The Politics of Death in the Selected Afrofuturist Works of Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Wanuri Kahiu

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the politics of death in the selected Afrofuturist works of three Black women: Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Wanuri Kahiu. The aim of this study is twofold: (1) to decentre in the Afrofuturist discourse the fixation on African American works (which have largely focused on Black experiences in the United States and been underpinned by masculinist concerns) by focalizing the works of Black women working from other Black traditions in Africa and the Caribbean, and (2) to provide a critical lens for appreciating Black women's Afrofuturisms. Through a close, critical, and contextual reading of five works—including Hopkinson's novels *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000), Okorafor's novels *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), and Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2009)—I underscore the authors' concerns with historical and contemporary colonial and political orders of death (necropolitics/necropower) aimed at a future without Black people.

In these women's works, this necropolitical order that aims to bring about a future without Black lives is also a gendered order. Its gendered politics is mostly expressed in the way it marks the Black woman's body as a site of Black death, a site wherein it must wage and win the war over the future of Blackness. Under the regime of colonial necropolitics, as imagined in these women's works, the Black woman's body is targeted with different forms of violence aiming to sterilize and/or kill it both for the sustenance of colonial society and for realizing a future devoid of Black presence, or a future based on the permanent injury and subjection of Black people.

In recognizing and identifying this necropolitical and patriarchal condition against Black lives in general and Black women in particular, the Black women artists whose works I discuss in the dissertation imagined prospects for alternative Black futures. In their Afrofuturist reimagining of Black survival and futurity, these women populate their works

with heroic Black women who confront different orders of death, women whose victorious struggles against these forces of death offer alternative prospects for Black and other futures. I argue in the study that the underlying counter politics (against colonial/patriarchal necropolitics) of these women's Afrofuturisms is founded on different projects of reproductive futurity based on Black women's resistance acts and leadership. My study suggests that the vision of reproductive futurity in these works is both an affirmative response against Black deaths and a radical act of Black women's liberation.

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Dedication

For my mom,

Olanrewaju Fajobi Adeniyi; the charming one

the wealth continues!

And my daughter,

Ijeoma Aduke Chigbo; the beautyful one

May the path never close.

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Introduction

On Afrofuturism and Black[1] Women's Arts

This study explores the Afrofuturist projects of selected Black women artists across a wide geographical, cultural, and temporal spectrum. In this introductory section, I elaborate the critical context of the study. In it, I trace as well as bring together the multiple contexts and traditions of Black women's Afrofuturist projects in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. I problematize the historical constructions and applications of the concept of Afrofuturism as an artistic tradition by pluralizing its multiple origins and evolving forms. Underlining the plural and multiple origins and forms of Afrofuturism allows for broadening understanding of the term and for decentring its fixation on African American experiences. My intervention throughout the study is based on approaches that trouble the Afrofuturist discourse's masculinist underpinnings oriented to African American concerns that often reiterate US exceptionalism. I go on to locate the primary concerns of wider Black women's Afrofuturisms in the criticism of necropower, hence the concerns in their projects with the politics and regimes of death.

[1] I have used a capital B "Black" throughout this dissertation to refer not to any ideal racial essentialism of identity or of any biological fact of race of African peoples on the continent or people of African descent elsewhere. Instead, I use Black to refer to the political and cultural construct mobilized by African/African descended peoples in the struggles against racism and the struggles for justice. By this definition of Black, I align with some extant scholarly views that the meaning of Blackness is not fixed but has remained open, complex, and heterogenous, or, as Achille Mbembe puts it in *Critique of Black Reason*, has "always belonged to a chain of open-ended signifiers" (6). As an open-ended signifier, Blackness has historically designated the racialization and dehumanization of people whose bodies were reduced to objects and material wealth. Historically and presently, too, it has been used to signify an affirmation of humanity for racialized and dehumanized people, an affirmation based on the possibilities and potential of self-recreation and the transfiguration of the human being. As I have come to understand it, Blackness as a complex, amorphous signifier both of violent reductionism of the human and a generative re/creation of the racialized self is a powerful construct that provides not only the vocabulary of anti-racist struggles but also what gives rhetorical coherence to the works I read in this dissertation as Black women's Afrofuturist cultural expressions. I believe my use of the term in this project as a political and cultural construct aligns with some discursive deployment of the term in the works of Christina Sharpe (e.g., *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*), Achille Mbembe (*Critique of Black Reason*), and in certain recent critical works calling for a deeper reinterrogation of the heterogenous meanings and deployments of Blackness; e.g., Annie Olaloku-Teriba's essay, "Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness."

The term Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future" to indicate "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Since Dery's coinage and definition of the term, it has evolved in scholarship beyond his specific focus on African American arts and his exclusive concern with technology and science fiction to include speculative fantasy by Black writers and artists either resident in Africa or in the Diaspora whose works deal more broadly with imaginative visions of the future often centred around Black experiences.[2]

The point Dery makes about technocultures and the "prosthetically enhanced future" (and one must add extraterrestriality/planetary reality) resonates with the thoughts of some Black pioneering theorists and practitioners of Afrofuturism, including, for example, Greg Tate (1993), Tricia Rose (1993), Samuel R. Delany (1998), Kodwo Eshun (1998), and Alondra Nelson (2002). The thoughts and contributions of these proponents have continued to drive the discourse of Afrofuturism. While other scholars have tried to call attention to the Afrofuturism of other genres beside the traditional literary forms gathered under the umbrella of speculative fiction and film, for example in music,[3] in film, comics and visual arts,[4] the key dimensions of the concept emphasize Black experiences, particularly African American literatures tracing back to the nineteenth century that focus on imagining other/alternate worlds (outside of enslavement), radical freedom, and Black utopias.

The bulk of the scholarship on Afrofuturism has centred on defining, historicizing, and mapping the borders of the concept, perhaps because it is still a term that is being worked

[2] See Womack; Eshun; Adejunmobi; Hamilton.
[3] see Chude-Sokei; Steinskog.
[4] See Womack.

out. There is the group thinking of it as a recent pop culture trend that is not necessarily tied to academia. For example, Ytasha L. Womack's 2013 book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,* is arguably one of the first primers on the subject. It attempts to define and highlight the aesthetics of Afrofuturism across a diversity of genres and popular forms. She emphasizes Afrofuturism as a pop genre. Her work further raises the question of whether Afrofuturist scholarship is fundamentally academic or popular. Womack's main project, however, seems particularly focused on underlining Afrofuturism as a peculiar aesthetic pop form. Another example that belongs in this camp is Erik Steinskog whose 2018 book, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come,* advocates expanding the focus of Afrofuturist scholarship to less discussed pop genres and elements such as sonic forms.

There are also those dedicated to thinking of Afrofuturism within African American artistic traditions going back to W.E.B. Du Bois and Sun Ra. Such works are committed to rooting the traditions of Afrofuturism in the genre of science fiction and other speculative forms, a fraught genre for African American writing and artistic practices. An example is Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones's 2016 edited book titled, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness,* which places the discussion of Afrofuturism around the frames of Black speculative fiction and science fiction. Another recent work published in 2019 is by Isiah Lavender III, titled *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. It is a more extensive revisionist project that attempts to read the works that assumedly pioneered Afrofuturism through a retroactive re/reading of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and John A. Williams as the pioneers of Afrofuturist writing.

However, while the focus on technoculture and other Black cultural imaginative forms have remained significant features of these contemporary Afrofuturist discourses, the term has still not been fully explored more broadly. Scholarly discussion of the concept is yet

to encapsulate the broader potential of the discourse to expand thoughts about Black futures beyond science fiction and the narrative of technology-powered future worlds. Even more importantly, these scholarly discourses have almost exclusively discussed Afrofuturism around African American experiences as Dery's original definition does (oftentimes disguised using the category of Black or the Black Diaspora). This presents a situation, as Louis Chude-Sokei notes in the context of music, of a "false universalism" of Blacknesses. This false universalism tends to gloss over the specificities of Black experiences across a wide geographical and historical spectrum and thus presents the peculiar forms of African American experiences as universally Black.

Hence extant scholarship on Afrofuturism ostensibly produces a hierarchized discourse in ways that give visibility and voice to African American experiences while muffling the distinctiveness of other Black experiences, thoughts, and imaginative practices, say in Africa or the Caribbean. In this way too, the discourse of Afrofuturism has come to be undertheorized on account of the glossing over of the heterogeneity and complexity of Black thoughts and imaginations globally. This gap marks an important and generative point that informs the basis of my dissertation. In my study, therefore, I provide a more expansive understanding of Afrofuturism. This expansive understanding accounts for the multiple diasporic (including transnational, transcontinental, transgressive, transformational, transverse) forms of Afrofuturism on the one hand, and on the other offers a broader understanding of Blackness beyond a consideration of African American Blackness in the US as a site of US imperialism. The larger aim of my work advocates for critical global Black studies.

As well, beside mapping the borders of the concept as some of the examples outlined above have done, another strand in the growing scholarship on Afrofuturism has tended to draw connections between the term and other genres and artistic traditions including the

intersections with discourses on science fiction, Afro-pessimism, postcoloniality, feminism, eco-criticism, posthumanism, and queer studies.[5] In several of these discussions, the inclination has been to think of Afrofuturism as an emergent impulse in the evolution of a broader response to global capitalism, White supremacism, neo-colonialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and heinous heteronormativity. The attempt has, therefore, been more precisely to theorize the utopian/antiutopian visions implied in the term with regards to its governing imaginative rationale of alternative futures.[6] It is to this latter concern with utopian/antiutopian visions of Afrofuturism that my own work is situated, with an extended focus on Black women artists (writers and filmmakers specifically).

It is important to note that in addition to their exclusive scholarly focus on African American artistic projects, the majority of the works discussed in scholarship as Afrofuturism centre crucially on works by Black men; for example, Ralph Ellison, W.E.B Du Bois, Sun Ra, Samuel R. Delany, Steve Barnes, and George Schuyler. In other words, men's works dominate and continue to shape understanding of the discourse on Afrofuturism.[7] This means that critical theorizing of Black women's Afrofuturist works across a broad geographical and social spectrum is lacking, especially with regards to accounting for not only the gendered characteristics crucial for appreciating the evolving patterns of Afrofuturist imaginations but also for the multiple forms of *Afrofuturisms* (plural) in Black women's works. As well, despite the centrality of Black women writers and artists working within the artistic tradition of Afrofuturism, committed scholarly attention that solidifies the prominence of Black women's Afrofuturism has been scant. Scholarship on Afrofuturism has yet to pay closer attention to the forms, commonalities, and divergences of Black women's Afrofuturist works.

[5] See Adejunmobi; Langer; Csicsery-Ronay; Nelson and Bould.
[6] See Zamalin.
[7] A notable exception would be Octavia Butler, who was a big name in Afrofuturism/Black SF and has been for a very long time.

Hence, I explore in this dissertation the Afrofuturisms of Black women writers, especially those that centre their fiction outside of the United States. This is with a view to theorizing the underlying visions of the future in Black women's Afrofuturist works. I use "Afrofuturisms" in the plural to account for the multiple evolving forms of the concept in works of women writing from different geographical, cultural, political, and identarian contexts.

By advancing a reading of Black women's Afrofuturisms and by identifying Afrofuturism as implicated in an idealism, I will basically be reading and advancing the concept historically as intervening (along gendered lines and as belonging) in a subgenre of the imaginative tradition of Black freedoms, Black decoloniality, and Black liberation struggles. My approach to Afrofuturism aligns with what Alondra Nelson cautions against when she observes an implicit echo of White futurism in Afrofuturism. She traces this implicit echo to the temptation in Afrofuturist projects (and scholarship) to adopt the White masculinist politics and rhetoric of futurism as espoused, most notably, in the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 futurist manifesto titled, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," which, according to Nelson, celebrates militarism, white masculinity, nationalism, technology, and a scorn of the past. My approach to Black women's Afrofuturist projects is in the attempt to deconstruct the masculinist underpinnings of the concept. It allows for a much-needed appreciation of Black women's artistic visions of the future and for recognizing the gendered dynamic underpinning different projects of Afrofuturism. It also highlights the core themes of posterity, survival, and reproductive futurism that Black women writers have been emphasizing in their works as the basis for speculating the future.

Contemporary Discourses on Black Women's Afrofuturism

In recent years, there has been a marked shift in the scholarship on Afrofuturism. Some scholars have begun to highlight the important contributions of Black women to Afrofuturism. The underlying claim has been that Black women's Afrofuturist projects have been underpinned by feminist visions challenging the patriarchal and masculinist forms of domination. I will attempt a review of some of the representative scholarship calling attention to Black women's Afrofuturisms.

In 2013, Ytasha Womack published a primer on Afrofuturism titled *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (henceforth *Afrofuturism*) wherein she defines and highlights the aesthetics of Afrofuturism across a diversity of genres and popular forms. Before Womack's book, there were essays, online group discussions, blogposts, newspaper articles, interviews and conferences thematized around Afrofuturism. However, Womack's book would be the first time Afrofuturism is discussed singularly in a book project. The publication of *Afrofuturism* which brings together scholarly works of the living practitioners served in part to put Afrofuturism into a coherent discourse, working to solidify the canonical status of Womack's book. Womack admits that the term had become an umbrella term "for an amalgamation of narratives" (24) as many more narratives are being retroactively read as Afrofuturist.

Womack's *Afrofuturism* is also an amalgamation of many strands of Afrofuturisms in art forms. She pays attention to the Afrofuturist discourse not only in the arts, but in divinity and spiritualism, mythopoesis, and African cult forms. Womack's book is equally unique for its emphasis on how Afrofuturism features in pop culture. She acknowledges the rise of the internet as contributing to the proliferation of Afrofuturist thoughts in pop culture, even as she notes that the internet in no way created Afrofuturism but only provided a platform to showcase the discourse as eminent in the different artistic practices. Importantly, too, in her

project Womack shows that classroom studies such as those by D. Denenge Akpem can help students use their study of Afrofuturism for their mental liberation:

> 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 and non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques. (9)

One distinct contribution of Womack to Afrofuturism is organizing the concept around its functionality. Afrofuturism is not just a discourse to dig into the past and produce lists of advocates; it serves as a rallying call for social justice and liberation movements. She notes that "Afrofuturism is concerned with both impact of these technologies on social conditions and with the power of such technologies to end the '-isms' for good and safeguard humanity" (36). At the heart of the Afrofuturist discourse is the understanding of a past that excluded Black peoples as contributing meaningfully to the history of science and technology as well as not belonging in the future. Womack notes that "part of the Afrofuturist academic work is uncovering these scientific investors past and present and incorporating other stories into the larger conversation about science, technology, creativity, and race" (46). Hence Womack pushes the discourse beyond popular forms in music and literature.

Yet the hallmark of Womack's contributions to the discourse on Afrofuturism may be found in her inclusion of women and her discussion of how Black women shaped Afrofuturism differently. As she writes:

> Afrofuturism is a free space for women, a door ajar, arms wide open, a literal and figurative space for black women to be themselves. They can dig behind the societal

> reminders of blackness and womanhood to express a deeper identity and then use the discovery to define blackness, womanhood, or any other identifier in whatever form their imagination allows […] In Afrofuturism, black women's imagination, image, and voices are not framed by the pop expectations and sensibilities of the day. The black woman is not held to Middle America's norms, trying to prove that she's not government dependent or aspiring to the beauty ideals in the latest blogs. Nor is there some uniform expectation of blackness that she is called to maintain. Women develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female expectations. The results are works that some critics call uncategorizable. (*Afrofuturism* 100-01)

Unlike other scholars before her, Womack devotes time to looking at not only how women make the list, but also how crucial their contributions are to the emergence of and the discourse on Afrofuturism. In a chapter devoted to exploring women's contributions to Afrofuturism titled "The Divine Feminine in Space," Womack mentions Nora Keita Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, Tananarive Due, and Nalo Hopkinson as writing feminism into the Afrofuturist genre, "creating more women images" (111), even though she claims that they all draw inspiration from Octavia Butler. Womack draws attention to the works of art curator Ingrid LaFleur, who has been curating Afrofuturist exhibitions for the last twenty years. LaFleur has an online platform, The Afrofuture Strategies Institute (TASI), devoted to researching alternate histories and alternate imaginations of Black/Africans. In 2011, Ingrid launched an All-female Afrofuturist show at Pittsburgh Gallery. According to Womack, the show featured "critically acclaimed artists Ayanah Moor, Alisha Wormsley, Krista Franklin, Staycee Pearl, and D. Denenge Akpem" (100). The artist line-up is a rare composition, considering that such programmes on Afrofuturism are usually male dominated with a few tokenistic appearances by women.

A noteworthy example happened in Germany in 2019 when the Berlin Kunstlerhaus Bethanien gallery was called out for lack of diversity when the artist-list of "Milchstrassenvekehrsordnung/Space is the Place," a programme "to explore the notion of a new space age" (How This Berlin), featured only three female artists (one white) in twenty-two artist performances. The museum, in response to the backlash, published a new curatorial statement excising from the news release words like "Afrofuturism" and "Black Panther" which had been in the previous release. An almost white male cast would have been a self-indictment on a programme touting Afrofuturism as a central point of discussion. In March 2013, Alisha B. Wormsley's text which reads "There are Black People in the Future" written boldly in white colour on a billboard was asked to be removed by the landlord because of "objections to the content" (Sharp, "Artist's Billboard Declaring").

Yet, notwithstanding these important acknowledgements of women's crucial place and contributions to Afrofuturism, one problem with Womack's *Afrofuturism* is that in such a project of wide-ranging appreciation of the discourse, she fails to critically commit to filling the gap in the discourse that is still growing, a gap necessary to illuminate as well as elaborate critically the contributions of women in a male-dominated discourse. Steinskog reminds us that the musical [and by extension the literary] canon "still seems to be dominated by Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee 'Scratch' Perry, via Earth Wind and Fire, Labelle, and Herbie Hancock, to Janelle Monae, Flying Lotus, and Jeff Mills" (29).

I share some of the observations of Tobias Van Veen in his review of Womack's *Afrofuturism* wherein he claims that Womack "aimed for universal breadth over microscopic depth" (154). Many of the artists/writers that Womack discussed are done in a hurry and not much attention is devoted to unpacking the relevance of their works to the overall project of Afrofuturism. Womack does not give attention to the deep engagements of many of the Afrofuturist works she helped to popularize in her book. It would have been perhaps more

illuminating to have more details on the works of the women Afrofuturists she mentioned in the sixth chapter of her book, particularly how the themes of the Black women writers and artists intersect with known male Afrofuturists, and how the works of these women artists/writers deviate from the works that have dominated the discourse for years. Such analysis would have probably addressed some of the concerns of Black women who deploy the aesthetic and artistic modes of Afrofuturism to show how women are reshaping the genre to tell their own stories. Darell May, art director for Stranger comics once said that "Afrofuturism stories created by Black women are so in demand they are telling stories in a new way" (Davis, "How Black Women"). Such newness was missing from the laudable contribution of Womack to Afrofuturism and feminism in Afrofuturist studies.

Prior to Womack's project of giving visibility to Black women's Afrofuturist works, the prominent feminist Afrofuturist scholar, Alondra Nelson, has contributed notably to the discourse. Nelson has been praised for her contributions in the development of Afrofuturism, especially in the popularization of the concept. Central to the convergence of scholarship and discussions around Afrofuturism in cyberspace is Nelson's work. She founded the popular AfroFuturism Listserv with Paul D. Miller, which attracted artists and scholars to develop ideas around Black futurity and technological innovation. Many scholars have praised the AfroFuturism Listserv as significantly contributing to the bloom in the interest and study of Afrofuturism in the late 1990s.[8] The Listserv was so popular that in 2000 it gave birth to the website www.Afrofuturism.net. Nelson edited a special issue of *Social Text* in 2002 entitled "Afrofuturism," a collection of essays which has now become a seminal text and which she acknowledged grew out of those discussions carried out in the cyberspace. According to Nelson, the essays and interviews in the special issue confront issues regarding race and gender distinctions and how in the digital age these distinctions were presented as not being

[8] See Womack; Steinskog.

problematic areas of enquiry ("Introduction: Future Texts" 1). For her, "the racialized digital divide narrative that circulates in the public sphere and the bodiless, colour-blind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age" ("Introduction: Future Texts" 6). Some of the works in the special issue dispel the narrative that Africa is left behind in the technological age. Loud among those voices were women.

For example, Elizabeth Hamilton in her essay, "Fatimah Tuggar's Afrofuturist Intervention in the Politics of 'Traditional' African Art," draws attention to how Fatimah Tuggar's photographic essay provides a counter narration of Traditional African Art. As Hamilton argues, Tuggar's body of work represents the cultural and temporal dynamism that is the mark of Afrofuturist art. Her computer montages and "black high-tech documents" are future-oriented yet historically conscious in ways that undermine the constructions of traditional art, such as the ethnographic present and a technologically poor Africa" (Hamilton 79). Hamilton also points at how Tuggar "in her computer montages collapses the boundaries of past, present, and future, creating worlds and narrative scenarios that accumulate and travel in multiple directions" (74). Tuggar uses her computer montages to counter notions of Africa as having a linear time and cultural purity that seem to suggest Africa's exclusion from western understandings of progress and development.

The oft-quoted definition of Afrofuturism by Nelson as "African American voices" subscribes to the notion that the concept applies rather exclusively to African American experiences and practices. Much of the progress of Nelson's Afrofuturist Listserv was possible because of the internet which at that time had considerably developed in North America and Europe but not so much on the African continent. Nelson's Listserv would perhaps have benefitted from a variety of scholarship from internet-disenfranchised African

scholars and artists who could have contributed to critical global Black studies on Afrofuturism.

However, as Sheree R. Thomas notes, the Listserv did not exclude Blacks in other parts of the world; instead, it should be understood that "The Afrofuturist listserv community recognized that there was [sic] a number of black creators innovating not just on American shores but in spaces and mediums all over the world" ("Dangerous Muses" 40). While people often quote Nelson as constructing Afrofuturism around African American experiences (often disguised using the category of Black or the Black Diaspora), her contributions to the discourse clearly show her commitments to ensuring that Afrofuturism serves not only an African American but also African/Afrodiasporic concerns. The essays and interviews in *Social Text* are a testament to these concerns with the inclusion of interviews with Nalo Hopkinson, a Jamaican-born Canadian writer and texts by Fatimah Tuggar from Northern Nigeria.

Sheree R. Thomas, the editor of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2001) and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2005), is yet another scholar who has centred Black women's voices in her projects on Afrofuturism. *Dark Matter* as the subtitle suggests is a collection of speculative fiction from people of African diaspora. The first book won the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology in 2001. The book boasts stories from W.E.B. Du Bois, Ishmael Reed, Steven Barnes, among others. Noteworthy is that the anthology also popularized the works of Black/African women speculative writers such as Tananarive Due, Jewel Gomez, Nalo Hopkinson, Linda Addison, Evie Shockley, Leone Ross, Nisi Shawl, Kiini Ibura Salaam, and Ama Patterson. Thomas would note in her essay "Dangerous Muses: Black Women Writers Creating at the Forefront of Afrofuturism" that since the publication of *Dark Matter*, Black women Afrofuturists have emerged as the leading voices creating bold, innovative works in the growing field. Writing tales that are

often interstitial, these authors blur the lines between science fiction and fantasy, the historical and futuristic, entering the interior lives and thoughts of Black women in the action. And like some of their predecessors of the previous century who weaved fantastical, science fictional elements with the historical and contemporary in their work such as Alice Walker in *Possessing the Secret Joy* (1992) or Lorraine Hansberry's invented African nation in *Les Blancs* (1970), these writers took traditional conventions and reshaped them, crafting stories that ring with imagination and feel like truth (59). According to Thomas, Black Women's Afrofuturist works are radical and "defy [as well as reimagine] old meanings imposed on black women's bodies and amplify their voices, creating characters that become heroines of their own adventures, the creators of their own unforgettable tales […] They are dangerous to the status quo, destroying old temples of golden ages past, and are stealthily building the world anew in their own remarkable image" (37).

Dark Matter, because of its more global dimensions to speculative fiction from Blacks/Africans, helped to popularize the writings of women in the speculative genre. Before then, few women writers were known to write in this mode, perhaps excluding Octavia Butler.[9] Many of the stories in *Dark Matter* form part of the readings in university syllabi used in teaching Afrofuturism and they are focused on how Black women engage the genre, even if subtly. Also, in the essay "Dangerous Muses," Thomas traces how Black women writers continue to "frame black women's agency and aesthetics in a world that often denies the existence of both" (55). According to Thomas, Andrea Hairston, Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, Sofia Samatar, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Kiini Ibura Salaam and Nisi Shawl are all writing with the Afrofuturist aesthetic mode which had previously rendered them invisible. As Thomas puts it, they are

[9] Octavia Butler was THE Black woman SF writer for so long and is presently canonized as such.

> writing works that placed recognizable black women as protagonists, as subjects of their own stories rather than objects and set pieces in those others, black women speculative writers created a space where ancient and modern systems coexist. In their new works, intergenerational systems of knowledge and survival techniques help characters mitigate the historical, seemingly infinite onslaught of anti-blackness, misogyny, and erasure. (44)

Thomas lists Ryan Coogler's 2018 *Black Panther* film as portraying strong women the way these women writers have done; hence describing *Black Panther* as a liberationist movie for Black/African women. Yet a closer examination of women's representation in *Black Panther* raises some crucial questions about the film's supposedly feminist bent. While I agree with Thomas that "black women are portrayed as sisters, mothers, wives, lovers, warriors, and scientists, […] healers" (41), I would argue on the contrary that they are only portrayed in such light to serve the aims of patriarchy.[10] None of the women is considered fit enough to rule Wakanda and all their efforts, which Thomas and other scholars praise as emancipatory, are put to making sure that King T'Challa holds the right to the throne rather than work to enthrone the women's unique visions of leadership.

Importantly, too, while these acknowledgements of Black women's practices of and contributions to Afrofuturism attempt to provide an Afrofuturist discursivity that extends beyond national boundaries, the fixation has remained on America. Rightly, some scholars and artists have recently begun calling attention to a shift that suggests that the discourse is expanding. For example, Tade Thompson, an Afrofuturist writer, echoes the geo-shift in the critical discourse on Afrofuturism when he says that Afrofuturism as African American is "'geopolitically inappropriate' as a descriptor of speculative fiction from the African

[10] See Chapter 1 of the dissertation for my extended critique of *Black Panther*'s representation of Black women.

continent" (qtd. in Samatar 2018). Tade Thompson is a British-born Nigerian whose novel, *Rosewater*, won the inaugural Nommo Award for Best Novel and the highly acclaimed Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2019. Michael Bennet hints at the multifarious state of the genre when he talks about the "the overlapping definitions of Afrofuturism," as many Afrofuturisms continue to emerge and find resonance in the thoughts of other pioneering proponents of Afrofuturism including Sofia Samatar, Greg Tate, Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose, Kodwo Eshun, and Alondra Nelson.

Many of these recent scholarly works have continued to map the project of Afrofuturism beyond the centrism on African American artists and experiences. In her 2017 essay "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism," Sofia Samatar draws attention to Afrofuturism and its planetary coverage. Mapping what she calls an alternative history from the Black American understanding of Afrofuturism, she traces literary materials that have engaged issues of futurity and how those materials are not only focused on African peoples and the continent, but other worlds. In Samatar's cartography of Afrofuturism, the message is very crucial as she uses the metaphor of the data thief that scavenges for materials on Africa and the future. Samatar's Afrofuturist vision is one that calls attention to the often whispered but undiscussed question of who is qualified to write Afrofuturism. There are few scholarly works on what it means to be Afrofuturist and non-Black and the possibility of a mutual exclusivity for both.[11] The question of the relationship between Afrofuturism and other racialized identities other than Black or those who have African ancestry is not within the

[11] For instance, Samuel Delany is not concerned so much about the race of the writer of an Afrofuturist work as much as he is concerned about the presence of prominent Black characters in an Afrofuturist story. In the essay "The Mirror of Afrofuturism," he calls attention to Dery's inclusion (in his seminal essay, "Black to the Future") of William Gibson, a white writer, as an Afrofuturist. It is equally noteworthy that Dery who coined the term "Afrofuturism" is white. While I think that it matters who occupies central space in the discourses on Afrofuturism and that Black artists should be the heartbeat of the discourse, I am by no means suggesting that works by non-Black peoples cannot be Afrofuturist. My interest in the current project is to decentre the US-centrism of Afrofuturism and call attention to some thematic threads linking the Afrofuturist works of Black women with cultural connections to Africa, the Caribbean, and other North American spaces.

scope of this study. As more scholarship leans to the coverage of Afrofuturism in popular culture and with the recent interest of Hollywood in Afrofuturist blockbuster creations, more questions on Afrofuturism and non-Black identities will have to be debated.

Yet the gradual decentring of the discourse's fixation on the US has not particularly gone beyond acknowledging diversity in Afrofuturist projects. Little has been done to provide important nuance and trace the multiple genealogies and trajectories of Black women's thoughts, influences, approaches, and practices in the constructions of Afrofuturism. In the attempts to decentre the African American focus in the discourse on Afrofuturism, some emergent approaches especially in the case of African writing have attempted to demarcate clear differences in the traditions and artistic approaches to works described as Afrofuturist. In recent years, some African writers and scholars—even though a number of them are based in the US—have begun championing an idea of "Africanfuturism," distinct from Afrofuturism. Their argument is that Afrofuturism is Western-oriented and dominated by African American experiences. One of the proponents of "Africanfuturism" is the Nigerian-born American writer, Nnedi Okorafor, who is credited with coining the term Africanfuturism. According to Okorafor, Africanfuturism is an African sci-fi and speculative genre that unlike Afrofuturism is "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" ("Africanfuturism Defined"). Okorafor also introduces another term that she calls Africanjujuism to describe "a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualties and cosmologies with the imaginative" ("Africanfuturism Defined"). The need for these kinds of specificity and redefinition, according to Okorafor, is to rid the genre of its de facto Western/American influence that processes Black experiences through a Western/American lens. Hence, according to Okorafor, "Afrofuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in Oakland, CA, USA.

Africanfuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in a neighbouring African country" ("Africanfuturism Defined"). This shift away from the focus on America is present in Okorafor's novels, for example, in *Lagoon* (2014) wherein she sets an alien invasion of earth in the city of Lagos, Nigeria.[12]

While I subscribe to the political underpinnings of such decentring projects, I do not think that these projects are essentially distinct from the Afrofuturism of African Americans. This is because these projects appear to be addressing similar concerns of white supremacism, anti-Black racism, colonization, slavery, and the dehumanization of populations marked for elimination. I would argue that there are more points of convergence than these traditions diverge. The works that Nigerian diaspora writers such as Okorafor, Akwaeke Emezi, and others are producing from their places of residence in the West are significantly shaped by ideas and ideologies steeped in the Western frameworks and practices. My point is that the global imperial condition and the cultural politics of empire makes it impossible to make a strong argument about the distinctiveness in cultural and artistic practices particularly in the context of artistic practices that evolved as responses to this global imperialism and the conditions of its violence. Hence, unlike Okorafor, my decentring approach is not based on any claims about the essential distinctiveness of non-American Afrofuturist projects. Instead, it is an attempt to underscore other important sites, contexts, experiences, and themes shaping the broader emergence of Afrofuturism from African and marginalized American (e.g., Caribbean and Canadian) contexts. In this attempt, I underscore the Afrofuturist projects in the selected works of Black women artists working in and from other Black traditions other than the US. In my reading of their works, I spotlight

[12] For a discussion of Okorafor's works as attempts to decentre America in the Afrofuturist discourse, see, for example, Wabuke, "Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and the Language of Black Speculative Literature". Some other works by Okorafor that are not US-centered include *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2008), *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (2019), *Remote Control* (2021) and *Noor* (2021).

their concerns with contemporary colonial politics of death (necropolitics/necropower) that aims to eliminate Black lives in the future. In these women's works, this necropolitical order that aims to bring about a future of Black disappearance is also a gendered condition. Its gendered dynamics is mostly expressed in the way it marks the Black woman's body as a site for death, a site wherein it must wage the war over the future of Blackness. Under the regime of necropolitics, as imagined in these women's works, the Black woman's body is targeted with different forms of violence aiming to sterilize and/or kill it both for the sustenance of white society and for realizing a future devoid of Black people. In recognizing and identifying this necropolitical condition against Black people in general and Black women in particular, the Black artists whose works I discussed in the dissertation imagined prospects for alternative Black futures. In their Afrofuturist reimagining of Black survival and future, these women populate their works with heroic Black women who confront different orders of death, women whose victorious struggles against these forces of death offer alternative prospects for Black and other futures. In the artistic works of these Black women, as I will elaborate in subsequent chapters of the dissertation, different projects of reproductive futurity serve as counter and revolutionary politics against the forces of colonial and patriarchal necropolitics. In these works, reproductive futurity is both an affirmative response against Black deaths and a radical act of Black woman expression.

