

Annotated Bibliography for Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*

by Erika Gotfredson

Attebery, Brian. *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*. Routledge, 2002.

Attebery's opening chapter identifies both gender and science fiction as codes, which he defines as "cultural systems that allow us to generate forms of expression and assign meanings to them" (2). For Attebery, labeling gender and science fiction as codes calls attention to their connection to language, to their learned "grammar" that allows us to assign meaning to signs (2). He consequently considers how science fiction has become a genre through which authors can lay bare and reimagine gender codes. As Attebery suggests, science fiction achieves this effect by "evok[ing] a sensation of strangeness" that highlights "aspects of society, self, perception, and the physical universe that are difficult or impossible to represent through conventional realism" (4, 5). In other words, the genre's ability to reconceptualize gender relies on its distinct separation from more realistic modes of fiction. Science fiction becomes a space through which authors can represent and explore modes of thinking about gender that disrupt the traditional binary of masculine/feminine. Attebery concludes his introductory chapter with a sense of hope that "if we change the signs, the world might follow" (15).

Attebery's monograph provides a lens through which we can read the *Binti* trilogy as a set of texts that exposes and expands gender norms. Gender dynamics are at the core of *Binti*'s story, as her departure from Himbaland and her role as harmonizer disrupt her community's traditional gender roles. *Binti*'s adventures prove to her family and friends that forcing her to align within gender expectations confines rather than enables her, and her return to Osemba thus prompts a transition away from those more rigid definitions of gender her community previously upheld. In addition, the trilogy includes some places and relationships that transcend gender binaries, such as *Binti*'s platonic relationship with Okwu, who remains ungendered throughout the text. Thus, Okorafor's text simultaneously deploys the science fiction genre to represent sites devoid of staunch gender codes and to centralize a young woman of color whose interstellar travel and role as harmonizer facilitate the necessary paradigm shift to achieve a more progressive society.

Burger, Bettina. "Math and magic: Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy and its challenge to the dominance of Western science in science fiction." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2020, pp. 364-377, doi:10.1080/15295036.2020.1820540.

Burger investigates how the trilogy's representations of math and interspecies relationships play a critical role in Okorafor's literary project of dismantling the Western tropes and ideologies traditionally associated with science fiction. More specifically, Burger argues that the *Binti* trilogy subverts binaries, most notably the distinctions between math and magic and humans and non-humans, to "challenge the dominance of Enlightenment-based Western science as the basis for contemporary science fiction" (366). Burger first acknowledges that while the trilogy aligns with some common definitions of Afrofuturism, Okorafor's term "Africanfuturism" more accurately describes how her texts center an "Africa-centered global diaspora" notably devoid of a Western center (366).* The article relies heavily on Donna Haraway's concept of "tentacular thinking" for its framework, which Berger defines as "a kind

of thinking that allows for a concept of the human as part of a larger network of beings and entities” (368). Burger’s article then charts the “African epistemologies and ontologies” that dominate the text (375); Burger specifically focuses on math and multispecies connections that, in their African forms, provide alternatives to “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism,” a term Burger quotes from Haraway, and instead emphasize communication and “interconnectivity” (368, 369). According to Burger, the trilogy reconceptualizes the notion of math as static, instead imagining math as the central force of the universe, one that allows Binti to shape the world around her. Additionally, Binti’s multiple transformations, which see her “individuality [transition] into multispecies connections,” dismantle Western narratives that feature a unified, individualistic version of the self (373). In these ways, Burger suggests how the novellas in Okorafor’s trilogy privilege African histories and traditions and consequently disrupt the genre conventions and accompanying ways of viewing the world associated with a predominately Westernized version of science fiction.

* See Okorafor’s [blog](#) for her definition and justification of the term “Africanfuturism.”

Crowley, Dustin. “*Binti*’s R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies.” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 2, April 2019, pp. 237-256, doi:10.1017/pli.2018.54.

Crowley begins with a consideration of the terms “cosmopolitanism” and “ecology,” two terms that “often seem to pull in different directions” and thus preserve “a complete distinction of the natural from the human” (237). According to Crowley, Okorafor’s *Binti* trilogy rejects this distinction and instead features “deep entanglements between human and more-than human” (237). In Okorafor’s texts, “human, technological, natural, and spiritual actors” all have voices and are deeply interconnected (238). Okorafor merges the “animist mode” of African literature—one which acknowledges the ability for non-human forces to affect humans’ lives—with science fiction’s “technoscientific speculations” to offer a distinctly posthumanist tale that challenges Enlightenment notions of selfhood and rejects anthropocentrism (238). The article presents as its evidence various non-human entities in the text, ranging from animals to plants, that possess agency and influence the world they inhabit. For instance, Crowley includes Binti’s living home “the Root” in a list of such “natural actors.” In addition, the series conceptualizes technology not as something that perpetuates “human autonomy” but rather as a force that facilitates “transform[ed] human bodies and eco-technological relationships” (245). Finally, Crowley demonstrates how Binti increasingly becomes a muddled conglomeration of different identities, which ultimately allows her to translate language between different communities and facilitate peace-making discussions. According to Crowley, these different ways in which the series forges new relationships between humans and non-humans contrast the customs of Himbaland, which Crowley describes as “ecological, but not cosmopolitan” (247); the Himba remain “clustered around their own lake” but “fail to engage the political aspects” of their relationships with other groups and places (247, 248). For Okorafor, communication across boundaries, whether the boundaries between places or between humans and non-humans, “provides a foundation for at least the possibility of humans and others working together with the intention to address histories of conflict and exploitation” (252). The article concludes with Crowley’s assertion that Okorafor is a “master harmonizer” herself insofar as she “[brings] together diverse genres and modes of knowing to lay claim to an alternative future” (254).

