



## Reflections

### **Nnedi Okorafor's Afrofuturism and the Motif of Hair**

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One of Afrofuturism's objectives is to offer readers positive portrayals of people of African descent. Early Afrofuturist W. E. B Du Bois, who added his short story "The Comet" (1920) to the genre, famously asserted during the Harlem Renaissance that literary contributions by African Americans should concentrate on racial uplift. In a brief analysis of the story, Nisi Shawl (2017) writes, "Like many Afrodiasporic authors who've come after him, he deprivileged the racism inherent in the status quo by smashing that status quo to tragic smithereens. Though the dream of Utopic ages to come is conveyed only in a few paragraphs toward the story's end and experienced by its characters in a nearly wordless communion, this dream, this communion, is "The Comet's" crux." One of the latest Afrofuturists to continue Du Bois' efforts is Nnedi Okorafor; this University of Buffalo professor offers her readers magical realist works written to both young adult and adult readers. Like Du Bois, Okorafor highlights discriminatory societal constructs that exist in her dystopic spaces.

Many of Okorafor's texts challenge idealized beauty constructs, specifically through the motif of hair. During a speech to the Science Fiction Research Association in 2017, Okorafor reflected on her experiences as a person of color and how she is treated in various spaces because of her natural hair. Okorafor asserted that her experiences have sometimes been

negative and even odd as some people attempt to touch her hair, which has been styled into long dreadlocks. Like Okorafor herself, the heroine of her first novel, *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005) has long dreadlocks, or dadalocks, which offer her a connection to nature and enable her to discover truths unbeknownst to others in her community. Her difference, one that Zahrah struggles to accept, gives her a sense of purpose as it assists her in saving her friend Dari's life. It is also implied in the close of the novel that this friendship may become romantic in the future. In the Binti series (*Binti*, 2015, and *Binti: Home*, 2017), the female protagonist also has her hair plaited, which comes alive once she becomes part-Meduse in the close of *Binti*. It is Binti's hair in both novellas that allows her to retain an attachment to her Himba culture as she continues to use *otjize* (a clay from her home) on her hair. Binti also uses her hair as a barrier between her and others that deem her different. For example, while going through security before boarding the ship to take her to the university, Binti moves her hair in front of her, between herself and the security officer speaking to her. Later, after she becomes biracial, Binti attends school, thereby learning how to master her new power. In the sequel (2017), Binti sets off to return to Earth, to her homeland; on her way there, she arrives at Oomza West Launch Port and reveals that her time away has altered her perceptions of others. While perusing the space and offering



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self-deprecating commentary about her hair, Binti observes, "Being in this place of diversity and movement was overwhelming, but I felt at home, too." This statement offers hope for the transformation of Binti's identity, one that allows for individuality. It is in *Binti: Home* that the protagonist learns to accept the changes made to her identity. When Binti travels to the Priestess Ariya, they discuss the changes that Binti experiences, including her hair as Meduse tentacles. Ariya responds to Binti's fears, notably the most harmful to her identity, as Binti asks herself, "Nothing is wrong with me?" In a cliffhanger ending (the third in the series—*Binti: Masquerade*—is expected in early 2018 from Tor), Binti learns to accept the Meduse, the bi-racial part of herself, just in time to ready herself for the imminent battle between the Khoush and the Meduse.

In "Hello, Moto" (2011), which showcases a combative moment between former friends, Okorafor continues her exploration of female friendship and POC hair, specifically the practice of wearing of wigs. Here, the female protagonist, Rain, combines magic and technology in order to create wigs for her friends, Philo and Coco, and for herself. These wigs are meant to bring the women closer together and help them become community leaders, but her plans go awry when Philo and Coco's desire for power and their greed drives the women apart. Instead of technology making life easier for the three women as Rain intended, Okorafor creates—as Lisa Yaszek observes—a conundrum. Okorafor highlights what the consequences are when the proverbial genie is let out of the bottle. According to Yaszek (2015), "Okorafor uses

classic SF tropes to stake claims for black people as authoritative subjects of technological modernity while asking us to carefully consider the ethics of technoscientific genius and its creations." Regarding prevalent issues in Okorafor's body of work, Yaszek observes that "Africans grapple with the lingering alienation of their various colonial pasts while combining Eurowestern and African technoscientific traditions to build new futures." The controversy surrounding females of color who wear wigs, thereby concealing their natural hair, highlights this conflict. Okorafor plays with this concept as she opens her short story, noting that Rain's natural hair is in poor condition because of the use of her wig, which is described as "jet black, shiny, the 'hairs' straight and long like a mermaid's."

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison points out this desire by some females of color to have a European physical appearance. In the concluding chapter, Pecola, in an effort to escape from her father's sexual abuse and the child that will result, she imagines what she looks like with blue eyes. Pecola believes that blue eyes, idealized beauty, will protect her from harm. Okorafor offhandedly calls attention to this desire for idealized beauty with the use of the wigs by her characters in "Hello, Moto"; here, the concept of Othering appears. For Rain, altering her appearance makes her feel disconnected from her community, her two friends. This separation is symbolized by her wig—it is a barrier that keeps her from human contact and incites violence in her community. Instead of their transformation enacting peace,



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it aids in the deaths of a woman and child. The wigs symbolize the colonial power to oppress others, which is shown through Philo and Coco's greed. In the end, Rain tells the readers that even though she has attempted to quash their appetites by using both juju and technology, which appear as the Hello Moto ringtone, to cease the power of the wigs, the women ultimately are unwilling to reverse their transformations. Philo, Coco, and Rain change into vampires, the story concluding with Rain trying to stop her friends' violent assault. Throughout these Okorafor texts, one can infer that for Okorafor, the issue of idealized beauty is a central point of contention.

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