LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Feminist Imaginings of African Futures: Counterfactual Mythmaking in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* and *Who Fears Death*

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Abstract:
This paper discusses how the African speculative fiction genre makes a strong claim for orality as a counterfactual space, with writers like Okorafor invoking traditional African storytelling techniques in their narratives. I consider speculative fiction a form of myth(making) and argue that Okorafor creates alternate worlds that offer a richness of possibilities for interrogating the shortcomings of dominant histories and narratives sanctioned by patriarchy. I use the notion of counterfactuality to argue that the possible worlds that Okorafor creates in her novels *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix* allow her to disrupt archetypes and find new ways of understanding the subjectivity of Africans in general and black women in particular. She reimagines the subjectivity of African women by making elaborate feminist proclamations through strong female characters who take on powerful patriarchal forces. In doing so, these characters are able to envision alternate worlds where dominant histories, gender relations, and other oppressive structures are contested and radically dismantled.

Keywords: Counterfactuals; Afro-futurism; African Speculative Fiction; Africanfuturism; Nnedi Okorafor; Mythopoesis.

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Introduction

This paper discusses two novels, *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*, both by the Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor. Her oeuvre has been described as 'counterhegemonic' and 'qualified to intervene as a politically transformative force within postcolonial studies' (Burnett 2015: 135). She explores alternative ways of reimagining African women by making elaborate feminist proclamations through strong female characters who take on powerful patriarchal forces to envision an alternate world where oppressive structures are contested and dismantled. I consider speculative fiction a form of myth(making) and argue that Okorafor creates alternate worlds that offer a richness of possibilities to interrogate the shortcomings of dominant histories and narratives sanctioned by patriarchy. The framing of my argument adds to the growing critical attention being paid to African science fiction by examining the genre as a site for the experimentation of counterfactual thought (Hills 2009: 437; Lebow 2009: 67). We should be careful to note at the outset that counterfactuals are used differently in science fiction than in historical discourse. As Matt Hill explains:

> Science fiction does not restrict itself to imagining different outcomes for world-historical events… [its] use of the counterfactuals is…one way in which it can destabilise ontological perspectives and compel readers to see the 'real' historical world in different, perhaps more critical ways. (2009: 437)

This ability of science fiction to negotiate the alternate worlds of actual world history and future possibilities lays a basis for its mythmaking potential. The worlds constructed by science fiction writers may seem far from plausible, but this is what makes them a potent space for counterfactual imaginings of how historical events would have turned out if certain things were to change. Counterfactuality in science fiction either looks backward to the past–this is where we have aspects of histories of the real-world seeping into the texts–or projects the future to worlds we have never experienced but might anticipate.

The interconnectedness of the multiple worlds in Okorafor's texts speaks to literary scholar Hillary Dannenberg's notion of speculative fiction as a 'semirealist ontological hierarchy,' which she identifies as one of the ways of counterfactual mapping in literary texts (2008: 121). The alternate worlds of speculative fiction draw from, alter, and challenge the past, which is the actual world of the reader. This allows authors to unpack common gender and racial stereotypes and turn them on their heads by presenting young and powerful female figures as liberators from some of the crises and catastrophes bedeviling the world at the moment (and likely to continue in the future).

These texts dramatize the interesting ways in which counterfactuals dismantle normative gender binaries. I draw on Kate Millet's assertion that the binary between male and female is a creation of patriarchy which considers 'male…as the human norm, subject and referent to which the female is 'other' or alien' (2000: 46). Millet's ideas are extended by Birte Christ's feminist approach to counterfactuals, which puts men and their dominance as the 'norm' or social fact, while women, the dominated Other, are the

resistant counterfact (2011: 190). As the perceived norm, men assume power and prescribe gender roles that keep the hierarchies in place.

My discussion in this article will unfold in two parts. The first part focuses on Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*. It discusses how the black female cyborg as a counterfactual figure renegotiates the cyborg archetype to reimagine African women within speculative fiction. The second part discusses the making and unmaking of dominant texts in *Who Fears Death* as a counterfactual process. I argue that Okorafor utilizes intertextuality in her worldbuilding to develop counterfactual interpretations of well-known figures and myths. In these refashioned myths, female heroes are placed at the center of the fight for a utopia where normative gender notions are shattered. Okorafor's worldbuilding is strategic in that her incorporation of African myths and spiritualities is directed towards creating young female heroes who are black, strong, and flawed in order to tackle questions of diversity, identity, and female exclusion.

The Black Female Cyborg as a Counterfactual Figure in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*

The Book of Phoenix is an important addition to the growing body of speculative fiction that is African-centred. Matthew Omelsky has argued that the cyborg in African science fiction is increasingly used to 'undermine organic notions of femininity, the female body, and masculinist power structures' (2014: 9). This means that the genre has become an important space for theorizing African feminisms, with the cyborg figure being an important disruptor of normative societal stereotypes. Belinda Du Plooy expresses a similar sentiment, observing that using the cyborg to discuss the realities of African women challenges us to consider new ways that African women can 'rewrite stories, displace hierarchical dualism and challenge naturalised identities' (2005: 135). Okorafor's use of strong, black female protagonists reveals the interconnection between African feminisms and the advancements in science and technology. More importantly, this interconnection challenges the genre of science fiction and how it has always represented the African context.

