrong because, as he puts it, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (Chapter 18), suggesting that only an animal would kill its own young. Paul D fails to understand that Sethe tries to reconfigure the future, in a way that is arguably not that different from what Afrofuturist texts aim to do, by exchanging the yoke of slavery for the freedom of death. Because Beloved came back to her, Sethe believes, “I don’t have to explain a thing” (Chapter 20).

Denver admits that she loves her mother, but that she knows “she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it” (Chapter 21). Denver’s indomitable spirit lies in the fact that despite being afraid of her mother, she will not leave so that it cannot happen again “and my mother won’t have to kill me too” (Chapter 21). Denver

says of Beloved: “She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine” (Chapter 21), which is eerily repeated in the next chapter by Beloved who says the same thing of Sethe: “I am Beloved and she is mine” (Chapter 22). In a poetic stream of consciousness, Beloved speaks of crouching, reminiscent of slaves in a slave boat, so that in her death, she represents the suffering of all slaves. Beloved only wants Sethe, and speaks of her as “she empties out her eyes” (Chapter 22) and repeats: “I want her face a hot thing” (Chapter 22) and “I see her face which is mine” (Chapter 22). The meaning behind the text is cryptic, but what can be gleaned from the mysterious longing is that she wants to join with Sethe:

she knows I want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me I see me swim away a hot thing I see the bottoms of my feet I am alone I want to be the two of us I want the join (Chapter 22)

By the end of the novel, Denver is cut off from their intimate bond when Sethe sees “the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin” (Chapter 26), which is the scar from her cut throat. From then on, if there is any food in the house, Beloved gets it, and Sethe “cut Denver out completely” (Chapter 26). It becomes difficult to tell them apart, and she watches her mother, looking for “a signal that the thing that was in her was out, and she would kill again” (Chapter 26). Beloved recounts her ordeals in the grave in horrifying detail. She speaks of “dead men” (Chapter 26) who “lay on top of her” (Chapter 26) and of having nothing to eat and ghosts “without skin” (Chapter 26) who “stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light” (Chapter 26). That is when Denver knows that she needs to have the courage to bring them all into the light:

and since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring (Sethe happy when Beloved was; Beloved lapping devotion like cream), Denver knew it was on her. (Chapter 26)

Denver takes the first courageous steps out of the yard, to “step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (Chapter 26). Leaving the house is Denver’s first courageous act that becomes the catalyst for casting out the bitter spirit of Beloved in their lives. Beloved is tormenting them both, tearing at her own throat to torment her mother until “rubies of blood opened there, made brighter by her midnight skin” (Chapter 26). Denver realises that “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for

it” (Chapter 26). News spreads that “Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her” (Chapter 26) and the neighbourhood rise and come to their house, where Beloved stands naked to confront them:

The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunder-black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (Chapter 26)

Moreover, then she disappears, “exploded right before their eyes” (Chapter 26). This exorcism is brought about by Denver, who dares to leave the house and seek help, and in the process, she too embodies Walker’s womanist:

Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. (Walker, 1983, p. xi)

Paul D immediately recognises that she is indeed “grown” and tries to tell her, but Denver quickly lets him know that she does not need his belated help or opinions:

He licked his lips. “Well, if you want my opinion –”

“I don’t,” she said. “I have my own.”

“You grown,” he said. “Yes, sir.” (Morrison, 2007 [1987], Chapter 27)

Ironically, the story ends with Morrison stating that “This is not a story to pass on” (Chapter 28), but in the telling of the story, she has done precisely that. While it is a story of horror and heartache, which no one should have to live through, let alone recount, there is value in the telling. Denver, the youngest and least likely hero, is the one who eventually overcomes the evil force that threatens her family, and in the process, grows up. Her story sets an example for young black women who read about her courage and are inspired by it. These readers can then imagine themselves in the place of the hero whom Womack longed for as she wanted to see dark-skinned heroes like her in popular culture (Womack, 2013, p. 6).

Ti-Jeanne also has to prove herself “in charge” and “serious” (Walker, 1983, p. xi) in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (2012 [1988]), “a novel that uses Afro-Caribbean folklore and magic in a futuristic setting” (Graham, 2004, p. 165) and is both an Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist novel. The title of the novel comes from the game and the well-known folksong, *Brown Girl in the Ring*:

Gal, show me your motion, tra-la-la-la-la,  
For you look like a little sugar plum (plum, plum)  
- Ring game (Hopkinson, 2012 [1988])

In the time-honoured Caribbean folksong, each dancer has a turn in the circle of dancers (ring), and has to show them her “motion”, or in other words, has to demonstrate how well she can dance while being watched by the other girls who clap around her. The song is thus a metaphor for the proficiency of a “brown girl” under pressure, with the support and encouragement of her girlfriends. Ti-Jeanne is the young woman who is thrown into the ring and has to perform under pressure, with the weight of her ancestors and a pantheon of Caribbean gods supporting her. Like Jessamy and her mother in *The Icarus Girl*, Ti-Jeanne has to reconcile her cultural heritage with contemporary beliefs. Ti-Jeanne is not a young girl, but she is also not immediately prepared to stand alone as she is an unwed black mother with only her grandmother to support and guide her:

Hopkinson uses themes similar to those found in Butler’s Parable saga and Barnes’ cyberpunk novels. But by setting *Brown Girl* in Toronto instead of Los Angeles, Hopkinson assumes the vantage point of a single, unwed, Black mother attempting to reconcile tradition, modernity, and romance in an inner city officially severed from society. (Rutledge, 2001, p. 247)

The force of evil in this story is also a member of her family, but this time it takes the form of her grandfather, Rudy, who rules the futuristic dystopian Toronto core with his posse using his own daughter’s spirit (Mi-Jeanne is Ti-Jeanne’s mother) in order to perform voodoo magic for his power. Rudy’s zombie, which is a familiar stock character in Gothic fiction, is the tragic figure of Melba. Early on in the novel when she is introduced, it is clear that she is an empty husk, and both “her will, her volition, seemed to be gone” (Hopkinson, 2012 [1988], p. 9).



Rudy's appalling treatment of women, including Melba and his daughter, Mi-Jeanne, is a metaphor for patriarchal dominance over women, utterly disregarding their rights and autonomy, reminiscent too of the treatment of slaves in both *Kindred* and *Beloved*, but also Connie's forced committal in *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

Fortunately, Ti-Jeanne is mentored by her grandmother, Gros-Jeanne (Mami), and has inherited her Caribbean spiritual gifts with magic and medicine. For example, "Sometimes she saw how people were going to die" (p. 9) and is visited by supernatural apparitions, like the Jab-Jab<sup>9</sup> (p. 18):

Hopkinson ensures the continuation of a female voice in Black FFF. As a native West Indian, she has already introduced new elements into the genre. Afro-Caribbean gods enter the theatre of fiction as active participants in a manner respecting the traditional theology surrounding these deities. (Rutledge, 2001, p. 247)

The father of Ti-Jeanne's baby, Tony, has been charged by Rudy with finding a suitable heart donor for the premier of Toronto. Tony discovers that Gros-Jeanne's heart is a match, and the fact that she is his child's great-grandmother does not stop him from procuring it for Rudy, whom he is quite justified in fearing. The theft of Gros-Jeanne's heart is diabolical, but figuratively, it also represents the excision of her loving guidance as a mother figure in Ti-Jeanne's life.

Ti-Jeanne, on the other hand, does not let her fear stop her from facing her grandfather, Rudy, at the end of the novel. Ti-Jeanne has had to face losing her mother, which is also the handiwork of Rudy. They discover that Rudy has trapped his own daughter's spirit as the source of his power, which is contrasted with Gros-Jeanne's magic as she is a "healer, a seer woman" (Hopkinson, 2012 [1988], p. 36) and "does good, not wickedness" (p. 36). Ti-Jeanne argues about this with Tony, who is afraid of her because of the tension between cultural and contemporary values. Conversely, Ti-Jeanne is derisive about Caribbean magic, and Gros-Jeanne warns her about being dismissive:

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<sup>9</sup> Legbara, the Prince of the Cemetery.

“Girl child, you know better than to call it obeah. Stupidness. Is a gift from God Father. Is a good thing, not a evil thing. But child, if you don’t learn how to use it, it will use you, just like it take your mother.” (p. 48)

Gros-Jeanne urges Ti-Jeanne to learn about her gifts so that she can “turn seer woman like Mi-Jeanne” (p. 48), her mother, and understand why the apparitions are visiting her. When Gros-Jeanne consults her tarot cards, Ti-Jeanne turns up a card with the Jab-Jab on it, which is to be expected as he appears to be protecting her, but also “La Diablesse” (p. 51). She learns that the she-devil leaves death behind her, but in Ti-Jeanne’s dream she stops La Diablesse when she wrestles her to the ground and breaks a bottle over her head and she turns “to ashes” (p. 53), which foreshadows how she will defeat her grandfather, Rudy. Ti-Jeanne must learn to “serve the spirits” (p. 59) and “heal the living” (p. 59) like Gros-Jeanne, by embracing her powers and accepting her magical cultural gifts if she is to succeed against her grandfather.

Aside from her grandmother’s influence and guidance, Ti-Jeanne must also fight battles of her own making in the form of her attraction to Tony, which is problematic throughout the novel. While Tony is a troubling character, there are glimmers of positive attributes, like his love for Ti-Jeanne, but these are clouded by sexist attitudes, like his comment that he would have “let” her keep her baby (p. 73), and duplicity when he takes Gros-Jeanne’s heart. Rudy’s ruthlessness is a mitigating factor as Tony is afraid of him, and for part of the narrative, Tony does appear to be trying to help. During a ritual to help him get past Rudy’s posse, a petrified Tony has to place a stool next to the stone head of an “Eshu” (p. 89), which is also a name given to subordinate manifestations of divinity in Nigerian religion. In *Who Fears Death*, an Eshu is a name given to those who can shape-shift, and who may themselves be deities (or become deities). The use of the same word for a powerful entity demonstrates how aspects of African religion have traversed the diaspora, and also serves to link the novels beyond the narratives. Furthermore, Ti-Jeanne learns later that the Caribbean religion also links the occult and Christianity:

“The African powers, child. The spirits. The loas. The orishas. The oldest ancestors. You will hear people from Haiti and Cuba and Brazil and so call them different names. You will even hear some names I ain’t tell you, but we all mean the same thing. Them is the ones who does carry we prayers to God Father, for he too busy to listen to every single one of we on earth talking at he all the time. Each of we have a special one who

is we father or mother, and no matter what we call it, whether Shango or Santeria or Voudun or what, we all doing the same thing. Serving the spirits.” (p. 126)

During the ritual, Gros-Jeanne pours blood over the stone Eshu to invite the spirits, and Ti-Jeanne is possessed by an Eshu called Legbara, the Prince of the Cemetery, who is also called the Jab-Jab and is her father spirit (p. 94). Ti-Jeanne discovers in this ritual that she is so powerful that even Gros-Jeanne “should ’fraid of she” (p. 95). Osain, Gros-Jeanne’s father spirit, responsible for healing, reveals that she can no longer fight Rudy because she has waited too long, and Osain specifically marks out Ti-Jeanne as her successor:

“Tell Gros-Jeanne is past time for she to do my work. Is too late for she and for the middle one, but maybe the end one go win through. Ti-Jeanne, she have to help you to get Rudy dead bowl and burn it. Is the only way to stop he from catching shadows in it. The spirits vex at he too bad for all the evil he cause.” (p. 98)

Ti-Jeanne will traverse “Guinea Land” (p. 104) to help Tony escape, which Gros-Jeanne tells her is the spirit plane where Africans go when they die. This spiritual plain corresponds to the “wilderness” in *Who Fears Death*. The ritual complicates Ti-Jeanne’s life as she finds out that Rudy is her grandfather, her mother is beyond saving, and that she will have to be the one to defeat him. Ti-Jeanne has to be the hero as she is the last in line, so the responsibility falls to her:

“The end one is you. It look like you did dreaming true, doux-doux. I must be the one to set the trap for Rudy, but is you go have to stop he.” (p. 124)

For Ti-Jeanne, being a good daughter is going to entail “single-handedly” hunting “down obeah-wielding gang lords” (p. 127), freeing her mother, avenging her grandmother and murdering her evil grandfather. Ti-Jeanne, a single black mother who has just lost her grandmother and found out that her mother’s spirit is being held in a “duppy<sup>10</sup> bowl” by her grandfather, has to find the strength and opportunity to confront him. Despite her terror, her choices are to do it or to wait for her mother’s spirit to do Rudy’s bidding and murder her. Ti-Jeanne realises that she cannot use force or might to bring Rudy down, she needs to take the

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<sup>10</sup> West African spirit or ghost.

Jab-Jab's advice and use "[c]unning, not force" (p. 194). Inside she is "quailing in fear, but she refused to show it" (p. 208). While Ti-Jeanne's bravado makes her appear braver than she feels as she taunts her attackers, she realises that she cannot give in to Rudy's lies that she will only be truly free if she agrees to become his spirit slave, like her mother.

Ti-Jeanne finally understands how to reclaim and channel her confidence and tells the Jab-Jab, "I can't keep giving my will into other people hands no more, ain't? I have to decide what I want to do for myself" (p. 220). Ti-Jeanne uses the centre pole of the palais, which is "the tallest centre pole in the world" (p. 221) to reach down to the dead and up into the heavens "where the oldest ancestors lived" (p. 221). Ti-Jeanne's audacious plan is to make the tower "their ladder into this world" (p. 221) because she was already "halfway into Guinea Land herself" (p. 221). In this way, Ti-Jeanne calls up the "graceful Oshun and beautiful Emanjah, water goddesses both, anger terrible on their unearthly faces" (p. 223) and a determined Melba with "her own skin draped over one arm" (p. 226). Next Gros-Jeanne enters, who "smiled proudly at her" (p. 226), her chest gaping where her heart had once sat. Gros-Jeanne tells her, "You do good, sweetness" (p. 226). Rudy cannot escape, and Legbara, Ti-Jeanne's own Eshu (the Jab-Jab) refuses him, and "Rudy screamed as the weight of every murder he had done fell on him" (p. 226). Legbara is proud of her and says, "Heh-heh! Daughter, ain't I tell you go be Duppy Conqueror this day?" (p. 229) because it is Ti-Jeanne who defeats her grandfather in the spiritual realm by calling all of his murders down on him, proving that she has nerve that outstrips the men in her life. Tony, who is no match for Ti-Jeanne's audacious strength and tenacity, admits that he does not "know how a person learns to be so strong" (p. 246). In the final acknowledgements at the end of the book, Hopkinson thanks her ancestors "for walking the path before me and lighting my way" (Acknowledgments).

According to Amanda Rico in her thesis on "Imagining Global Female Futures in Black Speculative and Science Fiction", the more nuanced character "write back" against the male hero trope:

However, although the Afrocentric superheroines described in the novels I discuss in this chapter do "write back" against tropes employed within a largely male-dominated, Eurocentric canon, their characterization involves forms of nuance and ambiguity that make them distinctively human rather than flat, reactionary archetypes. (Rico, 2018, p. 103)

All four of the protagonists in these Afrofuturist and Afro-Gothic texts written in the seventies and eighties, Connie, Dana, Denver, and Ti-Jeanne, overturn this trope and learn to rely on their tenacity. One could argue that this mettle is inherited from their resilient mothers (and grandmothers), honed by decades of oppression, and each of them becomes a light on their journey in the narrative, and crucially, to the readers. The courageous protagonists in these foundational texts are significant torchbearers for the novels that are studied in the chapters that follow because they demonstrate how Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist womanist fiction with audacious young black heroes enlighten and empower marginalised young black readers. Consuelo is not only enlightened by Luciente, her story enlightens her readers about critical feminist theory, and has been doing so for decades. Dana and Denver both have to overcome the horrors of slavery with very little agency, and Ti-Jeanne has to learn to embrace traditional religion and culture in order to illuminate her path. The novels each set the stage for the black heroes that inform this study as they were ground-breaking in their day, and remarkably, still have relevance for young black readers in the diaspora today.

## CHAPTER 4: FLIGHT FROM THE WILDERNESS

“Icarus, I recommend thee to keep the middle tract; lest, if thou shouldst go too low, the water should clog thy wings; if too high, the fire [of the sun] should scorch them. Fly between both; and I bid thee neither to look at Boötes, nor Helice, nor the drawn sword of Orion. Under my guidance, take thy way.” (Ovid, translated by Henry T. Riley, 2004 [1902])

In *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi (2013 [2005]) Jessamy is the audacious hero because she has to confront the conflict she experiences as the child of a Nigerian mother and British father. This chapter will demonstrate how the novel foregrounds the reconciliation of this cultural dissonance through the juju of Afro-Gothicism as a reclaimed term in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*.

In the legend of Icarus, Icarus’s father tells him not to fly too close to the water, nor the sun, nor the stars. Instead, he is to take his father’s advice on the path to follow in the middle of these two extremes. One can then infer that the implication for this novel with the title, *The Icarus Girl*, is that Jessamy does not receive sage advice on the middle path to follow between her Nigerian and British heritage. According to her grandfather, because Jessamy’s father is British he “knows nothing at all” (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 27), implying that as a British man he lacks essential knowledge about Nigerian culture, or that Nigerian culture is “right” and other cultures are “wrong”. Furthermore, Jessamy’s grandfather berates her mother, Sarah, because he believes she turned her back on her heritage as she “didn’t just take her body away from this place [Nigeria] – she took everything” (p. 27). Jessamy’s experience is familiar to many young readers in Africa and its diaspora today who can relate to her experience of estrangement. Jessamy’s audacity is in confronting this tension bravely, despite her youth, and traversing this middle tract between British and Nigerian culture, to emerge whole. The Afrodiasporic novel’s relevance in this study is the aspirational message of how the brave young girl merges her rent identity to become whole and attain a sense of belonging.

For this reason, her parents cannot give Jessamy the guidance she needs to navigate Nigerian cosmology in the way that Icarus’s father tried to do, and she too risks falling to her death as Icarus did. Jessamy’s flight from the wilderness is thus her (Icarus) flight from the force that threatens her because she is ignorant of her Nigerian heritage and culture. This tension is central

to the novel as Jessamy is befriended by a spirit who is trying to return from the wilderness and appears in the form of a vindictive new friend, TillyTilly. The concept of the wilderness is introduced by Jessamy's mother, who explains, "Traditionally, twins are supposed to live in, um, three worlds: this one, the spirit world, and the Bush, which is a sort of wilderness of the mind" (p. 191). This wilderness is a sacred spiritual plane that one goes to after death, and ought to be where TillyTilly is, but she disrupts the natural order by manifesting in Jessamy's life and trying to change places with her.

The concept of using a Western myth to explain an African paradox is not a new one as the Icarian myth has been used as a metaphor in other novels for a trial where one's audacity could result in death, comparable to Jessamy's risk as she faces her trial in *The Icarus Girl*. In Sindhu Thomas's paper entitled "Recovering Black Women's Subjectivity Through Reconstructed Myths in Toni Morrison's Fiction", she refers to Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, and notes that it "juxtaposes the African American folklore of a flying African with the Western myth of Icarus" (Thomas, 2012, p. 107). Thomas outlines how the "Icarian mythic pattern is one of personal quest, to test the individual's potential" (p. 107). Furthermore, she proposes that "[i]t is a flight from authority and repression and though it ends in death it is a flight towards freedom" (p. 107). While these experiences are not identical, the metaphor for Icarian mythic flight is still apposite as a "personal quest". Jessamy's trial does not end in death for her, but the risk is evident. Thomas believes that in Western tradition, flight "stands for freedom" (p. 107), because freedom has been "historically denied and socially forbidden" (p. 107) for African Americans. Thomas quotes from Aoi Mori's book, *Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse*, which outlines that an aspiration to fly by those subjugated was viewed as "audacious and presumptuous" (Mori, 1999, p. 140), and while Jessamy is too young and naïve to comprehend her situation, she certainly is both "audacious and presumptuous" (p. 140) in her interactions with TillyTilly, bringing to mind Alice Walker's definition of womanists as audacious, despite the problems with adopting an essentialist approach that suggests that all womanist definitions can be applied to all contexts. Nevertheless, the usefulness of the adjective "audacious" to describe a wilful protagonist is noteworthy.

Another myth that is explored in the novel, and which can be traced to African mythology, is the spirit-child, a major trope in Nigerian literature explored by Ben Okri and Amos Tutuola, amongst other well-known writers mentioned below. In this novel, the spirit-child is ambiguous in nature and origin, and although the reader is invited to make assumptions based on

breadcrumbs in the text, nothing is ever clarified. In an interview in *The Guardian* discussing TillyTilly, Oyeyemi said that “she can’t really be categorised” (Sethi, 2005). However, assuming that categorising her as an *abiku* child is apposite, a definition is useful. Timothy Mobolade in his article entitled “The Concept of *Abiku*” states that “Yorubas believe that the *Abikus* form a species of spirit by themselves” (Mobolade, 1973, p. 62) and that according to custom, “an *Abiku* is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family” (p. 62). Christopher Ouma’s paper entitled “Reading the Diasporic *Abiku* in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*” explains that the “notion of the *abiku* in modern African literature dates back to the poetry of John Pepper Clark and Wole Soyinka, both of whom sought to engage with the mythical aspects in the metaphysical, cultural framework of the Yoruba world” (Ouma, 2014, p. 190).

This metaphysical aspect fulfils one of the criteria for *The Icarus Girl* to fall within the parameters of Gothic fiction because it portrays “worlds notable for their differences from the operations of the ordinary world” (Gill, 2013, p. 73). It is also a work of Afro-Gothic fiction because it is contained within “the African imagination” (Irele, 2001, p. 4), and it contains the crucial element for Gothic fiction to be classified as such: “fear” (Punter, 1996, p. 18). Helen Oyeyemi roots this fear in the tension between Western and African culture, which “reflects colonizing cultural transformations as a kind of repression” (Duncan, 2019, Chapter 11). The fear is also rooted in the parallel between TillyTilly in this novel and Beloved in Toni Morrison’s eponymous novel, as in each an evil manifestation tries to usurp the girl’s place in the family. A close analysis of the book follows, foregrounding the tension between Western and African culture and Jessamy’s courage as she navigates this unfamiliar, intimidating terrain. Like Ti-Jeanne in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Jessamy must travel through her equivalent “Guinea Land” (Hopkinson, 2012 [1988], p. 104), which like Ti-Jeanne’s journey is a similar Bush or wilderness of the dead, and she must fight the dark force that threatens her there. The conclusion will demonstrate that she is “traditionally capable” (Walker, 1983, p. xii) in the manner defined in the Alice Walker’s womanist definition and that the “metamorphosis” that both Walker and Ogunyemi outline in their overlapping womanist definitions, which is often triggered by a traumatic event, takes place as Jessamy grows, and can eventually shed light on the terrifying darkness encroaching on her life.

In order to grasp the central tension in the novel, an understanding of Yoruba beliefs about twins is necessary. A paper entitled “Yoruba Customs and Beliefs Pertaining to Twins”



explains the high number of dizygotic twins born in Nigeria and suggests genetic and dietary factors are responsible. The paper explains the cultural understanding that twins share a soul, and when one twin dies, an *ibeji* carving is commissioned to appease the other twin, which is cared for by the family:

As the Yoruba believe that twins share the same combined soul, when a newborn twin dies, the life of the other is imperilled because the balance of his soul has become seriously disturbed. To counteract this danger a special ritual is carried out. After consulting the *Babalawo*, an artisan will be commissioned to carve a small wooden figure as a symbolic substitute for the soul of the deceased twin. (Leroy *et al.*, 2002, p. 134)

These sacred carvings are washed, fed and cared for in place of the deceased twin. Sarah neglects this tradition in the novel as she has adopted a primarily British worldview and has decided that a carving of an *ibeji* for Jessamy's twin, Fern, is unnecessary.

In the novel, it seems at first that TillyTilly might be Fern. Because it is never entirely clear who TillyTilly is, this deliberate ambiguity intensifies the sense of unease felt in the novel as she tries to possess eight-year-old Jessamy. Oyeyemi has suggested that TillyTilly is "from the Bush, 'a world that doesn't have the same structure as our world'" (Bloomsbury, 2019), and in the novel TillyTilly tells Jessamy that she is indeed a twin, leading the reader to surmise that she may, in fact, be Jessamy's twin sister trying to exchange places with her. At other times, she appears to be an imaginary friend, and at others perhaps even Jessamy's alter ego, although this latter suggestion is the most chilling as it means that all the evil committed by TillyTilly in the novel is Jessamy's own doing. It is only in the final pages of the book that TillyTilly and Jessamy's twin, Fern, appear to be separate entities, but in other places, it is less clear. On page 230, TillyTilly calls herself Jessamy's sister, but in the final pages Fern carries Jessamy through the wilderness to her final confrontation with TillyTilly (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], pp. 321-322). Perhaps the only clue that Oyeyemi gives about TillyTilly's identity is in her name. By mirroring the girl's name, TillyTilly, is she suggesting she is two girls or is she implying that TillyTilly is a mirror image of Jessamy? There also appear to be two sides to TillyTilly: at times the playful friend, and at other times, the dangerous demonic spirit trying to oust Jessamy. Again, is she a hidden part of Jessamy, or is she separate from her? Neither perspective is ever confirmed, intensifying the discomfort one feels towards the eight-year-old girl. The third-

person narration limited to the young Jessamy's point of view is also unnerving as the reader often feels the urge to warn the young girl of the peril she is in as she appears to be oblivious to the threat. There are other literary clues about Jessamy's mental state as the young girl reads *Hamlet* and can quote from the play about being in an "antic disposition" (p. 213) like the seemingly mad Hamlet. This is paralleled in Jessamy who appears to have a "febrile illness" (p. 8) and also seems quite insane at times, when in fact her anxiety is rooted in her struggle to reconcile her Nigerian-British identity and stave off an attack from the wilderness – whether caused by this mental anguish, or because of it:

It was Nigeria.

That was the problem.

Nigeria felt ugly.

Nye. Jeer. Reece. Ah.

It was looming out from across all the water and land that they had to cross in the aeroplane, reaching out for her with spindly arms made of dry, crackling grass like straw, wanting to pull her down against its beating heart, to the centre of the heat, so she would pop and crackle like marshmallow. (p. 9)

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is set primarily in Nigeria, the second part is set in England, and the third part is set in Nigeria. Nigeria is ostensibly where the final confrontation between Jessamy and TillyTilly happens, but perhaps it is more accurate to state that it takes place in the spiritual wilderness, which is where Jessamy actually is when she has to face TillyTilly and flee the wilderness to reinhabit her physical body.

Early on in the novel we are introduced to the eight-year-old Jessamy who suffers from a "peculiar febrile illness" (p. 9) and is choking in the seat belt in the aeroplane taking her to Nigeria. It appears to be the physical restraint of the seat belt and her mother's hands that Jessamy is struggling against, but her internal struggle is actually against societal constraints that have made her feel like a stranger in the world as a child of British and Nigerian parents. Jessamy's mental state is described as she screams in her seat as "the prickly feeling at the back

of her eyelids and that familiar sensation of her eyes almost involuntarily rolling upwards on to her head” (p. 9). While this is happening outwardly, inwardly, Jessamy is “sitting hunched up small, far away, thinking scared thoughts, surprised at what was happening” (p. 9). It is her mother, Sarah, who eventually manages to bring her out of her seizure by slapping her and, tellingly, it is her father’s hand that Jessamy seeks out as he “reached out and enfolded her hand in his far bigger one” (p. 11). It is evident that Sarah is the more pragmatic parent, but she is also the less patient one, and this is a reflection of her inner turmoil as Sarah also has to reconcile her Nigerian identity, which is presented to the reader as sternly disciplinarian, and her British identity embodied in Daniel who is much milder in his approach. The tension between Jessamy’s parents’ different ideologies and parental approaches does nothing to quell her anguish. However, as her mother and the Nigerian parent, Sarah plays an important role in guiding the young Jessamy, and even if it takes her some time to do so, to teach her about her heritage and how to embrace her Nigerian values alongside her British values.

In Nigeria, Jessamy quickly realises that she does not fit in much better there than she did in Britain as the child of Nigerian and British parents, and is especially conscious of how out of place her father seems, flushed pink in the African heat (p. 12). Jessamy feels as though people are staring at her conspicuous father because “their glances were slightly longer than usual, but not outright stares” (p. 12). He is an “oddity” (p. 13) in Nigeria, and she is also aware of being sized up by the official who stamps their passports when they go through customs. Jessamy feels herself “growing careful” (p. 13) at this ambivalent reception, which demonstrates the young girl’s perceptive observations of human behaviour, as well as her anxious assumptions about people and their judgemental attitude towards her as a “half-and-half child” (p. 13). Jessamy also notices her mother’s careful smile, an acknowledgement of the curious, judgemental glances accumulated as they progress through the airport:

Had he been thinking, who is this woman who has a Nigerian maiden name in a British passport, who stands here wearing denim shorts and a strappy yellow top, with a white man and a half-and-half child? Had her mother also put herself in his place, looked at herself from his side of the counter and found herself odd and wanting? Maybe that had been the carefulness in her smile. All that the eight-year-old Jess knew was that the smile wasn’t a particularly happy one, and that her mother hadn’t smiled like that in England. (p. 13)

On their way to the family home, Jessamy tries to imagine what her Nigerian grandfather will look like, having been told that his hair will be like “steel wool” (p. 13), but she is unable to picture his face. Jessamy’s chest constricts, and she cannot breathe at the thought that if she cannot visualise him, how will he see her (p. 15)? Her eight-year-old logic is superstitious and is further evidence that she is a very anxious child. This is exacerbated by an animated negotiation with a cab driver when her mother slides into Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin English, leaving Jessamy and her father “outside” (p. 15):

“Wetin you be wanting, now? You no go want us to chop? ... 10,000 naira, sae everything is OK, or ori e ti darun?”