Selected Works and Methodological Approaches

My focus in the dissertation is the selected works of three prominent Black women artists: Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Wanuri Kahiu. These writers have been notable figures in the emergent artistic traditions of Afrofuturism, and their works have continued to attract critical attention, albeit no scholarly attempt has so far been made to read them together. Importantly, their works will provide a broadly cultural, social, and

geographical spread for exploring Black women's Afrofuturisms outside of the familiar African American context. My choice of these writers is based in part on the fact that they write from different yet intersecting histories and practices of Black radical traditions. For example, Hopkinson is a Jamaican-born Canadian whose works draw on the vibrant Black traditions in the Caribbean and on the traditions of Black and Indigenous writing in the settler state of Canada. Okorafor is a Nigerian-born American and her works draw on combinations of African and African American cultural traditions. Kahiu is a Kenyan based international Film Writer/Director. Her works draw on various East African tropes of women's writings and storytelling practices. Accordingly, these women situate their works within distinctly separate geographies both literally and imaginatively. For example, Hopkinson sets her stories mostly in Canada and the Caribbean; Okorafor and Kahiu in African contexts.

The diasporic underpinnings of these women's works invite critical readings, as I do in this dissertation, that resist ideas of futurities that are rooted within national borders but instead privilege multiple *trans* (transnational, transcontinental, transgressive, transformational, transverse) visions of the future. By these multiple *trans*, I am underscoring the complex configurations of Blackness that resulted from the histories of transatlantic slavery—a mode of Black-being-in-the-world that cuts across national, continental, spatial/formational histories, and experiences. The notion of *going beyond* or *across* suggested in *trans* is precisely why the prefix articulates the different yet relational forms of Black experiences and imaginations of futurities. My thinking of *trans* in the context is also indebted to Christina Sharpe's use of *trans* to suggest "a range of configurations of Black being that take the form of translation, transatlantic, transgression, transgender, transformation, transmogrification, transcontinental, transfixed, trans-Mediterranean, transubstantiation […], transmigration, and more" (*In the Wake* 30). The prefix "trans," as Sharpe explains, signals to "what is in excess of those states" (i.e., continental, gender,

formation, migration) that the Black [trans]Atlantic histories have produced as well as thrown into crisis (*In the Wake* 30).

Equally important, the works of these artists that I discuss in my project were published between the late 1990s and the first 20 years of the twenty-first century; hence inviting a reading that considers the regimes of necropower set in motion in post-Cold War, post-9/11, and the new millenarian consciousnesses. Throughout the dissertation, I read my selected primary texts of these authors using a couple of conceptual frameworks. In order to delineate clearly the concept of Afrofuturism and to situate it historically within the context of Black women's works, I trace the multiple genealogies of Afrofuturism. As I have observed earlier, the common historical discourse of Afrofuturism is deficient for my own purposes, in large part because its genealogy does not account crucially for the multiple and gendered dimensions of the concept. Hence, I draw on broader Black contexts, traditions, and thoughts in order to rethink the history of Afrofuturism and to situate it within a wider background that also accounts for its transnational, transcontinental, and diasporic networks and frameworks. In this attempt, the works of several Black women thinkers, writers, and activists will be useful for my purpose.

Given that my hypothesis emerges out of the notion that Black women's Afrofuturisms are responses to contemporary forms of necropower, I theorize the prevailing conditions of necropolitics in my selected works by using the influential work of Achille Mbembe on the subject. By so doing, I underline from my selected primary texts the conditions and processes that characterize contemporary regimes of necropower, and theorize the ways that Black women's Afrofuturist projects are intervening in and providing alternative futurities against these regimes of necropower in order to assert (1) the gendered conditions of necropolitics and (2) the crucial roles of Black women in projects of change and futurity. While I apply the above-outlined theory rigorously in order to provide useful

nuances to the study, I recognize the value of close reading as an indispensable tool of literary criticism. Accordingly, throughout the chapters focusing on my reading of the selected novels and films, I close read the texts in order to identify important elements in them as well as the significant features of each writer's storytelling approaches.

In my first chapter with the title "Black Women's Afrofuturisms and Necropolitics: Beyond the Tokenism of *Black Panther* Afrofuturism, or Observations for a Reading of Black Women's Afrofuturist Projects", I provide further contextual critique informing my focus on Black women's Afrofuturist projects set outside of the US. The chapter provides a critique of Marvel's 2018 film *Black Panther* (directed by Ryan Coogler) as illustrative of the concerns out of which grew the present project's aims. My critique of *Black Panther* serves as a springboard for introducing the gaps impelling my project. I contend in this chapter that *Black Panther*'s Afrofuturism is illustrative of a masculinist, US-centric vision of global Black futures that have dominated contemporary discourses on Afrofuturism. By making this claim, I call attention to the film's narrative and representational strategies that while on the one hand gesturing to an Africanist, global-orientation to Black futurities remains on the other hand rooted in African American histories and experiences presented as the nomos of Black histories and experiences. Even more importantly, I argue that the Afrofuturism of *Black Panther* relies on a patriarchal, masculinist project that rewards women with significant positions of power as long as that power is put in the service of masculine retention of power and in the maintenance of patriarchy. I build on this critique to introduce an alternative account of Black women's Afrofuturism that centres Africa and other Black geographies in the Caribbean and North America and the archetypal Black women figures on whose struggles rest Black futurities. In addition, the chapter introduces the gendered necropolitical conditions at the heart of Black women's Afrofuturist concerns. I proceed to discuss Nalo Hopkinson's works as illustrative of the gendered necropolitics of Black women's

Afrofuturist projects. In Chapter Two, titled "Politics of Death in Hopkinson's Selected Afrofuturist Novels", I explore two novels by Hopkinson to argue that her writings are significantly underpinned by a politics of death. This death politics manifests as the violent outcome of the activities of colonial patriarchy on racialized women. Under this regime of death, Black bodies (especially Black women's bodies) become targets of violence whether in the quest to find organs to sustain white lives or in the project of sterilizing them against the future. Using Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000), I contend that Hopkinson's works provide an important intervention in response to the colonial violence of necropower through inscribing radical continuity on the oppressed lives and dead bodies of racialized peoples. I consider Hopkinson's early fictions as representative of a body of Afrofuturist works (within the contexts of Canada and the Caribbean) from the late 1990s to the early 2000s that respond to the necropolitical conditions impelled by the continuing forms of slavery and colonialism. Hopkinson's Afrofuturist vision in these works offers a counter-politics based on reproductive futurity won on the bodies of young Black women.

I explore further the politics of reproductive futurity in Chapter Three, "The Politics of Fear and Death in Okorafor's Selected Afr(i)futurist Novels." I discuss two of Nnedi Okorafor's novels: *Who Fears Death* (2010) and *The Book of Phoenix* (2015). Events in both novels are set largely in African contexts but are positioned transversally with other worlds. I read these works as narrativizations of contemporary necropolitical conditions that have turned Africa into a death world. Okorafor's works highlight death worlds that lead to genocides and the eradication of gendered (including minoritized and racialized) bodies. I show that the death worlds in these works are founded and sustained on a politics of fear. I go on to argue that Okorafor's Afrofuturist project in these two novels is organized around a feminist critique of the necropolitical conditions of the colonial and postcolonial states. This Afrofuturist project attends to two critical issues: one, it is mobilized against fear, and

second, it serves to position the Black woman at crucial interfaces of alternative future worlds founded on the politics of renewal and reproductive futurity, which emerges through a process that pulls completely apart the brutal structures and conditions of necropower. Whereas the poetics of Hopkinson's Afrofuturist works in the late 1990s and the early 2000s respond to the conditions of necropower through a politics of reproductive futurity that is hinged on resilient posterity, as I show in this chapter, Okorafor's intervention favours reproductive futurity and renewal as a kind of liberationist praxis.

In Chapter Four titled, "The Politics of Dreaming in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*," I look at the Kenyan artist Wanuri Kahiu's Afrofuturist short film *Pumzi* (2009) and its politics of dreaming, particularly how the film repurposes the vision of the future that is occasioned by the sacrifices of the Black woman hero. I interrogate further in this chapter the trope of reproductive futurity and the visions of motherhood that have underpinned the Afrofuturist projects of some Black women, e.g., Hopkinson and Okorafor. While I discuss *Pumzi* as similarly based on a politics of reproductive futurity in response to colonial and imperialist forms of necropower, I argue, however, that Kahiu's short film offers a complicated vision of motherhood based on its posthumanist (non-anthropocentric) vision of futurity. This vision, as I elaborate in the chapter, displaces the human [racialized or otherwise] as the most important subject or figure of the future.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I reiterate the insights discussed in the different chapters and offer a creative ending to the dissertation. This creative ending is based on my own short story titled, "As It Was." The story is speculative and responds to the politics of reproductive futurity in the selected works of my study. My preference for a creative ending to the project is not only to bring my creative writing skills into my doctoral dissertation but also my way of providing an imaginative response that allows me to speculate alongside the incredible works I have tried to analyze in the dissertation. My

creative response also allows me to open literary and cultural criticism up a bit as a site not only for clarification and analysis but also for speculation. In my Afrofuturist story, I envision abortion as an elaboration of the liberationist projects of the works I have discussed in the dissertation. My vision of abortion underlines in part the limits of imagining Black femininity through the prism of reproduction. At the same time, it underlines abortion as an affirmative, political, and futuristic project of feminine expression of agency.

Chapter One

Black Women's Afrofuturisms and Necropolitics: Beyond the Tokenism of *Black Panther* Afrofuturism, or Observations for a Reading of Black Women's Afrofuturist Projects

Introduction

I begin this chapter by providing a critique of Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018). My aim is to use the film's Afrofuturist representation of Africa to delineate my observations of certain illustrative trends that have come to predominate the project of Afrofuturism. My goals are to outline what I consider to be the problematic nature of these trends (in the context of *Black Panther*) while noting their privileging of masculinist ethos and their US-centrism. I will then offer some thoughts based on the Afrofuturist visions and practices deriving from African and Caribbean contexts, most notably founded on Black women's writings and experiences. In addition, I track a thread in Black women's Afrofuturist projects—i.e., their critiques of necropower—in order to lay the ground for my discussions of the thematic of race and gender as well as the speculative significance of Black women's Afrofuturisms in subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Marvel's *Black Panther*, Africa, and the Problems of Representation

Before I go on to highlight the tokenistic portrayal of Black women in Marvel's Hollywood blockbuster *Black Panther* (2018; directed by Ryan Coogler) and the film's limitations that I present as a counterpoint to the primary Afrofuturist works I discuss in subsequent chapters of the dissertation, it suffices to provide some broader contexts on the film, the gap it meant to fill as a work of cultural representation, and its global reception. The commercial success of *Black Panther* is an important reminder of the continued "global"

market value of exoticized cultural representation of Africa. In addition to the fact of *Black Panther* breaking market records,[13] popular reception of the film has been quite positive. Some reviewers praised the film for its supposed "embrace of diversity and representation" (Bishop)[14] while others described it as "a cultural watershed" for its Afrofuturism and its representation of African/Black cultures as well as its predominantly Black cast (Lowry).[15] The positive reception of the film was so engulfing that even state-sanctioned cultural institutions in the US (e.g., the US National Museum of African Arts, and the National Museum of African-American History and Culture) were quick to display in their galleries artifacts they have in their collections that, as they claimed, influenced one or other props and costumes used in the *Black Panther* film. Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post* perhaps captures the core of certain positive reviews of the film when she writes thus:

> Drawing on elements from African history and tribal culture, as well as contemporary and forward-looking flourishes, "Black Panther" pulses with color, vibrancy and layered textual beauty, from beadwork and textiles of Ruth Carter's spectacular costumes and Hannah Beacher's swarm, dazzlingly eye-catching production design to hairstyles, tattoos and scarifications that feel both ancient and novel. (Hornaday)

Evident from the above quotation is the excitement with the film's cinematic display of African "tribal culture," that is, a filmic representation of "African history" and experience in terms redolent with exoticisms of supposedly African tribal cultures and identities: beadwork and textiles, hairstyles, tattoos, and scarifications.

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[13] *Black Panther* is the 9th highest grossing films of all time. It grossed over $1.3 billion at the box office. It is the highest solo superhero film and the second highest worldwide grossing film of 2018, only trailing *Avengers: Infinity Wars* (Information correct as of November 2022).

[14] See Bishop, "*Black Panther* is the Grown-Up Marvel Movie We've Been Waiting for"; Coetzee, "Between the World and Wakanda".

[15] See Lowry, "'Black Panther' Pounces onto Marvel's Top Tier"; Oduah, "Audiences across Africa Hail *Black Panther* for Humanizing Black Characters".

It is noteworthy that across several African contexts, the film's reception was similarly positive (Coetzee 23). Writing in *The Telegraph UK*, Hedges-Stocks observes that many Africans were in awe of *Black Panther*, mostly based on the film's capacious representation of diverse African cultural forms and identities. For example, Omanga and Mainye observe that in Kenya *Black Panther* was well received because of the film's display of Kenyan colourful cultural costumes and other cultural practices (2). Essentially, the "emotional responses" to the film by African audiences seem to come from what some critics consider to be a psychological satisfaction of encountering supposedly [Black] African costumes, languages, bodies, music, and lore at the core of a major Hollywood film (Wilt).[16] In this encounter, the film is believed to grant its Black/African audiences a rather communal psychological satisfaction. Renée T. White thus describes this psychological satisfaction of the film to African/Black audiences:

> Since its opening, *Black Panther* has become a destination event. Its impact on people of African ancestry has been especially notable. The seismic reaction from black audiences around the globe is not only a response to the esthetic beauty and storytelling of the movie. It is as if audiences are experiencing mass psychic relief. (426)

To be sure, I am by no means underestimating the significance of the psychological satisfaction or communal psychic relief that the film seemed to give to many of its supposedly "Black" audiences. Frantz Fanon has explained that cultural and political practices that address themselves to the project of communal self-identity and celebration result (in the context of Black experiences) in response to the violence of racism and colonialism. In this response, such projects become "directed by the secret hope of

[16] Wilt, "How Black Panther Liberalizes Black Resistance for White Comfort".

discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others" (Fanon 170). Imaginative projects of cultural affirmation and rediscovery have been at the heart of anticolonial and antiracist political activism and thoughts in Africa and beyond such as found, for example, in Negritude Movement, Pan-Africanism, and in the emergent traditions of Afrofuturism.[17] These projects have responded not only to the physical violence of colonialism but also to its psychological and symbolic forms. What sets *Black Panther* apart, arguably, is its insistence on and representation of Black African culture thriving in a speculative world of advanced, fancy technology.

As Simon Gikandi explains, the violence of colonialism, for example, in the African context, encompasses an attack on the physical, material, psychic, and symbolic aspects of African peoples: "While it is true that colonial conquest and rule were effected through violent military methods, aggressive diplomacy and blatant economic exploitation, these processes ultimately came to acquire their authority and totality when they were represented in powerful narratives of conquest" (Gikandi 58). The violence of narratives and representation that Gikandi describes proved exceedingly severe because it produced a constellation of what Edward Said has described as Orientalist (or what Christopher Miller and V. Y. Mudimbe variously described as "Africanist") discourses; that is, a set of racist, simplistic and reductionist views of colonized [African] peoples that gained intellectual authority through a process of textualization and narrativization that shaped the popular imagination of Africans by and for the West.[18] Fanon perhaps explains this textual and narrational process most acutely when he writes thus: "Colonisation is not satisfied merely

[17] See Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century". See also Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*.
[18] See Said, *Orientalism*; Christopher, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*; Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*. For an analysis of the emergence of this Africanist discourse in anglophone literary traditions, see also Hammond and Jablow, *The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa*.

with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 170). In other words, the colonist's attack on the pasts of colonized peoples is meant to erase them from history as well as freeze them in history/the past. Colonial violence targeting colonized people's culture attempted to diminish the pasts of colonized people, to deny the humanity of colonized people, and to provide ideological legitimacy for the colonizer's violence. Hence, based on the recognition of the significance of culture (as a signifying practice) to the project of colonialism, cultural projects of retrieval and recovery by colonized people usually proceeded with a deliberateness to challenge such Orientalist or Africanist assumptions of colonialism.[19]

Perhaps the inclination to hold up *Black Panther* as a cultural and political project providing an imaginative horizon for discovering or constructing "some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us" explains the generous critical reception of the film by some African scholars. For example, Achille Mbembe considers *Black Panther* to be a tremendously beautiful film. Mbembe describes *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturist film that envisions an Afropolitan world: "une extraordinaire synthèse de toutes les idées et des concepts qui, depuis au moins la fin du XIXe siècle, auront accompagné les luttes nègres en vue de la montée en humanité" [an extraordinary synthesis of all the ideas and concepts that, since at least the end of the nineteenth century, have accompanied Negro fights in anticipation of the rise of humanity] ("*Black Panther*: Une Nation Negre debout").[20] By invoking the Afropolitan – a term Mbembe uses to explain the film's African world as one realized through a "synthesis" of or an acknowledgment of the cosmopolitan forms of

[19] By suggesting that culture is a signifying practice I aim to underline the signifying potential of cultural practices and the idea of culture as providing sites for the productions and negotiations of meanings. On the subject, see, for example, Stuart Hall, editor, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

[20] This English translation is thanks to Kehinde Lawal.

African cultures – he means an African-world that is complex, ever mobile, and ceaselessly shifting from one form to another in sound and language. It is not clear why Mbembe thinks that the film's *synthesis* of African cultures calls for celebration considering, as I will go on to briefly describe shortly, the possibility that synthesis may in fact constitute a dubious oversimplification of complex cultural and historical experiences. What is clear from Mbembe's review of *Black Panther*, as well as several other similarly positive reviews, is that the film is an important cultural and political project due to its pan-Africanist Afrofuturistic vision of an Afropolitan world, one that, as Fanon would have it, is meant to "rehabilitate us."

In addition to the communal psychological gratification that *Black Panther* offers for some who consider the film a cultural success for Black Africa and the Black Diasporas, the film is celebrated in part because it assumedly grants a fictional Black African nation (Wakanda) technological superiority over the so-called developed world and for what some reviewers and commenters saw as its explicit political statement on Black liberation struggles. In such reviews of the film, *Black Panther* is understood to be consciously fashioned as a political statement on global Black power and liberation (D'Agostino 2). The film's citations of historic Black revolutionary activisms in the US (notably seen from posters of the US hip hop group, Public Enemy, littered in its Oakland opening scene—the reference to Oakland is also significant as it is the origin site of the Black Panther Party and its activisms), as well as its dramatic situations that are premised on pan-Africanist response to white racism, colonialism, and the global order of Western domination, suggest that the filmmakers intended much more than to entertain with the film: *Black Panther*, in other words, self-fashions as a political cultural assertion realized not only through what many believe to be its cultural revolutionary status (as the first Marvel blockbuster focused exclusively on a Black superhero), but also assumedly through its very narrative.

One can conclude that these celebratory positions on the film's seemingly political, cultural, and revolutionary significance are based on the understanding of the film as responding to the dominant regimes of Western representations of Africa and "Blackness" in pejorative terms. As Stuart Hall explains in the context of Caribbean cinema, the celebratory disposition to films (such as *Black Panther*) that celebrate marginalized identities derives from a desire to embrace its identity politics and treat it as a resource of "resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which [Black experiences have] been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation of the West" (Hall 225). Except, as I will go on to argue, that *Black Panther* cannot be separated from or treated as not belonging in such dominant Western regimes of representation that centres the United States.

Contrary to the overwhelmingly positive reception of the film, I contend that *Black Panther* is a profoundly problematic Afrofuturist film that reinforces and endorses colonial tropes of Africa and Black identities. In this claim, I agree with the apt observation Tiyambe Zeleza makes that the film is an assiduous reproduction of stereotypes of Africa ("*Black Panther* and the Persistence of Colonial Gaze"). At its core *Black Panther* is anything but radical. It appears to offer instead a stereotypical and simplistic portrayal of Black struggles disguised as a revolutionary vision of Black [and African] liberation struggles. I consider the film's seemingly revolutionary identity politics as tokenistic. The tokenism of *Black Panther* – as manifested, for example, in its facile portrayal of a technologically advanced African kingdom in Wakanda, in its display of exoticized African fabrics and cultural costumes presented as an affirmative cultural representation, and its centrism of African American experiences as the essence of Black diasporic histories and experiences – further underscores the substance of the film's problematic narrative of Africa, its faulty social imaginary that reinforces Western colonial images of Africa, and importantly its portrayal of so-called

"strong Black women"[21] as apolitical servants fighting for the enthronement of a male monarch.

Even more to my concern in the dissertation, the film has been celebrated for its supposedly radical representation of Black African women. I argue otherwise and suggest instead the apparent masculinism of *Black Panther* as a male hero story that contrasts with the Black female hero figures I discuss in the primary texts of the dissertation. The masculinism of *Black Panther* may easily be traced to its origin in the Marvel and DC superhero comic genre. It is perhaps noteworthy that the Black Panther figure was the creation of two white men: Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.[22] Even though the film is directed by a celebrated Black director, its roots in that comic book series raises some questions about the stereotypes of Blackness and the patriarchal logics of the story, which are artifacts of the late-1950s white male imaginings of a particular kind of exotic Black futurity.[23] In the film, the celebrated women characters given prominent roles as general, scientist, queen mother, etc. are engaged in maintaining a patriarch in power. Their roles are tokenised in the story as none of the female characters alter the plot trajectory or the history of the kingdom in a conflict over tradition and modernity staged between two men.

But before I go on to describe the problems of narrative and representation in *Black Panther*, a few reiterative statements seem necessary. It is important to put into perspective that *Black Panther* is a commercial product of Hollywood. In other words, the film is driven

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[21] For an analysis of the "Strong Black Woman" syndrome in popular culture and narratives, see Parks, *Fierce Angles: Living with a Legacy from the Sacred Dark Feminine to the Strong Black Woman*.

[22] Many people believe that the character must have been inspired by the Black Panther Party, which came into existence in 1966, the same year that Lee and Kirby first introduced the Black Panther comic character, even though the authors have argued that this was not the case (Brown 298).

[23] It is noteworthy that recent entries in the Black Panther comic series have included narratives supplied by celebrated Black writers including Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nnedi Okorafor. It might be worth exploring these recent comic series alongside the earlier ones from the 1960s through the 1980s and early 2000s to determine the shifts and re-visions of the character and the story as well as to determine the extent to which Black writers can do what Audre Lorde cautions against (in "The Master's Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"): to write Black freedom and futurity out of a white imaginative creation of Black freedom and futurity.

by an entertainment principle that is circumscribed by a market ideology. The ultimate goal is economic profit, which in this case appears to have been achieved through extravagant spectacles tending to trivializations and opportunistic reification of supposedly African cultural identities. As a commercial product of popular Western entertainment, *Black Panther* is perhaps not the best work for examining the gendered and other problems of African American Afrofuturist narrative and representation of Africa, except [of course] that popular art has proven repeatedly to be a powerful cultural tool that shapes perceptions and worldviews. Moreover, the historical and cultural significance of *Black Panther* as a major Hollywood superhero film in recent years that is focused on a predominantly Black cast and a Black superhero means that the film wields an enormous cultural power to shape and normalize imaginary of social reality, an influence evidenced by the frenzy that greeted its release.[24]

In addition to the market ideology underpinning the film's production, *Black Panther* belongs in a genre of Hollywood superhero blockbuster founded on a saviour/warrior complex. This saviour/warrior complex, as some scholars have indicated, is a product of an American cultural and nationalist self-image of its military prowess and status as the self-appointed saviour of the world.[25] In highlighting this point, I note that *Black Panther* is in fact a Hollywood creation, one that offers a vision of American superheroism. Notwithstanding its supposedly fictionalized African setting and notwithstanding the filmmakers' evident attempts to cover a wide geographical range in the film's narrative including staging incidents in England and in South Korea, the United States remains central

[24] An example of this influence may be found in *Coming to America 2* that not only cites *Black Panther* in almost every one of its scenarios but also reproduces the problematic narrative of a dialectic of tradition/modernity that I discuss subsequently in the context of *Black Panther*.
[25] See, for example, Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*; Romagnoli and Pagnucci, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature*; Dittmer, "American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the Post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom".

to the film's narrative. For example, the film's plot divides significantly between Africa (Wakanda) and the US. The United States provides the site of King T'Chaka's fratricide leading to the orphaning of the boy who would become Erik Killmonger. The United States also provides the site for King T'Challa's newfound humanitarian mission to engage "the world," as he declares at the end of the film, not poverty-stricken and ravaged African neighbours bordering Wakanda. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind the imposing presence of the United States in *Black Panther*, and to consider the film's vision of Africa as entangled in the dominant representational regimes of Hollywood.

Consider the film's depiction of Wakanda as a technologically advanced African kingdom, a point most celebrated by critics of the film as a revolutionary cultural watershed and which has now become the popular understanding of Afrofuturism. A cursory look at this portrayal of Wakanda reveals an inconsistency that perhaps derives from a poverty of the imagination of Africa. One notices that the technological status of the kingdom is not consistent with its social and political life. That is, Wakanda's technologies do not in any serious way shape the deeper social, historical, political, and cultural life of its peoples and practices. In Wakanda, one sees skyscrapers, speed trains, futuristic jets – take note that these images are iconic symbols of Western modernity. Yet one is quick to observe that Wakanda's vibranium-propelled trains and aircrafts bear no commuters. The film does not grant the audience access to the insides of these skyscrapers and so it is safe to speculate that these structures harbour no offices or residences to suggest that there is an economic base that is propelled by the supposedly technological sophistication of the kingdom. Wakanda does not have roads for vehicular transportation. Absurdly too, technologically-advanced Wakandan border guards prefer to use militarized animals (rhinos), not tanks, for example, to wage combat; never mind that the kingdom prefers to develop hi-tech aircrafts, but not militarised birds, for its air travels. Compared with the film's representation of South Korea where, as

Zeleza observes, the urban modernism of South Korea's city, Busan, is not encumbered by images of rural lifestyle, the image of Wakanda is a problematic picture of rural modernism, of a society in possession of advanced science that in no way or form shapes its social and political life ("Black Panther and the Persistence of the Colonial Gaze").[26]

Also observe, Wakanda lacks mass media for its own people. King T'Challa, while aboard his hi-tech futuristic jet, listens to the BBC news reporting about his own father's death. Wonder why a technologically advanced Wakanda does not have a mass media culture serving its own people, a media that reports its own experiences and realities? Since, as some scholars have reminded us,[27] technology does not grow in a vacuum but develops within a culture, one would think that Wakanda's technological knowledge should in the least reflect the culture of its society. What one finds instead is a society divorced from its acclaimed technological prowess and know-how, an observation that leads one to conclude that the portrayal of Wakanda in terms suggestive of technological sophistication that in no significant way shapes the social, economic, cultural, and political conditions of the kingdom is sheer tokenism. What one finds in this way of portraying Wakanda is a desire to yoke together the pastoral that has been the staple of Western imagination of Africa with the dominant symbols of Western modernity and futurism – skyscrapers, speed trains, and jets. The result is an inconsistency that underlines a poverty of the imagination of Africa. The pastoral imagination of Africa often presents Africa as some kind of safari site, a place of wildlife, of tribal and ethnic peoples costumed in animal hides and customary attires. In this imagination, Africa is the backyard of Western civilization, where life has remained simple,

[26] One also notes that the film's representation of non-African places (e.g., in the US, the UK, and South Korea) is based on a realism that links its fictionalized depictions of those places to their real historical referents. Its representation of Africa is, however, based on a fictional referent not to any real place. While there are perhaps possible symbolic significance at play in this pattern of filmic representation of places, the association of Africa with a peculiar form of colonial fiction demands more critical apprehension.

[27] See, for example, Gyekye, "Philosophy, Culture, and Technology in the Postcolonial," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* edited by Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi.

agrarian, and primitive. In this imagination, Africans are noble savages whose simple, abject lives contain some important wisdom to teach the civilized world. This is the stereotypical European colonial imagination of Africa. The stereotypical images from this colonial imagination entered Wakanda unproblematically—as seen in the native costumes of Wakandan peoples, in the tribal marks and scarifications, in their weaponization of animals for combat warfare, in their customary political monarchical system that is based on a combat tradition. The imagination of Africa in Wakanda that is saturated with pastoral living is one evidence of the patterns of stereotypically colonial tropes underpinning the filmmakers' representation of the continent.

It is equally noteworthy that Wakanda's advances in technology do not appear to change its ancient warrior-based monarchical political system and the traditional wrestling combat upon which coronation is based. These cultural practices – primordial at best – that strangely remain unaffected by the kingdom's scientific and technological advancements constitute the basis for a murderous African American to easily waltz into the supposedly fortified nation and with utmost ease lay claims to the throne, successfully. Common Wakandan peoples do not participate in any inclusive way in determining its leadership. The spectator is meant to understand that this never-colonized, civilized, and advanced African nation, which is not beset by all the numerous problems facing contemporary African nations, has been perpetually at the mercy of benevolent monarchs, monarchs who had perennially shielded the nation from wars by maintaining a conservative approach to international relations. Yet, ironically, the technologically perceptive kingdom that assumedly has not been interested in wars and global politics seems to be singularly advancing in its weapons programs. All its technologies portrayed in the film appear designed essentially for military engagement but not for daily social life.

The cinematic fancy in *Black Panther* reveals an urge to portray Africa as a place of some exotic pastoral life and experience, as well as a technologically sophisticated place. This fancy, however, was not successful in harmoniously integrating both. The exoticism of one mutilated the reality of the other and it is for this reason that Wakanda's scientific advances are so excluded from its cultural and political existence. The impulse to depict Africa (Wakanda) as a futuristic place of technological advancement and primordial living all at once is at the heart of what I consider as the exotic impulse underpinning Western imagination and problematic narrative representation of Africa's historical trajectory. The point of these observations is to highlight the nature of Afrofuturist imagination undergirding the production of *Black Panther*. These observations of discourteous inconsistencies in *Black Panther* (perhaps signifiers of Hollywood's poor taste) underscore patterns of much deeper problems of the film's narrative.

The impulse underlying the narrative and representation of *Black Panther* seems to be one that privileges a totalizing approach, manifesting as what Mbembe has described as a synthesis or a mixture of [Black/African] cultures and historical experiences ("*Black Panther: Une Nation Negre debout*"). In Wakanda, one finds a pan-Africanist distillation of African identities and Black diasporic identities. For example, as many reviewers have been quick to point out, Wakanda encapsulates languages, clothing, music that are traceable to different Black African and Black diaspora groups. The setup of Wakanda's ritual combat seems to be a fusion of Afro-Brazilian capoeira and certain traditional African wrestling games.

By offering a Wakanda that encapsulates pan-[Black]Africanist identities, *Black Panther* through its speculative vision of Africa has positioned itself as making a statement concerning *all* of Black African and Black diaspora histories, cultures and experiences. In this symbolic positioning, Wakanda becomes at once a discovery and a speculation of a

glorious and beautiful Black African kingdom; in other words, an imaginative re/construction for Black African and Black diasporic pride.

Yet, in this attempt to offer a pan-Africanist vision of Black and African experiences, *Black Panther* simplifies all of Africa into "Black" Africa and the projects of global Black histories and experiences as one of pride and recuperation. The point isn't simply that the problematic representation of Wakanda in the film presents a reductionist vision of Africa that excludes other African peoples or one that suggests a homogenous project of Black liberation struggles. The more significant problem here is that such an approach to representing Black African cultures and experiences reinforces and normalizes the faulty and erroneous racial ontologies of Blackness that simplify the complex historical, cultural, and political experiences of peoples on the continent. Such simplification often constructs Africa as inhabited by a singular body of Black folks bound together in terms of a racial kinship, one that possesses a culture that is immanently similar. Such a vision of Africa disguised as pan-Africanist—even if speculative—tends to distort and trivialize the distinctive and diverse African cultural and historical experiences. Difference is often presented as only a matter of variation in cultural costumes and scarifications.

