Africanist Fantasy: Supporting Real-World Progressivism through Fantasy Fiction

by

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Introduction

This project consists of two major parts. The first part is a broad discussion of what I call "Africanist fantasy." I consider Africanist fantasy an offshoot of the larger movement of Afrofuturism. "Afrofuturism" was coined in the 1990s by Mark Dery to describe a wide movement of thinkers from the African diaspora interested in how technology might shape the future of Black people. Obviously, literature is an important component of Afrofuturism. Africanist fantasy is a genre that incorporates the diasporic African experience within traditional fantasy literature, which has historically skewed heavily to white European authors and subjects. Part one of this project will offer a broad survey of the history and critical problems associated with Afrofuturist literature and will end with a discussion of why it is now imperative we develop the term "Africanist fantasy." Part two of this project will offer two close readings of works of Africanist fantasy. The first is N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, which is the first installment in her *Broken Earth Trilogy*. *The Fifth Season* takes place in a dystopian alternate universe in which a small group of people are able to alter their volatile environment. The second is Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*, a "low fantasy" Bildungsroman in which its protagonist discovers that she has magical powers and becomes enmeshed in a secret magical world. By analyzing these two works as examples of Africanist fantasy, I will make a case that this is an important emerging genre of literature, doing crucial cultural work through an enjoyable medium.

In order to consider the future of Africanist fantasy, it is important to first look critically at the past. Chapter 1 of this paper will begin to pick apart the common explanations for the lack of representation in the traditional canon of Fantasy literature. Topics in this section will include the erasure and appropriation of Black culture and the historical implications of lacking

representation by engaging with theories by Gregory Rutledge and Mark Bould. There will also be an examination of a speech by Afrofuturist author Nalo Hopkinson to consider problematic language surrounding the industry, particularly the “raceless future” trope.

After opening the conversation with the negative aspects surrounding the slow evolution of Black presence in Africanist fantasy and science fiction, chapter 2 will shift the mood toward the positive aspects of inclusion and diversity in the fantasy canon. This chapter will look at Africanist fantasy and how it relates to identity, engaging with oppressive history through dystopian futures. One of Nnedi Okorafor’s books, *Ikenga,* a fantastical super-hero story written for a young audience, will be briefly analyzed in conjunction with an article by Nigel Malcolm who discusses the rhetoric used to divide the Black community and the effect that rhetoric continues to have on the identity of African Americans. The latter half of this chapter will further consider the facets of African American identity by moving toward a discussion about postcolonialism in Fantasy fiction by engaging further with Nalo Hopkinson through an article by Joshua Yu Burnett, who considers Hopkinson’s theory specifically looking at the work of Nnedi Okorafor.

The final part of the survey, chapter 3, will bring the emotional pendulum full-swing by focusing on imagining positive Black futures. This section will utilize a firsthand article by Nnedi Okorafor herself, as well as insights by chair of Latin American and Latino Studies at University of California, Catherine S. Ramirez, to discuss the power that connotatively ‘lesser’ genres of literature like Fantasy fiction have on real-world progressivism.

Once the foundational understanding of the factors involved in the evolution toward contemporary Africanist fantasy has been established, the final section will move to a close reading of the texts. The aim of these close readings will be to support or refute the claims made

about Black literature throughout the survey, and to depict the writing skills surrounding social issues that contemporary authors N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor employ that show Africanist fantasy belongs in the mainstream Fantasy fiction canon.

Chapter 1: Debunking Traditional Explanations for Lacking Representation

In Gregory E. Rutledge's article, "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The "Racial Establishment," Rutledge examines the evolution of futurist fiction and fantasy to argue the reasoning behind the lack of Black contribution to the canon up until 2001, when the article was written. He claims that there are a few main factors behind the lack of representation. One major factor he asserts as inherent to the issue is that the futurist fiction and fantasy (hereon abbreviated as FFF) industry is "systemic[ally] racis[t]" (Rutledge 236). Rutledge provides perspective throughout his article from several different angles, one of the early ones regarding renowned African American author Ralph Ellison and his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). His citation from Ellison "articulates [Ellison's] dilemma" (Rutledge 236) of writing about a sci-fi style character in conjunction with societal "racial issues" (Rutledge 236). In summation, Ellison describes the feeling he couldn't shake that his contribution to the science fiction genre was unwelcome, describing it as a "honky-tonk trumpet blasting through a performance … of Britten's War Requiem" (Rutledge 236). The issue highlighted by this firsthand perspective of an aspiring Black FFF author is that the genre itself was so consumed with elitist values propagated by the exclusive white literary community, that it appeared unbreachable by a wider array of human concepts such as racial inequity. Rutledge sees Ellison's perspective as an "unintentional belittling" of the "potential and need for Black FFF" (Rutledge 237), however I see Ellison's perspective as a strong metaphor for the intangible challenges that have tried to keep the African American experience barred from the mainstream FFF canon.

Rutledge uses this introduction as a segue into the flawed, yet prominent connotations of FFF in the 1950s to argue that FFF is actually a genre that naturally lends itself to African American literature. Rutledge says, "The link between *Otherness* and the otherworld

phenomenon of both fantasy and futurist fiction is something with which many persons of African descent may identify. Relegated early to positions of the exotic *Other,* Africans and their descendants have been marked as the primitive for centuries" (Rutledge 237). Nnedi Okorafor utilizes this link between otherness in reality and fantasy realms to her creative advantage; her novel *Akata Witch* (2011) has strong intentions of stereotype reversal that redefine the trope of otherness as empowering.

As the works of Africanist fantasy continue to successfully redefine dated norms in the contemporary canon, it begs restating the question: why has it taken so long? Gregory Rutledge attempts to answer this multifaceted question in his article "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The "Racial" Establishment." Rutledge argues that because diasporic Africans have frequently been taken advantage of and devalued by the rest of society, their history resembles the trope of oppression commonly seen in futuristic fiction and fantasy stories featuring no people of color. The struggles diasporic Africans have faced throughout history have been appropriated by white writers and reframed to omit the people of color, showing that Black colonial history is one that warrants sympathy and correction, without making the explicit connection to the realities of colonialism. Rutledge continues this argument by citing Gregory Benford, who says that "Science fiction arose in a time affected by science's unsettling relations about ourselves, about our position in the natural order … [and has] tried to grapple with ideas which disturb our sense of being at home in the world" (Rutledge 237). While it may not have been Benford's intention, this statement further emphasizes the relevance to the struggle of Black Americans, to their potential addition to the FFF literary canon, as people who had a very real and conspicuous difficulty finding their sense of belonging in a country that has only fairly recently recognized them as worthy of legal emancipation.

Rutledge continues by describing another blockage in the rise of Black FFF authors that is the "publishing industry's market-driven policy" (Rutledge 239). He says that "with the exception of the entertainment industry … the African American presence has been strongly circumscribed by European-American culture" (Rutledge 239). This consideration marks a major factor in the previous absence of diversity in the mainstream canon of published fantasy. The rhetoric used by Rutledge is a soft-spoken way of stating that the publishing industry was permeated by racist policy that sought to silence the voices of black authors as best it could. Rutledge continues by saying, "it was commonly believed that European-American FFF readers would not pay to read about the doings of Black characters" (Rutledge 239). He highlights the nuances of this distinction by the publishers (who claim to be simply operating under a supply-and-demand purpose and not a racist one) by citing Sandra Govan: "in a market where the readership was heavily male and European-American this reasoning seems valid …. [but] if African Americans were proportionally represented, they … would have been … a larger part of the market" (Rutledge 239). Govan approaches the subject with a more realistic critique. This emphasizes the absurdity in making excuses for a system that was tactfully oppressing the voices of people of color, when it is so clear that publishers traditionally catered to white writers.