Okorafor constructs the character of Phoenix as a hybrid and transnational black female cyborg who is more conscious of her humanity and African roots, making her a perfect tool for challenging racial and gender hierarchies. She is one of the 'speciMens'—cyborgs manufactured by an American corporation on the 28th floor of a 'Tower 7' in New York for different purposes. Given the radical biotechnological transformations that her body has been put through by the Tower 7 scientists, her physique is that of a forty-year-old even though she is only two. She, however, seems to have other abilities that her creators had not envisioned; while the American corporation—'LifeGen'—hopes she can use these powers to advance their capitalist interests, Phoenix turns out to be more human than the machine she is made to be. She is a radical cyborg that seeks to destroy the system that created her to give the world a fresh start.

Before I look in more detail at the specific characteristics of the fictional cyborg, Phoenix, it is important to consider some of the aspects of the history of cyborgs in the actual world. The term cyborg first appeared in a 1960 article by American scientists

Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, who postulated that creating 'a self-regulating man-machine system' would make things easier for humans, 'leaving them free to explore, to create, to think, and to feel' (Clynes and Kline 1995: 27). Since the 1960s, genetic modifications have developed significantly, with the cyborg becoming more advanced than before. The cyborg figure is no longer predominated by the 'brain-in-metal-body motif' (Laughlin 1997: 147) but is now used to embody culture and represent the complexity of human consciousness in the advent of technological advancements. The theorizations and representations of the cyborg in popular culture have also advanced, with the cyborg becoming an established literary archetype. In her canonical 1981 essay, Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (2017: 306). She considers the hybridity of the cyborg as a space for possibilities that can be used to transcend normative human and gender categorizations, which are products of patriarchy. She argues that 'cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other' and the tools are 'often stories, retold stories that reverse and displace hierarchies' (306). Haraway argues for the use of the cyborg as a metaphor that represents both utopian and dystopian worlds where normative binaries of race and gender are transformed. The assumption here, as Laughlin envisions, is that the cyborg figure is only valuable based on the culture in which it is created (Laughlin 1997: 155).

One productive way to understand Haraway's cyborg figure—and its importance to *The Book of Phoenix*—is to regard it as a 'counterfactual' of the sort theorized by H. P. Dannenberg. Historians Phillip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (1996) have theorized that counterfactuals are 'subjunctive conditionals in which the antecedent is known or supposed, for purposes of argument, to be false' (4). They contend that counterfactuals are unavoidable for scholars in disciplines such as history, where it is impossible to test their hypotheses and draw cause-effect relationships using controlled experiments. Dannenberg, however, writes that fictional counterfactualizing has been more radical in the field of speculative fiction, given its imagination of ontological pluralization (203). This is where the figure of the cyborg has increasingly been reimagined in ways that resonate with her notion of characterological counterfactuals, which 'alter character in order to create a counterfactual course of events, thereby creating a new version of that character' (120). Going back to Haraway's assertion above, cyborg writing and the changing role of the cyborg figure as a character in fiction is crucial in retelling stories that can unsettle the dominance of narratives.

Okorafor's depiction of Phoenix as a cyborg blurs the differences between the human and the machine, creating a connection that seems to contradict Haraway's counterfactual vision. By modeling Phoenix as a gendered machine that can interact with the world around her and thus understands the subjectivities she faces as a black woman, Okorafor creates a cyborg that reimagines social realities in more radical yet humane ways. Nevertheless, this modeling of the cyborg also seems to utilize Haraway's speculation that 'who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival' (2017: 309). Haraway suggests that the cyborg myth and the cyborg figure are spaces of experimentation utilized to different ends in genetic engineering and popular culture. For

the former, the goal resonates more with the dreams of Clynes and Kline to make things easier for humans. However, for popular culture, the cyborg is used as a mythical and metaphorical figure that readers can identify with and which can articulate their day-to-day social and political concerns. In both cases, the cyborg embodies transcendence and possibilities that keep changing.

