

# Exploring Nnedi Okorafor's decolonial turn in the *Binti* Trilogy

> **Josephine Olufunmilayo Alexander**

University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

busarjo@unisa.ac.za (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2194-0272>)

## ABSTRACT

Nnedi Okorafor is one of the best-known speculative fiction writers who has centred African perspectives and delinked from Western models. In her trilogy, *Binti* (2015), *Binti Home* (2017) and *Binti the Night Masquerade* (2017a), Okorafor disrupts the dominant white-masculine supremacist convention and traditions for a more diverse and inclusive narrative. In this article, I use decolonial thinking and the lens of Sankofa, a decolonial and African knowledge philosophy and worldview, to explore how Okorafor uses settings, characterisation, and ancient African traditional knowledge to achieve a decolonial turn in speculative fiction. By centring Sankofa, Okorafor sets her fantastic stories in Namibia among the indigenous and marginalised Himba people. She creates strong female characters who embody a multiplicity of beings operating intricately in a complex earthly, spatial and spirit world, and she exploits ancient African traditional culture and knowledge systems to create her 'organic fantasy' and a world of speculative fiction that transforms Western understandings of the genre.

**Keywords:** Speculative fiction, Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti* trilogy, decolonial turn, Sankofa, Africanfuturism.

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# Introduction

At its inception in the era of the Golden Age (1940-1960), speculative fiction was largely dominated by white men as authors, protagonists, and editors. The writing tended to invisibilise racial and ethnic minority groups who have been historically marginalised within Western society. They tended to privilege traditional, mainstream Anglo-American culture while viewing knowledge and reasoning from purely Western perspectives and presenting a universal position of power. John Clute and Peter Nicholls (1999:1088) opine that science fiction and, by extension, speculative fiction, has been a puritanical genre intended for male readership; while Lisa Tuttle (1999:1343) describes the genre as 'being by men for men or sometimes for boys', with a bias towards male superiority.

Women authors and authors of colour, such as Octavia Butler and Ursula Kroeber Le Guin, brought about much-needed diversity in speculative fiction: Butler as a female African-American and Le Guin as one of the foremost American woman writers of speculative fiction. The protagonists of Le Guin's early science fiction are anthropologists, rather than the typical male scientists found in the writings of male authors, such as Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Herbert G. Wells, and Jules Verne. By contrast, the main hero (Ged) in Le Guin's fantasy, *The Earthsea Trilogy*, has dark skin and, contrary to traditional expectations, some of the antagonists (the Kargs and the people in Osskil) are white-skinned. This switch in racial roles challenges the conventions of epic fantasies and myths (see for example, Bernardo and Murphy 2006; Kuznets 1985).

Butler was the first black African American woman to become famous for writing speculative fiction, although the first African American woman to write a speculative fiction novel was Pauline Hopkins.<sup>1</sup> Butler centres and privileges female protagonists who are, for the most part, marginalised and historically oppressed people, who embrace radical change, tolerance, and compromise to survive. According to Kilgore and Samantrai (2010:361), Butler's choice to write from the point of view of marginal characters and communities 'expanded speculative fiction to reflect the experiences and expertise of the disenfranchised'. Her characters are diverse and non-white, comprising old and young, male, female and, sometimes, a hybrid of alien and human. For instance, Shori, the protagonist of Butler's last novel, *Fledgling* (2005), is a small, young, black, female hybrid vampire whose species, the Ina, live symbiotically with humans. Morris (2012:149-151) sees this as a powerful disruption of the vampire genre, which is traditionally known 'to feature pale vampire heroes with paternalist tendencies' that privilege whiteness. Through her characterisation,

Butler widens speculative fiction by making it meaningful to new readers. In an interview with Stephen Potts, Butler identified the new readers as black, science fiction fans and feminists (Butler & Potts 1996:336).

## African Diasporic Speculative Fiction

In the introduction to *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), Sheree R. Thomas complains that ‘there has been little research’ into African diasporic speculative fiction aside from scholars’ focus on the speculative fiction of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler. In Thomas’ (2000:xi) view, ‘the contributions of black writers to the science fiction genre have not been directly observed or fully explored’ because ‘both science fiction and mainstream scholarship have overlooked or ignored the contributions of less well-known black writers’. Against this background, Thomas sets out to edit and examine a century of speculative fiction from the African diaspora, in the hope that the book would

help shed light on the science fiction genre, that it will correct the misperception that black writers are recent to the field, and that it will encourage more talented writers to enter the genre (Thomas 2000:xi).

Thomas’ first and second objectives are achieved in her presentation of 28 works of black diaspora writers, which includes the works of pioneers, established and emerging new writers in the genre, and five insightful essays.

Unfortunately, the publication excludes science fiction and fantasy by authors who are not African American. According to Tade Thompson (2018), African science fiction dates to Ane Jean-Louis Njemba Medu’s *Nnanga Kôn* (1932) and Muhammadu Bello Kagara’s *Gand’oki* (1934). Thompson further demonstrates the longevity of the genre by giving a few examples from different time periods to counter the narrative that attributes the rise of ‘Afrofuturism’ or ‘African SFF’<sup>2</sup> to the two films *District 9* and *Black Panther*. Wole Talabi (2022:2) establishes four eras of African SFF in his preliminary observations from a provisional history of African SFF from 1921 to 2021. His first era, from the 1920s to about the 1960s, consists of nascent works of colonial encounter that are mostly syntheses of oral traditional story telling. The second era, from the 1960s to the early 2000s, includes published works with elements of science fiction and fantasy, but which are classified under the wide umbrella of ‘African Literature’, or what he calls the troublesome category of ‘magical realism’. Talabi locates the third era in the works published and identified as speculative fiction from the early 2000s to 2011. The fourth era, from 2011 until the

present, features increased recognisability and visibility of the genre. This era fulfils Thomas' third objective of seeing more talented writers enter the genre. Thompson (2018:5-6) asserts that African speculative fiction from the new millennium began to shift into traditional territory, becoming concerned with representations of the future, space travel and the environment. He identifies Nnedi Okorafor as the most significant writer in African speculative fiction, while acknowledging the works of writers like Lauren Beukes,<sup>3</sup> Sofia Samatar, Nikhil Singh, Deji Olutokun, Nick Wood, Igoni Barrett, and Masimba Musodza.

