Imagining a Better World

Black Futurity in Contemporary Afrofuturism and Speculative Fiction

By Omara Samirah Dyer-Johnson
ID: 4269358

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Contents

Abstract

Originally coined in the 1990s, the term Afrofuturism has become a prominent part of popular culture and has helped to address the absence of Black people and cultures from speculations about the future. Many texts have been labelled as examples of Afrofuturism by critics, scholars and fans, though identifying the key aspects of the genre is challenging. This thesis argues that integral to the genre is the question: what is a 'better' world? I contend that an integral part of Afrofuturism is the author's desire to imagine a 'better' world and that each author presents an alternative consideration of what a 'better' world is or should be. This project focuses on contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism as existing scholarship has been primarily concerned with defining the genre, historicising it, and constructing an Afrofuturist canon. However, contemporary texts conceive of 'better' worlds in ways that differ from the established Afrofuturist canon.

To demonstrate the various perspectives concerning Black futurity, each chapter considers a different perspective concerning Black futurity from utopian isolationist futures to futures that approach climate change and environmentalism. Contemporary Afrofuturism has further developed the ideas in canonical texts and these varying speculations both indicate the changing terrain of the genre and exemplify the versatility of contemporary Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction. Afrofuturism is difficult to define because of these varying approaches, yet this breadth of perspectives is integral to the genre and its ability to challenge the absence of Black futurity in popular culture. Despite the difficulty of defining the term, Afrofuturism is and remains a genre that can significantly change the way we think about who belongs in the future.

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Introduction

In 2014, the hashtag #weneeddiversebooks began trending on Twitter. The hashtag was first used by author Aisha Saeed following the Twitter conversations between authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo, and it was trending by April 2014 ('About WNDB' 2017). This discussion about representation and diversity in children's literature and the publishing industry was a "response to the all-white, all-male panel of children's authors assembled for BookCon's May 31 reader event" ('About WNDB' 2017).[1] The hashtag drew attention to the inequalities in publishing particularly in children's and Young Adult fiction. #Weneeddiversebooks also highlighted the works of authors of colour, directing social media users to works they may be unaware of because, at that time, publishers did not necessarily emphasise diversity as they do now.

It was stumbling across this hashtag that led me to Afrofuturism. I had always read fantasy and a small amount of science fiction, yet the hashtag led me to scrutinise my bookshelves. I had always made an effort to find fiction written by Black authors or at least fiction that had Black characters, not just as sidekicks but as main protagonists. But most of the books I owned or borrowed that fit these criteria were literary fiction rather than speculative fiction. As enjoyable as fantasy and science fiction were, there was an undeniable absence of Black authors and Black characters, at least on my shelves. The earlier backlash against actor Amandla Stenberg's character, Rue, in the film adaptation of Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* (2012), indicated a hostility towards Black representation in genre fiction (Holmes 2012); maybe the lack of Black speculative fiction on my shelves and local library was not just due to my inability to find it, but also an indication that there were few Black authors of speculative fiction?

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[1] BookCon was a popular annual convention in New York, US for fans, authors, and publishers in the book industry. The convention has since been cancelled indefinitely following the coronavirus outbreak (P. Anderson 2020).

With #weneeddiversebooks and the racist outcry over Black characters in *Hunger Games*, I began trying to find Black speculative fiction. Indeed, #weneeddiversebooks led me to the book *Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith. Wanting more, I started searching specifically for Black fantasy authors which finally led me to Octavia E. Butler. Though her works were highly reviewed, and she was considered a prominent figure in science fiction, it was difficult to find her books in the UK at that time. However, in many discussions about her work online, fans and critics discussed Afrofuturism. Butler's writing took on a new meaning. It was not just about the importance of representation, but also the ability of Afrofuturism to place Black people in future worlds, addressing an absence whilst also, potentially, changing how we think about who belongs in the future.

Defining Afrofuturism

'Afrofuturism' is a relatively new term and was initially used to describe science fiction by Black American writers. Mark Dery used the term in the introduction of "Black to the Future," a series of interviews he conducted with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. The intention of the essay and interviews was not to find a new term to encapsulate Black American-authored science fiction, but to explore why "so few African Americans write science fiction" (Dery 1994, 179). Apart from a small number of Black science fiction authors, Dery noted a "perplexing" absence of African American science fiction writing (1994, 180). He argued that the "sublegitimate status of science fiction […] mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history" (1994, 180), so the absence of Black science fiction writers seemed surprising. Elements of science fiction appeared in Black literary texts;[2] however, there were few Black speculative fiction

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[2] Greg Tate states, "there's always been huge dollops of fantasy, horror, and science fiction" in literature by Black authors, and highlights Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) as an example (Dery 1994, 207).

writers and few Black characters in speculative fiction.[3] Indeed, author Octavia E. Butler discusses the dearth of Black characters as well as Black speculative fiction writers in the 1980s (2018).

Nevertheless, "Black to the Future" attempted to unite seemingly disparate works of Black speculative fiction found in "unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points" (Dery 1994, 182). Dery offered a broad definition: "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of tech and prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" (Dery 1994, 180). To better capture the genre, Dery briefly referred to different examples in popular culture that, he argued, exemplified Afrofuturism. These were wide-ranging and included the music of Sun Ra and Parliament Funkadelic, the visual art of Jean Michel Basquiat, and the Milestone Media comic series' *Icon* (1993-1997) and *Hardware* (1993-1997) (Dery 1994, 182). This thesis similarly explores contemporary Afrofuturism in different media – music, literature, film, and comics. This is by no means extensive, as Afrofuturism is also present in narrative podcasts, television series, visual art and performance, though these are outside the scope of this research.

It is unclear why 'Afrofuturism' became and remains such a popular term over other phrases or terms. Dery was the first to use 'Afrofuturism' to describe Black authored speculative fiction, but did not offer further analysis or discussion about Afrofuturism following the essay's publication. Similar concepts appeared around the same time. In *More Brilliant than the Sun*, Kodwo Eshun uses "AfroDiasporic Futurism" and "alien music" to describe the music of Black artists that "turns away from roots; it opposes common sense with the force of the fictional and the power of falsity" (1998, 003). Whilst he coined the term, the growing interest in Black-authored speculative fiction, inspired

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[3] The barrier between Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction is difficult to discern. Throughout this thesis, I refer to Black speculative fiction as fiction that includes science fiction, fantasy, and horror and includes Afrofuturism. I focus predominantly on Afrofuturism but also examine Africanfuturism as a distinct genre in the final chapter. "Black speculative fiction" is therefore a useful term to refer to Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism without ignoring their different approaches to Black futurity.

by technological developments that sparked a renewed interest in futuristic speculations, contributed to the interest, growth, and development of Afrofuturism into what it is today. This conceptualisation of Afrofuturism as a genre shaped by individuals who were artists and/or academics as well as fans began on Alondra Nelson's Listserv. The forum was active between 1998-2003, and became integral to Afrofuturism's development.[4] The listserv was "an early internet discussion pool" that allowed conversations about what Afrofuturism is or could be (2013, 18). Though many of the discussions are now lost due to the changes implemented by the companies running these online spaces, the Listserv connected artists, academics, critics, and fans whose online discussions have provided a foundation for Afrofuturist art and scholarship.

In the period since Dery's and Nelson's early interventions Afrofuturism has become popularised as an umbrella term for a variety of perspectives and approaches in different media. Yet despite attempts to define the term, Afrofuturism remains a nebulous concept, as I will discuss later in the introduction. However, this thesis does not intend to offer an 'accurate' definition. Instead, I argue that central to Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction is the idea of a 'better' world. What constitutes an improved future varies considerably and each chapter examines a different perspective of what a 'better' world can or should be. Whilst the speculation about better worlds and improved futures are commonalities in the texts, authors and artists who have been labelled as Afrofuturists have approached this idea in diverse ways.

Race, Technology, and Afrofuturism

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Afrofuturist texts were principally concerned with race and technology, particularly the way they intertwine. Dery's understanding of Afrofuturism was influenced by the digital divide, "a phrase that has been used to describe gaps in technological

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[4] I accessed the Listserv on 5 January 2018 which had migrated from AOL to Yahoo Groups following AOL's closure. On 15 December 2020, Yahoo Groups was also closed down, and the conversations that had been archived from Listserv are no longer available; neither are any links saved from my initial research.

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access that fall along lines of race, gender, region, and ability," though Nelson argues that it became

"a code word for the technological inequities that exist between blacks and whites" (Nelson 2002,

1).[5] As Nelson notes, "the promise of a placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by

technological progress" was part of a "popular mythology" in the 1990s, one that believed

technology would lead to a "race-free future" in which people were no longer constrained by racial

identity (2002, 1).[6] Nelson argues that the notion "that race (and gender) distinctions would be

eliminated with technology was perhaps the founding fiction of the digital age" (2002, 1).

Afrofuturism, at least during this period, became a way to surpass the digital divide discussions, and

offered differing perspectives about race and technology. As Marlo David argues, the genre

"challenges the post-human ideology of an imagined, raceless future. It recognises that blackness

still has meaning in the virtual age" (2007, 698). Afrofuturism could be considered a challenge to the

assumption that technological development would correct all inequalities. The "digital divide" and

the relationship between Blackness and technology were concerns of what Anderson and Jones have

delineated "Afrofuturism 1.0" (R. Anderson and Jones 2016, vii). Whilst race remains an important

part of Afrofuturism, the reduced relevance of the digital divide due to the improved accessibility of

technology in recent years has meant it is less prominent in the genre, particularly in the

contemporary texts that this thesis examines. As Nelson and others argued in the late 1990s and

early 2000s (R. Anderson and Jones 2016, vii), technology neither eliminated racial inequalities nor

could race itself be easily discarded in favour of technological 'progress'. Thus, Afrofuturist creators

during this time focussed on the idea that technological developments did not or could not eradicate

the relevance of racial identity. Whilst the idea of the digital divide has fallen out of favour,

Afrofuturism does continue to examine the relationship between race and technology.

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[5] The "digital divide" has gained new relevance as the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent need to work and study from home exposed the inaccessibility of technology for many households worldwide, a further indication of the impact economic inequality has on accessing technology ('Don't Let the Digital Divide Become "the New Face of Inequality": UN Deputy Chief' 2021).