While both Haraway and Okorafor imagine the cyborg as a tool of resistance and subversion and imagine figures that turn their makers' tools against them, Okorafor's experimentation with the figure of the cyborg stretches its limits even further. Her modeling of cyborgs seems closer to what literary critic Petros Panaou introduces as that of the 'post post-human' (2015: 72), in which a cyborg retains her humanness. Panaou argues that with increasing human control over the evolution process, recent young adult science fiction (YASF) is increasingly posing existential questions such as: 'what are we doing, why are we doing it, and is this the outcome we want?' (69). Okorafor's imagining of the cyborg resonates with Panaou's, demonstrating the evolution of the figure in popular culture in which they (cyborgs) are no longer referred to as 'it' but are assigned human pronouns and are able to challenge the ethical concerns of the technological advancements that make them possible. Phoenix, for instance, can read 700,000 books in a year and has free access to any information she needs. The engineers at 'LifeGen'–the American corporation behind her 'creation'–believe that this access to information works in their favor as part of their experimentation. Phoenix, however, gets to read world histories from centuries ago and '[listens] to audios of the spiritual tellings of long-dead African and Native American shamans, sorcerers and wizards' (Okorafor 2015: 10). Her access to knowledge and ability to use it to her advantage opens up her human consciousness and subjectivity as a woman. She is able to interrogate her identity beyond Tower 7 and recognizes herself as an embodiment of contradictions, describing herself in the negative as an 'abomination.' Nevertheless, she embraces her double otherness first as 'a cataclysm spurred by weapon engineers and scientists' (173) and secondly as a black woman who identifies more with the goddess Ani, an Igbo deity believed to be the creator of all forms of life. Despite the technological modifications to her body, she sees herself as 'natural [and] a child of the Author of All Things' (178). As a deity's daughter, she believes her purpose is to right the wrongs involved in the genetic manipulation of bodies and give the world a fresh start. She says:

> When Ani was rested to produce sunshine, she turned over and was horrified by what she saw. She reared up, tall and impossible, furious. Then she reached into the stars and pulled a sun to the land. I am that sun. I am Ani's soldier. I do her will. Ani has asked me to wipe the slate clean. (259)

As Ani's soldier and a designated weapon created by genetic engineers, Phoenix positions herself as a complex cyborg. She seems to be created from an imagination of the counterfactual (what if) questions one can ask based on Haraway's comment at the end of her essay that she 'would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' (2017: 329). What if a cyborg and a goddess (or at least her agent) were to coexist in one black female body? What would she achieve that a cyborg or goddess alone could not? As a product of multiple worlds,

Phoenix is thus endowed with powers which allow her to do things that are actually impossible in the actual world, even from the perspective of technology. For instance, she can fly across the ocean without drowning, burn to ashes, and gather her remains back to life like the archetypal Phoenix. Okorafor uses the possibilities created by real-world technologies and artificial intelligence and the speculative worlds of myths to create a character that pushes the limits of what a cyborg can do.

The novel ends when Phoenix decides to burn the entire world to 'wipe the slate clean' (259). As the only witness to everything that happens after she sets the whole world ablaze, Phoenix's choice of African storytelling techniques to narrate the histories of the now-vanquished world frames African storytelling as a historiographic source. The figure of a female cyborg orally narrating the past that she single-handedly erased from existence is a powerful counterfactual scene given that the patriarchal order that had influenced most narratives and from which stories of origin are traditionally told has also been destroyed. Phoenix's new origin tale takes direct aim at this patriarchal order: 'they are always taking from me. The Big Eye. This country. The superpowers. The seven men who drank HeLa's blood and now will never die' (258). She casts the world order she is about to destroy as a consumerist culture where African bodies are treated as products to be exploited. In this way, the novel attests to how cyborg figures like Phoenix can help us, as Lizelle Bisschoff notes, to reconsider existence and identity in radically different ways by creating new origin myths and new African feminist epistemologies' (2020: 622). Yet what is perhaps most notable is how this new myth is indissociably connected to the oral format of Phoenix's tale. Telling her story in her voice is part of the fresh start that she ushers in, even though she does it through a 'portable' (a digital device used for communication in this futuristic world). Okorafor thus brings together oral tradition and 21st-century technology and exposes the challenges of relying on the digital as a repository for oral traditions. She reinforces how oral traditions survive through being known and shared by the whole community.

This is not to say, of course, that Phoenix's origin story is an unmitigated success. While the ability to traverse different worlds provides her with the agency to dismantle all forms of normative categorizations, she is limited by constraints linked to the real world. Nowhere is this more than apparent than in how recorded stories such as Phoenix's are vulnerable to distortion, due both to technological changes that render the medium of the recording obsolete and to the ability of those who control access to such technologies to deliberately alter what has been recorded. In *The Book of Phoenix*, this distortion occurs when Sunuteel, a man from a new world order, comes across Phoenix's story while hunting stories for his wife in the forest and intentionally rewrites it to create what becomes the Great Book. This is essentially a patriarchal and ethnically divisive grand text that is widely circulated because it is believed by the members of the fictional world to contain their stories of origin. The novel, through this scene, dramatizes the limits of the oral form, especially when it is combined with recording technologies. The narrator's version as recorded faces the risk of manipulation from whoever gets access to the recording (the justifications and implications of which I discuss in the next section).