## Theoretical approaches

In his article on the cognitive empire, the politics of knowledge and African intellectual production, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni reflects on struggles for epistemic freedom and the resurgence of decoloniality in the twenty-first century. In response to the 'emphasis on privileging works of Diasporic scholars from South America for decoloniality/decolonisation', he centres 'often-ignored contributions of African intellectuals to the decolonisation of knowledge and politics' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021:882). He highlights the cognitive injustice pointed out by Santos (2014) and elucidates the multifaceted meaning of decolonising knowledge by providing a table titled the 'Ten-Ds' of the decolonial turn (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021:884). The definition of each of 'The Ten-Ds' shows that the main objective of decolonial turn is a struggle for cognitive justice and epistemic freedom. This entails the acknowledgement and accommodation of the different ways of knowing by which diverse people make sense of their worlds and give meaning to their existence. In terms of decolonising knowledge in the Global South, it provides the mental space for people to think freely from their own context, retrieve subjugated indigenous knowledges and engage in delinking from the hegemony of Western knowledge systems. Okorafor's writing conforms to three of 'The Ten-Ds' of 'the decolonial turn': deprovincialisation (placing Africa into the centre of knowledge and releasing it from marginality and peripherality); democratisation (opening to mosaic epistemology and ecologies of knowledges) and depatriarchisation (undoing the androcentrism in knowledge generation and opening up to feminist, queer, and womanist scholarship).

Okorafor is the foremost Nigerian American female science fiction writer to have extended the legacy of Le Guin and Butler in bringing diversity to the speculative fiction genre. However, unlike Le Guin and Butler, she describes herself as an 'Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist' in her blog post of 19 October 2019. Okorafor distinguishes Africanfuturism from the Afrofuturism of African Americans like Butler,

'who are direct descendants of the stolen and enslaved Africans of the transatlantic slave trade', and who centre African American themes and concerns. Okorafor (2019) further substantiates the definition of Africanfuturism as 'a sub-category of science fiction that is similar to Afrofuturism', but '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'. In this definition, Okorafor criticises the Afrofuturist movement for privileging and centring the West. Africanjujuism, on the other hand, 'is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative' (Okorafor 2019). In addition, she explains that she coined and started using the term Africanfuturism because 'the term Afrofuturism had several definitions and some of the most prominent ones didn't describe what I was doing.' Africanfuturism, according to her, 'does not include fantasy unless that fantasy is set in the future or involves technology or space travel, etc...which would make such a narrative more science fiction than fantasy.'

In an essay on Africanfuturism in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, Wabuke (2020) states:

In a definition that is created by a Black diasporic writer rather than a white American, Africanfuturism gets to a greater specificity of language, ridding itself of the othering of the white gaze and the de facto colonial Western mindset. Writes Okorafor:

'Afrofuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in Oakland, CA, USA.  
Africanfuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in a neighboring African country.'

Wabuke further explains the main difference between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism:

By not centering themselves around the concept of 'American' in their definitions, Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism are freed from the white Western gaze. And while some texts can hold aspects of both Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism – an Afrofuturist text and an Africanfuturist text are quite different indeed.

Thompson (2018) also acknowledges a difference between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism, but he asserts that the two are so intertwined that, in a few years, it will no longer be a useful distinction and Afrofuturism will become the umbrella term. Contrary to Thompson's assertion, many African authors have freely embraced and used Africanfuturism to describe their work. According to Chukwuebuka Ibeh (2022), the genre has since gained ground in the African speculative fiction community.

Africanfuturism has also gained currency as it has now been added to *The Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction*<sup>4</sup> as a noun and defined as ‘Nnedi Okorafor’s term for: a subgenre of science fiction that heavily features elements of African history or culture; cf. Afrofuturism’. In 2020, for example, *Brittle Paper* marked its tenth anniversary by publishing the *Africanfuturism Anthology*, edited by Wole Talabi. The anthology according to Talabi (2020) contains eight original visions of science fiction stories that fit into the category of Africanfuturism by both emerging and seasoned African writers staking a claim to Africa’s place in the future. The anthology made the final list for the Locus Awards.

A third important strand in the theoretical foundation of my article is Sankofa. The word Sankofa<sup>5</sup> originates from the Akan people of Ghana. It is made up of the three words ‘san’ (meaning to return) ‘ko’ (meaning to go) and ‘fa’ (meaning to look, to seek and take). It means ‘to retrieve’ and literally translates to ‘go back and get it.’ Sankofa is symbolised by a mythical bird bending its beak backward carrying an egg in its mouth while its feet face forward. It is associated with the Akan proverb ‘*Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenkyi.*’ A succinct insight into the mythical bird that symbolises Sankofa in association with the Akan proverb is explained in a 2004 multidisciplinary online curriculum by the Spiritual Project at the University of Denver as follows:

The egg in its mouth represents the ‘gems’ or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based; it also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from that wisdom. This symbol often is associated with the proverb, ‘*Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi,*’ which translates to, ‘It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.’ The Akan believe that the past illuminates the present and that the search for knowledge is a life-long process. The pictograph illustrates the quest for knowledge, while the proverb suggests the rightness of such a quest as long as it is based on knowledge of the past.

Sankofa has been embraced as a decolonial African knowledge theory. It theoretically implies that to know one’s future, one must understand one’s past. In an opinion piece entitled ‘Reimagining an Empowered Africa’, Laura Pereira (2022) writes:

the concept of Sankofa, which entails retrieving and drawing on pasts that are connected to land and the ancestors to progress into the future, is a powerful heuristic for a decolonial futures praxis that starts by acknowledging the past. Such indigenous frameworks are now being rediscovered, particularly in science fiction futures, illustrating a legacy of technological curiosity and scientific practice on the continent. African science fiction is rapidly growing and already constitutes a rich source of creative thinking that is grounded in everyday African realities.

Sankofa presents an understanding of Africa that is devoid of Western hegemonic bonds. It lends itself to the decolonisation of knowledge by enabling African scholars to take a decolonial turn by what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021:884) describes as democratisation: opening to mosaic epistemology and ecologies of knowledge.