Both her mother and the people surrounding her began to laugh – mysterious laughter, like a liquid, bubbling wall, leaving Jess and her father drenched with it, but still outside. (pp. 14-15)

Jessamy also notices that in Nigeria, people look directly at her, unlike in England “where people didn’t see you, where it was almost rude to, wrong to” (p. 16). A stranger on the street who looks at her can tell she is out of place. He mouths the word *oyinbo* to her. The cab driver explains that “[i]t means somebody who has come from so far away that they are a stranger” (p. 16), further cementing her feeling of alienation in a place that is meant to hold half the key to her identity. Her Nigerian name, Wuraola, which means “gold”, does nothing to help her feel valuable or as if she belongs, either:

Here, in this stone-walled corridor where the sunlight came in through enormous, stiff mosquito screens over each window and her clothes clung to her like another skin, Wuraola sounded like another person. Not her at all. (p. 19)

Jessamy does not know how to “become Wuraola” (p. 19). When her grandfather examines her, she feels as though she is “a little piece of him that had crumbled off, which he was examining for flaws and broken bits before deciding whether it was worth taking it to be reattached” (p. 21), but she passes his examination when he smiles at her, and she smiles back. He calls her: “Good girl. Fine daughter” (p. 22), signalling his acceptance of her.

In patriarchal Nigeria, grandfather is the head of the house and is served hand and foot by the women in his family. There is no such hierarchy between the sexes with Sarah and Daniel. Theirs is a more contemporary marriage, yet it is still surprisingly unequal in some respects. Sarah is more authoritarian because of her strict Nigerian upbringing, which is not portrayed as necessarily a good thing. Her ideas on discipline idealise corporal punishment, and there is considerable marital friction because of this. It would not be correct to say that she is in charge of the relationship because she is the more traditional disciplinarian, like her father, and to do so would attribute too much importance to toxic masculinity in childrearing, but Sarah does mirror her own rearing in her approach with Jessamy. In contrast, Daniel appears to be more reasonable, if somewhat ineffectual in his parental approach. If there is a comment to be made, perhaps it is that neither approach is entirely effective. While Sarah has inherited a Nigerian worldview when it comes to parenting, Sarah's father's view, for which he derides her, is that she has rejected her culture (to study English literature in Britain). This derision is plain to Jessamy almost as soon as she meets her grandfather:

“What job do you find in Nigeria that requires the knowledge of all these useless words? Different words for hot, for cold! Words describing white people, white things, every single story spun out in some place where we don't exist! It has no value; in my eyes, it is to confuse ...” (p. 26)

Jessamy demonstrates that she is undoubtedly Sarah's daughter when she responds by providing synonyms for the verb, to confuse: “dissemble, obfuscate” (p. 26), and Sarah has to leave the room before she laughs out loud. Her grandfather accepts this, but cannot forget that Jessamy's father is an outsider, an “*omugo oyinbo*” (p. 27), because he does not know who he is beyond his physical person. While this might seem like a strange statement as they obviously know each other, her grandfather means this in a philosophically cultural sense:

“I mean ... that I don't know who your father is; I don't know his people, I don't know what his name means and where it comes from. Harrison – what does that mean, Harry's son? Harris's son? Now, take Oyegbebi – it means ‘kingship lives here.’” (p. 27)

In comparison, her grandfather is of regal lineage, and his children “should be proud and strong” (p. 27) because of their name and heritage. He has a clear understanding of who he is in the community, and he cannot understand why his daughter left her country and her family

to join a family with no traceable lineage. Despite viewing his daughter's emigration as a betrayal, he accepts Jessamy and calls her "a fine daughter" (p. 28). However, as has already been noted in the first paragraph of this chapter, he is still upset that his daughter, Sarah, took "her body away from this place" (p. 27). Jessamy's grandfather finally accedes that his vanity allows him to forgive Sarah because she dedicated two books to him (p. 27), but his views leave an indelible mark on the eight-year-old Jessamy who is struggling to find her place in the world, and she becomes acutely aware that her grandfather has had to rationalise his acceptance of her.

The novel takes on a Gothic ambience when Jessamy has an encounter with a snake at the zoo in Nigeria and finds herself speaking in "some loose, gabbling language that was born from her fear" (p. 30). The incident is ominous because she becomes acutely distressed by the strange encounter, and she cannot take her eyes off the snake. The tension increases when they return home and Jessamy notices the Boys' Quarters where servants used to live before the women in the family took over the household chores. Jessamy feels a strange heat on the back of her neck that makes her turn back to the Boys' Quarters where she notices a lantern in the window (p. 33). The visit to this strange abandoned building is equally ominous and is reminiscent of other Gothic novels where the tension increases in gradual increments in an eerie setting, usually "an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space" (Hogle, 2002, p. 2). What follows is usually evidence of a haunting in the shape of "ghosts, specters, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) that rise from within the antiquated space" (p. 2). In the antiquated space of the Boys' Quarters, Jessamy notices her name written in the disturbed dust on a table: "HELLO JESSY" (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 40), and she realises that someone has been there "in the corridor, looking at her, knowing her name, writing her name" (p. 42). These incidents precede TillyTilly's arrival, and it takes some time to determine whether or not she is a real child or a figment of Jessamy's imagination. The creation of a being that one cannot prove is tangibly real, or with any supernatural encounter in the pages of a book, is another common element of Gothic fiction:

It is at this level that Gothic fictions generally play with and oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural – at least somewhat as Walpole urged such stories to do – often siding with one of these or the other in the end, but usually raising the possibility that the boundaries between these may have been crossed, at least psychologically but also physically or both. This

oscillation can range across the continuum between what have come to be called the “terror Gothic” on the one hand and the “horror Gothic” on the other. (Hogle, 2002, p. 3)

TillyTilly is the “monster”, but she does not appear to be so at first. She appears to be a young girl and potential playmate for young Jessamy who is feeling cast adrift because her grandfather has “unintentionally made her feel abnormal, like a freak, but in a powerful, questing way that seemed to put her melancholy under a microscope and make her fears appear groundless” (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 49). TillyTilly introduces herself as Titiola, but Jessamy struggles to shape the unfamiliar syllables in her mouth, and she finally agrees to be called TillyTilly with a laugh that, whether intentional or not, is disturbingly reminiscent of *Beloved*’s raspy speech because it is “a dry, raspy chuckle that sounded like wheezing” (p. 46).

As if to bolster the Gothic mood, when the girls undertake a midnight visit to grandfather’s study, they find a book of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poetry. In an uncannily apt rendition of his famous opium-induced poem, Jessamy warns:

“And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair! / Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread, / For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise.” (p. 53)

It is, in fact, Jessamy who should “beware” of the malevolent spirit next to her. Their friendship blossoms and Jessamy finds herself spending more and more time with TillyTilly. The friendship between the girls seems quite harmless, and Jessamy begins to rely on her more and more and even becomes quite desperate to keep her new friend:

*O God, please help me to stay friends with TillyTilly, please, please, please. Let me keep her. She is my only friend; I have had no one else. She gave me a book, my mother’s book. I have had no one else.* (p. 71)

Jessamy’s desperate prayer is indicative of her alienation in England and Nigeria because she is an outsider (*oyinbo*) in both places and has no friends. Nevertheless, there are signs from the outset that the friendship is not what it seems, but it is not until the second part of the book that

it becomes clear that there is something quite seriously amiss when TillyTilly follows her back to England.

At the end of the first part of the book, and the end of the Jessamy's visit to Nigeria, she encounters a strange charcoal drawing of a woman in what appears to be a shrine, surrounded by candles:

And the charcoal woman's arms – her arms were grotesque. Surely nobody could have arms that long! They were completely out of proportion to her body, long and thin, tentacle-like, stretching to her ankles. (p. 74)

The person for whom the shrine was created is not clear at this point, but TillyTilly is enraged to find Jessamy there. Why TillyTilly reacts this way is revealed in the second part of the book, as it is a shrine to her, but the reason for the shrine, and just who TillyTilly is, is never elucidated, which augments the sense of unease created by the mysterious girl. This unease is heightened when TillyTilly appears in England, and Jessamy's joy is matched by the reader's horror at the incongruity of her appearance across the ocean and in Jessamy's very neighbourhood. It is evident from that point on that TillyTilly is not real, but it is not yet apparent to the young Jessamy. The dramatic irony heightens the tension in the novel and sets an ominous mood that is unabated from this point on, conveying the cultural dissonance the young girl experiences as she is rent between her British and Nigerian selves.

Back in England, before TillyTilly reappears, Jessamy is still often unwell, but the root cause of her illness baffles her doctor who has subjected her to a battery of tests with no conclusive results, and even though at times she "was hot, and trembling violently because she was cold" (p. 80) he can find no physical cause for her condition. Jessamy is not happy at school either, and she is bullied by a girl named Colleen, who thinks that Jessamy keeps her thoughts to herself in order to garner more attention. The truth is far less sinister and, in fact, quite heart-breaking:

Once you let people know anything about what you think, that's it, you're dead. Then they'll be jumping about in your mind, taking things out, holding them up to the light and killing them, yes, killing them, because thoughts are supposed to stay and grow in quiet, dark places, like butterflies in cocoons. (p. 81)



Like Jessamy, Oyeyemi claims she was “a real mess at school” (Sethi, 2005). In an interview about the novel in 2005, Oyeyemi said that she “had a reputation for being the weird girl, the girl who’d go silent randomly and just kind of write down replies to people’s questions in a book” (Sethi, 2005). She slid into depression and talked about “shutting down” (Sethi, 2005) in the same way that her character Jessamy does in the novel. Similarly, Jessamy is afraid of the children at school. She is afraid of them trying to pry her open, and it reduces her to screaming fits when the pressure is unbearable. These terrors petrify her teacher, who is at a loss about how to manage Jessamy’s otherness:

But Miss Patel didn’t get a chance to finish, because just at that moment Jess bent double and, putting her hands over her eyes, began to scream and scream and scream. (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 84)

Colleen’s theory is that Jessamy’s attacks are “because she can’t make up her mind whether she’s black or white!” (p. 86). Although cruel, and having nothing at all to do with her race, Colleen’s diagnosis of Jessamy is also surprisingly intuitive, but only because it is Jessamy’s feeling of otherness that appears to be at the root of her anguish. Jessamy does not feel as though she fits in in Britain, nor does she feel entirely Nigerian, and when Colleen says this, Jessamy wonders, “*I mean, is it true?*” (p. 86). She is not sure who she is either. Jessamy’s feelings of alienation have been exacerbated by the school’s decision to advance her to Year 5, but only her father is unsure whether this is a good idea:

“It’s, erm, not Jess keeping up that I worry about,” he had said, his usually buoyant voice sounding almost muffled. Jess, her mother and Mr Heinz waited to see what exactly he had been worrying about. “Erm, well, I just thought maybe she might not actually, you know, like it.” (p. 87)

Her father’s fumbling over the issue is yet another example of his inability to take a stand on his daughter’s upbringing, and despite having her best interests at heart, he cannot speak up effectively. During this turmoil, TillyTilly returns, which seems to suggest that at times of severest distress, her imaginary friend (or alter ego) returns to the stage. If any other confirmation that TillyTilly is an otherworldly being or mental projection is needed, TillyTilly unnervingly states that she knows Colleen well and that “We should *get* her” (p. 94). The idea

of “*getting*” anybody terrifies Jessamy at first, and if one considers that this exchange is possibly one that she is having with some facet of herself, this is all the more chilling. Jessamy steps back and is visibly shaken by the suggestion, and TillyTilly responds saying, “Jessy, you idiot. I was only joking” (p. 95), but this is small comfort if the idea and the rebuke have all happened in Jessamy’s mind.

Somehow, TillyTilly can take Jessamy to Colleen’s house without them knowing she is there. The abuse that Colleen suffers at the hands of her mother is upsetting and explains why she is a bully herself. What is not clear is how Jessamy can infiltrate Colleen’s life in this way, and TillyTilly’s existence becomes even more menacing and enigmatic. Jessamy witnesses Colleen’s beating, but Mrs McLain and Colleen cannot see her as she screams at her daughter not to hide her “wet knickers again” (p. 101):

“Your room stinks! If you’re so ashamed of wetting yourself, then why don’t you just stop! You’re eight years old, for Christ’s sake! And you’re wetting yourself every day! Well, you can bloody well think again if you think I’m going to allow you to shame me by taking you to some kind of doctor like your class teacher suggested!” (p. 101)

Colleen’s life is tragic and underlines that fact that none of the characters are sketched two-dimensionally; not even the bully is confined to the usual trope of abusing power without having problems of her own. Jessamy finds an unlikely ally in the girl after confronting her, but only after she reveals her bedwetting shame as retribution after another bullying incident. The act of retribution reveals that Jessamy is also not merely the heroic victim in the novel either, even if she did feel “sort of *uneasy* about it” (p. 311) when she finds out that she is also capable of being the abuser. The playground showdown results in one between Sarah and Daniel at home because Sarah wants to discipline Jessamy for lashing out at Colleen:

Jess bolted in, cringing past her mother for fear of getting one of the rogue slaps to the side of the head that Sarah would sometimes give if she thought Jess had behaved badly. Her mother shut the door.

“D’you see what I mean?” Jess heard her father say. “She’s scared you’re going to hit her. This isn’t the way to make her behave herself, you know. It doesn’t matter whether you were brought up that way or not –” (p. 114)

Jessamy's parents decide that she needs to see a psychologist, which terrifies TillyTilly, her finger trembling at Jessamy when she tells her not to see him (p. 121). Could she fear that seeing him will cure Jessamy, and "kill" TillyTilly, whether she is an apparition or alter ego? Significantly, Jessamy thinks that TillyTilly is worried that Dr McKenzie will say that "she was made up" (p. 121), so in a sense might indeed destroy her. Unfortunately, Dr McKenzie does not have much success with Jessamy at first, but his daughter, Siobhan (Shivs) and Jessamy become firm friends. Shivs represents a wholesome, natural friend, and a stark juxtaposition to Jessamy's apparent friendship with TillyTilly. Jessamy teaches Shivs about *Hamlet*, and in turn Shivs teaches her about stereotypes and unhealthy ideals of beauty when she tells her that she is not allowed Barbies because "they represent this white idea of beauty" (p. 125). There is, in fact, a Barbie figure in the novel who appears to be entirely British with no identity crisis whatsoever. Dulcie, Jessamy's cousin, is described as a foil to Jessamy; she is a confident extrovert and "[e]veryone always went mad over Dulcie's long blonde hair" (p. 138). Dulcie is present with the babysitter, Lidia, to witness Jessamy's first corporeal horror experience with TillyTilly when she disappears in front of Dulcie's and Lidia's eyes and becomes trapped in the earth beneath the house:

Jess saw Lidia's mouth open to address her, then both Lidia's and Dulcie's mouths stretched wider in amazement and shock as TillyTilly's arms enfolded her from behind and pulled her

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and through the staircase, the carpet and the actual stair falling away beneath her feet as if she and Tilly were going underground in a lift that would never stop descending. (p. 146)

The horror of being stuck underground with a mouthful of dirt, and the feeling of unease when at first it seems that TillyTilly cannot immediately return Jessamy, is disturbingly palpable. When they do reappear, the witnesses reject what they saw as impossible, and Lidia decides that she just "ran away" (p. 151), giving Jessamy a believable story to cling to and to explain the anomaly. The terrifying incident makes it clear that Jessamy and TillyTilly are becoming

indistinguishable from each other (p. 151). Their bond becomes increasingly evident when they write a poem together, which Jessamy's mother surmises is too mature for her eight-year-old daughter to have written on her own, and she begins to worry about the strange friend she has never met and her influence on Jessamy. The poem seems to hint at death and loss, even though at this stage in the novel, Jessamy does not know that she had a twin sister who died at birth:

*"All my thoughts have left, with her.  
I thought I'd kept them in my head  
But when I tried to find the thoughts  
They all told me she was dead.  
I asked if I could go to her  
To find my thoughts, to think one day,  
But they said 'no', cause she'd prefer  
To keep me, too, and make me stay."* (p. 157)

Soon after Jessamy realises she is not real, TillyTilly disappears (p. 164). As a result, Jessamy has another attack, and her health deteriorates as she spirals inward, afraid "she might suck herself inside-out with the force of her breathing" (p. 164). Jessamy has become reliant on TillyTilly, but whether this is because she is a part of Jessamy, or because she helps Jessamy to cope with her loneliness, is not clear. When TillyTilly finally returns to Jessamy, she is not the same, and it becomes clear that the sketched woman in the Boys' Quarters is indeed part of TillyTilly:

Tilly came back, and Jess was scared. Tilly was standing by her bedside, and she was smiling, but she was ... folding over and crackling and jumping to different parts of the room like a piece of paper blown by a volatile wind. Tilly was paper-thin and peeling around the edges, and just beyond her, a pair of long, dark brown arms was snaking in through the open door, and the hands on the end of them were trying to hold the smiling, paper-doll Tilly in place. She knew, now, that TillyTilly and the long-armed woman were somehow the same person, like the two sides of a thin coin. (p. 166)

In a climactic scene, Jessamy finds the apparition of a dead baby under her bed and finally finds out that she had a twin sister and the baby's death is her "mother's fault" (p. 167). TillyTilly tells her to ask her mother about the dead baby:

“Ask her – there were two of you born, just like there were two of me. The other one of you died,” she said, unbelievably casual; so matter-of-fact that Jess was fine with it until the meaning hit her. (p. 169)

Alarming, TillyTilly tells her that they will be twins to each other instead and tells her that the baby’s name was “Fern” (p. 170). TillyTilly tells her that Jessamy is empty “without [her] twin” (p. 170) because she has “had no one to walk [the] three worlds with [her]” (p. 170). When Jessamy confronts her mother, Sarah is terrified and believes Jessamy is a witch and says “she doesn’t even look right ... Her eyes –” (p. 174). Daniel cannot reason with Sarah who tells him that twins always know, and Sarah explains the Nigerian belief that twins exist in three worlds and that it was folly not to have an *ibeji* carving made for Fern:

“Three worlds! Jess lives in three worlds. She lives in this world, and she lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush. She’s *abiku*, she always would have known! The spirits tell her things. Fern tells her things. We should’ve ... we should’ve d-d-done *ibeji* carving for her! We should’ve ... oh, oh ... Mama! Mummy-mi, help me ...” (p. 174)

Jessamy also terrifies Miss Patel, her teacher. Jessamy’s behaviour in the classroom is erratic, and her teacher physically manifests the strain she is under trying to understand and control her outbursts:

The skin beneath Miss Patel’s eyes looked fragile and nearly transparent, as if a finger brushing against it could puncture her. She looked, Jess realised, as if she had been crying. For some inexplicable reason, Jess began to feel very cross. No, cross was the wrong word. Cross was just stamping and shouting. (p. 182)

Jessamy is aware that Miss Patel is scared of her: “*Are you scared of me or something? You say you think I’m being attention-seeking, but you really think I’m WEIRD*” (p. 182). Jessamy begins to confront her inner turmoil and realises that “if it wasn’t Tilly’s fault, was it hers?” (p. 183). Sarah tries to help her to realise that Jessamy chooses what happens and that there is no outside influence, and Jessamy points an accusatory finger at her reflection in the mirror,

pressing “a finger against the cold glass, joining herself to her reflection, pointing, marking herself” (p. 185).

In a nightmarish dream sequence, TillyTilly purifies Jessamy using a hot coal “that she pressed to her mouth [...] burning not only her lips and fingers, but, it seemed, every inch of her by association” (p. 186). TillyTilly becomes a cleansing angel, using fire to cleanse her like “they’d read about in her grandfather’s study: how the angel had cleansed Isaiah, telling her that she could do it” (p. 186). TillyTilly’s cruel ritual is disturbingly visceral, the evil compounded by a black chalice that is offered to Jessamy, but which she rejects. In the dream they are beneath the earth somewhere, like Morrison’s *Beloved* trapped in her grave. Jessamy finally understands that TillyTilly has dark powers and knows things she ought not to know about, like Colleen’s incontinence and her dead baby sister, Fern. If TillyTilly is an aspect of Jessamy’s self, it still does not explain how she discovers these dark secrets. Furthermore, TillyTilly claims that Jessamy wants her to *get* Miss Patel, and that is why Jessamy cleanses herself with the coal, but Jessamy cannot remember any of it:

TillyTilly laughed scornfully. “You’re such a baby! Trying to take it back cause you are scared! Remember, you said it to me three times: ‘Get her, get her, get her, TillyTilly!’” (p. 190)

In the midst of Jessamy’s turmoil about TillyTilly wanting to hurt Miss Patel, Sarah comes to her to explain what an *ibejí* statue is. She explains that twins live in three worlds, “this one, the spirit world, and the Bush, which is a sort of wilderness of the mind” (p. 191). Jessamy realises that she has seen one in the charcoal version of an *ibejí* carving in the Boys’ Quarters for TillyTilly:

As she moved her fingers over the long, long arms of the statue, she realised that she had already seen one of these; a poorly done one, drawn with charcoal, not carved. (p. 193)

It is not clear who drew it, and the fact that it is poorly done points to a child like her. Furthermore, Jessamy realises that she must apologise to Miss Patel for her behaviour, but not long afterwards she disappears because of “a family emergency” (p. 211), which a school friend tells her “means the teacher’s gone a bit mental” (p. 211). There are no further details given

about Miss Patel, and one is left to infer that teaching the young Jessamy terrified the young teacher, or perhaps that TillyTilly did indeed *get* her as threatened. Again, the uncertainty is never resolved.

Jessamy's mental anguish increases and culminates in a physical altercation with her mother, who cuffs the back of her head when she screams at her father and tells him she will not eat school dinners. Daniel claims he is handling it, but Sarah says that if he was then Jessamy would be "flat on the floor with a few teeth missing!" (p. 197). Daniel makes reference to Sarah's father's brand of corporal punishment which she received as a child in Nigeria, which Daniel challenges her on and calls "senseless" (p. 198):

"Oh my God! 'Beat her senseless'! I love the way you quote me on something that I didn't even say! And now, now you're implying that my father's some kind of savage! It's just ... it's just discipline! Maybe you just don't understand that! You're turning this into some kind of ... some kind of European versus African thing that's all in my mind ..." (p. 198)

Their argument once again foregrounds the tension in trying to reconcile their British and Nigerian worldviews, which the novel appears to suggest is the cause of Jessamy's mental anguish and loneliness. The incident immediately precedes TillyTilly's possession of Jessamy, which again demonstrates that their struggle manifests in Jessamy, but TillyTilly makes it sound like a game which Jessamy will enjoy, and "Jess giggled at the idea, wondering if her parents would notice" (p. 199). Jessamy quickly realises that it is not a game and immediately wants the game to stop:

But Tilly had already grabbed her by the wrists, spinning her around in a manic, icy dance, then hop, skip, jumped inside her, and Jess, screaming now, (You said it wouldn't hurt!) had changed her mind, and she didn't want to be at all like TillyTilly. (p. 200)

Sarah can tell there is something wrong with Jessamy who screams at her touch, and Sarah tries to physically shake Jessamy free of her hysterical episode, another example of her physically accosting her child in frustration, believing it to be simply authoritative parenting. After Jessamy manages to reinhabit her own body, Sarah realises that something is horribly

wrong with her little girl, as well as her reaction to Jessamy, and finally admits, “I can’t mother this girl. I try, but ... I’m scared of her” (p. 203). Jessamy realises that she needs to be free of TillyTilly and prays to be released from her and admits that she is afraid of her dead twin sister, Fern, who she believes is angry with her because it is not fair that Jessamy is alive and Fern is not:

Dr McKenzie waited until Jess had recovered eye contact with him before asking: “What about Fern? Are you scared of her?” Jess unclenched her hands when she realised that her fingernails were spearing her palm. “Of course I am! But I try not to think about it. I think she’s going to – like, get me.” She gulped, frightened at the meaning, but happy that she’d said it now. The words made it sound lesser. (p. 208)

Dr McKenzie ascertains that any alter ego, whether it is TillyTilly or Fern, exists in Jessamy’s mind, and Jessamy has to promise herself that she will not do anything else as the pressure is not external to her and is within her control. Jessamy does not fully understand this. Nevertheless, her friendship with Dr McKenzie’s daughter, Shivs, is encouraged as she is seen as a good influence on their daughter as she quotes *Hamlet* to Shivs. The parallels between the play and Jessamy’s own life are hard to ignore. Both are visited by a ghost set on revenge, but whether or not these ghosts are also both family members is less clear. The link to a form of madness is also apparent, but again, whether this “antic disposition” (p. 213) is indeed “antic” in Jessamy’s case is not as obvious. TillyTilly does not like the sensible Shivs because Jessamy appears to like her more, or because she is afraid that Shiv’s logical mind will quickly see through TillyTilly’s machinations. TillyTilly takes the precaution of asking Jessamy not to tell Shivs about her because “She’ll think you’re mad” (p. 217). Again, this might indeed be a side of Jessamy that does not want to be dispelled, so she both loves and loathes Shivs, depending on how one views TillyTilly in the novel. TillyTilly briefly possesses Jessamy again on a phone call with Shivs and tells her not to phone her again and calls her a “stupid white girl” (p. 229). When Jessamy confronts TillyTilly and asks her who she is, she confirms that she is indeed her sister (p. 230).

The internal battle raging for Jessamy’s soul finally becomes apparent when her grandfather speaks to her on the phone. Somehow he intuitively knows that she is being eaten up by another person’s needs:



“Two hungry people should never make friends. If they do, they eat each other up. It is the same with one person who is hungry and another who is full: they cannot be real, real friends because the hungry one will eat the full one. You understand?” (p. 239)

TillyTilly will not give up the battle for Jessamy’s life and threatens to exchange places with her again from beyond the mirror. Her mirror image speaking to Jessamy from the beyond again suggests that TillyTilly is indeed a facet of Jessamy, but the mirror shattering outwards from the force of Jessamy’s mind is difficult to fathom. TillyTilly says that Jessamy knows who she is (p. 243), but Jessamy cannot reconcile this in her mind. She knows that TillyTilly is going to keep getting her into trouble until she no longer wants to be Jessamy (p. 244), and she finally confronts her mother about the corporal punishment and tells Sarah that she must hate her and hits her because Sarah herself was struck as a child (p. 246). Jessamy blames Sarah for Fern’s death, and Daniel finds himself “hitting his daughter with such force that she jerked backwards with a whole-body snap” (p. 246). Daniel’s uncharacteristic lashing out at Jessamy is the catalyst for his unexplained illness that follows before the end of the second part of the book. Daniel becomes entirely introverted and quiet and does not seem to be like her father at all anymore (p. 263). Instead, Daniel became “a thing, slurred of speech, emptied, inside-out, outside-in, by two girls, one of whom could bring seven years’ bad luck in a razor-edged shatter of looking-glass” (p. 263). The reader is left to infer that TillyTilly has found a way to *get* Daniel for his outburst, or perhaps a less sinister suggestion might be that he is suffering from depression because of the tension in the home.

Soon after the incident in the bathroom, TillyTilly once again calls Beloved to mind. TillyTilly begins to smell like “rotting vegetation” (p. 247) and is “stretching, pulling apart, a brown cycle of skin and eyes and voice” (p. 247). When Beloved seems to recall incidents from the collective memory of persecuted African Americans on slave boats in *Beloved*, she speaks of crouching in boats with an iron circle around her neck (Morrison, 2007 [1987], Chapter 22). TillyTilly’s tirade is less cryptic, but noting the parallel is still appropriate here as both speak of belonging and remembering where they left. TillyTilly begins to rant about belonging, one minute with the voice of a vulnerable little girl, and the next sounding like an adult woman who says, “There is no homeland” (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 249), in the same way that Beloved points to being ripped from Africa in her stream of consciousness narration. It is difficult to believe that an eight-year-old girl would be able to reach back into the collective memory of her family and use the word “homeland” to describe the place that TillyTilly

suggests does not exist – possibly because Jessamy is neither entirely Nigerian nor British. The solution to her feelings of isolation according to TillyTilly is to hate everyone, and she would *get* them for her:

“Go on, Jessy, hate everyone, anyone, and I’ll *get* them for you.” TillyTilly screeched.  
“The whole world. We’re twins, both of us, twins. Doesn’t that mean something?” (p. 249)

The disturbing episode ends when an adult woman’s voice appears to come from a ghastly spectre on the ceiling, described in horrifying detail like a bloated corpse with its tongue removed. The otherworldly corpse is heard before it is seen and tells Jessamy that there is no homeland, perhaps a reference to slaves in the antebellum South who could not return to Africa, as Jessamy has nowhere she can return to as she feels as though she belongs in neither England nor Nigeria. The creature is centimetres away from Jessamy’s face:

Something hanging upside down from the ceiling dangling a few centimetres away from hers; those pupils, dilated until there was no white; those enormous, swollen lips, almost cartoonish except that they were deepest black, encrusted with dead, dry skin, coated here and there with chunks of (I don’t know, I don’t want to know, please don’t let me ever know, even guess) something moist and pinky-white ... (p. 250)

The creature only has a stump of a tongue in its mouth, and tells her, “Stop looking to belong, half-and-half child. Stop. There is nothing, there is only me, and I have caught you” (p. 250). The stump of a tongue once again is reminiscent of the treatment of slaves in the antebellum South when African Americans were not given a voice, but is relevant for Jessamy too as she feels like an outsider in her own life. Jessamy cannot reconcile the different facets of personality and is not sure if she is “TillyTilly, JessJess, [or] FernFern” (p. 251), and is not mature enough to articulate this.

Dr McKenzie tries to help Jessamy to reconcile the different parts of her persona and asks her if she is scared of her mother. Jessamy says that she feels as if her mother wants her to be Nigerian, but she does not believe that this is possible because she might get hurt, and Sarah tries to downplay the turmoil she feels:

“Hurt?” said Dr McKenzie.

“Yeah, like ... being stretched.”

“Jess, it’s not a matter of my wanting you to be Nigerian – you are, you just are!” her mother said. When Jess looked at her, she continued, “You’re English too, duh. And it’s OK.” (p. 257)

The solution is not that easy for Jessamy, but she does feel as though making a choice will help to rid her of TillyTilly. Determining a solution to her predicament is a remarkable revelation for the young girl who is being split asunder by the push-and-pull of her mother’s expectations and her own dark thoughts. Furthermore, because this split can be attributed to historical, psychological and emotional dissonance in the diaspora, the relevance of using an Afro-Gothic lens for this, and relying on *Beloved* as a seminal diasporic text, becomes apparent. Dr McKenzie acknowledges this when he says, ““Jessamy, you’re a very articulate child, and your ideas are sometimes ... surprising. Did you know that?”” (p. 257). There are no simple answers, and the idea of choosing to be either English or Nigerian is not a viable solution for the young girl, but she does realise that the root of the problem is TillyTilly.