In order to further consider the subject of the publishing industry's racist "market-driven policy," one can turn to Farah Jasmine Griffin's article, "Thirty Years of Black American Literature and Literary Studies: A Review." The argument that African Americans would make up a larger percentage of the literary consumer demographic if they were more commonly represented in that literature being sold, is proven through an evaluation of the timeline of the evolution of Black literature over the last thirty years. Griffin argues that "since the founding of African American studies at the University of Pennsylvania 30 years ago, we have witnessed an

explosion of literary production by people of African descent" (Griffin 165). She examines the various reasons for the evolution of black literature and credits the University of Pennsylvania with being "at the forefront of institutionalizing and formalizing the academic study of Black literatures" (Griffin 167). This shows the power that progressive institutions have on the world. Simply adding a few classes to the curriculum that are teaching African American culture has clearly opened the door and inspired many Black creators to create socially aware and well-written literature. Griffin continues by exploring the earlier influences on Black literature, crediting Barbara Christian with an instrumental contribution to the canon: criticizing and challenging "that in privileging European poststructuralist theory, critics such as Baker and Gates ignored the variety of theorizing that has always taken place among Black thinkers and narrowed notions of what constituted theory" (Griffin 168). This point is more of the same reality that white structures of power have used tactics of erasure and exclusion in an attempt to keep voices of color out of the highbrow conversations. "Christian also argued that this move toward esoteric theorizing was a blatant move away from politics" (Griffin 168) meaning that white American and European elitist theorists knew that they had no ground to stand on politically, so they made other, more nuanced excuses in an attempt to maintain white power in the realm of intellectuals. Griffin continues to promote the work of Barbara Christian saying, "[she] was one of the most important founders of … Black feminist criticism and theory. Her book *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition (1980)* was the first to establish a tradition of Black women writing in the United States" (Griffin 168). Barbara Christian breached the wall of intolerance and managed to spread her progressive theory despite the many challenges for a person of color at this time. The beauty of progressivism is that it takes on an

exponential growth effect, so when women like Barbara Christian shine through the veil of intolerance and make their voices heard, others feel inclined and empowered to do the same. As the exponentiating effect continued to take hold, the world witnessed the rise of many new Black female authors throughout the 1970's that introduced whole new elements to the literary canon and operated at a level of professionalism worthy of recognition by peers. Griffin says these works were "characterized by striking, complicated, nonlinear narratives, beautiful, rich, sensuous language, and unconventional Black women characters" and that they "responded to and critiqued canonical Black male writers such as Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, as well as the male centered politics of the Black power and Black arts movements out of which most of the women emerged" (Griffin 169). While Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin are important influences on the early evolution of Black authors in literature, the importance of what Griffin is mentioning lies in the beginning of critical theory and conversation within the community of African American authors. This conversation continues to break down the box in which traditional society has attempted to contain Black culture. With the increased presence of Black women in literature, the literary conversation opened up to requiring "new kinds of literary history, criticism, and theory … [critics] began to theorize at the nexus of race and gender and in so doing helped to develop … Black feminist criticism and theory" (Griffin 169). This shows the type of adaptations that the literary conversation made as a wider range of people started to be represented. While the traditional literary conversation dominated by white Europeans and Americans had this attitude that there simply wasn't room for conversation regarding the history of people of color, it becomes clear that the conversation benefits from the addition of more diverse topics, and truly has an infinite amount of expansion available. As more diverse

perspectives are introduced to critical literary conversation, the more complex that conversation can become.

Looking back at the economic factors, Griffin continues by making a segue from the emergence of Black feminist criticism and theory to the sociological impact of the early stages of diversifying the scope of literature. Griffin says, "as the works of older writers became available, and as younger writers came of age not only reading republished works but also reading and being shaped by writers such as [Toni] Morrison, still more excellent works by Black women were published" (Griffin 169). Griffin again emphasizes the exponential growth effect that occurs as more Black writers emerge and create. It leads to more readers of color who appreciate the representation, which leads to a rise in sales for Black authors, which leads to a rising trend for publishing companies to start taking these authors seriously and publish more of their work. Griffin discusses the success of Terry McMillan, saying that it "exposed publishers to the large body of Black readers hungry for commercial fiction" after "[selling] nearly 4 million copies" (Griffin 170) of *Waiting to Exhale* (1992). Thus, the earlier argument by Sandra Govan of representation equating to sales, is proven. To go beyond simple dollars and cents, it is also important to note that this evolution Griffin examines has actually begun to flip the trends in contemporary speculative literature. Authors like Nnedi Okorafor and N.K. Jemisin are not merely selling books, they are winning awards and breaking records. N.K. Jemisin won the Hugo Award for Best Novel for every single book that she released in *The Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-2017), making her the first person to ever win the award three years in a row, or for all three novels in a trilogy.

Where there are successful minorities, there are often angry 'majorities.' While she was winning the Hugo Awards, Jemisin was the subject of condemnation by a group of people who

felt it was their responsibility to uphold the traditional whiteness that has dominated the science-fiction/fantasy canon throughout history. This group refers to themselves as the "Rabid Puppies" and are essentially a product of white fragility in a world that is becoming more progressive. They launched a smear campaign against Jemisin, saying that the only reason she won those awards is because of the current political climate in which liberalism and political correctness are dominating creative realms. In an interview with *The Atlantic* writer Vann R. Newkirk II, Jemisin addresses this racist movement by the Rabid Puppies, taking on a mature tone that almost resembles pity for their insecure fragility in a changing world. Jemisin says: "It's the same sort of reactionary pushback that is generally by a relatively small number of very loud people. They're loud enough that they're able to convince you that the world really isn't as progressive as you think it is, and that the world really does just want old-school 1950s golden-age-era stalwart white guys in space suits traveling in very phallic-looking spaceships to planets with green women and … they kind of convince you that that's really all that will sell" (Newkirk). The way that Jemisin handles this group of white supremacist readers is truly impressive. Instead of letting the Rabid Puppies efforts bother her and silence her success, she pays them little attention, instead focusing her efforts on continuing to write intricate novels that exhibit an expert level understanding of literary technique as well as incorporating inclusivity and progressive concepts. What is even more timely and hilarious about Jemisin's response, is that this interview took place five years before the launching of billionaire Jeff Bezos's penis shaped rocket ship. This reality that Bezos engaged with can be directly associated as a result of the toxic white masculinity perpetuated by traditional science fiction that groups like the Rabid Puppies yearn to keep in the spotlight. Jemisin is not only reshaping the future of fantasy

literature, but reshaping the minds of all who read and engage with Africanist fantasy thus, affecting change in the real world.

Jemisin knows the power of creating literature that alters the traditional vision for humanity. Griffin ends her argument on a positive note, referencing Robin Kelley who “reminds us of the importance of imagining a radically different future and engaging in struggles to bring those visions into being” (Griffin 172). This article shows the power of representation that Africanist fantasy creates for people who envision a different world for themselves, and the motivations it provides for them to change the real world for the better. As Griffin articulates in her concluding sentence, “Black writing … has allowed us to imagine a past unrecorded in the history books, not a romanticized or glorified past, but a more complicated one … and a future … worth struggling for or struggling against” (Griffin 172). Creative endeavors by Afrofuturist writers have true influences on the values of the minds to which they reach. By challenging dated norms and modernizing perceptions of what it means to be different, or ‘the other’, Africanist fantasy is dismantling prejudice in the real world.