In her 2020 article, 'Omumu: disassembling subordination, reasserting endogenous powers', Nkiru Nzegwu uses Sankofa as a theoretical framework to analyse stories of the role of women in traditional Igbo society and argues for the reassertion of women's endogenous powers. In another example of Sankofa in action, Ts'gye Rachel Titilayo Ogundipe Leslie founded the African Historical Society with the following vision statement:

[To] lead Africa and African-descended communities and cosmopolitan communities at large, into a vibrant and flourishing future emboldened by a comprehensive knowledge of the worldview, vision and accomplishments of African heroes and ancestors, to overcome the shortcomings and challenges of the past, present and the future based on providing broad access to the ancient information and knowledge contained in African manuscripts and artefacts (AHS 2021).

In the opinion piece cited earlier, Pereira reflects on Africanfuturism and Sankofa in African speculative fiction and how the two concepts could benefit the 'Future Ecosystems for Africa' project<sup>6</sup> in decolonising current ways of thinking 'clouded by Western, positivist perspectives' (2022). Her starting point for the decolonial journey is a turn to the speculative fiction of Africanfuturism, rooted in African experience, aesthetics, and values and retrieving indigenous knowledge through storytelling to reclaim our 'African futures by, among other things, drawing on data developed in Africa, drawing on ethical systems and ways of valuing biodiversity in Africa, integrating ecological, social and economic information.' In what follows, I will explore how Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy conforms to Pereira's ideas of decolonising knowledge production.

In her trilogy, Okorafor creatively engages with African history to frame the present and shape the future through the adventures and exploits of Binti, her heroine. By centring Sankofa in the actualisation of the major tenets of Africanfuturism, Okorafor brings African epistemologies to the fore while delinking from Eurocentric ones. This is achieved through setting, characterisation and Africancentrism.<sup>7</sup> Okorafor utilises African history and an African worldview, long marginalised by colonial misrepresentation and distortion, to address contemporary African issues and to create an imagined future deeply rooted in the African experience in Africa.

The *Binti Trilogy* — *Binti* (2015), *Binti Home* (2017) and *Binti the Night Masquerade* (2017a) — is a medley of *bildungsroman* and science fiction tales steeped in ancient African culture and an African world view. The novellas recount the adventures of a brilliant 16-year-old Himba girl, Binti,<sup>8</sup> who bravely leaves her insular indigenous culture to be the first of her community to attend the prestigious intergalactic Oomza University in space. Her quest for knowledge brings her into contact with other human and alien creatures in a series of breath-taking extra-terrestrial adventures in which she gets caught in the ancient warring conflict between the alien Meduse<sup>9</sup> and the earthly Khoush,<sup>10</sup> who both consider the Himbas<sup>11</sup> as inferior and uncivilised. In the remainder of this article, I will explore how Okorafor achieves a decolonial turn by centring Sankofa, rather than othering colonial Western mindsets which have characterised traditional speculative fiction.

## Exploring the decolonial turn in the *Binti Trilogy*

The creation of an imaginary setting is one of the distinctive elements in science fiction (Boston 2018). Unlike in mainstream fiction, the setting is not merely a backdrop for plot and characterisation, but the foundation on which story, plot, and characterisation are created and woven. Using Sankofa, Okorafor intentionally creates an imaginary setting in the future by going back to research the history and world view of the Himba people of Namibia. In a 2017 interview with Tom Hawking, Okorafor said she has always wanted to write the Himba in the future as a group of Africans who have consistently maintained their traditions and culture in the midst of modernity. By choosing to set her story in Namibia and among the Himba tribe, Okorafor takes a decolonial turn by deprovincialisation: placing Africa into the centre of knowledge and releasing it from marginality and peripherality. According to Nasser (2021:173), Okorafor attributes Africa a space in the future by exploring the past through tradition, beliefs, and mythology. This strategy is compatible with Sankofa.

The adventurous coming-of-age story, *Binti*, is set between the Himba village of Osemba and the intergalactic Oomza University via the space shuttle called Third Fish. The setting in *Binti Home* takes the protagonist back to earth and Osemba village, from where Binti makes a sudden and adventurous journey with her grandmother and the ‘Desert People’ to their desert village; then Binti returns to Osemba village with Mwanyi. The third novella, *Binti the Night Masquerade*, is initially set between the desert village of the Enyi Zinariya and Osemba, the village of the Himba; then the action shifts into space via New Fish as Binti’s body is transported

for burial in the Ring of Saturn and finally the setting returns to Oomza University, Binti having mysteriously come back to life to be permanently attached to New Fish. Baas (2022:23) makes the following observation about the setting of the *Binti* trilogy in Namibia:

Namibia (in the form of the desert and the presence of the Himba) is described as a place that seems to have undergone little change externally in respect of the present. The societies, in terms of their organisation and traditions, also appears to have remained stagnant. This contrasts with their place within a vast and highly advanced universe in which space travel and inter-planetary communication are the norm. These apparent paradoxes are synthesised through a strong focus on tradition and through the characters' appreciation of technology, even if not always machine or science based.

The dynamic settings, combining earth and space, plus the interaction between humans and non-humans, enable Okorafor to take a decolonial turn away from traditional Western science fiction. Like most speculative fiction, the *Binti* trilogy is set in the future, but in a distant future in Africa. It is set partly in space, but is deeply and intentionally rooted in the history and imagined ancient traditions and culture of the Himba, who are an indigenous community of northwest Namibia and southern Angola. By unapologetically positioning the Himba village of Osemba as a physical African setting, Okorafor provides her narrative with a distinctive African ancestral bloodline, which is strikingly different from most speculative fiction from the Global North.

As well as being integral to the plot, the settings also allow Okorafor to address human issues such as race and cultural tension. Race is foregrounded to fuel cultural clashes, prejudices, and discrimination between the Khoush (the majority patriarchal clan) and the Himba, whom the Khoush look down upon and call filthy. The Khoush and the Meduse have been at war for many years and the Khoush consider themselves superior to the alien Meduse, whom they describe as terrorists for their *mojh-ha-ki-bira* (great wave) tactic of killing in great numbers. The Himba and the Meduse detest one another because the Meduse think the Himba are evil, while the Himba think the Meduse are aggressive warmongers. The Himba also view the Enyi Zinariya as savages with a neurological condition. The race and cultural tension reflect African communities as similarly antagonistic as they are communal. Baas (2022:23) points out that the setting 'provides a stage to examine how power dynamics are still entrenched X years into the future and how attention to difference and strategies of othering still persist.' He also remarks that:

Namibia is employed as a way to discuss other injustices (the chief's stinger and restitution, institutional involvement in violence, effects of

long histories of war on smaller communities, marginalisation) and interrogates these effects on seemingly powerless individuals.