Her friend, Shivs, tries to help her to confront TillyTilly. In many ways, the young Shivs is also quite remarkable as she suggests that TillyTilly might be Jessamy’s sister, Fern (p. 259). Shivs can also tell that there is something very dark about TillyTilly:

She didn’t want to see her at all: from the moment that Tilly had come into the room, Shivs had felt a ... badness. It was the only way to describe it; it was like being sick and hearing rattling in your ears that wasn’t really there, it was slow, bottomless, soundless, creeping ... and it wasn’t just inside her stomach, but inside her head as well, slowly building in pressure. She’d had to make sure that she wasn’t imagining it, she’d needed the security of Jess’s touch to ensure that she wasn’t alone in the room with this ... thing. This was not another girl. This was not the kind of imaginary friend that you’d mistakenly sit on. She was a cycle of glacial ice. (p. 259)

In the third and final part of the book, Jessamy must confront TillyTilly who relegates her to the wilderness while she achieves her ultimate goal of possessing her body. Shortly before this

happens, her family in Nigeria finally present Jessamy with an *ibeji* carving to try to appease her dead twin, but she “couldn’t imagine anyone being at peace because of this carving, with its long, heavy features and clasped hands” (p. 299). Jessamy is angry that her grandfather failed to tell her about Fern, and he explains that she was too young and says, “When someone dies, it’s a special thing, almost a secret” (p. 300). Her grandfather goes on to explain that Fern is the other half of Jessamy (p. 300). Despite this, when he asks her who told her about Fern, she cannot tell him and bursts into tears. Jessamy lacks the emotional maturity to deal with the new information she is learning from her grandfather, and she does not know how to explain TillyTilly’s existence either. Not being able to articulate this complicates matters when TillyTilly reappears and takes possession of her body because she has not fully explained TillyTilly’s influence over her: “‘Time to swap!’ Tilly cried. ‘I did my share, I *got* everyone you wanted me to! I want to be alive too!’” (p. 303).

TillyTilly forces Jessamy to “shed her body as if it was merely some shell that the sea roars through” (p. 304). Only her grandfather can tell that the little girl in front of him is no longer Jessamy, although her mother does notice that “‘Jess’s voice did seem a little nasal’” (p. 305). Grandfather asks Sarah when last she had prayed, and there is a syncretic melding of Christian and traditional beliefs when he tells her, “There is nothing God can do for you” (p. 307) because Sarah has become too self-important to rely on God, and then he seems to contradict Christian values himself when he later wants to consult a traditional healer, Iya Adahunse. While this may seem to be a contradiction to Daniel, this melding of Christian and traditional Nigerian beliefs is not viewed this way by grandfather, who wants to look into Jessamy’s miraculous ability to speak Yoruba, including words and phrases that Ebun had not even taught her yet. Grandfather repeatedly asks Sarah, calling her Bisi, her traditional Yoruba name, “Where is your daughter?” (p. 312). He can tell that Jessamy is not spiritually present anymore. Daniel is unable to understand this melding of Christian and traditional beliefs and an argument ensues:

“Don’t you warn me! I’m warning you! You’re insane! INSANE! One minute you’re telling her to think on Jesus and the next you’re calling a witch doctor!”

“INSANE?!” Sarah’s father roared. (p. 313)

Sarah is equally enraged when her British husband and Nigerian father collide, representing the two different cultures becoming as immiscible as oil and water when neither side will

concede ground, much like the two cultural aspects of Jessamy that are unable to exist harmoniously throughout the novel. This turmoil precipitates a car accident when Sarah tries to remove her daughter from the situation. Jessamy is in a comatose state when the final battle ensues between Jessamy and TillyTilly, where Jessamy can finally join both halves of herself, and embrace both her Nigerian and British identities, to emerge entirely whole, and no longer a stranger in both worlds and cultures. Someone carries her out of the wilderness, someone who sometimes looks like Siobhan with her red hair, and sometimes it seems it is TillyTilly, but it is neither of them. The silent girl is revealed to be her sister, and she too is appeased, not so much by the *ibebi* carving, but when Jessamy says, “You can share my name” (p. 321). The strength Jessamy takes from this moment enables her to emerge as the young hero she has always had the potential to be, exorcising TillyTilly and taking back her life:

“Don’t, Jessy, please,” TillyTilly pleaded in a scream that rang in Jess’s ears, but Jess ran at her with the wind in an invisible current of fast-moving air behind her, taking her feet nearly off the slippery ground [...]

and

*hop,*

*skip,*

*jumped*

into Tilly’s unyielding flesh as she clawed at Jess’s presence

*(it hurt them both burningly)*

back into herself. (p. 322)

Whether or not TillyTilly is a part of Jessamy’s personality or not is no longer critical in this ultimate triumph, and the final line of the book suggests a form of redemption for Jessamy as she bravely confronts the evil TillyTilly and repossesses her body and she “woke up and up and up and up” (p. 322). Jessamy is finally able to reconcile the different facets of her identity during her flight from the wilderness, and as a British Nigerian like her protagonist, there is a sense that the novel was a way for her to explore this tension in her own life too:

Growing up in Nigerian culture, says Oyeyemi, can be “really, really oppressive. It’s like something almost tugging on your coat-tails saying, ‘Hey, remember you’re Nigerian,’ and I think that’s what TillyTilly is to Jess. But you know if Jess just left it

a bit, she would realise that it's OK to be Nigerian and English at the same time.” (Sethi, 2005)

Reading this book and others like it thrills these young readers who read about brave Jessamy reconciling the aspects of African culture that make them feel like an “*oyinbo*” (Oyeyemi, 2013 [2005], p. 16) or a stranger, when they encounter their own heritage and traditional practices which are foreign to them because of Western influence and their multicultural worldview. Jessamy has undergone the womanist “metamorphosis” (Phillips, 2006, p. 28) that both Walker and Ogunyemi write about as she melds her rent identity into a cohesive whole, acknowledging her twin sister by sharing her name with her. Oyeyemi’s novel of the brave young Jessamy breaks with the hegemonic ways of thinking and allows her “to imagine, describe, and invent [herself] in ways that are liberatory” (hooks, 1992, p. 2), just like the young Jessamy, and many of the young readers who pick up the book and can relate to the experience of alienation and not belonging of the young protagonist in its pages. This is a common experience for young local readers in South Africa who feel torn between Western and African cultural norms and standards. This is especially common in schools, where students are often expected to assimilate into the hegemony of the school when they should instead feel comfortable to enrich the school by bringing their own cultural and religious diversity. These cultural and religious dissonances are frequent sources of trauma in contemporary South Africa, which this book explores, and by stocking our school libraries with books like *The Icarus Girl*, featuring audacious young girls like Jessamy triumphing over these feelings of alienation, we encourage girls who feel like outsiders to confront these fears, and emerge whole, as Jessamy does.

## CHAPTER 5: JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

“The Mmuo Point is the wilderness,” he said, moving his hand as if it traveled over ripples of water. “Your great energy allows you to glide through the wilderness while carrying the baggage of life. Life is very heavy.” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 144)

The eponymous hero of the novel *Who Fears Death* is Onyesonwu. Thus, her name is a bold statement about her destiny as she must fearlessly confront her death. Okorafor has expressed her belief that diversity in speculative fiction is important because there “continues to be a dearth of young adult fantasy novels featuring main characters of African descent” (Okorafor, 2016, p. 285). She states that “black children very much want to see themselves reflected in these types of books” (p. 285). Okorafor also acknowledges that while black readers “want to go on the adventures and perform the magic, too”, there are also non-black readers who will “enjoy the ride and new setting” (p. 285), with Onyesonwu as the audacious womanist hero. In the same way that Jessamy’s journey to reconcile the tension between her African and Western heritage is likened to the journey of mythical Icarus, Onyesonwu is the audacious womanist hero who must travel a redemptive path through a literal and spiritual wilderness, with the weight of life and her impending death on her shoulders. However, in contrast to the allusion to Western mythology in *The Icarus Girl*, Okorafor utilises biblical allusion, as well as traditional Nigerian cosmologies, to show the redeeming power of this womanist heroism.

In Igbo cosmology, there is a balance between masculine and feminine deities with “Chukwu, the sky-father above, and Anì, the Earth mother below” (Nwoye, 2011, p. 308), but in *Who Fears Death* the focus is on Anì, prioritising feminine power. In addition, the female protagonist becomes the Christ-figure in this postcolonial futurist narrative, instead of the central male character, Mwita. This places Onyesonwu in the position of the saviour of the Okeke “slaves” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 16). With this in mind, I propose that this novel deliberately places African people in the position of the chosen people in the novel, as the Hebrew slaves in the Bible who were led out of Egypt, or in the same position as humanity being saved from the slavery of sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the afterword to her book, *Lagoon*, Okorafor directly addresses her view that fundamentalist Christianity teaches “Nigerians to hate their own indigenous traditions, spiritualities, and religions” (Okorafor, 2016, p. 306) because it teaches “a nasty form of hatred of one’s self in the guise of religion, brought or imported by outsiders and foisted upon people” (p. 306). *Who*

*Fears Death* presents an Afrocentric spirituality that counters the “Western dualistic worldview” in favour of “the African worldview [which] is a holistic one wherein the human and the divine are conjoined” (Hayes, 1995). Okorafor has appropriated the redemptive message of scripture to create in Onyesonwu an African hero who resonates with young readers to create a new fictional mythology that is Afrocentric. By doing so, Okorafor decolonises literature by challenging the “invasion of African culture” (Uduyoye, 2001, p. 27) through colonisation and doing away with the assumption “that cultural practices could be judged at the courts of European norms” (p. 27).

Furthermore, instead of rejecting Western scripture in order to discard “absolutising the Western experience to the detriment of the African experience” (Akper and Smit, 2005, p. 26), the novel subverts scripture. It is balanced with aspects of Igbo religion, appropriating the aspirational elements of Christian theology, and foregrounding the problematic fundamentalist theology using the Great Book. In *Who Fears Death*, it is the Great Book that is regularly referenced as a scriptural text that compounds the oppression of the Okeke. The reader learns in the prequel, *The Book of Phoenix* discussed in the chapter that follows, that it is a story written by a drunkard that “deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 232). The drunkard, Sunuteel, is based on the character in the magic realist novel by Nigerian author, Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (2014 [1952]), which was rather condescendingly mentioned in a review by Bernth Lindfors in 1968 to be the “first substantial literary work written by a Nigerian author” (1968, p. 42). Nevertheless, the tale was considered to be innovative at the time and is still viewed as influential to Nigerian writers as it was found to “share correspondences with some contemporary works including those of Nigerian writers Wole Soyinka and particularly Ben Okri” (Hart, 2009, p. 178). In fact, it is viewed as the “a seminal work of African mythopoeic fantasy and precursor of, for example, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*” (Bryce, 2019 p. 2). Additionally, the tale is noteworthy as its characters “do not concern themselves with colonialism” (Hart, 2009, p. 178). Instead, “however fantastic” (p. 178), it has “African themes that take place in African settings among African characters” (p. 178), corresponding to Okorafor’s fantastical settings and characters. As with persecution throughout history, the reasons for the curse laid upon the Okeke that made them the slaves of the Nuru are glossed over in the drunkard’s scripture, but not much can be expected of a drunk author. The implication is that the onus is upon the reader to be more critical and not merely accept written texts at face value.



The narrative also serves as an allegory for the Darfur genocide, when Sudanese president, Omar-al-Bashir, attempted to “wipe out three non-Arab ethnic groups in the region” (Associated Press in The Hague, 2010). These “non-Arab ethnic groups” are represented by the Okeke slaves who are rescued by the novel’s female messiah in Durfa (an anagram of Darfu[r] where more than 200,000 people died in the genocide), augmenting the text’s aspirational value for young black readers in contemporary society who are othered because of race and gender. The artefacts that are left behind are described in the Great Book and the origin of these gadgets are explained in the prequel novel, *The Book of Phoenix*, written four years after *Who Fears Death*:

“Under the new sun, most of what the Okeke built crumbled. We still have some of it, the computers, gadgets, items, objects in the sky that sometimes speak to us. The Nuru to this day point at the Okeke and say, *slave* and the Okeke must bow their heads in agreement. That is the past.” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 92)

The description of the technology that the reader recognises explains how Onyesonwu’s world could be a post-apocalyptic Africa, and invites the reader to speculate about what our world might look like if we continue to build our own metaphorical towers [of Babel] “high enough to prick Ani and get her attention” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 92). However, more importantly, it is in the rewriting that the power of the written word is emphasised in the narrative. Inspired by novels like *Who Fears Death*, the reader can *rewrite* her own reality through the transformative discourse that the book initiates:

Okorafor lays great weight on the future, its anticipation, and the responsibility to actively shape it. She establishes a network that incorporates the future and reaches back and forth in time and space, deconstructing regional boundaries and literary or cultural divisions. (Pahl, 2018, p. 220)

In the end, the book encourages the reader to view oneself as the author [Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1967)], as Sunuteel does. Sunuteel, the drunkard, transcribes Phoenix’s tale and reinterprets it, but with this power comes responsibility. Sunuteel does so irresponsibly, and in an act of horizontal oppression, proposes that the Okeke are slaves, and warps the story, and “spread this shit far and wide” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 232). It becomes

Onyesonwu's burden to liberate the Okeke from this travesty through her death and resurrection.

The basic plot and key definitions that relate particularly to Okorafor's text follow, as well as my own interest in the novel as an aspirational text for young readers. After that, the chapter will consider the audacious womanist hero, and her elevation from marginalised *Ewu* woman to the redemptive saviour, focusing on an exploration of the impact that the amalgamation of Christian elements with Igbo cosmology has in this Afrofuturistic novel. Black feminist and womanist lenses will also be employed to determine the book's aspirational value for young female readers, as well as an overview of fundamentalist religion and racism. Thereafter, Okorafor's view of the Africanfuturist, the importance of jujuism and the intersection of religion, superstition and culture is explored. The flying metaphor in the novel reveals how Onyesonwu flies beyond heights previously imagined for women, and her aspirational story decolonises the text through the Afrocentric milieu. Religious allegories that abound are probed as Onyesonwu becomes the messianic saviour in the book, and a symbiosis of aspects of Igbo religion and Christian scripture emerges. Najeeba and Njeri employ snail-sense feminism, demonstrating how women have had to go around obstacles. However, when Onyesonwu is born, she overcomes the obstacles that her mother and step-mother had to go around using cameline agency. Motherism is evident in Onyesonwu's mother, but has broader relevance, when Mwita turns out to be the more appropriate helpmeet, thus breaking stereotypical gender roles. An examination of the novel's portrayal of female genital mutilation, and reversing the procedure, once again foregrounds the text's aspirational value.

Onyesonwu moves through three stages on her hero's journey: becoming, student and warrior. Throughout each stage, she meets patriarchal resistance and oppression. First, Aro refuses to teach her. Second, the elder women who practice juju collude in patriarchal oppression by continuing the ritual and aligning themselves with Aro's views of women as sorcerers. Third, her father and the Nuru Seer are unable to admit that the saviour is an *Ewu* woman, and not a Nuru man. There are other audacious womanist heroes in the novel, besides Onyesonwu and Najeeba and Njeri. Onyesonwu's companions, Luyu and Binta, are also shown to be courageous martyrs, foreshadowing Onyesonwu's martyrdom. Power structures are explored in the novel, specifically sexual enjoyment and freedom, as well as Afro-textured hair which is a motif linked to power in the novel. In the end, Onyesonwu becomes the messianic saviour who bestows gifts of power on the Okeke and Nuru women. The story unchains the mind by

posing essential questions about subjectivity and womanist concerns using religious allegory to foreground Onyesonwu's sacrificial martyrdom.

*Who Fears Death* and other written and graphic novels by Okorafor have garnered considerable critical acclaim. In a TED talk about another eponymous female hero in the *Binti* series, Okorafor claims, "She becomes, not other, but more" (Okorafor, 2017c). Furthermore, she states that "leaving, but bringing, and then becoming more, is at the heart of Afrofuturism" (Okorafor, 2017c); however, more recently, Okorafor has used the term "Africanfuturist" to refer to herself, instead of simply an Afrofuturist, because she writes "Sci-fi stories that imagine a future Africa", the title of her 2017 TED Talk (Okorafor, 2017c). Okorafor states that she felt frustrated that the Africa she encountered in Nigeria was not evident in the narratives she encountered:

The Africa I was seeing in literature was a place of the past that was left behind, a place whose value was in it being "the cradle of civilization" millennia ago, a place whose culture many liked to appreciate as a place they'd left behind and then from a distance, a place that had no specifics (people went to "Africa," not a country or particular city in Africa), a place whose greatness existed only in its imagined state where colonization didn't happen. (Okorafor, 2019b, p. 82)

Okorafor explains the difference between classic science fiction and Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist fiction. She states that it is not rooted in the Western tradition and is not "white and male" (Okorafor, 2017c). Furthermore, she outlines its relevance for young black readers today:

So, what if a Nigerian American wrote science fiction? Growing up, I didn't read much science fiction. I couldn't relate to these stories preoccupied with xenophobia, colonization and seeing aliens as others. And I saw no reflection of anyone who looked like me in those narratives. (Okorafor, 2017c)

The hashtags #africanfuturism and #africanjujuism accompany many of Okorafor's posts about her stories about the female heroes in her narratives (Okorafor, 2020). Ogunyemi points out that "[p]rolific African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam unabashedly cross-pollinate one another, inadvertently performing juju functions, for the scientific art of juju is

affiliated to the science of the psychology of the insecure” (Ogunyemi, 2007, p. 22). The cross-pollination of religion that Ogunyemi refers to is evident in Okorafor’s novel, as is jujuism, which is a term for the intersection of “Anthropology, Medicine, Political Science, Psychology, Religion and Sociology” (p. 10), enabling people to “accept that juju comes in myriad forms that are consciously and rationally used to gain advantage in physical and psychological confrontations” (p. 10). Ogunyemi claims that she uses “juju loosely to cover intersecting ideas [religion, superstition and culture]” (p. 11). Furthermore, the etymology of the word in West Africa is thought to mean “conjure” in that it is believed to be “‘good medicine’ [that] homoeopathically and spiritually duels ‘bad medicine’ in the form of a curse” (p. 76). Ogunyemi describes juju as a “salve for the soul” (p. 11), something that women who immerse themselves in witchcraft seek:

To gain juju power, some women immerse themselves in witchcraft; intriguingly, the public perceives powerful women as witches. Therefore, my assumption is that juju exists and thrives in nooks and crannies almost everywhere. (p. 11)

Juju fiction is viewed as a “bewitched crossroads, where many literary aspects intersect: juju, the mystery novel, fantasy, the ghost story, the tall tale, the gothic, etc.” (1996, p. 184), which is true of the novels being considered in this thesis. It is a literary form which Ogunyemi admits that she straddles like “an insider-outsider” (2007, p. 11) because she views herself as a “believing skeptic” (p. 11).

Okorafor’s stories are rooted in Africanjujuism, which she defines as “a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (Okorafor, 2019a). Another crucial element of her heritage is her identity as a Naijamerican, a Nigerian African American, because her parents are Nigerian immigrants. Okorafor says that her “dual cultural heritage partly accounts for why I was attracted to the myth of the flying Africans – a tale that connects North America and Africa” (2008a, p. 131). Okorafor writes about flying Africans being Igbo like her, and notes that when she told her uncle about the myth, his response was, “Of course people can fly” (p. 131). Okorafor corroborates this in her paper, “Of Course People Can Fly”, also included in Barr’s compilation, *Afro-Future Females*:

To further expand Kilgore's argument beyond North America, I add that many African male authors also tend to portray African women and girls as being invisible, voiceless, or marginal. I was responding to this penchant when I created Asuquo. (Okorafor, 2008a, p. 131)

Asuquo is also just one of the characters created by Okorafor who can fly, and she explains that she was inspired to make this possible for her character because of Butler's influence. Okorafor was so enthralled by Butler that she named her daughter Anya, "after Anyanwu, a character from Octavia E Butler's book, *Wild Seed*" (Okorafor, 2008b, p. 241), who could fly:

When I read *Wild Seed*, I practically cried. There, in the book's pages, living in a remote Nigerian village long ago was Anyanwu, complex, Nigerian, and mythical. It was after reading that book that I went through my own "transition" and started to call myself a writer of science fiction and fantasy. (p. 242)

About Anyanwu, Okorafor says that "Octavia's character was the first African, Nigerian, Igbo fantastical being that I ever came across in fiction" and "the most amazing black woman I'd ever read about" (p. 241):

Anyanwu was a shape shifter who could become any animal whose flesh she'd tasted. I've always been fond of birds and their ability to fly, and when Anyanwu changed into a bird, my imagination soared. (p. 241)

Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death* is also able to shape-shift and fly, as can Phoenix in *Book of the Phoenix*. Again, this has metaphorical relevance for the young readers of these novels, especially like the young Okorafor who recognised the potential in the African characters she read about in Butler's stories:

Octavia's fiction contained a lot of firsts for me: black people and other people of color featured at the forefront of stories set in well-imagined strange worlds and situations; stories where race and gender were thoughtfully factored and woven into the type of fiction that I've loved since I could read; and the most memorable characters I've ever read. (p. 242)

Okorafor thus recognises how fiction can foreground issues of race and gender, especially because “Once the author wrote the story, the author became irrelevant” (Okorafor, 2015, p 227). What is still relevant is what the author has chosen to position her readers to ponder, and this commentary takes on a life of its own as it exists beyond the story, inspiring strong black girls to “fly” and reconfigure the future for readers like her young self. Womack notes Okorafor’s powerful social commentary in *Who Fears Death* (and the prequel *Book of the Phoenix*):

Afrofuturism can weave mysticism with its social commentary too. Award-winning fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* captures the struggles of Onyesonwu, a woman in post-nuclear, apocalyptic Africa who is under the tutelage of a shaman. She hopes to use her newfound gifts to save her people from genocide. (Womack, 2013, p. 10)

The message to young readers is that they too can fly by rewriting their own stories and visualising themselves in the role of the hero. Onyesonwu is as courageous and powerful as her mother, and she can also shape-shift and fly, which is a critical metaphor for empowerment. Okorafor realised that Africans could *fly* after reading Octavia E Butler’s exploration of the metaphor in *Wild Seed* (2008b, p. 241) because the protagonist, Anyanwu, could fly (p. 242). Even the similar-sounding name, Anyanwu, appears to have inspired the character of Onyesonwu. The flying metaphor is a recurrent one in African American myth because it is a powerful and apt symbol for liberation, because “[i]n the absence of the freedom to fly in real life, African Americans created the myth of a flying hero which is one of the most prominent ancestral myths in African culture” (Thomas, 2012, p. 107).

The heights to which Onyesonwu flies are beyond those previously imagined for women. While many of the women in the novel are respected as mothers, healers and honoured elders, Onyesonwu transcends even these revered heights, to succeed in traditionally male-dominated arenas. Onyesonwu’s journey also empowers the other women on the journey with her, who discover their path to personal and sexual liberation and become powerful, outspoken heroes too. A reviewer, Mikki Kendall, discusses the tension between this respect for women and the traditions that Okorafor challenges in the novel in a review in *Publishers Weekly*:

As she channels the past, present, and future into one complex tale, Okorafor walks a fine line between sincere respect and unstinting examination of tradition: mixing futuristic technology with magic rooted in the beliefs of Nigerian, Tanzanian, and other African cultures, exploring why many women willingly practice female circumcision and see it as a necessary rite of passage even as others find it horrific. (Kendall, 2010)

The African milieu in *Who Fears Death* is what Kilgore suggests directly challenges “complacent histories or futurist fiction that presupposes white and/or male superiority” (Kilgore, 2008, p. 121). It is certainly true that the book challenges the prevalent view of Africa in Western fiction as “an exotic proving ground for white male virtue and black male impotence” (p. 122). Instead, it uses the same milieu for a black female hero who can fly over challenges and conquer death. As the teacher of the young readers these books uplift, it is critical that I once again emphasise my etic perspective, as a *listener* and from the vantage of admiration for the liberatory potential of the novels. Okorafor herself has posted about this on the social platform, Twitter, and stated, “I think a lot of people need to learn the fine art of ‘shut up and listen’ when encountering cultures unfamiliar to them” (Okorafor, 2019c). Okorafor later posted this reply to the same Twitter thread:

It’s great to be curious and inquisitive, but it’s also necessary to know how and WHEN to ask questions and understand that some things are not yours to know (there’s knowledge in that, too). (Okorafor, 2019c)

It is as a “curious and inquisitive” (Okorafor, 2019c) listener that I explore the novel in the pages that follow. As Phillip Ray states in his chapter entitled “Toward Supportive Action”, I acknowledge that my role is “not to speak for the Afrofuturist, nor to assume I am even capable of truly understanding the messages in the literature” (Ray, 2019, p. 165). Instead, it is to emphasise the novel’s liberatory potential for the young readers today. Books are crucial tools for social change and commentary, and this book contests many current social justice issues, such as colourism, weaponised rape, genital mutilation and female pleasure, implicit bias, and the glass ceiling, foregrounding the issues and initiating vital discourse on these topics. Literature allows for conversations to take place in a safe environment. Elin Isvind, a Swedish teacher, discusses how *Who Fears Death* can facilitate these discussions in her paper entitled “Cultural Diversity in *Who Fears Death*: Teaching Representation through Fantasy Literature in the Intercultural Classroom”:

Fantasy as a genre is a significant tool for bridging the gap between different cultures, since it creates an arena for intercultural meetings where “the other” is in focus, which reduces the alienating aspect of different cultures and identities. (Isvind, 2017, p. 82)

Isvind’s reference to “an arena for intercultural meetings” is apt because the book allows for the discussion of the social justice issues suggested, at the same time as merging Nigerian and Western religion, thereby bridging differences by joining Christian motifs with Nigerian deities. Judith Rahn, in her paper on “(Re-)Negotiating Black Posthumanism – The Precarity of Race in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*”, has explored how Okorafor “implicitly counters the – prominently featured – Christian understanding of life and the world as finite and resolvable” (2019, p. 87). In *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor again explores religious allegory through a sacrificial death, incorporating many similar New Testament motifs that are reflected in *Lagoon*, such as “the Eucharist, boundless divine love, followers that mourn their saviour’s passing, the sacrifice itself” (p. 87). *Lagoon* has other similarities to *Who Fears Death* in that it also explores the position of slaves, together with a blend of Nigerian spiritual elements with Christian motifs, creating a symbiosis that is transformative:

Langer also explains that the often “traumatic and destructive hybridity” (Langer, 2011, p. 127) between Western science and traditional ways of knowledge production causes tensions that can only be resolved in a form of hybridity that is in itself productive and which, I would conclude, allows for the emergence of new, symbiotic formations that bear the potential for change. (p. 93)

I submit that it is through the “symbiotic formations” that Rahn proposes, by creating a hybrid of deities and ideology from Nigerian religion with biblical allusion, that Okorafor presents a middle ground that respects Nigerian culture, at the same time as using biblical allusion that will be recognisable to her young readers to offer a redemptive view of their place in society as women:

[African women] do their reflections in the context of multireligious and multicultural living. Their culture demands that they stay sensitive to relatedness and inter-relatedness. It follows from this that they reflect on the reciprocity, mutuality and justice



that community life demands. Woven into this is hope, the reason for struggling. (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 33)

In a further allusion to biblical scripture, Najeeba weans her child in the desert where she recovers from her brutal rape. Najeeba can be compared to the Egyptian slave, Hagar, in the Bible, whom Abraham cast out into the desert and whom the Lord blesses by making her son, Ishmael, the father of a nation (Genesis 21 v18). In *Hagar's Daughters*, Diana L Hayes writes:

[Black women] are the daughters of Maria Stewart, of Ida B. Wells Barnett, of Harriet Tubman, of Sojourner Truth, of Mary McLeod Bethune, of Rebecca Jackson, of Zora Neale Hurston, and of Hagar, the rejected and cast-out slave, mother of Ishmael, concubine of Abraham and threat to Sarah, his barren wife. (Hayes, 1995)

Najeeba is one of these strong women, and like Hagar, considers the hopelessness of her situation and decides she must live for the sake of her child. Even in the silent desert, Najeeba establishes how courageous and resourceful she is. Survival and silence are forms of protest and similarly to the other social justice issues raised in the book, mirror gender-based violence responses in contemporary society. Furthermore, Najeeba is like Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail, which "crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012, p. 27). Like the snail that "carries its house on its back without feeling the strain" (p. 27), Najeeba travels wherever she wishes, intact, bringing to mind Adimora-Ezeigbo's concept of snail-sense feminism that accommodates and tolerates. What Najeeba appears to tolerate is the abhorrent rape, by not immediately seeking revenge. Although she does scream back at the perpetrator while the rape is occurring, she realises that her scream "was her voice leaving her forever" (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 18). Later, Najeeba's voice does eventually reawaken in her daughter. Najeeba's "voice leaving" is not literal, but instead, the connotation is that she cannot be the one to speak or act against Daib. The tally of sexual violence is high that day as all the women in the village are repeatedly raped by the Nuru invaders in a mass act of weaponised rape. All the while, the rapists and their women sing and laugh at the victims' shame, claiming that the power of their god, Ani, belongs to the Nuru. The focus on a female goddess does not mean that patriarchy is not a problem in this post-apocalyptic Africa, rather it shows the author's concern with female messiahs and gods. In fact, the weaponised rape is justified by presenting it to the goddess, once again

demonstrating how religion can be distorted and misrepresented under the guise of worship or obedience to scripture:

*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.  
The power of Ani belongs to us  
And so we will slay you to dust  
Ugly filthy slaves, Ani has finally killed you! (p. 18)*

This song reinforces how the perceived inferiority of the Okeke in the Great Book is further distorted and redeployed to justify genocide. Daib records the vile deed on a “coin-shaped device from his pocket” (p. 19) and “started singing, stabbing his knife into the sand next to Najeeba’s head” (p. 19). The description of the rape is relentless, and Najeeba uses her voice to battle him in the only way possible, by spitting and snarling at him (p. 19). Eventually, Najeeba falls silent, and “became two eyes watching it happen” (p. 19). Her Alusi, “that ethereal part of her with the ability to silence pain and observe, came forward” (p. 20), to help her survive the two-hour ordeal, which to Najeeba “felt like a day and a half” (p. 20). Disassociation is not uncommon during traumatic events, and the novel “offers the opportunity to have a conversation with students about the perception and representation of rape in the context of the present-day conversation about rape culture” (Isvind, 2017, p. 71). It also makes it possible to discuss the refugee crisis because of war and invasion, which this example of weaponised rape mirrors, as well as the treatment of vulnerable women in contemporary society more generally.