The directness with which Nnedi Okorafor engages with the colonial trope of ‘otherness’ supports an examination by Mark Bould in his article, “The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF,” in which he makes the point “the satirical sf tale in which the alien or the android is the subject of prejudice, whatever its merits, … avoids direct engagement with the realities of racialized hierarchies and oppressions” (Bould 179). Bould continues to concentrate his argument saying, “the problem with [emphasizing the importance of the discussion of the value of life through abstract subjects (robots, aliens, etc.)] is that ... it validates and normalizes very specific ideological and material perspectives, enabling discussions of race and prejudice on a level of abstraction while stifling a more important discussion about real,

material conditions, both historical and contemporary" (Bould 180). Okorafor has a tendency toward presenting the appropriated "ideological and material perspectives" to which Bould is referring in such a way that subtly points to the commoditization of the Black struggle by white authors in order to create a compelling narrative that avoids historical contextualization.

Bould strengthens this argument, adding that "by presenting racism as an insanity that burned itself out, or as the obvious folly of the ignorant and impoverished who would be left behind by the genre's brave new futures, sf avoids confronting the structures of racism and its own complicity in them" (Bould 180). The 'raceless future' trope commonly used in traditional speculative fiction was intended as a method of implying that there simply is no need to discuss issues of race and prejudice, and that in the future everyone gets along because the authors are not interested in engaging with the nuances of racism and prefer a willing sociological ignorance. Nalo Hopkinson addresses the justifications for this willing ignorance in her transcribed speech at the International Association for the fantastic in the Arts, "A Reluctant Ambassador from the Planet Midnight." Hopkinson engages in a satirical scenario meant to tackle the status quo of white definitive norms in a comedic, yet powerful fashion. She begins the speech by introducing herself as a being that comes from another planet, and continues by examining common phrases uttered by white people and offering translations from the perspective of this other worldly being. This is an enjoyable and meaningful introduction to her argument because it really points out the absurdities in people's stances which have been commonly problematic in the real world as well as traditional works of speculative fiction. For instance: "

> You say: Eventually this race stuff won't matter, because we'll all interbreed and become post-racial.

Primary Translation: If I keep very quiet, maybe you won't see me and ask me to do any work. Plus, you might have sex with me.

Secondary Translation: I don't want to do my homework! This stuff is hard! I want some cookies! Are we there yet?" (Hopkinson 345).

These evaluations of common problematic speech provide a mocking tone that deconstructs the arguments made in the "You say:" portions. Hopkinson utilizes a comedy style comparable to Saturday Night Live that proposes widely accepted perspectives on racial subject matter and then dismantles that perspective using ironic mimicry. This method maintains a light approach that engages a wider audience in important conversations. Many people already feel overwhelmed in their personal lives and consider it too much of an undertaking to involve themselves in progressive social justice. By integrating entertainment with progressivism, Hopkinson manages to flip the perception of a conversation that is generally very serious into a conversation that is surprisingly lively and encourages more participation from the wider audience it reaches. This strategy draws a parallel to the power that connotatively hedonistic works of speculative fiction have in highlighting the absurd structures that exist in reality and challenging those concepts so as to provide perspective that benefits the progressive movement. Instead of staging the conversation of race and politics as exclusive to intellectuals, Hopkinson invites all types of people to consider the factors involved in this subject. By opening the floor to those who are too timid to speak and learn, perhaps for fear of being 'cancelled' or simply called stupid, Hopkinson is doing a service to the progressivist movement by making it more accessible and welcoming.

Using her platform, Hopkinson lays out a series of examples in which the alien role she is performing has "noticed a preponderance of wistful references in [human] literature to magical

people with blue skin" (Hopkinson 341). She then continues this analysis by saying, "since none of the images of real people from your world show such blue-skinned beings, we can only theorize … perhaps a race of yours that has gone extinct … perhaps it is a race that has gone into voluntary seclusion … [or we fear] this is a race being kept in isolation" (Hopkinson 342). By assuming a role free from the biases of Earthly colonial history, Hopkinson is able to point out that the lack of representation of people of color in today's literary canon and how it exhibits a systemic erasure/silencing of a massive demographic of people of color. The alien form she is representing for the sake of this examination concludes this portion by stating, "we're sure you realize why it is of extreme importance to us to learn whether imprisonment, extinction, and mythologizing are your only methods of dealing with inter-species conflict" (Hopkinson 343). This genius scenario challenges historical oppression and shows how speculative fiction can be used as an instrumental tool to inspire hope and empower the voices of people of color around the world and encourage non-black allies to partake in the progressivist movement toward diversification.

Chapter 2: Reshaping Black Identity in Fantasy Fiction

There are many ways with which one can observe the benefits of diversifying perspectives in literatures. For instance, Ruth Mayer approaches a subject that is not discussed as frequently as it should be in her article, "'Africa As an Alien Future': The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds." Mayer examines the representation of the Middle Passage in the arts and how "Afrofuturist artists turn to black history in order to recreate it in a markedly fantastic mode" (Mayer 555). She claims that many works of cinema and fiction avoid engaging with the importance of the actual journey of the slave trade and the psychological effects it had. She argues that "fantastic, mythic, or grotesque narratives seem so much more adequate to tackle the estrangement and angst erupting in (the slave trade)'s wake" (Mayer 556). This argument directly confronts the traditional commodification of the forced diasporic African experience discussed repeatedly throughout this paper. Too many famous canonical works written by white authors are built around a plot that mirrors the oppression and fight for freedom that is the backbone in the history of African American evolution, despite substituting blackness with white protagonists. These stories were hugely successful, indicating that the structure of systemic oppression and the fight for freedom make for engaging works of literature, and the whitewashing is a commodification of this trope. Mayer proceeds by addressing more contemporary representations of the Middle Passage that fall under the umbrella of Afrofuturism and how they differ from the problematic ones. These works tend to "concentrate on the fantasy spaces in between and nowhere at all, spaces that present themselves as mixed-up, ambivalent, floating" for example, "the sea, [a] paradigmatic space of openness and indeterminacy which gains … contradictory connotations once it becomes a setting for abduction, violation, enslavement, and revolt" (Mayer 555). One of the key characteristics of the Atlantic Ocean in the

context of the slave trade is this ongoing struggle for colonized African identity, the implications of which are still extremely prevalent in the black community. The slave trade worked tirelessly to break individualism in its subjects and this led to long-term psychological ramifications. Mayer quotes Hortense Spiller, who says, “removed from the indigenous land and culture and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all” (Mayer 556). This eerie quote by Spiller considers an interesting approach to the dehumanizing nature that the African slave trade had on the identity of African peoples forced from their home. They were stripped of communication, titles, and basic human rights and forced to reckon with the many fearful emotions on the journey across the Atlantic to an unknown land.

Mayer continues with an examination of Carrie Mae Weems’s work *Untitled* (Ebo Landing) that portrays the folktale where:

> One midnight at high tide a ship bringing in a cargo of Ebo (Ibo) men landed at Dunbar Creek on the island of St. Simons. But the men refused to be sold into slavery; joining hands together they turned back toward the water chanting, “the water brought us, the water will take us away.” They all drowned, but to this day when the breeze sighs over the marshes and through the trees, you can hear the clank of chains and echo of their chant at Ebo Landing (Mayer 559).