Another challenge that Phoenix faces in rewriting history and myth stems from her ambiguous identity. When Phoenix flies to Ghana to take back a stolen 'alien seed' after

she destroys 'Tower 7', she finds more sense of community and interacts normally with the people around her. This makes her think of America as her 'false home' (Okorafor 2015: 110). However, the other cyborgs who escape with her from 'Tower 7'—Mmuo and Saaid—believe she is more aligned to her American identity than her African one. In contrast to the cyborgs who originally lived in Africa before they were captured by LifeGen and are still conscious of their Africanness, Phoenix, they believe, can be traced by her creators and forced to do their bidding; it is thus, to their minds, only a matter of time before she succumbs to these orders. In what reads like a monologue, Mmuo–with whom Phoenix becomes involved romantically—tries to convince her to recognize the centrality of African spiritualities in her life as he waits for her to arise from one of her deaths:

> You are an American, Phoenix. So though you know Africa well, you will believe in the power of science over all that we know. But you are an African, too, so you know it in your flesh, your strange flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world. Where is it that you are returning from as I tell you my story? Is it from a test tube? Or from somewhere else? (Okorafor 2015: 138)

This passage brings to our attention the evolution of the black female cyborg as a tool for representing African diasporic identities. Phoenix is reminded of how, as an African born in America, she has to strike a balance between her multiple identities and her multiple homes. Phoenix, however, seems to have a stronger sense of her African origins than other cyborgs, such as Mmuo, can understand. From the beginning of the text, she is drawn to African cultural practices to the extent that she even chooses to narrate her story '[using] the old African tools of story: Spoken words. They are worthier of trust and they'll last longer' (Okorafor 2015: 7).

Okorafor utilizes the flexibility of the cyborg figure to comment on aspects of our own world's history. This allows her to stretch her imagination to include the plausible and the uncanny as tools for interrogating the past and projecting the future. I have mentioned that Phoenix's most potent weapon against her creators is her ability to tip the knowledge scale against them. Through her knowledge of both world history and its textual discourses, she comments on the legacies of slavery in our present-day and their repetition in the futuristic world she inhabits. For example, slave journeys to America are replayed in the scene where Phoenix's creators—LifeGen—trace her to Ghana, capture her and force her to take a voyage across the ocean. Her consciousness of black people's experiences in ships as they were transported to slavery prompts her to resist getting onto the ship (Okorafor 2015: 109). Even after she chooses to fly across the sea, she fears getting closer to the surface of the water because '[it] would pull me into its great belly as it had so many other Africans on unwanted journeys' (111). In another scene that highlights the legacies of slavery and racism and their persistence into this distant future, Phoenix explains that to her creators:

> [She] wasn't human enough to be a threat. They saw me as they saw the Africans made slaves during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade hundreds of years ago. They saw

> me as many Arabs saw African slaves over millennium and how some still see Africans today. (160)

By drawing our attention to such aspects of the history of the actual world, Okorafor foregrounds the fact that the legacies of colonialism always have overdetermined black bodies. Their exploitation, as the narrative suggests, has also provided breakthroughs for western biomedical research.

In the novel, the fact that cyborgs created from the altered bodies are all named 'speciMen' suggests the masculine nature of the project and its motives. Even though the speciMen are tools of patriarchal capitalism, their revolt against their creators reflects Bisschoff's assertion that 'part of the enigma and allure of the female cyborg … lies in the paradox of it being both a symbol of patriarchal control–often effectively materially and imaginatively created by male desire–and a signifier of freedom from patriarchal constraints' (2020: 613). As we see with Phoenix, Okorafor radically changes the image of the cyborg to suit African realities. While Phoenix may seem to serve the patriarchal control of her creators, she is strategic and uses her master's tools to dismantle the master's house, to borrow Audre Lorde's famous words (Lorde 1984: 112).

The nature of the counterfactuals is that while they provide spaces to imagine other possibilities and expand how we think about our realities, there is always the question of plausibility. When Phoenix scorches the entire world, one man remains alive, Saeed, with whom she fell in love in their early days in Tower 7. A cyborg himself who is possibly injected with HeLa's blood, he becomes a central figure in the new world where Okorafor's next book, *Who Fears Death*, is set. Towards the end of *The Book of Phoenix*, Sola, a character who claims to traverse the past, present, and the future, says Sunuteel's book of Phoenix is faulty because he was too afraid to look for 'The Seed [Saeed] for real answers…instead, he chose to write fiction' (Okorafor 2015: 273). As I discuss in the next section, the worldbuilding in the text is nowhere near the utopia that Phoenix hopes for. As a counterfactual device, Phoenix's character resonates with the reader more than it does with the world of the text. This is because the reader who inhabits the real world is able to make comparisons with the fictional world to tease out what is plausible and what is not. This is made possible by the novel's use of counterfactuals, which rely on relativity to make sense of the real world.

(Un)making the Great Book: Disruption and Intertextuality in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

This section of the paper examines how Okorafor's mythopoesis employs counterfactuals to provide a balance between realism and fantasy. Realism here is variedly defined as representations of our actual world and as the story worlds of previous works of fiction. My argument in this section takes a keen interest in how intertextuality, as a counterfactual device, allows writers to construct new worlds and modify or utilize the worlds that other texts have constructed, be they fictional or nonfictional.