The aim of the Nuru rapists is to create “children of violence” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 20), known as *Ewu*, to destroy the family unit “at the root” (p. 20) because they know that an Okeke woman will never kill her own child. The child belongs to the father, so the children growing inside the Okeke women as a result of the mass rape become “poison” (p. 20), and because of this Najeeba feels that Ani has killed her, yet left her alive (p. 22). Najeeba is formidable, like Jessamy’s mother in *The Icarus Girl*, and entirely responsible for Onyesonwu’s survival and strength as she gives birth to her in the desert all alone. Because Onyesonwu is the child of this weaponised rape, she is *Ewu*, marked as such by her unique colouring and freckles, a sign of

her mixed parentage, for which she is stigmatised and viewed as an outsider wherever she goes. Incidentally, the word *Ewu* is Igbo for “goat” (Bryce, 2019, p. 11), a clear indication of the perceived status of children who look different from the majority. Najeeba walks into the desert after her husband’s cowardice and rejection, and “because she was already dead, she wasn’t afraid” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 23). This bravery inspires her child’s name, Onyesonwu. Najeeba demonstrates a mother’s love and strength as she clings to life for the sake of the child:

*If I die out here, the child will die alone*, she desperately thought. *No child deserves to die alone*. She held on. She focused. (p. 24)

Despite choosing acceptance for herself, Najeeba does not choose tolerance for her daughter, and names her “Who fears death” because it will be Onyesonwu’s destiny to take vengeance against her father. In the closing lines of the first chapter, the narration from Onyesonwu’s point of view, four years in the future, states: “*My mother named me Onyesonwu. It means ‘Who fears death?’ She named me well*” (p. 6). The book’s epigraph elucidates the inspiration for the title as it quotes Patrice Lumumba, who asked, “Dear friends, are you afraid of death?” (Epigraph). Lumumba was the Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo (June to September 1960), a man who played a crucial role in liberating the country from Belgian rule, and who himself is viewed as a hero. By quoting this well-known African martyr, the epigraph reinforces the African milieu and concerns of the novel, and foregrounds the book’s “counterhegemonic potential, as well as the genre’s relationship to race and postcolonialism” (Burnet, 2015, p. 135) by creating a fantasy post-apocalyptic world.

The post-apocalyptic world is where Onyesonwu is born to a strong Okeke desert woman, Najeeba, and her Nuru rapist, Daib, the powerful sorcerer whose aim is to eradicate the Okeke people. The Okeke people are “the created ones” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 16) and are persecuted because that is the way it has always been. However, the only tangible difference between the Okeke and Nuru is skin pigment:

The Okeke people have skin the color of the night because they were created before the day. They were the first. Later, after much had happened, the Nuru arrived. They came from the stars and that’s why their skin is the color of the sun. (p. 16)

Because of the allegorical link to the Darfu genocide and the description of skin colour, I propose that the Okeke resemble black tribes and the Nuru people resemble Arab tribes. Oppression is accepted as fact and justified using scripture in the Great Book that tells the Okeke that they “were born to be slaves to the Nuru” (p. 16). This is reminiscent of the flawed argument that the story of Ham in the Bible rationalised racial oppression of African American slaves using biblical scripture (Burnet, 2015, p. 142). Furthermore, the description of the Okeke slaves and Nuru oppressors appears to be commenting on discrimination within Islamic radicalism just as much as it critiques Western Christian fundamentalism. According to Mercy Uduyoye, women theologians recognise that while both cultures have been tools for domination, there is also liberatory value in each:

[Women theologians’] critique of culture applies as much to the Western Christian culture as to the African religio-culture, not excluding the Islamic. Both are two-edged swords. Culture is experienced by women as a tool for domination, but there are aspects that can be liberative so they do not undertake a wholesale condemnation of either. (Uduyoye, 2001, p. 28)

Onyesonwu must navigate a society divided because of religious domination, and she becomes a liberative force as an audacious womanist hero, always “wanting to know more than is good for one” by pursuing her ambition to become a sorcerer, “in charge” by leading her friends and Mwita, her lover, and “serious” as she faces her death without wavering (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Furthermore, she is “traditionally capable” (Walker, 1983, p. xii) as she sets off into the desert to face her persecutor in the same way that escaping African American slaves will have walked to Canada to escape persecution. However, Onyesonwu walks into inevitable danger, not away from it, towards her own unavoidable and horrifying death. Onyesonwu’s quest demonstrates that she is concerned with the “survival and wholeness of black people” (Walker, 1983, p. xii), and this is the overarching concern of the novel as Onyesonwu, and her friends must overcome their own fear and persecution. A womanist lens is thus appropriate because of the book’s liberatory power as it is concerned with this “wholeness of black people” (p. xii), and also because of the intersectionality of race, class and gender. The shift in womanist concerns in this novel to those explored by Jessamy in Chapter 4 demonstrate again that a homogenous notion for black womanhood does not exist (Mirza, 2014, p. 5). Jessamy is a young girl oblivious at times of the danger she faces, whereas Onyesonwu is very aware of the death she walks towards, and is unafraid. The metamorphosis that Walker and Ogunyemi write about

takes place in the three parts of the book – becoming, student, warrior – reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s “the little-girl-gone-woman” (Phillips, 2006, p. 28). Onyesonwu journeys through these three states: becoming, student and warrior, on her path of self-discovery through a literal and spiritual wilderness. Like Jessamy, the wilderness is the spiritual plain that she must traverse to discover the truth about herself. Onyesonwu is mentored by the sorcerer, Aro, who becomes her reluctant mentor because of his own sexist views about women and their place. Still, he realises that she is a dangerous force without guidance, and he instructs, “All you can do is follow your path all the way to the wilderness, and then you continue along because that’s what must be” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 140). Thus, misogynist attitudes that dictate who should and should not be heroes based on gender are also disputed in the novel.

Returning to Najeeba and mothers, Motherism is pertinent in this novel because of her strength as a mother. Motherism has further relevance because it does not exclude men. Men are viewed as vital, and it is this complementarity that is esteemed by Motherist theorists, like Catherine Acholonu. The role of older women and elders is important in the novel because of their place in mentoring young girls. However, their struggles against patriarchal structures and horizontal oppression by women who preserve and participate in unhelpful practices, as “most cases of women abuse in traditional Africa are perpetuated by fellow women” (Acholonu, 1995, p. iii) is also foregrounded. In the novel, the elder women do not view their roles as secondary, and much like Onitsha women they might view feminist equality as a “non-liberatory concept” (Nzegwu, 1994, p. 95). Like these Yoruba Nigerian women, the elders in the text appear to hold egalitarian ideas about roles as being equal in importance to men’s, but different, with the focus for them being on womanhood and motherhood. As aforementioned, Catherine Acholonu’s Motherism offers an Afrocentric alternative to Western feminism, one that focuses on motherhood at the same time as including men. This is relevant for the character of Mwita who has the more traditionally nurturing gifts as a healer and carer to Onyesonwu throughout the book. However, he does struggle with his role at times. Mwita’s conflict over stereotypical gender roles is evident when Ssaiku praises him for his healing ability in the peripatetic village of Ssolu:

“I wish we had someone like you here. To be so well versed in the physical and spiritual is a rare gift.”

Mwita shook his head. “Not so knowledgeable in the spiritual, *Oga*,” he said. (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 296)

An Africana Womanist lens is apt at this point as the book counters “dewomanization” by the West as it foregrounds the female gender as “the magnet that holds the social cosmos intact and alive” (Hudson-Weems, 1995, p. xviii). The hero, Onyesonwu, reverses the genital mutilation that occurs in the book, countering archaic customs that view female sexual pleasure as taboo. At first, Onyesonwu willingly undergoes the procedure because “to be uncircumcised past eleven brought bad luck and shame to your family” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 33). Onyesonwu’s powers are awakening, and she hopes that the procedure will make her “normal” (p. 33) by putting “a stop to the strangeness happening” (p. 33). The perceived benefit is that the 11-year-old girls who undergo the procedure together are “bound” (p. 37) together, so that they can always rely on each other, and they are viewed as women in their society, so they finally have a say in adult matters:

“You [Binta], Diti, Onyesonwu, and Luyu will protect each other, even after marriage. And we, the Old Ones, will protect you all. But truth is the only thing that will secure this bond tonight.” (p. 37)

This statement by Nana the Wise is an acknowledgement of women’s strength when they unite, and the elders who perform the ritual are also united and revered, bound by the tradition. Only as women age can they enjoy the rights that men do in Igbo society, which is what is reflected in the novel:

The position of women among the Igbo is moderated by two considerations. The first is age. After attaining the age of a grandmother, the female enjoys some of the exclusively male rights. In that way, when operating as a great-grandmother, she can even upbraid a male of younger age in public without shocking the community. (Nwoye, 2011, p. 313)

During the rite, the elders uncover Binta’s sexual assault at the hands of her father, and the ritual allows the elders to confront Binta’s father. Before then, it was not possible, but Binta’s confession during the ritual makes retribution possible. What is less palatable is that “this group of women had known of Binta’s father’s behavior for a while” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 38),

but “were powerless to intervene until Binta went through her Eleventh Rite” (p. 38). Nana the Wise tells her that as an adult, “Your words will finally matter” (p. 38). This is alarming and suggests that if a girl refuses the two-thousand-year-old rite, she will never be viewed as an adult in Jwahir, showing how “most cases of women abuse in traditional Africa are perpetuated by fellow women” (Acholonu, 1995, p. iii). This forces young girls to undergo female genital mutilation in order to be given a voice. However, not all women collude in their own oppression, although this is common, and the fact that Onyesonwu deliberately undergoes the procedure is confounding because her mother is opposed to it. Najeeba feels it is both “primitive and useless” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 32) and “barbaric” (p. 45), which is compounded when the young women experience pain whenever they are close to orgasm because an enchanted “primitive scalpel” (p. 39) is used. Recounting the female genital mutilation and Binta’s abuse demonstrates the novel’s social relevance. By addressing social ills prevalent in society today, the book opens up a dialogue about the sensitive and often taboo subject matter. About rites of passage, Oduyoye states women are programmed to “live for children, family and community as these constitute the locus of one’s worthiness” (Uduyoye, 2001, p. 31), and that these rites are perpetuated by women themselves because of socialisation:

“This in some cases has come to mean that women live to please men and pride themselves with being the providers of continuity and the carriers of tradition. For the women, therefore, critique of norms of womanhood are part of the theology (Ravelonoloso Diambaye 1996)”. (Quoted in Uduyoye, 2001, p. 31)

The young girls in the novel soon realise that sexual pleasure is a right, and Luyu rages, “I’ve always enjoyed it! Why shouldn’t I?” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 78). For Binta, intercourse is abuse as her father sexually abused her. Luyu again demonstrates her own outspoken confidence when she tells Binta that her father should be “castrated like the other rapists” (p. 79), and when she is chastised she insists, “I will say and do what I want!” (p. 80), making her another example of womanist audacity in the story. Luyu is also described as “brazen” (p. 49) and continues to be so throughout the novel, and in her own right is the everyday hero in the story that ordinary young girls might better relate to as she has none of the innate powers that Onyesonwu has. Thus, Onyesonwu is not alone in her audacious womanist bravery. Luyu also bravely confronts death and offers unwavering courage and support to Onyesonwu on her quest. Furthermore, Luyu has a voracious sexual appetite, which is a trait stereotypically viewed as masculine or wanton. This overturns the notion that black women should only be

concerned with traditional feminine roles and should not also be seen as sexual beings, subverting the “trope of wifehood and or motherhood as a ‘necessary’ identification parameter of African womanhood” (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013, p. 9). After the genital mutilation, Luyu angrily notes that women are “tricked into thinking our husbands are gods” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 80) because the juju used on the scalpel during the rite means that sexual intercourse is only painful until the marriage is consummated. What Okorafor demonstrates is that the practice of female genital mutilation is not one forced upon women, but that women collude in this:

“It was Aro who came up with the idea to put juju on the scalpel but it was the Ada who accepted. They felt they were doing something good for the girls.” (p. 81)

While juju is used to oppress young women, later, when the ritual is reversed, the novel demonstrates how “[j]uju is powerful as a sign, for, at its most potent, it can empower its owner or disempower the adversary; it plays a vital role in establishing justice” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90). Onyesonwu reflects that in school, boys and girls are taught about their bodies, but there is no equivalent word in Okeke for the clitoris. This glaring omission foregrounds the misogynistic view that sexual pleasure for women is immaterial. Onyesonwu grapples with this injustice when she asks herself, “*Why in Ani’s name is this removed?*” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 90). When Mwitā challenges Onyesonwu’s inability to reach climax, he tells her to “Do something about it then, Eshu woman” (p. 130). Immediately after Onyesonwu realises that she can use her power to reverse the genital mutilation, she can reach climax:

That tiny piece of flesh made all the difference. Growing it back hadn’t been hard and it pleased me that for once in my life obtaining something of importance was easy. (p. 130)

Unfortunately, this is a story, and there is no magical way to do this for women outside of the pages of this book. Nonetheless, Onyesonwu’s victory over the archaic rituals that prevent sexual pleasure is just one instance of the celebration of sex and sexuality that foregrounds women’s right to sexual freedom and enjoyment. Similar attitudes towards sex and sexuality are lauded by Lefanu in her comments on Russ’s “modern heroine” who is “tough, clever and independent” (Lefanu, 1988, p. 35), as well as “sexually autonomous” (Hogle, 2002, p. 24). It is in the narrative strands concerning love and sexuality, as well as platonic love between



friends, that we see the characters as all “part of the human same” (Steady, 1987, p. 8). This once again parallels Walker’s womanist concerns as Onyesonwu is “[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xii). Mwita may be Onyesonwu’s “complement” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 8), her partner in sexual awakening, but she is the hero. Mwita’s role is still essential, and when she first sees him she feels as though she “was like looking into a mirror when you’ve never seen your reflection” (p. 49), but his role is to assist, her role is to save. It is this anti-essentialist view of womanism that is an inversion of the expected gender roles in the book that foregrounds its value as an aspirational text.

Mwita, although an important ally and lover, struggles with his place at times. When Onyesonwu passes the initiation that he failed, there is tension between them that has to be addressed. She tells him that being born male “does not make you more worthy” (p. 129). Later in Ssolu, what has thus far been unconfirmed implicit bias becomes considerably more explicit when he says, “*I should be the sorcerer, you should be the healer. That’s how it’s always been between a man and woman*” (p. 253). Onyesonwu’s response is immediate and scathing:

“You aren’t the one whose mother in a wasteland of desperation asked all the powers of the earth to make her daughter a sorcerer. You aren’t the one born from *rape*. You came from love, remember? *YOU* aren’t the one the Nuru Seer prophesied would do something so drastic that she’ll be *dragged out before a screaming crowd of Nurus, buried to her neck and stoned until she is dead!*” (p. 253)

Onyesonwu reveals the death that she moves inexorably towards, and Mwita cannot respond at first. The reader is invited to view his attitude from Onyesonwu’s point of view. Onyesonwu wonders, “Who was he to think he was entitled to be the center of things just because he was male?” (p. 254). Onyesonwu’s thoughts are echoed by Okorafor in her aforementioned TED talk that she writes science fiction that is not “white and male” (Okorafor, 2017c). Mwita is not the hero, Onyesonwu is, and this gender reversal is difficult for Mwita to accept at times. However, there are other times in the novel when he is a paragon of loving support and the ideal helpmeet, in a reverse biblical allusion to the Genesis creation account. Theology presents two contradictory views of women, at times as “beautiful images that put women at the core of family” (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 31), and at others less palatable suggestions that ““women are the servants of men”” (p. 31). In this book, Mwita is Onyesonwu’s “servant”. It is these dissonances

between patriarchy and an understanding of Christlikeness that concern African Christian women theologians in Africa, according to Oduyoye (p. 32). These concerns are reflected in creative works like *Who Fears Death* through the inversion of gender expectations, and in others, like *The Color Purple* where Celie comes to a completely new understanding of God as being neither male nor female, but rather “inside you and inside everybody else” (Walker, 1992, p. 202). Onyesonwu is also ambivalent about a creator with human qualities and occasionally suggests that she does not believe in Ani, the Earth goddess. When she does encounter the creator, she finds it is not human, but rather cold and logical, and it “completely obliterated” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 292) her and rearranged her in “[a]n order that made more sense” (p. 292). What these examples demonstrate is that womanist books function to “eradicate Western hermeneutical patterns, full of oppressive ideologies and distortions aimed at promoting Eurocentric values” (Akper and Smit, 2005, p. 33). Furthermore, they underscore “what is meant by the Bible needs redefining in the African context” (p. 33). Crucially, the book emphasises that the gender of the hero is not what is essential, and this story shows us that the hero could just as easily be a young woman, despite the weight of the literary canon historically often signifying that this allusive figure ought to be a man. It is also apt that the book does this by challenging a Eurocentric view of the Bible, given findings that the Garden of Eden would, in fact, have been in Africa (Yorke, 1995, p. 151). With Mwita as a helpmeet, Onyesonwu leaves the relative safety of Jwahir, a veritable Garden of Eden in comparison to the trials on the road and in Durfa that await. They learn of the threat that approaches in the form of the sorcerer, Daib, and his plans of ethnic cleansing of the Okeke. Similar to Adam and Eve who are expelled from the Garden when they learn too much from the Tree of Knowledge, the knowledge is a burden and they have to leave.

The first part of the book is entitled “Becoming”. In this part of the book, Onyesonwu realises her potential and begins to learn when to be quiet and when to speak. Silence has its uses, particularly in protest, healing and prayer, and much of this she learns from Mwita because “if you spend enough time in the desert, you will hear it speak” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 52). Prayer is called “Holding Conversation with the land” (p. 53). Learning this simple sorcery from Mwita begins to prepare her to harness her powers, which is crucial because her father’s magical eye is seeking her out to destroy her. Daib comes in the form of a cobra in one incident, making her want to gouge out her own eyes. The snake is controlled by Daib who magically injects a metaphorical venom into her through sorcery, making her feel self-loathing. When Onyesonwu emerges from this attack, Mwita tells her that she had shape-shifted, and he reveals

that she is an Eshu, meaning that she can “shape-shift, among other things” (p. 55). It is also the name used in Igbo religion to describe lesser divine spirits, and is referred to in *Brown Girl in the Ring* on a number of occasions to describe minor manifestations, like Legbara, The Prince of the Cemetery. Thus, one can infer that Onyesonwu’s power is a divine gift. Like Ti-Jeanne’s encounter with her evil grandfather in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Onyesonwu must face her evil and powerful father in order to save herself and to rewrite the story, for herself, and young readers. In contrast to Mwita’s desire to rescue a crying Onyesonwu from Daib by saying he will not let him kill her, which is intended to be a demonstration of love, only she can protect herself. Mwita’s words are empty and represent the archaic fairy tale formula that requires that the man saves the helpless woman, but this is a different story altogether, and he is not the hero who saves the day. Onyesonwu does not need rescuing, and in fact, it is impossible to rescue her as the reality is that she has to die in order to be reborn.

Onyesonwu is not a damsel in distress, and another indication of this is her assertive nature. Her acerbic tongue when incensed invites comparisons with cameline agency and it is apt that camels are revered in the novel because they mirror Onyesonwu’s hardy strength and daring. Njeri, Onyesonwu’s stepmother, likewise had close associations to camels as a camel racer who died when one fell on her. Still, she only chose to be a camel racer because “Camel-talking is a man’s job, so she chose camel racing instead” (p. 11), showing that when patriarchal structures limited her, Njeri went around the obstacle. Even in death, Njeri is not bitter, and speaks to Onyesonwu in the wilderness during her initiation vision, and advising, “Always walk your *own* path, Onyesonwu” (p. 127). Onyesonwu does manage to walk her own path and is a better example of the effectiveness of cameline agency than Njeri, who goes around the obstacle, as she spits her bile, or vitriol, at oppressors by speaking out, as camels are known to do when they spit their stomach contents out at abusers in “a symbolic act of purging themselves of indigestible food” (Nkealah, 2017, p. 123). Camels do not go around obstacles, as snails do (in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism), but ride roughshod over them. Onyesonwu does this, almost killing Aro in the process. Aro refuses to teach her because she is a woman, and Mwita tells her this is because she was “born in the wrong body” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 63). Aro is steadfast but does acknowledge her audacity and fiery courage because he believes the Great Mystic Points are an Okeke art and that her Nuru blood makes her unworthy. Furthermore, he shames her for coming to him “filthy with woman blood as we speak” (p. 66). Ogunyemi expounds upon this revulsion and recognises that it is in fact rooted in fear:

At the core is that men fear women: the nubile maiden with her “bottom power” that seduces the hapless man; the pre-menopausal mother basking in the magical power of motherhood; and the post-menopausal mater-familias exercising authority through juju power. (Ogunyemi, 2007, p. 15)

The mysteries of the female body mark women as unclean, contaminating them, instead of exalting them for their role as mothers. First, Mwita derides her for being a woman and being able to carry children, and appears to allude to menopause when he says, “when you get old, that ability becomes something else even greater, more dangerous and unstable” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 63). Second, Aro shames her for approaching him while she is menstruating. Onyesonwu’s “mere drops of blood” (p. 66) are spoken of as though she “were awash in it” (p. 66). Mwita tells Aro that “[s]he listens to no one” (p. 66), once again proving that despite obstacles and derision, Onyesonwu does not give up, even when the danger that they have to face is recounted by a photographer who brings with him a digital photo album of horror from the West of “dead, charred, mutilated Okeke people” (p. 71). The photographs show graphic sexual violence perpetrated by the Nuru against Okeke people by Onyesonwu’s father and his army, and the photographer is a prophet of doom, ranting that “He’s coming” (p. 71) and that people must flee. Onyesonwu moves towards these horrors, cementing her heroism and the story’s womanist concern to portray her as such. Later a storyteller comes and tells them about a prophecy by a Nuru Seer who will save them from these horrors:

“He says a Nuru man will come 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.” (p. 94)

As the book progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that the seer’s sexism is at fault as he refuses to acknowledge that the sorcerer could be a woman, and she is the “hope” (p. 94) the Okeke seek. Ironically, the Nuru Seer’s implicit bias makes it impossible for the Nuru people to find the sorcerer by claiming that it is a man and being unable to acknowledge her mixed parentage, which is a clear example of the fallacy of short-sighted prejudice and bias.

Onyesonwu finally confronts Aro in rage and demands that he teaches her, indignant at his obstinate refusal. Onyesonwu is audacious in her courage and outspokenness, and it is out of a justified sense of righteous indignation that she flies at Aro and shouts, “TEACH ME! WHY WON’T YOU TEACH ME? WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU? WHAT IS WRONG WITH *EVERYONE*?” (p. 104). Onyesonwu’s victory against the oppression of her sex brings clarity, and she realises that Aro’s refusal to train girls and women is because he is afraid of their emotions (p. 105). Ogunyemi acknowledges this fear of the inherent power that women have and believes this fear is well-founded when men treat them unjustly, foregrounding the novel’s aspirational value once again:

However, men do have cause to fear women, because men continue to treat them unjustly. The text as juju is a verbal, talismanic force, crafted to fend off evil by naming and confronting it, as we saw above in many traditional cleaning rituals. (Ogunyemi, 1996, pp. 89-90)

Ironically, a woman’s feelings are useful and often unique, because her nurturing and motherly strength (embodied by Najeeba), is what often sets her apart. By contrast, Aro’s toxic masculinity fears this strength, as he views this as a power he cannot understand or control. Mwita notes that Onyesonwu is too impulsive, and a danger to them all in her precipitous outbursts, but this strength and audacity is what makes her a hero. In a male hero, this impulsivity and strength would be viewed as assertive strength, but in Onyesonwu, it is viewed as dangerous. In the second part of the book, Onyesonwu finally becomes his student, and Aro apologises to her and admits that he has been “arrogant”, “insecure” and “a fool” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 119), demonstrating that intolerant views can be overcome. Furthermore, Aro acknowledges that Onyesonwu’s mother’s power has trumped her father’s:

“Your mother most likely was the one who set you on this path. There is much to her, *sha*.” He paused, seeming to consider this. “She must have demanded it the day you were conceived. Her demands obviously trumped your birth father’s. If you had been a boy, he’d have had an ally instead of an enemy.” (p. 119)

To become Aro’s student, Onyesonwu must first pass the initiation that Mwita failed. Mwita is reluctant to tell her about it at first because he views it as “the greatest failure of [his] life” (p. 121). Mwita’s wounded pride is evident here, but it is comprehensible because even though

he did face his death, he was not permitted to enter tutelage. In order to pass the initiation, one has to face one's own death, and in a sense that will feel real during the initiation. Sola, the whitest sorcerer Onyesonwu has ever seen, oversees the ritual. Sola is sadistic and admits that he enjoys the screams of young initiates, but he is surprised by her resolve and courage as she faces her death. During her death, the men in her future ask, "Who will throw the first stone at this problem?" (p. 127), an allusion to the adulterous woman in the Book of John, Chapter 8 verse 7. In the biblical account, Jesus challenges patriarchal discipline by pointing out that none are uncontaminated by sin, but unlike the biblical account, the men in this story do not hesitate to throw the first stone. The version in the Bible is concerned with eradicating the outdated view that men can and should stone sinful women, but *Who Fears Death* uses this allusion to reflect that the sacrifice of disobedient women is still problematic in many societies and religions. In fact, Oduyoye discusses how "Christian women theologians in Africa have also turned their attention to the Church with a concern for its redemption from the patriarchal captivity that undermines its Christlikeness" (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 32). The outcome is that their struggles have "led to reflections on spirituality, suffering and sacrifice" (p. 32). Certainly, this account in the narrative offers the reader a moment to pause and consider the suffering and sacrifice of women as a broader social issue in Africa and elsewhere. When the first stone hits the back of her head "[t]he pain was an explosion" (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 127). More and more rocks are thrown at her, and she "knew death the moment it touched [her]" (p. 127). Onyesonwu watches her future self die and retreats as "the world of the spirits, a place I would learn to call 'the wilderness', began to melt and mix with a star-salted darkness" (p. 127). When Onyesonwu emerges from the initiation, Mwita is there nursing her back to health, but with a jealous edge that makes his concern "strained" (p. 128), an indication that at this stage in the novel, Mwita still has his own implicit bias about gender roles to confront. Onyesonwu reflects on the experience and wonders, "*Why didn't she fight?*" (p. 128), not realising that she is referring to her future self, believing that she would have done so, even if the situation was hopeless. This becomes increasingly ironic as we come to realise that the woman in the hole is Onyesonwu, but this statement demonstrates her courage and strength as a young initiate nonetheless.

It is in the third part of the novel that the group of travellers move towards the inevitable confrontation with Daib, with Onyesonwu's friends who have agreed to accompany her at significant personal risk to themselves. Onyesonwu demonstrates her cameline agency once again in Banza when she is almost raped. A group of young men treat her like their property

because she is *Ewu* since the only way that mixed-race women like her can make a living in Banza are as prostitutes. These men have no intention of taking no for an answer, and when she rebukes them, they attack her. Onyesonwu wastes no time in “spitting her bile” at her attackers, fighting, kicking, and “grabbing the testicles of another and squeezing as hard as I could” (p. 204). While this is happening, the women just stand and stare as she screams for help, and she realises that she is “[t]he walking dead” (p. 204), not viewed as living or having any worth to the women in the town. Onyesonwu becomes incandescent with rage and changes into a sphinx, her body taking on the shape of a “giant robust desert cat” (p. 205), and she admonishes them. However, unlike the defeated sphinx in Greek mythology who dies, the men realise who Onyesonwu is and apologise to her. Their apology is unsatisfactory as it does little to address the persecution of the *Ewu* women in Banza. Even the women in the town are not prepared to assist her and collude in her oppression until they find out who she is. Later, as retribution for Binta’s death in Papa Shee, Onyesonwu blinds the entire town. This is a symbiosis of the Oedipus myth that weaves Western myth into an account that becomes a liberatory feminist fable, discarding the failed male hero in favour of a strong womanist one. First, instead of the male protagonist, Oedipus, outsmarting the sphinx by solving her riddle, in this African version of the Oedipus myth, Onyesonwu is the sphinx and takes vengeance against misogyny in Banza. Second, instead of Oedipus blinding himself, Onyesonwu blinds the entire town as retribution for the stoning of Binta in Papa Shee. This Afrocentric version revises the misogyny of the Western canon, symbolically suggesting how blind the canon has been to oppressive patriarchal structures that perpetuate the same tired old tropes:

I wanted to show them darkness. They were all blind and that’s what I made them. The entire town. Men, women, children. I took the very ability that they chose not to use. (p. 240)

The incident also demonstrates how the oppression of *Ewu* people is so ingrained that they are entirely dehumanised, mirroring the persecution of refugees worldwide. In the act of ironic justice, Onyesonwu decides that because they cannot see people as equal, they should no longer have the ability to see at all.