[6] The existence of the digital divide has been debated largely because it was founded on a simplistic binary between those who had access to technology and those who did not (Selwyn 2004, 345–46).

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Technology remains an important theme in contemporary Afrofuturism, though recent scholarship has explored an alternative perspective. Womack discusses this briefly in the seminal *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*: "When I first met artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith in July 2011, she best summed up race as creation: 'Blackness is a technology,' said Smith. 'It's not real. It's a thing'" (2013, 27). By viewing race as a tool, the rigid parameters that define racial identity can be changed and challenged. This idea can be traced to Beth Coleman's essay in which she argues that "technology's embedded function of self-extension may be exploited to liberate race from an inherited position of abjection toward a greater expression of agency" (2009, 177). For instance, Janelle Monáe's android character merges African American history with the technological in her portrayal of the oppression of androids, as explored in the second chapter of this thesis. Black identity and technology become intertwined in Monáe's android, as she uses Afrofuturism as a lens to reimagine enslavement, but also sees technology as a challenge to the rigid binary divisions that are used to separate races and species.

Science fiction frequently speculates about the impact of racism and inequality and the importance of social change; these themes are not present only in Afrofuturism. However, as Lavender argues, "Science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race, makes real aliens, has hidden race dialogues. Even though it is a literature that talks a lot about underclasses and oppressed classes, it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space" (2011, 7). Afrofuturism prioritises discussions about race that were often relegated to the background in mainstream science fiction.[7] Yet race is not the only topic explored in Afrofuturist texts and, as this thesis demonstrates, recent works often consider a wide range of social issues. However, Afrofuturist texts explore race and racism through a mixture of allegory and metaphor, similar to science fiction, but also engage in more explicit explorations that reimagine contemporary or historical Black experience in futuristic environments. As Lavender notes, "although this

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[7] Lavender describes this as the "blackground" to "define the embedded perceptions of race and racism – intended or not – in Western science fiction writing and criticism" (2011, 6).

conversation on race and racism in science fiction criticism has slowly become apparent in the past

twenty-five years, Afrofuturism has greatly amplified the discussion" (2011, 11).

This focus on race and Black identities – predominantly Black American identity – in

futuristic worlds has helped to delineate Afrofuturism from broader science fiction and fantasy,

though this distinction may no longer be as relevant as broader genre fiction becomes more diverse,

and most importantly, as authors and artists either try to distance themselves from Afrofuturism or

find new terms that better suit their work. Nevertheless, it is difficult to form boundaries or be

certain about where Afrofuturism belongs; it could be regarded as a genre in and of itself, or a sub-

genre of science fiction. This is complicated further by its expression across multiple media, a feature

that was emphasised in its early conceptualisations, as well as the flexibility of the term. Afrofuturist

work is not always recognisable as either science fiction or fantasy. "Fluid fiction" is used by Kinitra

D. Brooks to describe the works of Black women. Brooks argues that Black women authors are

"difficult to label as specific genres, and criticises labels such as Afrofuturism and speculative fiction

(2018, 65, 69). Brooks argues that "fluid fiction" can be a "counterparadigm that encompasses the

structural and immovable nature of staid binaries, flowing within and seeping into the exposed weak

points of institutional structures" (2018, 76). Whilst I agree that Afrofuturism and speculative fiction

both have their limitations, they are the terms that are most commonly used and are therefore most

relevant to this thesis. Lisa Yaszek describes Afrofuturism as the "150 years old tradition of

speculative fiction written by black people" (2013, 1), identifying works such as Martin Delany's

Blake, Or the Huts of America (1859-1861) as early examples of Afrofuturism. The novel is an

"alternate history novel in which Cuban and American slaves engineer a successful revolution"

(Yaszek 2006, 45). In identifying this tradition of Afrofuturism, Yaszek also indicates the political

foundation of Afrofuturist works, intertwining the concerns about social change, racism, and slavery

with science fiction. Yaszek suggests early Afrofuturists were concerned with "the ability of

Afrodiasporic blacks to make a place for themselves in Western – and even global – futurity. By way

of contrast, contemporary Afrofuturist authors […] readily assume that people of colour will indeed

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be key players" (2006, 55). This is reflected in the texts explored in this thesis; there is no debate about whether the characters in each text are integral to the future.

African American identity was integral to Dery's conceptualisation of Afrofuturism. As I have discussed, at the time of Dery's essay, ideas about Black identity, futurity, and science fiction were similarly being discussed and written about by other scholars and critics. Yet, because Dery's essay has so often been cited as the first explicit identification of Afrofuturism, his thoughts and arguments have continued to shape contemporary understanding of the genre, especially his focus on Black *America*, despite the *Afro* in Afrofuturism. Yet this is not to say that Afrofuturism has always been created by and for Black Americans; for example, Eshun uses the phrase "AfroDiasporic Futurism" (1998, 003) and in the seminal essay "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism" emphasises the importance of diasporic Afrofuturism, particularly the need to centre Africa in speculative fiction (2003, 291–93). Nevertheless, Africa is not the primary focus of Afrofuturism. Indeed, popular Afrofuturist texts such as the *Black Panther* (2018) film have been criticised for reducing African cultures to a costume (Mashigo 2018). In response to the US-centricity of Afrofuturism, author Nnedi Okorafor coined the term 'Africanfuturism' to describe her own work that had often been labelled as Afrofuturist by critics and fans. The development of Africanfuturism highlights the lack of diasporic perspectives, and I revisit this in the final chapter of the thesis.

Afrofuturism as a Genre

At different moments, Afrofuturism has been called a movement, an aesthetic, a theoretical principle, and a sub-genre of science fiction. That it can be all and none of these things at once is a further indication of the difficulty in defining the term. The idea that Afrofuturism is a movement arises from the presence of social commentary in most works of Afrofuturism, and the understanding that "the imagination is a tool of resistance. Creating stories with people of colour in the future defies the norm" (Womack 2013, 24). But whilst some artists, such as Janelle Monáe,

intertwine Afrofuturism with current social issues concerning class, racism, gender, and sexuality, social consciousness itself is not particular to Afrofuturism alone, and neither do Afrofuturist texts or authors claim an explicit connection to specific social and political movements. Thus, Afrofuturism's tendency to engage with social commentary and criticism does not make it exceptional, as science fiction more broadly is often influenced by social issues of the past and present even if it is not always apparent. Science fiction is not just escapism – which is also important – but it "is [also] an inherently political genre, in that any future or alternate history it imagines is a wish about How Things Should Be (even if it's reflected darkly in a warning about how they might turn out). And How Things Should Be is the central question and struggle of politics" (Nast 2013). Yet science fiction is not considered a movement simply because the genre often includes social commentary.

Nonetheless, Afrofuturism's connection to social and political commentary and activism has a particular character that is shaped by Black history and experience. This can be traced to early precursor texts such as *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) by Sutton E. Griggs, which channels Black Nationalist thought as the author imagines a separate Black nation being formed within the US. In line with this, the claim that Afrofuturism is a movement is based on the view that it is a vehicle through which Black creators imagine alternative histories and better futures for the Black diaspora. In this view, creating Afrofuturist texts might not be direct activism, but it is a step towards building or inspiring an engaged movement. In other words, in order to create a better world, it must first be imagined. As Robin D. G. Kelley argues: "unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about our liberation" (2002, 198). And Jones has noted an emerging relationship between Afrofuturism and activism, stating: "The shift toward social justice is a developing area of Afrofuturism, moving beyond what has previously been defined as an aesthetic movement" (2018a, 45). But whilst the importance of imagining a better future is integral to cultural artefacts analysed in this thesis, I do not refer to Afrofuturism as a movement. Some Afrofuturist works have clear connections to political and social movements, such as Janelle Monáe's which are explored in

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chapter two below. But the majority of Afrofuturist texts do not intentionally form a connection to political or social movements, though this is not to say the connections between Afrofuturism and social movements are irrelevant, especially as Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction may inspire action in consumers.

The visuality of Afrofuturism has led many to refer to it as an aesthetic. Anderson and Jones acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of Afrofuturism, and identify aesthetics as a significant aspect (2016, x). Afrofuturism has also been described as a "global aesthetic movement" and as a "critical and aesthetic concept" (Yaszek 2013, 1; Lavender and Yaszek 2020, 1). Indeed, the visual expression of Afrofuturism has contributed to the popularity of the genre. Artists like Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe have become part of an Afrofuturist canon not just because of their sound but also due to their films, videos, visual presentation, and performance style, and as a result, visuality has been seen as a significant factor in determining whether a particular text is Afrofuturist. However, there are no consistently shared stylistic features or visual conventions in Afrofuturist artefacts or performances that might serve to define a distinct aesthetic. Thus, the idea that Afrofuturism is an aesthetic is shaped more by the opinions of viewers than by the presence of an identifiably common style across texts and media. I therefore choose not to refer to Afrofuturism as an aesthetic.

Rather than describe Afrofuturism as an aesthetic or as a movement, I refer to it as a genre. 'Genre' is sufficiently flexible and "never denotes a medium-specific mode of analysis […] but instead refers to the ways in which meaning making takes place on similar terms across media" (Carrington 2016, 7). This is particularly useful as I explore Afrofuturism in different media and the numerous ways in which different artists have imagined Black futurity. Whilst it can be productive to form parameters and identify specifics, Afrofuturism is constantly changing and evolving and has never been precisely defined; thinking of it as a genre allows a greater degree of flexibility of interpretation than does viewing it as a 'movement' or 'aesthetic'.

Forming an Afrofuturist Canon

The Afrofuturist canon, whilst always developing, typically includes a small number of writers and musicians from around the mid- to the late 20th century, usually Sun Ra and Octavia E. Butler.[8] As I have mentioned earlier, recent scholarship has identified works from the 19th century as precursors or examples of early Afrofuturism to historicise the genre, yet these writers are not necessarily included in the canon yet. Though I mention both Sun Ra and Butler it is important to note, as Steinskog argues, that "the canon is both loose and open, in a constant process of becoming rather than something fixed, and both adding new acts following in similar veins and employing new perspectives on the past continually expands the conversation" (2018, 29). There is no definitive reason why these artists have become synonymous with Afrofuturism; however, I do consider possible explanations for Sun Ra's and Octavia E. Butler's role in forming the genre.