Who Fears Death revolves around the rewriting of the Great Book, which is itself a rewriting of Phoenix's story in *The Book of Phoenix*, and which in the present of the novel

acts as a dominant religious text. It is a collection of mythologies crafted from Sunuteel's misinterpretations, as discussed in the previous section, and justifies the gender and racial dominance reflected in the current status quo. For instance, it decrees the domination of the Okekes by the Nurus, two ethnic groups residing in what is present-day Sudan. Sunuteel creates these two categories to represent dark-skinned and lighter-skinned racial dichotomies, respectively. However, in Phoenix's version, the Okeke refers to everyone. The members of the fictional kingdom are made to believe that the book was written by the agents of a Goddess Ani and thus cannot be questioned. It is, however, prophesied that a Nuru man will come to rewrite the Great Book. Onyesonwu, born out of the rape of an Okeke woman, turns out to be the one chosen for the task and has to contend with various societal barriers before she can get to the Great Book.

On the back matter of *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor (2010: 420) notes that the story was inspired by real events that occurred in the Darfur region of Sudan and were reported by Emily Wax for *The Washington Post* in 2004. In the report, Wax details how an Arab militia in Sudan, Janjaweed, orchestrated an ethnic cleansing against black Africans during which men were butchered, and women were raped to bring forth 'Arab babies to take the land' (2004: para. 6). In these pogroms, women bore the heaviest brunt because those who survived the killings not only watched their fathers, husbands, and sons killed but were also forced to bring forth children who were not welcome to either the black or the Arab communities. Okorafor's counterfactual worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death* uses these events as part of future history and appears to interrogate their causes, issuing a warning to her readers in the process. In this way, she utilizes what Dannenberg describes as one of the key counterfactual characteristics of science fiction. Dannenberg avers that the 'future history' created by science fiction 'involves a single linear extrapolation from the real-world present that creates a conjectural vision of the near future or distant future' (2008: 200). The conjectural vision does not have to provide plausible scenarios but offers a safe distance from which we can examine the present world. Furthermore, it is a vision that carries evidence that resonates with the present, thereby constituting plausible counterfactuals.

Okorafor can be understood as an author who is creating just such a plausible counterfactual through her narrative. She does so by constructing a mythopoesis that involves both implicit and explicit intertextual play, which she uses to transform other texts' story worlds in pursuit of her own counterfactual mythmaking. Intertextuality can create an emphatic effect, rendering a counterfactual (re)imagination of the worlds of other texts and the world that the author inhabits. *Who Fears Death* is in dialogue with other texts at various levels. In this way, it reflects Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, in which she posits that 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*' (1941: 66, emphasis in original). This challenges the notion that a text can bear a single meaning assigned by the author and invites multiple ways of meaning production, which serves to rid the text of any authoritative interpretation. The writing process does not end at the moment of composition but is delegated to the reader, whose interpretations—and the new meanings produced therein—are part of the writing. Kristeva's theory of intertextuality hugely influenced the French theorist Roland Barthes, who writes that:

> [A] text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 1977: 146)

Here, Barthes shows us how intertextuality undermines a text's canonical status and the meanings that authors invest in them insofar as it invites the reader to play a role in producing meaning. By arguing that a text is a tissue of quotations, he suggests that readers participate in the act of "writing" the text based on how they relate with it culturally. Thus, the text's known author is only one among the many who participate in making meaning out of the text.

This strategy performs two functions in Okorafor's mythopoesis; first, it establishes a context from previous texts and arms the reader to understand the present text better. Secondly, it opens up spaces and multiple worlds from which we can imagine other possibilities beyond what we know in the present actual world and the story world. This allows us to tease out her engagement with the historical material in the actual past and the futuristic 'past' in the text.

The aspect of intertextuality crucial to the worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death* is the contextualization of the Great Book, narrated in its prequel, *The Book of Phoenix*. In *The Book of Phoenix*, Sunuteel, the author of what is now the Great Book, justifies his rewriting of Phoenix's story by repeatedly quoting Barthes' famous essay, 'The Death of the Author,' in which he avers that 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (1977: 147). The allusion to Barthes' theories of intertextuality invokes his foremost concern that meanings in texts cannot exist in isolation and instead solicit readers' multiple interpretations. Through their worldviews and experiences, readers are actively engaged in challenging a text's encoded meanings. Barthes likens this production of new meanings to a revolutionary act, seeing it as 'to refuse God and his hypostases–reason, science, law' (147). *The Book of Phoenix* dramatizes its intellectual engagements with Barthes' theory in the scene where Sunuteel, the first person to access and listen to Phoenix's extracted memories, is confronted by the voice of Phoenix through a 'portable' warning him not to distort her story:

> You can rewrite a story, but once it is written, it lives. Think before you do; your story is written too and so is the map of the consequences. Ani will remember the path, even if it is full of loops and swirls. Think, old man…. You're just a memory…you've been extracted. You're nothing now. Leave my portable. (Okorafor 2010: 268)

The above exchange pits an author (Phoenix) who wants her text to retain a certain intended meaning and a reader (Sunuteel) whose reading ignores aspects of Phoenix's story that do not conform to his expectations of what the world should look like. He, therefore, produces a new version that ensures a continuation of oppressive narratives, albeit in a form that has been slightly altered after Phoenix's destruction of the world. Okorafor suggests a complex and perhaps implausible relationship between authors and readers.