After this, the group encounter the sibilant sandstorm haven of Ssolu, where Onyesonwu has time to regroup and to expand her knowledge. Onyesonwu meets another female sorcerer in the peripatetic village, Ting, Ssaiku’s apprentice, who has also had to carve out a niche for

herself despite the weight of patriarchy and sexist attitudes towards women like them. Ting tells Onyesonwu not to braid her hair, which suggests that to do so in some way confines her power. In this and other references to natural hair being freed and brushed into an Afro, the book counters racist attitudes towards Afro-textured hair. In an article entitled “Straightening our Hair” by bell hooks, she writes that when she walked into a packed auditorium, her hair “unprocessed, wild and all over the place” (hooks, 1989, p. 4), most of the other women had straightened hair, and hooks felt many of them regarded her “with hostile stares” (p. 4), judging her as “an undesirable” (p. 4). Women in the United States view dreadlocks as the antithesis of straightened hair, and “as a political statement” (p. 4). Okorafor also describes Afro-textured hair as being a liberatory concept and as a symbol of power in women in the novel. When Sola visits, he tells Onyesonwu that her father, Daib, was his apprentice, Onyesonwu learns that Daib’s mother, Bisi, Onyesonwu’s grandmother, was a powerful woman “born dada” (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 316) with “hair so long that by the time she was eighteen it was dragging on the ground” (p. 316). Furthermore, Afro-textured hair features throughout the novel, with the female characters being described as most beautiful when they have brushed out their Afros. Diti is described as looking irresistible to Fanasi when she “combed out her large Afro and patted it into a perfect circle” (p. 256), and Onyesonwu’s hair is often referenced. In one incident, Ting tells Mwita to, “Let her hair go” (p. 291) before Onyesonwu releases and meets with a being she believes is the Creator, so letting her hair loose is an essential part of the ritual. It is during this meeting with the Creator that Onyesonwu dies her first death, and her “spirit and body were utterly completely obliterated” (p. 292) and then reassembled in a more sensible arrangement. This is her first death and resurrection and foreshadows her final death and resurrection when she rewrites the story at the end of the book.

Onyesonwu’s second death occurs soon after the first. She can go Alusi, which as aforementioned is linked to the Mystic Points, and a gift she inherited from her mother. It helps one to travel across time and space but also helped Najeeba to become an observer to her rape when Onyesonwu was conceived. To understand this, the Alusi Point “*speaks with spirits*” and the “*Uwa Point moves and shapes the physical world, the body*” (p. 359). The “Uwa world is governed by Alusi” (p. 145); thus, they have the power to move and change the physical world. When Onyesonwu is resurrected after meeting with the Creator, she becomes fully aware of her power, and travels away as a blue spirit towards her father who is ready for her, and “sang as he tore, gorged, stabbed, and twisted at parts of me that I didn’t know were there” (p. 293). When Onyesonwu returns to Mwita, she is “bleeding all over” (p. 294) after the encounter with



her father. Mwita tells her that she had died and had not had a pulse for three minutes. While the attempt at retribution failed, and she returns with a malevolent rune inscribed on her hand from her father, the fact that she travels straight to her father to exact her revenge after her rebirth is telling. Mwita remarks, “Ah, your name truly fits you, *o!*” (p. 295) because she has proven once again that she is fearless.

After the lessons and rest in Ssolu, the smaller group of three, Onyesonwu, Mwita and Luyu, move towards their respective deaths. As aforementioned, Mwita has also seen his death, but unlike Onyesonwu, his destiny is to be her helpmeet and healer, inverting and normalising a change in gender roles that foreground the book’s concern to liberate men from toxic expectations that limit them, just as much as it does so for women like Onyesonwu who take on the role of the hero. Luyu is also heroic and courageous despite having none of the powers and advantages of her companions, and she holds off the hordes chasing Onyesonwu towards the book of Rana’s prophecy, where Luyu dies a horrific death. Luyu is described as “beautiful and strong” (p. 375) and unafraid “as she watched them step from their boats, taking their time now that they knew we were trapped” (p. 375). She even laughs and says “Come on, then!” (p. 375). The men do not hesitate to attack an unarmed Luyu, and “tore her apart” (p. 376). The reader cannot help identifying more with the more ordinary Luyu, who cannot use magic or rewrite her story, and who represents all the womanist and feminist heroes who have laid the groundwork for liberatory novels like this one.

Onyesonwu must also bravely confront her insurmountable odds, with more success than the ordinary heroics of her beautiful friend. Onyesonwu confronts Daib who still believes that “a tall bearded Nuru sorcerer will come and force the Great Book’s rewriting” (p. 364). Ironically, Daib raped Najeeba in order to create a powerful *son*, but his power has come through the maternal line, and in his daughter, Onyesonwu, her power is rooted in both her mother, Najeeba and paternal grandmother, Bisi. In order to defeat Daib, Onyesonwu must fulfil the prophecy that predicts that a “Nuru man who was a sorcerer would come and change things somehow, rewrite the book” (p. 161), except the Nuru Seer, Rana, who predicts this, is wrong. It will not be a man, and it is Sola who tells Onyesonwu that she must “Rewrite the Great Book” (p. 317) and thus fulfil the prophecy that will bring change. This is cleverly mirrored by Okorafor when she rewrites the novel by ending on a new Chapter 1, entitled “Rewritten” (p. 384). Daib tells his daughter that he enjoyed raping her mother and asks her why she is a girl, to which Mwita replies, “Because it’s been written” (p. 365). He is referring

to the erroneous prophecy which Onyesonwu corrects. Mwita is ready for this confrontation, having seen his own death, and when Daib becomes a tiger that attacks Mwita he “slashed Mwita’s chest open, and sunk his teeth deep into Mwita’s neck” (p. 366). Onyesonwu wants to heal Mwita, but Mwita stops her, and she realises that he knew that he has to die in order to fulfil the prophecy and find out who she is:

“Find it,” he whispered. “Finish it.” He took in a labored breath and the words he spoke were full of pain. “I ... know who you are ... you should, too.” (p. 367)

In her anguish over his death, Onyesonwu’s retribution is in the act of creation, specifically, conception, which can only occur in a woman’s body. She is carrying Mwita’s sperm in her after their lovemaking the previous night, and “[a]t the moment of conception, a giant shock wave blasted from me, a shock wave like the one so long ago during my father’s burial ceremony” (p. 367). Conception is thus shown here to be a powerful act, not a shameful one associated with bleeding and sexual impurity espoused by Aro, reminiscent of Old Testament views on female purity. This moment counters all the misogynist attitudes towards women, their cycles, female pleasure, childbirth and menopause, misogynist attitudes that are all explored and countered within the novel repeatedly. The cost is high and “[e]very single male human in the central town of Durfa capable of impregnating a woman was dead” (p. 370), except her father who is maimed and would never be able to use the Mystic Points again. Furthermore, all the women are pregnant:

“So ... not just me, then. *All* the women.” “I don’t know how far it went. I don’t think it touched the other towns. But where there are dead men, there are pregnant women.” (p. 370)

Onyesonwu has destroyed patriarchy and liberated the women of Durfa, but must also pay a heavy penalty because her own child is doomed as she moves towards her own death. Still, by rewriting the Great Book, Onyesonwu realises that she has given birth to an ideology that has freed the Okeke from slavery:

But this place that you know, this kingdom, it will change after today. Read it in your Great Book. You won’t notice that it has been rewritten. Not yet. But it has. Everything has. The curse of the Okeke is lifted. It never existed, *sha*. (p. 378)

The narration shifts and dramatic irony is apparent in the novel at this point when a fictional author begins to recount the story of Onyesonwu's death in the final pages. Having heard Onyesonwu's story, the fictional author knows that Onyesonwu should have been able to escape. Nevertheless, Onyesonwu is beholden to the whims of the actual author and therefore must die because "[s]he was like a character locked in a story" (p. 379). In another biblical allusion to Samson, the symbol of her power, her hair, is chopped off as they "dragged her to that hole in the ground and buried her to her neck" (p. 379), and an injured and powerless Daib watches as the narrator describes the rocks hitting her, light spilling out of her and the sand melting (p. 380).

With Onyesonwu's death, powers awaken within the Okeke and Nuru women, gifts from Onyesonwu. Further biblical allusions are employed as women find "[s]ome could turn wine to fresh sweet drinking water" (p. 380). These powers are Onyesonwu's gift to women as "[i]n the death of herself and her child, Onye gave birth to us all" (p. 381). "Slavery here is over" (p. 381) for womankind in the book, and the aspirational message is apparent. Society can be changed, but "something must be written before it can be *rewritten*" (p. 383). The rewriting for Onyesonwu takes place after chapter 62 and Onyesonwu's death. It begins with "Chapter 1: Rewritten", and Onyesonwu's death is rewritten. Instead of being martyred, her ascension blends Christian scripture with Nigerian animism as she becomes a *Kponyungo*, a firespitter, and shoots into the sky to find Mwita:

Suddenly, she knew where she would find him. He would be in a place that was so full of life that death would flee it ... for a while. The green place her mother had shown her. Beyond the desert, where the land was blanketed with leafy trees, bushes, plants, and the creatures that lived in them. He would be waiting at the iroko tree. (p. 385)

In *Who Fears Death* the role of the protagonist in recreating the story by rewriting the ending is innovative and invites the reader to do the same in her own life. The usefulness of countermemories is made apparent in this novel because "Afrofuturism unchains the mind" (Womack, 2013, p. 15). In this case, Onyesonwu provides a counternarrative so that the story both mirrors and challenges issues in contemporary society by rewriting them. In this manner, "[o]nce the author wrote the story, the author became irrelevant" (Okorafor, 2015, p. 227). The Igbo saying, "*adiro akwu ofuebe enene nmawu*/one cannot stand at a spot to watch a

masquerade” is “a proverb that raises profoundly the issues of perspective and subjectivity” according to Nnaemeka (2003, p. 369). Okorafor poses important questions about subjectivity and womanist concerns using speculative fiction as a vehicle to liberate her readers:

“Like Uhide, the spider artist [in Okorafor’s novel, *Lagoon*], African science fiction’s blood runs deep and it’s old, and it’s ready to come forth, and when it does, imagine the new technologies, ideas and socio-political changes it will inspire. For Africans, homegrown science fiction can be a will to power. What if? It’s a powerful question.” (Okorafor, 2017c)

Onyesonwu is the messianic saviour in *Who Fears Death*, whose death and resurrection free the Okeke from Nuru genocide. The Okeke slaves are the chosen people in the novel whom Onyesonwu sets free from bondage through her death, much like Christian scripture shows how Jesus Christ’s death sets Christians free from sin. Contemporary “sins” are reflected in the novel through the intersection of racist and sexist attitudes, but also the Okeke’s acceptance and complacency regarding their perceived inferiority, corroborated by the Great Book. The book also rejects “absolutising the Western experience to the detriment of the African experience” (Akper and Smit, 2005, p. 26). Instead, the Afrocentric concerns are foregrounded through the juju text, which, according to Ogunyemi “is necessarily apocalyptic” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90). As a result, its efficacy is never in doubt as it “stands as a metaphor for metamorphosis” (p. 90) through writers who “endow their victimized character with juju power as manifested in some mystical agency” (p. 90), which is certainly true of Onyesonwu whose apocalyptic narrative certainly is a metaphor for change. Ogunyemi acknowledges the power of these juju narratives:

People depend on it for inner strength. Juju, as well as the text, are prayers that can be seen and held. Reliance on the metaphysical is psychologically sound, as generations of confused Nigerian women have found. (p. 90)

Onyesonwu is a womanist hero who, through her audacity and courage, changes the landscape for young black girls through this aspirational tale. While religious allusions abound, Okorafor does not neglect Nigerian beliefs, melding jujuism with Christian theology in order to present a fantasy postcolonial narrative form that defies rigid classification. In a paper, Okorafor cites the Nigerian author, Ben Okri, as helping her to place her own writing in a paper she wrote

entitled “Organic Fantasy” because she discovered that his books were also “full of Nigerian figures, traditions and historical elements that were similar to those in my work” (2009, p. 281), and she “could tell that Okri *believed* what he was writing” (p. 281). Okorafor also conveys the sense that she believes in what she is writing because her protagonist, Onyesonwu, holds obvious aspirational value for young readers. Unlike young Jessamy in *The Icarus Girl*, whose flying metaphor was concerned with not being given crucial information about her own heritage, Onyesonwu demands the instruction she needs to follow the middle path and rewrite her story. In the book, the ability to soar above societal constraints is intentionally inspirational and is echoed by the protagonist’s literal ability to fly.

## CHAPTER 6: BEACON OF TRUTH

The sky is vast enough for all birds to fly without colliding – Yoruba proverb (Nkealah, 2016, pp. 61-74)

*The Book of Phoenix* (Okorafor, 2015) decolonises speculative fiction because this Africanfuturist prequel to *Who Fears Death* obliterates Western oppression and leaves the page blank for Onyesonwu's audacious rewriting. Phoenix is the redemptive womanist hero in the text that describes the apocalyptic event before the narrative of Onyesonwu, who becomes a "beacon" (p. 36) and a purifying fire. Through Phoenix's recording, *The Book of Phoenix* is transcribed by Sunuteel. It becomes the Great Book's story that illuminates the deconstruction of Western hermeneutics and a reconstruction of scripture using an African lens. In this way, it illuminates "the lost history of [black] women in that tradition" (Gonzalez, 2007, p. 88 quoted in Schneider and Trentaz, 2008, p. 796). This can be understood as a reconstruction of hermeneutics "that seeks to revise the core theological categories at work in the tradition" (p. 796). I agree with Ogunyemi's view that these Afro/Africanfuturist novels are the "contemporary woman's *ofo*":

The novel has become the contemporary woman's *ofo*. In a showdown, the *ofo* is the sign of conjuration that identifies the holder as protected and on the path of victory because the cause is just. This is akin to the traditional setting in which Igbo men display their *ikenga* (two hands, or horns), while Yoruba men refer to their contestation as *agbomeji* (two rams battering each other to the death for territory or the ram's horns filled with juju – protective or adversarial potions), symbols of their masculinity and authority. Juju is powerful as a sign, for, at its most potent, it can empower its owner or disempower the adversary; it plays a vital role in establishing justice. (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90)

Through this reconstruction, the novel is rendered the contemporary woman's *ofo* in the face of injustice. The audacious womanist hero's journey becomes a "just cause" in itself, empowering her. Furthermore, it functions to decolonise the text by a black female writer and protagonist by foregrounding jujuism and Afrocentric ideas of justice and empowerment.

*Who Fears Death* introduces the central characters in *The Book of Phoenix* when specific reference is made to a passage in the Great Book to people who can walk through walls, fly or eat glass (Okorafor, 2018 [2011a], p. 11). In *The Book of Phoenix*, the prequel to *Who Fears Death*, we meet these cryptic characters that Onyesonwu speaks about walking through walls, (Saeed), eating glass (Mmuo) and flying (Phoenix). We also learn about the apocalyptic event that shaped the world that Onyesonwu must once again recreate and rewrite. *The Book of Phoenix* expounds upon the origins of the Great Book in a scathing criticism of the misinterpretation of written texts, sacred and otherwise, as it is the sovereign scripture that perpetuates many of the injustices in *Who Fears Death*. Pahl states that “[t]he genealogy of the Great Book is described in *The Book of Phoenix* and offers a critique of the alleged supremacy of writing and its claims for truth” (Pahl, 2018, p. 215). The reader discovers that the Great Book is nothing more than an extract from Phoenix’s memory which Sunuteel imperfectly transcribes through the lens of his own marginalisation and bias:

It is his transcription that divides the Nuru and the Okeke, a distinction that was not included in Phoenix’s memory. Nevertheless, Sola also says that he “laugh[s] because most of [his] words are lies” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 231). This revelation and the manipulation of unreliability of both Sunuteel and Sola challenges the inherent truth claim of written accounts and reframes the whole set-up of the society in *Who Fears Death*. (Pahl, 2018, p. 215)

In the same way that the novel’s sacred text is rendered unreliable, the focus of this chapter is the liberation of black people through a reimagining and reconstruction of familiar scripture and mythology with an African lens. The novel utilises Greek mythology alongside religious allegory in a similar manner to *Who Fears Death* (2011a), analysed in the previous chapter. Okorafor’s revisions in the representations of Western religion and mythology through the female deity, Ani, demonstrate how familiar allegories can function to empower and liberate when they are reconstructed in a more inclusive narrative, becoming in the process, an aspirational ideal for readers. The celebration of juju is also an important concept, which “can empower its owner” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90), in this case, our audacious womanist hero in Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* (2015). This hero is Phoenix, and the novel once again centres a heroic black female messiah.

First, the allegorical implication of Phoenix's name and the significance of her African descent will be explored. Second, in order to explore the novel as a womanist *ofo*, an idea that dovetails with Walker's audacious womanist, an exploration of the Big Eye's pursuit of her in Africa (LifeGen Technologies and their employees) is necessary to understand the novel's primary antagonist. LifeGen Technologies represents a Big Brother society in *The Book of Phoenix*, and it is against this global power that Phoenix must undertake her *ofo*. LifeGen Technologies' treatment of people of colour as slaves or bodies to be "mined" or "farmed" for their organs and other uses will be considered with close reference to the text. This practice is reminiscent of the treatment of slaves in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, explored in Chapter 3. Third, a critical discussion on the significance of the Nigerian female deity, Ani, will be developed in more detail by considering the veneration of female deities in African ontologies, and its effects. Fourth, the allegorical significance of farming black bodies, the flying metaphor and her other powers, like "slipping" and combusting and reincarnating, will be discussed. Fifth, Motherism, in particular Phoenix's mother figures, and her close relationships with Kofi, Saaed (the Seed), Mmuo and Seven are crucial sources of support, acknowledging that black feminism and Motherism do not exclude black men. Sixth, speculative fiction's decolonisation through the novel will be considered. In the concluding paragraphs, the significance of Phoenix's paradoxical view of herself as a villain, despite being a purifying fire that seeks retribution, will reaffirm her status as the audacious womanist hero. Thus, the page will be left blank for Onyesonwu to rewrite the future, just as Phoenix, and to some extent (considerably less successfully), Sunuteel do.

The mythical phoenix is incarnate as Phoenix, who narrates her story to Sunuteel. Phoenix tells the listener (both Sunuteel and the reader) that she is "two years old" and "forty years old" (Okorafor, 2015, p. 24). She is an "accelerated biological woman" (p. 48), one of the speciMen who "had been created in Tower 7 two years ago from the DNA of an African woman possibly born in Phoenix, Arizona" (p. 39). Phoenix is thus both American and African, as is Okorafor, but Phoenix calls America "my false home" (p. 92). In this, and in other ways to be discussed in this chapter, Phoenix's heritage points towards a future rewritten from an Africanfuturist perspective. Her martyrdom foreshadows Onyesonwu's death and resurrection in this prequel and gives an alternative to Western history using an Afrocentric lens to reconstruct black people's marginalisation in an allegorical tale. This focus on black lives in the present and the marginalisation and persecution of black people in the past is mirrored in Tomi Adeyemi's book, *Children of Blood and Bone*, discussed in Chapter 7. Centuries of the marginalisation



and exploitation of black lives and racism are why Phoenix's captors make the mistake of believing that she would be born 40 years old and subjugated, on a "leash" of the mind, as though this is a trait that is so inherent it is in one's DNA:

They saw me as many Arabs saw African slaves over millennium [*sic*] and how some still see Africans today. The Big Eye didn't think they needed to put a leash on me because my leash was in my DNA. (p. 136)

However, Phoenix soon proves that she cannot be subdued, and her name signals her potential and becomes prophetic as she does bring about purification through an apocalyptic event. Therefore, the significance of her name, Phoenix, is both tenor and vehicle as her ability to combust and be reborn points to the legendary beast and a literal scorching, as well as the related concepts of purification, renewal and rebirth:

I was naked and covered in dust; I must have looked like a ghost. But I was alive. After I'd died, I vividly remembered dying. My name is Phoenix, I thought. I don't know who named me, but I am named well. I stood up straighter. (p. 36)

Early on in the novel, the power of names is foreshadowed as Phoenix knows that "[t]hey have a way of becoming destiny" (p. 44). Thus, the phoenix is essential to understanding the character and the concept of purification by fire. The mythical bird is thought to have African roots linked to Egyptian lore:

The phoenix may be a literary descendent of the *benu* or *bnw* of Egyptian solar myths, a sacred bird, which through association with the self-renewing deities Rê and Osiris, became a symbol of renewal or rebirth. (Hill, 1984, p. 61)

The first mention of a phoenix "is attributed to Hesiod in a c. 700 BCE riddle of longevity, derived from oral tradition" (Nigg, 2016, p. xvii). In Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, the phoenix is said to live five hundred years, and then the "aging bird builds its nest of spices in a palm tree, and from its body a new bird rises" (p. xvii). The poem, *De Ave Phoenixe*, believed to have been written by Lactantius, helps establish "the element of fire in the bird's death" (p. xviii). In Okorafor's version, Phoenix incinerates dominance by Western powers, and the page is left blank so that Onyesonwu's story can be imagined using an Afrocentric lens.

During a sojourn in Africa, Phoenix is given another name, “Okore, which meant eagle” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 87), which carries connotations of a predator’s strength and ferocity. The emblem of the eagle is also apt as she becomes “a harbinger of violence” (p. 85) intent on destroying the ironically named LifeGen Technologies. They treat the lives of people of colour with callous cruelty, in the same manner that slave masters were wont to do in the antebellum South (explored in chapter 3 in the analysis of Butler’s *Kindred*). When Phoenix finally decides to escape after the apparent death of her friend, Saeed, she discovers how horrific the crimes committed by LifeGen Technologies are:

Bodies. And I could smell them. The whole hallway reeked with their rot and blood and feces and bile and the smoke of the trucks. My brain went to my books and recalled where I had seen this before. “Holocaust,” I whispered, fighting the urge to turn to the side and vomit. I shut my watering eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. I nearly gagged on the stench. I opened my eyes. (p. 24)

Phoenix is also experimented upon, being burnt with hot needles and “broader instruments” (p. 66) on her “face, belly, legs, arms”, which “burned every part of [her]” (p. 66), and she “knew the smell, sound and sight of [her] cooking flesh” (p. 66). For Saeed, it is considerably worse as they use “electric shock, poisoning, disembowelling then reconstructing” (p. 66) to test the limits of his endurance. These experiments demonstrate how they are commodified and treated in much the same way as slaves were, except they are not merely used for their labour; their bodies are, in a sense, literally *mined* for their *wealth* in the same way that Africa has historically been mined for its mineral and oil wealth:

They could not speak. How could those people cultivate these once normal children to lose the ability to speak? Why? So that they wouldn’t complain when their organs were continuously harvested and sent to whoever could pay the highest amount? It was evil. (p. 198)

Ellen Eubanks agrees with the view that science fiction can reconfigure the future in that “Nnedi Okorafor uses a combination of the forms of indigenous futurism and what Isiah Lavender terms meta-slavery narratives to challenge the hegemonic ideologies of Western science fiction” (Eubanks, 2018, Abstract). Eubanks also proposes that LifeGen Technologies

is a vehicle for Okorafor to draw “attention to the continuation of the racist ideologies that informed slavery and colonialism into today’s systems, thus highlighting the modern exploitation of people of color” (Eubanks, 2018). There is also a tenuous link to the legend of Icarus (see Chapter 4) when Phoenix is flying back to America over the ocean, which serves as another reminder of the horrors of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade:

If my wings got wet, I wouldn’t be able to fly. The water would pull me into its great belly, as it had so many other Africans on unwanted journeys. (Okorafor, 2015, p. 93)

As Icarus was advised to travel the middle tract, so must Phoenix, or risk drowning in the ocean below. Metaphorically too, she must navigate a careful middle tract to determine what her path to liberation will be, and not just her liberation, but for the other accelerated beings, and arguably, the readers as well, so that they do not bear the “leash” (p. 136) of the mind.

This “leash” (p. 136) has several different facets. As previously stated in Chapter 5, Okorafor believes that Nigerians are taught “to hate their own indigenous traditions, spiritualities, and religions” (Okorafor, 2016, p. 306) by fundamentalist Christianity because it teaches “a nasty form of hatred of one’s self in the guise of religion, brought or imported by outsiders and foisted upon people” (p. 306). Once again in this novel, Okorafor uses religious allegory, but instead of favouring Western belief systems, foregrounds the female Nigerian deity, Ani, and the “Author”:

I decided to leave it all up to what Saeed called The Author of All Things, for Saeed had stopped believing in Allah long ago, and I had never believed in any gods of religions. (2015, p. 44)

Referring to the “Author” identifies Phoenix, the fictional author, and Okorafor herself as empowered and authoritative narrators of their experiences and views. In summary, the novel rejects imported religions that teach “a nasty form of hatred of one’s self” (2016, p. 306) as Okorafor (and Phoenix) reject other religions in favour of this “Author”. However, as discussed, Phoenix also explicitly acknowledges the Nigerian female deity, Ani, and that “[a]ll things come from the land, Ani” (2015, p. 219). Phoenix narrates the creation story that Sunuteel transcribes and tells the reader that “Ani has asked me to wipe the slate clean” (p. 219). The creation story tells how the world was “nothing but sand and dry trees” (p. 219) until

Ani made all the bodies of water because “water is life” (p. 219). While she rested, “human beings sprang from the sweetest parts of the rivers and the shallow portions of the lakes” (p. 219), but they “were aggressive like the rushing rivers, forever wanting to move forward, cutting, carving, changing the lands” (p. 219). The creation story tells about the “seven mighty towers” (p. 220) they built at the “apex of their genius” (p. 220) wherein “they performed impossible feats” (p. 220), reminiscent of our own ascendance and the Towers of Babel. In these towers, they “built juju-working machines” (p. 220) and “fought and invented amongst themselves” (p. 220) as they “bent and twisted Ani’s sand, water, sky, and air” (p. 220). They also “took her creatures and changed them” (p. 220) as they “sought to make themselves just like Ani: immortal, all powerful manipulators of earth’s lands” (p. 220). Aside from this creation story, subverting and revising the book of Genesis, other significant biblical references are reimagined and rewritten, affording special attention to the strength and deification of the black goddess, Ani, but also the black author, Okorafor, and the audacious black protagonist, in this book, Phoenix. One of these biblical references simultaneously functions as an allegorical reference to the seminal dystopian novel *1984*. The Towers run by the Big Eye could also refer to the biblical Towers of Babel in Genesis that attempt to “prick Ani” (p. 219), as well as to the novel by George Orwell, *1984*, and the concept of a panopticon Big Brother society, “because they were always watching and experimenting on us” (p. 70).

In her book, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women*, Susan Starr Sered states that the most important finding of her study is that “women’s religions are not so different from men’s religions” (Sered, 1996, p. 8) because the rituals and explanations for existence are all present and persuasive. Instead, it is the impact of gender on these religions:

I do believe that [...] gender has a significant – although not absolute or universal – impact on **how** people image supernatural beings, on the **form** and **interpretation** of the rituals performed, on **whether** and **why** one seeks altered states of consciousness, and on the **manner** in which individuals grapple with the ultimate conditions of existence. (p. 9, bold in original)

How Ani is “image[d]” in the text is as “immortal” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 220) and all-powerful. The impact of gender is that the female deity is a mother-goddess, the creator, with humans springing from the water as she slept, revising the traditional Western view of God as an all-powerful man. More and more theorists are challenging this view that God must be a man. In

2017, “Afro-Cuban, Chicago-based painter Harmonia Rosales showed us that the possibilities are in fact endless and transcendent” (Kiunguyu, 2019) by painting God as a black woman. However, what is even more pertinent for this study is the impact of the veneration of female deities in African ontologies. Diedre Bádéjò writes about the strength of African femininity:

Through the lens of our definition of African feminism, we confirm that inner strength and femininity are cultural norms derived from ancient African philosophy and cosmology that, in the words of an Akan okyeame [*sic*], recognizes that through the womb of woman all humanity passes. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 95)

Thus, “African women remain at the center of the social order” (p. 95) and in Nigerian culture, this points towards matrifocality. Bádéjò states that the marginalisation of African women is “largely the result of external factors” (p. 95), including “Western hegemony, paternalism, and sexism” (p. 95), as well as “enslavement and colonialism” (p. 95). These are deliberately overturned in *The Book of Phoenix* to return the reader to an understanding of matrifocality in the social order. Bádéjò’s paper also focuses on mythical-religious icons, for example, the female Yoruba deity Oṣun:

Oṣun is the giver of children and a renowned healer of women’s and children’s ailments. As an African woman, Oṣun plays many roles that emanate from her central role as woman and mother. (p 96)

These feminine roles foreground the matrifocal attributes of Nigerian goddesses, in particular, her role as a woman and a mother. However, Bádéjò argues that “Western male sexism confused the relationship between women and nature by demanding that women be virginal and motherly at the same time” (p. 101). In doing this, they “confounded women’s power by restricting ‘real’ women to weak, juvenile roles where their rights existed within the context of dominating male systems” (p. 101). She calls for a “reestablishment of African manhood” (p. 101) and also a “reinstatement of the philosophical practices and tenets of queen mothership, female rulership, and a healthy priestesshood” (p. 101) to curb the influence of Western feminist attacks on Nigerian culture and values. These “dominating” Western and “male systems” are overturned in *The Book of Phoenix*, and the story itself becomes a religious text after it is transcribed.

