

## Reimagining African Identity through Afrofuturism: A reading of

Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* (2015)

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### Abstract

Afrofuturism is a flourishing contemporary movement in African and African American studies. It has attracted black diasporic writers, artists, musicians, and theorists. Afrofuturism has been described by cultural critics as a way of looking, navigating and imagining future conditions of life through a black lens. Afrofuturists illuminate up-to-date issues by placing them in fantastical contexts; more specifically, they address themes and concerns of the black people that have been otherwise neglected in the western futurist canon. One of the most prominent afrofuturist authors, with a close connection to Africa, is Nnedi Okorafor. Her novella *Binti* (2015), a space travel adventure through an Afrocentric lens, deftly explores questions about the cultural identity in a futuristic world. Accordingly, the study aims to explore the theme of the African identity in Okorafor's novella, focusing on selected visionary references rooted in African culture to signify a new image for the African in a new environment, where blackness is technologically managed. In so doing, the paper highlights the mix between the incredible myths of the Himba people and technoculture, which make it possible for Okorafor to challenge the stereotypical view of the African identity, put a black face on the future, and mark the novella as an African-inspired futuristic work.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Nnedi Okorafor, African identity, African myths

### Introduction

Afrofuturism is mainly considered the new black speculative fiction. It is chosen as the best umbrella that encompasses "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora" (Nelson 9). What's especially important about Afrofuturism, separating it from other genres in future context, is that it is rooted in

ancient African traditions, creating a contrast between the past and the future expressed in realms with futuristic technology that all come from the minds of black people. Based on a literature review on Afrofuturism, the paper will be organized as follows: The first part provides a brief introduction to the concept of Afrofuturism as an aesthetic and a cultural movement, followed by a general overview of Okorafor's black imagination. This, in turn, offers a framework for the analysis of Okorafor's novella *Binti* (2015) which takes place in the second part of the paper. In this context, the study views Okorafor's *Binti* (2015) as an afrofuturist imagination, being expanded by an African female voice in an attempt to redefine the identity of her African descent for today and the future.

Mark Dery, the American cultural critic, coined the term "Africanfuturism" in 1994 to refer to speculative fiction that deals with African-American futuristic themes, expresses the anxieties and distresses of the African-Americans in the 20th-century technoculture context, and explores the real world through unreality. In this regard, David Wyatt defines speculative fiction as a literature that is completely different from the real world, which helps the writer to break the chains of conventional thought, and the reader to find himself/herself in the imaginary space. This freedom acts as the main catalyst for redefining the image of black people in a more positive light. Besides, Wyatt has captured the role of imagining "different futures, as well as, different pasts and presents of the societies and cultures in which they inhabit in multilayered ways" (1-2). In the same vein, Ytasha Womack expresses that the strength of the human spirit lies in the gift of imagination, which is appraised by Africanfuturism as a power of creativity, reshaping culture and transcending social limitations.

Furthermore, Dery perceives Africanfuturism as a way to explore different stories about black peoples which address their culture, technology, and future. Hence, by endorsing a visible and necessary black presence in the future, Africanfuturism is one form of resistance that escapes proclivities to problematize or victimize blackness. Similarly, Womack considers the black imagination as "a tool of resistance" by which black artists, with the power of technology, "have more control over their image than ever before" (25). Furthermore, Lisa Yaszek notes, in her article "An Africanfuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*", that Africanfuturists fight for equality and black people's right to find a place in the future that must not be defined by a white frame of reference (300). In this sense, it can be said that Africanfuturism is a language of rebellion, blending African culture, mysticism, and technology, in a way to change negative stereotypes and reconsider new roles for the black in the future. This is

similarly mentioned by other scholars such as Charles R. Saunders, who notes that this is “a genre that purports to transcend convention and stereotype” (398).

Most notably, Womack defines Afrofuturism as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (11) and finds it “a journey of self-discovery”. Regarding the afrofuturist narrative, Womack holds that “combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs”(14). Thus, it is only through this combination that hope for freedom of expressing self-identity can be expressed.

This type of fiction has been a space to call home for many black women writers like Octavia Butler, LA Banks, and Tananarive Due, to tell their stories while paving new pathways of black and diasporic imagination. Throughout history, the voices of black diasporic women in speculative, science, and fantasy fiction have often gone unrecognized and not given their acclamation. However, today, black women’s lived experiences in an increasingly globalized world are profoundly presented in popular Afrofuturism fiction, offering black women writers, such as Nnedi Okorafor, creative freedom, “a free space ... to be themselves... to express a deeper identity and then use this discovery to define blackness, womanhood, or any other identifier in whatever form their imagination allows” (Womack 100-101). Thus, as previously mentioned, the study attempts to explore how Okorafor, through Afrofuturism, commands freedom in reimagining the Africa identity by mixing multiple elements, including Himba myths and legends with the far-reaching future.