The point is not that Afrofuturism or speculative fiction or science fiction should be loyal to realism or that it should attempt to represent reality accurately. After all, the genre's uniqueness is precisely its radical claims to alternative reality and speculative insights. The problem is not that *Black Panther*'s representation of Africa is inaccurate. The problem is that it builds its speculative world using blocks moulded from European racist fantasies of Africa.

No other aspect of the film is its problematic imagination and diagnosis of Africa's historical conditions most present than in what I consider to be the core of the film's diegesis.

The central tension of the story is based on a dialectic of tradition and modernity, that is, a binary opposition between the past (tradition) and the present in which the past continues to haunt the present and progress is signified by a radical break with tradition. This dialectical drama in *Black Panther* reinforces the stereotypical view based on the binary categories of a tension between tradition and modernity that continues to overshadow and hinder understanding of African cultural and historical trajectories. In this dialectical vision, tradition signifies authenticity, backward-looking, rural life, primitivism, conservative thinking; modernity implies progress, liberal-mindedness, forward-looking. This dialectical drama is also a masculine drama. It relies on a patriarchal understanding of modern African history based on masculine quests for power and control. It is perhaps no wonder that in this drama women enter into history through sideways gesture; such as waging a fierce war to return a deposed male king on whom the destiny of the nation rests and who is singularly saddled with the power to change the nation's course and policy.

To be fair to the makers of *Black Panther*, this century-old theme of African history as constantly driven by a never-ending conflict between tradition and modernity has been at the center of several discourses on Africa. The mid-twentieth century – that is, the period of anticolonial struggles in Africa and the rise in African nationalisms – witnessed variants of the ambivalence towards history. In the struggles against colonialism and the bid to construct new national identities from the nation-state structures cobbled together by European colonizers, two ambivalent impulses seemed to underpin the cultural and political projects of postcolonial nation-building. One emphasized the importance of African traditions and the need to recover Africa's glorious pasts in postcolonial nation-building. This school of thought has been designated broadly with such terms as Afrocentrism or Africentrism or

nativism/traditionalism.[28] The Afrocentric argument has largely been underpinned by the facts of European colonial violence and its violent denial of Africa's history. Centering and affirming Africa's histories and traditions was, therefore, a logical response to the violence of colonial denialism. For the Afrocentric impulse, basically, the direction of Africa's future must be in the resurrection of traditions.

On the other side of the debate are thinkers and activists who were suspicious of Africa's historical memories and traditions. For the anti-traditionalist, tradition poses a threat to modern nation-building because it emphasizes complicated micro-level, ethnic-centric histories and experiences, as against shared structures of experience for building nations out of the rubble of colonial devastation. For them, tradition needs to give way to the modern impulse founded on the trauma of colonization for any true progress to be realized in Africa.[29]

The persistence of this theme in discourses on Africa—including discourses coming from within and outside Africa—underlines an inability to think and imagine African experiences (even in contemporary times) beyond the key tensions one find in colonial and early postcolonial discourses on Africa's historical transition from colonial to quasi-independent governance. The inability to discourse "Africa" beyond the dialectic of tradition and modernity suggests that Africa continues to be imagined as dwelling in a never-ending limbo, an *abiku* condition (as Ben Okri imagines it in his novel *The Famished Road*), a state of perpetual liminality. In this liminal condition, Africa's future becomes constantly understood as a wager between two conflicting forces: traditionalist forces that insist on a primitive, nativist ethic of social order and policy, and progressive forces that see Africa's

[28] See, for example Asante, *Afrocentricity*. On the subject and a critique of Afrocentrism, see, for example, Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*.
[29] See, for example Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*; Táíwò, *Africa Must Be Modern: The Modern Imperative in Contemporary Africa – A Manifesto*.

survival to rest squarely on its willingness to modernize by which is meant to go global (read: Western). In this conflict, as *Black Panther* portrays it, traditionalist forces are the bane of Africa, constantly holding Africa's present back, leaving Africa's survival only realizable through a radical break away from the primordial and oftentimes violent obsession with tradition.

An aspect of the consequence of the past's hold on the present in *Black Panther* presents itself through the character of Erik Killmonger's return to Wakanda. King T'Chaka's (Bonisile John Kani) inflexible approach to maintaining tradition has led him to kill his own brother Prince N'jobu (Sterling K. Brown) who has gone rogue in the US. To cover up this "crime," he abandons N'jobu's son Erik Killmonger/N'Jakada (Michael B. Jordan) to the whims of an American society. The boy grows into a psychopathic monster and returns to cause Wakanda serious problems. The evident message of the drama is the return of the repressed. His return and partial defeat of T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) turns Wakanda upside down, cinematically depicted in the film using an upside down shot of Killmonger as he strides to occupy the throne.

The drama of Killmonger's troubles to Wakanda makes two points in one go. First, it underlines the nature of "sin" committed in the maintenance of African tradition. The sin is one of a backward gaze and an inflexible insistence to maintain tradition even at the cost of fratricide. The second point is to have "Africa" finally accept its own significant share and responsibility in the history of slavery and the violent displacement of Blacks in the world. Killmonger comes from a lineage of descendants of enslaved Africans, as suggested in his link to his absent African American mother—an absence that underlines the film's marginalization of women as focal and important subjects of Africa's history and struggles for change. This is the ancestry he firmly identifies with at the point of death when he refuses to be cured from his wounds: "Why?" he asks T'Challa who has hinted at a cure for his

wound. “So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the oceans with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. ‘Cause they knew death was better than bondage.” One is quick to observe that here Killmonger’s words (signalling a matrilineal identification) are inconsistent with his earlier identification with his father N’jobu, which in fact is his reason for staking claims to the Wakandan throne. Yet, in identifying with the Middle Passage, Killmonger invokes the lineage of his mother whose absence and invisibility in the film’s narrative underscore a notable gap and perhaps a source for generative speculation.

Killmonger’s vengeful violence against Wakanda (e.g., in killing Zuri [Forest Whitaker] who is the guardian of Wakanda’s tradition, and in briefly dethroning the late King T’Chaka’s son and setting in motion a civil war) has been aimed at accomplishing two things: to return violence to oppressive white power, and to yank Wakanda out of its slumbering hold on tradition that is lying at the heart of the kingdom’s isolationist and conservative international policy. He succeeds in attaining the latter aim, albeit not in the exact form he would have wished: hence King T’Challa ostensibly breaks with tradition and declares in the end a willingness to engage with the world (a point I will return to shortly). In this success, the audience is perhaps meant to witness Killmonger’s villainy transform somewhat into a positive act.

If one considers that *Black Panther* was produced to fill a cultural gap by providing an Afrofuturist vision of Black and African superhero, then the question really would be: What would a Black African superhero do, given the history of global white supremacy and historical oppression of Blacks and Africans? *Black Panther* clearly answers this question by privileging the male superhero. It tries to make up for its refusal of a female superhero by assigning women with seemingly important roles to play in a male plot. The film appears to provide a drama of its own refusal to allow a female superhero when Nakia (Lupita Nyong’o) offer the magical herb to General Okoye (Danai Gurira), an opportunity to become the Black

Panther. Both women refuse to become the Black Panther and remain content in their roles as loyal servants to male kings. By so doing, the film encourages an understanding of ambition for power and a visionary drive to lead the nation as a masculine quality. By this representation, the film answers the question of what a Black superhero might do given the atrocious histories of Black oppression by favouring two masculinist visions processed through Killmonger and T'Challa.

Killmonger is the figure of the vengeful super-villain who while the filmmakers are not ready to accept the terms of his villainy that is founded on retributive justice are equally not fully ready to do away with him entirely. Hence, he has to be a different kind of villain, the heroic villain, a guilty scapegoat whose fall serves to change the anointed hero (T'Challa) to accept the validity of his mission. In other words, Killmonger has to become a scapegoat – a guilty goat, nevertheless – sacrificed for Wakanda's historical transition from a tradition-bound kingdom to a more open and global-oriented one. The momentous point of this break with tradition comes after Killmonger's temporary defeat of T'Challa sends the latter man down back into the ancestral realm where he confronts his dead father. While the film does not make clear the spatial location of the ancestral realm, my guess is that the ancestral realm is somewhere below the earth metaphorically since embarking on the journey requires that the sojourner is first buried in the ground.

T'Challa's visit to the dead reinforces the katabatic form underpinning the film's narrative. The katabatic form seems crucial to the narrative of *Black Panther* because it underlines the excavatory project of pulling Wakanda out of its subterranean hibernation. As Rachel Falconer observes in her study *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, the katabatic imagination or the descent narrative form, which has remained a prominent feature of Western writing since ancient times, has served in different ways as a paradigm of struggle in

the confrontation with history. Usually, the journey through the lowest point is meant to transform the sojourner and equip them with strength, wisdom and experience.

In *Black Panther*, the portrayal of T'Challa's katabatic sojourns to the ancestral world is twofold. His first visit to the ancestral realm during his coronation shows him celebrating and embracing tradition and asking to learn a lot more from it. His second visit finds him rejecting tradition as wrongheaded. This second descent and successful ascent from the world of the dead is not so much a quest for wisdom as it is his rejection of tradition and the past.

In the ancestral realm, T'Challa has to reassess Wakanda's tradition and find answers to the kingdom's modern challenges. He confronts his dead father who stands as the mouthpiece of the past (tradition) cinematically depicted by placing him in the foreground of a line of other royal ancestors standing behind him. To the ancestral throng, young T'Challa rebukes: "You were wrong! All of you were wrong! To turn your backs to the rest of the world!" That backward turning, signifying the conservative nature of Wakanda's tradition, is the cause of present threat to the kingdom. The young king acknowledges that Killmonger is "a monster of our own making," ostensibly authorizing a vision of an "African" responsibility for the supposed historic anger and violence of the Black diaspora [particularly those in the US]. "I must right these wrongs," declares T'Challa, and then goes on to register his break with the past: "We let our fear of discovery stop us from doing what is right. No more! I cannot stay here with you." With this declared break with tradition, T'Challa arises from the realm of the dead a resurrected man, born-again with a new consciousness and commitment to "right [the] wrongs" of Wakanda's (read: Africa's) past.

As I noted earlier, the dialectic of tradition and modernity that underpins the film's narrative has become a constant narrative about Africa, from both inside and outside Africa, particularly in the context of imagining the continent's troubles, historical development, and

considerations of its future. This narrative insists that the major factor impelling Africa's modern plights has to do with a perennial combat between progressive and conservative impulses, the former seemingly forward-oriented and global-looking, the latter as backward-looking and insisting on the values of tradition. *Black Panther* resolves this conflict in favour of the former.

A fundamental issue with the centrality of this trope in the film is that it does not only sell a false colonial-driven assessment of Africa's historical experiences but also blames so-called African traditions (that it strangely appears to celebrate in its portrayal of African costumes) for the continent's contemporary problems and for the supposed monstrosity of the Black diasporas. *Black Panther* will have us think that African advancement is being hindered and haunted because of Africa's inflexible hold on the past (tradition) or because of "sins" committed in the name of this tradition. At the same time as *Black Panther* offers Wakanda as a model African nation whose success is due to its non-colonization by Europe, it also depicts Wakanda as a failed experiment on account of its tradition. Curiously, the filmmakers have not been content with blaming African tradition for Africa's troubles, but even go the extra mile to apportion responsibility for African American "anger" and "violence" on the sins of African tradition.

Black Panther's haste to put Africa at the center of responsibility for historical crimes against itself and its diasporized progenies is testament to its colonialist evaluation of Black/African realities. *Black Panther* portrays Killmonger as the incarnation of African American anger and violence from the experience of slavery and racism in the US. A problem with depicting Killmonger in this way is that his pathological inclination to violence and bloodletting appears to support the view of the so-called angry Black male as violent and prone to criminal acts. His embodiment of extreme violence prepares the spectator to accept the violence done to him as necessary and right. In this way, too, Killmonger's message of

redemptive violence and violent self-defence against white supremacist violence on Black peoples is criminalized. Unlike the colonial condition of existential violence that produced the affirmative anticolonial violence that Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the condition of Killmonger's violence appears rather as a pretext to satisfy his pathological thirst for blood. His is not the creative violence seeking to liberate, it is instead a totalitarian form of violence (just like the colonial violence it claims to be up against) seeking to destroy anything in its way.

As if this representation of Killmonger isn't already terrible enough, *Black Panther* relocates responsibility for his transformation into a "monster" to Africa as T'Challa declares during his second momentous confrontation with his royal forebears. Africa's responsibility in Killmonger's monstrosity is based on its dispersion and abandonment of its own children. In the effort to maintain tradition as it were, Africa (Wakanda) left its progenies to burn. Killmonger, as the film portrays him, must therefore be seen as the product of the crime of Africa's past. The film's narrative of Africa's abandonment and complicity in the "criminality" of the Black diaspora (or precisely African Americans) appears on its face to be a subtle (if not a most daring) racist submission made in recent years about Black experiences.

The absence of Killmonger's African American mother in his life appears to have been probably done with a view to emphasizing his links to Africa and in order to use this link to stage Africa's complicity in his monstrosity. This complicity manifests in Wakanda's (through King T'Chaka's) role in denying paternal guidance to the child and ostensibly abandoning him to the whims of America. That the child grows up to participate in the murder of the African monarch who has killed his own father as well as to cause Wakanda enormous problems smacks of providential justice.

The repression of Killmonger's maternal lineage in favour of his patrilineal connection to Wakanda reveals *Black Panther* to be anything but radical and a break with tradition. *Black Panther* privileges patriarchal tradition and the film's diegesis supports a process of patriarchal retention of power. The force of conflict in the film is after all men in combat over the throne and soul of Wakanda. Women are not qualified to compete for the throne, even when opportunities present themselves to the women, such as the different moments in the film when Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) and Okoye (Danai Gurira) severally turn down responsibility to become the Black Panther. They prefer to serve as surrogates fighting to maintain the patriarchal foundations of their nation. The image of the muscular African strongwoman suggested in characters such as Nakia, Okoye, Shuri (Letitia Wright), and Queen Mother Ramonda (Angela Bassett) is, in fact, not as revolutionary as one might expect when understood that these women's various commitments have been essentially in the services of male monarchs.

The kinds of facile and tokenistic representation of so-called African cultures that I have highlighted earlier in the chapter is precisely at work in the film's representation of its "African" strongwoman. *Black Panther* would have us imagine women warrior figures fighting to save or reform men – in the same way as Wakandans fight among themselves to save white society – as a positive liberationist image of femininity, even if the women are ultimately working to retain society's patriarchal traditions. Giving women prominent roles (such as military general, scientist, etc.) traditionally reserved for male figures while not reworking the terms of social relations and the social structures of patriarchy upon which society derives a sense of itself does not offer a radical break with the status quo. Simply put, it's sheer tokenism.

In the film's epilogue staged as King T'Challa's address to the United Nations, which in a sense is his victory speech against the conservative impulse to hold on to nationalistic

tradition, the Wakandan king states clearly his commitment to engage with the rest of the world:

> For the first time in our history, we will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world. Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth. More connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one, single tribe. (134 mins)

When someone asks what the kingdom has to offer the rest of the world, the conspiratorial amusement on the king's face exchanged with *those* who know says it all. The film's spectator gets the irony and is supposed to participate in this knowledge of the kingdom's advanced scientific knowledge and resources hidden and hoarded from the rest of the world.

From T'Challa's speech, the spectator is supposed to understand that the historical concealment of African knowledge base and resources is the working of an African fear of discovery and a conservatism springing from a desire to avoid colonization leading to a hold on tradition. The speech reveals that the concealed Wakandan kingdom is at once a graveyard of "scientific" knowledge and rare "natural" resources, and its future depends on its willingness to arise from the graveyard of history and share its buried treasures with the rest of the world. King T'Challa's successful ascent earlier from the grave already foreshadows the kingdom's symbolic emergence from the grave of the past. *Black Panther* seems less concerned with the process of burial of such a powerful kingdom, of the history that forced this kingdom into a graveyard. King T'Challa's declaration in the epilogue about "sharing [African] knowledge and resources" is a travesty and a faulty assessment of Africa's

contemporary situations, including the continent's continued experience of colonial despoliations and extortions. The logic of T'Challa's speech is premised on a problematic view that Africa (Wakanda) is conservative, particularly about its "indigenous" knowledge and resources, and that it can assume a relevant status in the global community if and only when it is ready to "share." This narrative reinforces the European colonial trope of Africa as a place of hidden knowledge and hoarded resources, what Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow have called the "tropical treasure house theory" (33), or as V.Y. Mudimbe puts it in *The Invention of Africa*, "the myth of an African treasure house" (59).

It is important to remind one that at the heart of the European colonial mission in Africa and the rest of the colonized worlds was the quest for supposedly hidden treasures and knowledges of other peoples. Travel writing and literatures of colonial exploration by Europeans – a notable example is H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) – are laden with such exotic images of distant places that are filled up with supposedly "rare" resources and inhabited by "savages" who do not understand the importance/value of these resources. The narrative of an African kingdom in possession of hidden scientific knowledge and a rare resource (vibranium) in *Black Panther* reinforces and validates such romantic colonial imaginations of Africa as a site of hidden treasures. One positive, one must concede, is that the film grants power and agency to Wakanda, and Wakandans, at least, to know the importance and value of their vibranium.

Yet the narrative of *Black Panther* even goes further to suggest that the only significant way Black Africa (Wakanda) can participate in global affairs as a force to be reckoned with must be, as King T'Challa declares, to share its hidden knowledge and resources. So suggested, *Black Panther* pushes aside contemporary relations of inequality and colonial exercise of control over Black Africa's knowledges and resources by Western and Eastern powers—in other words, it ignores the necropolitical conditions [present in the works

discussed in subsequent chapters of the dissertation] impelling Black oppressions in Africa and elsewhere in the world. An understanding of Africa as a site of global exploitation and violence is cast aside in favour of a false image of the continent as a monumental force that has been induced to slumber due to its inflexible hold on traditions whose time is past. *Black Panther's* response to questions of how to deal with continued colonial injustices and oppression is to preach Africa into "sharing" its indigenous knowledges and resources, as if Africa isn't already over-resourced and overexploited, as if global powers are not already exercising firm control and imperious agency over so-called African knowledges and resources, as if there are indeed hidden knowledges and resources on the continent that are not already in the firm grip of the imperial power orders. But, as one may be inclined to ask, why should the film be held to such critical standards that are often extended to works of realism given that it is, after all, a work of speculative fiction? I would argue in response that it is for the simple reason—if one considers the film as aligned to the Afrofuturist cultural project—that *Black Panther* builds its speculative narrative on the histories of slavery and colonization in Africa and beyond and organizes its representations around antiracist and anticolonial politics. In other words, it sets itself up as a radical cultural project of global Black liberation.

My discussion of *Black Panther* in this chapter is meant to show how the project of Afrofuturism as one finds in the film is largely driven by masculinist concerns (claims to monarchy and political power, resource extraction, violent resistance, superheroism, etc.) and how these patriarchal concerns are dominating and enforcing the understanding of Afrofuturism including African-based Afrofuturism imagined through an African American lens. In addition, I wanted to underscore the US centrism of such Afrofuturist works (seen through a Black Hollywood lens), and the marginalization of Black women's roles and experiences even while appearing to assign women with major roles.

Also, importantly, *Black Panther* glosses over a crucial aspect of what, in the film, might have offered a committed interrogation of the gendered necropolitics unequally delivering violence to Black women. Consider the scene at the beginning of the film when the Black Panther and his team intervene to save some kidnapped Black girls and women. The scene is most likely a reference to the historical Boko Haram kidnap of hundreds of schoolgirls in the town of Chibok, Nigeria.[30] The unfortunate historical incident was the kidnap of nearly 300 schoolgirls, who were kidnapped from their boarding school on April 14, 2014 by the Boko Haram terrorist group. Throughout the attack which went on for hours, there was no state intervention as the girls were marched into the forest, held in captivity for months, sexually assaulted, and some of them married off to their kidnappers, and some killed. In *Black Panther*, an alternative history of the Chibok story is presented. In this fictional version, the Black Panther intervenes to rescue the girls as part of Wakanda's humanitarian efforts in Africa. While there are valid questions to be raised about the politics and ethics of this representation of the Chibok girls' experiences, *Black Panther* does not seem to be interested in probing deeper into the conditions that made women and girls targets of a terrorist campaign nor is the film's plot informed or shaped by the girls' story. Instead, this scene in *Black Panther* appears to advertise Wakanda's technological prowess and humanitarian work in Africa—typical of Western attitudes and engagements in Africa. The girls' experiences serve as springboard to dramatize male superheroism and saviourism. Black women's experiences are not the main subjects and concerns of such a masculinist Afrofuturist imagination, nor are women crucial for considering historical changes and projects of futurity. At best, as *Black Panther* does, Black women are given major roles to play in a plot centering men and their reign as the arch subjects of Black liberation. The

[30] For more information on the Chibok Story, see, e.g., Parkinson and Hinshaw.

subsequent sections of this chapter track other contexts and visions of Afrofuturism that centre Black women's experiences and struggles.

"Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise": Afrofuturism and Black Women's Writing

In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison draws on a popular, mythical story of a blind old clairvoyant woman and some mischievous kids who attempted to trick her into demonstrating that she is not in possession of any clairvoyant powers that folks believe her to possess. As Morrison recounts, the kids had asked the blind woman to tell them whether the bird one of them had in their hand was dead or alive. After a long-troubled silence that Morrison interpreted to mean a reprimand of the kids, the old woman finally responded,

> "I don't know", she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture")

Morrison interprets the test by the kids and the old woman's response as a drama of artistic speculation. The blind woman cannot see what the kid is holding let alone be certain that it is a dead or living bird. In other words, the kids have put her on a test of failure – a blind guess. Yet the old woman's reply to the kids, according to Morrison, underlines her attempt to shift "attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised": responsibility (Morrison, "Nobel Lecture"). "It is in your hands," therefore, becomes the blind woman's refusal to make speculation a one-sided affair and an exercise of demonstrating clairvoyant powers. Instead, the speculative becomes an invitation to responsibility, to refuse assertions of power or superior insight and knowledge.

Morrison's anecdote provides a succinct account of the character of my understanding and approach to what today is broadly described as Afrofuturism—that cultural practice of speculating Black futures by negotiating pasts, presents, and futures of Black experiences. In her Nobel lecture Morrison reads the "bird" of speculation as signifying language and the blind woman as "a practiced writer" in a speculative chase. She uses this anecdote more broadly to meditate on the complex conditions of writing African American historical experiences as well as the promises and pitfalls of language and art in articulating Black historical and traumatic experiences. The idea of speculating Black experiences as an art of generative and responsible practice underlines an important element of what I will go on to describe in subsequent chapters of this project as a crucial feature of Black women's Afrofuturisms. This feature is marked by responsibility, which informs each artist's artistic visions and commitments.

As a term signifying an artistic practice, Afrofuturism loosely describes the speculative artistic works of Black artists attempting to imagine Black futures. A central question of Afrofuturism has remained thus: What is the future of Blackness, especially given the persistent conditions of violence characterizing the past and present experiences of Black peoples around the world? The project of speculating Black future is a daunting task. Some, like Morrison, may insist that speculating alone is as revolutionary as it is importantly political, especially because the project by virtue of its form enlists the speculation of possible futures whose outcome cannot be known upfront.

In this section, I want to trace some of the wider histories and traditions of this artistic impulse that puts Blackness at the centre of projects of speculation. I will do this, however, by centering certain discourses on Black women's struggles and experiences in order to shift focus from the masculinist emphasis of Afrofuturist discourses most notable (as I showed in the preceding section) in *Black Panther*. Also, the attempt here is to broaden the discourse on

Afrofuturism in ways that account for both common and divergent visions and commitments to speculation. Throughout, my approach centres women's experiences at the same time as it decentres the fixation on African American experiences in the discourse on Afrofuturism by centring Africa and the Caribbean instead.

The Transgressive Figure of Black African Women's Afrofuturism

As Moradewun Adejunmobi has explained, if indeed the notion of cognitive estrangement or what Darko Suvin has called the novum (or "a strange newness" [373]) is at the heart of the genre of science and speculative fiction, then this artistic impulse and practice of cognitive estrangement are firmly rooted in Black African storytelling forms and other Black traditions (268). The impulse to estrange the consciousness to force it into a radical speculation of reality is a crucial quality of Black African arts. This impulse is already entrenched, for example, in what is more popularly regarded as African magical realism and fantasy and similar traditions among Black writers in other parts of the world. Some notable works in the twentieth century by famous African writers such as Daniel Fagunwa (*Forest of a Thousand Daemons*; 1938), Amos Tutuola (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*; 1952), Tawfiq El-Hakim (*Fate of a Cockroach*; 1966), Yambo Ouologuem (*Bound to Violence*; 1971), Buchi Emecheta (*The Rape of Shavi*; 1983), Ben Okri (*The Famished Road*; 1991), among several others provide a strong basis for rethinking the place and importance of the speculative writing tradition in Africa and elsewhere in the Black world. Importantly, this kind of literary practice that is addressed to speculating the future is central in African and Black women's writings more broadly.

While not providing a literary history of Black women's speculative writing in Africa and elsewhere, it is perhaps noteworthy that only a few years after Octavia Butler who is regarded by some as the "mother" of Afrofuturism published her famous novel *Kindred* in

1979, the novelist Buchi Emecheta published one of the first Afrofuturist novels by a Black African woman in 1983, set in Africa and titled *The Rape of Shavi*. Emecheta's novel centres Black African experiences in its exploration of the nuclear destruction of the planet as a result of Western avarice. The nuclear destruction leads Western society to invade Africa, first as refugees and subsequently as colonizer despoilers in what is clearly a classic retelling echoing previous traditions of Africa-Europe contact narratives and colonial alien invasion stories as found in numerous African folktales but also in published works of the early twentieth century including South Africa's Thomas Mofolo's 1920 novel *Chaka*, the Cameroonian writer Jean-Louis Njemba Medou's 1932 novel *Nnanga Kon*, and Fagunwa's Yoruba novels, among others.[31]

Emecheta's speculative narrative serves in significant part to underline and bring into focus what I consider to be an important figure of Black African Afrofuturisms: the figure of the transgressive woman contemplating the future. This is a figure of tension that in many instances bestrides history (the past and its present traditions) and posterity. One can argue that an archetypal feminist figure of several Black African oral traditions (especially in West Africa) is a woman known in many tales as the headstrong (or the stubborn) woman.[32] She is usually young, beautiful, and determined. Her story usually centres on her stubborn refusal to marry any of the men in her town and in the neighbouring towns and cities. Her resolve makes her a person of renown—if not notorious—as several men compete for her attention seeking ways to break her and make her into a wife.

Yet all the attempts failed. Her story travels far until it reaches the world of monsters and spirits. One monster in particular feels challenged by the story that he goes over to the

[31] For a discussion of Emecheta's *The Rape of Shavi*, see Danita, "The Cycle of Utopia in Buchi Emecheta's *The Rape of Shavi*"; Wabuke, "Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and the Language of Black Speculative Literature".
[32] My specific focus here is from the Yoruba oral traditions. Yet there are several examples of this figure in the oral traditions of other African societies in West Africa and beyond.

king of monsters to seek permission to visit the world of humans and claim the headstrong woman. On receiving permission, this monster—ugly and repulsive—set out by visiting different parts of the world to borrow the finest of human body parts. With the borrowed parts, he transforms into a very handsome, charming young man. He would eventually succeed in winning the headstrong woman, perhaps in part because of his looks and because of the adventures he promised. As he returns home with the woman, he begins returning all the body parts he had borrowed so that by the time he reaches his home he has become fully transformed into a monster. There in the world of monsters he enslaved the headstrong woman.

The figure of this headstrong woman occupies a very important place in several twentieth-century Black African written literatures for different reasons, but mostly perhaps because of this figure's relation with the story of colonization and indigenous oppression of women. The originators of that tale probably use it as a cautionary tale warning young women to be careful about their choice of spouses, the understanding being that men searching for wives always wear borrowed polishes and manners that they discard along the roadside the moment they get the woman into an imprisoning marital bind.

Yet the tale is much more than a cautionary marriage story; it is loaded with sentiments about the wrongheadedness of a determined woman who wishes to choose what her society or community has not approved. The plot progressively works against the woman leading to her punishment for wanting more than is available in her town. The young woman's decision to look beyond her community appears to threaten the masculinist foundations upon which the society stands. As the supposedly most beautiful young woman in her community, she represents in a sense "its virtue and fecundity," as Dokubo Goodhead puts it, and "therefore cannot be simply let go" (62). To grant her success in her headstrongness is tantamount to rupturing the stability and constitution of society built on

male power and dominance. Hence, she must be punished for her determination and rescued by a male hero, a corrective plot meant to teach young women to obey the customs and traditions of their people.

One of the earliest appearances of this figure in modern African literature is in Amos Tutuola's 1952 fantasy and speculative novella, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. In the novella, the headstrong woman is taken by a spirit monster described by the novelist as a curious creature, "beautiful 'complete' gentleman" called Skull (18). The hero (or superhero) of the story, a man known as the palm-wine drinkard, manages to rescue the young woman from the monster. He is then rewarded with a marriage to her by the woman's father. Both in some of the folktale versions and the adaptation in Tutuola's novella, the so-called headstrong girl is forced from one enslavement to another, from one regime of domination to another, from a monstrous foreign colonial oppression to an indigenous one. It is perhaps no wonder that this figure whose story tells about the different oppressive regimes—indigenous and foreign colonial—wagering on her life comes to define Black African women's feminist literatures of the twentieth century as found in several such writings.[33] Many of such feminist works jettison the Black male [super]hero/rescuer and privilege instead the woman's own heroic struggles in her confrontations with history.

One notable feminist adaptation of this figure may be found in the works of Ama Ata Aidoo, especially in her 1970 play *Anowa*, but also in her novels. Unlike the characteristic narrativization of this figure in African men's writings as a transgressor punished or defeated for taboo desires and headstrongness, as one finds, for example in Wole Soyinka's characterization of Sidi in his 1962 play *The Lion and the Jewel*, Black African women's

[33] A few notable examples are as follows: Aissatou in Bâ's *So Long A Letter*; Lucia and Nyasha in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Olanna and Kainene in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as well as Ifemelu in *Americana*. All these women are figures who transgress oppressive social and political systems. What unites them is the trope of the headstrong woman.

adaptation of this figure differs significantly on several scores. For example, in Aidoo's *Anowa*, the headstrong woman turns her rebelliousness into a moral weapon against her society's complicity in the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Aidoo, unlike Tutuola, refuses to imagine the foreign colonizer as a non-human monster while humanizing the indigenous society. In *Anowa*, both the colonizer white and indigenous peoples are humans engaging in an abominable atrocity in the name of trade. Throughout Anowa—the so-called headstrong woman—confronts every fibre of moral failing in her society including challenging her husband's immoral involvement in the slave trade and exposing his impotence which he has tried to hide by appealing to different cultural authorities. In the end it becomes apparent that her society cannot accommodate her transgressive moral consciousness and so she kills herself in revolt, a final act indicting and dramatizing the peril confronting her society should it refuse to change.

This figure is what one finds in several women's works narrating Black African women's transgressive activisms in different genres but most notably in the speculative genre. This figure refuses to be held down by the past and by customs and traditions. She is both the figure of African feminist writers' speculation and herself a figure offering different visions of the future. In other accounts, as found in several of Emecheta's writings but also in the first published novel by an African woman—Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966)—she comes to reject society as it has been constituted in history, oftentimes choosing instead to stay a distance away from it, a decision that attracts further ostracism as well as different mythologizing about her including the mythology of her possession of clairvoyant powers as the blind old woman of Morrison's anecdotal tale. Hence this figure is the same one with the gift of sight, the one that Morrison remarked about in her Nobel lecture. She is often suspected of witchcraft and clairvoyance, perhaps because she focuses so much on contemplating the future that others usually ignore or try to prove her blind just like the

mischievous kids in Morrison's anecdote. This figure, which presents a counterpoint to the Black male superhero or the reactionary women of *Black Panther*, is what I find as the inspiration in the speculative Afrofuturist works of the Black women selected for study in this dissertation. That these works significantly establish their plot narratives on this perhaps uniquely Black African woman figure underscores the transgressive characteristic of Black women's Afrofuturism as I will show in subsequent chapters of the dissertation. Yet, it begs asking how this African woman figure is relationally linked to the Black African diasporas, especially the Black Caribbean and that this figure is an alternative to the masculine hero figure in *Black Panther*.