Similarly, and more pertinent to this chapter in particular, is the Igbo goddess, Ani, also named Ala, who “controls the coming and the going of ancestors” (Salami-Boukari, 2012, p. 78). Ani is “the goddess of the Earth and the arbiter of morality” (p. 78), recognising women’s skill as creators/mothers and as mediators in essential matters. However, despite these mediator and maternal roles, this does not necessarily mean that liberation by female protagonists is unambiguous. On the one hand, Julia Hoydis discusses in her chapter on the novel, texts such as *Who Fears Death*, and I would argue this prequel, acknowledge “female oppression and, at the same time, [affirm] women’s abilities to liberate themselves and others” (Hoydis, 2017, p. 188). On the other hand, the narrative may feature female heroes and goddesses, yet Hoydis notes that it is interesting that we are “confronted with a narrative in which this option [forgiveness and reconciliation] is ruled out completely” (p. 193). This is certainly also true in *The Book of Phoenix* where the slate is completely wiped clean, and perhaps the message is that a complete revision of the past is what is necessary. Speculative fiction facilitates this revision in feminist and womanist writing. Kodwo Eshun considers this significance of Afrofuturism in the “production of futures” in the diaspora:

Fast forward to the early twenty-first century. A cultural moment when digitopian futures are routinely invoked to hide the present in all its unhappiness. In this context, inquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial. The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective. (Eshun, 2003, p. 289)

It is thus necessary for the audacious woman to fly above societal constraints where Western powers persecute African nations, but what is distinctly different from Western history books that have focused on the benefits of colonisation is the African lens Okorafor holds up, as African magic (referred to as “juju”) is highly prized. About Bessie Head, Ogunyemi writes that she “employs jujuism to dismantle an African colonial system” (Ogunyemi, 2007, p. 91). This decolonisation of the text using jujuism is also evident in Okorafor’s novels. Okorafor’s Afrocentric lens advances the decolonisation of speculative fiction by foregrounding African people’s oppression by Western governments that want to steal African magic and power to harvest it and use it for monetary gain without giving Africa any credit. The metaphorical significance points to the exploitation of labour and mineral wealth from African colonies. Still,

one might argue that the theft of juju and power through subjugation is literal too, and points to the exploitation of black people as chattels through slavery.

After Phoenix escapes from Tower 7's torture, she stops to tell a story of her time in Africa where she enjoys a time of peace before the Big Eye comes and looks for her. The breaking of the fourth wall through the use of second-person narration places the reader in the story as the "storyteller starts it again" (Okorafor, 2015, p. 61):

She starts it in her own place, in her own moment, in her own point of view. As long as you listen, she is in charge of your destiny. You and the storyteller share everything, even your existence. Listen ... (p. 61)

Phoenix is motivated to escape from Tower 7 because she believes that Saeed has committed suicide, and flying across the ocean, Phoenix "couldn't have been gladder to see the coast of Africa" (p. 58). It is apt that she returns to her DNA ancestors' home to seek solace and recover physically and emotionally. Phoenix also reburies the alien seed that The Backbone had offered to her when she escaped the tower. With this seed comes abundance for the Ghanaians of Wulugu, and the villagers recognise this and are generous in return, building her a house and garden. Phoenix enjoys a time of peace and prosperity in Africa, falling in love with a doctor name Kofi Atta Annan, whose "father had named him after the UN diplomat who spearheaded the riots in Nigeria and Ghana over a century ago" (p. 63). Unfortunately, her happiness does not last and the Big Eyes arrive, but in Ghana they are known as "Red Eyes" (p. 69):

No one knew who the white men were or what their company was named. They called them "Red Red-Eyes," a name they tended to call all white people. "Red-eyes" signaled danger, demons, envy, and jealousy. (p. 69)

These demons are white men from America who come in and take advantage of the power of their wealth and privilege, an age-old tale of exploitation of people and resources. In particular, young women are paid for sex and subservience, "simultaneously miserable, and content" (p. 70) as their lack of agency and resources make it impossible to make other choices, forcing them into "[w]orking, being used, paid scraps" (p. 70) and "being publically handled by these men like prostitutes" (p. 70) by the Red Eyes. One night, Phoenix sees a Big Eye "mashing" (p.71) a young woman's face into the ground: "This was rape" (p. 71). Phoenix cracks his skull

with one hard slap after he calls the woman, Sarah, a whore. Sarah realises that she has “betrayed God’s messenger” (p. 76), alluding to Phoenix’s angel-like wings and role as her saviour. On the contrary, Phoenix considers herself an angel of death and retribution, but the truth is more complicated as she is also an angel of rebirth and renewal. The encounter with the rapist signals the end of Phoenix’s short-lived happiness in Africa as the Big Eye track her down and she is forced to “put Kofi out of his misery” (p. 84) when he is shot by the Big Eye trying to protect her. This is Phoenix’s second death and rebirth by fire, and Kofi’s death foreshadows the denouement that requires a complete destruction before revision can occur.

After Kofi’s death and her rebirth, Phoenix determines to go quietly with the Big Eye, but this is not surrender. The Big Eye cannot leave her there, nor can they risk having her talk, because “stories travel and germinate” (p. 90), and “sometimes, stories evolve into trouble” (p. 90), signalling the power of storytelling, especially the stories of a woman with her power. However, despite agreeing to follow them back to her “false home” (p. 92) in America, she refuses to return on the ship they want her to board, again asserting her independence and ensuring that she is not sent to America on a ship the way transatlantic slaves ancestors once were.

Phoenix again decides that she will begin to write her story and leaves the ship she is being forced to follow, and escaping the Big Eye by slipping through time and space to Tower 1, known as “the nexus” (p. 97). Tower 1 is “where the Big Eye created their first abomination” (p. 97), Lucy, a ten-year-old Ethiopian girl who was programmed never to age:

They believed that she was a traceable direct descendant of “Mitochondrial Eve” and thus carried the complete genetic blueprint of the entire human race. On top of this, the girl was afflicted with hyperthymesia, an extremely rare condition that made her able to remember every moment of her entire life. They gave her the code name, “Lucy.” (p. 98)

Lucy is the first instance of the Big Eye “mining” black bodies for their “wealth”, in this case, DNA that does not age. This elixir of youth is more valuable than minerals and metaphorically represents the mineral wealth and wealth through labour plundered from Africa over the ages. Crucially, it also demonstrates how black lives are less important than the lives that are extended through farming African DNA. This points towards Africa’s pillaged knowledge and



wealth, despite the view of writers like Joseph Conrad portraying Africa as the “dark” (unenlightened) continent (Phillips, 2003)<sup>11</sup>. Okorafor reimagines this narrative in this speculative setting using allusion and allegory by representing Africa as the very place where enlightenment can be and has been found, but at a high cost to liberty and life. Some of these allegorical captives are released by Phoenix, many of whom are barely recognisable as human anymore:

Most have mechanical limbs, some more than others. One woman has a mechanical lower body, but with human legs. I see three people in the same room with skin that glows a soft green. At first I think they are what I used to be, but when I look more closely, I see that their skin is embedded with millions of miniscule screens. (Okorafor, 2015, p. 101)

Throughout these events, Phoenix comes to view herself more as an angel of vengeance than a messiah figure, although I argue that she is both. Phoenix tells herself that this is “the second time in my existence, I feel that if there is a God then I am doing God’s will” (p. 101). At this point, it is important to note once again that this uncertainty about God’s existence is resolved in the final pages when the story concludes with Ani’s creation story and reference to the “Author” (p. 44). Although she is never directly referred to as an angel of vengeance, the reader is invited to view her in this light because of the retribution she seeks and her otherworldly form. The concept of a destroying angel is another allegory that is mentioned in the Bible, and is apposite because it cannot act any other way than that which its creator intends:

The destroying angel is explicitly mentioned twice in the Bible (II Sam. 24:16; I Chron. 21:15). In addition, there are several other passages in the Bible and rabbinic literature that refer to destructive supernatural forces. The idea of the destroying angel as an independent force, acting of its own accord, is foreign to the Hebrew Bible, which emphasizes that God is in control of these destructive forces so as to negate polytheistic beliefs. The angel can do nothing on its own initiative and must only act in compliance with the will of God. It is He alone who deals death and gives life. (Bar, 2014, p. 259)

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<sup>11</sup> This is discussed in Chapter 4.

Phoenix does not rely directly on God, even if she believes she is doing his will. Instead, the author is in control of her destiny and determines her path. This ambivalence about whether or not there is a God or a higher power is familiar from *Who Fears Death*. As discussed, this is conveyed in the tension between the religious allegory and traditional Nigerian religion elements, including references to Aní and jujuism. In the end, the book suggests that it is in fact the author who is all-powerful in the narrative, and implies that the reader can decide to harness this agency in her own life too.

Phoenix continues her quest to destroy the Big Eye by taking down Tower 4 next. In it is a six-year-old accelerated being named HeLa. The character is based on Henrietta Lacks who died of cervical cancer at the age of 31. Lacks's cells were harvested by doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, without her consent, and this exploitation is another example of "farming" black bodies:

In the laboratory, her cells turned out to have an extraordinary capacity to survive and reproduce; they were, in essence, immortal. The researcher shared them widely with other scientists, and they became a workhorse of biological research. Today, work done with HeLa cells underpins much of modern medicine; they have been involved in key discoveries in many fields, including cancer, immunology and infectious disease. One of their most recent applications has been in research for vaccines against COVID-19. (Nature, 2020, p. 7)

Henrietta Lacks was a mother of five, but "[n]one of the biotechnology or other companies that profited from her cells passed any money back to her family" (p. 7). Because of this, the creation of the character of HeLa in *The Book of Phoenix* functions again to point to the lack of agency in black lives, but it also suggests a novel lens for considering agency and power, in that the wealth or magic/juju in her cells bring immortality to the vampires who steal it. Okorafor's manipulation of historical events in the novel cleverly foreground the aims of the Black Lives Matter movement:

Now, the extraordinary events of 2020 – the #BlackLivesMatter movement for racial justice, and the unequal toll of COVID-19 on communities of colour – are compelling scientists to reckon with past injustices. Some have called for a reduction in the use of HeLa cells in research, or even an end to their use entirely. (p. 7)

The effects of HeLa being life-giving instead of cancerous is particularly noteworthy. HeLa is “harvested” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 169) for her blood that brings with it immortality, and so far, “Seven deadly sinners” (p. 217) have benefitted from it and “will never die” (p. 187). Her DNA is the African wealth being stolen without her consent – her body is literally being plundered – and HeLa is tormented by the power these seven deadly sinners wield because of their immortality, and aptly names the Big Eye “vampires” (p. 187). The implication is that these seven deadly sinners indulge in lust, greed, envy, anger, pride, gluttony, and sloth. Nothing else is said about them. Phoenix knows that she has to save HeLa, and soon realises that the only release HeLa will know is in death:

I watched Tower 4 burn then melt. And I watched HeLa who watched me as she returned to the essence. HeLa was not a Phoenix like me. She was something more basic. She was a purely natural wonder, until they accelerated her. Man had not made her into one who dies but lives and then dies but lives. So when she died, she was allowed to leave. (p. 190)

The gift of immortality bequeathed by HeLa’s blood is also an expression of a woman’s ability to procreate, and her menstrual cycle, which signals this ability to procreate. In many cultures, women are viewed as unclean because of menstruation. Still, this section of the novel skilfully challenges these biases, simultaneously mirroring Western patriarchal plundering of Africa and African people. HeLa, a woman, has blood that brings life in much the same way that a mother’s blood nourishes and brings life, with motherhood being an important aspect of the Nigerian female deities previously mentioned. Phoenix’s victories bring about change, and the slaves in the other towers begin to mobilise:

*We were slaves. We were born that way. But we have escaped.*

*Now we are the Ledussee. [Let-us-see.]*

*Let us see what happens now that we have freed ourselves.* (p. 192)

Thus, Phoenix is not only an angel of vengeance but ultimately also becomes a winged saint or guardian, inspiring change and revolution, hence my view that she also plays a messianic role in her final sacrifice at the end of the novel as part of her *ofo*.

Alongside her at different times in the novel is a teacher, Seven, another winged figure. Seven is described as “crucified” (p. 27), and he foreshadows Phoenix’s martyrdom by also sacrificing himself for the greater good. The first time Phoenix meets Seven the biblical allusions abound, with reference to the apple of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis, as well as the crucifixion:

My first thought was of the same book that spoke of the treacherous apple of knowledge. The Bible. Except that the man with enormous wings was not held up by any wooden cross. He was suspended in mid-air with his arms out and his legs tied together. His eyes were closed. His brown-feathered wings were stretched wide. (p. 27)

Whereas crucifixion signifies an opportunity for confession and redemption for sinners, Seven’s retribution after Phoenix releases him is gruesomely appropriate and reminiscent of the tortures of hell after the horrors committed in Tower 7: “[w]et tearing sounds, screams, ripping, snapping, choking” (p. 28). Seven’s role is as a father and a teacher. They are both angelic looking, but with brown wings and brown skin, overturning the one-dimensional binary of white versus black equivalent to good versus evil, and is another way that black readers can see themselves in affirming ways. On the way back to America after the death of Kofi, Seven teaches Phoenix about herself, telling her that she is “super-mortal” and he is “immortal” (p. 95). He tells her that she is “speciMen, beacon, and reaper, life and death, hope and redemption” (p. 95) and teaches her how to slip between time and space (p. 96). Seven often appears exactly when Phoenix needs him. He is her guardian angel and teaches her about herself. He is also an important plot device to drive the narrative forward, as he appears to Phoenix precisely when she seems to be trapped in an impossible position. When it appears that she cannot escape the nanobots the Big Eye inject into her blood (p. 92), he appears beside her soon afterwards and tells her how to slip between time and space to thwart them. Later, he flies alongside Phoenix on the day of her *ofo*, or showdown, “on the path of victory because the cause is just” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90), and prepares her by saying that “Today will be your day” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 176), and that she needs to “focus [her] anger” (p. 176).

Seven’s role is not just as a guardian angel, who in life died after a fight and sprouted wings to become “a saint” who is “one with God” (p. 179). He also plays a vital role as an agent of decolonisation. As previously outlined, gone are the white-skinned angels of the western tradition, and gone are the white feathered wings. In its place is a strong black man, with “deep

African facial features and a crown of wooly hair” (p. 28). Gone is the crown of thorns, and Seven is sketched as Christlike in his magnificence with brown feathered wings and African features. There are other indications that Seven is Christlike. Phoenix wants to ask him “why he’d allowed them to catch and “crucify” him (p. 154), and the reader wonders why he is intent on “saving people like some New Mythology superhero” (p. 159). Seven appears to have entirely altruistic motives – to sacrifice himself to stop humanity from continuing to sin. Seven’s name is also symbolic, carrying considerable significance in the Christian religion. It is the Sabbath number, the day of rest, on which day the Lord rested after the creation. It is also a number used repeatedly in the Book of Revelation for the seven churches, angels, seals trumpets and stars. Even the Koran utilises the number seven – the number of heavens.

In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes about African literature and the “suggestive magical power of language” (wa Thiong’o, 1992, p. 11). He argues that language carries culture and that exposing a child “exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to himself” makes him “stand outside himself to look at himself” (p. 17). Chinua Achebe’s well-known novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), looks at this influence of colonialism on the Onitsha people. The title of the novel references William Butler Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming,” which Saeed references:

There is a verse in a poem that has always stuck with me. I didn’t have to even try to memorize it. The poem was so powerful that it stuck to my brain the first time I heard it: “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold,” by a man named Yeats. (Okorafor, 2015, p. 127)

Saeed’s mention of the poem is patently more an allusion to Achebe’s commentary on colonialism’s influence than it is to Yeats’s poem. Even Mmuo’s father understands the danger of the colonised mind, as he “read things by legendary agitating African writers from long ago, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka” (p. 114) and “listened to “old tunes from Fela Kuti” (p. 114). He understood “the meaning of colonialism and about the “colonized mind” from the deep Internet when he was twelve years old” (p. 114). Mmuo tells his story of the Big Eye invading Nigeria and his experience of colonial subjugation. Mmuo tells of robot spiders, ironically created by the Nigerian government’s engineers: “Can you imagine? We came up with these things ourselves FOR ourselves. We’re so colonized that we build our own shackles” (p. 118). Later, similar robots come after Phoenix, Saeed and Mmuo near the end of the novel

(p. 162), and Phoenix reflects that “human beings make terrible gods” (p. 162). Despite this, the novel suggests that the author is omnipotent, and not unlike Sunuteel, we are invited to consider the power of the pen. The question the novel ultimately poses is “Who is writing you?” (p. 228). Okorafor writes in English, but since she writes about a postcolonial vision from an Africanfuturist perspective, she makes a valuable contribution towards decolonising fiction. The child is not “made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition” (wa Thiong’o, 1992, p. 17). Okorafor decolonises African literature by challenging the position of the coloniser and viewing the colonised as the juju-wielding hero. Seven tells Phoenix, “Because you are change, Phoenix” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 180), and informs her that wherever she goes, she will “bring revolution” (p. 180). Thus, Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* brings revolution to speculative fiction.

Phoenix does not see herself as the hero of change that Seven believes she is. Instead, she believes that she is the “villain” (p. 104) and she wants to “burn the entire city starting from this arboreal heart” (p. 104). This phrase refers to The Backbone that stands “tall and audacious, as if it belonged there more than the solid buildings around it” (p. 150). There is an inversion of roles as Phoenix begins to view herself as the Armageddon, and Seven takes on the part of a prophet who offers a sermon on redemption to New Yorkers, another allegorical reference to Christ:

But when he stood in front of the tree with his wings out, hysteria and fear made everyone see something else. When he raised his voice and spoke to the people about redemption, their apathy, and how they needed to look at their own role in all this, they vibrated with guilt and rage. Still, Seven stood his ground. (p. 196)

Seven’s slaughter was televised (p. 197) as they “sawed and hacked” (p. 197) all night and when The Backbone fell, “many were crushed” (p. 197) as they tried “to excise a demon so deep within that it was beyond their grasp” (p. 197). The implication is that the demon is beyond their grasp because it lies within, and Seven’s sacrifice foreshadows Phoenix’s own “crucifixion”.

In this way, Seven is both a teacher (p. 198) and a motherist figure as expounded upon in Chapter 1, because Motherism is about a balance of power in matriarchal and patriarchal systems: “there is always a balance that ensures the mutual distribution of power and roles

*between the sexes*” (Acholonu, 1995, p. 18). Seven and Phoenix represent this balance of power. The clear womanist and African Womanist ideals posited in the audacious hero, Phoenix, are further augmented by other strong mother figures in the novel. Saeed is also identified by Acholonu as one of the “six different faces of the African Eve” (Acholonu, 1995, p. 24), as a wife, daughter/sister, mother, queen, priestess, goddess and *husband* (p. 24), because Saeed is akin to a husband to Phoenix. Even more relevant of course, is Phoenix’s own mother, who carries her in her womb and gives birth to her at great personal cost because the radiation has catastrophic effects on her body. Her mother, Vera Takeisha Thomas, like Najeeba, is not the one to seek retribution. Instead, Vera encourages her daughter to “give ’em hell” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 207).

Phoenix is conceived from “a slurry of African DNA and cells” (p. 146), and her surrogate mother gives birth to her all alone (p. 206) because they are not sure how volatile Phoenix might be and are afraid she will “blow up... or something” (p. 206). The Big Eye refer to this “slurry of DNA” as “devil’s seed” (p. 202). Fortunately, Phoenix comes out alive, “Glowing like a little sun – orange under ebony brown” (p. 206). Vera has very little to do with Phoenix’s upbringing, and removing the newborn from Vera “made her go crazy” (p. 203). Phoenix cannot save her mother who has cancer caused by carrying her radioactive child, but Vera’s relief at seeing Phoenix before she dies makes her hold onto her one final time, even though it hastens her death:

Vera Takeisha Thomas had cancer, and it had been caused by me. From the constant internal exposure to my light and my own strange blood mingling with hers. This was on the file. She was dying. And there I was exposing her to more of my light when I was bigger, older, and stronger. She should have told me to stay back. Instead, she’d held on to me. Until she could let go. (p. 206)

Vera proves that she is as audacious as Najeeba is, and decrees that her daughter become the avenging angel by telling her to “give ’em hell” (p. 207). Phoenix has the power to slip back in time to spend time with her mother, but she realises that even by slipping back in time, all she can do is relive the same moment:

Then I would slip and it would happen again. This would always happen. I couldn't save my own mother. All I could bring her was death. Harbinger. Reaper. It was in my DNA. (p. 214)

In this way, Vera is a motherist figure, because she is a mother, but also because her love is powerful, as many believe that an African women's power originates from the "sacred and almost divine importance accorded to motherhood" (Amadiume, 1997, p. 147).

The novel also investigates sexual and platonic love with Saeed, Kofi and Mmuo. While Seven is a father figure and teacher, Phoenix relies on Saeed and Mmuo to guide her and help her to channel her anger. Saeed becomes her lover, and like her, is also a weapon, ironically named Saeed, the Seed, because he is in fact designed to kill off survivors in disaster zones (Okorafor, 2015, p. 146). Mmuo is particularly interesting as he can move through objects. In Sunuteel's account in the Great Book, he becomes the name for one of the Mystic Points that allows Onyesonwu to "alu", visiting the wilderness and travelling through time. When they are finally attacked, and Mmuo is murdered and Saeed captured, she slips away for the final purging. This concept of moving quickly between places is called "slipping" in *The Book of Phoenix*, and is novel as Phoenix moves between pockets of time, and does not travel quickly over time and space as Onyesonwu does:

I count to five as I focus inward. I am heating up. My wings are probably glowing. Then I fly forward, and I am gone. "Slipping," that's what I will call it. And it isn't hard to do because I am "slippery." And it doesn't hurt. I am made for this, too. And I know exactly where and when I am going. (p. 97)

As already expounded upon, this is where and when she is going is to release the captives in the other towers. Yet, paradoxically, Phoenix views herself as a villain and "a harbinger of violence" (p. 85). Her intention from the beginning is to seek retribution for the horrors committed against her and the other bodies being "mined", but despite using fire to purge the world, she still emerges as a saviour as she leaves the page blank for Onyesonwu:



I'M ALIVE, AGAIN. I am the villain in the story. Haven't you figured it out yet? Nothing good can come from unnatural bonding and creation. Only violence. I am a harbinger of violence. Watch what happens wherever I go. (p. 85)

Phoenix believes that she is “a weapon” (p. 105), or more specifically, “a bomb”, and thus she is doing what she was created to do. She believes that the author will destroy the planet using a star (perhaps a meteorite) and “burn all the evil away, taking all the good with it” (p. 108), but perhaps she is that “star” as even as she tries to avert this disaster, in the end, she causes it when Saeed is in danger and Mmuo is murdered. In this purifying fire, Phoenix is most formidable, and she practises cameline agency by spitting her bile at the oppressors, focusing her anger appropriately and catastrophically. As Seven expresses:

“Oh, you are angrier than any woman I know,” he said, perceptively. “And that is good. But you need to focus. If you remember none of what I tell you, remember that.” (p. 176)

*The Book of Phoenix* uses allusion to rewrite redemptive death and rebirth as Phoenix is a purifying fire. In death, she burns up the evil around her and is reborn – something like the martyr that Onyesonwu becomes in the end, but instead of rewriting her story in a new life, Phoenix is reborn in her current reality, like the mythical phoenix that burns up and is reborn from the ashes. Fire both purifies and obliterates, and is compared to the “scorched earth” practice in a war that burns up territory to clear the enemy and supplies:

In warfare, there is a military strategy called “scorched earth.” It is when you destroy anything that might be useful to the enemy as you move through or pull out of their territory. (p. 218)

Likewise, Phoenix burns up everything, and like the biblical flood that washed evil away in Genesis, but in this revision, the powerful purge of evil is through fire (p. 223). When Phoenix incinerates Tower 7 and releases Seven, she “felt the radiance burst from [her], warm, yellow, light, plucked from the sun and placed inside me like a seed until it was ready to bloom” (p. 30). The purifying fire “bloomed” and “the entire lobby was washed” (p. 30). After the tower falls, “a small lush jungle sprang from the rubble of Tower 7 like a wild miniature Central

Park”, demonstrating how her death and rebirth foreshadow in this micro-Eden her final death and hope for the future in *Who Fears Death*:

All things come from the land, Ani. This was why the alien seed fell and burrowed into it. It’s best to start at the beginning. So not Allah. Not Krishna. Not God. Not Nature. Ani. Mmuo spoke of her to me. Ani is the spirit of the earth. The spirit of flesh. When I look deep into my DNA, I see that I know her story. I simply have to speak it from my heart and soul. (p. 219)

In these concluding pages of the novel, Phoenix acknowledges the female deity, Ani, but she also recognises storytelling’s power. Phoenix seems to speak for the author when she says that she loves books, “the feel of the pages on my fingertips” (p. 135) and that they are “light enough to carry, yet so heavy with worlds and ideas” (p. 135). Critically, she says that books “make people quiet” while they read them, “yet they are so loud” (p. 135) because of the powerful ideas that they convey. In this case, the novel describes the strength and boldness of the female hero in an African milieu, connecting with young black readers who can see themselves in her womanist audacity as the protagonist who is “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). They want “to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one” (p. xi), and change the landscape for readers who look like them. Phoenix realises that her “genetic selection” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 150) and “forced fertilization” do not matter as much as the fact that she is “[a] child of The Author of All Things” (p. 150), who is Ani, but also Okorafor herself.

In the final lines of the book, Sunuteel realises that Phoenix is alive and addressing him through the book’s pages, in the same manner that we realise that the character has life through what she conveys. Sunuteel finishes listening to her story, and Phoenix’s final words express again the power of storytelling to “scorch the earth” (p. 222) and leave the ground clear for a new story – Onyesonwu’s story:

I scorch the earth. Yes, I can do that. I am that. Phoenix Okore blew across the earth. She burned the cities. Turned the oceans to steam. She was the reaper come to reap what was sown. Wherever those seven men lived. Let them die. Let everything die.

Let that which had been written all be rewritten. (p. 222)

The paradox contained in these lines is evident. Phoenix is both saviour and villain. Hers is a round character that revolutionises the flat superhero trope who can only save the day. Instead, Phoenix both rescues and destroys, and thus can be conceived as one of the more nuanced characters that Amanda Rico writes about in her thesis on women in black speculative fiction. Okorafor frames the paradoxical nature of female heroes deliberately, and in this way “conveys that diasporic identity is largely a balancing act between multiple intersecting and oft-times competing transcultural modes of knowledge” (Rico, 2018, p. 106). Phoenix still emerges as the hero in this Afrodiasporic text as she uncovers “how black women’s bodies are seen, read, and appropriated [which] is a central issue for current discourses on diasporic identity formation” (p. 105). Phoenix both rescues and obliterates, but despite this ambiguous ending, the message is clear that this “scorching” is necessary to clear the page. Unfortunately, Sunuteel has his own internal bias, and his prejudice distorts Phoenix’s message. Sunuteel whimpers when he hears the story about Ani pulling a star to earth because of the Okeke’s immorality, but he could not accept the truth that “[h]is people weren’t born to suffer for the sins of those Okeke who came before him” (Okorafor, 2015, p. 225). It was “all stories” (p. 225). Sunuteel also realises that Saeed, his teacher, is also the Seed, and that he has “been taught by the very man who had loved the woman who ended the world as it was known” (p. 226). Sadly, Sunuteel cannot imagine any other story except the one in which the Okeke are persecuted because “what is in one’s heart comes out in one’s stories” (p. 229). He fails to seek “The Seed” for “real answers” (p. 231) according to Sola, and chooses instead to “write fiction” (p. 231). Sunuteel’s wife narrated the Great Book, and “in this way, both Sunuteel and his wife become immortal” (p. 230) by taking Phoenix’s book, “digested its marrow and defecated a tale of his own” (p. 231). The final line is narrated by Sola:

Then he and his oracle of a wife spread this shit far and wide. And their Great Book deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again. But that it another story. (p. 231)

It is up to the reader to determine the truth more successfully than Sunuteel does when Phoenix’s recorded voice asks Sunuteel, “Who is writing you?” (2015, p. 228). The reader is invited to ask her/himself the same question, and this is where the aspirational value of the text lies as one considers how one can rewrite one’s own story:

In *The Book of Phoenix*, the character Sunuteel openly acknowledges and deliberates the ideas conveyed in Roland Barthes's essay "The death of the Author" (p. 227). Barthes outlines in this essay that writing gains meaning in the moment of being read and interpreted, thus distracting the focus from the author toward the text and the reader. Okorafor's writings, in their acknowledgement of different sources and backgrounds as her literary heritage, also evoke a concept of writing as an interweaving of different voices and a text's identity being constituted by the discourse that it draws on. (Pahl, 2018 p. 214)

Ogunyemi's view that these Afro/Africanfuturist novels are the "contemporary woman's *ofo*" as is evident in Okorafor's novels that decolonise speculative fiction is particularly evident in *The Book of Phoenix*. The womanist hero in this case is Phoenix, whose cleansing fire scorches the earth, likewise purges the page so that new chapters can be written. In this way, scripture is also rewritten revealing a black female deity, Ani, as the co-creator of the black protagonist with the black female author, the "Author of All Things" (Okorafor, 2015, p. 150). These blank pages empower young black women who aspire to be like Phoenix and Onyesonwu, in a world that has incinerated Western oppression and patriarchal standards by placing "resonant Black experiences in literature, albeit exaggerated by fantasy and science fiction" (Huddleson, 2016, p. 3). Kayla Huddleson's dissertation entitled "Afrofuturism as Applied to Self-Perception: An Experimental Vignette Study" confirms that these novels are empowering:

Exposure to a positive role model and the acquisition of adaptive cognitive and behavioral skills could shape not just responses to adverse situations but also the way in which persons view themselves, particularly themselves in the future (p. 4).

Despite Phoenix's ambivalent view of herself as villain, she emerges as a saviour in the novel, and so is a positive role model for the future. In this way, the novel expresses women's own ambivalence towards their role as agents, simultaneously inspiring them to view themselves as overcomers in "adverse situations" (p. 4). Furthermore, it enables young men to imagine a world with strong womanist heroes, instead of believing that rescuing the damsel in distress should fall to them. Once again, this is my interest in the influence Afro/Africanfuturist books have in enabling young black women to imagine a future when they are the courageous heroes who take up the challenge of decolonising fiction and promoting Black Lives Matter.