### **Nnedi Okorafor’s afrofuturistic imagination**

Nnedi Okorafor (1974- ), the award-winning, Nigerian-American author, whose fiction has been celebrated by the American and African SF communities similarly. Alexandra Alter, in his review “Nnedi Okorafor and the Fantasy Genre She Is Helping Redefine”, asserts that the last decade has perceived Okorafor as one of the most pioneering and imaginative Afrofuturist writers. Most of her stories, which are often set in West Africa, use the background of fantasy to explore serious social matters, such as, racial and gender inequality and dehumanization (Alter). She is one of the nontraditional writers who have achieved success by giving African history and culture a fantastic, futuristic, and feminist style to influence her work. Moreover, T.E. Barber, N. Gaskins, and Guthrie hold that, Okorafor’s speculative fiction draws upon elements of mythology, magic realism, and dystopian horror. In her article “Organic fantasy”, Okorafor shares with her readers the working of her imagination in the pushing of the

reader's imagination and the provision of different African role models. Okorafor herself categorizes her writing simply as "organic fantasy," which "blooms directly from the soil of the real" (Organic fantasy 278). For her, "fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality" (Organic fantasy 279). Critics such as Donald Haase, holds that fantasy is treated as an extensive genre, borrowing traits from myth, epic, romance ....mystery, science fiction, and other genres" (331).

Regarding her novella "Binti", Okorafor, in her talk at TEDGlobal 2017 conference in Tanzania, explains that her protagonist's journey and alteration represents one of the central principles of Afrofuturism, which leads to a new way to look at the genre of speculative/science fiction. She adds that the theme of leaving homeland in search for self-discovery and finally asserts identity is at one of the cores of Afrofuturism, which is completely different from science fiction. That is why, the paper chooses Okorafor's Binti as an example of an Afrofuturist work of art drawn on the real, the magical, and the fantastic worlds, through "the use of some form of magic, portals to another world or to the past...self- aware and coming of age, supernatural beings or events... , [and] Time travel" (Sinclair 5).

### **An overview of *Binti* (2015)**

When *Binti* was first published in October 2015, it earned a considerable amount of accolade from critics and readers who bestowed it with the Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novella. The novella and its reception call attention to how speculative and science fiction themes are presently being used to explore black survival in the future. In the novella, a sixteen-year-old 'Himba'<sup>1</sup> girl, Binti, is the first person narrator and the title character. She is a gifted mathematician, scientist, and inventor. The plot-driving incident is her invitation to study at a prestigious intergalactic university called Oomza Uni. Her intelligence is an instance of extraordinary African preeminence. She is taught by her father over three hundred years of oral knowledge about circuits, wire, metals, electricity, and math current. Being the first of her tribe to leave her people's home, she runs away during the night and boards a ship, known as "Third Fish". The ship is attacked by the "Meduse", the jellyfish-like alien species, who is described by Binti as "blue and translucent, except for one of its tentacles, which was tinted pink like the waters of the salty lake beside [her] village" (*Binti* 15). The reader learns that the "Meduse" has an old war with the Khoush, a fictional

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<sup>1</sup> The Himba tribes are descendants of a group of Herero herders. They are rustic people and resist change and adhere to their traditions and cultural heritage which is rich, unique and immersed with meaning, significance and harmony. (Goyal 9)

pale-skinned ethnic group, who are the dominant and privileged ethnic group on Earth, have absolute control on space travel and view Binti's people as near slaves. After killing all of the passengers by the "Meduse", Binti, the only survivor, escapes to her room and is eventually able to take down the invaders because of a piece of an ancient artifact called "an edan". She stays on the ship for five days until she reaches her destination.

As seen in the previous synopsis, Binti, the protagonist, goes off on a mission to uncover a strange new world. Okorafor's depiction of Binti's journey on a spaceship to Oomza university planet, hundreds of light-years away, increases the intensity of the reader's response to the fantasy of a futuristic text and produces a typical life-changing quest through a non-stereotypical image of the African woman endowed with fantastic potentialities. The Himba girl becomes a pioneer for space travel and exploration, in hopes of changing her tribe's inner exploration beliefs which, "is obsessed with innovation and technology, but [does not] like to leave Earth, [and prefers] to explore the universe by traveling inward, as opposed to outward. No Himba has ever gone to Oomza Uni" (*Binti* 6).

Okorafor's story is set in a new imaginary world; however, it still borrows some of its consistency from the reader's acquaintance with the real world. This is shown, initially in the story when the reader is confronted with Binti's vivid accounts about the belief system of her people when she says, "We Himba don't travel. We stay put. Our ancestral land is life; move away from it and you diminish" (*Binti*7). This is also evidently revealed in Binti's distinctive African outfit, which is represented by "the thin metal rings" around each ankle that "jingled noisily", the "long red skirt", "thin leather sandals", her "anklet", and her "thick", "plaited hair" with "fresh sweet-smelling otjize". Her clothes, hairstyle, and jewelry are all of particular significance to the Himba and are part of their tradition and culture. These cultural images from homeland show us an Afrocentric and non-western cosmology, which revisits Womack's view of the aesthetics of afrofuturism which embraces Afrocentricity with "non-Western beliefs".