The jazz musician and composer Sun Ra is frequently considered an Afrofuturist icon, not only because of his music, but also his personal style and performances. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Sun Ra and his Arkestra performed in elaborate clothing inspired by Egyptian mythology and the prospect of utopian space exploration, merging mythology and science fiction. This led to Sun Ra being identified as one of the early examples of Afrofuturism.[9] His film *Space is the Place* (1974) speculates about a future inspired by Black nationalism and space colonisation, with Black people leaving Earth, and therefore racism, behind to form a Black planet. Paul Youngquist explains that Sun Ra "composed music peculiarly suited to the hopes and needs of living people, black city people inhabiting an inhospitable white world. He was the original brother from another planet, dedicated to inventing a future for fellow aliens consigned to dark streets and dead-end dreams" (2016, 8).[10]

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[8] This is not an exhaustive list as there are numerous artists who are considered contributors to the Afrofuturist canon, including authors Samuel R. Delany and Nalo Hopkinson, musicians Parliament-Funkadelic, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Erykah Badu, and Grace Jones.

[9] As with most other Afrofuturist artists, Sun Ra's music has been labelled Afrofuturist by scholars and fans; it was not a term he used.

[10] Youngquist also acknowledges Sun Ra's influence on various artists such as George Clinton, Afrika Bambaataa, and Janelle Monáe. For more on Sun Ra see Paul Youngquist's *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* and Chapter 9 of Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1998).

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Sun Ra's music effectively placed Black people in futuristic worlds, and he remains a key figure of Afrofuturism, particularly Afrofuturism as it is expressed in music, which I discuss in chapter two on Janelle Monáe.

Octavia E. Butler, as I have mentioned earlier, was well known for her speculative fiction, covering science fiction, fantasy, and horror, published from the 1970s to the mid-2000s.[11] Her works were popular at the time of their publication, and Butler received numerous awards and accolades for her contribution to science fiction.[12] Whilst she was "never, perhaps, quite the household name she had once hoped to be" there has been a resurging interest in Butler's novels from the mid- to late 2010s, as fans of genre fiction, in search of diverse books as I was, discovered her writing for the first time. In particular, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* series became increasingly popular in the late 2010s as the novels, set in a future dystopian US, featured a president who promised to "make America great again" (Butler 2007b, 20). Butler's apparent prediction of Donald Trump's campaign and presidency drew new audiences to her work. Butler's novels are, in part, noted for the way they speculate about Black women or Black girls in futuristic and fantastical environments which has contributed to her being considered one of the prominent figures in Afrofuturism. Individuals seeking Black representation in speculative fiction are often directed to her novels online by social media users, reviews, and articles. Like Sun Ra, part of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (2007a) explores whether space colonisation can be considered a viable way of escaping oppression. As one of the most prominent Black speculative fiction writers, Butler is a prolific contributor to the Afrofuturist canon. Though this thesis does not aim to add to the substantial body of scholarship concerning Butler's writing, in chapter three below I put Butler's

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[11] Gerry Canavan's *Octavia E. Butler* (2016) is currently the most comprehensive study of the author. However, there is a substantial scholarship on the majority of Butler's texts; see chapter three of *Bodyminds Reimagined* by Sami Schalk (2018), chapter three of Ingrid Thaler's *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions: Octavia E. Butler, Jewelle Gomez, and Nalo Hopkinson* (2010), "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision" by Jim Miller (1998), and chapter two of Shelley Streeby's *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2019).

[12] Canvan refers to Butler as "a fixture on English, Women's Studies, Queer Theory, African American Studies, and Postcolonial Theory college syllabi […]; an admired public intellectual; and even an officially certified genius" (2016).

Parable series in conversation with N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy to consider the interconnectedness of oppression and environmental issues, and the presence of these themes within Afrofuturism.

The formation of an Afrofuturist canon has been the work of theorists and critics as much or more than it has been the work of creative artists themselves, many of whom do not use—or even reject—the term. Steinskog refers to "the founding fathers of the Afrofuturist discourse" (2018, 23), citing Dery, Kodwo Eshun, Mark Sinker, and Greg Tate as critics and theorists who have played an important part in the formation of the genre. They each use different terminology to express similar ideas. Though he does not refer to Afrofuturism, Sinker's essay "Loving the Alien" (1992) expressed similar ideas to Dery shortly before "Black to the Future" was published. Sinker identifies "Black Science Fiction" as an "acknowledgement that Apocalypse already happened: that (in PE's [Public Enemy's] phrase) Armageddon been in effect" (1992). Afrofuturism or "BlackSF" offered another interpretation of the experience of African enslavement – as an alien invasion. He writes: "The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values" (1992). This perspective was popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, contributing to the understanding that Afrofuturism can both speculate about the future and connect Black Diasporic history to speculations about Black futurity.[13] Sinker's emphasis on the alien indicates a connection to posthumanism, particularly the "the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the universal representative of the human" (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018, 1).[14] Braidotti and Hlavajova note that "gender and sexual difference, race and ethnicity, class and education, health and able-bodiedness are crucial markers and gatekeepers of acceptable 'humanity'" (2018, 2). Afrofuturism's exploration of the 'human' has often been influenced by this

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[13] The intertwining past, present, and future in Afrofuturism can also be traced to Sankofa, an "Akan philosophical tradition" that emphasises the value and importance of "retrieving" what has been lost in the past in order to build a future (Temple 2010, 127).
[14] See Alexander Weheliye's "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music" (2002) for further discussion about the relationship between Afrofuturism and posthumanism.

idea of the human category being exclusive. Considerations of the human and the limitations of categorisation are explored further in this thesis. The texts I analyse vary between challenging our understanding of the human which Janelle Monáe does in her early albums, to emphasising the importance of moving away from such categories entirely, a prevalent theme in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction. Though the idea of transatlantic slavery imagined as an alien invasion is less common in contemporary Afrofuturism, aliens, alienation, and challenging rigid ideas of the 'human' remain integral themes in Black speculative fiction, and are discussed in depth in chapters two and three below. It is also integral to the final chapter on Africanfuturism.

Greg Tate's writing was also influential to the early formation of Afrofuturism. Tate was interviewed by Dery in "Black to the Future" in which he puts forth a similar argument to Sinker by highlighting the themes associated with genre fiction – specifically alienation – that are embedded in Black American culture: "the imaginative leap that we associate with science fiction, in terms of putting the human in an alien and alienating environment, is a gesture that repeatedly appears in the work of black writers and visual artists" (Dery 1994, 209–10). Tate later explored alienation but expresses scepticism towards the terms being used because they are closely intertwined: "black science fiction, Afro-Futurism, Afro-Punk, post-blackness […] are all born of attempts to accommodate and simulate the strange reality of being black" (2009). He also argues that "they're also just a tad elitist and academic – at times intended to suggest that some blacks, usually college miseducated, are more modern, avant-garde, and outside the black box than others. The world that most black working-class people live in here in these United States is already as freaking strange twisted and bizarre as any space opera" (2009). Tate argues that Afrofuturism was inaccessible for the majority during the late 2000s.[15] Author N. K. Jemisin has echoed this recently in response to her work being labelled as an example of Afrofuturism, stating: "That for me is a thing of academics"

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[15] Fans did participate in the development of Afrofuturism through discussions on the Afrofuturism Listerv that was popular in the 1990s-early 2000s, which I have discussed earlier. However, it is unclear whether members were fans *as well as* scholars or critics.

('What Was, What Is & What Will Be: A Cross-Genre Look at Afrofuturism' 2019). However, as I argue throughout the thesis, Afrofuturism has emerged into and become part of mainstream popular culture since the 2010s and, as a result, has increasingly been shaped by fans on social media, as well as scholars and critics. Though the caveats of this mainstream prominence are examined further in the introduction and in the first chapter, the exclusivity of Afrofuturism no longer remains a significant issue.

In contrast to Tate, Eshun embraced the idea of Afrofuturism and employed the term "AfroDiasporic Futurism" to analyse developments in music (1998, 002). Later, in the article "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism", Eshun identifies Afrofuturism's duality as a genre that considers the future but simultaneously looks to the past (2003, 289). Black Diasporic history has since come to be seen as an integral part of the genre. Whilst Eshun's scholarship has been instrumental to the development of Afrofuturism, one of his core arguments concerning Afrofuturism and Africa has, until recently, remained underdeveloped. He notes that "Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia. There is always a reliable trade in market projections for Africa's socioeconomic crises" and he posits Afrofuturism as a potential solution: "an Afrofuturist art project might work on the exposure and reframing of futurisms that act to forecast and fix African dystopia" (2003, 292–93). However, the majority of Afrofuturist texts, particularly those in mainstream popular culture, remain US-centred and do not offer speculations about Africa. Yet this is changing, as the recent coining of the term 'Africanfuturism' by author Nnedi Okorafor would suggest (2019b). This new development implies that African futurity has been absent from Afrofuturism, which has privileged American approaches to Black history and Black identity. I discuss the way Africanfuturism both adds to and challenges the US-centric bias of Afrofuturism later on in this introduction and in the final chapter of this thesis which analyses Okorafor's work.

Steinskog also notes the "potential male – not to say masculinist – bias" of Afrofuturist scholarship (2018, 23).[16] This is less true of contemporary Afrofuturism in which the voices of women creatives and theorists are increasingly prominent; however, it is also important to note the significant contributions of women to founding Afrofuturist discourse. Alondra Nelson's highly influential scholarship, as noted earlier, conceptualised Afrofuturism as a theory to interrogate the relationship between Black American culture, identity, and technology. That she is not considered to be part of the Afrofuturist theoretical canon is surprising, particularly as Nelson's Listserv became a way for scholars, critics, academics, fans, and artists to interact, share their ideas about Afrofuturism which have helped to shape the genre. Similarly, Ytasha L. Womack is also a key—if more recent— theorist. Her seminal book *Afrofuturism: The world of black sci-fi and fantasy culture* (2013) is noteworthy in facilitating Afrofuturism's emergence into mainstream culture. The book was accessible to a wide and varied audience and was the first non-fiction, book-length exploration of the genre. It remains a popular introductory text because it collated the various ideas about what Afrofuturism is and can be that were otherwise scattered across academic journal articles, essays in magazines, and online conversations such as those on Nelson's listserv.