## CHAPTER 7: QUEST FOR *ALÂFIA*

As Zélie says in the ritual, “*Abogbo wa ni omọrẹ̀enínúè jẹ̀ àti egungun.*”

*We are all children of blood and bone.* (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 527)

Zélie Adebola is the bodacious<sup>12</sup> protagonist in *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), narrating the book in the first person alongside two other key characters, Amari and Inan. This chapter will focus primarily on Zélie and her quest for *alâfia* (“peace” or “welcome”) for the marginalised characters in the book because she embodies both the boldness and the audacity that make her a bodacious womanist hero. Zélie is an archetypal audacious womanist because she is “responsible”, “in charge” and “serious” (Walker, 1983, p. xi), and as a Reaper (a *divîner* like her mother before her), her sacred duty is “to guide the lost spirits to *alâfia*, and in exchange, they would lend us their strength” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 203). The novel once again emphasises the complementary nature of womanist ideology in Nigerian culture, demonstrating how “African femininity complements African masculinity and defends both with the ferocity of a lioness” (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 94). However, in contrast to the Igbo cosmology explored in chapters 5 and 6, this novel utilises the author’s study of Yoruba Orishas<sup>13</sup> that view gender roles as complementary, with women at the centre as custodians of “the earth, fire and water” (p. 94), and critical to understanding the source of Zélie’s power. Concluding with a study of the bodacious character of Zélie is thus appropriate because it attests to Afrofuturist novels functioning to become allegorical stories of liberation and empowerment and once again establishes the plasticity of speculative fiction in changing our perceptions about the protagonists in books to include bold young black women as heroes. In an interview with Sarah Hughes, Tomi Adeyemi stated, “Our books aren’t there to magically fix publishing but maybe they’ll start the changes moving so that in six months we’ll have even more great stories, where we see ourselves and are heard” (Hughes, 2018).

*Divîners* in Orisha are recognisable because of their dark skin, silver eyes and white hair. They practice magic and the source of their power is known as their *ashé*, which is a Yoruba concept discussed below. King Saran rules the kingdom and has eradicated magic through genocide by brutally murdering all adult *divîners*, viewing the children whose powers have not yet

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<sup>12</sup> The word “bodacious” is a portmanteau of the two words, bold and audacious, and is an appropriate description of Zélie’s impetuous audacity that contributes to our hero’s ability to liberate maji (*divîners*) like her and attain *alâfia*.

<sup>13</sup> Yoruba deities.

awakened as nonthreatening. The setting to the story is this genocide, and in particular, the incident when King Saran's soldiers used a majicite chain to kill Zélie's mother in front of her, leaving only the memory of "the way her corpse hung from that tree" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 2). The inciting incident occurs when magic is reawakened by artefacts that wash ashore in a small village, and the powers of *divîners* in the proximity are revived. King Saran's general, Kaea, demonstrates how "the divîners transformed" (p. 39) as they "became maji" (p. 39) when they come into contact with the sunstone or the scroll artefacts. Kaea brings forth Princess Amari's only friend and servant, Binta, who is marked by her dark skin and white hair as a *divîner* to demonstrate how when she touches the scroll, "[l]ight explodes from Binta's hand" (p. 42). Amari surreptitiously witnesses the event and her father plunging his sword into her friend. Traumatized by her friend's murder, Amari discovers the scroll in Kaea's quarters and runs away with it and is rescued by Zélie in the marketplace. Zélie's village is burnt down when the king sends his son, Inan, to find Amari, and she must escape with Zélie and her brother, Tzain, on a quest to rekindle magic and overcome evil. The heroes face enormous adversity, mirroring key events in the Black Lives Matter movement, but they ultimately overcome the king's dark forces by bringing magic back to Orîsha. Crucially, this magic is deeply rooted in the author's appreciation and celebration of her Yoruba culture, which is the language of their incantations. Adeyemi describes the moment she discovered Yoruba deities:

When I first discovered the Orîsha, it was a part of my [Yoruba] culture and a part of my legacy so it was kind of like finding treasure in your own backyard. Once I found it, I decided to lean into it. Something I've seen that happens a lot is that people – often fantasy writers specifically – will find a piece of someone's culture and put it into their writing. But you can't just take one cool thing and throw it in there. That's other people's culture, that's other people's heritage, that's other people's religions. Once I found it, I was like, "OK, I want to do this right because this is a part of my culture." (Uthman, 2018)

The nostalgic reclamation of African power to engage African American realism has not always been empowering. Achille Mbembe discusses how Afropolitanism enables us to view Africa as "a major platform and also an agent in the making of the modern world order" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 31) that cannot "be understood outside of its entanglement with multiple elsewheres – an entanglement that has produced different outcomes, and not all of them are necessarily catastrophic" (p. 31). Mbembe makes the case for Afropolitanism as "a name for

undertaking a critical reflection on the many ways in which, in fact, there is no world without Africa and there is no Africa that is not part of it” (Mbembe, 2016, p. 29). In another paper entitled “Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism”, Mbembe posits that there is no African identity outside of allegory:

Rather than fabricating social and political utopias, the analyst is invited to grasp the springs of this tension between image and illusion<sup>14</sup> and the paradoxes and lines of escape which are thereby made possible. It is precisely these paradoxes and lines of escape which make it such that, strictly speaking, there is no African identity other than allegorical. To a large extent, the articles collected here invite the decoding of this allegory. In order to decode the allegory, new archives still need to be produced. Furthermore, the repertory of intellectual inquiry needs to be expanded. (2001, pp. 11-12)

Adeyemi recognises the usefulness of allegory in this intellectual expansion. Allegorically, by returning magic to Orisha (the name of the place and the Yoruba cluster deities), the novel acknowledges Yoruba deities (Orishas) and decolonises the text by rejecting a society that suppresses this indigenous knowledge and power. Thus, Nigerian language and culture are essential motifs in the novel. The book is the first in a series, and the second book, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, was released in 2019.

In order to understand this chapter’s focus, a definition of *alâfia* is apposite. Thereafter, the book’s title will be juxtaposed with Walker’s womanist definition to demonstrate the novel’s contemporary relevance, merging with the relevance of key Black Lives Matter news stories that will provide reference points through an analysis of specific events in the book. The Sky Mother is the most powerful deity, and Oya, “the Goddess of Life and Death” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 17), is our hero’s Orisha, which will once again attest to the importance of female deities in Yoruba religion. An analysis of Zélie’s mother will initiate a discussion on Motherism in the book, as well as Zélie’s relationships with other Motherist influences, to consolidate Motherism as an inclusive and emancipatory term. Throughout this chapter, other significant liberatory motifs will also be commented upon, especially the significance of language, Afro-textured

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<sup>14</sup> These disparate signs and fragments of reality are subsequently rearranged around central signifiers which function both as images and as illusions (Mbembe, 2001, p. 11)

hair and martyrdom. Finally, the book's relevance to young readers will be asserted in another text that decolonises speculative fiction and dispenses with a single story of Africa (Adichie, 2016).

Other studies have considered power and identity in *Children of Blood and Bone*, including a thesis by Sierra Zareck entitled "'Like Breathing for the First Time': Magic, Structural Oppression, and Black Re-Empowerment Through Identity Reclamation in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*" (2020). Another paper by Marvin John Walter undertakes a posthumanist analysis of the novel entitled "The Human and its Others: A Posthumanist Reading of Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and NK Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*" (2019), which is referred to below. However, this chapter will offer a reading of the text as an allegory for Black Lives Matter using an Afrofuturist lens. In an interview, Adeyemi outlined this as one of the book's primary concerns:

But as for its other purpose: It's an allegory for the modern black experience, for people who aren't black to understand what it's like to walk in our shoes. I personally believe that books are the closest you can ever get to being inside someone else's head. So that is what the book is for – to show that, and to make it very clear. Every obstacle in the book is tied to a real obstacle that black people face now, or have faced as recently as a few years ago. (Lewis, 2018)

*Alâfia* is defined as "peace, health" (Crowther, 1852, p. 28) in Yoruba religion. In the novel, Adeyemi has presented the concept as being synonymous with a peaceful afterlife, and its counterpoint is "the hell of *apâdi*" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 202). Zelie explains that "when Orishans died, the blessed spirits rose to *alâfia*: peace" (p. 202), which is a "release from the pain of our earth, a state of being that exists only in the gods' love" (p. 203). However, "spirits weighed down by sin or trauma can't rise to *alâfia*; they can't rise from this earth" (p. 203). Instead, they "stay in *apâdi*, reliving the worst moments of their human memories again and again" (p. 203). In her review of the novel, Jaye Winmilawe clarifies that this is strictly not accurate and that some creative licence has been exercised:

Additionally, while the actual Yoruba concept of *alafia* is peace, the author's hint that *alafia* is analogous to the Christian idea of heaven does not correlate with the realms of the afterlife that Yoruba *Orisha* devotees subscribe to. (Winmilawe, 2018)



The significance of theology in these diasporic Nigerian Afrofuturist novels has been discussed in previous chapters that have quoted Oduyoye's book, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Oduyoye's book outlines how "patriarchy undermines Christlikeness" (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 32), and that "[African women's] culture demands that they stay sensitive to relatedness and inter-relatedness" (p. 33). Once again, these concepts are relevant as our hero is a strong womanist protagonist who challenges patriarchy and is concerned with the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. xii). Additionally, Oduyoye's book defines *alâfia* more relevantly for this study as a quest for "freedom and blessedness" (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 32), which explains that it is also a state of being in life that is focused on liberation and transformation, not just a state sought in death:

Women's Christology centers around goodness, salvation, liberation and the acts that redeem, transform or reconstruct. Their religion is a quest for freedom and blessedness: the complete and integral well-being that the Yoruba of Nigeria describe as *alâfia* and the Hebrew render as *shalom* and for which the Muslim women theologians have taught their Christian sisters to render in Arabic as *salaam*. (p. 32)

Zélie is on her quest to "redeem, transform and reconstruct" (p. 32) by returning magic to Orisha and overthrowing the evil King Saran who murdered her mother. Her quest will bring about *alâfia*, not only in terms of "freedom and blessedness" (p. 32) as outlined by Oduyoye, but also so that "spirits weighed down by sin or trauma [can] rise to *alâfia*" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 203). Thus, "[i]n assigning Zélie the gift of drawing strength from remembrance of the dead, Adeyemi taps into a capacity that has become so important for black protest today" (Newkirk, 2018), which is to remember the lives lost and to use them as a vehicle for protest and empowerment.

The title conveys further significance in acknowledging our humanity and life because "blood and bone" are physical components of all people that are the same, regardless of race, class and gender, and point to inclusivity that accepts our common humanity. In an interview, Adeyemi confirmed that it was indeed her intention to write an inclusive and empowering story:

On the one hand, it's for kids like me – and kids who look like me, and even kids who don't look like me but also aren't white – to see that wow, we can do this. We can ride giant lions and fight the bad guy and have these great adventures. (Lewis, 2018)

When the novel asserts that “We are all children of blood and bone” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 518), it acknowledges a commonality between all people. This concept of finding commonality is encapsulated in the second part of Walker's womanist definition that aligns with Ogunyemi's definition when it calls for “black unity” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 62) that is “mandalic at its core” (p. 62) because Walker's definition has similar concerns – “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xii). Walker's concern with survival and wholeness is discussed by LaJuan Simpson, who uses Walker's definition to define bodacious behaviour and a call for freedom in her paper entitled “Transforming the Prison: Outrageous and Bodacious Behavior in ‘Angela Davis: An Autobiography’”:

[Davis] uses the prison, a place of confinement, to empower African American women, and she transforms it into a space of power and freedom through her use of identity, education, and intellectual and social development. To examine this transformation, I will use Alice Walker's term “womanist,” which is defined as a black woman who is willing to cross boundaries and break rules to achieve wholeness. (Simpson, 2007, p. 323)

Similarly, Zélie is presented as a bodacious African woman who transforms confinement as an oppressed group into “a space of power and freedom” (p. 323). She does this by crossing boundaries and breaking the rules, much to the chagrin of those around her who worry about this bodacious impetuosity. Her brother, Tzain, views this audacious precocity as stupidity: “‘Baba, please.’ Tzain shoos me away. ‘If Zél goes, she'll do something stupid’” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 31). Unfortunately, her inability to restrain herself often makes things worse. Even though it is not her fault, her entire village is burnt down when she helps the seemingly docile Princess Amari escape from King Saran's brutality. The relationship between the two young women is vital to understanding the womanist concerns in the book as they gradually become friends. Zélie demonstrates how to be “traditionally capable” (Walker, 1983, p. xii) to the young princess, who has also suffered because of the king, her abusive and cruel father:

The headstrong and martial Zélie assumes at the outset that the privileged princess, all softness and uncertainty, is destined to sabotage Zélie's quest. Yet Amari turns out to have experienced her share of brutality. In developing their relationship, Adeyemi explores the ways in which violence – especially as it plays out (very graphically) in male control over female bodies – ricochets through history. Both women come to see more clearly how inequities of color, class, and gender converge. (Newkirk, 2018)

In the opening pages, just such an incident occurs when Zélie recounts how King Saran's men disturb a group of girls in a training session with Mama Agba. From the beginning, Zélie is impetuous, and Chapter One opens with the words "*Pick me*" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 3) before Mama Agba does indeed pick her to train against Yemi, a *kosidán* girl of the ruling class who does not have the distinct white hair of a *divîner*. It appears as though Yemi's name is a shortened version of Adeyemi's, an acknowledgement perhaps that implicit bias is something we each need to confront. Colourism is unmistakable in this scene as Yemi is light-skinned, signalling her status because even as the illegitimate child of a noble, her skin tone indicates that she has "never spent a day labouring in the sun" (p. 4). Yemi feels superior to dark-skinned *divîners* like Zélie, and calls her a "maggot" (p. 5), a "miserable, degrading slur" (p. 5) that renders her as sub-human. Marvin Walter's posthumanist reading of the novel outlines how this slur others Zélie:

Central to the justification of this oppression is the homogenisation of the *divîner* and *maji* through the discourse created by the *kosidán*. Typical to the process of othering, certain characteristics are allocated to *maji* and *divîner*, not allowing them any individuality in the discourse. This homogenisation finds one expression in the description of *divîner* and *maji* through a single derogative term: "Maggot" (Walter, 2019, p. 9).

After this exchange, soldiers enter the *ahéré* to collect the king's tax, and Mama Agba tries to reason with them, saying she has paid taxes recently. Zélie cannot hold her tongue and retorts, "Maybe you should stop robbing us" (p. 10). Despite being othered, Zélie is outspoken, and this is the first example of her not being able to control her righteous indignation in the face of oppression. As a result, Zélie is thrust to the ground by her hair. It is also the first incident in the book to mirror a significant Black Lives Matter incident that was met with outrage worldwide. An *ABC 7 News* article, "Caught on video: Texas officer arrested for pushing 14-

year-old” states that a teenager and her friends were told by adults that the black children had to “leave the area and return to ‘Section 8 (public) housing’” (Associated Press, 2015). One girl refuses to leave the area and the officer “appears to grab the girl in frustration” (Cole-Frowe and Fausset, 2015). She identified herself in a KDFW-TV interview as Dajerria Becton (Cole-Frowe and Fausset, 2015). Becton, much like Zélie, is indignant, and because of this, she is pushed to the ground by a white police officer, who kept her trapped underneath his knee. In contrast, a white teenager taking a video of events as they unfolded was not confronted (Cole-Frowe and Fausset, 2015). Brandon Brooks, 15, stated:

“I was one of the only white people in the area when that was happening,” he told the station. “You can see in part of the video where he tells us to sit down, and he kind of like skips over me and tells all my African-American friends to go sit down.” (Cole-Frowe and Fausset, 2015)

Zélie’s painful ordeal is inspired by this incident when “the guard slams [her] to the ground facedown, knocking the breath from my throat” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 11) and then “digs into my back with his knee” (p. 11). Adeyemi asserts, “Every moment of violence in the book is based on real footage” (Hughes, 2018), and corroborates that this early scene “was inspired by the notorious video of a police officer pushing a teenage girl to the ground at a pool party in Texas” (Hughes, 2018). Adeyemi further explains that “It’s not my intention to be gratuitous but I want people to be aware that these things are happening and that the actual videos are much worse” (Hughes, 2018). Zélie’s courage is evident and inspirational, but as discussed, this is rash, and Mama Agba tries to teach her that while she is learning how to fight, she must also “learn the strength of restraint” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 16). Mama Agba tells her, “Courage does not always roar” and “Valor does not always shine” (p. 19). Despite this wisdom, Zélie’s bold heroism is an important plot device as, throughout the book, she has to learn “when to fight” (p. 19) and when to be still.

Another critical moment inspired by Black Lives Matter occurs before the story begins when soldiers murder Zélie’s mother and her father cries “as the soldiers wrapped a chain around her neck” (p. 2). Zélie hears her mother’s “screams as they dragged her into the dark” (p. 2), and she cannot forget “the way her corpse hung from that tree” (p. 2). The young girl is so traumatised that she sobs in Amari’s arms when she tells her, “It’s like every time I close my eyes, he’s wrapping a chain around my neck” (p. 483). The death of Zélie’s mother is inspired

by a 4-year-old girl witnessing her mother's boyfriend being murdered by a police officer. In a *CNN* article entitled, "After Cop Shot Castile, 4-Year-Old Worried Her Mom Would Be Next" (Park, 2017). The article is based on a video that shows that the "4-year-old girl tried to calm her distraught mother, Diamond Reynolds, as both of them cried in the back of a police car" (Park, 2017). The mother and daughter had just witnessed Minnesota police officer, Jeronimo Yanez, shoot "Reynold's boyfriend, Philando Castile multiple times during a traffic stop" (Park, 2017) and "police placed Reynolds and her young daughter in the back of a squad car" (Park, 2017) with Reynolds in handcuffs. In the video, the 4-year-old is distraught, but she still tries to calm her mother down, saying, "Mom, please stop cussing and screaming," she said, "I don't want you to get shooted" (Park, 2017). The young girl is heard saying to her mother, "It's OK. I'm right here with you" (Park, 2017) and that she will keep her mother safe. *The New York Times* reported that the officer was acquitted, sparking conversations and protest because, as the murdered man's mother stated, "The system in this country continues to fail black people and will continue to fail us" (Smith, 2017).

The incident is crucial for understanding the character's motivation as Zélie admits to Inan that she is "always afraid!" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 312) because of what she experienced as a child, admitting her fear is not a weakness as it makes her bolder:

"They didn't drag your mother by her neck and hang her for the whole world to see."  
Now that the truth is out, there's nothing I can do to stop. My chest billows as I sob.  
My fingers tremble at the terror. Afraid. The truth cuts like the sharpest knife I've ever known. No matter what I do, I will always be afraid. (p. 313)

The novel proposes that fear is not a hinderance because there is no courage without fear. In the Castile case, "the shooting set off large marches across the twin cities" (Smith, 2017) and "drew notice from President Barack Obama. The governor of Minnesota, Mark Dayton, asked, "Would this have happened if the driver were white, if the passengers were white?" (Smith, 2017).

Other key Black Lives Matter incidents in the novel are intended to mirror to the inordinate number of children murdered by police officers in the United States. When Zélie and her friends come across a community of children *divîners* and the soldiers discover them, the leader, a young female *divîner* named Zulaikha, bravely confronts them. Zulaikha is only 13 and is

“strong, defiant beyond her young years” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 399) when she faces the armed legion:

“Search us if you must,” Zu responds. “We will agree to an examination. But please, lower your weapons.” She raises her hands in surrender. “I don’t want anyone to get hur—” It happens so fast. Too fast. One moment Zu stands. The next, an arrow pierces through her gut. (p. 399)

Zulaikha is “speared with Orisha’s hate” (p. 399), which represents the hatred of racism, and does not step back to safety, but “[f]orward, so she can protect us” (p. 400). In the Author’s Note, Adeyemi invites us to cry for the innocent children like Zulaikha who lost their lives:

If you cried for Zulaikha and Salim, cry for innocent children like Jordan Edwards, Tamir Rice, and Aiyana Stanley-Jones. They were fifteen, twelve, and seven when they were shot and killed by police. (p. 526)

Adeyemi references an article in *The Root* that names some of the young children who lost their lives to officers:

“Mike Brown was 18.

Jordan Edwards was 15.

Tamir Rice was 12.

Aiyana Stanley-Jones was 7.” (Velez, 2017)

Like Jordan Edwards, Zulaikha is just 15 years old when she is murdered. Another article in *The Root* entitled “15-Year-Old Jordan Edwards Laid to Rest as Family, Friends, Classmates Remember His Short Life” quotes Pastor M L Dorsey of the True Believers Church of Christ who “brought mourners to their feet with the fiery rhetoric of a black preacher accustomed to preaching about injustice and pain” (Helm, 2017). Pastor Dorsey is quoted as saying:

“Philando Castile,” he said. “I can’t stand no more! Alton Sterling. I can’t stand no more!” He also called the names of Michael Brown and Walter Scott – all unarmed black men killed by law enforcement – before ending with, “Jordan Edwards. I can’t stand no more!” (Helm, 2017)

In the novel the battle ends when another young *divîner*, Kwame, ultimately uses his fire *ashé* through his Orisha, the deity, Sàngó, to defeat the guards in a redemptive martyring reminiscent of Phoenix (discussed in Chapter 6):

A vortex of flames shoots from Kwame’s throat, pushing the guards even farther back. As he sears through their attack with the last seconds of his life, the divîners react. (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 402)

Kwame’s brave martyrdom allows them to escape. He is a purifying fire that obliterates the guards and demonstrates once how the sacrifices of young black people pave the way for change and revision in the future, much as Phoenix does, discussed in the previous chapter.

Another concept that invites parallels with Okorafor’s characters is Afro-textured hair as a liberatory concept (see Chapter 5), because “all maji were graced with coiled white hair, an homage to Sky Mother’s image” (p. 161). As her powers awaken, the texture of Zélie’s hair becomes more recognisably Afro-textured as it “was straight as a blade before, but now it bunches in tight spirals, twisting further in the wind” (p. 304), restoring her power and her Africanness. Amari notices how curly it is, and Zélie acknowledges her empowerment through her maternal lineage when she confirms that she thinks it is magic as “Mama’s hair used to be like this” (p. 371). Similarly, Zulaikha is described as having “white hair [that] settles around her head, big and fluffy like a cloud”, and even though she is only 13, “Kwame and Folake stand to attention in her presence” (p. 299). This magic and power are rooted in Yoruba religion and language, through the Orishas, or deities, representing the different gifts with which each *divîner* is endowed. The power each *divîner* can call upon is referred to as *ashé* in the novel because “[t]o cast magic we must use the language of the gods to harness and mold the ashé in our blood” (p. 90). There is evidence that “[t]he orisa cosmic forces that manifest around the world are inherently diasporic” (Jones, 2005, p. 323) because *Brown Girl in the Ring* (see Chapter 3) explains the concept of African deities in Afro-Caribbean religious practices:

“The African powers, child. The spirits. The loas. The orishas. The oldest ancestors. You will hear people from Haiti and Cuba and Brazil and so call them different names. You will even hear some names I ain’t tell you, but we all mean the same thing. Them is the ones who does carry we prayers to God Father, for he too busy to listen to every single one of we on earth talking at he all the time. Each of we have a special one who is we father or mother, and no matter what we call it, whether Shango or Santeria or Voudun or what, we all doing the same thing. Serving the spirits.” (Hopkinson, 2012 [1988], p. 126)

Oya is Zélie’s principal deity, or Orisha, and the source of her *ashé*. In the Yoruba pantheon, Oya is described as waiting patiently for her gift from the Sky Mother, and “[f]or Oya’s patience and wisdom, Sky Mother rewarded her with mastery over life” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 160). Oya’s reward was “transformed to power over death” (p. 161) when her gift was shared with her worshippers. Because of this, Oya had to be “selective, like her mother, sharing her ability with only those who showed patience and wisdom” (p. 161), which does not describe Zélie at the beginning of the novel as she is often accused of impulsivity and rash decision-making. Nevertheless, Zélie is a Reaper and has the power Oya endows upon her followers, showing the author’s concern with female power and agency through a female goddess.

Another female deity frequently mentioned in the novel is the Supreme Goddess, the Sky Mother. The identity of the Sky Mother is unclear, which may be deliberate as there is more than one structure for the supreme beings in the Yoruba cosmology. In a 1976 paper entitled “Yoruba *Òrìsà* Cults: Some Marginal Notes Concerning Their Cosmology and Concepts of Deity”, P R McKenzie notes that “[m]uch controversy has been aroused over the question of the Supreme Deity, rather less over the status and interrelationship of the *òrìsà*” (McKenzie, 1976, pp. 189-190). He explains that the ordering of the Yoruba cosmology is a complex one and that there are hundreds of lesser deities:

Just as people have been content to give a notional answer to the question of the number of *òrìsà* – 201, 401 and so on – so too, we have tended to be content with some convenient model of the Yoruba religious cosmology which grouped the *òrìsà* cults together in some kind of ordered way. (p. 190)



In the Appendix, McKenzie lists Olódumare (Olórun) as the first of four creator deities, or “Cosmic, All Deity” (p. 203). Under the heading “Celestial Father, Sky Deity, Creator”, the five *òrìsà* listed are Olódumare, Odùduwà, and Obátálá (p. 203). The names for the Great Mother Goddess are also given. The Sky Mother may refer to Odùduwà, sometimes referred to as male, and occasionally female, as she is listed under the heading “Sky Deity”. More important than her identity is that Adeyemi refers to the creator as a mother, indicative of the high status of women in Yoruba culture and religion because “through the womb of woman all humanity passes” (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 95). Adeyemi may be using creative licence and be referring to “Olódumare, the Supreme deity, whose abode is also in the sky (hence his other name Olórun – meaning owner of the heaven or sky)” (Lawuyi, 1988, p. 236), despite being a male Orisha. However, in one version of the creation story (Olupona, 1983), Odùduwà is a female deputy to Olódumare, and with Obátálá, is responsible for creating the Yoruba world:

On his way to carry out Olódumare’s assignment, Obátálá met some other divinities who were drinking, joined them, got drunk, and fell asleep. Another divinity, Odùduwà, who overheard Olódumare’s message, seeing Obátálá fast asleep, picked up the earth given to Obátálá and went forth with it to perform the task of creating the world... When Obátálá woke up, he discovered that Odùduwà had carried out Olódumare’s assignment. He was ashamed of himself [... and] engaged in an argument [with Odùduwà]. (pp. 92-93)

In her book, *Ọṣun Sèègèsí*, Bádéjò states that the female deity Ọṣun, one of the cluster deities like Oya, who is Zélie’s deity, and was present at the creation:

Ọṣun is the goddess of wealth, femininity, power, and fecundity (see Bádéjò, 1996. *Ọṣun Sèègèsí*). According to the mythology, she is the only woman present at the creation of the world. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 96)

To reiterate, it is not crucial that the Sky Mother’s identity is known, but Odùduwà does appear to be the most likely choice. What is more apposite is the hierarchy that recognises the strength of women, mothers, goddesses and queens in Yoruba culture:

The role of allocations and performances in the myths, while casting insight into a hierarchical structure dominated by Olódumare, reveal the power relations between the

sexes. A woman, whether as Orisanla or Odùduwà, was a deputy to Olódumare. In this position she was superior to other gods, particularly the male gods with whom, as in the situation below, there was rivalry for power. (Lawuyi, 1988, p. 237)

The important role of language in the oral tradition also cannot be overemphasised. This is made apparent by a *sêntaro*, Lekan, whom they meet in the temple of the gods on their quest to rekindle magic. The temple's name is *Chândomblé*, which again demonstrates the creative licence used to create an inclusive Yoruba milieu that acknowledges the diasporic movement of the people and religion:

The author intentionally added diaspora perspectives, which is laudable. For instance, *Chandomble* is not a real city, but it is the actual religion of the Yoruba/*Orisha* in Brazil. Adeyemi discovered *Orisha* in Brazil, although they are the Gods of her own parents' homeland. *Ibeji* is a desert city to the south, when in reality *Ibeji* is not a city. *Ibeji* is the Yoruba word for twins, and an *Orisha*. (Winmilawe, 2018)

The temple at *Chândomblé* is where they meeting Lekan, who tells them that “The language of the gods, [is] as old as time itself” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 156). Zélie considers the symbolic power of the Yoruba language as she studies “the symbols that would one day become the spoken language of Yoruba, giving us the tongue to cast our magic” (p. 157) and realises that “[a]ll that matters is Sky Mother's will” (p. 157). The Sky Mother “created the heavens and the earth, bringing life to the vast darkness” (p. 158) and “On earth, Sky Mother created humans, her children of blood and bone” (p. 159), whom she loved as they were “each created in her image” (p. 159), echoing the biblical verse in the Genesis creation story.