### **Okorafor's depiction of Himba myths in a future context**

Okorafor seizes upon Himba culture to reinvent the African identity that has been neglected in western science/speculative fiction canon. That is why, *Binti* is full of reverence for the protagonist's African knowledge that offers a repositioning of

Africa's location in futurist fiction and serves as a vehicle through which to imagine the black power. This is revealed in her words about her family: "I come from a family of Bitolus; my father is a master harmonizer... We Bitolus know true deep mathematics and we can control their current, we know systems" (*Binti* 10). When Binti decides to leave her homeland, she takes along with her three main objects, her astrolabe (a multi-functional device that also stores all information about a person, including possible futures), her oil clay on her skin in the form of "otjize", and her edan (a mysterious and ancient artifact) and most importantly, her culture and her home.

Regarding Binti's "astrolabe", an apparatus resonant of ancient astronomers and navigators, it is represented as a personal device that holds all the details of one's life and all possible forecasted futures, and the ability of mathematical sight. Binti uses it as a map, "in binocular vision to see things up close" and as a communication tool that allows her to communicate with the deceased's family. It regulates her body and allows her to hinder anxiety and panic attacks. It was built by her ancestors and she herself built an advanced version with her extensive math skills. Praising her African history, Binti asserts that, her ancestors are the creators and builders of astrolabes. They use math to create the currents within them. She adds that "the best of [her people] have the gift to bring harmony so delicious that we can make atoms caress each other like lovers" (*Binti* 28).

Historically, the astrolabe is the best and most important analog computer available to Islamic astronomers. Jonathan Powell holds that astrolabes were developed in the medieval Islamic world. Though al-Fazari is the first Muslim to have helped build an astrolabe in the Islamic world in the eighth century, Mariam Al-Astrulabi was known in the tenth-century as the female astronomer and maker of astrolabes in Aleppo, Syria (Ansari), who is most likely to have an impact on Okorafor's portrayal of her protagonist, Binti. On one hand, making the astrolabe the central piece of technology in the story both reaffirms the obliterated place of the Islamic world in Western depictions of scientific history and denotes a presence of the past, if only in name. On the other hand, Okorafor makes the Himba culture artisans of futuristic communication technology as deriving not from the western Greek and Roman thought, but from the ancient Islamic world. In other words, the past represented by the astrolabe furnishes new material for the present and future.

Okorafor shifts from past references to future by referring to the spaceship she takes to travel to Oomza University. This spaceship is described as "a magnificent piece of living technology" (*Binti* 10), an organic ship that is made of plant-like fibers to

withstand space and regarded as one of the most amazing biological technologies Binti had ever read about. This imaginary description of this living spaceship, where black people hadn't been perceived to be, aligns with the notion of the black imagination of the future (Kelley) and marks the work as an African-inspired futuristic work. Okorafor, in her depiction, emphasizes how black people can imagine new worlds and inverts the stereotypical view about the black identity and controls the imaginary scheme.

The alien - encounter is by far one of the most recurring elements of futuristic and science fiction. Much of the horror of the hellish nightmare of this encounter is preoccupied with how everyone aboard the spaceship is killed by the "Meduse" except for Binti who narrates, "I took a quick look around the giant hall. I could smell dinner over the stink of blood and Maduse gases... Images of my friends Olo, Remi, Kwuga, Nur, Anajama, Rhoden crowded my mind" (*Binti* 10-11). To connect with the aliens, Binti uses "treeing"<sup>2</sup> (a mathematical method used by her ancestors), which allows her to send out blue beams enhanced by her "edan", an ancient metal technology, that Binti carries with her from her homeland. Okorafor presents the mystical power of treeing as a psychological meditation when Binti needs to calm herself and as a symbol of knowledge and superiority of her people. Binti narrates, "when you do math fractals long enough you kick yourself into treeing just enough to get lost in the shallows of the mathematical sea. None of us would have made it into the university if we couldn't tree, but it's not easy" (*Binti* 22). In this regard, Okorafor makes Binti's technological skills and mythical background inextricable from one another, showing little difference between mathematical advancement and the pervasiveness of historical myths that give Africa its exceptional identity.