This work is incredibly powerful because it is representative of one of the reactions to the forced displacement of these Ibo men. When the slave trade is taught in schools, the concept of the initial journey is often glazed over, depicting the horrible physical conditions on the ship yes,

but much more complicated are the psychological conditions. Mayer states that through this story by Weem, "the sea turns from blankness to myth—the history of slavery mixed up with the myths of Africa bringing about the dead men's return and their haunting takeover. Where [Herman] Melville discloses a dead end, Weems's horror scenario figures as a point of departure for a new symbolic repertoire" (Mayer 560). The product of this work is that it redefines the meaning of the ocean. Where older texts dictated the ocean to be "blankness" and a vast empty space, for the forced diaspora of African peoples, the ocean represents a very significant space to them. The ocean marks the beginning of a brutal history for diasporic Africans that will forever be relevant to the future. As Mayer states, "Black diasporic history … is a thing of the future, not of the past, a subject of fantasies, dreams and speculations—the currents and changes of the sea—which is created in the process of its recuperation" (561). It is within the ocean that the African peoples were stripped of much of their agency and identity, and in this context, the ocean is far from simple blankness. Mayer emphasizes this point saying, "black history requires a methodology of its own, new goggles, if you will, that make readable what seemed blank and reveal the ghosts of the past at loose in the present world" (Mayer 561). So many works of fiction avoid addressing the brutal history of the slave trade, and adopt a perspective that it is time to 'move on' or 'move forward' without recognizing, exploring, and researching the truth of the past. However, they utilize tropes of cultural displacement by means of colonialism by appropriating the African slave experience. "The aliens and monsters haunting Afrofuturist narratives explode the confines of historiography and realism, collapsing established patterns of signification and identification, and put forth undecipherable codes and fractured images" (Mayer 564). These Afrofuturist works are building the framework for the reconstruction of the identity of the Atlantic Ocean in the context of the African Slave Trade. Pieces of Africanist

fantasy literature manage to build toward this reconstruction and reversal of the traditional erasure and appropriation. This strengthens the notion that identity in general can be reimagined and reinforced by literary works of Africanist fantasy.

Ikenga (2020) by Nnedi Okorafor navigates the perception of social and physical characteristics of identity. Nnedi Okorafor uses the literal super-powers of the protagonist, Nnamdi as a way to redefine colonial and postcolonial notions of Blackness. "He strained with all his might to intentionally bring forth his shadow body. He thought about the feeling of being big. Being powerful. Being black like the moonless night" (Okorafor-Ikenga 69). This passage uses metaphor and simile to challenge the dated norms stemming from the colonial era that define what it means to be Black. Africanist fantasy works like this one have the power to take back the identity of the diasporic African peoples since the time of colonization. Society has traditionally implied, extremely offensively, that being Black means you act a certain way, with a lot of negative attributes attached. Because of this, there exists an issue of identity within the Black community.

In Nigel Malcolm's article, "Slaves to the Community: Blacks and the Rhetoric of 'Selling Out,'" Malcolm argues that "the rhetoric of "selling out" functions as a mechanism of social control meant to keep blacks on "their side" of the color line" (Malcolm 121). He claims that the black community is intentionally permeated with this paranoia of betraying the race by achieving success and that this keeps a lower level of individualism within the black community. Malcolm quotes W.E.B. Du Bois, who states that "one ever feels his twoness, -an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Malcolm 120). This presents the thought that being a person of color, and being an American are two contradictory

characteristics. Malcolm continues by discussing the side effects that occur when individuals in the black community find themselves in a position where they are able to make the system work for them, saying, "the tension between the aspirations of the individual and the demands of the racial group create internal pressures that bring forth a divided self that mirrors the one Du Bois wrote about at the turn of the twentieth century" (Malcolm 121). There is a certain level of indoctrination that has taken place, despite all of the progress made by the Black community that makes it difficult for some people to be supportive of others. This can be considered as a reason there aren't more writers of color confident enough to step into traditionally white realms with which they connect. Malcolm says, "this is the result of a color line, drawn by white citizens in the past, but now solidified and reified by blacks in the present" (Malcolm 121). Those that have broken free from the chains imposed by colonialism and systemic oppression often have been made to feel like they had to suppress their "Blackness" in such a way so as to elevate themselves and integrate into white society. It is not the fault of any individual, but rather the result of a long-term racist system that has tried to keep African Americans in a social box. Malcolm articulates this by quoting Stubblefield who says, "labels constrain communication, curtail behavior, and function as a means of socialization" (Malcolm 123). It is not uncommon to hear someone say that a black person talks 'white' when hearing the use of eloquent speech. Africanist fantasy can aid in breaching the "color line" that Malcolm refers to by depicting characters of color that possess myriad skills and interests. By reading about characters who follow their passions and achieve greatness, the minds of a diverse audience can be rewired to overcome dated notions of what it means to be African American.

Nnedi Okorafor tends to utilize reversal of stereotype details in such a way that adheres to the same structure of reductive stereotyping to show the absurdity in upholding dated social

norms. In this way, she is doing what another Afrofuturist author, Nalo Hopkinson, calls on all writers of postcolonial fiction to do: “take the meme of colonizing the natives, and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it” (Burnett 135). Hopkinson wants writers to assume the role of not only critics, but also what she calls ‘tricksters.’ “Critics [by] map[ping] out … new speculative frameworks that liberate rather than oppress colonized peoples” and “tricksters to the degree with which they deploy older, oppressive speculative frameworks and signify on them, revealing readers’ investment and indeed complicity in speculative fiction’s oppressive legacies” (Burnett 135). Hopkinson is essentially highlighting the notion that people are so indoctrinated by traditional tropes of colonialism in literature that they subconsciously tend to desire literary frameworks that embody those tropes. Hopkinson proves herself a psychological genius indicating that one easy path toward reclaiming black identity in a postcolonial world is by manipulating the colonialist literary framework in a way that incorporates racial progressivism whilst maintaining the appearance of a traditional and compelling work of fiction. Joshua Yu Burnett analyzes the application of this concept in his article, “The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction”. Burnett argues that speculative fiction is a tool with which we can examine “new conception[s] of postcolonialism” (Burnett 133). He claims that contemporary fiction writers such as Nnedi Okorafor use their abilities to create work that challenges both the norms of speculative fiction and the norms of postcolonial criticism (Burnett 133). “Okorafor plays both the critic and the trickster, taking the often-white supremacist past (and sometimes present) of mainstream/white speculative fiction and … transforming it into something new and counterhegemonic” (Burnett 134). This notion of ‘tricking’ readers using familiar tropes with unfamiliar details is a major facet of the power of

Africanist fantasy. By essentially chumming the waters of stereotypical ignorance with varying unusual details of race and oppression in their stories, Africanist writers can influence readers to realize their own socially ignorant shortcomings in such a way that will enlighten readers while keeping them engaged.

Chapter 3: Imagining Positive Black Futures

Perhaps the most important intention of the Afrofuturist movement lies in imagining positive futures for people of color. One of the tools that has aided in the massive uptick of Afrofuturist creation is, of course, the connectivity of the internet. Creative thoughts and ideas are capable of reaching millions of minds within minutes. This has increased the rate at which in-touch writing is being produced. In Grace Gipson's article, "Creating and Imagining Black Futures through Afrofuturism," Gipson discusses how "academics, artists, and social activists are using Twitter to raise awareness about, and expand the horizons of, Afrofuturism" (Gipson 85). While traditionally, as discussed earlier, much of the power of the Black literary voice was controlled by the publishing industry, now the stories by people of color are much more accessible. Gipson's examination of the spread of Afrofuturism in the digital realm leading to the effects of Afrofuturism in the physical realm is significant and she brings up many strong points. She begins her argument by explaining that "over the past five years, social media has fueled a palpable hunger and desire among African diasporic internet users to know more about Afrofuturism as a lens to better understand our lives and possibilities beyond our present circumstances" (Gipson 84). A lot of the research discussed thus far refers to Afrofuturism with regards to the inspiration it provides, but this article goes one step further and provides specific examples of the ways in which Afrofuturism can be applied to improve the real world. Gipson quotes Ytasha Womack, as stating "Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Gipson 84). By utilizing a modern technological tool, Twitter, Gipson is able to analyze Afrofuturism in a meaningful way that more closely adheres to Womack's definition of "an intersection" (Gipson 84). In Gipson's words, she articulates this as "using Afrofuturist ideas and concepts to educate, share stories, fight oppression, and help build