The Traditional Early Morning Old Woman of Black Caribbean History

In her book *The Black Shoal*, Tiffany Lethabo King describes quite provocatively a conversation about his poetry that the famous Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Braithwaite, had with the African American poet Nathaniel Mackay in 1995. In the interview Braithwaite ponders what is meant by Caribbean poetry by providing a poetic meditation. The poet gazed from his house overlooking a sandy beach one day and sees something remarkable:

> This is an ole yard, okay? and this old woman is
> sweeping, sweeping the sand of her yard away
> from her house. Traditional early morning old
> woman of Caribbean history. (qtd. in King 5)

This old woman of Caribbean history is at once both morning and history, engaging "in a peculiar dawn ritual that Braithwaite cannot fully understand the first time he views it" (King 5). What seemed most confounding to the poet was that the woman kept sweeping sand away from sand into the sea, especially given that water would invariably return the swept sand:

> She's going on

like this every morning, sweeping this sand – of
all things! – away from… sand from sand
seen?... And I say Now what's she doing? (qtd. in King 6)

Yet much later the poet comes to appreciate the old woman's ritual as a valuable practice "of survival, gratitude, and perpetual crossing of the 'middlepass age' [keeping] the ebb and flow of the tides touching the shores of the continent of Africa and the coasts of the Caribbean" (King 7). The woman's ritual is therefore one of continuity—an ebb and flow that constantly underscores the endless continuums and connections between Africa and the Caribbean as well as other shores. Braithwaite would go on to describe these connections, continuities and discontinuities as tidalectics, a term he conceptualizes to be different from Western dialectics: "Why is our psychology not dialectical – successfully dialectical – in how Western philosophy has assumed people's lives should be, but tidalectic, like our grandmother's – our nanna's – action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding (reading) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future" (qtd. in King 7). This idea of tidalectics that mediates connections and continuities while at the same time signalling disjuncture and rupture is what I find ringing in the Afrofuturism of my selected Black women's works from different Black artistic traditions. These works envision the future as based on a tidalectic wave that centres Blackness in contemplating the ebb of the future. This wave moves against the linear and progressivist forms of Western futurity. It is also the tidalectic quality of Black women's Afrofuturism that explain the forms of continuities, ruptures, and connections in the selected works of this dissertation.

Necropolitics and Black Women's Afrofuturisms

Part of why I positioned *Black Panther* (2018) in this chapter as a counterexample to the primary texts I discuss in the dissertation is due to its relative disregard of necropolitics, a notable element in the Afrofuturist woman-centred hero narratives of this study. Crucially, as I elaborate in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation, a common thread in the Afrofuturisms of the selected Black women authors of my project has been the gendered politics of death and the politics mobilized in the process of delivering and resisting the forces of death. This thread is also prevalent in the works of several other notable Afrofuturist women writers including Buchi Emecheta, N.K. Jemisin, Octavia E. Butler, Rivers Solomon, among others. Based on this observation it matters to examine the instrumentality of death in Afrofuturist works by Black women. My argument is that there is a gendered death politics underpinning Black women's Afrofuturist writings—i.e., the potentially dead bird in the story (to refer to Morrison's anecdote cited in the previous section) and the politics surrounding its death. In part, as I show in subsequent chapters of the study, this gendered politics of death (in addition to the transgressive inheritance of Black women's artistic works and practices) indicates that the conditions giving rise to Afrofuturist visions in Black women's writings are governed by a gendered understanding of what Achille Mbembe has described as necropower. Necropower, as Mbembe explains, describes the governing order of colonial sovereignty that is founded on a violent "capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 27; emphasis in original). In other words, this is a governing order that is constituted fundamentally of a peculiar form of violence, one that is based not so much on the politics of regulating life but more crucially on the politics of death based on a governing order that regularizes certain populations to be in a liminal zone between life and death from where different kinds of violence can be routinely delivered to them to advance colonial power.

Mbembe first published the essay ("Necropolitics") wherein he advanced the concept in 2003 and it was later republished in 2019 along with other essays in a book also titled *Necropolitics*, even though the original French title of the book is *Politiques de l'inimitié*—Politic of Enmity. Mbembe's book generally is an attempt to provide an understanding of the contemporary epoch that he began theorizing in the 1990s. He thinks that our epoch is one about changes, movements, xenophobia, realignments in relationships, especially the relationship between living and dying. It is an epoch governed by a politics of enmity and separation—a politics of death; hence necropolitics. The original context of Mbembe's necropolitics essay is the early 2000s at the inception of the West's so-called "war on terror."

According to Mbembe, necropolitics is based on the idea of politics as a form of war (66). He writes: "When politics is considered a form of war, the question needs to be asked about the place that is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular when it is wounded or slain). How are these aspects inscribed in the order of power?" (*Necropolitics* 66). In other words, Mbembe appears to be interested in the order of power that determines who lives and who dies. In answering this question about the determination of the power over life and death, Mbembe draws on Michel Foucault's idea of sovereignty and the concept of biopower and their relations to the notion of state of exception.[34] The state of exception, a concept Mbembe took from Giorgio Agamben's book of the same title, is a condition of emergency, which is an exceptional condition requiring some form of emergency response. Under the state of exception, the law or the norm as *we* used to know it is often suspended and the authorities are allowed to exercise power in the name of responding to whatever it is

[34] The concept of state of exception is often traced to the works of the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, who used the idea based on his notion of state of emergency to describe the exceptional condition or a state of emergency (such as during war time) whereby the law (or the rule of law) is set aside or transcended in the exercise of sovereign power. Schmitt develops the concept (see, e.g., *Political Theology*) to explain the conditions in twentieth-century Europe within which sovereignty can emerge and sovereign [or absolute] power exercised without rein. Giorgio Agamben in his book *State of Exception* uses the concept to explain a contemporary world order that uses states of exception as a governing technology to obfuscate violence enacted against those it deems as enemies.

that threatens *us* to save and protect *us*. The condition of some wars, for example, would be considered a state of exception, and within such a state the law (as it used to be normally delivered) may be suspended in order to enact an emergency to protect/save the body politic. Under a state of exception, power can be exercised outside of the law with a rationale rooted in the idea of saving and protecting *people*. This condition that permits the exercise of power in a way that justifies its violence as part and parcel of saving/protecting people is what Mbembe finds as the normative order of power since the dawn of Western imperialism—from the time of Atlantic Slavery through colonization to contemporary neocolonial conditions such as the West's invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in the so-called War on Terror.

Mbembe's theory of necropolitics is indebted to Agamben's works (e.g., *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*) and importantly to Foucault's works, particularly the latter's genealogical analysis of power and biopolitics. What Foucault appears to be interested in was to trace a genealogy of political rationality and power in Western societies, from a process he observes to move from the conditions or politics of sovereign power to biopower. According to Foucault, sovereign power is addressed to the defense of sovereign rule—the reign of the monarch, for example, whose rule is exercised in the determination of who lives and who must die. The politics of sovereign power is mainly the politics aiming to defend the sovereign right to rule or to exercise power over life and death. The civil war enacted in *Black Panther* provides an example of the kinds of politics over sovereign power—of people warring in order to establish a particular sovereign's right to rule. However, according to Foucault, sometime from the seventeenth century onwards, this kind of politics shifted and

transformed into a politics of society—politics aiming to govern populations. This emergent politics—that is, biopolitics—takes as its target the governing of the population.[35]

This shift from the defence of the sovereign to the defence of society or the people produced different forms of technologies of control aiming to govern or regulate the life of populations or society. Besides such technologies of discipline as the prison or school systems, biopolitics also produced the technology of state racism, which society directed against itself or against groups or elements within society with the aim of their "permanent purification," as Foucault puts it. A demonstration of this use of the technology of racism is the Nazi death camps during World War II, when the German Nazi regime decided that its Jewish and other citizens it deemed disposable (e.g., gay peoples and people with mental disabilities) were a threat, stripped them of their citizenship, and began eliminating them. This very manifestation of racism as a politics of death, for example, in the Nazi death camps, is what Mbembe calls necropolitics. Mbembe writes:

> Biopower, in Foucault's work, appears to function by dividing people into those who must live and those who must die. As it proceeds on the basis of a split between the living and the dead, such power defines itself in relation to the biological field—of which it takes control and in which it invests itself. This control presupposes a distribution of human species into groups, a subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between these subgroups. Foucault refers to this using the seemingly familiar term "racism." (*Necropolitics* 71)

In other words, the determination of who lives and who dies is governed by *racism* (71). Foucault's notion of racism isn't so much concerned with Europe's racism and colonial violence against racialized Others as it does with an instrumentalist understanding of

[35] See Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*.

racism—a technology of control and a way to govern populations. Racism in this Foucauldian sense is governed by a politics of death, not merely a politics of identity categorization but one about identifying those who must live and those who must die.

What Mbembe does in his work is to build in part on Foucault's biopolitics and to call attention to what he calls the double of biopolitics: necropolitics. According to Mbembe, one must see the Nazi death camps as one instance of a normalized process that has come to define modernity. Sovereign power, which is marked by the right of rule, to decide who lives and who dies, was not left behind in the past but has evolved as the double of biopower. It is this double that Mbembe calls necropower and shows the ways that it exercised (and continues to exercise) control over life and death in Europe's colonies and postcolonies. Whereby Foucault would consider state racism as a biopolitical technology to regulate the life of society, Mbembe would explain racism of the kind as a necropolitical form, or to put it differently, the governing form of necropolitics is racism (*Necropolitics* 71). Racism is therefore the technology used by necropower to determine death or to determine who must be reduced to a condition of living dead, or to decide whose lives belong in the future of society and those whose lives must be purged from it. It is, effectively, a form of Western imperialist governmentality.

The slave plantation was one site that demonstrated the political rationality of necropower. The exercise of necropower is basically a condition of war and terror. According to Mbembe:

> Any historical account of the rise of modern terror needs to address slavery, which could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation. In many respects, the very structure of the plantation system and its consequences express the emblematic and paradoxical figure of the state of exception. This figure is paradoxical here for two reasons. First, in the context of the plantation, the slave's humanity

> appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. Indeed, the slave condition results from triple loss: loss of a "home," loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status. The triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether). (*Necropolitics* 74-5)

Mbembe is here deliberately interrupting discourses of biopolitics that so very often do not engage with slavery. He goes further to describe the ways that the plantation functions as a site of total violence working not simply to deny the physical life of the enslaved person but also to deny their very humanity manifesting in the denial of culture, of language, and so on. It is the condition of creating/producing the enslaved into what Agamben has described as *homo sacer* or bare life,[36] which is to say the condition of existing under absolute exercise of power. Mbembe goes on to say:

> As an instrument of labor, the slave has a price. As a property, the slave has a value. The slave's labor is needed and used, so he is therefore kept alive, but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity. […] Violence, here, becomes an element in manners, like whipping, or taking the slave's life itself: an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror. Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life. (*Necropolitics* 75)

The condition of death-in-life (which resonates rather with the idea of social death[37]) suggests that the enslaved is permanently barred from human society, that is, without a future and put

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[36] Bare life (or *homo sacer*) is a concept Giorgio Agamben advanced in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* to describe how Western sovereign power constitutes subjects under a state of exception. Moving away from Foucault's notion of biopolitics that describes the emergent form of governing biological bodies of the population, Agamben looks at the ways some populations are reduced to bare life (homo sacer). The homo sacer is a figure from the Roman Empire whose citizenship rights and privileges have been suspended and the figure banished from society. Any violence done to the homo sacer is therefore without consequence and unpunishable. The condition of the homo sacer, according to Agamben, makes clear that sovereign power operates by determining who belongs to the body politic and who is cast outside or reduced to bare life. The Nazi death camp during World War II provided as example of how sovereign power is exercised in the determination of who belongs in the body politic and who must be effectively turned to bare life and killed with impunity.

[37] The concept of social death was coined by Orlando Patterson (in his book, *Slavery and Social Death*) and generally used by scholars of slavery to describe the condition of natal alienation of enslaved people and their

in a situation of routinized forms of violence including physical, social and other forms of deaths.

In his 2001 book, *On the Postcolony*, which was published only a few years before the publication of his necropolitics essay, Mbembe describes this condition of death-in-life as a kind of zombification, whereby the human is emptied of meaning. The order of power in the slave plantation is not fundamentally different from the order of power in the colonies. The same necropolitical conditions governed by a colonial rationality (of racism) is what Mbembe finds in the colonies and postcolonies, a reason he turns to Frantz Fanon to explain the necropolitical conditions of colonialism.

The founding violence of colonialism is based on what Fanon describes as the logic of "a Manichaean world" (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* pp. 31-32). This Manichaean world is a racist system that dehumanizes colonized peoples as irredeemably evil. So, racialized as darkly evil people and fixed in a perpetual conflict with the forces of good (as the colonizer portrayed himself), the colonized person becomes invariably the object of deliberate, routinized forms of exterminatory violence. This is the violence carried out in the exercise of colonial sovereign power; that is, the colonial *imperium* or imperial regime. The contemporary order, according to Mbembe, has continued to be governed by this imperial power and its necropolitical rationality. This imperial power must be understood as the necropower of our epoch.

The operational conditions of necropolitics, therefore, come in the form of a declaration of permanent emergencies or states of exception and siege, which permit the arbitrary exercise of sovereign power or necropower anywhere that the colonial *imperium* so wishes. This condition is one of war: a condition of perpetual warfare, whereby the colonial

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ostracism from the social life of wider society. The concept describes a condition of bare life whereby a group of people have been stripped of social life and identity and reduced to what Mbembe describes as living dead.

sovereign has declared a permanent state of exception and emergency against racialized populations.[38] For example, since 9/11 in the name of fighting terror, the Western imperium can invade any part of the world and administer incalculable physical, economic, social, and environmental violence. Under the regime of the colonial *imperium*, routine practices of brutal violence and indignity are enacted and regularized on Black and other racialized as well as feminized and inferiorized bodies.[39]

This understanding of the contemporary world as governed by colonial necropolitics is what I detect in the Afrofuturist works of the Black women selected for this study. These works underline the historical and contemporary world orders as governed by necropolitical conditions founded on Black enslavement, zombification, and death and ask what future there can be for populations that colonial power has put in a state of living dead. Importantly, one can discern a critique (or modification) of Mbembe's notion of necropolitics in the works of Afrofuturist Black women authors I discuss in the dissertation. This critique concerns the blindness to the dynamics of gender in Mbembe's project, a blindness that fails to account for the shared yet peculiar forms in which necropower deals with racialized populations based on simplistic ideas of gender. As these works reveal, there is a gendered dimension to necropolitics. The works present an understanding of necropolitics as constitutive of patriarchal forms of violence that target Black women's bodies with violence as part of colonial power's attempt to maintain Black enslavement and non-future. These works represent the routinized violence of necropower as fundamentally rooted in patterns and practices of colonial and patriarchal violence on Black women's bodies through a violent process where colonial imaginaries of different kinds feminize Black women as reproductive vessels to be regulated, sterilized, or turned into a dangerous weapon for eliminationist aims.

[38] For a discussion of state of exception, see Agamben, *State of Exception*.
[39] See also Puar's influential *Terrorist Assemblages*.

These works show that often colonial necropower authorizes direct violence against racialized people and/or establish the conditions of lateral violence among racialized populations. Its rationale for these forms of violence is often based on the logic of insuring the future against populations it deems inferior, an excess, and a threat to whiteness.[40] The demonization of racialized bodies as terrorists or threats to the future of whiteness or white supremacy and their consignment in the zone of death also underlines such bodies (including the feminized body without reproductive capacities) as a threat to posterity, as an unwanted body without any meaningful place in an imagined ideal future. Under the regime of necropower, the racialized community, or body becomes a target of routine, negligible violence, occupying indefinitely the "zones of abandonment" (Biehl; Povinelli).

At the same time, the Afrofuturist visions of the selected works I discuss in subsequent chapters of the dissertation are underpinned crucially by a politics of reproductive futurity that has been deployed in response to the violence of necropower on Black and other futures. The notion of reproductive futurism has been elaborated by Lee Edelman (for example, in his book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman underlines the heteronormative logic underlying "our" conceptions, politics, and visions of the future. This

[40] The necropolitical governing order in the selected Black women's Afrofuturist works is also marked by what Jasbir Puar has described as "queer necropolitics," a phrase that describes how the exercise of necropower functions through a process of rendering queerness as deviant sexuality (because of the interworkings of race and masculinity, i.e., (non-white men as "not real men" so thus queer) and queer and racialized populations as terrorists in order to normalize the violence done to them and render them fungible (*Terrorist Assemblages* 36). While Puar's work focuses on queer identities and state abnormalization of queer sexuality, my focus is racialized identities of Blackness. Yet, as Christina Sharpe explains in *In the Wake* citing Omise'eke Tinsley, the history and experience of the Transatlantic Slavery or the Black Atlantic Blackness "'has always been the queer Atlantic'," that is, "the Black and queer Atlantic have always been the Trans*Atlantic" (30). The connection of Blackness and queerness, according to Sharpe, is because of the way they have been imagined or represented in colonial imaginaries as excess—and excess "writ large on Black [and queer] bodies" (32) in the process of their subjection to necropower. Their imagination as superfluous and excess is also what allows for their construction as terrorists or as threats. So, constructed as terrorists, queer, Black bodies (and not exclusively) become the subjects of routinized forms of violence to be surveilled, governed, and killed. As fungible populations, they are not fit subjects of the future. As scholars have noted especially in the discourse on queer identities, queer bodies are often marked as useless because they are considered unable to reproduce biologically; hence necropower imagines queer cultures and practices as a threat to an idea of the future built on the logic of biological reproduction (see, e.g., Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco, editors, *Queer Necropolitics*. See also, Edelman, *No Future*).

logic comes from an understanding of the future as built on biological reproduction and the need to secure the future for "our" children. This reproductive vision of the future bars queer people and non-reproducing bodies as unfit subjects of the future. The political underpinnings of the Afrofuturist works selected for this study depend significantly on this logic of reproductive futurism. I suspect that the dependence on this logic is in part because these works are responding to necropolitical conditions that conceive Black women's reproductive abilities as a threat and therefore targeted for regulation and even death. As a result, some of these works (notably in Hopkinson's and Okorafor's selected novels) articulate visions of reproductive futurism as resistance practice. As well, these works offer complicated and nuanced visions of reproductive futurity as an Afrofuturist liberationist praxis.

The Afrofuturisms of the Black women writers whose works I am interested in respond to the governing orders and conditions of necropower that are underpinned by unequal distributions of death. The key questions informing my reading of their works include the following: (1) What accounts for the politics of death vis-à-vis Black peoples in general and Black women in particular in the Afrofuturist works of these Black women?; (2) How are these Black women artists imagining the conditions of necropower in relation to race and gender in their fictional works?; (3) Why are they responding to the conditions of necropower through racialized and gendered futuristic speculations?; and (4) What visions of the future are these women artists advancing in their different works? The next three chapters of the dissertation elaborate on the necropolitical conditions in the Afrofuturist artistic projects of Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Wanuri Kahiu. As well, the chapters taken together discuss the artistic visions and commitments offered in the works of these Black women as Afrofuturist responses to the violence of necropower.

Chapter Two

The Politics of Death in Nalo Hopkinson's Selected Afrofuturist Novels

This chapter discusses Nalo Hopkinson's widely acknowledged Afrofuturist novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000). While my reading of them in the chapter reinforces their popular readings as Afrofuturist works, I will go further to read them together as underpinned by a gendered politics of death. The chapter discusses Hopkinson's focus on Black women's lives in death-worlds and how these women navigate oppressive systems. I contend that both works provide intervention in the response to the violence of necropower by subversively inscribing radical continuity on the oppressed living and dead bodies of racialized and other peoples, especially Black women's bodies. In Hopkinson's story world, death is a prevalent force around which contestations over life and the future are wagered. The questions of who is allowed in the future and under what condition drive the narratives of the selected novels. Hopkinson's Afrofuturism appears to resolve these questions by reconceptualizing death as a prescient form for Black radical survival.

Death in these works is gendered. While death is a characteristically universal experience of racialized Black peoples' relation with colonial and racist necropower, Hopkinson's novels also insist that the experience of death is gendered and must be understood as such. By enlisting a gendered politics of death in these Afrofuturistic, speculative narratives, Hopkinson in these novels intervenes in a male-dominated Afrofuturist discourse. In her intervention, the writer shows that necropower's attempt to eliminate racialized Black peoples from the future or put them in a permanent state of injury as living dead is disproportionately experienced by Black women not least because of the relation of womanhood to biological reproduction but also to the social and cultural survival

of Black communities. Hopkinson's novels, as I will go on to discuss in this chapter, dramatize the processes of emergence of Black feminine awareness of the peculiar revolutionary place of the Black woman in the establishment of a future with conscience.

Hopkinson has been considered by most critics as a writer of speculative fiction. Her oeuvre encapsulates interests in Black women's experiences, Black Caribbean cultures, Afrofuturism, science fiction, among other related concerns. Her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, published in 1998, put her on the map as an internationally acclaimed writer when it won the Warner Aspect First Novel and the Locus Award for best first novel. She published *Midnight Robber* (2000) two years after, which was nominated for Nebula, Hugo, Tiptree, and Sunburst awards. The book was chosen as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year in 2000. These recognitions are testaments of the influence of these novels and the important place that Hopkinson and her works occupy in the discourses on Afrofuturism since the turn of the twenty-first century.

In the last two decades, Hopkinson has published three other novels including *The Salt Roads* (2003), *The New Moon's Arms* (2007), and *Sister Mine* (2013). She has edited three anthologies: *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (2000), *Mojo: Conjure Stories* (2003), and *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004; co-edited with Uppinder Mehan). Her short story collections, *Skin Folk*, and *Falling in Love with Hominids* were published in 2001 and 2015 respectively. These works draw heavily on a wide range of Black Caribbean folklore, which itself incorporates myths, legends, idioms, and mores from different African and African diasporic traditions.

In a 2001 interview with Christian Wolff, Hopkinson remarks that her artistic commitments to fiction writing had been founded on a deliberate cosmopolitan blend of Black Caribbean folklore and her fantastical vision of reality. She considers her speculative

fantasy as part of a process of examining "humanity's efforts to understand, explain and manipulate our environments, whether through devising tools, machines, methods of enquiry or ritual codes of behaviour. Folklore is one such system. Folk tales encode mores and archetypes in story so that they are easily taught and passed on by word of mouth" (Wolff 27). In a sense, therefore, Hopkinson aims her writing to attain the status of folklore for which the present and future generations of people (especially Black peoples) can live by. In this commitment, she oftentimes appropriates, revises, and reconceptualizes folkloric forms and archetypes in the attempt to reinterpret reality and envision alternative prospects for the future.

Hopkinson's artistic visions and commitments have also been shaped by her cosmopolitan experiences of living in different places. She has had an arguably diasporic life. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, on December 20, 1960, Hopkinson's family had been moving since she was eight months old. While growing up, she lived in Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad, and also the United States where her father had an appointment at Yale University. She moved with her family to Toronto, Canada when she was 16 years old. Years later, she returned to the United States and taught Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. She presently lives in Canada and teaches at UBC's School of Creative Writing.

Hopkinson admits that being *dislocated* from places has its merit and perhaps accounts for the hybridity in her writing. She says that "it is difficult for me to assume that the way my world is for me is the way it is for everyone, or is the way it will always be" (177). Her geographic (dis)locations also account for her connections to peoples and cultures from many contexts. The materials she engages with are from different cultures, but she creates a collage with them which makes her works unique.

As a result of the mosaic of cultures, traditions, and experiences immanent in her writings, Hopkinson has been described by some critics as "[flirting] with various speculative fiction genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, horror and dystopia" (Batty 175). Susana Morris focuses on how Hopkinson's "Afrodiasporic tales of fantasy and folklore skillfully blend tradition with a futurist vision" (164). Most of the scholarship on Hopkinson's writings has focused largely on how they connect or differ from established generic conventions. Despite the volume of subjects that Hopkinson has explored in her creative works, much of the engagement has not been about discoursing the depth of her Afrofuturism and the crucial importance of death in her works.

The critical receptions of her works underline these multiple influences. Critics have read Hopkinson's works as a unique blend of science fictional novum, magic realism, and Caribbean folkloric forms that critique the imperialist ethos of science fiction (Salvini; Skallerop; Wood); as a decolonial genre fiction that utilizes form (by combining the elements of fantasy and sf) to critique the ideological fantasies of colonization (Moynagh); as a critique of multiculturalism (Reid); and as a feminist critique of colonial zombification of colonized peoples (Romdhani; Anatol). These readings importantly underscore the decolonizing aesthetic and narrative underpinnings of Hopkinson's works (McCormack). Or as Amandine H. Faucheux puts it in acknowledgement of the works of Black women speculative writers more broadly, Hopkinson's works "are particularly recognized [and have been read] for the ways in which they challenge and transform the tropes, characters, and conventions of speculative genres, notably by featuring women of color as protagonists and by introducing more diverse characters" (563). My reading of *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Midnight Robber* in this chapter complements these focuses on the decolonizing significance of Hopkinson's writings. Yet my focus on the gendered politics of death in what I consider as Hopkinson's Afrofuturism departs from extant scholarship on her works. My departure here is marked in

part by an interest in highlighting the gendered nature of decolonization projects as well as importantly to call attention to what has been overlooked in the scholarship on Hopkinson's works: the thematic of death.

Yet, in my attempt to read these works as marked by a gendered Afrofuturist politics of death, I am in no way attempting to map a new general outlook on the works or offering an alternative framework that may be considered more suitable for reading Hopkinson's works. Hopkinson is highly critical of labels that pigeonhole her writing. Often asked if she is a science fiction writer, Hopkinson has always asserted that she writes different things.[41] In an interview with Nancy Batty, she says that "often [I'm] asked if I feel pigeon-holed as a genre fiction writer, and I do and I don't" (184). She explains that she resists restrictive forms in all their guises: that is, seen as pigeonholed vs. not pigeonholed. It could be both and more. The cosmopolitan, diasporic visions implicit both in her writing and in her dispositions to her writing underline her impulse for openness, continuity, and possibilities. My discussion of her first two novels in this chapter is informed by this ethics of openness and cosmopolitanism that allows for flexible and nuanced reading. By focusing on the politics of death in her selected novels, my inclination is to invite further thinking about Hopkinson's writings and their underlying Afrofuturisms.

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[41] Hopkinson's work would not fit into the science fiction world of Darko Suvin who theorizes "novum" and "cognitive estrangement" as twin identifiers of the genre. Neither would it qualify as science fiction to Carl Freedman, whose ideas reinforce western scientific rational thought as a requirement for the genre. In the last two decades, the fixity of science fiction on western science has changed to accommodate Indigenous and non-western systems of knowledge. In an era of such nuanced understandings of science fiction, Hopkinson thrives strongly as a Black/Caribbean voice, whose themes and subject matters add a black Caribbean cultural and global appeal to the genre. In her works, she infuses a multiplicity of art forms and traditions including but not limited to fantasy, magic realism, horror, non-western technology, spirituality and supernatural elements. Jessica Langer in her book *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* speaks about the infusion of these previously "strange elements" when she argues that the "instability of science fiction is not a weakness but rather a strength: it has shown itself capable of including a wide variety of texts and voices, including those characterized by hybridity in genre, in its purview (2).

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Brown Girl in the Ring (subsequently *Brown Girl*) presents a story of three women, Gros-Jeanne, Mi-Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne and the conditions of their lives in Metropolitan Toronto. The novel is set in a relatively post-apocalyptic future time where the Canadian central government has collapsed, and the rich/white/privileged Canadians have moved to fortified suburbs. It is a world controlled by Rudy, the head of the Posse. Rudy is connected to these three women: he is husband to Gros-Jeanne, father to Mi-Jeanne and grandfather to Ti-Jeanne. These familial connections are revealed as the story unravels. Rudy terrorizes Downtown Toronto and preys on the marginalized population with his army of men who exploit and oppress the residents.

Setting the story in a ghettoized Toronto seems instructive as it underlines the segregated nature of a Canadian world: an apartheid society that forces racialized people to live in a state of abjection away from (even though in proximity to) privileged and fortified white society. The ghettoized world is rife with violence and suffering . While *Brown Girl* can be interpreted as a dramatic struggle within a family, particularly in the way it builds its story around the situation of a disorganized Black family to illustrate the unequal and oppressive nature of relationships among people of different races and classes in Canada, it can be further understood, as Michelle Reid observes, as a critique of "Canadian multiculturalism and the official government promotion of a diverse Canadian national identity" (297). This observation seems equally pertinent when understood in the context of the novel's major plot trajectory: a struggle to harvest a suitable Black woman's heart among a disposable population in order to save the life of a white Canadian premier.

As I mentioned in the preceding section, the critical reception of *Brown Girl* has resonated along the lines of the broader reception of Hopkinson's works. Critics have

essentially read the novel as a critique and an unmasking of especially Canadian racist multiculturalism (Reid) and as a work of decolonization.[42] In these readings, the targeting of Black body parts to save the life of a white Canadian premier has provided the basis for articulating the processes of colonial dismembering of the racialized Black body (and community), and transplantation as a form of syncretism that allows for an alternative consideration of multiculturalism.

In "A Heart of Kindness: Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," Laura Salvini aims to ground *Brown Girl* as a science fiction text that adds to the genre tropes. In doing this, Salvini tries to show how Hopkinson uses the Legbara figure in Caribbean folklore to revitalize the "global identity" of the science fiction genre (just as Gros-Jeanne's heart revives the premier's heart). Salvini argues that "Hopkinson's quest for a 'scientifically plausible' idea in her first novel fulfils Suvin's classic concept of fictional novum" (183). Salvini explains the novum in *Brown Girl* as "the enchanting cultural framework" (186) and echoes Lee Skallerop's interpretation of the novel as magic realism that applies the novum. Similarly, Sarah Wood argues that Hopkinson uses science fiction tropes and offers "a localized resistance to imperialist assumptions that can be found in sf" (316). These readings are indicative of the attempts to champion Hopkinson's aesthetic choices and approaches in *Brown Girl* and in her other works as part of a broader cultural project that champion hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and multiculturalism (as ways to re-member the world). For example, in "Crossing the Boundaries of the 'Burn': Canadian Multiculturalism and

[42] In the context, the reading of Hopkinson's works as decolonizing is often addressed to the project of cultural representation. The understanding is that the representation of Black and other racialized peoples' experiences in Canada have been predominantly racist and colonial in orientation. Hence, works such as those by Hopkinson is read as providing a decolonized representation or narrative that dismantles the racist and colonialist assumptions about Black and other colonized peoples found in Western colonial discourses. This notion of decolonization is what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang would contend distracts from the fundamental aim of decolonization—which is the repatriation of Indigenous land—because it treats the concept as a metaphor. See Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."

Caribbean Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," Michelle Reid argues that *Brown Girl* supplies an alternative to Canadian multiculturalism in its privileging of Caribbean hybridity or syncretism; that is, a reading of the novel as contributing a cultural model of reintegration through the recognition of the contributions of immigrants and indigenous people as sustaining the continued efficiency of the Canadian state. While this way of reading the novel is important, it tends to appropriate the novel's form as a contribution to an idea of a global form, hybridity and cosmopolitanism as offering an ethic for the future of all peoples. My approach is rather to focus on the novel instead as an imagination of Black future (not as a contribution to global futures), as an expression of radical Black survival based on women's work.