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Crowley's article begins with a description of how Africa is often represented as a monolith within a "single story of African wretchedness" (268). Crowley identifies Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* series and *Lagoon* as texts that resist that trend; these texts instead position Africa "as a cosmopolitan hub vital to a global interaction" (268). Crowley's reading relies on two main ideas. Crowley first asserts that most scholars who read Okorafor's work overemphasize its historicism and consequently run the risk of obscuring its spatial concerns. Furthermore, Crowley centralizes the idea of space and place as fluid and dynamic entities in contrast to more rigid conceptions of space ingrained within colonial and imperialistic endeavors. According to Crowley, Okorafor's works imagine fluid and dynamic places and boundaries, thus connecting Lagos and Binti's Himbaland to other places across the globe and universe at the same time that their local histories and heritage are preserved. Crowley's reading of the *Binti* series focuses primarily on Binti's growing ability to feel at home in the various places she visits, as well as her ability to make connections to and relationships among those places while remaining connected to her original home. In direct contrast to the initial isolation of the Himba people, Binti becomes a collective identity and achieves the capacity to communicate across boundaries, which becomes crucial to "creat[ing] more productive and inclusive relations between groups" (281). Through the *Binti* trilogy, "Okorafor envisions places that are not uprooted or elided but intersected and transformed by an expanded geography of relations, making each place more internally diverse and more productively connected across the globe and cosmos" (286). Crowley concludes that Okorafor employs the science fiction genre to imagine new spatial relations that transcend the boundary-making impulse of imperialism and thus envisions a future beyond such oppressive systems.

James, Lynette. "Children of Change, Not Doom: Indigenous Futurist Heroines in YA." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, nos. 1-2, 2016, pp. 151-176, doi:10.3828/extr.2016.9.

James's article begins with a discussion of how young adult (YA) literature often depicts future worlds as "ethnically and culturally monolithic landscapes of bewildered have-nots with no recourse to change their station" (151). In response, James highlights three YA authors—Ambelin Kwaymullina, Joseph Bruchac, and Nnedi Okorafor—who offer alternative narratives in which young people have the capacity to effect change. According to James, the discussed novels, all written by "authors of color who identify as First Nations, Native or Indigenous peoples," exhibit Indigenous futurism, which James defines as "a deliberate, intentional, and purpose-driven position that addresses not only inclusion but intersectionality for its protagonists and themes" (152). By incorporating women of color protagonists who exert agency into their futuristic worlds, these authors facilitate a shift within YA science fiction towards more diversity and hope. This article primarily lists different ways that the aforementioned authors extend and disrupt the genre conventions of YA science fiction, including each novel's nuanced attention given to the characters' love relationships and the heroines' use of violence and technology.

Ultimately, these novels represent for their readers the ability for young people to bring about change and promote diversity as a necessary foundation for those endeavors.

While this article primarily focuses on Okorafor's 2007 novel *The Shadow Speaker*, it more generally encourages identifying Okorafor as a YA author and underscores the importance of Okorafor's novels for pushing the boundaries of YA science fiction. Most significantly, James's discussion provides a framework through which to read Binti, for the eponymous protagonist of the *Binti* series fits the mold of the woman of color heroine at the core of Indigenous futurism. By breaking from many of the conventions of science fiction, Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy represents a heroine who intervenes in the war between the Khoush and the Meduse and whose agency and strength allow her to create momentous change.

Toliver, S. R. "Afrocarnival: Celebrating Black Bodies and Critiquing Oppressive Bodies in Afrofuturist Literature." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 52, 2021, pp. 132-148, doi:10.1007/s10583-020-09403-y.

Toliver begins the article with a call for teachers to integrate more Afrofuturistic works into literature curriculum that privileges realistic texts, for Afrofuturistic texts can "redefine the ways in which Black women and girls' identities are imagined and depicted" (133). More specifically, Toliver's article takes interest in the possibilities for Afrofuturistic texts to "critique the dominant bodies that elevate anti-Blackness in society" (134).^{*} Toliver adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's term "carnavalesque" to describe how various Black authors carve space for liberatory celebrations of Blackness amid the deconstruction of such oppressive structures. Toliver coins the term "Afrocarnival" to describe how novels by Nalo Hopkinson, Sherri Smith, and Nnedi Okorafor "create speculative worlds that celebrate Black people, Black cultures, and Black imaginations, while also critiquing oppression" (145). Toliver's reading of Okorafor's *Binti* exhibits how the author employs grotesque realism to map "the intangible issues of social justice onto physical bodies" (134). For instance, the women who scrutinize and criticize Binti's hair become embodiments of a centuries' long history of Black women being subjected based upon their appearance. According to Toliver, by "caricature[ing] dominant society," Okorafor prompts readers to contend with often abstract, yet still consequential injustices (143). In addition, Toliver identifies how the novel celebrates Blackness by showing how Binti joins other groups, such as the Meduse, in the fight against injustice. The article concludes with Toliver's idea that centralizing Black creativity and celebrating Blackness is just as necessary as dismantling the power structures that stymie creativity and liberation in the first place.

^{*}A note of clarification: Okorafor prefers the term "Africanfuturism" to define her work, per her [blog](#).