Contemporary Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction scholarship

This thesis examines contemporary Afrofuturist texts, the majority of which were published or released between 2000-2020. "Afrofuturism 2.0" is a term that Anderson and Jones coined to distinguish more recent expressions of the genre from earlier instances of Afrofuturism, or Afrofuturism 1.0, that were characterised by the discussions surrounding the digital divide and the relationship between Black communities and technology. Anderson and Jones describe Afrofuturism

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[16] Steinskog's critique echoes that of Josh, a user on the Afrofuturism Listserv, who similarly noted that "in the genealogies of afrofuturist thought and cultural production that have been dropped to date, women are notably and problematically absent. what's to be done. part of the problem has been that the concept of afrofuturism emerged from music writing and criticism, and as any issue of *the wire* demonstrates and with the exception of some trailblazers like carol cooper, tricia rose and ann powers, music writing has always been a man's game" (March 1999, *sic*).

2.0 as being characterised by "five dimensions" highlighting the impact of the genre on

"metaphysics; aesthetics; theoretical and applied science; social sciences; and programmatic spaces"

(R. Anderson and Jones 2016, x). Afrofuturism, they argue, has developed into a theoretical concept

that is not just applicable to the arts and humanities but has also become a "more applied,

theoretical, critical, and transdisciplinary approach in regards to the future of African peoples" (R.

Anderson and Jones 2016, ix). Though Afrofuturism has always been multidisciplinary, Anderson and

Jones argue that it has recently developed into a genre that crosses into the sciences as well as

technology. The majority of this thesis is framed around Afrofuturism as a theoretical and artistic

principle and does not necessarily distinguish Afrofuturism 1.0 and 2.0. The features of Afrofuturism

1.0 such as the interest in technology are still present in recent Black speculative fiction. There is no

neat distinction between the two approaches. Afrofuturism is not static, and there are

developments and changing perspectives as Afrofuturism has evolved from a somewhat niche,

academic topic to a mainstream genre. Whilst I examine the connection between Afrofuturism and

environmentalism in the third chapter, I also explore technology and alienation in the final chapter

on Africanfuturism. These themes are often associated with Afrofuturism 1.0. The thesis does not

aim to delineate the two approaches to Afrofuturism as they have merged in the genres' recent

increased presence in mainstream popular culture.

Whilst this is discussed in greater depth in the first chapter, Afrofuturism's mainstream

presence, as indicated by the popularity of Marvel's *Black Panther* film adaptation, is a recent

development. Afrofuturist works may have been popular in the 1990s and early 2000s, but these

were not often referred to as 'Afrofuturist' by casual fans. Whilst fans have shaped Afrofuturism

from its inception through participation in the Afrofuturism Listserv, the combination of increased

awareness about Afrofuturism and the prevalence of social media has recently allowed fans to share

their own interpretations of the genre, label certain works as examples of Afrofuturist art, and direct

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fans to other independent or mainstream examples of Afrofuturism.[17] These instances are difficult to measure as they are usually sporadic, apart from the release of *Black Panther* which, more than any other Afrofuturist work, brought substantial attention to Afrofuturism even though it was not marketed as such, at least in the official advertisements. Fans and critics were referring to the images and narrative of the film as 'Afrofuturist,' which prompted viewers who were unfamiliar with the term to seek out further information around the time of the film's release.

Lavender's and Yaszek's understanding of contemporary Afrofuturism has also been significant to this research, particularly the hope and potential Afrofuturist fiction and thought can bring to viewers and readers. This thesis follows their argument "that Afrofuturism remains valuable as a critical and aesthetic concept more than a quarter-century after its inception" (2020, 1). Though I discuss the value of Afrofuturism in further depth in the first chapter in relation to *Black Panther*, Afrofuturism is an important genre because it begins to address the absence of Black futures in speculative fiction and has the potential to change our understanding of the future. The genre questions who is included and excluded in speculations about the future, and most importantly for this thesis, what constitutes a better future for Black communities. It is an exciting genre that, particularly in recent years, is not just about mourning what could have been and addressing the ruptures to Black futurity caused by transatlantic slavery but is rather about trying to imagine an improved future to inform actions in the present.

Recent scholarship about Black speculative fiction is not only concerned with Afrofuturism. Isiah Lavender's *Race in American Science Fiction*, for instance, highlights the complex presence of race in science fiction. He states, "science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race, makes real aliens, has hidden race dialogues. Even though it is a literature that talks a lot about underclasses and oppressed classes, it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space. If

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[17] As well as Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, discussions about Afrofuturism occur on other platforms such as Reddit and Discord. They do not always take place in Afrofuturism-related spaces but in groups and communities that discuss genre fiction more broadly.

science fiction is about social change, let us talk about how this change comes about from an 'other' space, a black space" (Lavender 2011, 7–8). Lavender links "social concepts such as miscegenation and passing for white with a variety of classic sf motifs – aliens, androids, cyborgs, and so on" to "effectively create a viable dialectic to examine the pervasiveness of race in sf" (Lavender 2011, 7). Though this thesis does not primarily focus on race and representation in speculative fiction, Lavender's scholarship provides a foundation for understanding their importance to Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism "has greatly amplified" the "conversation on race and racism in sf criticism" (Lavender 2011, 11), and the contemporary examples of Afrofuturism that I explore in each chapter are often explicit in their discussions about race, racism, and oppression, without solely relying on the allegorical approach Lavender discusses.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic*, like Lavender's work, explores Black identity in popular speculative fiction, focussing on popular Young Adult and children's fiction. Thomas' argument that "working toward a fantastic that is restorative, transformative, and emancipatory has the power to remake our world" (2019, 13) is integral to the main questions of this thesis: how have Black authors of speculative fiction imagined a better world? What constitutes a 'better' world? Thomas illustrates how the impact of speculative fiction on our current understanding of identity, belonging, and inequality can allow us to "collectively imagine our world anew" (2019, 2), an idea that this thesis continues to develop.[18] As well as the potential "transformative" power of speculative fiction Thomas mentions, her analysis of the impact of fandom on race in different texts is also discussed in this thesis, often labelling the texts examined as examples of Afrofuturism even if the author has never used the term to identify their work. The role of fans is most apparent in the first chapter on *Black Panther* because of the film's popularity and subsequent financial success.

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[18] Thomas' research overlaps with Afrofuturism; however, she considers "the Black fantastic as part of the larger Afrofuturist project, which responds to and transcends what I describe as 'the dark fantastic cycle' in the Western imagination" (2019, 9).

Afrofuturism in contemporary popular culture

The first chapter of this thesis traces the development of Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* from the first comics of the 1960s to the blockbuster film of 2018; however, the majority of the thesis focuses on Afrofuturism produced from the late 2000s to the late 2010s. I have chosen to focus on contemporary work as it is currently the most under-researched: much of the existing scholarship has focused on introducing readers to Afrofuturism as a concept and the various ongoing debates about what it means, whether it has an impact on popular understanding about the future, and whether it will remain relevant. Whilst I do touch on these debates throughout the thesis, I am most concerned with how contemporary Afrofuturist texts—as labelled by fans, critics, or scholars rather than the artists themselves—have contributed to Afrofuturism's emergence into mainstream popular culture outside of the limited Afrofuturist canon that I have discussed previously. Established Black science fiction and fantasy writers such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler are often considered mainstream writers, and their works have indeed received substantial attention since they first began writing in the 1960s and 1970s. However, science fiction and fantasy have become much more prominent in popular culture in recent decades, attracting large and varied audiences: "Just as fantasy television, superhero movies, comics, cosplay, and other traditionally marginalized fan pursuits have moved into the mainstream, science fiction media has become much more visible over the last decade, reaching a wider audience, and changing to accommodate that audience" (T. Robinson 2020). In other words, it is no longer a small subculture just for nerds![19]

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[19] The popularity of franchises like *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Star Wars* has contributed to the growing presence of speculative fiction in mainstream popular culture. The Marvel films are not explicitly science fiction or fantasy but contain elements of speculative fiction, and continue to attract large audiences. *Black Panther*'s role in the popularisation and commercialisation of Afrofuturism is explored in chapter one below.

The interest surrounding Afrofuturism and the commercial potential of Black-authored

speculative fiction began to emerge in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, Afrofuturism decisively

entered mainstream popular culture in the 2010s. Data concerning Afrofuturism is difficult to locate

as it is not an established genre like science fiction or fantasy. Nevertheless, there is a general

increase in the number of searches for Afrofuturism worldwide, according to Google Trends (see

Figure 1.1). Whilst it is difficult to identify accurately what caused this, there are a few potential

contributions to the rise in Afrofuturism and its emergence into mainstream popular culture. By

mainstream, I mean works that have both been labelled as an example of Afrofuturism by fans,

critics, or scholars, and have also been recognised by wider audiences as indicated by commercial

popularity and award nominations. Another indication of mainstream presence is accessibility; the

texts examined in each chapter below are widely available. They are not produced by underground

or small publications. The film adaptation of *Black Panther* may be the most prominent example of

Afrofuturism in mainstream popular culture and leads to an increase in Google searches of the term

Afrofuturism at the time of the film's release (see Figure 1). As a Marvel film produced as part of the

currently popular superhero stories, the film had an established audience formed by those who has

watched the previous Marvel films as well as those who read the comics. Nevertheless, the popular
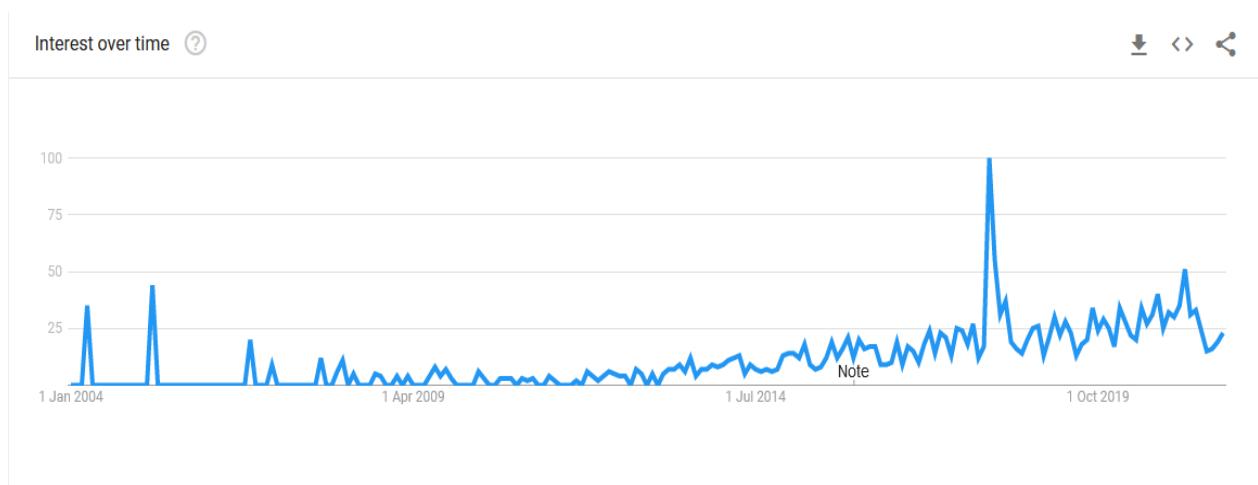
Figure 1.1 Google Trends shows a general increase in the searches of 'Afrofuturism' from 2014 to August 2021. The largest increase in February 2018 coincides with the release of Marvel's Black Panther *and this remains the most popular moment for Afrofuturism in terms of Google searches. The scale from 0-100 is not the specific number of searches but a value assigned by Google. No data before January 2004 is available. Note that an improvement in data collection for Google Trends was released in January 2016 which may have impacted the data available before this point.*

interest in Afrofuturism seems to start prior to *Black Panther* and may even have contributed to its success.