As well, my reading of *Brown Girl* complements and refracts other readings that discuss the preying on the Black body to sustain white society. In "Zombies Go to Toronto: Zombifying Shame in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," Rebecca Romdhani considers *Brown Girl* as a novel without a concrete literary genre but argues that the zombie figure pulls together the shifting and fragmentary elements in the text. The zombie figure authorizes "a reading that encompasses the brutal history and emotional legacy that African people have experienced from the transatlantic slave trade via the Caribbean and North America to present day Toronto" (72). Romdhani's reading of *Brown Girl* draws attention to the shame of that history and the recurrent issues such as cultural cannibalization which the novel foregrounds. Romdhani sees the embrace of Afro-Caribbean religion as necessary to "help prevent and heal zombification" (88). Similarly, in "Living with Others Inside the Self: Decolonizing Transplantation, Selfhood and the Body Politic in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*," Donna McCormack reads *Brown Girl* as Hopkinson's attempt to decolonize the science fiction genre that has organ transplantation as one of its progressive markers and themes. For McCormack, Hopkinson beams attention on not just how organ

transplantation elongates lives but the power divide that makes oppressed people into pawns in the process. Gros Jeanne's organ harvesting, which sustains Premier Uttley's life in the wider scheme of things, according to McCormack, "challenges the biomedical model of selfhood used in transplant therapy, which insists on a strict distinction and separation between living recipient and deceased donor" (252). The novel in the light of this reading can be understood as shining light on the injustices and inequalities between Black and other oppressed groups and whites in Canada, a reminder of the violence [of transplantation] against oppressed groups and an opportunity to conceive a just/better world.

Yet, unlike these extant works, my preferential reading of *Brown Girl* is to centre Black futurity—not as a subplot in the project of reforming a Canadian state and body politic along the lines of syncretic or cosmopolitan ethics—as a gendered project carried out by Black women in the effort to survive and liberate Black people from the orders of Canadian colonial necropower.

Some of the critical engagements with the novel tend to front a perspective on *Brown Girl* as organized around an Afrofuturist vision of a Canadian future with conscience that is realized through the dismembering and death of Black peoples. It is not clear from these readings why the humanity of white society must be realized through the death of Black peoples (or in the afterlife of Black cultural custodians such as Gros-Jeanne) and why the premier's death should not have offered better prospects for Black freedom and an alternative future rather than a future of a white body pumped alive by a Black heart. The logic supported in the reading (see, e.g., Reid) of a human heart that gives a heartless premier some conscience as the basis for conceiving a more integrative, syncretic ethic of the future repeats to some extent the same pattern of violent logic against racialized peoples—the notion that racialized peoples are superfluous and are only useful as objects for the sustenance of white

society. These readings of *Brown Girl* appear to gloss over the war waged by members of a Black family for the vitalization of white society—a reality the novel shows to be enforced by colonial necropower.

As I argue, the Devil's riddle posed in the novel—that is, the riddle of how to humanize the Devil with a human heart—is after all a ruse to destroy the Black family (community) from within as part of the process of re/vitalizing colonial white society. Beyond the significance of Gros-Jeanne's heart in a white body, Ti-Jeanne's victory instead signals the prospects of a vibrant and positive future founded on communitarian ethics and cultural awareness that guarantee Black survival and social reorganization in the future, even as it dramatizes the process of Black women's coming into an awareness of their crucial place in the liberation struggles of Black peoples. As I go on to show, Hopkinson's intervention is crucially important for highlighting how women's experiences of violent patriarchy and their exposure to excessive violence (including familial violence of masculine abandonment and single parenting) have equipped them with a unique consciousness needing to be tapped in the project of Black survival and the reformation of Black community in the future based on the leadership of Black women.

Brown Girl may be classified as belonging in a subgenre of speculative fiction based on the threats to racialized, gendered people. Since *Brown Girl* came out in 1998, there have been several other notable speculative works of the kind based on similar visions of the threat to racialized bodies. Speculative fiction of the kind about the necropolitical orders of racialized peoples' lives have often underscored the threat to the racialized body as a target for organ harvesting. Some notable recent examples include the conditions of those described as clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go,* the situation of Indigenous peoples in Cherie Dimaline's 2017 novel, *The Marrow Thieves*, which is set in a Canadian

context, and the threat to the Black body in Jordan Peele's 2017 neo-slavery film, *Get Out*. In these works, the dehumanized racialized body is targeted for the sustenance and humanization of oppressive white society. Yet, unlike in some of these other works where the harvesting of racialized bodies underscores a necropolitical reality of Black deaths, *Brown Girl* grants radical agency (a gendered one) to the harvested Black body parts. Gros-Jeanne's heart is not to be completely subdued and stolen. Instead, the stolen heart refuses to simply serve as a conquered organ. It reworks the order of the premier's body and injects the heartless premier with a conscience. By the same token, Gros-Jeanne's granddaughter gains an awareness of the importance and power of culture in the survival of Black community. Hence the Afrofuturism of *Brown Girl* centres Black cultures and experiences as the beating heart of a future with conscience.

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Before I go on to elaborate on the gendered politics of death in *Brown Girl*, it might be worth mapping the necropolitical context of the story. This is to underscore the broader historical, social, economic, political, and cultural condition of death that the Black women in the story intervene in. The story begins with a request from Baines, a government official, to Rudy: "We want you to find us a viable human heart, fast" (1). Baines who "had obviously never ventured into Rudy's neighborhood before" (1) has to go to the Burn to request a heart harvested for the dying Premier Uttley. Rudy, a Black agent of the Canadian colonial state, has been empowered to terrorize the population in the Burn. He is an agent of the government, tasked with regulating and policing the borders of the Burn. Rudy himself wants an escape from the Burn and must play the role in his own quest to escape. The world of the Burn provides the basis to consider the necropolitical conditions highlighted in the novel.

As Achille Mbembe explains, the governing rationale of necropolitics is often in its control or regulation of populations. “This control,” as Mbembe explains, “presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others” (“Necropolitics” 17). This distribution of populations is to determine how death is distributed, who lives and who dies, who gains privilege and who doesn’t. In *Brown Girl*, the Burn as a segregated place reserved for racialized peoples is a site of normalized suffering and routinized deaths, a place where racialized bodies may be disposed of at will, where body parts of racialized peoples may be harvested with impunity and disregard. It is, as Mbembe would have it, the “double” of the affluent white areas, by which is meant the place where so-called civil society has banished the spectacular forms of the violence it subsists on (*Necropolitics* 15-32). The politico-juridical order of the Burn is based on a state of exception, which Mbembe drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s use of the phrase describes as “a permanent spatial arrangement that remains outside the normal state of law” (“Necropolitics” 13). The population forced into such bare conditions of living must live in a permanent state of injury, constantly preyed upon for the sustenance of the oppressive colonial state and its institutions including the harvesting of their body parts.

The gnashing reality of Toronto’s Burn where the poor, immigrant and unwanted populations are concentrated in *Brown Girl* is an institutionalized death-world. The Burn enables a perpetration of mindless cannibalistic capitalism that is needed for the sustenance of the Canadian body politic. Such an act of violence is possible, to paraphrase Mbembe, because the Burn in inhabited by those racialized as threatening savages (“Necropolitics” 24). Such violence is founded on a logic of exploitation that the oppressor justifies as necessary for its own survival. In this way, the oppressive system construes the requirement for its privileged living to be based on the death and violation of the oppressed, exploited, and

segregated Other. In *Brown Girl*, the Burn functions as a necessary site where a Canadian premier must find a heart to survive on. Hence the novel shows the Burn to be constantly made into a valuable state resource where a necropolitical governing order sources its lifeline from bodies it has rendered disposable. In the Burn, there is no solid government infrastructure: no schools, no hospitals and no welfare system or social services. A closer look at the death world of the Burn in *Brown Girl* gives a vivid picture of its emergence through a decadent process:

> Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto: Etobicoke and York to the west; North York in the north; Scarborough and East York to the east. The Toronto city core is the hub. The mud itself is vast Lake Ontario, which cuts Toronto off at its southern border. In fact, when water-rich Toronto was founded, it was nicknamed Muddy York, evoking the condition of its unpaved streets in springtime. Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. When Toronto's economic base collapsed, investors, commerce, and government withdrew into the suburb cities, leaving the rotten core to decay. Those who stayed were the ones who couldn't or wouldn't leave. The street people. The poor people. The ones who didn't see the writing on the wall, or who were too stubborn to give up their homes, or saw the decline of authority as an opportunity. As the police force left, it sparked large-scale chaos in the city core: the Riots. The satellite cities quickly raised roadblocks at their borders to keep Toronto out. (3-4)

The type of people who live in the Burn are energetic, versatile, and hardworking. The structure of the Burn however makes it possible for many residents to embrace questionable living to survive. The daily living of the Burn as presented in the opening part of

Brown Girl shows how the Canadian government continues to manage populations by subjecting them to subliminal conditions that make crime a pathway for survival. For example, Pavel and Paula were both lecturers at the University of Toronto before the riots. As residents of the Burn, they sell raw meat and have become crooked people so much so that anyone "who crossed Paula and Pavel ended up in their cookpot" (13). The younger men who are able-bodied but unemployed: Crapaud, Jay, Crack Monkey, Tony all depend on Rudy to survive. They are all drug-dealing, addicted and dangerous members of Rudy's posse. The children of the Burn, who are symbolically the future of the Burn are daily being terrorized, traumatized, and killed by Rudy. In that chaotic setting, the Burn represents a land of stolen dreams because the living conditions are so totalizing that it crushes any attempt to live outside of its necropolitical designs. Essentially, the Burn is a quintessential site of lateral violence.

These necropolitical designs of the Burn effectively turn its residents into zombies. Rebecca Romdhani argues that the zombie figure accounts for the way many of the characters in the novel can be read and that the zombie figures "symbolize the long history of oppression and exploitation of people from the African diaspora" (73). In a sense, the Burn can be understood as a site where racialized peoples are zombified; that is, living in a state of lifedeath as living dead. Hopkinson's representation of the Burn in *Brown Girl* offers a vocabulary for understanding how minoritized groups are deliberately subjected to impossibly harsh conditions to prove their worth.

While the Burn is a site for understanding the existential violence of colonial necropower, it is also the site for understanding the unequal distribution of violence on racialized peoples and bodies on gendered grounds. In the context, while Black women face similar extreme violence that other people in the Burn face, they are targeted with other forms

of violence including rape, abandonment, and organ harvesting. Notwithstanding the death conditions of the Burn, Gros-Jeanne's dogged embrace of culture as a healing spiritual balm against colonial violence empowers her with a unique awareness of their situation and a mission to secure a different future for the community. She understands that the necropolitical project is addressed to multiple ways of killing racialized peoples, most especially from within. In the context of the Burn and in her own family, the threat is not only coming from outside but also engineered from within, through the colonizer's instrumentalization of patriarchy against Black women and Black women's bodies. Hence the hunt for a Black woman's heart as a replacement for the dead heart of the white premier is the work of a white colonial system working in concert with Black male agents. Whereas Rudy recruits mostly Black men to perpetrate violence against Black women and others including through abandoning their children and forcing women into experiencing the agonies of single parenthood, Gros-Jeanne addresses her cultural intervention to caring for the social, physical, and spiritual life of those marked for various kinds of destruction. She helps to take care of the children Rudy hunts as well as other sick people in the area. Many people experience situations that rid them of their humanity and turn them into zombies without empathy such as Mi-Jeanne and Melba but Gros-Jeanne's heart survives the crushing realities of the Burn. It is no surprise that it is the same heart that is snatched for Premier Uttley. On the one hand, the act of stealing Gros-Jeanne's heart can be understood as a genocidal attempt to destroy the binding force of Black community, even at the same time as the story shows that even in its subduing and dismembering, Black women's bodies continue to resist and to affirm agencies of their own.[43]

[43] On Black/Indigenous resistance struggles and their relationships and overlapping histories and concerns, see, e.g., Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living* (2022). See also, King, *The Black Shoal* (2019).

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What *Brown Girl* seems to underscore most crucially about the violence of necropower and its zombification of racialized people is the attack on culture. The Burn as a site of death is so because it lacks cultural essence and soul. The zombified body is a body without a soul; hence a cultureless social self. It is within the context of seeking cultural sustenance that Gros-Jeanne's significance may be further appreciated. She is the old woman of Black Caribbean lore, a custodian of positive cultural essence, a figure of magic and prophecy. It is noteworthy that Hopkinson's characters in *Brown Girl* appear in part to be based on the famous 1957 play *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* by the Caribbean (St. Lucian) writer Derek Walcott.[44] The gendered import of Hopkinson's novel in the context may be better appreciated when considered equally as a departure from the masculinist forms that Walcott's play underlines. The play is based on a Caribbean folklore about three brothers challenged to a seemingly impossible task of humanizing the Devil in whatever way possible. Ironically, it is the Devil himself who has set the brothers to the task and takes on different disguises to torment them as they attempt the task. The youngest of the brothers eventually manages to outwit the Devil by sheer instinct, feeling, common sense, and patience. His disdain for oppression, his knowledge of the forest, the natural world and the cultures of his people, and his reliance on the communal principles supply the tools for his victory over the Devil.

Unlike in Walcott's play, however, Hopkinson makes women across three generations the central characters of the struggle with the Devil. In *Brown Girl*, the Devil is not only a white enslaver as Walcott's play portrays him, but a white system governed by a white woman with several agents including power-crazed Black men such as Rudy who can destroy

[44] For more details on the influence of Walcott on Hopkinson and on the acquaintances of Hopkinson's family with Walcott, see Anatol, "A Feminist Reading of Soucouyants in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Skin Folk*".

their own families in their own selfish quest to escape their colonial situation. In reworking the gendered drama of Walcott's influential play, Hopkinson in *Brown Girl* puts Black women in the heart of a serious meditation on the histories and experiences of slavery and colonization in America (the Caribbean and Canada). The legend which presents the tale as an anecdote of Black history offers a masculine story: of three brothers (men) embarking on adventurous quest for the promise of tantalizing rewards. The futuristic import of the story is based on victory of the youngest brother (following the failures of the older ones), a future based on the coming into the wisdom of experience and of the knowledge of outwitting the Devil.

Brown Girl offers a different gendered narrative. This time three Black women confront the Devil but not as part of a quest for some rewards. If anything, their confrontation with the Devil of a colonial Canadian state is set against the kind of quest that the Devil had put Black men to. Rudy in other words is the foster child of Walcott's male questers. His mission—like the instructions given to the three brothers of Walcott's play—is to find a suitable Black woman's heart for the ailing premier. This quest pits him against the community and the women in his abandoned family he has already been working to destroy. In a sense, therefore, the gendered politics of *Brown Girl* is set against the established, yet violent, discourse of patriarchal, masculine quest tropes.

Hopkinson's focus on the intergenerational struggles in one Black Caribbean-Canadian family suggests an interest not so much in the outwitting of the Devil but instead in the rebuilding of community. The novel restages the historical question of Black survival and future not as a matter of outwitting the Devil as Walcott's play does, but as a matter of healing and protecting the family's soul. The condition of Gros-Jeanne's family reflects the necropolitical reality of the family's physical, social, and cultural death in Canada. It is a family burning up from inside out as reflected in the violence Rudy is doing to his own

family and community. It is a family with men who have intergenerationally abdicated their responsibilities to their families while at the same time working to do more violence on the women. Gros-Jeanne diagnoses the situation as a condition of cultural death and decides to educate her granddaughter Ti-Jeanne about the potency of their culture and to prepare her for the future. Even though Ti-Jeanne is reluctant at first, she comes around to understand the liberating power of culture. Unlike the masculine quest of Walcott's play between three brothers, *Brown Girl*'s emphasis on women kin's intergenerationality underscores not just the *long durée* of the threat but also its totalizing reach across generations.

If the Burn enables a reading that women have almost always borne the brunt of oppressive regimes, it is understandable why the three women central to *Brown Girl* (Gros-Jeanne, Mi-Jeanne, and Ti-Jeanne) are subjected to varying degrees of atrocity as they fight their mostly male oppressors. For example, Rudy slithers Mi-Jeanne's body from her soul, and turns her into an agent of death: "When it killed, or each time it was fed blood, the essences of terror, pain, blood, and death appeased the hunger for a little while. But whenever it brought sweet death to another, it knew that it did murder, that it would have abhorred its own decisions" (155). Mi-Jeanne's condition is a crushing one; she suffers the brunt of the ritual that makes her a killing machine for Rudy. She also suffers from the inability to act independently. Mi-Jeanne's curse has great consequences for her and her victims. The severance of her soul from her body (that is, her zombification) means that her body roams aimlessly around the Burn, devoid of essence. The way the Burn is cut off from the suburbs of Toronto and turned into a wasteland underlines the condition of Mi-Jeanne's condition of living dead, now Crazy Betty. Mi-Jeanne is Rudy's child and Rudy appears intent on ruining her life to get back at his ex-wife Gros-Jeanne as well as poach on the devotion of a daughter. While Mi-Jeanne exists in this liminal space, where she terrifies everyone but belongs to no one except Rudy, she summons up courage to warn her family of Tony's plan (as instructed

by Rudy) to kill them: “It had felt the mad woman-body arrive at the farm, had felt her try to communicate the message of danger. Tony was danger. But Crazy Betty had no intellect to drive her tongue. She had only babbled half sentences that they hadn’t understood” (157). While Mi-Jeanne unsuccessfully prevents Tony from killing Gros-Jeanne, her ability to summon her inner strength while in a living-dead bind of Rudy’s spiritual control over her soul is the hallmark of feminine will and power against evil. While Rudy diminishes Mi-Jeanne as a person, she performs an act that eventually helps the community. Mi-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne and Gros-Jeanne belong to different generations of women, and the need for them to collectively fight a murderous state shows how much commitment is needed to challenge colonial necropower.

Ti-Jeanne’s role in *Brown Girl* is crucial to the war waged on the necropolitical state. Ti-Jeanne, a single breastfeeding mother, is confronted with the choice of fighting Rudy or running away after Tony (father of Ti-Jeanne’s baby) murders Gros-Jeanne. She chooses, like Mi-Jeanne, communal above personal interest and decides to face Rudy. Reid notes that “healing and preventing zombification is shown to be crucial for the wellbeing of the African-Caribbean diaspora, a state that can only be achieved through reclaiming, and reconnecting with, their African heritage” (73). Ti-Jeanne’s greatest fear is losing herself like her mother Mi-Jeanne—that is, becoming zombified. This fear at first prevents her from embracing her powers and propels her to repress her gifts of futuristic sight (especially the moments of other people’s horrifying deaths) and to shunt her destiny. Although she does not see her own death, she fears that the visions of death might portend trouble. With nothing but her desire to conquer Rudy, she goes to the CN Tower where she summons the cultural knowledge taught her by Gros-Jeanne (all the *orisas*, Shango, Ogun, Osain, Shakpana, Emanjah, Oshun, Oya, Esu, as well as her spirit father, Prince of Cemetery, i.e., a connection to her African heritage) to fight Rudy and destroy the duppy bowl that empowers him. The

opening chapter of *Brown Girl* foreshadows Ti-Jeanne's victory over Rudy. Her victory is not a victory for herself alone but mostly for the people of the Burn. The children of the Burn have become safe following the death of Rudy, their greatest oppressor.

Even though Ti-Jeanne's victory echoes the victory of Ti Jean in Walcott's play—perhaps an attempt to position the young as the victors of the present and the future—it is Gros-Jeanne, the guardian of culture and spirituality, who makes the victory possible. Gros-Jeanne, former nurse and herbalist can best be described as the Burn's hospital. In her own words, Hopkinson describes Gros-Jeanne as someone who:

> has both conventional medical training and the spiritual/herbal lore of the tradition of Orisha worship, which she practices. In Orisha, the spiritual is allied with the corporeal. Herbs and good food heal the body, but the mind and soul need to be taken care of, too. So, while Mami is quite capable of making up a poultice to treat a skin condition, she can also lead a religious ceremony to heal the spirit, and she can cook up a mean pot of soup to nourish the body. (Glave 155)

She uses her knowledge of herbs and rituals to heal people. She connects physical and spiritual/ritual elements to heal people, in spite of the backlash. It is Gros-Jeanne who teaches Ti-Jeanne to embrace her Black and other Caribbean cultural heritage including the ritualistic process of invoking the spiritual for interventions. She does not have to do that for "among Caribbean people, bush medicine used to be something private, but living in the Burn changed all the rules" (14). Gros-Jeanne tells her granddaughter, "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" (47). She loses her life to save the Burn and even though she physically dies, she resurrects in Uttley and becomes—not the answer to the riddle of how to humanize the Devil—the

resistant force that even in its death continues to challenge the orders of necropower. The transformation forced by Gros-Jeanne's heart to Uttley's body seems to metaphorize the small yet significant successes of Black women's struggles against necropower. After the successful heart transplant, Uttley's "heart's frenzied buffeting had slowed to a more regular pace, but then Uttley began to feel a numbness spreading out from her chest with each beat of the heart: down her arms, through her trunk and legs. Bit by bit, she was losing the ability to control her own body. The heart was taken over" (237). Gros-Jeanne's stolen heart manages to overpower Premier Uttley's body and thus forces the Premier into performing acts of kindness. Her newly acquired "social conscience" (239) propels her to fund small enterprises with fresh loans signaling a transformational process in the Burn. Premier Uttley's decision to change the Burn after Gros-Jeanne's heart has taken over is significant on two levels. First it shows that the government is not totally helpless in salvaging the Burn, but the rottenness of the Burn is a necropolitical plan by the government. With Gros-Jeanne in charge of Uttley's heart, humane policies are being made to revamp the Burn. The whole process of a heart taking over smacks of the earlier ritual done by Gros-Jeanne where the Prince of Cemetery possesses Ti-Jeanne's body. Second, the transplantation of Gros-Jeanne's [Black] heart in Premier Uttley's white body (hence its continued life and refusal to be dead) furthers an understanding of how Black death in the context of the struggles against colonial necropower forces its own repurposing and meaning in a white political domain. Its violent transplantation to serve as a life force in the white premier's body becomes at the same time the way it manages to subdue its host. Hence *Brown Girl* offers a redemptive political vision of Black women's victimization, a vision that insists that even in the experience of extreme violence and subjection Black women and Black women's bodies refuse to serve simply as the prop of power and the script upon which necropower writes the future. What happens, instead, is that the condition of victimization becomes repurposed for liberationist aims.

Hence the transplantation of Gros-Jeanne's heart metaphorize the political victory that Ti-Jeanne's spiritual/cultural victory over Rudy has secured for her community. The Afrofuturist vision of *Brown Girl* is addressed in response to the necropolitical and gendered conditions of Black and other minoritized peoples. Hopkinson's novel appears committed to a vision of Black women's central political leadership role in the struggles for Black liberation and in utopian future world.

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Midnight Robber is set in an imagined Caribbean future world some 200 years from the present. This future world is a largely Black Caribbean world that repeats the colonial situations of the past and the present. Just as Hopkinson does in *Brown Girl* by narrativizing necropolitical violence as a systemic form that ruptures Black families and communities from within, so too *Midnight Robber* underlines the reproduction of past colonial conditions in a utopian Caribbean future. The novel shows that the violent orders of patriarchy and colonial subordination that marked the history of the slave ship have carried into a future marked by spaceships. The trope of death as a tempering force of change recurs in Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*.[45] The novel presents the story of Tan-Tan, the privileged daughter of Antonio, who is the Mayor of Cockpit County, and his wife, Ione. Tan-Tan's coming of age-story is about her gradual transformation from a doting daughter into an abused teenager and

[45] Critical receptions of *Midnight Robber* follows similar themes as those found in the discussions of *Brown Girl*. It has been read as a decolonizing science fiction work (Boyle; Moynagh); as a postcolonial cyberpunk novel that underlines the complicit of information technology in colonial violence (Morrison, "Info-topia"); and as an exploration of maternal dynamics that trouble conventional understandings of women's role (Anatol, "Maternal Discourses in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*"). Freya Verlander summarizes a crucial trend in the scholarship on the novel when she writes that *Midnight Robber* "draws on, complicates and reimagines issues of colonization from the marginalized perspective: by setting the novel away from Earth, writing the colonized race as non-human, and casting her humans as Caribbean descendants" (73).

finally into The Robber Queen, a liberating figure in Afro-Caribbean tradition. Hopkinson focuses on metaphoric death, unlike the bodily death in *Brown Girl*, to show the transformative and gendered power of death. The metaphoric death in *Midnight Robber* underlines a vision of hope for the condemned and oppressed groups of exiles living in the underworld of The New Half-Way Tree.

The novel takes place in two planets, Toussaint and The New Half-Way Tree. Some critics believe the names in the story derive from historical references to places and peoples in the Caribbean. Toussaint seems to be an apparent reference to the Haitian revolutionary general Toussaint L'Ouverture. Place names in the story such as Cockpit County and New Half-Way Tree reference real place names in Jamaica. There are several other references to African and Black Caribbean cultural figures and legends. Even the character names such as the hero's name Tan-Tan (a reference to a Caribbean carnival character) allude to mythical, legendary, and popular figures and incidents.

Toussaint is a world colonized by Caribbean people from Planet Earth, with the help of the Marryshow Corporation. The colonization of Toussaint comes with advanced technology that relies on the Granny Nanny, which is an all-seeing technological power like Big Brother in George Orwell's *1984*. The peculiar attribute of Granny Nanny and its difference from other surveillance technology such as Big Brother is its benevolence and allowance of a type of balance which permits all the citizens free access and will, as long as it does not interfere with the order of that world, as seen for example when the Pedicab drivers shut down the system to perform tasks which will not be readily taxed by the system. The efficient nature of governance in Toussaint makes it a utopia where people live in relative comfort aided by technology that eases daily tasks. For instance, the Eshu technology, which is available to everyone on Toussaint, is used to accomplish manual tasks. The portrayal of

daily life in Toussaint is unlike any that has been presented in other Afrofuturist works. In film, *Black Panther* comes close as a never colonized, rich-in-vibranium African country but the difference is that Toussaint is self-assured and has no underlying threats to its very existence. The seeming absence of a huge war-like armory, as presented in *Black Panther*, suggests that Toussaint is in no danger of any military invasion that may threaten its sustenance. It is in a word a Black Caribbean utopia.

Toussaint at a glance seems like a successful utopian planet that promotes equity. But as with any utopia, there is an underlying dystopia that sustains the workings and efficiency of that system. The narrator in the opening paragraphs of the novel describes this other-world of Toussaint:

> But wait-you mean you never hear of New Half-Way Tree, the planet of lost people? You never wonder where them all does go, the drifters, the ragamuffins-them, the ones who think the world must be have something better for them, if them could only find which part it is? You never wonder is where we send the thieves-them, and the murderers? Well master, the Nation Worlds does ship them all to New Half-Way Tree, the mirror planet of Toussaint. (2)

The New Half-Way Tree is a world for Toussaint's outcasts, just as the Burn in *Brown Girl*. The journey to New Half-Way Tree through the dimension veil is a journey of no return that echoes the historic passage of enslaved Black Africans through the Door of No Return,[46] as Antonio reiterates: "you ever hear people say the only way out is through" (71). Usually, a grievous crime in Toussaint is the reason offenders are sent to get punishment. While Toussaint is presented as overly technologized, New Half-Way Tree is shown to be

[46] See Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*.

very close to the natural world. In New Half-Way Tree, there are dangerous animals such as the carnivorous bird, the Big Mako. It is also a planet where the douens, an intelligent species who thrive by feigning ignorance of technology, coexist peacefully with humans (aka the Tallpeople). The world of the New Half-Way Tree is dangerous, seemingly primitive, and unlike Toussaint where the Eshu serves humans. In a word, therefore, the same necropolitical order operational in the emergence and governance of the Burn in *Brown Girl* is operational in the segregated worlds of Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree.

As Kate Perillo observes, "if Toussaint successfully implements technologies in order to abolish historical inequalities, the arms race and reemergence of the Plantation on New Half-Way Tree also reminds readers how easily that implementation can take a destructive turn, reproducing what it sought to eliminate in the first place" (7). I would add that the two planets inform each other; one is the double of the other. The disguised brutalities that produced Toussaint are what have been banished to New Half-Way Tree, a death-place serving not only to regulate behaviour in Toussaint but also to sustain life therein.

The necropolitical situation in New Half-Way Tree ensures that there is no presence of Granny Nanny. The name, Granny Nanny, conjures the historical Nanny who was a resistance leader of the Jamaican Maroons in the eighteenth century. Though the accounts about her are mostly in oral narrations, she is believed to have fought a war against the British. Antol Giselle Liza reads the Granny Nanny as a grandmother figure who is "associated with freedom and leadership, deepening the positive connections between Hopkinson's fictional figure and the historical Nanny" ("Maternal Discourses" 113). Granny Nanny's figure as benevolent overseer is reminiscent of Gros-Jeanne's role in *Brown Girl* and how her presence in the Burn makes all the difference to the lives of the people living there. The absence of this maternal figure of kindness, abundance, and cultural strength

shows the soullessness and cultural death of New Half-Way Tree. Hopkinson presents the two opposite planets to show how the condition of human living depends on geolocation and geopolitics. The two-worldness of the narration sets the stage for the events that will allow the needed liberating force of freedom to emerge out of the death-world of The New Half-Way Tree. Hopkinson introduces Tan-Tan, a young woman figure of rebellion and liberation, just like Ti-Jeanne, to answer the riddle of restoring the humanity of zombified life in New Half-Way Tree. Tan-Tan's life trajectory dramatizes in part the gendered nature of the violence at work in the necropolitical ordering of the two planets when her father kidnaps her and flees to New Half-Way Tree in the attempt to escape punishment. Tan-Tan's journey to the death-world of New Half-Way Tree becomes a form of death, a journey to the underworld to rejuvenate the dead.

While *Midnight Robber* is about Tan-Tan's story, it is also about Antonio's (her father) control and abuse of Tan-Tan. Antonio escapes to New Half-Way Tree after cheating (using poison) and killing Quashee, Ione's lover in a machete fight during the annual Carnival in Toussaint. Knowing he would not escape conviction, Antonio escapes punishment from the system by going to New Half-Way Tree. Such an escape from justice, which the bifurcated world of Toussaint provides, places a big question on the utopian ideals of the planet. Antonio's escape from Toussaint is symbolic when compared with Tan-Tan's inability to escape her crimes after killing Antonio. Antonio's incessant rape of Tan-Tan from age nine exemplifies how men escape their crimes while women have to live with them. In New Half-Way Tree, Antonio rapes Tan-Tan many times and impregnates her, a pregnancy she aborts. On her 16th birthday, during another rape attempt, Tan-Tan comes into a new awareness of herself as Robber Queen:

> Something was scraping at her waist. Her hand found it. The scabbard. With the knife inside. A roaring started up in her ears. It couldn't have been she. It must have been the Robber Queen who pulled out the Knife. Antonio raised up to shove into the person on the bed again. It must have been the Robber Queen, the outlaw woman, who quick like a snake got the knife braced at her breastbone just as Antonio slammed his heavy body right onto the blade. (168)

Tan-Tan kills Antonio in self-defense and becomes a fugitive, first because she fears punishment for her act and because her stepmother, Janisette, is on her trail to kill her. Janisette knows about the rapes, but as an agent of patriarchy supports the crime and blames Tan-Tan for Antonio's absence from her life. Tan-Tan has never been new to blames. During her 9th birthday, the same day that Antonio first rapes her, he blames her for his exile (139). New Half-Way Tree is designed to protect criminal agents working for Toussaint and unleashing terror on the weak and many of these oppressors are outcasts from Toussaint, just as Rudy in *Brown Girl* runs the Burn for the Canadian colonial state. Many people in New Half-Way Tree know about Tan-Tan's repeated rape by her father, but there are no laws for which such offenses are punishable. The world of the New Half-Way Tree has all the workings that Mbembe describes as "zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate each other […] where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended-the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization'" (24).

Tan-Tan's act of killing Antonio becomes at once redemptive in the sense of liberating—the form that Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. As a form of necessary redemptive violence, killing Antonio (her father) becomes the act of her humanization or coming into a new revolutionary beingness. At the same time, killing

Antonio figures as a castration of the rapist patriarchal phallus, a necessary act required for women's liberation against violent patriarchy. Tan-Tan's exercise of redemptive violence to end her oppression activates a personality that will help other oppressed groups. She is unaware of her powers at the time. Her metaphoric death, which happened when Antonio forces her down the path of the New Half-Way Tree, is in hindsight a necessary process to confront a necropolitical condition. When the Robber Queen persona possesses Tan-Tan, she becomes capable of unexplainable swiftness, strength, and oration.