Even though the former does not have authority over their stories, they can make interventions and attempt to resist readerly interpretations that challenge the authority of their stories. This, however, does not seem to succeed in the novel's story world because Sunuteel goes against Phoenix's warnings and ultimately produces the Great Book.

Nevertheless, the Great Book derives its uniqueness and authority from a single interpretation that sees it as the accurate narration of the origin of things in the world of *Who Fears Death*. Even the quest to rewrite the text as prophesied is interpreted differently: the Nuru seer, Daib, sees it as a necessary restoration of the status quo. In contrast, Onyesonwu's rewriting is intended to dismantle the oppressive interpretations ascribed to the text. *Who Fears Death* is, therefore, a counterfactual retelling of Sunuteel's narrative in the Great Book, which is itself a rewriting of Phoenix's narrative. Okorafor utilizes the fresh start that Phoenix promises at the end of The Book of Phoenix as a background for her worldbuilding in *Who Fears Death*, which makes Sunuteel's Great Book into the model for the actually-existing present world of *Who Fears Death*. As I have discussed in the previous section, the alternate world Phoenix hopes to create by destroying her world does not materialize because the world is built on stories, and her story is distorted. The intertextual resonance between the two of Okorafor's texts elevates the reader to a vantage point from which they can read how the conflicting interpretations of the Great Book are constructed.

Okorafor's intertextuality extends beyond the narratives we find in the text. *Who Fears Death* is replete with allusions to past works of fiction, which Okorafor uses to construct what Dannenberg has called 'characterological counterfactuals' (2008: 121). Dannenberg notes that characters can be alternate versions of their counterparts in other worlds, 'be it in real-world history, in another work of fiction, or in the same fiction' (2008: 121). Characterological counterfactuals can occur where one text utilizes a version of a character in another text. In this case, the reader has access to two versions (or at least characters that bear close semblance) in the textual universes of two texts. For instance, *Who Fears Death* and Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) bear a remarkable resemblance. The plot structures of both texts focus on female figures subverting the wishes of powerful male figures who seek to retain dominance. Like Doro in *Wild Seed*, who exploits Anyanwu's powers with the hopes of siring children with special powers, Daib in *Who Fears Death* also rapes a sorceress, Najeeba, and hopes to sire a powerful sorcerer to fulfill the prophecy of rewriting the Great Book. Furthermore, Anyanwu resists Doro's exploitative schemes the same way Najeeba uses her mystical powers to overturn Daib's wishes by bringing forth a sorceress who goes on to rewrite the Great Book. This intertextual dialogue is especially important in understanding that despite Okorafor's self-styled futurism, it has many interconnections with Afrofuturism, to which texts like *Wild Seed* belong.

Such characterological counterfactuals can also be seen in how Okorafor's mythopoetics appeal to the world of African mythology. The text novel contains numerous references to Igbo mythological phenomena embodied in the mythographic use of images from the community's spiritual cosmologies. For instance, in the narrative, Goddess Ani, the creator of all things, is the counterpart to a powerful deity in the Igbo religious cosmologies with the same name. Among the Igbo, she is believed to be in charge of the

earth, morality, fertility, and creativity. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's celebrated novel, *Things Fall Apart,* presents Ani as a goddess who 'played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth' (1994: 26). For the Igbo and in Achebe's fictional world, Ani plays second fiddle to Chukwu, an overarching male deity who assigns roles to other minor deities. Achebe presents her as bearing great responsibility, and her authority is unquestionable in the fictional Umuofia society. When Okonkwo, the protagonist, breaks the traditions of the Week of Peace by hitting one of his wives, he is informed that 'the earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish' (23). Ani, in this context, is presented in a positive light; even though she is feared, the members of Achebe's world have developed myths around her that are meant to encourage hard work and good morals.

But in contrast to Achebe's novel, Okorafor's mythographic depiction of Ani in the text portrays her as the Supreme Being and the originator of everything. Okorafor makes this counterfactual change in order to explore what a deity can and cannot do for humans, thereby exposing the misunderstandings, exploitations, and even manipulations that occur when such figures are discussed in religious teachings and writings. In *Who Fears Death*, Ani is shown to have a close personal relationship with the Okeke women who routinely visit the desert to 'hold conversations' with her. However, Onyesonwu's mother, Najeeba, and other women are attacked and raped while in the middle of the 'conversation,' a moment that they consider holy. The fact that the narrative further reveals that 'the Goddess Ani hadn't bothered to tell the women that they were dying' (Okorafor 2010: 18) suggests a betrayal by Ani and weakens the concept of the deity in the eyes of the violated women. The above scene scandalizes the Igbo conceptualization of Ani as their moral guardian and protector of the earth. Reading the scene through a counterfactual mode allows us to interrogate what would have happened if Ani had done what the women and the community believed to be her role. Would the women have been attacked? Would Najeeba have been raped and Onyesonwu born? These questions are further explored by Onyesonwu later in the text, where she expresses disappointment in the deity and considers her 'a weak human idea' (326), implying the dangers of misinterpreting the deity's roles.