In her 2017 TEDGlobal talk, Okorafor said she never saw characters who looked like her in the science fiction she read while growing up. This means there were no girls and women, no black people and, on the rare occasion when black characters featured, they were consigned to the periphery and cast as 'others.' The speculated futures in these early science fiction writings also echo the racial and gender prejudices of the time. In an interview with Wired Book Club in 2017, she explains that her goal in writing science fiction is to challenge convention and empower new kinds of stories, finding inspiration everywhere.<sup>12</sup> Characterisation is one of many ways in which she achieves this goal.

Okorafor created Binti as an extraordinarily brilliant 16-year-old mathematician and an adventurous Himba girl, who deserts her insular village life to travel into space to become the first Himba admitted to Oomza University, the intergalactic citadel of learning. The university population is 5% human and 95% other life forms from other planets. Binti is an outsider, as she discovers on her way to the university.

As I moved past seated passengers far too aware of the bushy ends of my plaited hair softly slapping people in the face, I cast my eyes on the floor. Our hair is thick and mine has always been very thick.

Just before leaving, I'd rolled my plaited hair with fresh sweet-smelling otjize I'd made specifically for this trip. Who knew what I looked like to these people who didn't know my people so well.

I was the only Himba on the shuttle. I quickly found and moved to a seat. (Okorafor 2015:11)

Black women's hair has always been contentious in terms of race and a defining characteristic of African women's identity.

Binti's character is rooted in her Himba heritage and the scientific and technological attributes of her people. However, Okorafor confesses, in an interview with Dean Nelson in 2019, that part of Binti's characterisation mirrors her own lived experiences of feeling like an outsider in the white racist suburb of South Holland, Chicago while growing up as a Naijaamerican ('Nigerian American'). Her love for mathematics and science, her passion for books, her curiosity to seek knowledge and her perception of Africa as an organically magic place are all written into Binti's characterisation. Okorafor (2009:276) acknowledges writing herself into the stories when she states: 'I can't help who I am. And who I am is reflected in what I write.' Like the superheroes in much Western science fiction, Binti is a powerful superhero. Her encounters with extra-terrestrials feature harmony, compromise, vulnerability, cooperation,

collaboration, and a strong survival instinct, rather than xenophobic attacks and conquest. As in Western science fiction, the source of Binti's power is based on science and technology, but her knowledge and skills are inherited from her mother, a mathematical genius, her father, a master maker of astrolabes, and the latent ability of the Himba to innovate technologically. For instance, Binti receives from her father over three hundred years of oral knowledge about circuits, wire, metals, electricity, and mathematical current. Casting Binti with these homegrown attributes is another example of Sankofa in (imaginative) action.

Throughout the three novellas, Binti's initial identity, 'Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib', continues to shift, as has occurred in other science fiction novels. For instance, in NK Jemisin's *Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, the main character, Yeine Darr, changes her identity dramatically. She starts off as a country girl and becomes a main heir of the ruling class, as well as the broker of a truce between the gods and humans. In *Binti* (2015), Binti's distinctively *otjize* Himba hair, into which she wove her family history, is replaced by tentacle-like *okuoko* as she becomes part Meduse. Shifting identity gives Binti the legitimacy to broker a truce between the Meduse and Oomza University authorities.<sup>13</sup> At the end of *Binti Home*, Binti's identity includes being an Enyi Zinariya through the activation of the alien technology gifted to her paternal grandmother's tribe by Zinariya aliens. When Binti asks Ariya what the alien technology will do, the priestess answers: 'Connect you to an entire people and a memory. And allow you to solve your *edan*' (2017:150). Being an Enyi Zinariya gives Binti a more advanced ability to communicate across space with every Enyi Zinariya anywhere. At the end of *Binti Home*, Binti states:

I was Himba, a master harmonizer. Then I was also Meduse, anger vibrating in my *okuoko*. Now I was also Enyi Zinariya, of the Desert People gifted alien technology. I was worlds (Okorafor 2015:161).

In yet another shape-shifting encounter in *Binti the Night Masquerade* (2017a), Binti is physically entangled with New Fish, the living spaceship whose microbes restore her to life from death.

At the end of the trilogy, once everything has been resolved, Binti becomes a hybrid of ancient and modern, of nature and technology. When Binti wonders if she is still human, Dr Tuka, the Khoush doctor who carries out DNA testing, says:

Your DNA is Himba, Enyi Zinariya, and Meduse...and some, but not much, New Fish... . But your microbes are mostly from New Fish, yes. Your microbes exist with your cells, so this blend is what makes you, you. So you are different from what you were born as, certainly. But as I said before, you're healthy (Okorafor 2017a:191).

Binti has metamorphosed from Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib to 'Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka Meduse Enyi Zinariya New Fish of Namib' (Okorafor 2017a:169).

The themes of change and growth are accentuated by Binti's becoming more like the alien species she has encountered. The following explanation of her shifting identities by Dr Tuka highlights how she has evolved:

So see it this way: You're paired with New Fish and Okwu, each of whom has a family. Your family is bigger than any Himba girl's ever was. And twice, you were supposed to die. And here you stand healthy and strong.... She chuckled and then added, 'And strange. There is no person like you at this school' (Okorafor 2017a:194).