It is also instructive that the Robber Queen comes to fully manifest on Tan-Tan's 16th birthday signaling her rebirth from Tan-Tan the oppressed to Tan-Tan the fighter for the oppressed; that is, in following with the carnival plot of the story her transition from adolescence to young adult, a ritual initiation indicative of feminine self-affirmation. The first person she liberates is herself, even if partly, because Janisette remains on her trail for killing Antonio. N.A. Pierce notes,

> Intertextual narratives, transgressive narratives, and reimagined narratives are all central to Tan-Tan's engagement with Carnival and the Midnight Robber Queen mythos. As Robber *Queen*, Tan-Tan subverts a traditionally male space and claims the Carnival position as her own. She adapts it to her needs and circumstances refusing to accept her gender as a limitation. (220)

Tan-Tan's metamorphosis into the Robber Queen would not have been possible without the support of the douens species. Tan-Tan has a friendly and accommodating disposition to the douens, the non-humans living in New Half-Way Tree. The first creature she and Antonio meet in New Half-Way Tree is a douen, Chichibud, who takes her and Antonio to Junjun, the human settlement in the planet. Chichibud and Tan-Tan maintain an almost sibling-like relationship throughout the novel. The humans in the New Half-Way Tree

do not see the douens as equal to humans because the Douens help the humans with building work and are never really known beyond the services they offer. Tan-Tan's self-exile is however possible because of Chichibud's help. Chichibud, who she later discovers to be a male of the species takes her to the Daddy Tree, the settlement of the douens. Among the douens, Tan-Tan learns more about their daily living and in time is able to navigate their world. Unlike the humans in Toussaint, the douens have a more organized community with individuals having a shared commitment to the survival of others. That sense of communal survival invoked when Tan-Tan joins them because they do not alienate her. Tan-Tan's introduction into the community is collectively discussed and agreed to in spite of the inherent dangers. The douens initiate her into a cult of silence by giving her the tree frog to eat (183). Apart from the help of the community, Chichibud's wife, Benta serves as a great maternal support that Tan-Tan needs to survive the living conditions of that non-human settlement. The douens live on trees and eat raw food. Benta understands the difficulty in acclimatizing to new ways and gives Tan-Tan some education on how to cook her food on the forest floor. Such sense of communalism is absent in Junjun, which is the reason Antonio gets away with raping Tan-Tan multiple times. Giselle Liza Anatol draws attention to Hopkinson's focus on other mothers and how they are responsible for the grooming of Tan-Tan.

> Regarding idealized motherhood, Hopkinson undoes the conventional privileging of biological motherhood over and above other familial relationships. Tan-Tan receives much more of her formative, sustained care from those not genetically related to her than she gets from her birth parents. Granny Nanny and Eshu and the house compute, the robotic minder, Nursie, and the birdlike creature Benta all prove better equipped to mother Tan-Tan than Ione. Strikingly, the list of physically, emotionally, and

psychologically nurturing mothers includes mostly non-human beings, some of whom are simply sentient and not truly 'alive.'" (117)

The stability the douens provide Tan-Tan helps her navigate the most difficult times of her life. With Abitefa's (Chichibud's daughter's) help, she assumes the role of Robber Queen and her adventures become material for folksong in the communities where she helps people while possessed by the Robber Queen figure. Tan-Tan's trials as an exiled and outcast woman have helped build her strength and resolve for the series of decisions she will have to confront as Robber Queen. More important is her ability to juggle this huge responsibility with carrying Antonio's child to term (as she is pregnant from the last rape). Her decision to birth Antonio's child, a child of rape and a reminder of her father's abusive legacy is one way that Tan-Tan shows utmost strength in the novel. Tan-Tan reproduces herself in her baby son, whom she names Tubman (most apparently a reference to slavery abolitionist Harriet Tubman), whose birth signals a reconnection to Granny Nanny. Many critics have reacted to the birth of Tubman in many ways. Leif Sorensen argues that the entire story gravitates towards the birth of Tubman and "this revelation transforms the narrative into a piece of posthuman pedagogy in which an artificial intelligence schools an unborn cyborg on the ways of the world(s) he is about to enter" (279). Freya Verlander draws a connection between Tubman and Harriet Tubman, the slave who escaped and helped secure the escape of other slaves through the Underground Railroad (72).

However, Granny Nanny's presence in New Half-Way Tree through Tubman "the human bridge from slavery to freedom" (329) signals a newness and a new matriarchal order, though supervised by Granny Nanny, but fully in control by Tan-Tan the defender of the oppressed. Granny Nanny's utopic vision is discriminatory to the people of the New Half-Way Tree but Tan-Tan who shows no bias for human or douen has begun the process of

reproducing herself in a world in need of some saving. Her legacy will continue in Tubman, whose existence assures of some coexistence between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree in the future.

In *Midnight Robber* just as in *Brown Girl*, the attempts to reverse the necropolitical conditions of death worlds unfold through processes of coming into cultural awareness and spiritual strength. The heroes of both stories (Ti-Jeanne and Tan-Tan) are young women/mothers who develop into the full consciousness of their roles in community. They both must confront the death politics in their families, particularly the violence by the patriarchs of the family. The novels dramatize the necropolitical situations that the heroes must confront as a violent condition of their own families. Having confronted (as women) the concerted violence of patriarchy in their families amidst a broader condition of racist colonialism, the novels show that these young women are better equipped to battle/challenge state's necropolitics and imagine other ways of community and being. The heroes' victories come through a communal effort as well as through some exceptional qualities that they possess, a kind of feminine predestination that they must come into in order to realize their full potential.

As these heroes are young mothers with sons, the visions of the future speculated in the novels seem to be based on an understanding of a posterity in which the present necropolitical orders are recast and rebuilt away from violent patriarchs. The future belongs to these culturally aware and empowered women whose ethical orientations to community and social conscience have equipped them with the right qualities to raise better sons for the future. These are women who have not only conquered death but also passed through it in order to emerge on the other side of reality the stronger. In other words, the processes of the emergence of these icons of the future unfold through a death ritual or a carnival process

whereby young women have to undergo a death rite. These women also seem to be obsessed with bloodlines as a means of securing a certain future. These rites of passage end successfully in the young women's emergence on the other side of the ritual process fully formed and initiated into the revolutionary struggles of oppressed peoples. In the Afrofuturist worlds of *Brown Girl* and *Midnight Robber*, the future belongs to these women and the sons they hope to raise differently. While both stories do not offer guarantees that the present necropolitical orders would be banished from the future, they at least underscore the processes for such banishment. Yet it is not exactly clear why the female hero figures of Hopkinson's novels have to transfer their struggles and experiences to sons whose futures it seems these women are fighting to secure. The implications of this outcome of the novels for our understanding Hopkinson's Afrofuturism remains a point for further speculating.

In this chapter, I have analyzed Hopkinson's novels *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Midnight Robber* as underpinned by a politics of death. I showed how the worlds in these stories are governed by necropolitics. These texts centre women who challenge oppressive power, who die whether physically or metaphorically, and whose dramatic struggles against necropower underline a gendered political ritual of struggle for an alternative future with a conscience. As Eshun notes, "Afrofuturism [of this kind] 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 intervention within the current political dispensation may be untaken" (301). These women heroes are not tokenistic, but actors in the creation of a new Black/African futuristic imagination.

Chapter Three

The Politics of Fear and Death in Nnedi Okorafor's Afr(i)futurist Novels

Introduction

This chapter discusses the Afrofuturist visions in two selected novels (*Who Fears Death*, 2010, and *The Book of Phoenix*, 2015) by the Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor. Okorafor has insisted that the concept of "Afrofuturism" (which, according to her, emphasizes African American histories and experiences) does not exactly describe her artistic visions and commitments.[47] This is because she locates the sites of her futuristic imaginations in Africa; hence her preference for the term Africanfuturism. By Africanfuturism, Okorafor's intent is to put Africa (geographically, culturally, historically) at the centre of the discourse on Afrofuturism. In this chapter, I call attention to the centrality of the politics of fear and death in Okorafor's Africanfuturism. I examine the necropolitical nuances of her writing as based on these politics of fear and death. Importantly, I discuss the gender politics informing Okorafor's Africanfuturism in the two selected novels, especially with regards to envisioning an alternative world future led by young Black African women.

Okorafor's journey into becoming a writer began through an unfortunate event.[48] She was diagnosed with scoliosis at age 13 and became paralysed waist down at age 19 after a corrective surgery. Okorafor found solace in writing right at the hospital following her surgery. She started with writing short stories until she took a summer writing class at the advice of a friend. She never stopped writing since then. Her works have received important recognitions and acknowledgements. Okorafor has won the Locus, Hugo, Nebula, World

[47] See Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined".
[48] The biographical information I provide on the author is gleaned from the following sources: Siobhan, "Nnedi Okorafor: An Introduction"; Naimon, "Between the Covers Nnedi Okorafor Interview"; Okorafor, "Organic Fantasy"; Okorafor, "Writers of Colour"; Okorafor, "Writing Rage, Truth and Consequence".

Fantasy Awards, Lodester and Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature. From 2005-2021, she has written eighteen books: three children's books, (*Long Juju Man, Iridessa and the Secret of the Never Mine* and *Chicken in the Kitchen*), five comics and novels for adults and young adults. Her popular adult novels include *Who Fears Death, The Book of Phoenix, Lagoon, Noor,* and her *Binti* trilogy. In 2017, she wrote the *Black Panther: Long Live the King* comic for Marvel. In 2017, HBO announced it was adapting her book *Who Fears Death* into film. Similarly, in 2020, Hulu was making the *Binti* trilogy into a movie. No doubt, Okorafor has proven her versatility in being prolific in multiple genres and breaking the boundaries of narrative genre that appeals to different age groups.

Quite unlike many writers who are not overtly critical of how they are identified, Okorafor is different. Born in 1974 in Cincinnati, Ohio, to Nigerian parents, she calls herself "Naijaamerican" or "Nigerianamerican" to register primarily her Nigerian roots. She has mentioned her repeated visits to Nigeria since age 7 as crucial to her acclimatization to the culture and the people. In an interview with David Naimon, she addresses her in-betweenness in the different identarian contexts that she occupies:

> Mind you, when it comes to the African identity, I don't even fit that, I'm Nigerian-American, by the most solid clear definition of being African-American, I don't fit that. My parents came here in 1969 as immigrants from Nigeria, I am not the direct descendant of stolen Africans, but at the same time, I wasn't born and raised in Nigeria either, so I'm not that either. When I'm having these conversations, I'm speaking as somebody who's just, I don't fit anything solidly, and I'm perfectly fine with that. I think that my point of view of not fitting in anywhere, I think that helps me to be able to see things more clearly and understand things more clearly from an outsider-insider point of view. My whole thing is really about changing the narrative

> and just opening it up a lot more because I just think it's really important. ("Between the Covers: Nnedi Okorafor Interview")

Okorafor's outsider-insider perspective on reality is perhaps most evident in her speculative works which tend to draw significantly on her revisionism of African myths and legends. Most of her stories are set in fictionalized otherworldly African countries and societies. Some of her stories have diasporic or speculative settings woven into actual African places. Her choice of setting is not unconnected to her love for Nigeria and Africa. She admits in the same interview cited above that "Nigeria is my muse. The idea of the world being a magical place, a mystical place, is normal there" ("Between the Covers Nnedi Okorafor Interview"). She coins the word "organic fantasy" for her type of speculative fiction, a type of fantasy which "grows out of its own soil" (Okorafor, "Organic Fantasy" 277). In the writing fashion of her mentors, Ben Okri and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (as well as her influences such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, Nalo Hopkinson), Okorafor erects imaginative structures through which an alternative world-building of the future could begin in Africa.

Okorafor's writings fuse elements of science fiction, magic realism, fantasy, and speculative fiction. In the mosaic of her style, a notable feature is the presence of strong, roundly developed Black African characters, most especially Black African women. Her commitment is largely to recentering the place of young Black African woman, a reason that her novels are often populated by young African women who grow from the margins of society and history to become the redemptive, procreative, and regenerative forces of their society's futures. Okorafor has argued that her preference for Africanfuturism (as against Afrofuturism) is precisely because of her desire to centre in her works the regenerative potential discernible in African worldviews to which she subscribes. She rejects her works being labelled as Afrofuturist, arguing that the term caters to African American futurisms that

are largely based on a similar trajectory as the futurism of Western white society. Okorafor defines her craft of Africanfuturism as:

> a sub-category of science fiction […] 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 […] Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be'. It acknowledges, grapples with and carries 'what has been.' ("Africanfuturism Defined")

Okorafor is not the only artist to express a reluctance with the Afrofuturism label. Some other Black writers have also rejected having their works labelled by the term because of concerns similar to Okorafor's.[49] At the center of their disdain for the label is the geopolitical baggage that comes with it, which tends to exclude African cultures, countries and writers in the issues and questions that have dominated the discourse in the last two decades. Even though in recent years few works situated in Africa have been retroactively read by critics as Afrofuturist, academic norms, events, and conferences on Afrofuturism have been centered largely around works produced by (and centring) African Americans, and works that mostly detail the plight of Africans in the diaspora.

[49] For example, Chinelo Onawalu, a Nigerian editor and speculative fiction writer, rejects the label because it appears to marginalize African experiences in its emphasis on the Black diaspora. She says, "I certainly wouldn't call myself an Afrofuturist because I believe the term defines a particular type of literary, artistic, and musical aesthetic that is born out of unique experiences of the African diaspora [and not Africa per se]" (*Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* 44). Similarly, Bill Campbell, the editor the of the book, *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond*, vows never to call himself an Afrofuturist. His choice of title for his book, as he explains, is primarily a marketing strategy to popularize a book written by Black folks. The problems he has with the term is the broadness of the movement and how it lacks a doctrine or manifesto.

Yet, beyond the politics of terminological framing or label, I think that it is important to underscore that these projects are more connected than divergent in the ways that these critics and artists are claiming. The point remains that questions of race have been at the crucial heart of the different artistic projects imagining the future of Black peoples in the world. The anxiety for those emphasizing Africa and other sites of Black futuristic imaginations is largely because the discourse on Afrofuturism has not catered to a diverse African/Black population but instead centred an African American focus in ways that reiterate the workings and assumptions of US Empire/exceptionalism. Particularly given that the Afrofuturist project emerged in response to the politics of exclusion in the dominant, Western (and mainstreamed) imagination of world/global futures, the exclusionary politics of the Afrofuturist discourse deserves these criticisms. However, it is important to recognize the overlapping visions for the future of Black peoples beyond the contests over terminological representation. I tend to agree with Jane Bryce when she talks about the often-complicated nature of terms like Afrofuturism when she says that "literary labels, like other kinds of boundaries, are porous and slippery, and an apparently stable sign or category may well point simultaneously in various directions" ("African Futurism" 4). I see Okorafor's project of African futurism pointing simultaneously in similar and various directions as Afrofuturism, a reason I use the term "Afrifuturism" in the title to underline this project's concerns with race/racism that centres Africa and continental African experiences and realities.

The slipperiness and overlaps of Okorafor's works with the different projects of Afrofuturism have been discussed extensively by some critics whose works illuminated understanding of Okorafor's love for apocalyptic worlds as well as her empowerment of victimized subjects in her works. For example, Kristine Kotecki in "Apocalyptic Affect in Nnedi Okorafor's Speculative Futures" says that Okorafor "deploy(s) apocalyptic upheaval to bring to light underlying social problems" (176). According to Julia Hoydis, Okorafor

"depicts the subject of the victimization and the dis- and re-empowerment of women as reality, necessity, and utopian possibility of the future" ("Race, Gender, and Genre in Black Female Speculative Fiction" 77). Okorafor's works have also been read alongside speculative fiction writers such as Octavia Butler, Nisi Shawl, Nalo Hopkinson, and Tananarive Due.[50] Okorafor shares some similarities with Hopkinson. Both infuse newer tropes into their writing to experiment with and broaden the genres they are working in. They also draw from their cultural myths and stories to create unique yet recognizable characters. One unique thing they both share which is a point of connection between this chapter and the previous one is their narratives developed around young Black women who are avatars of impossible changes in their communities. This is a point Okorafor mentions in the interview with David Naimon:

> What if Black women were truly powerful? I've read a lot of African literature, especially when I was in graduate school at Michigan State. I found the African literature section at the library and read everything on the shelf. I came away feeling like I wanted to see Black African women be powerful, I wanted to see them win. In so many of those books, they did not win. I was reading realism. I thought, What if they won? And what if they were so powerful that sometimes they destroyed shit? What if they used their valid anger, and what if it wasn't in the most acceptable way? I wanted to see that. I wanted to dismantle the patriarchy. ("Between the Covers Nnedi Okorafor Interview")

My aim in this chapter is to discuss Okorafor's linked novels *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*. I read the two works as underpinned by death worlds. Okorafor's

[50] See, e.g., Hoydis, "Fantastically Hybrid: Race, Gender, and Genre in Black Female Speculative Fiction"; Davis, "Power and Vulnerability: BlackGirlMagic in Black Women's Science Fiction"; Jones, "Africana Women's Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine: Difference, Ethics and Empathy"; Langer, "Postcolonial Speculative Fiction in Africa and Its Diaspora".

works highlight death worlds that lend to genocides and the eradication of minoritized and racialized bodies. I show that the death worlds in Okorafor's works are founded and sustained on a politics of fear. I argue that Okorafor's Africanfuturist project is organized around a critique of the necropolitical conditions of the postcolonial African state. This project, as I contend further, attends to two critical issues: one, it is mobilized against fear, and second, it serves to position the Black woman at the crucial interfaces of alternative future worlds founded on visions of renewal and the defeat of fear through a process that completely pulls apart the brutal structures and conditions of necropower. Whereas the poetics of Hopkinson's Afrofuturist works in the late 1990s and the early 2000s respond to the conditions of necropower through a politics of resilient posterity, I show that Okorafor's intervention favours renewal as a liberation praxis.

Rewriting the Future for the Sake of the Present: The Retributive Seeds of Genocide in *Who Fears Death*

Who Fears Death (*Death* subsequently) is set in a postapocalyptic Africa, a time after "the old Africa" (16) and a "place that used to be a part of the Kingdom of Sudan" (381). The towns in *Death*—Jwahir, Banza Papa Shee, Ssolu, Durfa—appear likely modelled after stereotypically traditional communities in different parts of Africa. In her novel, these towns are patriarchal, practice magic and voodoo, have technology and are heavily reliant on the instructions of a sovereign text called "the Great Book." The Afrifuturist project of the book, as I argue, is addressed to dismantling the gendered death world authorized by the Great Book. The hero's journeys and her coming into an awareness of her feminine powers as well as her place as a leader through whom a different world can be realized all work to structure the speculative drama of patriarchal demolition and Black African women's empowerment. While Okorafor's novel calls attention to the necropolitical conditions theorized by Mbembe

as the order of colonial power, unlike Mbembe's work, however, *Death* (as well as *The Book of Phoenix*) complicates the genocidal order of colonial necropower as necessarily gendered. Okorafor's gendered vision unfolds through the dramatization of the ways that the war over group lives and deaths are waged on the woman's body—making this body the site of history and of posterity.

Okorafor's postapocalyptic African Kingdom in *Death* is plagued by a history of racial violence that has fostered an oppressive, hierarchized community.[51] The novel narrates the necropolitical conditions of genocide based not only on the attempted physical elimination of Okeke people by the Nuru but also a violent process engineered to biologically eliminate them. The biological nature of the genocidal violence described in the story underlines the oppressors' genocidal logics that are based on eliminating their victims not only in the present but also ensuring that they are not part of the future.

The Nuru and the Okeke are the prominent groups in the story, and their cataclysmic history is an albatross that hangs over their everyday relations. The Okekes are the enslaved people of the Nurus. In the narrative about the differences between Nurus and Okekes as authorized by the Nurus based on a religious book called the Great Book, race (as based on an idea of phenotypical difference) is an essential mark of distinction: "the Nuru people had yellow-brown skin, narrow noses, thin lips, and brown or black hair that was like a well-groomed horse's mane. The Okeke had dark brown skin, wide nostrils, thick lips, and thick black hair like the hide of a sheep" (25). These supposedly phenotypical differences structure

[51] While it may be argued that the novel portrays these identities in what appears as ethnical terms, the specific workings of these identities in the story underline the major assumptions of racism and racialization. Unlike the notion of ethnic identity that marks group difference based largely on social, cultural, historical, and sometimes geographical differences, racial differences (especially as derived from the pseudoscience of European racism) are marked by a false ontology of phenotypical differences upon which oppressive groups structure their essentialist notions of a racialized group character (See, e.g., Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*). In *Who Fears Death*, group difference in the context of Nuru/Okeke dynamics is based not only on social differences (ethnic) but largely on an ontology of physical/bodily othering (racial).

the relation of the two groups as the work of nature: that is, the belief that the physical differences in appearance between the two groups mean that the Nuru are biologically superior to (and therefore destined by nature to enslave) the Okeke. The enslavement of the Okeke is so entrenched that the Great Book governing their affairs sanctions their enslavement and inferior status. The significance of the Great Book in the novel highlights not only the violence of the text but also a historical process whereby the technologies of writing and literacy encode oppression as an unchanging, indelible code. I agree with Miriam Pahl's reading when she says that "the discourse of the Great Book [in the novel] has grown beyond its pages and serves to dictate and justify social structures. Its fixation in writing claims authority and truth and allows the inhabitants of the kingdom to refer to it to explain their fate and position in society" (218). In other words, the Great Book functions as an authority of violence and oppression, a book sanctioning and normalizing the enslavement of groups of people. To reinforce the violence prescribed by the Great Book, the Nurus launch an onslaught on the Okekes, activating a genocide that leaves most of the Okeke men dead and a mass rape of Okeke women.

Death chronicles the cycle of genocidal violence that takes the form of mass rapes of women. The governing logic of the violence is patriarchal as it is based on the understanding that children belong biologically to their fathers and that women are only a vessel through which men reproduce their own race and attributes. Hence the mass rape of Okeke women has been engineered to reproduce the Nuru race through Okeke women, an expression of the Nuru's exercise of absolute power and control over the future of the Okeke, a deliberate act of biologically exterminating the Okeke race as it were. This patriarchal vision of genocide leading to the mass rape of Okeke women produced the central phenomenon of the novel's story, mixed-race children of violence, called the Ewu.

It is noteworthy that, like Hopkinson, Okorafor often weaves together elements of African histories, myths, and cosmologies in her writings. Her novels are usually saturated with sometimes revised versions or sometimes mainstream understandings of myths and legends from different African cultural traditions. In *Death*, Okorafor appears to allude to different historical and mythological tropes and forms from different African cultures including the Igbo, Yoruba, the Hausa-Fulani, among several others. The labelling of children of genocidal rape as Ewu in the novel may likely be a reference to the Igbo experience of war and genocide in Nigeria during the late 1960s. Okorafor's parents are, after all, Igbo who emigrated to the US in the 1960s during the war. Ewu in Igbo literally means goat and the phrase Ewu hausa (Hausa goat) was used in the Igbo region of Nigeria as a popular insult after the war to refer to children born through the rape of Igbo women by Hausa soldiers. "Okeke" is also another word that perhaps gives credence to this interpretation as the word is a popular Igbo family name. "Nuru," on the other hand, seems to refer to a shortened version of the Muslim/Arab name Nuruddin, which is a popular name in the Muslim-majority Northern Nigeria. So, it is most likely that Okorafor's use of these names is a deliberate reference to the violent history in Nigeria, especially between the Igbo and the Hausa even though the story appears to reference violent encounters in other parts of Africa, most notably the civil war in the Sudan.[52] These references to African conflicts are important for understanding Okorafor's African futurism project not least because they centre African historical experiences by positioning continental Africans as subjects (even if as perpetrators or victims) in the violent histories of the continent but also because they invite critical engagement of the legacies of European colonial racism on the African continent even in the supposed aftermath of official colonization. While in the novel there are no white colonizers,

[52] In the Acknowledgements section at the end of *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor references "the 2004 AP news story by Emily Wax titled, 'We want to make a light baby'" that discusses "weaponized rape in the Sudan [as creating] the passageway through which Onyesonwu [the hero of *Who Fears Death*] slipped into my world" (387).

the structures of violence erected by the absent whites remain powerfully active and debilitating, as the work of the Great Book makes clear. By absenting whiteness in the story world of *Death*, Okorafor seems to invite a more critical engagement with African subjectivity that allows for better understanding of how it has come to be constituted by a violent history of racism—an understanding that offers better prospects for envisioning an alternative African future.

The Ewu in *Death* occupy a delicate place in their society. As products of genocidal rapes intended by the Nurus to obliterate the essence of the Okeke as a group, it is perhaps understandable why the Ewu are scorned by the very society where they are raised. As biological "racial" hybrids, the Ewu, which translates in the story as "born of pain" (31), are dark-skinned in comparison to the Nuru. They are called children of violence in recognition of the history of their births and their complex place in the Seven Rivers Kingdom. The presence of these children serves as a constant reminder of the genocide of the Okeke and equally as the half-successful attempt to annihilate the Okeke by the Nuru. Thus, the Ewu are hated by both Okekes and Nurus and they have a difficult existence as bastards and outcasts of a history in which they embody both victim and villain.

Okorafor's eponymous protagonist, Onyesonwu (another Igbo name that Okorafor translates as "Who Fears Death"), bears this crushing burden of being an outcast. To be an Ewu who "look[s] neither Okeke nor Nuru, more like desert spirits" (25) is to live perpetually in fear and in a state of double stigma and marginalization. The fear of societal reactions to Ewus plagued Najeema, Onyesonwu's mother, for years. After her rape by Daib, the evil and powerful Nuru General (also a sorcerer), she is abandoned by Onyesonwu's father and she goes into exile for her and her daughter's safety. Derogatory names like "Nuru concubine, slave, Ewu carrier" (28) are often hurled at her by people who see her with her daughter, and the fear for her life set her running into the desert for six years where she raises her daughter

alone. The fear of being hunted causes Najeema to say her daughter's name only in whispers, never uttering her daughter's name but believing that "one day, Onyesonwu will speak her name correctly" (25). Like other Ewus, Onyesonwu lives with the knowledge of the history of her birth and as such declares, "*I am awful. I am evil. I am filth. I should not be*" (55; original emphasis).

Ewu identity in *Death* is complicated by the violent history between the Okeke and the Nuru. This complication is most telling in the reality that even inter-marriages and love affairs between the two groups cannot escape reference to the genocidal rape. Hence the genocide forces its meaning on any other kind of relationship that can exist between the Okeke and Nuru, essentially contaminating and foreclosing any positive, generative relationship. Onyesonwu's lover, Mwita, underlines this point when he explains the nuances of Ewu identity to the hero:

> I'm not completely like you…Your mother […] she was assaulted. My mother was not. Everyone believes an *Ewu* child is like you, that his or her mother was attacked by a Nuru man and he succeeded in impregnating her. Well, my mother fell in *love* with a Nuru man […] And yes, we come out looking the same as children of… of rape." (58-59)

Mwita's conception out of a love affair between a Nuru man and an Okeke woman offers an alternative vision of identity in the novel serving to dismantle any essentialist ideas about children from supposedly inter-racial affairs even if violent ones. Such a relationship provides an alternative vision of identity but also complicates power and its relation to desire.

The necropolitical condition in the novel is a gendered and genocidal one that produces the Ewu as a "hybrid" race forcibly created to wipe out the Okeke. The logic of this genocide highlights the patriarchal underpinnings of the violence that *Death* maps and

interrogates. The logic is based principally on a biological form of genocide. This biological violent form differs to a large extent in method from outright killing. Its violent vision is bifurcated along gendered lines. While it targets Okeke men with outright physical death, it violates Okeke women's bodies because they can reproduce. It is not immediate death it seeks with women's bodies. It seeks instead to target its assumed capacity to reproduce Okekeness in the future. Its warped vision of reproduction conceives the biological to be inseparable from the social, cultural, ethnic. In other words, the racist vision of the genocide is mostly manifest in its idealization of women's bodies as the site where the war for the future of a group must be waged and won. To exterminate the Okeke as a group, therefore, is to target their women with rape—hence the genocide by the penis. This violent and patriarchal imagination of womanhood as a reproductive vessel through which groups (read: men) reproduce themselves functions at once to banish women as determining agents of group form (i.e., it reduces womanhood to non-being in so far as it is understood that women's bodies do not embody group identity per se but instead serve only as vessels) and as the core targets of genocide. The nature of its violence is rape—not only to violate and humiliate women but also to turn women's bodies into the complete object of patriarchal power; that is, the object on which a patriarchal genocidal power can write its violent script. In this way, too, the conflicting groups assume gendered qualities: the Okeke identity comes to be feminized as the object of masculine Nuru genocide. The children produced in the crucible of this violently gendered history as expressions of genocidal power are what Okorafor appears more interested in speculating.

As children of genocidal rapes, the Ewu are supposed to embody the very violence of the destruction of the Okeke; that is, their very lives would bring about the death of a group. While the logic of this necropolitical force is parochially patriarchal in the way it objectifies the Okeke women's bodies as a site upon which Nuru men can rewrite the Okeke code or

DNA, it is important to underline that its vision of the subjects of its violent creation—the Ewu—are not exactly humans but nonhuman weapons, a technology of death. The Ewu, therefore, are a technology of death created by the Nuru masterminds to destroy. As Onyesonwu comes to learn later, her biological father Daib is the arrowhead of this necropolitical reality. His original intention has been to use his power of sorcery to create a powerful Ewu male child who would join forces with him to assist with annihilating the Okeke. His plans eventually fail because Onyesonwu's mother taps her own powers to change Onyesonwu's gender. In a sense, therefore, Onyesonwu is at once a combination of different things: a son changed into a daughter, a weapon of mass destruction, a woman with magical powers, and a human-nonhuman being. Even though she is fashioned by the Daib out of violence, her mother has also infused an enormous capacity for love and care in her. She becomes not simply an embodiment of the capacities for death and life, for hate and love. These qualities would inform her quest in the story to discover her fate in the world and to destroy Daib.

Onyesonwu's quest in the story reveals an attempt to come to grips with the governing logic of necropower and ways to defeat it. Fear and death stand out as the major technologies that the hero must confront and learn to use. As Mbembe explains in "Necropolitics," any attempt to reckon with the conditions of necropower has to be based on a deeper understanding of its dynamics for "under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred" (40). *Death* underscores as well as complicates this situation most remarkably using Onyesonwu's quest to discover her destiny and to destroy Daib. In her quest, the lines between suicide and resistance, sacrifice and redemption increasingly become blurred. She realizes that she must die in order to live; must fear in order to conquer fear; must sacrifice her own life to live for others. This condition is so because it is precisely how the

necropolitical condition operates based on the two governing logics of necropower, as Mbembe would have it. The logic is fear as a technology both of control and an end in itself. Under the conditions of Nuru necropower, fear is important. It is the underlying confirmatory logic for genocide—the fear of the Okeke Other who must be eliminated to save the Nuru, a fear that presents the Other as a permanent existential threat. The logic of this fear is what provides the governing rationale normalizing the elimination of the Okeke as the right thing to do. The other side of this fear is that its logic strikes terror in the psyche of its victims who are perpetually put in check, constantly terrorized, and arbitrarily killed in the name of fear.

In *Death*, Onyesonwu has to learn and master this fear not only because she recognizes that her very existence is a creation of this fear and is intended to function as a technology of death. But also, she recognizes that the Daib who exercises absolute power (or the power to deliver death) over his subjects is like the sovereign described by Mbembe (quoting Bataille) as "he who is, as if death were not" (14). To be as if death were not is to be above death, to not fear death, to become and to deliver death. This recognition is what produces the second logic Mbembe describes—the logic of martyrdom. This logic while still a direct product of the necropolitical order is what generally develops among oppressed peoples responding to the violence of necropower. The coming into this logic signals an attitude of redemptive and sacrificial death as paths to freedom. It underscores a necessary awareness required to reorder the destinies designed for the Ewu in the story. Hence Onyesonwu rejects Daib's designs for her to serve as an agent of death for the necropolitical state and instead works to undermine and destroy the state as it has been constituted and governed.