communities in need" (Gipson 84). The availability of social platforms for individuals has led to a digital space wherein traumas can be expressed and considered, leading toward a normalization of the discussion of mental health and social issues that can, in many cases, be traced back as results of colonialism. Gipson supports her claim by saying, "for Afrofuturist practitioners, theorists, and teachers, Twitter serves more than entertainment and social purposes; it also facilitates community organization and the education of others" (Gipson 85). While the literary concept of Afrofuturism is most commonly discussed in terms of understanding Black history and reclaiming Black identity through a defamiliarization of traditional norms; Gipson's application of this concept focuses more specifically on "open[ing] up new conversations and projects that can take place in real-world sites" (Gipson 85). Gipson approaches this as a more hands-on trend that can improve the world in a multitude of ways outside of improving representation in visual arts. This takes progressive concepts in the digital realm and applies them as practical communal undertakings in the physical realm. Gipson strengthens her argument, providing examples of tweets and discussing how "organizers and activists [in three major cities with significant black populations] draw on the themes and imaginaries of Afrofuturism to find hope and healing, to rebuild communities, and to seek justice" (Gipson 97). This shows how in this digital age, Afrofuturist ideals are more easily applicable than they once were. Beyond that, the ability to reach a large number of like-minded people at the click of a button makes Afrofuturist ideology more teachable than ever. Gipson refers to Martin Luther King Jr. and his emphasis on the importance of continuity in regards to progressive thought. "King's overall message in his Detroit speech was that it was urgent and important to continue the civil rights movement's forward momentum; King emphasized that Detroit, and later Washington DC, and the entire nation had to be future-oriented with respect to racial equality"

(Gipson 97). This comparison is so interesting because it provides the perspective that we are constantly living out the progression of Afrofuturism with each passing day. This point is significant because it breaks down this idea that has been perpetuated by traditional, whitewashed sci-fi of a raceless future that would simply happen passively over time, and emphasizes the fact that we all need to actively work together and learn together in order to continue the progression of equality. Gipson concludes this article with a supporting quote from John Jennings: "Afrofuturism is not science fiction, but about imagining different spaces of creative thought that doesn't put your identity in a box" (Gipson 102). This is an important point to the purpose of Africanist fantasy. It is imperative to the health of Afrofuturist identity's that they remain a fluid spectrum of creativity that empowers, rather than an easily definable box that enforces a restrictive taxonomy. In the final words of Gipson, "Afrofuturism proves to be a convincing identity, network, safe space, and artistic expression that dismantles the box and opens up a plethora of imaginary spaces of creative thought" (Gipson 102). Thus, indicating the intermingling of the concepts articulated in creative expression with the applications those concepts have on reality.

Nnedi Okorafor enhances the argument that speculative fiction is merely a reshaping of reality, rather than a completely other world and in that way plays an important role in literature. She does so in her article, "Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence," by telling a story about one of her students, Jermaine Reed, living in the South side of Chicago who was on route to academic success until the system swallowed him up and destroyed his future. She fills her story with details that, for people coming from a place of greater privilege than Jermaine, seem like they are out of a fantasy novel themselves. "Jermaine came from a neighborhood where having a weapon in the home to defend his family was a good idea and relying on the police was

laughable" (Okorafor-Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence 22). When Jermaine was attacked, he used his weapon to defend himself and was arrested and locked behind bars in the local jail facing five years. After reading this article, it becomes clear that the character Sasha in *Akata Witch*, who is described as being able to weaponize powerful juju (magic ability) for his age, is heavily based on the real-life student of hers, Jermaine. She continues by describing her visit to Jermaine in jail and the details she noticed while inside, perhaps most significant: "[the inmates] were all young black men" (Okorafor-Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence 23). By altering the course of the reality that she witnessed with Jermaine, she is able to paint a more hopeful future for Sasha.

Instead of being locked away in prison after his crimes, Sasha's parents sent him to his ancestral homeland Nigeria, where he could learn to control his powers among his peers and how to use them more responsibly. Sasha makes friends and builds a social support system that allows him to thrive. In this case, *Akata Witch* provides a progressive perspective that these young men in Chicago prisons are more victims of their setting than they are inherent criminals. It also asks important hypothetical sociological questions like: what if the system was built to support and engage with these young people, instead of isolate them and ruin their futures? As Okorafor notes in this article, "when one is jailed, the purpose is to destroy that person, not rehabilitate him or her" (Okorafor-Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence 23). Okorafor uses the character Sasha to consider the subject of legislative reform and the flaws in the United States' justice system.

Nnedi Okorafor is open about her writing influences, saying "some speculative fiction may be unconcerned with realism, but mine sure as heck is deeply concerned with it" (Okorafor-Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence 25). Okorafor's inspiration for her writing comes from

the real world, and in this way serves to directly confront real world problems. She begins the conclusion of her article, “Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence” with a consideration that serves to put down the dated, traditional views of speculative fiction: “I can just imagine some of my old professors humphing and pursing their lips at this because, in their opinion, speculative fiction couldn’t possibly be connected /grafted to/the result of/melded with/born from/part of our really truly realistic world” (Okorafor-Writing Rage, Truth, and Consequence 26). This is a comical, yet powerful concluding sentence because it exhibits Okorafor’s disdain for the old, white dominated literary world that she grew up in while maintaining a light, humorous tone that indicates that those views are going to be left in the past, if she has any influence in the matter. As it turns out, after winning seven major awards, she has quite a bit of influence in the matter.

Along the same lines of Okorafor’s thoughts on the applicability of Afrofuturism to real world progressivism, Catherine S. Ramirez’s essay, “Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin” argues that Chicanafuturism redefines traditional, dated, stereotypical views of Chicano/Chicana culture previously defined by majority white speculative fiction writers. She claims that “by appropriating the imagery of science and technology, Chicanafuturist works disrupt age-old racist and sexist binaries that exclude Chicanas and Chicanos from visions of the future” (Ramirez 189). Ramirez begins by discussing Afrofuturism. She points out the flaws in her childhood exposure to the science fiction genre as feeling inadequately represented. Ramirez quotes Octavia Butler, saying films like *Star Wars* featured “every kind of alien ... but only one kind of human—white ones” (Ramirez 185). *Star Wars* fans may be quick to retort that Lando Calrissian is portrayed by a Black actor, but the point stands that, generally speaking, it is a story of white protagonists overcoming oppressive structures of power, that could have easily involved more diverse representation in the leading and accompanying roles. While it is a classic and

incredible franchise worthy of praise in its own right, it is important to consider the erasure of people of color that was so common in popular works like this one and the effect that has on the perspectives in society. Ramirez continues by saying that "science fiction can prompt us to recognize and rethink the status quo by depicting an alternative world, be it a parallel universe, distant future, or revised past" (Ramirez 185). This point is an important consideration of Afro/Chicana futurism in that speculative fiction allows for minorities to use aspects of their culture in conjunction with captivating storylines to create not only a more representative style of storytelling, but one that redefines cultural norms as defined by the dated speculative fiction canon.

Ramirez develops her theory of Chicanafuturism as building off of Afrofuturism, stating that "like Afrofuturism, which reflects diasporic experience, Chicanafuturism articulates colonial and postcolonial histories of indigenismo, mestizaje, hegemony, and survival" (Ramirez 187). These themes are perfect building blocks for a science fiction/fantasy story and are incorporated in some way in most famous works already, albeit typically without proper representation. Ramirez's argument concludes with the notion that "Chicanafuturism defamiliarizes the familiar" (Ramirez 190) which is what the science fiction and fantasy genre are supposed to do in order to be successful. Chicanafuturism "brings into relief that which is generally taken for granted, such as tradition, history, or the norm" (Ramirez 190). Ramirez's point is that certain aspects of reality that previously did not 'need' defining (from the perspective of the dated canon), are now being defined in ways that combat their widely used definitions. I like the way Ramirez articulates this point so simplistically, because it should be a simple action, but by allowing stereotypes to permeate the ever-evolving language of society, generalizations have taken the lead over individual accomplishment. By no longer allowing connotative language to

be taken for granted in literature, Afro/Chicana futurist writers have the ability to redefine dated stereotypes and promote positivity.