The three novellas are replete with strong black female characters who play major roles. These characters address the racist and male-centred bias of speculative fiction. Binti's mother, a mathematical genius, saves her family when the Root, their ancient family home, is burnt down. There is Binti's grandmother and the Ariya, who both embody the history and tradition of the Enyi Zinariya. The Ariya is a spiritual and epistemological custodian who presides over the initiation rites that connect Binti to her father's bloodline. The connection endows Binti with the ability to communicate with other Enyi Zinariya, human and alien, across space. Many of the professors at Oomza University are also women, including the spiderlike Professor Haras, the University's president; Professor Okpala, Binti's supervisor; and Professor Dema, *Okwu's* supervisor. Binti describes these professors in *Binti* as 'educated beyond anything she could imagine. Thoughtful. Insightful. United. Individual' (Okorafor 2015:76). Among the five hundred passengers on the way to Oomza University are many brilliant young girls like Binti, who 'loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing' (Okorafor 2015:21). The living spaceship, Third Fish (which takes Binti to Oomza University) is imbued with motherly attributes by giving birth to New Fish. Both spaceships play significant roles: Third Fish saves Binti on the way to Oomza University after the Meduse murdered everyone else, and New Fish, microseconds later, brings Binti back to life in one of its breathing chambers. Shifting identities are not limited to Binti. For example, Haifa, at Oomza University, is studying weapons with Okwu and tells Binti in *Binti Home*: 'she'd been born physically male' and had her body transitioned and redesigned to female when she was thirteen (Okorafor 2017:25).

Okorafor turns the dominance of male characters in Western speculative fiction on its head. She juxtaposes powerful female characters alongside less dominant but important male characters like Binti's childhood friend, Dele, who supports

her when she is betrayed by Himba elders; *Okwu*, the Meduse who becomes part of her family; and Mwinyi, the Enyi Zinariya, who is also a master harmoniser, possessing powers to commune with humans, wild animals, and aliens. These characters act as Binti's allies at every critical point of her adventure, ensuring her survival and growth.

In centring strong female characters, Okorafor challenges Western androcentrism by going back in history, in accordance with Sankofa, to exploit the roles played by women and girls in traditional African communities. She tells the stories of African girls and women, as did her favourite authors, Octavia Butler and Buchi Emecheta.<sup>14</sup> Okorafor empowers African girls and women by giving them more agency and projecting African femininity. She takes a decolonial turn of depatriarchalisation by undoing the androcentrism in knowledge generation and opening up her narrative spaces to feminist, queer, and womanist scholarship.

In the *Binti Trilogy*, Okorafor intentionally creates characters who reflect diversity and inclusiveness in earthly, spatial and spirit worlds inhabited by humans and a multiplicity of other beings. She points out:

There continues to be a dearth of young adult fantasy novels featuring main characters of African descent. In my experience visiting high schools and grade schools, black children very much want to see themselves reflected in these types of books. They want to go on the adventures and perform the magic, too. They want to imagine. Non-black readers also enjoy the ride and new setting. I am happy that my strange stories are adding some plump drops to this near-empty bucket. I also hope that as children (and adults) read my works, they will eventually follow the roots that extend deep and firmly into the rich African soil and sand and learn a thing or two about this potent part of the earth (Okorafor 2009:285).

The quotation above underscores the importance of diversity and inclusion in speculative fiction and the need for deprovincialisation, democratisation and depatriarchisation of the genre to appeal to wider audiences across the globe.

In the three novellas, Okorafor portrays traditional African family and communal life, which prohibits or frowns upon individual actions that impact negatively on the family or community. When Binti defies the most traditional element of her culture and sets off in the dead of night to Oomza University in the first novella, she ruminates that:

My nine siblings, all older than me except for my younger sister and brother, would never see this coming. My parents would never imagine I'd do such a thing in a million years. By the time they all realized what

I'd done and where I was going, I'd have left the planet. In my absence, my parents would growl to each other that I was to never set foot in their home again. My four aunties and two uncles who lived down the road would shout and gossip among themselves about how I'd scandalized our entire bloodline. I was going to be a pariah (Okorafor 2015:9).

Okorafor also portrays the communal spirit embedded in the African way of being. In *Binti Home*, for example, the whole Himba community joins Binti's family in ceremonially welcoming Binti and *Okwu* back on earth from Oomza University. The communal spirit also explains why Binti's individual decision to go to Oomza University is seen as an aberration that brings negative consequences to her family and community. For instance, Binti's decision is frowned upon by her sister, Vera. She accuses Binti, of being responsible for their father's failing health and describes Binti as polluted and so ugly that no man will marry her. Dele, Binti's best friend, also accuses her of making it difficult for the girls in her family to marry (Okorafor 2017:79-80). In *Binti the Night Masquerade*, we witness the communal mourning and funeral rites performed after Binti's death, foregrounding the African world view of connecting the living with the dead and ancestral spirits.

Okorafor, like Butler, took inspiration from both the African history of communal living and her own experiences to explore how different races might co-evolve through compromise and cooperation. Such ancient African conflict resolution and diplomacy features communication and dialogue rather than war and conquest. Nevertheless, Binti's world is plagued by long-running wars between the Meduse and the Khoush and the impact of the wars on her small Himba community of Osemba. Binti unleashed the African diplomatic skills of conflict resolution to stunning effect in the scene where the Meduse try to kill her while on board Third Fish. With the help of her *edan*, Binti is able to understand the Meduse language. She engages *Okwu*, the fiercest of the Meduse, until they find common ground on which to build trust and respect for each other.

Curiosity to know more about each other's cultural background and practices engenders a friendly interaction, which emboldens Binti and *Okwu* to approach the Meduse chief and offer to broker a peace deal with Oomza University. Binti becomes vulnerable in the negotiations that ensue and risks releasing her *edan* to win the trust of the Meduse. In return, the Meduse inducts her as a friend and part of their family. Binti becomes part Meduse, with authority to negotiate on their behalf for the return of the chief's stingers. Okorafor uses the scene at the university where Binti leads the negotiations to showcase Binti as a master harmoniser with the intuitive gift of African diplomatic wisdom, embedded in Himba traditional beliefs

and culture. As part of the truce, *Okwu* becomes the first Meduse to be admitted into Oomza University to study weaponry. His admission opens up the introduction of a new strand of indigenous knowledge production alongside the Himba knowledge system that Binti brings to bear via her *otjzie* and *edan*.

Okorafor uses the return of the Meduse chief's stinger to interrogate unethical research practices that promote the appropriation of other cultures' epistemologies without permission. This is, by extension, an endorsement of the current efforts by some African scholars to have the West pay for African art and artefacts stolen by European colonisers (Wambu 2020; Adichie 2021; Gbadamosi 2022; Aguigah 2023). In addition, Okorafor uses the inclusion of Binti's Himba indigenous knowledge and *Okwu's* Meduse's war tactics in the university curriculum to imagine the university of the future as a decolonial centre where southern epistemologies, sidelined in mainstream knowledge production, are recognised cooperatively, collaboratively, respectfully, and with equal legitimacy to the dominant Western epistemological system. Emily Davis succinctly discusses this observation in her article titled 'Decolonizing Knowledge in Nnedi Okorafor's Binti Trilogy':

Okorafor's grounding of her work within a deeply Afrocentric vision of science fiction activates different intellectual genealogies of and epistemologies for the concepts of knowledge and education that are not limited by current Eurocentric frames or educational institutions (2020:45).