In her attempts, she sacrifices herself to death in order to cause the death of Daib and his forces. Throughout the story, Onyesonwu confronts life as history that has happened yet has to be relived backwards. The story begins near the end with Onyesonwu recounting her

story to a man while in prison awaiting her execution. The narrative jumps back in time and later forward. The death that Onyesonwu experiences by the end of the story is a death she has already experienced once during her initiation training. Having already died once, she is in a sense a living dead in her story, a figure who bestrides and blurs any boundaries between death and life. Her story underlines the conditions of her demonization as a racialized Black woman on account of her gender as a woman, her race as an Okeke, her history as a child of rape, and her blood as a contaminated Ewu. Her embodiments of the different imprints and registers of necropower work to empower her with a unique stubbornness and defiant way of doing things out of order, a reason for which she is able to defeat Daib and fulfil her destiny of rewriting the Great Book. For example, her main revolutionary act at the end of the story results from her refusing to heed the instruction to avoid sex if she is to rein in her powers. Her refusal to heed this instruction means that following the killing of her lover Mwita, Onyesonwu is able to magically impregnate herself using the semen left during their lovemaking. This act of reproductive power reverses the genocide orchestrated with the penis through rape. In this act, the woman reclaims the position to create (reproduce) and to cause creation. Hence this act of self-pregnation causes, on the one hand, the mass deaths of men in the area, and on the other, the impregnation of all the women in the area. This capacity to create and to destroy, or a capacity of creation in destruction, characterizes her mission to rewrite the Great Book by wiping the violent texts clean, leaving the slate blank for a new beginning.

The necropolitical world of Okorafor's *Death* is a total dystopia for Black women. Okorafor describes it as an all-too familiar world: "when I consider empires and worlds, this is a prime example of how I create them. I don't. They are already there. I live in them, am affected by them and I write about them" ("Writing Rage, Truth and Consequence" 24). Jalondra Davis in "Power and Vulnerability: BlackGirlMagic in Black Women's Science

Fiction" opines that "Okorafor uses the character of Onyesonwu to comment on the form of ethnic cleansing that particularly targets women and girls" (27). Davis interprets Onyesonwu as the "otherwoman" instead of the superhuman and posthuman, as she argues that "the young women heroines of several black women's science fiction novels access their magic not through superhuman gifts, but through otherhuman ontologies, communal resources, and exclusion from other forms of power. Their magic is indelibly connected to their vulnerability, the same vulnerability that positions these young black girls as constant rhetorical threats to society" (15).

While I partly agree with Davis, Onyesonwu's embodiment as an Eshu accounts for her powers in a society where to be woman is to be disadvantaged. Onyesonwu's mother does not reveal her own powers to her daughter because of the nature of that society. Onyesonwu has to learn about her mother's powers on her journey to the West. The prophecy that the Great Book will be rewritten by an Ewu woman is so popular in the world of the story because of the belief that a woman is not capable of significantly altering history's trajectories. Onyesonwu however has to activate her powers to embark on the quest that can bring liberation to her and her people. Eshu is a trickster god in Yoruba cosmology; powerful but controversial because of its benevolent and mischievous nature. Eshu is noted for its two-sidedness; it plays tricks both to morally upright people and evil people alike. The Eshu figure is not activated in Onyesonwu until Ogundimu, her mother's husband, dies during which time she comes into a partial understanding of her powers, especially her ability to shapeshift and take the form of animals. Hence the death of her mother's husband, which exemplifies Davis' notion of vulnerability, is symbolic as a necessitating force that sets Onyesonwu on a journey to bring life and freedom to the Ewus and Okeke people. Yet Onyesonwu's heroic intervention functions at once as a reclamation of conventional understandings of womanhood that has been devalued and dismissed by patriarchy at the

same time as she works to establish an entirely new world order founded on women's leadership as a liberationist praxis for the future.

Onyesonwu goes through the eleventh rite in Jwahir to conform to societal dictates. Her willingness to follow societal guidelines for a woman, however dated, shows how women in that society are brainwashed into acts of torture to prove their worth and devotion. I argue that rites of passage such as the eleventh rites are ways that the necropolitical state further bifurcates the society in its politics of control. The production of Ewu children by the necropolitical state is similar to the eleventh rite initiation as they are both engineered by sexual violence. While one is forced, the other is woven into the fabric of the society to keep women within the stranglehold of patriarchy. Onyesonwu finds her gender to be limiting as it hinders her from beginning her quest. Aro, the great sorcerer in Jwahir, who could teach her the Great Mystic points that would make her come to the full understanding and usage of her powers, refuses to teach her at first because she is a woman: "You cannot measure up," Aro tells her (65). Onyesonwu's struggle is instructive especially given the great sacrifices she has to make to belong in that society by performing the initiation of the eleventh rites. Aro's acceptance to teach her the Mystic Points, something that has never been done to any woman is also instructive. The process comes with gnashing sacrifices. Aro warns her: "You have to ride through death to pass" (138). Onyesonwu dies and rises from death to measure up. The process of Black women's liberation—even when they are fighting for their societies—often requires that they pass through death. Sometimes death for the woman manifests as the loss of something of the individual self, which must be sacrificed before one can come into their full being.

The trajectory of Onyesonwu's life reveals a constant negotiation between life and death, a blurring of the boundaries between life and death, a never-ending state of renewal of the self in order to attain significance. This state of renewal involves conquering the fear of

death. Fear of not belonging, tied to the fear of being an outcast makes Onyesonwu to allow the cutting of her clitoris. Yet in undergoing these humiliations and violence, she begins to understand her mother's suffering and why she has to avenge her mother's rape and confront the necropower that has reduced the fate of women, Okekes and Ewus, in that world to subhuman conditions. Okorafor uses death as a force of redemption in the future world she presents in *Death*. While Onyesonwu survives in the end, transformed into a *Kponyungo* bird as she escapes, her journey to success has been marked by death scenarios. She goes through a spiritually excruciating initiation, which many Okeke men and women failed, dies in the process and comes back to life. Her journey to the West is a journey of death. Some of her friends, who accompany her in the quest for the freedom of the Okeke, either die in the process or quit the quest when they recognize that the freedom quest is a journey of death. Mwita, Onyesonwu's lover and an Ewu male who has been instrumental to the successful dethroning of the sovereign Daib, also dies. The story is, therefore, saturated with different forms of death serving on the one hand as the product of a necropolitical order and yet on the other as the necessary response to necropower. Okorafor's *Death* supports the logic of death based on martyrdom as a necessary response or counter politics to the instrumentality of terror and death unleashed by necropower. In this way, Onyesonwu's fate is similar to Gros-Jeanne's in Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Both women offer themselves as necessary sacrifices for their community's freedom and transition. In the context of *Death*, the heroic sacrifice of the hero provides an imaginative pathway for rewriting the racist book of power that is at the heart of the genocidal relations between the Okeke and the Nuru. Onyesonwu's sacrifice of her body in the attempt to remedy the wrongs of history serves to rework the Daib's idealization and treatment of the woman's body as a site for group annihilation. Sacrificing her (Onyesonwu's) body for the course of historical change paves the way for its transfiguration that makes allowance for a new history to be written.

In *Death*, the logic of martyrdom based on the sacrifice of the woman's body provides the foundation to rewrite the Great Book of oppression and enslavement. The project of rewriting the Great Book, which may be seen as a project of reworking the orders of history, reveals Okorafor's futuristic revolutionary vision. I agree with Joshua Yu Burnett's summary of this project:

> Ultimately, the "rewriting" of the Great Book is an experiential, not literary, act, yet this serves as a complication, not a rejection, of print culture as a form of post-colonial resistance. The words on the page have meaning but cannot be read by Onyesonwu and remain unseen by the reader. They fade but do not vanish; the rewriting is created out of Onyesonwu's body, but the rewritten book is clearly marked as separate from the body. The Great Book is at once located inside and outside of Onyesonwu as the person who produces it yet cannot ever know it. (147)

In the next section I discuss the nuances of this project of radical rewriting of necropolitical histories of Black peoples in the context of Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*.

To Wipe Clean the Slate of Death in *The Book of Phoenix*

Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* (subsequently *Phoenix*) brings into sharper focus the necropolitical conditions of masculine texts used to inscribe death on feminized bodies. The story retraces a world that produced the genocidal world of *Death* to show the history of the Great Book that authorized the genocides narrated in Onyesonwu's world. *Phoenix* shows that the organizing form of necropolitics is the male written text. The book is a technology of governance and control that inscribes the conditions of death on racialized and feminized people. Its inscription of death is mostly based on its conception of inferiority and threat in terms suggestive of female desire, which it aims to control and limit. The story of *Phoenix*

tracks the history of this patriarchal text whose legacies would be defeated centuries later by Onyesonwu in *Death*.

Okorafor's *Phoenix* is the prequel to *Death*, published five years after. That is, the events in *Phoenix* happened before those depicted in *Death.* This order of publication and presentation of events in the novels encourage thinking about the ways both books invite the reader to read or re-read history backwards. The world of *Phoenix* is technologically advanced and technologically corrupted, dramatized, for example, in the unethical genomic experiments being carried out on enslaved peoples kidnapped mostly from Africa and Asia, and transformed into lethal weapons of death. The headquarters of these hideous practices is America where technology has been perfected in the act and art of slavery. The apparent connection of this world to the history of slavery shows that the world of *Phoenix* is anything but the future. It reveals instead a necropolitical condition of enslavement that has become the nomos of history. The technologies of enslavement in *Phoenix* serve as the prelude to the unnarrated (or perhaps unnarratable) catastrophe that would produce the post-apocalyptic world of Onyesonwu in *Death*. Yet, while the world in *Death* is presented as one heavily reliant on magic and voodoo, where battles are won on battlegrounds through force, the world in *Phoenix* is portrayed as a more technologically advanced setting whose outcome can only be total destruction of the world. As Diana Brydon explains, "[s]uch temporal disruption, distinctions between self and other, and between technology and magic in these texts function to complicate what Mbembe calls 'the conflation of reason and terror'" ("Resisting Necropower" 1).[53] This complication is because whereas the world of *Phoenix* is a product of

[53] The critical reception of *The Book of Phoenix* has focused largely on its depiction of rage. Some representative claims have been that the novel mobilizes Black feminine rage as a positive force of change. Diana Adesola Mafe summarizes these claims as follows: Phoenix specifically channels and performs rage as a signifier of black feminism—the same rage that Audre Lorde articulates in *Sister Outsider* (1984), that bell hooks describes in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), and that Brittney Cooper identifies in *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018). For more on the novel's thematic of rage, see also, Lindow, "Nnedi Okorafor: *The Book of Phoenix*, the Morality of Abomination"; Stefanova, "The Unpredictable Powers of Female Flight in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*." These readings underline the feminist

neoliberal capitalist violence founded on the terror of technological reason, the world of magical reason in *Death* is the outcome of technological apocalypse. Hence it is not so much a conflation of reason and terror as it is a conflation of technology and magic, of science and religion.[54] Under necropolitical regimes as the two novels highlight, these forms of reasoning—technological/magical—produce terror and death. Hence *Phoenix* seems to ask what it means for racialized peoples to be turned into weapons of death under the orders of necropower, and what it means to resist and defeat a history of this process of death engineering. *Phoenix* provides the historical context for understanding the racism and genocidal logics portrayed in the world of *Death*. The logic of engineering a people's self-destruction from within is at the heart of *Phoenix* and the novel traces the history of this logic to the colonial metropoles of the West.

Just as found in *Death*, the plot structure of *Phoenix* is episodic and achronological. The story begins near the end and circles back and forth. The story contains two interconnected yet parallel stories. The first is the story of a discovery by a desert dweller called Sunuteel, who finds some audio files from centuries earlier. The audio files belong to a woman called Phoenix and provide an account of Phoenix's story. The plot moves between Phoenix's story and Sunuteel's transcription, interpretation, and editorial adjustments. Sunuteel's efforts underscore the history of the Great Book that Onyesonwu in *Death* fights to destroy and rewrite.

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underpinnings of the story based on the politics of Black feminine rage. My reading of the novel does not depart from these extant perspectives. Mine is more concerned with how rage is mobilized towards rewriting the terms of the future and the significance for an African futurism.

[54] Okorafor has also spoken about the significance of her fusion of technology and magic in her writing. She considers the relationship of the magical and the technological as based on the peculiar forms of being African in the world including historically and culturally: "To be African is to merge technology and magic […] I'm not doing anything in my fiction that doesn't exist already. I got the idea FROM my experiences of being an African, from being amongst Africans, and being IN Africa" (Quiana 209).

The structure of narration and publication of *Phoenix* and *Death* underlines Okorafor's rejection of linear time as an account of progress in the African context. The structuring of the events in *Phoenix,* as in *Death* in which the books begin at the end of the character's quest and then traces events that lead up to the end syncs with Okorafor's conception of time as cyclical in Africa. This African conception of time is what accounts for/enables the notion that death is not the end/not an end.[55] *Phoenix* starts with Sunuteel's discovery of recordings relating Phoenix's story as an accelerated organism. The novel ends with Sunuteel's revision of the story in a way that "defecated a tale of his own" (232). Sunuteel's edited version of the story becomes The Great Book on which enslavement of the Okeke is authorized and validated in *Death*.

Phoenix tells her story from the twenty-eighth floor of Tower 7, a space where she observes the strange events around her:

> I don't know why they gave me such a large mirror in my bathroom. High and round, it stretched from wall to wall. Therefore, I saw myself in full glory. As I slathered the thick, yellow, nutty smelling cream onto my drying skin, it was as if I was harbouring a sun deep within my body and that sun wanted to come out. Under the dark brown of my flesh, I was glowing. I was light. (15)

Phoenix wonders why she glows in the dark, why she looks like a forty-year-old woman even though she is two years old, why she is confined to Tower 7 and not allowed to see outside. Just like Onyesonwu in *Death*, Phoenix is a creation of necropower. She is a speciMen, a genetic experiment of LifeGen, an American corporation, like several other speciMen: Mmuo (who could walk through walls) and Saeed (Phoenix's lover who eats broken glass). Phoenix could read a 500-paged book in two minutes and have her internal temperature rise to

[55] On the notion of indigenous African conception of time, see, e.g., Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy.*

220degrees when provoked. Phoenix has a weaponized body, which the necropolitical state also fears and at first succeeds in controlling (48). Yet as is the case with Onyesonwu in *Death*, love propels Phoenix into disobedience when Saeed goes missing in very questionable circumstances.

Phoenix's fate is no different from Onyesonwu's. Okorafor places her protagonists in death worlds as creations of necropower and equally uses love and death to awaken their awareness to their alternative destinies. As Onyesonwu wakes to the history of her people following the death of her mother's husband Ogundimu, and later the death of her lover Mwita, Phoenix turns her anger over Saeed's death against the state causing the destruction of Tower 7 (31). Like Onyesonwu, Phoenix is a figure of recurrent martyrdom. The only major difference between Onyesonwu and Phoenix is the nature of their journeys. While Onyesonwu moves to the West to confront Daib, Phoenix does not immediately embrace her destiny. After she self-resurrects from her first death, with the destruction of Tower 7, she runs away from America and finds refuge in Africa, in a place called Wulugu in Ghana. Her journey to Africa is important on two levels; the first is to trace her origins and the second is to serve as an affront to necropower. Before the journey, Phoenix had been ignorant of her position as an accelerated organism with Black African roots. In Wulugu, she is exposed to the exploitation of African peoples, which is no different from the exploitation that she herself and other speciMen of generic experiments know too well. In Africa, she comes into a full awareness of the totalizing violence of necropower, particularly in the ways that Africans are harvested to supply human and material resources for Western lab work. In Ghana, Phoenix realises the multifaceted nature of her powers: she is not only a lethal weapon, she is also capable of accelerating the growth of other species. In Wulugu, where the people welcome her and call her "Okore," the eagle, the people become wealthy in that year's bountiful harvest (62). Her journey to Africa serves to position the continent both as the past

and the future. It is the originary site of enslavement, from where people like Phoenix have been stolen and transformed into the perfect labour and weapon of death. Yet, at the same time, it is the site of the future, where the weaponized subjects seek refuge and from where she launches a resistance struggle against necropower. In Africa, Phoenix also comes to learn to shift her fate. Like Onyesonwu who has the ability to take the shape/form of animals, Phoenix learns to shift and reengineer her fate.

Yet Phoenix cannot escape the Big Eyes of necropower that tracks her to Wulugu to devastating consequences for both her and the people. The confrontation between Phoenix and the forces of necropower underscores her as a figure of martyrdom who sacrifices her body for Black physical, cultural, and historical freedoms. In her revolutionary acts, Phoenix discovers her full potential: a weapon that can cause death by incinerating everything around her, a discovery that sows fears in the heart of necropower. With the help of Mmuo and Saeed she returns to the Towers wherein Black and other racialized bodies are violated, experimented on, and turned into dead bodies. There, she incinerates the sites and systems of violent oppression. In a final act of resistance, Phoenix destroys the epicentre of the experiments and the whole world order created by necropower:

> All things in the city are in chaos, people staring at screens, crashing cars, cowering, praying, cursing, fleeing.
>
> I am the sun. Ten thousand degrees Fahrenheit. Ani has pulled me to the earth. To wipe the slate clean. This is how it happens. New York's prodigal daughter returns home.
>
> Not just New York. 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. (221)

Phoenix's revolutionary violence extends beyond the United States. She burns down everything that "might be useful to the enemy" and causes monumental environmental damage that causes the oceans to dry up (223). The significance of her violence—while devastatingly catastrophic on just about everyone—is to wipe history clean, to give the world a second chance to start over. This vision of a new history born out of the violent end of an unjust old-world order is a staple of science fiction and fantasy.[56] The logic is often that the world has become so unjust and tainted that the only solution to its historical injustice is to destroy it completely and establish a new order. This vision is also underpinned by Christian beliefs, for example, in the Biblical account of the destruction of the world by flood. Yet just as in that account, the new world that was born out of the catastrophic end of an old appears to have inherited all of the old's necropolitical conditions and violent logics. The clean slate that Phoenix attempts to leave behind fails when Sunuteel uses the slate to write his own distorted visions down. The failures of Phoenix's redemptive revolution provide the context for the cyclical struggles that Onyesonwu has to confront.

One can also understand the nature of Phoenix's revolutionary catastrophic violence as an attempt to turn the racialized Black woman's body into a weapon against the scripted patriarchal violence of necropower, an attempt to turn her body into a script for posterity. Phoenix's preference for voice recording, which leaves something of her humanity and voice in her story, aligns with a vision of African orality that is open to productive retellings. That Sunuteel chooses to distort Phoenix's story by cannibalizing it to sync with the injustices of

[56] For a discussion of this theme in the SF and fantasy genre, see, e.g., Hoydis, "Fantastically Hybrid".

his time is not so much the core problem the story underscores as it is the technology of book writing that he uses to render his prejudices permanent. The book of this kind does not permit flexibility but instead works to authorize a permanent condition of enslavement. In *Death*, Onyesonwu rewrites not merely the book but the technology of writing. She combines the powers of orality through song and an ancient African writing system called Nsibidi. She does so to excise the violent texts off the Book. Her wiping of the Great Book is not a transcriptive exercise or a revisionism of the book's contents. Instead, she wipes the Book clean. By this attempt, Onyesonwu turns the Book into an unreadable blank slate, turning the blank pages into sites of speculation wherein the terms of a different future may be written. In this way, the Book takes the form of pregnancy (just as Onyesonwu herself appears to be by the end of *Death*) or a child born or torn out of a woman's body.

The history of the Book as narrated in *Phoenix* underlines the distortive process of writing and power. The creation of the Book that scripts the permanent enslavement and death serves as the basis to speculate the relations of slavery, colonialism, racism, and writing. As revealed in the story, this pattern of violence is gendered and based on a male attempt to distort and permanently inscribe a condition of domination on feminized subjects. In other words, the violence is precisely the violence of men writing upon women bodies. The processes through which the orders of necropower in both novels shape bodies into deadly weapons underscore the nature of this form of male writing upon racialized women's bodies. In the worlds of both stories, necropower writes racialized bodies into docility, enslavement, and in some cases out of existence. To write people is also to foreclose them out of the future as determining, free agents or subjects. In both *Phoenix* and *Death*, the struggle against necropower becomes the struggle to rewrite the order of violence. The racialized body (Black woman's body precisely) becomes the site of this struggle. The heroes of both novels

have to reclaim control of their own bodies, have to let their bodies die and be resurrected multiple times in the struggle against an unrelenting history of violence.

Okorafor's vision in response to necropower is apocalyptic. Her heroes, unlike Hopkinson's, do not take prisoners. They do not attempt to reform the necropolitical state through acts of cultural or spiritual surgeries. Instead, Okorafor's heroes prefer to wipe the slate clean, turn the pages of the Book blank so that something completely new and different may be written for the future. Okorafor's Afrofuturist commitments of *Death* and *Phoenix* insist that the only viable response to the longue durée of Black slavery, racism, colonization, and neo-colonial devastations must be a rejection of the belief in the redemption or reformation of the necropolitical orders of contemporary world systems. This rejection must be based on an alternative politics of fear and death that returns catastrophic violence to necropower. Such catastrophic violence, as both novels appear to support, are generative and provide a usable creative means of rewriting the necropolitical book of death.

Chapter Four

The Politics of Dreaming in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*

In this chapter, I examine the Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu's short film, *Pumzi*. *Pumzi* was produced in 2009, premiered at the Sundance film festival in 2010, and won the best short film at the Cannes Independent Film Festival in the same year. The film also won some African prizes including the Silver Prize for Best Short Film at the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia and the Special Jury Prize at the Zanzibar International Film Festival, establishing it as offering a profound Afrofuturist statement on Africa and the world more broadly. *Pumzi* has been tagged Kenya's first science-fiction film and one of the first science-fiction short films produced by an African. My discussion of the film is aimed at further accentuating what I have so far outlined as the politics of death underpinning certain Black women's Afrofuturisms. This politics of death, as I have elaborated in the previous chapters, is addressed in response to the orders of necropower launched against racialized, especially Black, peoples. These women's Afrofuturisms conceive the world under necropower as a death world whose trajectory must be changed for racialized peoples to survive in the future. The envisioned dramas of realizing such a future preoccupy the narratives of Nalo Hopkinson's and Nnedi Okorafor's selected novels. These dramas offer Black [mostly young] women's bodies as a site where the struggles for the future are staged and must be won.

Kahiu's *Pumzi* does not depart from these Afrofuturist logics. Instead, as I will go on to show, the film reifies the recurring logics of these Afrofuturisms. These logics insist that the future can and must be saved through the reproductive sacrifices of Black women heroines who must fight against the attempts by necropower to sterilize racialized peoples and engineer them out of the future. This reproductive Afrofuturism in *Pumzi* and the other selected works of this dissertation works as a counter politics to the necropolitical project of

the contemporary colonial world. The vision of this politics first recognizes the gendered nature of the necropolitical state and the peculiar ways that necropower tries to eliminate racialized Black peoples from the future by targeting the Black woman's body and her ability to reproduce biologically, socially and especially politically. The recognition of this necropolitical project that targets Black reproductive womanhood with elimination (as part of a broader project of Black disappearance) is what, as I have been arguing in the previous chapters, informs the reproductive Afrofuturisms discernible in the works of the writers selected for this study. What I attempt to outline subsequently in this chapter by way of a reading of *Pumzi* is an interrogation of this reproductive feminist Afrofuturist trope.

To appreciate the perspective *Pumzi* brings to this study, it is perhaps important to put it in conversation with the other works under study. The Afrofuturism detectable in Hopkinson's *Brown Girl* and *Midnight Robber* responds to a necropolitical world spurred by Western racism, colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism. These novels narrativize the struggles of young Black women who must figure out the riddles spurned by a violent world order intent on eliminating racialized and inferiorized peoples. The young heroes soon crack the riddles necessitated by the sacrifices of older women who have served as guides. As such, these narratives appear to be based on the normalized visions of an existential cycle: the old giving way to the young; the young gleaning the wisdom of experience from the old to chart a better future; the struggle for posterity won on the reproductive victory of the young over the sterilizing forces of necropower. As these forces or necropower are not simply targeting young individual women with sterility and death, but by extension their supposedly inferiorized races, the young women's victories necessitate a political vision whose logic is based on the heroism of young Black women upon whom the future of their race rests.

Okorafor's Afrofuturism is less emphatic on the ravages of Western colonialism but highlights the connections of Western colonial racisms to the endemic postcolonial African

violence such as ethnic-racism, inequality, patriarchy, and genocides. In *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*, Okorafor addresses the apocalyptic necropolitical conditions present in actual and fictitious African countries. The vision of the future derivable in these works responds to the extant orders of continental African and Western necropower. The drama, just as in Hopkinson's works, is based on the necessary sacrifices that young Black women must make to save the future. Yet, unlike in Hopkinson's works where the old die to illuminate the path for the young, in Okorafor's works, the burden of sacrificial death rests with the young. It is for this reason I consider Okorafor's works as underpinned by a tragic ethos that is based on the death of the young for the survival of the collective—deaths that produce political changes and new political visions for social organization and living. In other words, where Hopkinson's Afrofuturism presents a drama of existence based on the old passing (by way of their sacrificial death) the baton of existential struggle to the young, Okorafor's Afrofuturism provides an inverse: the young dying to keep the old and others alive and their sacrificial deaths serving as the basis for their resurrection. Hence the impulse in Hopkinson's works may be considered as motivated by genealogical, generational commitments to struggle. Okorafor's appears rather based on heroic tragic commitments further underpinned by a vision of resilience, resurrection, and continuity. In addition, Okorafor's works also challenge straight/capitalist/colonial notions of teleological time/temporality/progress, and insist instead on an African vision of cyclic return. It is not so much whether both [Hopkinson's and Okorafor's] artistic impulses and commitments are somewhat opposed to each other as the ways they seem to depend on the same logic. The logic I detect in both is the staging of the struggles over the future of racialized Black peoples on young Black women's reproductive bodies—whether this body is redeemed by the sacrifices of the old (as found in Hopkinson) or by its resurrection (as with Okorafor).

I argue that the Afrofuturist project of *Pumzi* is very similar to those detectable in Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works. *Pumzi* is set in what seems like a hopeless post-apocalyptic world, a world that lacks a fundamental life-sustaining resource: water. Unlike in the works of Hopkinson and Okorafor where the causes of their extant death worlds are revealed and very clear, in *Pumzi*, the origin of its sterile world is unknown. For instance, the nature of the water crises is not clear and the cause of the conflict that led to the water wars in post-World War III is also unclear. The assumption one may venture is that the war was nuclear and caused enormous devastation to life forms on earth. Hence it is not out of place to locate the cause of the film's death world to the excesses of colonial capitalism. Given the film's release in 2009, it appears that Kahiu is probably playing with an informed audience's knowledge of or belief in climate change and the potentially catastrophic works of colonial capitalist activities on the planet.

It is also not particularly clear in *Pumzi* how the facility focalized in the film came to exist and how many others there are and where. The people in the film—with the exception of those governing the facility—do not also seem to know what is outside of the facility. What seems to matter in the film is that the facility known as Maitu Community is the central location through which the conditions of living in a postapocalyptic world of the film is revealed. There is also no information about the ancestry of the people in the facility and how they came to converge in that facility. Not only is the information about the origin of the apocalypse missing, but there are also no revelations about the events that necessitated the formation of the facility and its operational norms.

Whether these missing gaps in *Pumzi* are a result of bad film production or directorial astuteness is also unclear. What seems clear, to me, is that the film focalizes a necropolitical condition that invites speculative engagement. The necropolitical situation of the Maitu Community—which I elaborate a bit subsequently—is mostly expressed in the ways that the

human being has been reduced to robotic living condition for the sustenance of some unseen beneficiaries. The Community is like a machine, both in its outlook and its function. The occupants live a rationed and heavily regulated life of work. Their condition of living—which they have come to accept as living—is a condition of death. The death life of the Community becomes manifest in its attempt to eliminate one of the humanizing qualities of the occupants: the capacity to dream. Dreaming existence appears to be what threatens the autocratic regime of the Community; hence its outlawing.

Pumzi invites speculation and presents more questions than answers, especially those which the film itself poses. For instance, why is the relationship of the people in the facility robotic, conducted in an official, impersonal manner? Why are they decked in a special suit? Why are they all bald? Where are the old people? Where are the children? Were these groups of vulnerable people left behind in a waterless world because of the apparent challenges of their care? Why would no one speak in *Pumzi* but communicate via technological channels? Why do they speak what sounds like American English in a facility supposedly located in Kenya?

While there are no likely convincing answers to these questions apparent in the film, *Pumzi* appears instead to task the audience to think about what it might mean to survive an ecological disaster whose brutalizing effects make dreams of a hopeful future impossible. The missing contexts in the death world of *Pumzi* invites an analysis of the film through a speculative lens. Importantly, the film seems to underline a politics of the future that is based not so much on a historical past (i.e., the re-historying of the present and the future) but on the project of speculation. As I see it, *Pumzi* tasks the audience to ask what the future means without a clear knowledge of the past (or only with a fuzzy speculated knowledge of the past) and whether there can be a future when the present is engineered to produce nothing but stasis.

When asked about *Pumzi* in an interview with bitchmedia (interviewer unknown), Kahiu says, "when I was at the film festival in Zanzibar, there was this boy who said the most beautiful thing. He said, 'If you ask everybody here, 'What exactly happened in that film?' they wouldn't be able to tell you. But if you ask everybody here, 'What was that film about?' they would be able to tell you.' I thought that was really beautifully put" ("The Africa That I Know"). Kahiu in that interview describes some of the reactions *Pumzi* has generated and admits that many people are torn on what to make of the film. The fact is that *Pumzi*, while it is an intriguing film, also invited a curious eye. Kahiu said that she was oblivious of the plot structure when she was writing the story, she only wanted to write "a story about a girl set in the future" ("The Africa That I know"). One thing which *Pumzi* explores, and which marks its difference is the imagination of a future that is Black centered. For the first time, a filmmaker resident in Africa presents a postapocalyptic world from the lens of (presumably) the last surviving humans in Africa, therefore empowering Africans with the task of ensuring human continuity. Kahiu mentions that her artistic commitment was not in question when she set out to write the story. In an interview with XamXam, she speaks about her intentionality about the themes in *Pumzi*:

> We need to be very clear about the messages that we are putting out, very clear about messages we are putting out, because especially coming from Africa, where all the images that have come out have been about starvation, or children with flies in their eyes, or war or destruction, or poverty , or hunger or famine, or, there have been so many negative images coming out of Africa, that if we don't actively combat those images, we are doing ourselves a disservice, and not only for ourselves but for future generations. ("Africa and Science Fiction" 06:25-07:02).

As highlighted in the interview, Kahiu's project seems partly to challenge the negative stereotypes of Africa as a site of death without overly effacing harsh realities of the living

conditions on the continent. In *Pumzi*, Africans are humanized through their representation not only as survivors of a postapocalyptic world but also as the subjects for the regeneration of the world. One significance of this filmic representation is that it grants Africans historical personhood as fit subjects for reimagining the conditions of the future.

Kahiu's love for fragmented stories was inspired by the stories her mother told her as a young girl. In her 2017 TEDx talk, entitled "Fun, Fierce and Fantastical Art," she referenced her mother's stories as "the craziest stories that combine science with an overactive imagination" (Kahiu, "Fun, Fierce and Fantastical Art"). She studied Management Science at the University of Warwick in England, went on to obtain an MA in Film Directing from University of California in Los Angeles. Kahiu has directed the films *Ras Star* (2006), *From* a *Whisper* (2008), and *Rafiki* (2018). Her films are all set in Africa, mostly Kenya and even though she is an internationally acclaimed film writer, producer and director, her use of Kenyan-centered narratives is highly prominent in her works. According to Kahiu, her selection of subjects for her stories has created a problem with securing funding and sponsorships.[57] The expectations from Western funding agencies, what Kodwo Eshun has described as the futures industry, are based on a bleak outlook about the future of the African continent.