Okorafor's mythographic utilization of the Igbo spiritual cosmologies demonstrates how she uses her brand of YASF as a space for cultural renegotiations in the actual world. This reflects what Brian Attebery has cited as one of the cultural functions of the genre: '[to provide] new contexts, and thus inevitably new meanings, for myths. Fantasy spins stories about stories…. the most powerful and provocative fantasies recontextualize myths, placing them back into history and reminding us of their social and political power' (2014: 4). While Attebery's remarks seem to be aimed at fantasy, YASF, especially by Okorafor, takes advantage of the blurred edges of both science fiction and fantasy in its worldbuilding. In this way, Okorafor focuses us on the different perspectives of myths and African cosmologies, urging a reinterpretation of narratives in ways that encourage divergent perspectives.

Another aspect of characterological counterfactuals is dramatized by Onyesonwu's ability to traverse different worlds in different forms, enabling her to escape some of the

discriminations she faces in her world. She is unwanted by both the Okeke and the Nuru because of her mixed heritage (Okorafor 2010: 72). However, her ability to shapeshift into different animals and birds offers her alternatives to see the world without the oppressive categorizations sanctioned by the Great Book. Dannenberg has argued that characterological counterfactuals enable a character to have a change in her 'personality in order to create a counterfactual antecedent' (2008: 120). For instance, of all the reptiles and birds she is able to shapeshift to, she finds a 'sense of power' (Okorafor 2010: 89) as a vulture because it allows her to see her immediate environment, Jwahir, from a vantage point where she sees it as if she has been to 'greater places' (89). This suggests that as a vulture, she has access to different worldviews that readers do not know about, but which gives her a sense of escape from Jwahir's oppressive traditions.

The ending of *Who Fears Death* is complex and reflects what Dannenberg has described as 'radical metafiction'–the creation of 'multiple versions of a story, created through multiple bifurcations' (2008: 216). There are visible distortions in the temporal sequence of the narrative, leaving the reader with multiple possibilities as endings. In the final chapters, the narration becomes complex by introducing the multiple first-person points of view of witnesses to Onyesonwu's story, each presenting a different version of how her story ends. In the first ending, which is in Onyesonwu's voice, the Great Book has been rewritten, and the kingdom waits to experience change. However, for Onyesonwu, 'fate must play out' (2010: 410), a statement that is open-ended and leaves room for multiple interpretations.

The second version of the story's ending is told from another character's perspective, a Nuru journalist who witnessed the ending and interviewed Onyesonwu for her story. In her narration, she likens Onyesonwu to 'a character locked in a story' (2010: 411) because she seems unable to save herself from her inevitable fate. However, this version is rendered by a witness who observed the change that Onyesonwu promises in the first version after rewriting the Great Book. The wave of change is seen in her parting gifts to the women before she was stoned and cremated:

> All the women, Okeke and Nuru, found that something had changed about them. Some could turn wine to fresh sweet drinking water, others glowed in the dark at night, some could hear the dead. Others remembered the past, before the Great Book. Others could peruse the spirit world and still live in the physical. Thousands of abilities. All bestowed upon women. There it was–Onye's gift. (Okorafor, 2010: 413)

This version of the ending challenges the archetypal of the traditional Jungian hero because Onyesonwu, a woman, does not seem to make the complete cycle expected of the usual male hero, who returns to his people after a successful adventure. It is also the ending where Onyesonwu's transformative feminist power is seen and felt the most. Her feminist utopia is more explicit in this ending, as seen in the boons that she gifts women to mark the end of the slavery sanctioned by the Great Book.

The third version of the story's ending is told from the point of view of yet another first-person narrator, Sola, who presents Onyesonwu as angry and retributive: her 'very

essence was change and defiance' (2010: 415). This is shown by the fact that Okorafor dedicates an entire chapter to the symbol of the peacock, which, according to Sola, means that even though Onyesonwu is indeed dead, her scribbling of the symbol on the floor of her cell implies that she 'has been wronged…and is going to take action' (416). Furthermore, this version challenges the notion of a feminist utopia in the previous ending, suggesting that the gifts that Onyesonwu left to the women were harmful to them, as they 'began encountering the ghosts of those men wiped out by [Onyesonwu's] … impetuous actions' (415). This ending also suggests that even though Onyesonwu rewrites the Great Book, her action only leads to more evil. Like in *The Book of Phoenix*, Onyesonwu's hopes for a different world that will materialize when she wipes out all fertile men do not come to fruition (at least according to this ending).