She further opines that Binti's demand for the return of the stinger is an explicit rejection of a corporate model of education, signalling Okorafor's vision of the university as a space where broad cultural and educational interchanges are supported and respected and where education 'functions as an instrument of peace and transcultural connection' (Okorafor 2017:54).

The unprecedented appearance of the Night Masquerade to Binti allows Okorafor to tap into an African spiritual and ancestral world view, which is often perceived as evil when viewed through the lenses of Christianity, modern civilization, and Western education. The masquerade, in African belief systems and especially among the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria, is symbolic of the connection between the living and the dead. It is central to African spirituality and ancestor worship. Okorafor demonstrates the potency of this belief system in the connection that Binti makes with the Enyi Zinariya. As soon as the Night Masquerade appears, her paternal grandmother arrives mysteriously with a group of Enyi Zinariya from the desert village. The mystery here is their instant and sudden arrival as Binti, her parents and brother, are scrambling to make sense of the aberration of Binti seeing the

## Night Masquerade in *Binti Home*:

The knock came again, followed by my father's voice calling my name. I ran to the door and opened it and met his frowning eyes. Behind him stood my older brother Bena, also frowning.

'Did you see it?' my father asked.

I nodded.

'Kai!' Bena exclaimed, pressing his hands to his closely shaven head. 'How is this possible?'

'I don't know!' I said, tears welling in my eyes.

'What is it?' my mother asked, coming up behind him, rubbing her face.

My younger sister Peraa peeked from the staircase.

She was the eye of my family, silent and curious about all things. Has she seen it, too? I wondered.

Somehow, my father knew she was there, and he whipped around to shout, 'Peraa, go back to bed!'

'Papa, there are people outside,' she said. 'People?' Bena asked 'Peraa, did you see anything else?'

Before she could respond, my father asked, 'What people?'

'Many people,' Peraa said. She was out of breath and looked about to cry. 'Desert People!' (Okorafor 2017a:91).

In this scene and the subsequent events, Okorafor privileges the ancestral bond between Binti and the Enyi Zinariya, resulting in the Ariya guiding Binti's initiation to switch on and activate 'The Zinariya',<sup>15</sup> the technology bestowed on the Enyi Zinariya by Zinariya aliens who landed at their desert village to rest and refuel on their way to Oomza University, long before people knew about it (Okorafor 2017a:12).

In addition to the Night Masquerade, there are several references to 'The Sevens,' the polytheistic gods the Himbas worship. This attests to the fact that Africans had their own traditional religion, gods, and deities, prior to the arrival of Western Christianity. There are also cultural rituals performed by Binti when leaving for Oomza university and again when leaving the university to return home. In *Binti the Night Masquerade*: 'Thank the Seven, praise the Seven, the Seven are great, they make circles in the sand!' (Okorafor 2017a:155).

And in *Binti* and *Binti Home* respectively:

I swiped otjize from my forehead with my index finger and I knelt down. Then I touched the finger to the sand, grounding the sweet-smelling red clay into it (Okorafor 2015:9)

As she went, I swiped otjize from my forehead with my index finger, knelt down and touched the finger to the Oomza soil, grounding the otjize into it (Okorafor 2017:25)

By retrieving and drawing on past African spiritual world views, Okorafor takes a decolonial turn through Sankofa, revealing how Africans have been alienated from their own spirituality, and advocating for a fresh understanding of Africa.

Okorafor's representation of Africa is, however, not utopian. She criticises gender inequality in the patriarchal Himba society, for example when she opposes the barring of girls and women from seeing the Night Masquerade, even if they are heroines of their family and community like Binti. Okorafor also frowns at the expectation placed on Binti as a female master harmoniser. In *Binti Home*, for instance, she is expected to ignore her own feelings and ambitions for the sake of her family and community. She is not held to the same standard as her siblings and must defer to age. She is required to remain peaceful and calm even when she is viciously and verbally attacked by Vera, her eldest sister:

'You're so ugly now, Binti,' she said. 'You don't even sound the same. You are polluted. Almost eighteen years old. What man will marry you? What kind of children will you have now? Your friend Dele doesn't even want to see you!' 'Some of the girls here now want to do what you did,' she said. 'You're supposed to be a master harmonizer. Look at you. What harmony do you bring here?' (Okorafor 2017:73).

In another salient criticism in *Binti the Night Masquerade*, Okorafor denounces the masculine domination of Chief Kapika and the Himba Council Elders.<sup>16</sup> Chief Kapika makes Binti uncomfortable when she requests to call an *Okuruwo*<sup>17</sup> to avert more destruction of Himba land in the raging war between the Khoush and the Meduse. Chief Kapika responds:

'Have you not looked around?' he asked in his soft voice. 'Your childish selfish actions led to all this strife. We don't leave our lands for a reason, Binti. Now you speak beyond your years. What makes you think you can call an Okuruwo?' (Okorafor 2017a:66)

At the *Okuruwo*, when Binti, *Okwu* and Mwinyi meet the Council Elders, Binti is berated and accused of bringing war upon the Himba because she brought *Okwu* home. Despite this, Binti convinces the Council Elders to invoke Himba deep culture to broker peace between the Khoush and the Meduse. However, the Council Elders betray her and do not attend the peace meeting. Rather than giving in to fear and despair, Binti bravely takes it on herself to meet the two warring parties and conjure

up deep Himba culture so that a peace deal can be struck. Unfortunately, almost immediately the deal is agreed, one of the Khoush soldiers shoots and kills Binti. In this incident, Okorafor highlights the discrimination, prejudice, and brutal violence Binti suffers to accentuate the struggles and personal challenges that girls and women face in traditional male spaces. At the same time, Okorafor projects how girls and women can be empowered when they choose to use their agency to disrupt patriarchy.