It is important to consider the differences and similarities in Afrofuturism and Chicanafuturism. Ramirez manages to describe the intricacies of Chicanafuturism in such a way that supports the intricacies of Afrofuturism which provides for a wide scope argument about the benefits of inclusivity, sensitivity, and voice in speculative fiction. Ramirez critiques the genre of speculative fiction on the basis that it has historically promoted whiteness as superior, often heroic, and people of color as subordinate, often evil. She concludes the essay by describing the goals of the college course she teaches on Black speculative fiction. By beginning her essay discussing the authors of color that inspired her, and concluding the essay with a glimpse into how she inspires the next generation of college level readers, Ramirez maintains the positivity needed to continue to fuel the Afro/Chicana futurist movements in speculative fiction.

Chapter 4: *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin

The Fifth Season is the first installment in the Broken Earth Trilogy by N.K. Jemisin. This trilogy has been in the spotlight for its successful critical reception, and has led Jemisin to be a major contender in the realm of legendary science fiction/fantasy writers. She is now the first author to win the Hugo award three years in a row for “Best Author,” and the series is the first trilogy to win a Hugo award for all three installments. Even more significant, N.K. Jemisin is the first African American to be awarded a Hugo for “Best Author” since the inception of the award in 1953 making her a landmark creator in the fantasy realm and bringing Africanist fantasy further into the popular mainstream canon.

The story takes place in a dystopian world, with a volatile environment that has a tendency to shift tectonic plates causing massive amounts of damage to the populations living there. There are a select few people gifted genetically with abilities to influence and control the extreme environment. The population has formed mostly small, spread-out communities or “Comms” that have a strong sense of loyalty to each other in order to survive. The government that oversees and attempts to control all of the gifted people is called the Fulcrum. The Fulcrum is an antagonistic institution that is shrouded in mystery throughout the first novel, as the protagonists are trying to learn more about it. When the Fulcrum finds that it cannot control the gifted individuals to carry out the will of the organization, it sentences them to either be killed or sedated and harvested for their abilities to maintain equilibrium in the geological setting.

Often, as discussed in the earlier sections of this paper, authors of Afrofuturist texts invent oppressed groups that do not exist in reality. This is the case with the Orogenes: a group of beings in the universe of *The Fifth Season* who are born with the ability to manipulate the movement of the earth’s tectonic plates. This title is a play on the term “orogeny,” which is a

geological word used to describe the ways in which mountains have formed by shifting tectonic plates. The Orogenes possess a great deal of power, some of which can be controlled through training in the Fulcrum. However, because of this power, they are feared by many of the non-orogenic peoples in the Comms and ridiculed as a threat to society. "Orogenes" is the inoffensive way to refer to this group, however ignorant members of the rest of human race often refer to Orogenes as "roggas," which is an offensive slur, not unlike the n-word and f-word (i.e., the derogatory term for gay people). Indeed, "rogga" shares many phonetic similarities with both of these actual slurs and therefore reminds readers familiar with modern American racial and sexual bias of the real-world bias that Jemisin's fictional bias mimics. Early in the novel, the protagonist, who is called Damaya at this point, realizes that she is an Orogene and suddenly understands that she belongs to a group that she was long taught to discriminate against: "She. *She* is a rogga. All at once she does not like that word, which she has heard most of her life. It's a bad word she's not supposed to say, even though the grown-ups toss it around freely, and suddenly it seems uglier than it already did" (Jemisin 89). Here, Damaya suddenly recognizes the harm in racial slurs, which she had not considered prior. Perhaps Jemisin is doing two things here: first, giving readers who have experienced racial oppression representation in her novel; secondly, she is helping readers who have not experienced racial oppression understand that this experience teaches one what is so harmful about racist slurs. Since readers identify with Damaya, they too come to see racism from both sides.

The trope of otherness is considered frequently throughout *The Fifth Season.* At every new junction of their journey, the protagonist Orogenes are faced with unwelcome at the best of times and unprovoked violence at the worst of times. As soon as people realize they are Orogenes, they treat them with disrespect. The setting of this novel is a world divided up into

"comms" or communities which are all very closely knit. Being in a world where individual survival depends on a certain level of community, this ostracizing mentality shared by the majority of comms can make life very difficult for the Orogenes. This is a setting that can be related to being a person of color traveling through the American South, certainly in the past, and still today. For instance, when Syenite and Alabaster arrive at the com where their mission is to take place, Syenite immediately senses that the leader she is meeting with, Asael, considers her as unworthy of respect. Syenite calls Asael out on this behavior, saying "'discomfort is understandable. It's the rudeness that isn't.' Rust this. This woman doesn't deserve the effort of her explanation. Syen decides to save that for someone who matters. 'And that's a really shitty apology. 'I'm sorry you're so abnormal that I can't manage to treat you like a human being" (Jemisin 156). This scene uses the first-person perspective to display a most satisfying retaliation against bigotry. When it comes to hierarchical structures of power, racism and ignorance all too frequently go unchecked due to the nature of risk involved for the person in subordinate positioning. Syenite is essentially there to do a job for Asael, her performance in which will determine the quality of life she maintains moving forward. In order to survive in the real world, it can sometimes be considered too dangerous to go against the grain of power, especially when one's career is on the line, however Syenite has always been an outspoken character, who yearns to fight injustice anytime it appears. Through Syenite's steadfast approach to righteousness, Jemisin ignites a fire in all those that can relate to how they've had to react or not react to mistreatment in their own world. Once again, through Syenite, the exciting representation of the youthful attitude toward dismantling traditionally overlooked intolerance is displayed, which encourages readers who admire Syenite to be more outspoken in their daily lives against bigotry.

Jemisin continues to impress the importance of standing up to discrimination by the reaction that Asael has at being called out for her ignorance. After a few witty retorts by Syenite, Asael loses her composure, and says: "You're a rogga," Asael snaps, and then has the gall to look surprised at herself" (Jemisin 156). By confronting Asael's intolerant reception of her, Syenite manages to coerce Asael's true colors to come to the surface. For a respected leader like Asael to use such an offensive slur in her aggravated state is a mark of the nasty truth that drives Asael's values. The look of surprise on her face at having let that slip brings forth parallel instances in our reality when major pop-culture icons or politicians have said bigoted statements in times of their perceived indignation. The irony of course, being that they are the ones treating others unfairly, so when they perceive even the slightest unfair treatment being done unto them, they sometimes crack, the way Asael did. Syenite does not miss a beat, responding with poise and dignity in the most satisfying manner: "'Well'. Syenite makes herself smile. 'At least that's out in the open" (Jemisin 156). This indicates the culmination of the argument, where Syenite has just claimed a certain victory. She stood up to a person in a position of power, unsure how much leverage she had due to the limited information she was given, but very sure of the fact that she wanted to be treated with respect. By demanding this basic level of humanity and remaining in control of her emotions, she was able to not only sway the situation in her favor, but cause a racist person to out themselves. This scene captures a multitude of societal issues, the most prominent being that those in positions of power, despite being in the wrong, are allowed a much wider berth of uncontrolled emotions than they expect from the people they have historically deemed to be subhuman/savages/animalistic. This highlights one of the many ironies of racist principles and the power of rhetoric. By labeling othered peoples with offensive terms

meant to taxonomize them as subhuman, the oppressive systems are taking part in the truly subhuman practices.