The mainstreaming of Afrofuturism occurred at a time when diversity, not just in speculative fiction, but in popular culture in general, became a heavily debated issue, particularly on social media, during the 2010s. The #weneeddiversebooks campaign in 2014 is a popular example (Kirch 2014). The hashtag, as I have mentioned previously, circulated on Twitter and Tumblr and became a way for social media users to express their demand for change to the publishing industry. The demand for more diverse characters on screen and in books was not only about race, but gender and sexuality as well. Fans wanted to see themselves reflected in the content they consumed and social media became a way for them to voice this demand and critique works that lacked diversity, too.[20] The hashtag "#ownvoices" has been used since 2015 to highlight not just diversity in terms of representation within popular culture, but also the importance of authorship. #ownvoices identifies and promotes "stories about marginalized people […] written by authors of the same identity group" (Rosenfield 2019).[21] Those who were vocal about wanting diverse representation in popular culture demanded characters that were not just of different races or sexualities, but that were authentic, too. However, authentic representation is difficult to define and judge: is it dependant on the identity of the authors or artists who create the culture? And how can authenticity be defined and policed when there is no single, universally agreed way of expressing a particular identity?

Yet despite these complications, in the 2010s 'diverse' representation became a selling point and a way of determining what was 'good' in culture: publishers and companies such as Marvel

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[20] See Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' discussion about participation on *Harry Potter* fansites and "the ways that audiences respond to textual erasure and misrepresentation by using social media" in Chapter 5 of *The Dark Fantastic* (2019, 13).

[21] #ownvoices has also been criticised for the assumption that only authors who share the identity of their protagonists can write 'authentic' narratives, even though authenticity is often difficult to determine. As Ronsenfield argues, "gatekeepers who consider themselves anti-racist allies can have troubling preconceptions of what marginalized people's stories should look like, and will pressure writers with different backgrounds to stick with 'issue books' centered on oppression or injustice" (2019). Furthermore, #ownvoices, initially intended to promote the works of diverse authors, "has since expanded in its use to become a 'catch all' marketing term by the publishing industry" (Lavoie 2021).

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created new stories to try to appeal to what is now an expansive market of people wanting to show their social, political, and cultural awareness through the media they consume (Rosenfield 2019; Smith 2019). Within this broader commercial and ideological context, Afrofuturism has been identified as a contribution towards diverse storytelling as it is often created by Black people and depicts protagonists that are Black or are recognisable as Black even if they exist in fictional worlds where race and identity do not mirror reality. For this reason, the interest in diversity in popular culture may have had an impact on the popularity of Afrofuturism in recent years. However, as with #ownvoices, there is the risk that Afrofuturism could be reduced to a marketing term, a convenient way to package and promote any work of Black-authored speculative fiction. I discuss this further in the following section about the limitations of Afrofuturism and explore *Black Panther* as an example of the globalisation and mainstreaming of Afrofuturism in the first chapter of this thesis.

Afrofuturism's popular profile has been boosted by the demand for diversity in culture; but the demand for diversity has also altered Afrofuturism. Alongside explorations of racial and ethnic diversity, representations of the multiplicity of gender identities and sexualities have become a feature of contemporary Afrofuturism. Works such as Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) and Nicky Drayden's *Symbiosis* (2019) depict Black LGBTQ+ characters within Afrofuturism. As Amandine H. Faucheux notes, "black queer theory can be usefully applied to Afrofuturism" to form "Queer Afrofuturism" in order "to designate those afrofuturist texts in which race is inextricably tied to gender and sexuality in such a way that it is impossible to talk about one without always already signifying the other" (Faucheux 2017, 565). I discuss this further in the second chapter of this thesis which explores Janelle Monáe's music and the relationship between Afrofuturism, self-expression, and Black LGBTQ+ identity.

The limitations of Afrofuturism

Whilst Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction have developed substantially over the past thirty

years, some aspects of the genre remain unresolved or have been identified as a limitation recently.

As discussed earlier, the popularity of contemporary Afrofuturism and its growing presence in

mainstream popular culture have introduced Black speculative fiction to wider audiences. The

financial success of *Black Panther* in 2018 and the numerous accolades N. K. Jemisin received for her

Broken Earth trilogy (2017-2019) have highlighted the profitability and popularity of Afrofuturism in

mainstream popular culture. This is beneficial for the genre as culture that is considered profitable is

more likely to receive a substantial budget, and thus be able to reach large audiences who also

contribute to Afrofuturism's further development.[22] It also makes it easier for fans to discover other

texts – "#afrofuturism" on social media and quick searches connects consumers to a wide range of

texts, which as discussed earlier in the introduction, was an intentional part of Afrofuturism: to unite

Black speculative fiction in different media to highlight the different perspectives about Black

futurity. However, the popularity and marketability of Afrofuturism complicates the genre: how does

the financial backing of large corporations alter the message of Afrofuturist texts? If the popularity

of science fiction and fantasy has been "changing to accommodate" new audiences, then is it likely

Afrofuturism will also change in response to wider audiences (T. Robinson 2020)? Imagining a better

future is integral to Afrofuturism, and most texts warn of the threats posed by large corporations,

greed, and inequality. Can Afrofuturism speculate about such futures and be funded by companies

like Amazon, as the adaptation of Octavia E' Butler's *Patternist* series is? I discuss this in chapter one

below with reference to *Black Panther* as the film imagines Black futurity but is also a product of two

global companies, Marvel and Disney. The specific impact of these corporations on the media

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[22] The recent popularity of Afrofuturism has probably contributed to the promised adaptations of Octavia E. Butler's *Patternist* series (Obenson 2020), Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* series (Liptak 2020), and N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series (Templeton 2021). This is not to say that these adaptations have been selected only because of Afrofuturism's current popularity, but rather that the popularity has contributed to these narratives being considered profitable by large corporations, including Amazon and Hulu, and therefore been approved for adaptation.

produced under their name is unclear. However, it is unlikely that these organisations would produce a film that seemed to support Black revolutionary politics, such as those espoused by Erik Killmonger, the antagonist in the adaptation. Would *Black Panther* be a different story if it wasn't part of Marvel Entertainment but produced by a smaller company with a smaller budget? Could it have the same impact and generate such interest and discussion if it were an independent film? The desire to reach mainstream audiences and the need for financial support from large corporations in order to do so, whilst retaining the various political and social messages that are prominent in the genre, is currently one of the main challenges for Afrofuturism.

Another issue affecting Afrofuturism is the US-centricity of the genre. This is unsurprising given the global dominance of American popular culture. However, by name *Afro*futurism implies that it is diasporic. Given that it is difficult for Afrofuturism to be representative of the many different communities that claim a connection with Africa, the ubiquity of Black American Afrofuturism carries the risk that the genre is reduced to futurity as imagined by Black artists in the West. It is unsurprising that Black American Afrofuturism, as varied as it is, tends to be the material that has been most successfully popularised and absorbed into the cultural and commercial mainstream. It is part of US popular culture, which is increasingly dominant and accessible worldwide.[23] I discuss this further in the final chapter on author Nnedi Okorafor, who, frustrated with the US-centricity of Afrofuturism, has recently started to describe some of her novels as "Africanfuturism." She describes it as work that is "specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora" (2019b).[24] The creation of Africanfuturism has not prevented Okorafor's work from being described by others

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[23] There are multiple explanations for the global presence of US popular culture, including "economic prosperity", technological development, and "the worldwide spread of the English language [that] has tremendously paved the way for American movies, music, and books to be understood" (Oussayfi 2018).
[24] The growing interest and publication of speculative fiction by African writers has been described as a "movement" (Goodreads and Edoro-Glines 2021). Okorafor's coining of the term Africanfuturism has been influential as have authors such as Tade Thompson whose first book in the *Rosewater* series (2018-2019) won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award in 2019, and Jordan Ifueko's highly acclaimed Young Adult fantasy, *Raybearer* (2020).

as Afrofuturist, but her decision to create a new term supports the idea that Afrofuturism is not as diasporic and diverse as it implies. Though I am critical of the US-centricity of Afrofuturism, it is nonetheless reflected in this thesis, as each chapter focuses on an American text or creator apart from the final chapter on Okorafor who is Nigerian-American and whose books and comics are predominantly set in various African countries.

What is a "better world"?

As I have outlined in this introduction, ideas and perspectives within Afrofuturism have changed over the past thirty years, making the genre difficult to map or define. However, in some ways this nebulousness is an advantage, in that it allows the genre to change and be applicable to the wide-ranging creative work that imagines Black futurity. Despite the multiplicity of Afrofuturism, I contend that an integral part of the genre is the desire to imagine a 'better world'. One of the main research questions that this thesis considers is: How have Black writers of speculative fiction imagined a better world? In what ways are these worlds 'better' than the one we currently inhabit? Imagining a better future is not unique to Afrofuturism, and utopian science fiction seeks to explore the same question. Indeed, many of the chapters below consider works that engage in a critical dialogue with science fiction utopianism. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series and Monáe's android albums highlight the limitations of utopias that rely on the oppression of marginalised identity groups. Even the recent iterations of *Black Panther* comics share this perspective, as it is revealed that the apparently utopian Black nation of Wakanda is dependent on the exploitation of another group (Coates 2017e, 167). Nevertheless, Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Fiction more broadly often try to imagine a better world, not necessarily a utopia, through a perspective that centres Black diasporic history, identity, and cultures. Though the precise character of these 'better' and 'improved' futures varies from text to text, they generally concern an attempt to imagine or create an egalitarian society free from oppression. In this sense, Afrofuturism tries to avoid the pitfalls of traditional literary and

conventional science fiction utopias that rely on some—often hidden or suppressed—form of exploitation, though each Afrofuturist text depicts an alternate path of establishing this improved future.