Okorafor juxtaposes the patrilineal Himba with the matrilineal Enyi Zinariya to privilege the historical roles of women as, among others, custodians of culture in traditional African communities. Binti's grandmother and the Ariya embody the Enyi Zinariya's indigenous knowledge and belief system. The grandmother and the Ariya are presented as the repository of history and knowledge transmitted orally from generation to generation and documented in the collective memory of the Enyi Zinariya. Okorafor creates a series of dialogues between Binti and her grandmother, the Ariya and Mwinyi, to centre the primacy of orature in the production and discovery of knowledge, (Ruth Finnegan 1970). In one such dialogue in *Binti Home*, Binti's grandmother tells her that, compared to the Himba,

'The Enyi Zinariya are old old Africans.'

'And contrary to what you all believe, we have technology that puts yours to shame and we've had it for centuries.'

'We didn't create it though,' she continued. 'It was brought to us by the Zinariya. Those who were there documented the Zinariya times, but the files were kept on paper and paper does not last. So all we really know is what elders read and then what the elders after those elders remembered and then what the next elders remembered and so on' (Okorafor 2017:127-128).

In a subsequent dialogue, Mwinyi tells Binti about the Ariya cave in the centre of a dried lake.

'Something used to live in it, back when this was a lake,' Mwinyi said as we walked. 'Maybe even dug the hole in the rock, itself.'

'How do you know?' I said, looking at the ground as we walked.

'It's in the Collective,' he said, glancing at me. 'That's the Enyi Zinariya's memory that we all can touch.'

I nodded.

'But no one knows exactly what kind of creature it was' (Okorafor 2017:139).

Through other dialogues with her grandmother, Binti becomes enlightened and more aware of the true history of the Enyi Zinariya. Contrary to what she has been brought up to believe, she discovers that they are natural scientists and researchers

with more advanced scientific and technological know-how than they have been credited with. In addition, her grandmother tells her that the Enyi Zinariya had known about Oomza University long before people on Earth. Most importantly, she reveals the mysterious power of Binti's *edan* as a Zinariya technology. When the Night Masquerade appears to Binti, her grandmother performs the matriarchal role of securing her for the rituals (Okorafor 2017a:97). As a spiritual head, the Ariya is vested with the power to perform the rituals (Okorafor 2017a:154). In her article 'Omumu: Disassembling subordination, reasserting endogenous powers,' Nkiru Nzegwu (2020) highlights the endogenous power and roles of women in the traditional Igbo communities from which Okorafor hails. She also alludes to similar power in communities across Nigeria and West Africa and argues that female subjugation is the construct of imperialism and patriarchy. In the light of Nzegwu's argument, it is only natural for Binti to be constructed as Okorafor did.

Okorafor also centres Sankofa in taking a decolonial turn in the conception and representation of fantasy. The fantasy in her work differs from the fantasy in Western traditional speculative fiction, as she explains in her article, 'Organic Fantasy' (2009). The fantasy in her work is organic because it is directly connected with her conflicting American and Nigerian cultural experiences and her own view of the world as magical. She opines that organic fantasy emerges from the very nature of its story. In the Binti trilogy, the fantasy created around Binti's exploits is deeply rooted in the cultural practices and spiritual world view of the Himba and Enyi Zinariya. The scenes and events in Binti's four-night journey through the desert with her grandmother are reminiscent of African folktales, rooted in African oral culture and traditional belief in the spirit world, where inanimate objects, elements in nature and animals are imbued with human attributes within the context of African climate, landscape, and life-forms. This primordial belief in the connection between the human spirit and the spirit world of non-human beings creates magical encounters replete with weird and mysterious beings who are capable of extraordinary exploits. This confirms Okorafor's (2009:278) assertion that organic fantasy 'blooms directly from the soil of the real' and is also the 'most accurate way of describing reality.'

For example, Mwinyi tames predatory animals with his harmonising gift, while Binti twice survives death with her shape-shifting experiences and her ability to fall into a meditative mathematical trance. Mwinyi and Binti's capabilities are rooted in their cultural identity as harmonisers. Okorafor's fantasy does not emanate from a vacuum. It is deeply rooted in traditional Igbo beliefs and, by extension, African belief systems embracing the spirit world and ancestors. As a Nigerian of Yoruba descent, Okorafor's fantasy and magical realism bring to memory the adventurous exploits and scenes

from the classic texts of Daniel Fagunwa, the renowned Yoruba novelist, and Amos Tutuola, another prominent Yoruba novelist who wrote in English. Both authors rely on elements of traditional Yoruba folktales and folklore in their narratives and stories (Lindfors 1970).

Okorafor engages with the Western hegemonic hold on the genre of speculative fiction by going back in history, according to the philosophy of Sankofa, to access ancient African wisdom, traditional culture, knowledge systems and philosophical and spiritual worldviews to interrogate the present and to imagine the future of Africa. She draws on and centres African epistemology. This allows her to weave traditional lives and beliefs into her stories and to dispel the Western bias against the African race while shining a light on what is and what can be (Okorafor 2019b). Like the Sankofa bird, Okorafor in the *Binti* trilogy bends backward into African history to invoke ancient African traditional knowledge and beliefs as a decolonial turn. This invocation allows her to speculate about the future by connecting the past with the present and decentring Eurocentric ideals of speculative fiction. Okorafor opens up to mosaic epistemology and ecologies of knowledges by democratisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). Joshua Yu Burnett (2015:135) opines that Okorafor revises the image of Africa that has been created through Western epistemological misrepresentation by presenting an alternative understanding of Africa devoid of hegemonic bonds, demonstrating that Africa can play a role on its own terms in the future advancement of knowledge, science, and technology. Burnett further remarks that Okorafor's work exemplifies counter-hegemonic artistic impulses that illuminate how speculative fiction is uniquely qualified to intervene as a politically transformative force within postcolonial studies.

## Conclusion

As one of the foremost African and African diasporic writers of the last two decades, Okorafor's speculative fiction is a radical critique of coloniality. It delinks from the Western gaze long associated with the genre and diverges from Afrofuturistic works such as Butler's and the African American authors featured in Thomas' *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000). She revises colonial stories of exploration and conquest and, instead, writes narratives in which an extraordinary 16-year-old from a marginalised Himba village in Africa travels into space and back to earth, harnessing traditional cultural skills and practices to bring about both change and harmony while changing and growing in the process. Okorafor gives black African female characters a voice, removes them from the

margins, centres them as main protagonists and writes about her own complex experiences as a Naijaamerican.