In his essay, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," Eshun notes that "Africa is always the zone of absolute dystopia. There is always a reliable trade in market projections for Africa's socioeconomic crises. Market dystopias aim to warn against predatory futures, but always do so in a discourse that aspires to unchallengeable certainty" (292). According to Tambay Obenson, "The message for Kahiu has been that, as an African filmmaker, the

[57] The biographical information I provide from the author is from these sources: "Biography: Bio — Wanuri Kahiu"; TEDx Talk: "Fun, Fierce and Fantastical African Art"; Interview with bitchmedia "The Africa That I Know".

expectations for the stories she should tell are rigid, and they often come from non-Africans who continue to be the main financiers of top-shelf African cinema" ("How Rafiki's Director Wanuri Kahiu's 'Afrobubblegum' Movement Brought her from Kenya to Hollywood). Mich Nyawalo praises Kahiu's *Pumzi* for escaping the politics of promoting a poverty porn trope about Africa. Kahiu's artistic commitment in writing what these critics consider to be progressive and engaging tales about Africa is the reason she advocates, alongside some other artists, for a new kind of writing about Africa called the Afrobubblegum.[58]

Pumzi has been read by many critics as an ecological disaster film that calls attention to the Anthropocene. Matthew Durkin in his review of the film says that *Pumzi* "not only suggests the future of the natural world, but also imagines the inevitability of dystopia if humanity continues to participate in unthinking materialist consumption and continued exploitation of the environment" (231). Durkin opines that Kahiu's film on environmentalism through an afrofuturist lens "produce[s] an indictment of unrestrained materialist consumption and its physical effects upon the natural world […] with a number of other pertinent issues such as matriarchy/patriarchy, authoritarianism, technology and communication, classism, and poverty" (231). Shirin Assa notes that "*Pumzi* is imagined based on the premise that the human factor is the main culprit in environmental depletion of natural sources in general and water supplies in particular, with irreversible effects on this planet's ecosystem" ("*Pumzi*, the Labyrinth of FutureS" 60). These critics seem to read *Pumzi* as a cautionary postapocalyptic tale, which calls attention to the future of the planet ravaged by climate change occasioned by human capitalist greed. Such a cautionary tale will

[58] In her TEDx Talk entitled "Fun Fierce and Fantastical African Art" Kahiu talks about being a part of a group advocating for Afrobubblegum art which Kahiu explains as "advocacy of art for art's sake. It is the advocacy of art that is not policy-driven, or agenda-driven, or based on education, just for the sake of imagination […] Does the work of fiction have at least two healthy Africans, who are financially stable (and do not need any saving) […] having fun and enjoying life?" The Afrobubblegum Test is modelled after the Bechdel Test, which measures the representation of women in Fiction.

follow in the line of other apocalyptic texts that portray the end of the world because of humans' selfishness and inattention to their destructive activities on the planet. Durkin sees Kahiu as presenting "the future of the natural world, but [she] also imagines the inevitability of dystopia if humanity continues to participate in unthinking materialist consumption and continued exploitation of the environment" (231). In her essay "Gendered Ecologies and Black Feminist Futures in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*," Amanda Renée Rico looks at what she calls "gendered ecologies" (82), a term that encompasses ecological activism and ecowomanism but largely "prioritizes race, gender, and environmentalism" (85). Rico's reading of *Pumzi* is a more critical analysis that highlights not just environmental apocalypse but also how Kahiu uses ecological imagery to promote a vision that puts the Black woman at the centre of an imagining of the future. Most ecological readings of *Pumzi*, as I have observed, place more emphasis on the ecological damage the film apparently foregrounds. In other words, *Pumzi* has become a cautionary tale on the importance of ecological preservation as well as a popular material for environmental advocacy. The focus on the film's ecological concerns seems to marginalize its feminist and Afrofuturist commitments. Just as Rico's reading does, my subsequent discussion of the character Asha (Kudzani Moswela) in the film allows for an interrogation of *Pumzi*'s rejection of colonial necropolitics and an apocalyptic vision of a sterile future in favour of a vision that promotes renewal and regeneration bought on the sacrifice of a young Black woman's body.

Matthew Omelsky reads *Pumzi* as belonging to a subgroup of African science fiction which he calls "postcrisis African Science fiction," which are texts that articulate "future African topographies—spaces that have felt the fullest effects of climate change, nuclear radiation, and the imbalances of global capitalism" (34). I read *Pumzi* as an Afrofuturist film that calls attention to the workings of necropower and the struggle against it by an unrelenting Black woman. I see *Pumzi* as showing how necropower continues to manage

human populations to inflict fear and sustain regimes of control. As such, the Maitu Community becomes a site—even if metaphorically understood—to examine the orders of necropower that instrumentalize the horrors of its destruction of the environment to terrorize, govern, and regulate racialized peoples. Under its terroristic governmentality, racialized people are forced into a facility where they are made into robots, worked endlessly, and every ounce of their blood and sweat taken. Seen thus, *Pumzi* offers a vision of precarious existence for Black African peoples. *Pumzi*'s African setting is also significant for understanding it as an Afrofuturist work. In the film, Africa is the site where the struggle for the future is enacted and won. The film's portrayal of the disasters to Africa's environment further underlines the colonial condition that for centuries have visited catastrophe on not only humans and animals on the continent but also importantly on the African environment. It is, therefore, crucial that the film's vision of the future decentres the human by centering trees and the environment.

Pumzi starts with the inscription typed onto the screen "Maitu Community, East African Territory, 35 years after World War III – 'The Water War'" (00:14). This opening scene grounds the film in a postwar society and time. The scenes of the underground facility in a desert-scape which follows is symbolic for thinking about that community as one existing on the margins of death. After all, the presence of water signifies life and its absence, death. The colours signify this death, the grey and the dusty brown that cascade the view of the facility and the scene of the Virtual Natural History Museum where archived newspapers headline the effects of climate change on the earth. In this world, Asha, a curator at the museum, is pictured in her workplace. The focus on Asha in her workplace highlights the work life as the primary reason for existence in Maitu Community. Everyone is working in *Pumzi* and even though the film presents this death world as an ecological catastrophe, labour is introduced as the lifeforce and the means of social interaction and engagement. The totalizing statement by the matriarchal council, "The outside is dead" (07:52), serves as a

mechanism to justify and enforce the labour of the workers. It would appear that the greatest currency in Maitu Community is water. There is a stringent rationing of water, as the workers are handed a minimal quantity to survive on. There is also a perfection of purification of liquid waste in this world. This mode of living seems to sustain the balance in the community, but it is a balance that is questionable; its motive of work and sweat as means of sustaining life in the facility is revealed to be a ploy to enforce maximum work when the council attempts to cover up the evidence of life outside. This attempt exposes the Community as a kind of work plantation where the conditions of death have been reimagined as the basis of life and enslaving work is used as an apparatus of regulation and control of the community.

I argue that in the death world of *Pumzi,* the lives of the workers are reduced to bare lives and the governing structure of the "community" is founded on a logic of perpetually exploiting maximum human labour and the constant enforcement of minimal living. Living in Maitu is a most brutal form of living because it presents no alternatives. It is within this world that Asha's character exudes valour as she singly confronts the operational logics of necropower to alter the direction of the future. In Maitu, dreams are sanctioned. To dream is to go against the necropolitical state. There are dream-killers in the form of dream suppressants given to the people when they dream. On the bottle of Asha's dream suppressants, there is the inscription, "DREAM SUPPRESSANTS: take 1 tablet immediately after an attack" (01:25). In Maitu Community, therefore, dreams are insurgency attacks to the state. At the point when Asha begins to look away from the limitations of that pseudo community, she begins to dream, not just about water, but also about a large body of water and a blooming tree, suggesting that the outside is not death as the Maitu governing council would have it.

By allowing herself to dream (e.g., refusing to take the dream suppressant pills), Asha embarks on an incendiary mission whose first act is the liberation of the colonized mind. The dream suppressant is a form of colonization Asha refuses. In other words, dreaming is the core target of necropower and hence a weapon against the necropolitical state. Those who cannot dream (through the coercive work of suppressive dreams in the state) are not only made into total subjects of the state but also agents of their own domination. While the necropolitical state impresses on its subjects the belief that a lack of water accounts for the sterility of the world, it is invariably the suppression of dreams that makes Maitu sterile in perpetuity. Asha's significance in the film rests largely on how her character invites a deeper discourse on the fate of the world not so much in the absence of water, but in the absence of dreams.

The world in *Pumzi* appears technologically astute in the perfected acts of purifying urine, and boasting of 0% greenhouse emission. This illusory structure of this utopic-arrangement that is located underneath the detritus of a decayed world is shattered when Asha receives a soil sample with geometric coordinates. She realizes that the Maitu seed ("Mother" in Swahili) sprouts when planted using the soil, suggesting the possibility of soil with water content that can sustain life outside of the facility. Asha's excitement is matched by a corrosive rebuttal by her superior and the matriarchal council and she suffers serious consequences for going against the necropolitical state. Her discovery threatens the state's technology of control: the illusion that there is nothing outside the facility for the inhabitants, that the world outside is dead and that the only way to live is to work robotically in the facility. Asha is sentenced to manually produce electricity using a thread machine (as is done in the facility) and her research museum is destroyed.

The destruction of the museum is instructive on two levels. First it shows that the governing body will go to any length to prevent an advancement in the living conditions for

its people, revealing Maitu as a facility that is engineered for slow deaths of its Black populations. Second, the destruction of the museum is also a wiping out of history and the vestiges of the past, especially those that will alter the future designs of the necropolitical state in *Pumzi.* Such an attack of the past in order to secure a posterity of absolute control of people underlines a similar necropolitical situation one finds in Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works. In these works, there is a deliberate attempt to attack the histories and cultures of a particular group of racialized peoples in order to control and destroy them completely. Whereas in these other works the attempted destruction of racialized Black people is to secure the future of white/settlers, in *Pumzi* it is not exactly clear whether the beneficiaries of the death conditions in Maitu are the members of the ruling council or some other unseen powers. Yet the presences of external influences (e.g., in research knowledges shared, in the use of American English, etc.) suggest that the necropolitical forces at work are dispersed across networks that far exceed the Maitu facility. The film leaves this bigger external influence to the spectator's speculation (as though to suggest it's obvious) but makes clear the conditions of robotic living in the facility is characterized by death.

As seen in *Pumzi,* the absence of dreams makes it impossible to imagine or speculate the future. Asha's role in preserving and acting on her dream at once places her in a group of revolutionary women in the emergent Black women's Afrofuturisms that envision the young Black woman as the figure of the future, a figure that embodies the political missions and commitments for salvaging the world's future, and in whose actions and imaginations may be found the ethical praxis for regenerating a sterile world. This figure comes from the trope of the headstrong African woman. In *Pumzi*, she has to confront the brutalizing orders of necropower to ensure a radical continuity of life.

In the characteristic fashion of this figure as seen in Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works, Asha escapes the Maitu facility and goes in search of the tree of her dream. Asha has

to rely solely on her will as she battles not only human but environmental forces in the desert. At first, she uses her compass as guide but it leads her deeper into a sterile world of lost dreams. Gradually, at a point of near exhaustion, Asha comes to terms with the limitations of her scientific compass and so throws it away. She turns instead to her dream and imagination for guide. That is, the compass in her soul. It is this compass of the soul that Asha depends on to crack the riddle of her dream and find her way through the labyrinth of a desolate world. Not finding a tree as she has hoped, Asha plants the sprouting tree she has taken from her research in the facility, locks it into the soil with the water she has left, and sacrifices her body to fertilize the land. By this sacrificial act, Asha sows her dream in the desert soil and nourishes it with her sacrificed body. And out of the young Black woman's decomposed body a large tree comes to life, attesting to the regenerative potential of the world, signaling the life force of Black femininity. The film's final montage shows a tree visible and then more trees, suggesting Asha's success in triggering life and vegetation. Hence Asha resurrects as a living tree.

As a work of speculation, the film is not staging a literal drama based on whether an ecological crisis can be solved by sacrificing one's body. Instead, the film's political project and vision must be seen in its metaphorical significance as a speculative work. In this speculative consideration, I see *Pumzi* as offering a profound metaphor on the redemptive power of dream—the dreams of young Black African women. The film's politics of dreaming underscores an Afrofuturist filmic metaphor that rethinks the orders of the future on the terms of a young Black woman's dream. This metaphor is mobilized around the dramatic story of a woman who dreams herself to death to save the world, and from whose dream act the necropolitical conditions of a death world may be reversed and a sterile world restored to life. Asha, like the heroic women in Hopkinson's and Okorafor's novels, is a figure of sacrifice for the revival of life in the future. Yet, importantly, unlike the futures imagined in

Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works that centre racialized Black survival, *Pumzi* offers a posthumanist vision that displaces the human (whether inferiorized/racialized) as the main or most important subject for imagining the future. In *Pumzi*, Asha's sacrificial act is to plant a tree and the last images of the film show trees, suggesting the success of Asha's sacrifice. The filmic emphasis on trees underscores an alternative vision of futurity—perhaps one without the human as it is presently constituted. This vision of the future displaces not just the human but also the identarian politics through which the human is presently conceptualized. Yet what I think makes the film Afrofuturist is that the work of bringing this alternate future into existence is given to a Black African woman whose dreams and imaginations have been seized by this future.

Women sacrificing themselves for posterity is central in the works of the three artists explored in this dissertation. Whether it is in response to the necropolitical conditions of climate disaster, racism, or colonialism, the woman intervenes to do something different. This narrative vision in *Pumzi* aggregates to the narrative visions found in the works of Hopkinson and Okorafor, visions underpinned by a notion that the sacrificial death acts of young Black women advance life and may guarantee the future of Black peoples. The figure of their Afrofuturisms is the young Black woman who embodies the physical, mental, imaginative, social, and cultural qualities to re-dream the world.

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the revolutionary Afrofuturist politics of the heroic figure of the Black woman in these works draw on certain tropes that connect women to posterity in reproductive terms. The metaphoric suggestions of dreams in *Pumzi* (as well as in *Brown Girl, Midnight Robber, Death* and *Phoenix*) evoke the image of womanhood as a figure of reproduction. Yet, whereas Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works build their vision on ideas of biological reproduction, Kahiu's centres interspecies reproduction that challenges the orthodoxy of the human as the most important figure of the future. This Afrofuturist vision of

interspecies reproduction works to encourage the imaginative possibility for human sacrifices based on a rather planetary thinking. It is very symbolic that the final scene is trees only covering the earth and there are no humans.

A metaphorical reading may suggest that *Pumzi* portrays an understanding of Asha as mother figure with powerful fertility/posterity, who endures the agonies of pregnancy (her sojourn) to deliver the future; her dream thus serving as the seminal dream of her pregnancy. The physical manifestations of this pregnancy may be found in the young tree she carries with her as she escapes the facility. With this tree, which Asha carries on her body as though bearing a pregnancy, she embarks on a mission to find a land upon which to plant her tree. In this sense the image of motherhood in the film is similar to the images of motherhood that saturate the worlds of Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works. Yet the film's portrayal of Asha does not exactly hold up this image given that Asha's dreams throughout have not been about human birth. Instead, her dreams have been based on interspecies, non-anthropocentric notions of futurity.

One possible limitation of the anthropocentric feminist Afrofuturism in Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works is that they appear to mobilize political project against necropower on a similarly necropolitical logic that reduces women to a biological project of reproduction. In other words, these works appear to respond to necropower's politics of death by a deployment of radical politics of reproduction. Reproduction, therefore, provides the ethical and revolutionary grounds upon which the young Black woman may be recovered and centralized as a heroic figure for the survival and redemption of a threatened race. Besides not offering alternative prospects (other than reproductive ones) for young Black women's importance to the future, these works advance a vision of reproductive Black womanhood as the figure of Afrofuturist futures. Are we, therefore, to understand, as *Pumzi* makes clear, that outside of a reproductive ethics and praxis an alternative future that counters the orders of

necropower cannot be dreamed up and imagined? *Pumzi*, as I have contended, does exactly this—imagine futurity that is not about humans, and thus not about human biological reproduction. By so doing, the film exposes the deeper workings of necropolitical violence—its attack on all things it has reduced or imagined as the natural world, things that should be resourced and exploited, be they racialized humans, animals, environments.

Conclusion

As I have tried to sketch out throughout the dissertation, the artistic visions and commitments of the Afrofuturist works of the three Black women artists at the heart of my study have centred reproductive ethics and praxis as the basis of an alternative futurity. The need for an artistic political project on Black reproductivity arose in response to the necropolitical project of anti-Black racism that targets the elimination of Blackness or a reduction of Blackness to a permanent state of injury in its vision of the future. In the works of these Black women, this necropolitical agenda must be understood as disproportionately gendered in ways that mark the Black woman's body as the site of death or the site wherein the war against Black peoples must be waged and won. To counter this project, these artists in their different ways insist on populating the future with Black and other bodies who must surmount enormous odds. The long and varied violent histories of Black enslavement and colonization established the conditions of Black death from any other prospects of the future. As is widely discoursed and most notably portrayed in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, Black women's bodies since slavery have been targeted with different forms of violence and social and physical death. During slavery, Black women having babies meant more property/wealth for the slavers, thus helping to fortify slavery. After the official ends of slavery, white society began to conceive Black women having babies as a threat to whiteness; hence the idea of a future society with Black presence or Black people as free people became a dystopia to whiteness. Consequently, colonial white power's attempts—in Africa and elsewhere in the world—have been to control/regulate Black women's reproductive ability/capacity. This control of Black women's reproduction is how white supremacy ensures the future would remain supremely white. White women having babies aggregates to conventional reproductive futurity. Black women having babies must be seen as dystopian chaos and thus needs to be controlled (by sterilization and other forms of violence including

outright death). In this historical and contemporary context, having one's own child is itself a radical act. Reclaiming the capacity to reproduce is itself an affirmation not only of one's humanity but also of one's radical insistence on being in the future on one own's terms. That these artists reclaim Black motherhood as what will save all of us and the future of the world can be read as profoundly radical. Therefore, the Afrofuturist projects of these women's works are positive and supply a radical politics of futurity. At the same time, these projects offer different politics and visions of reproductive futurity.

In both of Nalo Hopkinson's novels, young Black women heroines go through different rites of passage that culminate in radical motherhood serving the basis for a reimagined future world. The politics of reproductive futurity dramatized in the heroes' lives work to counter the conditions of death authorized by colonial necropower. Similarly, in Okorafor's novels, the Black women heroes turn their reproductive powers into political instruments to reverse the orders of necropower. In both of Hopkinson's and Okorafor's works, the radical project of securing the future is centrally anthropocentric—that is, based on a notion of biological reproduction—even though the imaginative consciousness of their works underlines realities and experiences that extend beyond the human. Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*, while significantly based on the politics of reproductive futurity, rejects an

anthropocentric vision in favour of interspecies relations. The film offers a more complicated posthumanist vision of radical motherhood that repopulates a human-destroyed world with trees and vegetation.

All these works underline the condition of Black life as governed in a necropolitical order fashioned on the logic that a secure future must be one without Black people as people or one without any trace of Blackness in it. To realize its genocidal mission, this order conceives the Black woman's body with absolute subjection and death. As such, the Black

woman's body becomes the site wherein the necropolitical war against Black future and survival is waged. The works of these three Black artists underline the gendered dimensions of necropolitics, a notable gap in Mbembe's view of necropolitics that generalizes the conditions of racialized peoples.

As a creative writer invested in the kinds of politics espoused in these works, I feel inclined to close this dissertation by providing a very short speculative story that I hope may help to elaborate what I think is a repressed politics in these works, whose prospect is no less profound. While I agree with the reproductive politics of Afrofuturism in the works I have examined in the dissertation, I would like to offer by way of speculation an alternative vision based on the politics of abortion—even if only to create some tension by putting abortion beside reproduction. The short story that follows provides my sideways engagement with the reproductive politics of the Afrofuturisms in Hopkinson's, Okorafor's, and Kahiu's works discussed in the dissertation. This story is by no means an answer to the complex anti-racist projects of these women's Afrofuturisms but instead my own way of asking more questions. The logic of the story depends significantly on the Yoruba notion of time as cyclical where no neat demarcations are made between the past, present and the future. In this Yorubaworld logic of time, the challenge is not often on how to survive in the future or assure continuity through reproductive femininity because there is no separable future from present and past. The challenge instead is on how to solve a cycle, especially a troubled cycle, that is doomed to repeat itself endlessly. The question in the context of the long histories of Black enslavement and colonization will be how to arrest an endless cycle of heinous and atrocious violence against Black people. My story thus offers a vision of abortion as a usable politics for intervening in the project of reproductive futurism.

As It Was

The past is present is future. The past if present is future. The past when present is future.

The words kept repeating in Morounmubo's head like a permanent hum. Everybody knew Adiitu's reputation for accuracy. She is not one for errors or fuzzy pronouncements. She doesn't lie, doesn't make mistakes, doesn't hold back anything and does not fear to hurl the brutality of truth to the loveliest and fiercest persons alike. She trained at the famous Nubia University where the science of futurology originated just after the period of the Great Sickness. So, if Adittu said something was as bright as day, it must be really shining as day.

But Morounmubo cannot accept what Adiitu claimed to have seen. What if this time Adiitu was wrong? Wrong for the first and maybe only time? What if? The *what if* is the reason she makes the dangerous journey across the Iku Desert. Put herself to be transported by corpse-smelling iku riders who provide the only means of transportation across the death desert. On the other side of the desert, the Nubia University stood tall and deep—a city citadel sprawled across a wide expanse of land, both above and beneath the land. They said the city was bigger underground than what could be seen above. The place used to be called Oyo before the Great Sickness, known then as one of the largest cities in the Western part of Old Africa.

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When Morounmubo awoke from the travel slumber, she could not believe her eyes. Nubia Citadel stood before her as a thousand and one biggest ile she had ever seen. The buildings were all made of shinning marble. Morounmubo could not say exactly what the ile at the outskirts looked like because her two iku riders had put her in a swoon necessary for the journey. She imagined that she must've traveled as though in a dream on their horse-like electric bike. In a trance, she felt being pulled by a magnetic force down a seemingly-endless

pit. And that was all she remembered about the journey. When she asked the iku riders whether the journey to Nubia must be felt as though one was sucked into an endless pit and why, they told her it was only necessary because the road to Nubia was death.

"What brings you here?" one of the riders asked her.

"Answers," Morounmubo said slowly, not to them, but to herself, as she headed towards the open gates of the mausoleum-looking citadel.

***

There was no need for a guide at Nubia University. Merely touching any part of the walls and muttering a location produced a clear map of the site sought. It was a universe of its own. Morounmubo followed the arrows that pointed her in the direction of the Institute of Futurology, where she was hoping to invalidate Adiitu's words. *Invalidate*. She would rather Adiitu was wrong than right. Nothing gladdens the soul more than to learn its desires were valid and unblemished by negative truths. What was the point of truth if all it did was to produce deep sorrow? Morounmubo preferred the truth of her desires to the futurological truth of Adiitu whose words, like the venomous strike of the viper, paralyzed the soul.

Morounmubo could hear the anxiety in her chest, the ringing throbs of her wishes leaping in the faint expectation that the truth of a woman's desire might prove stronger than fate. For some days she had mastered the strategy of suppressing the chill in her soul, the unfeeling gauge of an unwanted truth. What if Adiitu was right and the experts at Nubia confirm she was: what would she then do? "But how could so much currency be put on the science of uncertainty?" Morounmubo said out loud countering the feared queries of her mind.

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During the Great Sickness, a group of men and women who hid themselves in the desert sands east of Nubia discovered what became known later as the new science of futurology. This science provided the knowledge of the cure to the sickness that ate the soul first before it turned the brains into pap. The scientists behind this new science called themselves Nameless and their identities were never known, not even in Nubia. One of their most influential discoveries was that every living thing that died always returned to repeat the exact same plot of their earlier lives. If in a woman's first life she lived a sad life, her subsequent lives would repeat the plot of a sad life in whatever time and space she returned. It didn't matter the slight shades and hues of nuance to the plot. A man who in a previous life died in his prime through an incurable disease may return again to die in his prime through a painful crash. Same plot, yet different death scenarios. The new science figured out not only this fact of existence but also how to diagnose it early and alter lives whose fates spelt disaster for themselves and others. The slogan behind the new science: *when we know the past, we can solve the future by acting on the present. It's all in the science*.

Every pregnant woman was required to undergo a futurological diagnosis. The science was not yet able to diagnose a child once born. It must be done before birth while the child is still in the womb. The experts would flip through the past lives of the child about to be born, and with that knowledge provide a diagnosis of the child's future. In some states, the science was law and whatever the scientists determined as the right course of action must be carried out with or without the pregnant woman's consent. In most states south of Nubia, the woman decided what must be done and whatever she decided was permitted. In fact, these states had maintained the law of confidentiality and only the mother and the experts knew the result of the diagnosis, which must be immediately destroyed. Not even the father must know. Many people did not like the idea of giving women so much power to decide which pasts must be repeated in the futures, especially when it meant women could bequeath the

future with horrible pasts. Some said women were the reasons for all the problems, especially the women who knowing futures would be bad yet out of their sheer weakness of will carried through with delivering babies who should not be born. Such women were called Aje in Morounmubo's town. To be called an Aje was to be banished from society. A woman could easily become an Aje if her child committed a wrong. The public judgement was always: She must've known the child was a problem child and still decided to bring the damn thing here. Aje. Children became the mothers' biggest nightmares. Any wrong act, a miscalculated step or judgment could bring public condemnation to the mother. There was no room for delinquency.

Notwithstanding the troubled paths a mother had to confront and the elevated status in the society of those women—those known as Lewa—who decided motherhood was a social disease, most women still chose to be mothers. Futurologists said it was only because in their past lives they were mothers and so must relive the plot. Morounmubo did not know the plot of her past lives. Like most mothers, her own mother never told her. She couldn't have, even if she wanted to, because she died during childbirth. It must've been her own fate: to die at that point when pain and pleasure peaked all at once, to glimpse the thing of joy that she would not be alive to raise. Most mothers never told their children what they knew about their past lives. Some futurologists said it was because many mothers forgot just when the baby was born. They were still researching to know the cause of that forgetfulness.

***

It took Morounmubo 14 years to feel the pangs of pregnancy. She didn't care when her blood stopped flowing during their expected periods. She had been there many times before only to discover they were false alerts. 14 years of disappointment and frustration and cries. And so, she maintained her indifference when the vomits and nausea started. Then her

belly began to bloat and bulge. Funsho couldn't ignore Morounmubo's indifference anymore. "This is it. It must be it," he said to her one evening when she writhed from the pangs of three consecutive kicks inside her belly. But rather than excitement, her body began palpitating. A gyration of confusion and an unwillingness to deal with another false alert. Funsho was reassuring and firm in his certainty. She was not dreaming the pregnancy; it was really happening to her. That was when she went to the clinic to confirm it. Once confirmed, she noticed her body. It was writing its own presence of being anew, building itself into a well-crafted house. To be a house is to be destined for the use by others. A good use, perhaps.

And then, as was customary, Morounmubo consulted the famed futurologist of her town—the Great Adiitu, who some believed learnt from one of the Great Nameless.

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At the Institute, Morounmubo learnt the experts knew she was coming. They were expecting her. She was upset. Could Adiitu have told them? How could she know? One of the experts sensed her thoughts and assured her that no one told them she was coming. They knew through another branch of futurology that could predict the immediate future just a day before it happened. All secretarial planners at the Institute were experts in this branch of the science. They used it to plan each day's affairs. They could accurately predict an event a day from it but not its outcome. They could predict that Morounmubo would visit but not the outcome of her visit. Sometimes when they managed to predict an outcome, they were unable to predict the exact details or trajectories.

"What do you want?" asked the secretarial expert who received Morounmubo.

"I have a life growing in my womb, sir. I want to know…"

Before Morounmubo finished, the man interrupted her. "You have one of the best futurology clinics in your town. Adiitu cannot go wrong. Did you see to her?" When Morounmubo

nodded and avoided the man's eyes, he smiled, "I see. It must be that stubborn refusal to accept a difficult truth. Come with me."

The secretary took her to a room and ushered her into a lone seat. He turned to type something into a screen on the wall. Inside were two men busy staring into a large transparent gourd filled with water. The water looked crystal clear and the lights in the room reflected so brightly from it. The two men did not show any signs they noticed Morounmubo's entrance into the room. They continued staring into the gourd until a door opened in the back wall of the room. Morounmubo was surprised because she didn't know the wall had a door there. She suspected that if the walls were wired maps, it was possible that they could just easily be anything else: door, mirror, lens, screen.

A woman past her mid ages, who looked just like Adiitu, came in. The secretary pointed at Morounmubo and the woman nodded.

"I hear you don't believe Adiitu's diagnosis." Before Morounmubo could respond, the woman continued, "I suspect I wouldn't myself if I were you." Morounmubo stared at the woman confusedly.

"Everyone calls me Nderi. That's my name these days." Morounmubo was about to introduce herself when Nderi said, interrupting her again, "I know your name. I know more than your name. I can already see your past lives so clearly."

Morounmubo was confused. "I thought the science could not see the past once a child is born?"

"The tears in your eyes hide nothing of your past lives," Nderi said, smiling. She dragged a stool and sat directly in front of Morounmubo, so close that her face was almost pressing into the worried younger woman's face. Morounmubo could smell her breath, which evoked the scent of ripe agbalumo fruit.

"Did you know that water was the main element of the science of futurology?" Nderi asked but didn't wait for a response. "Yes, water. That's our eyes into the past. I will take you to the bath, just in the next room. There, you will soak yourself in the pure water of clarity. The science of the bath will tell us the past lives of the child you carry."

"Us? Who are the 'us'?" asked Morounmubo.

"You and I," said Nderi. "I won't be telling you what you yourself haven't seen with your own eyes in the water."

***

Morounmubo's eyes could weep; they refused to shed a tear. Adiitu was right, never wrong. *The past is present is future. The past if present is future. The past when present is future.* Nderi held her hand but not to console her because there was no feeling in the hold.

Morounmubo wished Funsho was with her at that very point. She missed his firmness, his way of knowing what to do and acting on it without hesitation. Without second thoughts. That must be a gift. When she told Funsho she had to travel to Nubia to find answers, he did not ask why. "If that's what must be done, then it must be done" was all he said. He planned her journey and took her all the way to the point where he had to leave her. He never asked to follow her, never pressured her for information. Sometimes Morounmubo worried that he was too firm, too duty bound, too accepting of fate. Morounmubo felt it must be something about himself he already knew and made his peace with it. Must be something like that because he never seemed to waver on anything.

Once she arose from the Bubble Nderi put her in, she seemed to understand why experts like Adiitu always sounded indifferent and sometimes cruel. They must've seen a lot to become unfeeling people. No one who experienced the Bubble would be the same. Morounmubo was

surprised at first when she saw the Bubble. It's the exact shape of a woman's womb. The water in the Bubble looked slimy but felt coarse on the body.

"You know the thing about the Bubble," said Nderi, "is that it turns a full-blown woman like you into a baby again. We can see the past lives of anyone in it. So, I will not only be seeing the child's pasts but also yours. You can only see the child's." Nderi then stared at her very seriously for the first time. "You must never ask about your own past lives once out of the Bubble."

But that was the only thing Morounmubo wished more than life to know. She thought: maybe if she knew she might make the right decision, act right. She thought about Nderi's parting whisper into her ears: *Sometimes, most time, all of the time, the best way to save the future is to abort it.*

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Adiitu had said to her that afternoon: "It's in your hands. The ancestor in your womb is Erhu, the one who would always return a slave, suffer unnameable indignities and humiliation, and die through unbearable pains, only to return." The expert stared quietly at the pregnant mother and chanted in studied seriousness: "As it was in the past, so it shall be."

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Years after, Morounmubo would tell her niece, Ranti, about a woman's journey across the Iku Desert and about the Bubble water of clarity. "In that water," Morounmubo said, "a woman's body was everything. What you learn in it is to find your body and master it. That's all that matters." And when Ranti voiced her confusion of the older woman's riddles, the latter replied with more riddles: "As it turns out, there are some of us who must guard against the return of oppressed ancestors. Sometimes, most time, all of the time, the best way to save

the future is to abort it. The best way to resolve a troubled cycle is to abort it. That is the very truth of freedom."

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