The works examined in the chapters that follow have all been labelled as Afrofuturist, yet the futures imagined in each text are substantially different, and exemplify the varied understandings of futurity in Black speculative fiction. The first chapter of this thesis is about the 2018 *Black Panther* film adaptation and the various iterations of the Black Panther character in comics from the 1960s to the present. The improved future imagined in these narratives is often centred on isolationism and technology development for the privileged citizens of Wakanda, the fictional Black nation in East Africa. In chapter two, I analyse musician, actor and video-artist Janelle Monae's work, particularly the connections it establishes between Afrofuturism, resistance to oppression, and protest. For Monáe, particularly in her most recent album *Dirty Computer* (2018), an improved future is reliant on resistance in a dystopian society, often through valuing Black joy and self-expression that challenges normative definitions of race, gender, and sexuality. The acceptance of otherness is integral to Monáe's vision of a better future like most of the texts in this thesis. However, Monáe considers expressions of joy and pleasure as necessitates for establishing an improved future. The third chapter on N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-17) examines a developing, ecocritical lens in Afrofuturism in which the protagonists of the series attempt to imagine and build a better future amidst environmental disaster. I explore Jemisin's view of the interconnectedness of climate change and social inequalities as well as the opportunity of creating a better world on the ruins of a fallen dystopian society. The final chapter considers Africanfuturist fiction by Nnedi Okorafor as a way of imagining an improved future that centres African cultures and communities and implicitly criticises the US-centricity of Afrofuturism. Each text has been selected because they are part of mainstream Afrofuturism or Black speculative fiction; they are accessible, have gained popular attention, have a substantial audience and, ultimately, have the ability to change the ways consumers of popular culture think about the future. Most importantly, the texts

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examined in the following chapters display the variety of approaches to Black futurity. They have all been considered part of the large umbrella term that is Afrofuturism, yet the speculations about what a better world is or can be, substantially differ. Afrofuturism is difficult to define because of these variations, yet this breadth of perspectives is integral to the genre.

Chapter 1: Isolated Futurity in Marvel's *Black Panther*

In February 2018, the highly anticipated cinematic adaptation of Marvel's *Black Panther* received its global release*.* Though the character Black Panther had appeared previously in *Avengers: Civil War* (2016), the 2018 film was the first in which he appeared without a supporting cast of other, familiar superheroes. *Black Panther* became an international success, both financially, as it made more than $1 billion USD in less than a month after its release, and culturally for its depiction of a Black superhero.[1] The film was celebrated by some for being "an opportunity to consider how a futuristic (technologically advanced) world, when built through a black cultural lens, can continually strengthen communities and rival nations" (Colloqate 2018). Others found the film's approach to the perennial question of Black liberation lacking in nuance. For example, critic Christopher Lebron argued that the film's treatment of the antagonist, Erik Killmonger, and his militaristic plan for the liberation of the African diaspora, had portrayed a "devaluation of black American men" (2018). Furthermore, Lebron suggested that the film "relegated [Black Americans] to the lowest rung of political regard" because Wakandan intervention is portrayed as the solution to the economic and social ills of the rest of the diaspora, potentially disregarding the efforts of local Black communities and social movements (Lebron 2018).

Nevertheless, the *Black Panther* film introduced new, wider audiences to some of the themes and concerns of Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction that I have discussed in the thesis introduction. Following the distribution of the film, numerous news sites and blogs offered

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[1] *Black Panther* was often referred to as the first Black superhero film, though this is debated. Whilst the character is the first Black comic book superhero, there were other Black superheroes prior to 2018. The cinematic adaptation of *Blade* (1998) featured Wesley Snipes as the vampire hunter and was based on a character that appeared in various Marvel comics throughout the 1970s and 1990s*.* Another Black superhero film that is sometimes mentioned is *Meteor Man* (1993), which is about a teacher who gains powers after being struck by a meteor and uses them to fight crime. This was mostly aimed at children rather than the broad audiences that Marvel's films attract and was considered a comedy rather than a superhero film. The *X-Men* character Storm is also worth noting; though the character never received a standalone film adaptation, Storm is one of the most memorable Black superheroes and one of very few Black women superheroes in Marvel.

introductions to Afrofuturism and other Black-authored science fiction and fantasy texts (Arboine 2018; Broadnax 2018; Loughrey 2018; Mikael-Debass 2018). Those who wanted to continue their exploration into Black speculative fiction were directed towards various authors and musicians who have been identified as creators of Afrofuturist work such as Octavia E. Butler, Sun Ra, or Janelle Monáe who I discuss in chapter two below.

The film also prompted a renewed interest in Black Panther and the various comics[2] the character has appeared in since the 1960s, with many of these comics specifically highlighted as further examples of Afrofuturism. This included the three new *Black Panther* comics which were released in 2016, building on the character's appearance in *Avengers: Civil War* (2016) and preparing fans for the 2018 release of *Black Panther*. The main narrative, *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet* (2016) by Ta-Nehisi Coates (writer) and Brain Stelfreeze (artist), consisted of one narrative told over the course of two years. This series led on to the most recent arc, *Black Panther: The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* (2018-2021).[3] Two spin-off series, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* (2017) by Marvel's first Black woman lead writer, Roxane Gay,[4] and *Black Panther and the Crew* (2017b), also written by Ta-Nehisi Coates and artist Butch Guice, were published alongside the main storyline but were cancelled after only five and six issues respectively. Marvel cited poor sales as the reason for *World of Wakanda*'s and *The Crew*'s cancellation. These cancellations alongside low sales reported for some of Marvel's other titles[5] sparked debates within the company and

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[2] The retelling of superhero narratives by different creative teams is common within larger comic book companies like Marvel and DC, yet independent comics rarely retell stories. This retelling suggests a need to produce comics that have a ready-made audience in order to make as much profit as possible. Black Panther's story has not been reimagined as many times as those of other popular superheroes (such as the various Spider-Man or Superman titles, for example). Instead, there have been multiple arcs that share similar plots and characters but also introduce new themes and ideas or further develop previous arcs.

[3] The series was due to end in 2020 but, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, there were substantial delays in completing the series and distributing physical issues. This chapter was written prior to the final issues of *The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* being released.

[4] As journalists, cultural critics, and political commentators, both Coates and Gay had a sizeable readership prior to working on these *Black Panther* comics. Their new roles as comic book writers may have attracted readers from outside of Marvel's usual audience.

[5] Alongside *Black Panther,* Ms. Marvel and Miles Morales as Spider-Man are also popular, diverse superheroes within the Marvel universe.

amongst some fans about whether diverse stories were even wanted by comic book readers, given these poor sales figures. Indeed, Marvel's vice-president of sales, David Gabriel, said: "We saw the sales of any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their nose up against. That was difficult for us because we had a lot of fresh, new, exciting ideas that we were trying to get out and nothing new really worked" (Griepp 2017).

Shortly after this debate about diversity, and its potential profitability, the *Black Panther* film adaptation was released as were various short-running *Black Panther* comic book arcs alongside the main storyline written by Coates, including *Black Panther: Long Live the King* (2018), and *Shuri* (2018-2020) which are both written by Nnedi Okorafor, and *Killmonger* (2019) by Bryan Hill (writer) and Juan Ferreya (artist).[6] Low sales have plagued iterations of *Black Panther* comics over the years, though this has similarly impacted many of Marvel's other comic titles which have also suffered from decreased sales. This chapter will return to the relationship between *Black Panther* and the economic impact of Afrofuturism, but Gabriel's remarks indicate why there are multiple, and at times short, retellings of the same narrative.

This chapter will examine various *Black Panther* comic arcs, from the 1960s to the ongoing narrative that began in 2018, alongside the film adaptation, in order to consider the ways different creative teams have represented Black futurity through the Marvel character. It is worth examining the two media together, as the film regenerated interest in the comics and reached audiences who would be less likely to read the comic series. The ease of watching the film versus reading the comics

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[6] It is worth noting that recent *Black Panther* writers Coates, Okorafor, and Gay are vocal about their political stances and have a left-leaning and liberal readership. Many of Marvel's comics have and continue to reflect progressive politics. The company tries to cultivate this image using the authors they hire, though this does not necessarily reflect the perspectives of all creative teams and corporate figures in Marvel. A notable example of the conflicting politics within Marvel occurred when Isaac Perlmutter, a recently retired Marvel executive, made a donation of $360,600 to the "Trump Victory" committee in April 2019 ('Individual Contributions: Isaac Perlmutter' n.d.; Jerome 2019). It is unclear how much of this donation was directly from his income as a Marvel executive, but it does conflict with the public image Marvel tries to portray as a company and in its output, of being a supporter of diversity and inclusivity.

is worth noting; as Black Panther has appeared in various comics, some of which were under other titles such as *The Fantastic Four*, *The Avengers*, and *Jungle Action*, new readers can be overwhelmed and uncertain of where to begin reading. As with many large comic book companies, Marvel also references other comics within one narrative arc in order to urge the reader to buy other comic titles; for example, the *Black Panther: Intergalactic Empire* #13 (Coates, 2019) includes references to *Shuri* #1-5 and Coates' earlier arc of the *Black Panther* (2016) comic*.* Marvel's films, on the other hand, are much more accessible and present simpler, self-contained narratives that can be understood in isolation. Whilst analysing every retelling of *Black Panther* is outside the scope of this chapter, I will focus on the longer-running titles such as those by Reginald Hudlin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, as well as the film adaptation which was significant in introducing new audiences to Afrofuturism. A survey of the multiple iterations of Black Panther from his first appearance in comics in the 1960s to his current incarnation as a Marvel hero shows the development of the character and the world he inhabits from a utopian, technologically advanced African future in early storylines, to an oppressive empire in the most recent series.