Amid the Meduse wave of destruction, Binti remembers how none of her people wanted her to go to Oomza Uni. Even her best friend Dele did not want her to go. At that moment, she recalls a joke made by Dele. He asks her not to worry if she travels on board the ship and meets the Meduse; she will never be noticed by them. Then he laughs and laughs. Ignoring his silly joke is the only way for her to keep going. The irony in the above-mentioned quotation is a clue to understanding the African experience. Ironically, Dele's joke speaks to the history of the Himba's forced colonial marginality in which they are only seen as exotic crutches without agency. At the same time, presenting Binti as a confident and stubborn girl in the context of afrofuturism revisits Womack's view of "afrofuturism" as a free, literal and figurative world for

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Shaviro, in his review "Nnedi Okorafor's Binti series", defines the term "treeing" as "a process of envisioning mathematical equations, such as the formula for the Mandelbrot Set (which produces infinitely ramifying fractals)". Review on Nnedi Okorafor's Binti series by Steven Shaviro <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1473>

women to assert themselves and to express a deeper identity and, consequently, use this freedom to redefine the black or African identity in whatever form their imagination permits.

Returning to the Himba myths as the source material of *Binti*, Okorafor engages the reader's attention to "edan" which carries an old current: First, it is described as "a stellated cube... a device too old to know its functions, so old that they were now just art" (*Binti* 17). But, as the story unfolds, it mysteriously protects her from the Meduse attacks. Binti's edan produces a bright blue deep beam within its black and grey gaps, which reminds Binti of "the bioluminescent snails that invaded the edges of [her] home's lake" (*Binti* 25). Shuddering with fear when confronting the Meduse, Binti prays to the mystery metal, which she does not know what made it a weapon, to protect her. Thus, this device guides the protagonist and becomes her mythical Africa that offers exponential potentialities. This metal artifact not only protects Binti, but later in the story, it acts as a translator that allows her to communicate with the Meduse. Again, Binti's unusual mastery of science here via the spiritual apparatus "edan" envisions a future that overturns prejudiced notions of primitive Africa while maintaining a tribal African aesthetic. Moreover, empowering this mythical object recalls Walter Mosley's view about the power of fantasy that breaks reality by altering the logic. One would notice that Okorafor creates an atmosphere that reminds us of Womack's term "The African Cosmos" (73), which appraises the power of ancient knowledge, dissolves the boundaries of normative identity, and advocates for self-definition and identity. Therefore, through Okorafor's lens, her amalgamation of past (Himba tradition), present, and future (the pioneering use of 'astrolabe' and 'edan' as technological instruments in space travel) advocates racial uplift and paves the way to what African people could do. In other words, Okorafor's exploration of the past through tradition, beliefs, and mythology attributes Africa a place in the future.

Okorafor's continual use of ancient artifacts with technological empowerment creates what Daniel Kreiss calls a "mythic consciousness" of authorized racial identity that would enable blacks to recreate and invent technologies and construct Utopian societies on outer space landscapes" (58). This is shown in Okorafor's depiction of another object from the African culture, "otjize". It is a paste extracted from the Himba red soil which women apply from head to toe. It serves, both as a cosmetic and a health enhancer for the Himba people. Throughout the novella, Binti rubs the reddish paste, "otjize", over her body and hair when she yearns for home. Describing the value of otjize, she says "the weight of my hair on my shoulders was assuring my hair was heavy with otjize, and this was good luck and the strength of my people, even if my

people were far far away” (*Binti* 20). The red color of the clay is, therefore, a symbol of the earth’s red color which indicates Binti’s strong connection with her homeland that represents her identity. Later in the story, when the Meduse realizes the value of the otjize in healing their tentacles that shrink when exposed to Binti’s edan, they respect Binti and ask to take this powerful paste. She refuses to give them her red clay saying that taking it from her is like taking her soul. Through the use of otjize, Okorafor shows that African culture can be reimagined with futuristic technology to assert black power, identity, self-worth, and the ability to interact with the other.

Eventually, the story has in no way reached its resolution upon Binti’s arrival at Oomza University. Her space adventure, stepping away from all that she knows into an unfamiliar world, is only the beginning of her struggle to assert her place in the outer world. However, it is her African heritage that provides her with the first opportunity to build a bridge between herself and the other. In this regard, Binti’s journey is perceived, then, as a free space for her to feel empowered.

## Conclusion

On the whole, Afrofuturism proves to be a promising type of fiction that African writers can use to reimagine the identity of Africa. *Binti* (2015) proves that this genre is no longer indistinguishable or shallow. Overall, Okorafor, in *Binti*, provides an empowering intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. It mixes African tradition with technology that smoothly blends the past, the present, and the future. Okorafor expertly combined traditional African artifacts tied to mysticism along with space travel and alien encounter, “to bridge the idea of an African origin with the transference of culture and family values into a space-friendly future” (Womack 12). Hence, *Binti* is “a free space” which signifies a new wave of future-African fiction that is generating vivid and original new futures while giving the reader access to an African-centric outlook. This allows Okorafor to reexamine her heritage and reimagine the future in a cross-cultural context.

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