In *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin comments on the process through which individuals interact with institutions by showing how various characters, including Syenite and Alabaster, relate to the Fulcrum: the shadowy and oppressive institution that controls the Orogenes, using and limiting their power as it sees fit. At one point in the novel, Alabaster is more comfortable working within the Fulcrum's system than Syenite. Alabaster is what is known as a "Ten-Ringer." The rings represent a ranking system, meaning Alabaster is an extremely powerful Orogene who has worked in the Fulcrum for a very long time. Nevertheless, he still expresses his understanding of Syenite's disdain for that institution: "You hate the way we live. The way the world makes us live. Either the Fulcrum owns us, or we have to hide and be hunted down like dogs if we're ever discovered. Or we become monsters and try to kill everything. Even within the Fulcrum we always have to think about how *they* want us to act. We can never just...be" (Jemisin 123). At this point in the story, Alabaster is resigned (or conditioned) to the methods of the Fulcrum. He expresses a fear that if they tried to escape the Fulcrum's reach, they would be "hunted down like dogs." In this simile, we can see that Alabaster understands the Fulcrum sees him as not fully human. Later, we find out that Alabaster is aware that sedated Orogenes are trafficked as unwilling prostitutes. While Syenite is horrified by this shocking abuse of power, Alabaster is not willing to face its ethical implications because he sees himself as powerless to solve it. By creating a fictional institution oppressing a fictional person who becomes complicit in (or at least resigned to) his own oppression, Jemisin teaches readers to understand how actual historical processes of oppression like colonialism not only dehumanize their victims, but make their victims see themselves as less than human and not capable of struggling for justice.

The prologue of *The Fifth Season* sets an ominous tone of the physically shifting geological landscape in which this story takes place. This shifting geography is used throughout the novel to draw parallels to the fluid nature of existence. The narrator alludes to the world ending, but concludes the prologue saying: “This is what you must remember: the ending of one story is just the beginning of another. This has happened before, after all. People die. Old orders pass. New societies are born. When we say “the world has ended,” it’s usually a lie, because the planet is just fine” (Jemisin 18). The effect that this parable has is to highlight the vastness of time, indicating the unobserved fragility of structures of socialization. If individuals are able to view existence from a perspective unfettered by their own daily habits and short-term goals, the motivations and understanding of those individuals begins to change. Jemisin is using the abstract setting of this novel to enforce the truth that all social structures of power in place today and throughout history have been created and will eventually be destroyed. This sets the revolutionary tone of the novel as an indication of the power of individuals, particularly individuals who have been historically classified by oppressive systems that appear invulnerable. It brings forth a feeling of hope for the oppressed that institutions of power generally quell in an attempt to maintain their subjects’ passivity. Jemisin is emphasizing the power of progressivism, regardless of length of time. Any small progress is still progress, and by continuously fueling progressive movements, eventually there will be major changes. This is the power that combining classic themes of speculative fiction with relevant social issues has in Africanist fantasy, and the message that authors like Jemisin and Okorafor are able to display intertwined with fantastical details. The story may be fictional, but the messages are real.

Chapter 5: *Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor

Akata Witch by Nnedi Okorafor is a coming-of-age tale centered around a young girl named Sunny Nwazue. The plot takes on a relatively simplistic, linear structure typical of fantastical Bildungsroman stories: Sunny is an outcast at school with no friends and a challenging daily life who eventually finds herself exposed to a hidden magical society in which she thrives, becoming an instrumental role in saving that society from a powerful magical antagonist. The twist that Okorafor puts on this story to make it so much more influential than traditional low-fantasy coming-of-age stories is that she incorporates a plethora of characteristics and details that deviate from the standard. Okorafor takes standard themes of identity and social issues and flips the details around, creating unique perspectives through her characters that dismantle ignorance at its core, as opposed to challenging instances of ignorance the way people are used to seeing it challenged. *Akata Witch* is a progressive text of Africanist fantasy that furthers the Afrofuturist philosophy by breaking down traditional *and* contemporary interactions with race and identity in social settings.

The main character in *Akata Witch* is Sunny, who uses first-person narration solely in the prologue, to provide the mental framework for how she regards herself. She introduces herself curiously as “my name is Sunny Nwazue and I confuse people” (Okorafor-Akata Witch 3). She then goes into detail how she was born in New York City, but moved to her parents' hometown in Nigeria when she turned nine. “You see why I confuse people? I’m Nigerian by blood, American by birth, and Nigerian again because I live here. I have West African features …[and] light yellow hair, skin the color of ‘sour milk’ (or so stupid people like to tell me), and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right color. I’m albino” (Okorafor-Akata Witch 3). By introducing the main character through first-person perspective, Okorafor accomplishes a

multitude of progression surrounding the colonial trope 'otherness.' First, this first-person voice provides agency to Sunny; she gets to describe herself the way she thinks of herself. Second, the issue with the dated tendency of othering people based on physical appearance is directly addressed by showing the effect that this has had on Sunny's self-image. Despite having the agency of first-person voice, she still largely describes herself in regards to what other people consider. This highlights the concept that people, especially young people, feel like there is some 'normal' phenotype that they should work toward conforming to, so as to not burden others with the "confus[ion]" that occupies Sunny's image of herself. This indoctrinated longing for physical conformity is further emphasized in the way that Sunny says, "God ran out of the right color" as though there exists a right and wrong. What is so interesting about the characteristics that Okorafor has assigned to Sunny is that she is visually white skinned in a setting of all black skinned people. Despite sharing the same ethnicity, she is condemned as the 'other' due solely to her appearance. This is a rather unique set of characteristics that allows for a consideration of the illogical socialized ignorance in regards to skin tone. Furthermore, she is the American immigrant in Nigeria, as opposed to the more common story of the foreign person trying to make their way in America, which brings forth a largely untapped set of circumstances for Okorafor to explore. Sunny is called a "stupid pale-faced akata witch" (Okorafor-Akata Witch 11) which is a term used by her Nigerian peers to degrade Black Americans. Akata is a real term used by some Nigerian peoples toward African Americans as a means of degrading them for their adoption of American culture. This is a fairly uncommon perspective in mainstream fantasy that brings forth new perspectives and insights into the ways that bigotry operate in similar fashion structurally across cultures. Okorafor has brought forth an awareness to a particular ignorance that she may have been exposed to herself as an American born in Ohio to traditional Nigerian parents. By

naming the novel, *Akata Witch*, there is an indication of a reclaiming of identity for Sunny, who embraces her condemned unique qualities through finding her skills as a witch, leading to her confidence and appreciation for her differences.

The offensive notion discussed earlier in the survey portion of equating whiteness with proper speech is something that Nnedi Okorafor also approaches in *Akata Witch* (2011). Sunny receives the highest grade in her English class on a writing assignment and all of her classmates immediately stage her as the 'other' thanks to the American teacher's mismanagement of the situation. Her proper English speech in conjunction with her albinism encourage the other children to bully her, asking if she liked watching the teacher punish them because "you're white too" (Okorafor-Akata Witch 12). When Sunny retorts, she "added bass to her voice and enunciated the word 'idiot' with her most Nigerian accent" (Okorafor-Akata Witch 13), indicating that she felt the need to be received as seeming more 'Black' by the flawed stereotypes, perpetuated by the other students, but originating as byproducts of colonialism and forced displacement of black identity. As Malcolm states, "Those who fail to live their lives in a way befitting a "black" person are singled out for having defied the social norms of the group" (Malcolm 121). This fear of ostracization by one's race is fueled by the issue of the white oppressive guidelines of identity. For instance, by staging Nnamdi's superpower in *Ikenga* (2020) as his physical form embracing the previously caricaturized primitive animalism that was used as defeatism by white structures of power, Okorafor is making progress in deconstructing the racist negativity associated with Blackness. This also brings into light, the clarity that the large bodied African genealogy should come with connotations of strength and indomitability, not primitivity and incapability; so, naturally all of the negativity associated with African peoples were simply constructs of colonial white fragility manifesting into a defense mechanism intended

to subordinate a race of peoples who appeared more physically evolved than they. Okorafor uses the simile “being black like the moonless night” (Okorafor-Ikenga 69) in a way that emphasizes this notion of a world unimpeded by whiteness. It calls to attention one's imagination of what might have been, had the African peoples remained uncolonized which is a major facet in the many intentions of Afrofuturism that Africanist fantasy can consider in a multitude of scenarios.