Each comic series and the film adaptation offer different perspectives on Black futurity, through the artwork, the narrative, and the world-building. Wakanda, the prosperous, isolated African country that Black Panther rules, has been considered an example of Afrofuturism because of its advanced technologies and economic and political self-sufficiency. Wakanda and *Black Panther* more broadly have been one of the few examples of Afrofuturism that speculates about a possible idyllic futurity for some Black people. In its first appearance in the *Fantastic Four* comics of the 1960s, Wakanda was depicted as a utopia because of its wealth and access to consumer goods. However, in the more contemporary comics, it is portrayed as a dystopian, intergalactic, colonial power. Each of these visions of Wakanda under various creative teams, can be considered as a speculation about Black futurity and the multiple directions such futures could take. By analysing the *Black Panther* and associated comics through the lens of Afrofuturism, Wakanda can be read as a site of changing perceptions about Black futurity. I will argue that a 'better' world in the early comics

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was dependant on Wakanda's isolation, creating a distinction between those with access to the wealth and technology of Wakanda and those without such access. Despite the importance of the early comics regarding their pioneering representation of Black characters, the Wakanda depicted in them recreated inequality rather than challenged it. In more recent comics, the isolationist approach is increasingly criticised, challenged, and eventually depicted as a cause of Wakanda's internal issues.

There has been little research into the significance of Wakanda within discussions about Black comic characters. Tim Posada describes Wakanda as a "unique example of countermemory" that "interrupts hegemonic understandings of African history" because it reimagines a precolonial African country that remains free from European colonialism (2019, 9–10). Martin Lund mentions the early depictions of Wakanda, situating it amongst the backdrop of other representations of Africa in western media and noting the continuation of colonial imagery within the advanced nation (2016, 7–8). The majority of existing scholarship about the *Black Panther* narratives usually engages with representation and characterisation, as Black Panther was the first Black superhero in mainstream comics. This chapter will similarly discuss the impact of representation, but I am more concerned with the changing approaches to Wakanda's isolation and the way this impacts the depiction of Black futurity.

The character was created in 1966 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, who are well-known for creating characters that have become commonplace within mainstream popular culture. Adilifu Nama's *Super Black* is one of the earliest attempts to engage critically with Black superheroes, describing them as "cultural ciphers for accepted wisdom regarding racial justice and the shifting politics of black racial formation in America" (2011, 4). Nama describes his methodology as "*critically celebratory*", as he attempts to "reclaim black superheroes from the […] cliched assumptions used to examine them that diminish their sociocultural significance and view the cultural work they perform as tired tropes about blackness primarily written by white men" (2011, 5). This chapter will follow a

similar path, noting the importance of the character and Wakanda culturally despite the absence of

Black creatives directing the character and narrative until the 1990s.

Nama also raises a pervasive issue surrounding Black comic characters who are often

criticised for being inauthentic characterisations of Black people by white creatives. Though this

thesis is about the way Black creators have imagined Black futurity, it is also important to note that

Black Panther was initially created by two Jewish-American men, and many of the other Black comic

book heroes prior to the 1990s were written and illustrated by predominantly white creatives.[7]

Whilst the diversity of writing and artistic staff in international comic publishers has improved over

time,[8] and contemporary independent comics by Black creative teams are increasingly recognised

and accessible, older comics are a complicated terrain as they do not typically involve Black creatives

but are works of speculative fiction that occasionally place Black characters at the centre during a

time when this marginal representation was celebrated because it had not been done before. Nama

frames his approach to supposed "inauthentic" characters as follows:

> Rather than examining black superhero representations in terms of how they are
> inadequate, underdeveloped or inauthentic figures conjured up by white writers
> and artists, I view them as significant (even if problematic) expressions of a
> science fiction (re)imagining of black racial being that reflects and reveals a
> myriad of racial assumptions, expectations, perceptions and possibilities. (2009,
> 135)

I will take a similar approach, as older *Black Panther* comics often provided a foundation for

the subsequent narratives written by Black creatives that will also be discussed in this chapter, such

as those by Reginald Hudlin in the early 2000s, and the current *Black Panther* comics by Ta-Nehisi

Coates. The discussion around authenticity also appears in Afrofuturism more broadly as a genre, as

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[7] Marvel's other notable Black superhero, Luke Cage, was created during the Blaxploitation-era of the 1970s, yet the writers and artists involved were four white Americans. Similarly, DC's Black Lightning, and Storm from Marvel's *X-Men* are all significant Black superheroes that have had little or no input by Black creators; Kenneth Ghee discusses the authenticity of Black comic characters at length, criticising the representation of Black characters in mainstream comics, as opposed to independent comics by Black authors (2013, 246).
[8] The diversity initiative was not wholly supported, as illustrated by the cancellation of various *Black Panther* comic series.

discussed and explored in more depth within the introduction to this thesis. Regarding *Black Panther*, the character and Wakanda have remained favourites for Black fans of speculative fiction even though the initial comics are not always viewed favourably by contemporary readers. The *Black Panther* narrative and the world of Wakanda have become a form of Afrofuturist content because of Wakanda's technological development and Black Panther's use of this technology to defend the nation, as well as the series' signalling to Black culture, history, and politics which has become more visible in later comics. Whilst authorship is important, particularly as there has been a lack of Black creatives involved in the comics industry and in mainstream speculative fiction more broadly, it is not the only criterion that I, fans, or scholars rely on to label a text as Afrofuturistic.

The chapter is arranged chronologically, and the first section explores the earliest appearance of Black Panther in the *Fantastic Four* comics during the 1960s. The absence of Black cultural influences within this early narrative limits the Afrofuturist potential of the story, though it provided a foundation for the following storylines that are often considered to be examples of Afrofuturism. This section is followed by an exploration of the *Jungle Action* series published throughout the 1970s, a longer arc that is often considered the first Black Panther series. I argue that whilst Wakanda is considered a utopia because of its wealth and technological advances, it is limited by its isolationism. This strategy has prevented the nation from being colonised but also prevented Wakanda from intervening in the struggles for independence or against racism across the Black diaspora. Wakanda's insularity ensures that it is safe, yet the nation is inaccessible, nor does it appear to offer international aid. The better world that Wakanda could help build is impeded by the nation's isolation. I then analyse the *Black Panther* comics from the early 2000s in which Wakanda has become involved in international politics but refuses to share resources with western powers and be complicit in the economic inequalities that have allowed these countries to become wealthy. Wakanda tries to form a new approach to the future of the nation rather than recreate the pattern of exploitation that defines western capitalism. I then explore the film adaptation and its attempt to address different approaches to Black futurity from isolationism to forming a militant,

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internationalist movement. Finally, I return to comics, and will examine the recent *Black Panther*

series written by Ta-Nehisi Coates. These comics are a departure from the previous narratives and

take a critical approach to the origins of Wakanda. The series considers the tensions between

preservation of traditions and adapting to change as well as the complexities of forming nations and

empires that are utopian for a minority but dependant on the oppression of others. For each

iteration of *Black Panther* examined in this chapter, Wakanda's isolationism is a prominent theme

that has a substantial impact on the way the comics and film depict an improved future. This chapter

will explore the impact of isolationism on Black futurity and consider the ways recent comics have

justified or challenged Wakanda's insularity.

Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's depiction of a Futuristic Africa

Black Panther first appeared in issues #52-53 (1966) of Marvel's *Fantastic Four* (1961-) series,

created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. Comprised of characters Mister Fantastic, the

Invisible Girl, the Human Torch, and the Thing, the *Fantastic Four* became one of Marvel's well-

known superhero-teams, setting the scene for similar heroic team stories such as the *X-Men* and

Avengers comics, which both began in 1963.[9] The Black Panther's introduction to Marvel in 1966,

however, was confusing. The character is considered to be one of Marvel's heroes, yet some readers

during the 1960s considered him a villain.[10] This may be due to the prejudices and expectations of

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[9] *Fantastic Four, X-Men*, and *The Avengers* have also received animated spin-off series', and multiple cinematic adaptations, though the *Fantastic Four* films have never rivalled the success of *X-Men* or, in particular, *The Avengers* series.

[10] In his analysis of the introduction of Black Panther*,* Matthew Tetusch mentions the confused reader response towards the character's identity as hero or villain that is evident in fan letters (2017). These issues of *Fantastic Four* have been reprinted in multiple volumes and redrawn, making the comics more vivid than their original printing. However, letters pages, featuring comments from fans and responses from the editor, are not always reprinted in new collections; for example, *Fantastic Four* #52-53, whilst included in the collection titled *Panther's Rage,* do not reprint the letters section. Yet, these same issues, when reprinted in *Fantastic Four* collections, do include these letters. Accessing the original copies of the comics is difficult, given the collectability of these early issues (bids on said issues can start from near £1000 for ones in good condition), so this chapter is reliant on reprinted collections in the form of eBooks, some of which do include the letters to the editors.

certain readers, who assumed that the only Black character in the comic series and Marvel comics in general, must be the villain. The narrative initially implied that Black Panther was the antagonist as his first appearance ends with a battle against the *Fantastic Four,* who had long been established as the 'good guys.' The Black Panther invites the Fantastic Four to Wakanda with the intention of testing his combat skills against the group, in preparation for his battle against Ulysses Klaw. This is all part of Black Panther's goal to avenge the death of his father and ensure the safety of Wakanda from the exploitation of Klaw. Whilst he does not intend to harm the Fantastic Four, he does lure them into an ambush, only stopping his attack when the Four have clearly triumphed. The cover and opening page of issue #52 also reinforce this reading of Black Panther's character, by depicting him leaping from the shadows onto the unsuspecting Fantastic Four (see Figure 2.1). The first page

Figure 2.1 The cover and first page of Fantastic Four #52 (1966). The way Black Panther is posed make it unclear as to whether he is a friend of the heroic Fantastic Four or a new enemy.

further implies that Black Panther may be a new villainous character, describing the Fantastic Four as being "trapped in the incredible realm of … Black Panther" (Lee and Kirby 1966a).