Aside from being the source of their *ashé*, or power, language is also crucial for understanding the balance of power between the sexes. Bádéjò explains that there are systems preserved by oral traditions that protect the rights of women:

In the oral literature, the extremes of sexism are monitored by an elaborate system. That system, reflected in the religious and political hierarchy and preserved in the oral tradition, maintains cooperation between female and male in the continuity of human life. As the texts illustrate, femininity is strength and power, beauty and serenity, leadership and followship [*sic*]. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 100)

Zélie's character as the hero is critical for ensuring the "continuity of human life" (p. 100). Her view of women as role models, in the Sky Mother and her own mother figures, is integral to a full understanding of her character. When her mother is murdered, "two soldiers jerk the chain over her neck, so tight the majacite links draw blood from her skin" (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 79) and they "drag her from the hut like an animal, kicking and thrashing" (p. 79). Zélie allows herself to imagine how the scene might have played out if her mother had full use of her magical powers, as "Mama's magic feeds off her rage" (p. 79) and "dark shadows twisting around her, she looks like Oya, the Goddess of Life and Death herself" (p. 79), because "[w]ith magic, she's still alive" (p. 79) and she saves "Baba's warrior spirit" (p. 79), which was snuffed out with her death, leaving him an empty husk. Mama's feminine power rescues Baba's spirit in this vision. This is a Motherist ideal, and Bádéjò explains how the genders complement each other in African culture:

African femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of the lioness while simultaneously seeking male defense of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 94)

Likewise, Acholonu's Motherist principles expound the "*balance that ensures the mutual distribution of power and roles between the sexes*" (Acholonu, 1995, p. 18), often visually represented by the "widespread use of the womb shaped calabash, and the *earthenware* pots in African villages for drinking, cooking and holding medicine" (p. 22). Motherhood is a critical motif in understanding Motherism, but also the role of the mother is crucial because "the nurturing and sustaining image of 'mother' found in African mythic and poetic images seeps into the literary definitions of 'heroine' in African American writing" (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 106). Once again, this demonstrates the "sacred and almost divine importance accorded to motherhood" (Amadiume, 1997, p. 147). However, Motherism also embraces sexual equality based on the principles of African feminism that state: "For women, the male is not 'the other' but part of the human same" (Steady, 1987, p. 8). Bádéjò summarises this as an "African feminist ideology founded upon the principles of traditional African values that view gender roles as complementary, parallel, asymmetrical, and autonomously linked in the continuity of human life" (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 94). In the novel, the Baba (father), Tzain (brother) and Inan (in the role of lover/husband) all assist Zélie on her quest, demonstrating an understanding of "the human same" (Steady, 1987, p. 8). Furthermore, Bádéjò states that all women, not just mothers,

have authority as agents of social change because in African philosophy, “[w]omen’s mythicoreligious iconography underscores women’s agency in the physical and metaphysical world” (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 100). These women are Mama, Mama Agbar, Amari, and even Oya and the Sky Mother. According to Bádéjò, the Yoruba view their foremothers as heroes who balance femininity and strength and can “bathe in oils” or “be ready to draw swords of defense from within themselves when necessary” (p. 100). It serves as a counterbalance to Western sexism, which Bádéjò explains undermines the status of women by juvenalising them and denying access to the priestesshood:

Western sexism had denied its own womanhood legitimacy through its mythicoreligious systems first by demoting European womanhood from adult status to legal minors, and then denying them access to the priestesshood, a phenomenon that never occurred in traditional societies. Indeed, the religious tenets of any society underscore the philosophical legitimacy for its social actions. The place that women occupy within that religion validates or negates their voices and power. (p. 101)

In the novel, both men and women are *maji* and act as priests through the gifts bestowed upon them by their *Orishas*. Zélie, and later Amari, demonstrate this heroic power and endow young readers with their power in the same way that Bádéjò states African oral traditions have done:

The social and spiritual images imported by African mythicoreligious images demonstrates a cultural prism through which African womanist/feminist meaning passes. Oral literary images of *Oṣun* as a powerful deity, and *obà*, or ruler, and the heroine of *Oṣogbo* township during the Fulani Wars empower Yoruba women and sublimate a legacy of woman-power, irrespective of enslavement in African American literary traditions. (p. 105)

In order to awaken this allegorical feminist agency, represented by magic in the novel, Lekan tells the young heroes that they need to find three relics. The first is a bone dagger, “[a] sacred relic carved from the skeleton of the first *sêntaro*” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 161), and whoever “wields it draws strength from the life force of all those who have wielded it before” (p. 161). The second relic is “the sunstone, a living fragment of Sky Mother’s soul”, and the third they already have, the scroll that Amari stole from her father, the king. To re-establish their connection to the Sky Mother, they need to carry out a sacred ritual:

“On the centennial solstice, a sacred island appears off the northern coast of the Orinion Sea. It is home to the temple of our gods. We must take the scroll, the sunstone, and the bone dagger there and recite the ancient incantation on this scroll. If we complete the ritual, we can create new blood anchors and restore the connection, securing magic for another hundred years.” (p. 164)

Despite magic already appearing in small pockets because of the scroll, Lekan tells them that the ritual is necessary or “magic will not last beyond the solstice” (p. 165) because “[r]eestablishing the maji’s connection to Sky Mother is the only way” (p. 165). Lekan confirms the novel’s womanist concerns are anti-essentialist in nature when he points out that “Only a woman can become our *mamaláwo*” (p. 165), and he cannot perform the ritual, thus the expectation that this power will be a patriarchal right is overturned. Thus, Zélie is the novel’s principal hero because only she can become the priestess and save the maji. The title of *mamaláwo* is significant:

Creative license is taken with various Yoruba and *Orisha* references. For instance, the term *mamalawo* as a female priest is the author’s clever spinoff of the actual Yoruba term *babalawo* for a male priest of *Orunmila (Ifa)*. The female version of a *babalawo* in reality is an *iyanifa*. (Winmilawe, 2018)

When Zélie adopts the priestess role of *mamaláwo* at the temple, Zélie experiences a surge of magic described as a tsunami breaking free (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 171) as her *ashé* flows through her, linking to the blood motif as it “inks itself into each cell” (p. 171) and stains her blood:

It inks itself into each cell, staining my blood, filling my mind. In its power I glimpse the beginning and end at once, the unbreakable connections tethering all of our lives. The red of Oya’s wrath whirls around me. The silver of Sky Mother’s eyes shines. (p. 171)

Zélie is now in the position of hero, and her womanist audacity ignites when she confronts King Saran and says, “You crushed us to build your monarchy on the backs of our blood and bone” (p. 415). She tells him that his mistake was not that he kept them alive, “It was thinking we’d never fight back!” (p. 415). Inan recognises that while he can barely breathe because of

fear of his father, Zélie rises up, “[d]efiant and fiery as ever” with “[n]o regard for her life” and “[n]o fear for her death” (p. 417), like Onyesonwu in Chapter 5. Zélie has every reason to be scared of the king after witnessing her mother’s corpse hanging from the tree, but she is bodacious and puts fear aside as King Saran tells her that he admires her defiance, impressed that she has made it that far (p. 419). Zélie embodies not just her mother in this bodacious heroism, but all women as a social agent of change. Bádéjò discusses this role as social agent as being multifaceted:

As social agents, our foremothers and sisters lived within the iconography and philosophy that stressed their roles as political and religious rulers, healers, and military personnel, wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 100)

At the end of the novel, Zélie assumes her duty as religious leader as the *mamaláwo* by taking the sunstone. She has a vision that brings further clarity to the novel’s title and extends the blood and bone motif: “Instead of Sky Mother, I see blood. I see bone. I see Mama” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 517). Zélie completes the ritual by taking out the “true bone dagger from the waistline of my pants and slice through both my palms” (p. 517) so that “[w]ith bleeding hands, I press onto the sunstone, releasing the binding blood for the ultimate sacrifice” (p. 517). Thus, blood ritual serves to link the novel’s title with the concept of blood ancestry, and the bone dagger is significant too, both linking her to her mother through her vision and through her Orisha. It is appropriate to note that Winmilawe’s review criticises this excerpt and states that this is not what Orisha practitioners do, and that “[g]iven the negative images people have of African based religions, clarification must be stated” (Winmilawe, 2018). Nevertheless, the blood and bone motif is striking because it argues in favour of “the maji’s humanity” (Walter, 2019, p. 11), and “the novel thus demonstrates the inhumanity and cruelty of oppression and marginalisation resulting from othering (p. 11) and “the inhumanity of othering minority groups through a hegemonial system in power” (p. 11). It is thus significant that the ritual ends with Zélie finally understanding the truth, “We are all children of blood and bone” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 518), foregrounding inclusivity and “wholeness” of people, which both Ogunyemi and Walker (Walker, 1983, p. xii) expound upon in their womanist definitions. Regarding power structures, the aim in womanist literature according to Ogunyemi “is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels” (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 62). This is evident with Zélie’s triumph over oppression in the novel.

In the same manner that Onyesonwu has to face death, Zélie also has to face a temporary death when “death swallows” (Adeyemi, 2018, p. 519) Zélie and she finds herself in “the peace and darkness of *alâfia*” (p. 520) with her mother. Zélie wants to stay with her mother, but she is forced to return when her mother says, “It’s not over, little Zél. It’s only just begun” (p. 523). Zélie returns to find that magic has returned to Orisha, and she has succeeded in her quest. Amari “holds up a bleeding hand, and in the darkness it swirls with vibrant blue light” (p. 525) with a white streak that resembles a lightning bolt in her hair (p. 525). Amari is now also a maji, and as her father and brother have been defeated, she is also the future queen. Thus, both priestess and queen are now maji, critical roles that foreground the mythical and social power of women discussed by Bádéjò:

African feminism cannot carry out its charge without the reestablishment of African manhood to ensure its fulfilment. Conversely, African manhood cannot progress without the reinstatement of the philosophical practices and tenets of queen mothership, female rulership, and a healthy priestesshood. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 101)

This reinstatement of African philosophical “practices and tenets” (p. 101) demonstrates how the text decolonises speculative fiction and dispenses with a single story of Africa (Adichie, 2016). In a TED talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie proposes that it is impossible to speak about a single story without discussing power structures. She used an Igbo word, *nkali*, that she translates to mean “to be greater than another” (Adichie, 2016) to explain how power structures can function, because Adichie believes that stories are also governed by this principle: “How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power” (Adichie, 2016), and that if you “[s]tart the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story” (Adichie, 2016). Single stories are not only untrue, says Adichie, but “[t]hey make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 2016). Adeyemi’s story of Zélie overcoming evil forces in an African milieu decolonises the text because the story does not discuss colonialism and it dispenses with Western sexism that “confused the relationship between women and nature by demanding that women be virginal and motherly at the same time” (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 101). Bádéjò believes that this “confounded women’s power by restricting ‘real’ women to weak, juvenile roles where their rights existed within the context of dominating male systems” (p. 101). In *Children of Blood and Bone*, Zélie martyrs herself and emerges as the bodacious

womanist hero of the story, thus decolonising the text by rejecting “both enslavement and colonialism, through the lens of Western patriarchy” (p. 101) and foregrounding African women’s agency via “Africa’s asymmetrical, complementary, parallel gender relationships” (p. 101) that “are disfigured by enslavement and colonialism” (p. 101). Instead, the novel presents an alternative that confronts gender and racial bias in speculative fiction while also stressing key Black Lives Matter travesties in an effort to decolonise the text and confront contemporary racism. Adeyemi discusses this in an interview as a “necessary corrective” (Hughes, 2018):

Does she feel that *Children of Blood and Bone* is a necessary corrective, given how white much current fantasy is? “Oh yes,” she says with a laugh. “That does make my blood boil – the idea that it’s totally fine to have a queen of the dragons but you can’t possibly have a black person.” (Hughes, 2018)

Adeyemi’s novel offers an alternative vision of the future for young black readers. In another interview, Adeyemi corroborates that the value of fantasy is that “you get to take a step back [from the real world]” as “[i]t’s an incredible tool for putting out a message like this, because it’s creating a distance that forces people to see inside situations as opposed to being warped by prejudices and racism” (Lewis, 2018). Through her death and resurrection, Zélie reawakens more than just magic and gender equality through the roles of hero, priestess, and queen. She does this with the help of her friends and family, embodying Motherist inclusivity and equality of the sexes and womanist audacity by being the hero in the narrative.

Zélie’s story explores the complementary nature of Nigerian womanist ideology of the Yoruba Orishas that view gender roles as complementary. In this culture, women are the custodians of the elements, and Zélie’s power demonstrates the matrifocality of the novel’s concerns, in conjunction with Nigerian theology. Her tale of liberation demonstrates how Afrofuturist novels function to empower young readers who can view themselves as the bodacious black female heroes.



## CONCLUSION

We can learn from Oşun and Abenaa Birem, from Harriet Tubman and Margaret Garner, from Du Bois and Antar Mberi, that within the soil of African feminism lies our present and future reinstatement as custodians of earth, fire, and water. (Bádéjo, 1998, p. 105)

The audacity and courage that Jessamy, Onyesonwu, Phoenix and Zélie display in the pages of these speculative and Afrofuturist novels of the Nigerian diaspora, *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi (2013 [2005]), *Who Fears Death* (2018 [2011a]) and *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor (2015), and *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018), have aspirational value for the readers who seldom see heroes like themselves in books. The books function to reconfigure the future for young black women. In these concluding pages, an overview of the relevance of womanist and speculative theory will be restated, beginning with a discussion on the central aspect selected for this study from Alice Walker's womanist definition: audacity. A summary of the various ways in which the female hero is rewritten to decolonise these Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist novels will further demonstrate the progression in the genre's womanist concerns. Finally, the relevance of these four Afro/Africanfuturist novels as the "contemporary woman's *ofò*" (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90) will be reiterated as "the sign of conjuration that identifies the holder as protected and on the path of victory because the cause is just" (p. 90). A just ending is evident in each novel, with the womanist hero emerging as redeemed, and for most of the stories, as the saviour. The womanist hero in Afrofuturist texts paves the way for a future when the young readers of these novels can become the strong, audacious leaders of tomorrow because once you can imagine something, you can believe it is possible.

An article in *The Witness* by Christopher Preston entitled "The Planet is Becoming Synthetic" (Preston, 2020), discusses how humans are the planet's "most audacious species" (Preston, 2020). Preston considers how human beings have shifted from being caretakers to being "shapers". While his article primarily considers planetary concerns, significant parallels can be drawn to the manner in which he defines our species, especially concerning our audacity and our ability to shape the future. These novels have the potential to inspire the young women who read them to see themselves as audacious heroes in their own lives who shape their own futures. This audacity is a focal concept in the thesis and is certainly evident in the young

women in these novels fighting patriarchal systems in futuristic, and in certain aspects, “synthetic”, milieux. These futuristic or otherworldly Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist settings create texts that decolonise speculative fiction, which is crucial for challenging bias, especially in schools. The black British writer, Bernadine Evaristo, who won the Booker Prize and the Women’s Prize for Fiction for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), explains that inclusive novels prompt more inclusive curriculum choices:

Evaristo said she hopes for a future literary landscape “with a wide range of totally inclusive novels”, because “a wider range of voices, cultures, perspectives can only enrich what already exists and will contribute to a more inclusive education system and a more egalitarian society”. (Evaristo, quoted by Flood, 2020)

Encountering these novels enables young black women to see themselves as heroes and overthrow the single story that the literary canon often perpetuates, which Evaristo argues is necessary to create “canons, plural” (Flood, 2020) of literature. Evaristo challenges the existing white bias in the literary canon for being “created by men who went to Oxford and Cambridge, studied in all-male colleges where they were taught about ‘novels by white men who wrote primarily about white male protagonists’, and went on to teach in private schools themselves” (Flood, 2020). A more inclusive literary cannon will also serve to counter the single story about Africa and African culture:

“Even today, in academia, when we talk about literary history in the 20th century, there are those who are resistant to exploring beyond the traditional canons, who refuse to engage in the conversations that have been ongoing for decades, actually, and who refuse to teach anything but what they call ‘great novels’ – meaning novels by and about men, typically white – while denying the existence of an exclusionary culture that not just undervalues but ignores work by women, for example, or people of colour,” said Evaristo. (Flood, 2020)

The Nigerian author, Chimamanda Adichie, writing in the United States, writes stories that counter this “exclusionary culture” that Evaristo derides. Adichie’s books immerse the reader in the experience of black protagonists in Nigeria and the United States. Speaking about her roommate in the United States in her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story”, Adichie says that it struck her that her roommate’s “default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of

patronizing, well-meaning pity” (Adichie, 2016). The reason for this patronising position was that this roommate “had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe” (Adichie, 2016) in which “there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals” (Adichie, 2016). Each book in this thesis challenges the single-story pitfall through stories set in an African milieu and foregrounding Afrocentric concerns. In fact, in all of the books, except *The Icarus Girl* and, in places, *The Book of Phoenix*, the milieu is entirely African. Furthermore, even though the authors were born in the United States and Britain, they all acknowledge their Nigerian heritage in their novels. All of the novels reflect the influence of Nigerian culture on the writers by foregrounding African jujuism, traditional religion, language, and other Afrocentric concerns, such as Afro-textured hair and colourism, as empowering constructs – and even literally the sources of the hero’s magic and power. Ogunyemi discusses the source of the woman writer’s power and its juju potential:

The woman writer, young or postmenopausal, is accessing an identical source of power. Her novel – which one can refer to as juju fiction because of its potential for transformations and instilling self-confidence in its owner, as juju is expected to effect – emanates from this context as a verbal agency for change. Reading and believing it make its tenets be. As men fear the force of women’s education in bringing about change, so they fear the juju potential in the novel by women. (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 89)

Aside from this “juju potential” (p. 89), the value of Walker’s African American womanist theory and Ogunyemi’s African womanist theory are critical for appreciating the enfranchisement of the female protagonist in these stories. Womanist theory is complemented by Motherist theory, among other black feminist concepts like cameline agency, snail-sense feminism and nego (negotiation and “no ego”) feminism, also pertinent lenses for understanding the empowerment of each protagonist., as well as this study’s anti-essentialist approach to the focal womanist term, audacity. Bádéjò expresses this as an “inclusive expression of power” (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 110) which celebrates the complementary nature of gender roles in African culture:

Finally, our femininity is an inclusive expression of power. For the sons and daughters of African deities, queen mothers, and community women, womanhood is power. It confirms that African women’s power is feminine, mysterious, and beautiful, and it

exists as a complementary expression of the African man's power. Thus, we are centered and secure in our own mythicoreligious foundations of power and femininity that complete Olódùmarè's vision of a divine and human family – one in which our fullness expresses itself in myriad songs and praise poems of living. (p. 110)

It is apparent that these novels succeed in foregrounding this feminine “expression of power” (p. 110) for the young black women who read them. The liberatory potential in each book is through the womanist hero. She has to overcome adversity and, in each case, her story functions to decolonise fiction by presenting Afrocentric concerns, thus obliterating the single story about Africa.

The liberatory potential of Afrodiasporic writing, particularly Afrofuturist and Afro-Gothic writing, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, functions to illuminate and underpin the aspirational message of each novel. Eshun's belief that Afrofuturism recovers “the histories of counter-futures” (Eshun, 2003, p. 301) is demonstrated in the narratives by these diasporic authors, as within the spaces of these novels, critical interventions occur which challenge “the current political dispensation” (p. 301) and ensure that a future that liberates young readers is possible because it has already been imagined. This is critical if one is to counter the patriarchal canons that Evaristo denounces as “novels by white men who wrote primarily about white male protagonists” (Flood, 2020). Eshun also states that “Afrofuturism can be understood as an elaboration upon the implications of Morrison's revisionary thesis” (Eshun, 2003, p. 297) and discusses how the early efforts to unearth a “substantive historical presence” (p. 287) for diasporic African people, particularly slaves, is explored in Morrison's *Beloved*, discussed in Chapter 2, but is also pertinent to some extent in Percy's, Butler's and Hopkinson's novels, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Kindred* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*, respectively. From these early examples of Afrofuturist and Afro-Gothic fiction, it is evident that the narratives “extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective” (p. 289). Thus, the books are compelling and inspire the reader to reimagine the future for young black readers.

While these novels have a particular function for young black women, others can also derive significant value from them. For all men, seeing young black women as the heroes in the novel enables them to view this as possible and not as something so unlikely that the idea of a black female hero seems incompatible with their view of the world. Not only can young black women

see themselves in the pages of the novel, older women who read these books might also see what the future says is possible, potentially even changing the present for these readers and their children. The process of reading a text holds multiple possible interpretations, and through a close reading of these texts, the possibilities become the sites of these new vistas.

Regarding the interpretation of the novels, the African milieu and concerns in each also open up new landscapes for discussions on the impact of globalisation, immigration, the refugee crisis and war in Africa and the world. The Introduction to this thesis discusses the dialogue that takes place between the author and the reader as an active participation process, which Belsey states “subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in the *signifiers*, sounds or images”. It is “never fixed, single or final” (Belsey, 2013, p. 167). Meaning is “inevitably plural” but “not infinitely plural” (p. 167), and we each bring cultural capital to our participation in the process of signification. As Jacques Derrida points out, repetition is both paradoxically the same and not the same as the original (p. 169). The shifts that occur mean that a range of interpretations does occur and challenge bias for readers of all demographics.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in a conversation with Delany, Russ stated that science fiction is “natural, in a way, for any kind of radical thought” (Delany and Russ, 1984, p. 29). That is why Afrofuturist texts are critically important. As has already been discussed, it is the plasticity of science fiction that allows one to question “a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms” (Lefanu, 1988, p. 40). Lefanu’s belief that this allows for the female protagonist to be “strongly gendered” (p. 35) is evident in these novels as they propose “a real sense of sexual politics” (p. 35) through their heroic, “tough, clever and independent” (p. 36) characterisation, making for ideal “feminist heroines” (p. 36). Characterisation is thus crucial, as Afrofuturism as an art form projects “noble pasts for people of color while carefully crafting a heroic black face for the future as well” (Yaszek, 2006, p. 46). Yaszek also believes that Afrofuturism has an essential political corrective role to play that “combat[s] the erasure of black subjects from Western history” (p. 47), and which Alondra Nelson describes as “apt metaphors for black life and history” (p. 47). Ytasha Womack also celebrates how “Afrofuturism unchains the mind” (Womack, 2013, p. 15) and asks, “Were stories about aliens really just metaphors for the experience of blacks in the Americas?” (p. 32). De Witt Douglas Kilgore agrees that “Black women who contribute to SF/F/H<sup>15</sup> have reached the point where

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<sup>15</sup> Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror

the history they recover can potentially become future history” (Kilgore, 2008, p. 127). Barr refers to these speculative fiction novels written by black women as “female-centered Afro-Futurist texts” (Barr, 2008, p. xvii). Barr calls them “part of science fiction’s newest new wave, the Afrodiasporic, fantasy-infused, magic-centered science fiction” (p. xvii). Oyeyemi, Okorafor and Adeyemi all deploy “magic in strikingly convergent ways to reevaluate a whole set of gendered and racialized dichotomies” (Dubey, 2008, p. 35), which is why the critical acclaim that these novels are attracting make this study of particular relevance:

With the emergence of a growing number of writers of non-realist fiction in the early twenty-first century (Nnedi Okorafor, Lauren Beukes, Helen Oyeyemi and Tomi Adeyemi among a crowded field), theorizing and interpreting the diverse forms of non-realist African and African diasporic fiction clearly represents an important area of growth for scholarship in African literary studies. (Adejunmobi and Coetzee, 2019, Chapter 1)

These authors were not the first women to contribute such meaningful material. Chapter 2 summarises the contributions of four women who wrote seminal Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist womanist fiction with audacious young black heroes. Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* is the story of Consuelo, a marginalised woman of colour who meets a woman from the future, Luciente, which allows her to imagine a future different from her oppressive reality. Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* explores slavery and racism in the antebellum South. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Denver is the hero in the gothic setting, and just as Ti-Jeanne in *Brown Girl in the Ring* has to face otherworldly spirits to overcome, so does Denver. These four texts lay the foundation for this study of contemporary heroes in the Nigerian diasporic Afro-Gothic and Afrofuturist novels, and these characters are the torchbearers whose audacious womanism paved the way for Afrodiasporic writing such as the books examined in this thesis. Furthermore, these earlier novels demonstrate that when Walker and Ogunyemi were defining womanism in the 1980s, these black female authors were already creating heroes that embody the audacity that is the focal element of womanism that this study is concerned with, which suggests that theory and literature developed simultaneously, out of the same matrix.

In Chapter 4, it is argued that *The Icarus Girl* by Helen Oyeyemi describes a common experience for young women in Africa and the African diaspora. Jessamy is comparable to the fabled Icarus because she has to travel the middle tract between the sun and the ocean,

representing the tension between her Nigerian and British heritage. This tension is familiar to many young readers who can relate to Jessamy because they too have to navigate Western and African norms and cultural expectations. Jessamy is audacious because of the courage she displays when facing a malevolent spirit in the novel, a common feature of Gothic and Afro-Gothic fiction, representing the strain her rent identity creates in her life. Her womanist “metamorphosis” (Phillips, 2006, p. 28), as a result, allows her to fuse her fragmented identity by acknowledging the twin sister she never knew. Jessamy has “to imagine, describe, and invent [herself] in ways that are liberatory” (hooks, 1992, p. 2), and this has aspirational value for readers as it is a familiar experience in Africa and the African diaspora. As discussed in this chapter, cultural and religious dissonances are frequent sources of trauma. *The Icarus Girl* allows readers like Jessamy to explore similar experiences occasioned by Western and African cultural dissonance and emerge whole, as the protagonist does.

In Chapter 5, Onyesonwu’s name, meaning “Who Fears Death”, is also the book’s title. Her name is the vehicle for her audacity in the face of adversity in the form of several patriarchal structures that function to undermine and stifle her. Aro, the sorcerer, initially refuses to mentor her, and the collusion of the elder women who practice juju undermines her efforts to become a sorcerer, despite evidence that she is powerful and needs guidance to harness this power. Her father and the Nuru Seer are both too sexist to interpret the signs correctly and realise that the saviour in their sacred visions is an *Ewu* woman instead of a Nuru man. Because of Onyesonwu’s determination to harness her power and seek vengeance for her mother, which ultimately end in her martyrdom, all the women in the book receive empowering gifts, as do her readers through the aspirational message for young women today. The role of Onyesonwu’s mother, as well as Mwita as helpmeet, her stepfather and her friends, also embody Motherist concerns that acknowledge womanist heroes have fought long and hard for freedom. Furthermore, the text recognises that black men can be allies when facing oppression, which novels like *Beloved* (discussed in Chapter 3), and others, grapple with, such as the tragic story of Margaret Garner:

Margaret Garner, the historical subject of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, symbolizes African motherhood confronted by a sense of futility and loss of faith in the future. With African manhood captured and destroyed, the sacred and social agency of African womanhood becomes vulnerable. In this context, Garner symbolizes the attempts to nullify African womanhood as the pinnacle institution of black world culture. The

giver, sustainer, and nurturer of life [is] driven to become a desperate murderer of her own children. (Bádéjò, 1998, p. 103)

*Who Fears Death* confronts this, and the text provides an anticipative future where motherhood is indeed sacred. Other key womanist issues are explored, such as sexual enjoyment and power structures in African culture, by exploring Afro-textured hair and Nigerian religion. By melding religious allegory and Nigerian jujuism to foreground Onyesonwu's martyrdom and resurrection, Okorafor encourages the reader in this Africanfuturist vision to fly over societal constraints, conveyed literally and figuratively by Onyesonwu's ability to fly and emerge as the messianic saviour.

Chapter 6 details how Phoenix purges the page and once again invites young black readers to acknowledge the power of storytelling by empowering them to aspire to be audacious womanist heroes in their own lives. In the same way as Onyesonwu has to sacrifice herself to eradicate oppression, Phoenix's sacrifice inspires young women to ask themselves, "Who is writing you?" (Okorafor, 2015, p. 228). The author is dead (p. 227), and the aspirational value in this novel is not only because Phoenix can slip away or fly over oppressive structures, as Onyesonwu could, but because the young reader can do the same by rewriting her own story. Beyond being able to rewrite our own stories in this way, Adichie reiterates why stories matter:

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (Adichie, 2016)

In the final chapter, Chapter 7, once again the story is shown to function to "repair that broken dignity" (Adichie, 2016), simultaneously considering how the Afrofuturist novel decolonises speculative fiction and dispenses with a single story of Africa (Adichie, 2016). Once more, in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Zélie has to sacrifice herself before emerging as the bodacious womanist hero. The term *bodacious* is an American portmanteau of the words *bold* and *audacious* and is pertinent as it accurately describes the impetuous Zélie who exasperates her brother and father as she confronts danger often without any concern for her own safety. The novel confronts gender and racial bias through specific Black Lives Matter incidents, which Adeyemi recreates in the pages as a tribute to the travesties the victims suffered. Adeyemi



challenges Africa's single story by creating an entirely African milieu in setting, characters, language, and power structures, with a bodacious womanist hero as saviour.

Ultimately, each book has to become "real" in readers' minds, despite the "unreal" settings, in order to reflect the quotidian experiences of their own lives. Materially, this entails attention to the milieu, both cultural and physical, by locating the stories in Nigeria or other recognisably African places. There is some overlap between the material and the philosophical and spiritual because, aside from the African setting in each novel, in part or entirely, there are also cultural aspects that are also distinctly African. Reading these distinctly African stories about the agency and audacity of young black female heroes mirrors contemporary activism by telling "stories that matter" (Adichie, 2016). These are "extroverted African novels" which "speak outward and represent locality to nonlocal others, be they expatriate communities abroad, other African nationals on the continent, Japanese, Europeans, Brazilians, or U.S. students" (Julien, 2006, p. 684). Although "these so-called Afropolitan novels are detached from African everyday life and are thereby symptomatic of the publishing industry's tendency to circumvent writing from and for the African continent" (Harris, 2019, p. 1), they can at least be seen to be writing "for the African continent" (p. 1). The point that epistemologically they "de-realize" literature about Africa because they are not directly from Africa (but instead published elsewhere) cannot be disputed. However, these novels do indeed tell stories that fulfil the requirement that they "present as real to the mind" (p. 2) and "bring vividly or clearly to mind as if real" (p. 2). About Okorafor's book, *Lagoon*, Harris states:

*Lagoon* uses science fiction to articulate a politics of mutation and contamination, where bodies, mutated by toxins, chemicals, and drugs, or magically interwoven with animal genomes or spirits, adapt to their toxic environments but also become embodied and visible reminders of the consequences of slow violence. (p. 153)

The novel's concern with "slow violence" (p. 153) as a result of globalisation demonstrates once again that Okorafor is undoubtedly writing about and for Africa, using "African magical realism to draw on ancestral spirit beliefs and animism [...] to imagine highly technologized futures" in order to "to create a specifically African futurist aesthetics" (p. 154). Thus, despite Harris's concern that stories from outside of Africa "de-realize" African storytelling because they "are complicit in the larger economic structures of de-realization" (p. 175) because they are "written in English and published in book form for sale as commodities and thereby tend

to reiterate the experience of reading as a middle-class leisure preoccupation” (p. 175), I would argue that the novels in this study still contribute by countering the “de-realizing” of Africa in other critical ways. In fact, Harris states:

I would add that the ways in which ancestral spirits animate deep time, and how these figures comment specifically on both colonial history and its economic and environmental aftermaths, make Afro-futurism, as the phrase correctly emphasizes, uniquely and distinctly an African form. (p. 162)

All four of the novels, *The Icarus Girl*, *Who Fears Death*, *The Book of Phoenix*, and *Children of Blood and Bone* by their diasporic Nigerian authors are distinctly African and regain what Adichie refers to as “a kind of paradise” (Adichie, 2016) by rejecting the single story about Africa and creating womanist heroes who reconfigure the future for young readers. These Nigerian diasporic novels have become the “contemporary women’s *ofo*” (Ogunyemi, 1996, p. 90), and they emerge victorious because their “cause is just” (p. 90). The just cause in each case is the liberation of the young black female reader, not only for her sake but also to enlighten all other readers who are not accustomed to seeing the young black female protagonist as the heroic saviour.

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