Contemporary Afrofuturist authors like Nnedi Okorafor challenge the traditional avoidance of addressing racial issues by incorporating them as clear aspects of their story. In Okorafor’s novel, *Akata Witch* (2011), she uses her knowledge and experience as a woman of color who has lived in both The United States and Nigeria to create characters that exemplify complex issues in the real world that she has experienced. When one of the American characters in *Akata Witch* (2011) is confronted by peers about the magical crimes that he committed that caused his parents to send him to Nigeria, Okorafor masterfully synchronizes her own life experiences in Chicago with the fantastical backstory of this character in a way that brings depth and feeling. Orlu, a self-proclaimed rule follower, challenges Sasha, the American ‘criminal,’ saying, “Sasha hasn’t mentioned that he also switched the minds of two police officers” (Okorafor-Akata Witch 60) to which Sasha defends his actions:
“they were abusing the power they were given! Y’all don’t know what it’s like for a black man in the U.S. And ya’ll certainly don’t know Chicago cops on the South Side” (Okorafor-Akata Witch 60). Nnedi Okorafor calls on her experiences as a teacher at Chicago State University where she was exposed to the violence from both residents and police mostly in the South Side. This conversation between two characters of differing ethical limitations, brings abstract perspective to the ways in which people regard (particularly black) criminals. Often, after a major incident where police injure or kill a black man, a common phrase heard is

something along the lines of “they should have just followed the law.” While on the surface it is easy to say that Sasha is the ignorant one in the conversation, Okorafor opens up the complexities of these situations. It can be argued that she stages Orlu, the magical child who adheres to all rules very adamantly, as the ignorant one who simply does not know oppression the way that Sasha does. When one has the privilege of being able to live comfortably within the guidelines of their respective institution of power, they cannot understand why someone else would break the guidelines and do something as extreme as Sasha did. However, Sasha explains that Orlu and the others simply don’t understand why he had to do what he did, highlighting the issues in America of corruption and bias by Police forces and the lack of consideration by those that have never been victimized by it. As it turns out, Sasha ends up being an extremely helpful addition for the group do to his ability to work around authority figures and think outside the box, whereas Orlu’s strengths are somewhat limited in this regard.

One of the ways in which Okorafor uses the blending of the magical world in conjunction with the reality of the reader, is to highlight the common tendency that we have been socialized to strive for ‘perfection’ as defined by the status quo. When Sunny is integrating into the magical world of the Leopard people (magical people), she is tasked with certain assignments of study by a mentor. One of her assignments includes working with a book that is essentially a manual for how to find her specific magical strengths. The textbook has a lot of attitude in its writing, that often angers Sunny, who calls it harsh, but learns to appreciate the bluntness with which it proposes its lessons. The book refers to Lambs (non-magical people) as being “on a constant, unrealistic, irrational, and unnatural quest for perfection … no matter their definition of it” (Okorafor – Akata Witch, Kindle Location 1146). This message is a major theme throughout the story of introspection and appreciation for what makes one unique. The text goes on to say: “we

[Leopard Folk] embrace those things that make us unique or odd … for only in these things can we locate and develop our most individual abilities" (Okorafor – Akata Witch, Kindle Location 1146). This parable that enforces individualism within a community is an especially influential and empowering theme of this story that follows the intentions of Afrofuturist philosophy. Sunny has all of these characteristics that make her different from the others and she initially feels are a curse. However, by embracing her differences and looking inward to find her strengths, she is able to manifest her abilities and become one of the most powerful Leopard people to ever exist. Therein lies the power that Africanist fantasy has on encouraging people both young and older to have the confidence to welcome who they are and to reclaim their self-identification on their own terms. Nnedi Okorafor is able to use fantasy fiction not only as a means of entertaining and captivating readers, but also as a means of furthering progressive perspectives on what it means to be an individual in a society plagued with the socialized desire to reduce the beauty of the self and instead group individuals based on a few simple characteristics as they see fit.

Conclusion

Creative mediums like literature have long been known to have influential capabilities on the minds of those that engage with them. The elite have attempted to reduce fantasy fiction to a form of escapist, pleasure-seeking content with little room for in-depth analysis. However, Africanist fantasy proves that to be an inappropriate classification. By melding traditional structures of popular captivating story-telling with historical implications of the diasporic African experience, Africanist fantasy must be recognized as worthy of being considered scholarly literature.

N.K. Jemisin takes on a complex literary structure that considers the nuances of history through abstract concepts and challenges of the proverbial timeline of humanity. *The Fifth Season* depicts the fragile nature of socialization and the power that individuals hold when they exhibit an unwillingness to conform to oppressive institutions and maintain hope for a better future. This novel addresses the different perspectives surrounding intolerance at different stages. Some characters, such as Asael, find themselves coming to terms with their own perceived ignorance, emphasizing the efficacy of education and diversity in all realms of life toward progressive social relations. Other instances involve characters, as with Alabaster, realizing their apathy and resignation to oppressive institutions with which they find themselves a part of, leading to a consideration of the ways in which routine and feelings of hopelessness can make individuals go against their values in order to hold some power in the world. Perhaps the most influential, Syenite, brings forth the youthful fire that encourages and inspires people to always speak their mind and fight against injustice, despite the personal risks that are associated. By covering all of these varied perspectives throughout the novel, Jemisin stages this text as a radical progressivist novel that does not allow for simple escapism, as previously was connotated

to fantasy literature, but rather arouses the need for continued change in the real word using the fantastical medium.

Nnedi Okorafor works in social issues differently, by maintaining a familiar plot structure in *Akata* Witch with details relatively unfamiliar to canonical fantasy. This is what Nalo Hopkinson says is an effective way to reach progressive ideals through to people that may not realize their own social awareness shortcomings. By confusing the traditional details of what consumers regard as bias, Okorafor is able to directly approach the root issues of ignorance and racism. This leads to a novel that deconstructs the divisive nature of socialized humanity and calls in to question the ways in which all people, regardless of ethnicity, are ostracized in some way, and the overarching detrimental societal effect that comes along with it. Furthermore, Okorafor emphasizes the benefits of self-analysis and learning to love one's own characteristics, as opposed to holding themselves to the impossible standards of a society meant to keep individuals in their place. This may seem like merely a nice thought, but when one considers the many tragedies that have occurred throughout history as a result of insecurities and/or mental illness regarding one's perception of themselves within society, the message of loving oneself has a boundless benefit to the progression of the world as a whole. *Akata Witch* stands as an entertaining story that encourages individualism and depicts the ways in which celebrating our perceived flaws can lead us to find out who we really are.

By incorporating social issues with fantastical concepts, Jemisin and Okorafor have aided in the progressivist movement by reaching a wider audience that previously may not have been able to consider the nuances of the postcolonial African experience and in this way have tapped into a large population of newly progressive readers. When complex subjects such as race relations are relegated to highbrow settings, they exclude the layman from engaging with the

topic the way all people should have the ability to do. By fusing entertainment with social issues in a manner that invites open consideration of said social issues, Africanist fantasy invites everyone to engage with concepts of Afrofuturism in a way that strengthens the movement toward a more cohesive society that is not afraid to stand up to systems of oppression.

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