Okorafor brings alternative relevance to speculative fiction by making it a socio-political tool to engage issues such as race, prejudice, gender and the place of Africa and African epistemology in the future of global scientific and technological development. In addition, she envisions the Oomba University, not as a centre of colonialism, but as a place of collaborative and collective knowledge production, in which indigenous knowledge is acknowledged and allowed to flourish while interacting with other forms of knowledge on equal terms. By centring Sankofa philosophy in the *Binti Trilogy*, Okorafor decentres Western hegemonic epistemologies, decolonising the genre and paving the way for other ways of knowing and of being through the creative imagination of settings, characterisation, and alternative knowledge systems, which are unapologetically indigenous and African. Her Africanfuturist work provides a potential avenue for counter-hegemonic discourse. It revises the white masculine supremacist past of the speculative fiction genre and turns it into an inclusive, diverse, and transformative genre through deprovincialisation, democratisation and depatriarchalisation. Okorafor presents pluralistic and multiple approaches, complex narratives, and multiple ontologies in place of restricted ontologies.

## Notes

1. Hopkins's proto-science fiction novel, *Of One Blood: Or the Hidden Self* was serialised in *The Colored American Magazine* between 1902-1903 (MIT Press 2023).
2. The acronym 'SFF' refers to 'Science Fiction and Fantasy' and is used interchangeably with 'speculative fiction'.
3. Lauren Beukes is a South African author who won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for *Zoo City* in 2010 and has subsequently shot to fame in the speculative fiction genre. She is also a short story writer, journalist, television scriptwriter and documentary maker.
4. Chukwuebuka Ibeh describes *The Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction* as the world's most recognised platform on science fiction terms, containing the largest and most extensive vocabulary of English-language science fiction. It is edited and coded by Jesse Sheidlower, Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University and former Editor at Large of the Oxford English Dictionary.
5. For more information on Sankofa, see Kwarteng (2016), Symbolikon (2023), MasterClass (2022), ayeeko.africa (2022), Witness Stone Project (2023), and Untold International Blog (2015).
6. This is a 'network of organisations embarking on a programme of revisioning African Futures by, among other things, drawing on data developed from Africa, drawing on ethical systems and ways of valuing biodiversity in Africa, integrating ecological, social, and economic information, and working with multiple audiences' (Pereira 2022).

7. I have created the term 'Africancentrism' as a word that relates to 'Afrocentrism' in the same way as Okorafor's 'Africanfuturism' relates to 'Afrofuturism.' In other words, 'Africancentrism' is a perspective that focuses on Africa from within Africa, while 'Afrocentrism' focuses on Africa from outside it.
8. Binti means 'daughter' in Swahili (Babymigo).
9. The Meduse are an alien race shaped like jellyfish, who hate and see human beings as evil. They are described as aggressive warmongers and have been in war for many years with the Khoush.
10. The Khoush are the majority ethnic group on earth, apart from the Himba and the Enyi Zinariya. They are inspired by Arab people and culture, especially the ultramodern cities that Okorafor visited in the United Arab Emirates (Dutt D'Cunha 2018). They are portrayed as having lighter skin than the other ethnic groups. They see themselves as superior to all other ethnic groups, races, or species. The Khoush are in perpetual war with the alien Meduse because they see them as inferior, and they also treat the Himba disrespectfully and with disdain for the same reason. The professors at Oomza University are Khoush.
11. The Himba are Binti's ethnic group. They are described as an insular people, but innovative and technologically skilful in making astrolabes. In real life, they are one of the last semi-nomadic pastoralist cultures of Southern Africa whose existence has been relatively unaffected by modern Africa until recently (Currington 2001). They are unique because of their closeness to earth and nature and their striking social traditions. This is most pronounced in the hairstyle of the women and the practice of using red ochre to beautify their skin and protect their children's skin from the sun. They are presided over by a headman, who, at the time of Okorafor's writing, was Hikumine Kapika, the name Okorafor actually uses for the Himba chief in the trilogy.
12. In the interview, she explains that Binti's treeing habits mirror her own practice of meditatively solving mathematical problems (2017b). 'Okwu is characterised after the first living baby jelly she ever saw on her visit to the United Arab Emirates (2017b). The multiform and weird characters at Oomza University are created after her love for odd living things, especially small ones, such as bugs (2017b). In another interview, Okorafor reveals how the idea of the *Binti Trilogy* came to her from her own experience of defying her family wishes in moving from Chicago to Buffalo in New York (Hawking 2017).
13. Some members of Oomza University have stolen the chief of the Meduse's stinger to study it as weapon of war. This unethical research behaviour triggers the murder of all the students and the professors travelling to the university. The Meduse's plan (before Binti's intervention) is to gain entrance into the university to invade and murder to get back the stinger.
14. Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) was a Nigerian feminist writer who is one of Okorafor's favourite authors. In an interview with WIRED Book Club, Okorafor explains how Emecheta's works impact her positively, but, unlike the African women portrayed in Emecheta's novels, Okorafor wants the African women in her stories to have happy endings (Okorafor 2017b).
15. Binti's grandmother describes the Zinariya as "a living organism tailored for our blood that every member of the clan drank into his or her system with water. Biological nanoids so tiny that they could comfortably embed themselves into our brains. Once you had them in you, it was like having an astrolabe in your nervous system. You could eat, hear, smell, see, feel even sense it" (Okorafor 2017:129). This technology allows any Enyi Zinariya to communicate across space between themselves and the Zinariya aliens wherever they are. The power embedded in the technology is exemplified in the trilogy by Mwinyi, who is a master harmoniser, like Binti, and can do 'deep grounding' (Okorafor 2017a:178).

16. The Council Elders consist of five old men, including Chief Kapika, two old women, including Titi — the woman who led the pilgrimage into the desert — and one young man (Okorafor 2017a:78).
17. *Okuruwo* is a ceremonious gathering that can only be initiated by elders to call on the soul of the Himba to heal itself when the lifeblood of the people is in grave danger. It requires power only the old can wield (Okorafor 2017a:66). Certain traditional rituals are practised when the call takes place (Okorafor 2017a:70).

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