Still, another version of the story's ending is told as a rewriting of the first chapter. This version presents Onyesonwu as angry and resistant, but unlike in the previous versions, she does not give her captors a chance and attacks them because 'she was not a sacrifice to be made for the good of men and women' (Okorafor 2010: 418). Furthermore, the narrator revisits the introductory scene where a dejected Onyesonwu attempts to bring her dead stepfather back to life and makes a strong intertextual correspondence with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1961):

> She thought of the Palm Wine Drunkard in the Great Book. All he lived for was to drink his sweet, frothy palm wine. When one day his expert palm wine tapper fell from a tree and died, he was distraught. But then he realised if his tapper was dead and gone, then he must be somewhere else. And so the Drunkard's quest began. (Okorafor 2010: 418)

While it is a fact that the tapper is dead, the 'Drunkard' counterfactually believes that he must be somewhere else, which leads to the construction of another world, a space that Okorafor utilizes. The above passage is a synopsis of Tutuola's classic novel, and unlike what we have seen with Okorafor's intertextual correspondence with Butler, the characterological counterfactuals, in this case, 'generat[e] different character versions' (Dannenberg 2008: 122). In the first case, Tutuola's 'drinkard' is a man traveling to the world of the dead because his daily supply of wine is interrupted by the death of his tapper. But in Okorafor's rewriting, Onyesonwu traverses the world of the dead during her initiation to prepare her to face a powerful male villain who is the custodian of the Great Book. Their missions to these worlds are thus different; the man's mission is voluntary while Onyesonwu's is a prophecy that must be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, the transworld journeys between the two narratives allow Okorafor to extend the worlds in *Palm-Wine Drinkard* to aid in her myth creation. The title, *Who Fears Death*, resonates strongly with the main character's name in Tutuola's classic novel, who introduces himself as 'the father of gods who can do anything' or 'the palm wine drinkard.' The Palm-Wine Drinkard's arduous journey to the land of the dead attests to his fearlessness against death. The spiritual world where Tutuola's protagonist travels is known as the 'Deads' Town,' similar to the 'wilderness' in the world of *Who Fears Death*. Just as the palm wine drinkard can meet his dead palm wine tapper (who gives him an egg to use

to meet all his needs), Onyesonwu believes that she will summon Mwita from the dead and love him again.

The land of the dead is thus an alternate world that is intertextually constructed through existing fiction. Matt Hills argues that such a setting, known as 'counterfiction,' operates 'as a form of counterfactuality' (2003: 437). He argues that the 'construction and interpretation of counterfictions…depends, for both the writer and the reader, on intertextual knowledge and cues' (440). This implies that both the reader and the writer must be aware of a certain fictional world to understand how the text occupies and 're-ontologises' it (440). Therefore, *Who Fears Death* contemporizes *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by incorporating magical realism, fantasy, futuristic technologies, African mythologies, and religious cosmologies into her work. In doing so, it reconstructs the genealogy of African speculative fiction to include Tutuola as a notable forebear (one whom, as Jane Bryce (2019) notes, has not been given the same critical attention as realists such as Achebe).

Conclusion

In this article, I have interrogated how Okorafor's two novels produce new forms of myths. The two texts demonstrate the need to expand the genre of science fiction to incorporate African mythologies, spiritualities, and futuristic technologies. In both texts, Okorafor presents a complex engagement with the power of stories, especially insofar as her characters are tangled up with the history of our present-day world. These characters are trying to create other possible worlds where normative categorizations in the actual world and the textual actual world are dismantled (though they face constraints that compromise their missions).

Okorafor endows her female protagonists with various abilities that I have examined as instances of characterological counterfactuals. The characters have access to different possible worlds within the textual universe that the reader does not know about. We have to rely on their narration to fathom the agency these spaces accord them in their quests, which involve facing strong patriarchal forces. In *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu's quest to rewrite the Great Book involves an initiation process in a world beyond everyday life. She also finds freedom in the moments when she shapeshifts to a vulture, which gives her a different perspective of her world and allows her to escape its dominant subjectivities. While Haraway's idea of the cyborg figure as genderless would be the ideal case of a characterological counterfactual, Okorafor's cyborg, Phoenix, is conscious of her gender but is endowed with the ability to do more than the cyborg Haraway imagines. She is thus a complex identity that stretches the limits of the cyborg.

The complexity of characterological counterfactuals in Okorafor's two novels is demonstrated further in their unstable endings. The protagonists do not seem to succeed in their quests despite the agencies their different abilities accord them. One of the endings in *Who Fears Death* demonstrates an instance of what I describe as radical characterological counterfactuals whereby the author stretches the limits of counterfactuality to imagine a possible world where there are no fertile men while all fertile women are 'gifted' with pregnancies.

Okorafor's novels have made African speculative fiction a flexible space where counterfactual thought can be tested. This is demonstrated by the alternate possible worlds that they create, and Okorafor's incorporation of African spaces provides her with the material to speculate on the continent's future while at the same time reflecting and commenting on its past and present realities. Even though these texts create new myths by building worlds that are different from our own, Okorafor invites us to tease out the historical and mythological material sedimented in the genre of African speculative fiction.

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