The confusion surrounding Black Panther's identity as hero or villain is apparent as one fan letter sent to Lee and Kirby by Darryl Miller highlights. Miller refers to Black Panther as "superior to run-of-the-mill super-space villains"(2017a), implying that he perceives Black Panther as oppositional to the heroic Fantastic Four. This is echoed by another fan letter from Alan Finn who expresses his disdain for Marvel villains: "The Black Panther stinks! A lot of your other villains do…" (2017a). However, one reader, Henry B. Clay, III, was celebratory of Marvel's inclusion of Black character in other comics and particularly jubilant about Black Panther's presence in *Fantastic Four*: "but now a real live Negro super-hero!!! This almost had me doing flip-flops and walking around in a daze, saying, 'This is good' […] I hope to see him in his own comic soon" (2017b). Despite the confusion for some readers, others such as Clay, saw Black Panther as the writers intended and were excited by the first Black superhero.

Issue #52 begins with the Fantastic Four flying above an American city in a spacecraft that was sent by "an African Chieftain, called … the Black Panther." Expressing surprise at the idea of any technology, especially technology that has surpassed that of the US, being developed in Africa, the Thing asks "how does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gizmo?" (Lee and Kirby 1966b). This dialogue on the first page introduces the misconceptions of the west – namely that Africa as a continent is backward and incapable of creating anything of scientific or technological importance – that Lee and Kirby intended to challenge through their depiction of Wakanda. The Thing's reference to *Tarzan*, a popular series of films, based on the books by Edgar Rice Burroughs from the early twentieth century, highlights the way western perceptions about Africa were often framed by popular culture.[11] These films and books were themselves based on

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[11] Kevin Dunn discusses the tropes in Western films about Africa, including the figure of Tarzan, describing the many Tarzan films as "arguably the largest shaper of the West's perception of Africa" (1996, 155).

false representations of Africa that were shrouded in western colonial and imperialist thought. Such films focussed on the white protagonist with non-white characters only occupying the background as figures used to show the otherness of Africa. Whilst Black Panther appears alongside the *Fantastic Four*, he is certainly not a background character, though his initial appearance is brief. Much of issue #53 revolves around T'Challa, who bears the title of Black Panther, and his decision to invite the Fantastic Four to Wakanda so he can test his own combat skills in preparation for a fight against his arch-enemy Ulysses Klaw.[12] Klaw is a reoccurring character who attempts to seize the metal, vibranium, "Wakanda's greatest natural resource." In the *Fantastic Four* storyline, Klaw's pursuit of the vibranium has caused the death of T'Challa's father, T'Chaka, who bore the title of Black Panther previously.[13] The ambiguous position of the Black Panther as either hero or villain is rectified as issue #53 draws to a close; Klaw is temporarily defeated, and T'Challa makes a vow to "pledge my fortune, my powers – my very life – to the service of mankind" (Lee and Kirby 1966b).

The Black Panther is introduced to readers as a powerful character due to his physical training and intellect, as he matches the skill of the Fantastic Four. As well as the technological aspect of the Black Panther and the country he rules, some of the character's skills, such as night vision, are the result of secret rituals and the consumption of herbs that grow in Wakanda (Lee and Kirby 1966b). The combination of the technological with folklore and spiritual practices indicates "the convergence of [an imagined] African tradition with advanced science and technology" (Nama 2009, 138). It is unlikely that Lee and Kirby were intending to represent actual African rituals or practices, though they were intent on sharing antiracist messages. For example, Lee writes: "Bigotry and racism are among the deadliest social ills plaguing the world today" ("Stan's Soapbox, November 1968," reprinted in *Intergalactic Empire* #13). It is also worth noting that Lee's and Kirby's stance on

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[12] As with many superhero comics, the story of T'Challa versus Klaw is retold and reimagined in later comics and, more recently, in the film adaptation.
[13] Black Panther is a title that links the individual to Bast, the Panther god that many Wakandans worship. This relationship with various deities is not explored in the *Fantastic Four* comics, but is developed in later *Black Panther* narratives.

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racism did not necessarily mean Marvel wanted the Black Panther character associated with the

radical politics of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense which was also founded in 1966. Indeed,

the character was briefly renamed as Black Leopard in *Fantastic Four* #119 (1971) by Roy Thomas,

John Buscema and Joe Sinnott.[14] Nevertheless this "convergence" between imagined spiritual

practices and technology reappears in later comics and not only makes Black Panther and the world

of Wakanda memorable within Marvel's expanding comic and cinematic universe, but it is also one

of the signifiers of the comic's place within Afrofuturism. Whilst the religious and spiritual practices

of Wakanda are developed further in later comics, the merging of the spiritual with technology,

often thought of as binary opposites, is imagined as commonplace; Wakanda has technology that is

wholly futuristic but not at the expense of spiritual traditions. Rather, there is harmony between the

technology they use, and the various religious beliefs held by Wakandans. Though Lee and Kirby

struggled to avoid colonial imagery, as I will discuss later, and did not develop Wakanda extensively,

the *Fantastic Four* comics remain significant, if only as the foundation that allowed later creative

teams to further develop Wakanda and the Black Panther character.

As well as depicting the first Black superhero, the two *Fantastic Four* issues introduced

Wakanda, the country located somewhere in East Africa but isolated from the rest of the world. As

Nama argues: "most importantly, Wakanda is a scientific wonderland where African tradition and

advanced scientific technology are fused together to create a hi-tech African Shangri-La nation-

state" (Nama 2009, 137). He also notes:

> The use of a third-world country as a high-tech base of operation for Black
> Panther is a pioneering representation given that New York City, a recurring
> symbol of Western modernity with its towering skyscrapers and bright lights, has
> for decades occupied our collective imagination as 'the city that never sleeps' and
> played a central role as the urban terrain of choice for a multitude of
> superheroes. (2009b, 137)

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[14] In *Fantastic Four* #119, T'Challa explains that the name change was because he was indifferent to the Black
Panther Party's politics and changing his title was the only way to avoid any association (Cronin 2018). Whilst
segregation is acknowledged briefly in the issue, the name change drew more attention to the character and
the realities of racism and segregation. Black Leopard was short-lived, and in Black Panther's subsequent
appearance in *Avengers* (1971) he is called T'Challa.

Though there is little exploration of Wakanda more generally across these two issues, there are

some glimpses of the nation and its citizens. Lee and Kirby establish a pattern in the *Fantastic Four*

issues, by presenting a common western assumption about the 'dark continent,' and then

challenging this within the narrative, often with examples of futuristic technology. For example, the

reader is introduced to wireless communication used by the Wakandan emissary to contact the

Black Panther. Mister Fantastic's scepticism that the device could "transmit a message half-way

'round the globe" is intended to speak to the thoughts of the reader who might have also doubted

the capabilities of such technology, especially when created by an African nation. This scepticism

about African countries was common in American popular culture, and, I would argue, it continues

into the present, if in more subtle ways.[15] Nevertheless, the pervasive image of the 'dark continent'

Figure 2.2 The first depiction of Wakanda appears to recreate an image of Africa as perceived by western audiences.

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[15] Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk discusses these images of Africa in western media, and notes the power these images have on the perceptions of the west: "if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner" (2009).

was partly used as narrative device; by presenting an image of Africa that would have closely aligned with western perceptions, Lee and Kirby then countered these assumptions with Wakanda's "advanced technology."

Whilst Nama is often celebratory of Black Panther and the representation of Wakanda in his discussion about Black superheroes,[16] Lee and Kirby often unintentionally reinforced the prejudices they hoped to challenge. In the first view of Wakanda, the nation looks no different to 'Africa' in western popular culture. Lee and Kirby do not recreate any identifiable style of African architecture, nor do they make Wakanda appear as an advanced nation in the initial panel (see Figure 2.2), though access to technology is what makes Wakanda unique to the rest of the world. Though there are hints at the access to technology throughout issue #52, such as the weaponry in Figure 2.2 and the "man-made jungle" that the Fantastic Four fly through as they enter the country, Wakanda is unremarkable for the most part. The country continues to appear in a similar way throughout McGregor's *Jungle Action* series of the 1970s. It was not until the 1990s *Black Panther* series that the portrayal of Wakanda mirrored its access to advanced technology.

Black Panther and other Wakandan citizens are illustrated wearing animal-print loincloths and togas, and some wear animal headdresses (see Figure 2.2). Rather than presenting attire that is influenced by research into actual African cultural traditions, these comics recreate the imagery of Tarzan films that the Thing refers to in the first page of *Fantastic Four* #52. By contrast, the *Black Panther* film adaptation made a concerted effort to depict a futuristic African society but also visually represented the multiplicity of African cultures. For example, in the scene in which T'Challa is challenged for the title of Black Panther by another leader, M'Baku, the various communities in Wakanda come together

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[16] Martin Lund has noted that Nama's selective reading of *Black Panther* "evinces a confirmation bias common in scholarship on comics and identity" (Lund 2016, 3).

Figure 2.3 The costuming in the film adaptation was influenced by a variety of cultural attire across the African continent.

for the occasion. Alongside the mountain, surrounding the waterfall, each group has a distinctive style of dress that can be traced to different African countries and cultures (see Figure 2.3). In the film, the Border tribe's attire was inspired by "Lesotho shepherds,"; the River tribe's appearance was influenced by the "Tsamai and Suri tribes of southwestern Ethiopia"; and the Jabari were based on the "Karo tribe in Ethiopia and Dogon tribe in Mali."[17] Though this has also been criticised for lumping distinctive cultures into one to form Wakandan tribes (Edoro and Shringarpure 2018), and for potentially appropriating African cultures (Chutel 2017), the film was at least recognisably influenced by actual existing cultures. By contrast, the influence of African cultures is markedly absent from the earlier comics, though Lee and Kirby do allude to some abstract culture through the

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[17] These influences on Wakandan aesthetics are not named in the film as Africa in the Marvel universe may not necessarily reflect the continent in reality, but these designs are referred to in *The Art of Wakanda* (2018), which discusses all of the visual aspects of *Black Panther*, such as costume design, hairstyling, and scenery (Roussos 2018, 30, 34, 40).

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"traditional dances" and "ceremonies" of Wakanda's citizens (Lee and Kirby 1966b), yet these were mostly superficial additions that were underdeveloped.

The connection between Black Panther and Afrofuturism is partly dependent on cultural representation. Although Lee's and Kirby's creation of a Black superhero and a technologically advanced African nation was a step toward diverse depictions of the future, their inability or unwillingness to be influenced by existing African or African diasporic cultures raises questions about the early comic's links with Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is, as mentioned in the thesis introduction, an amorphous term and the applicability of Afrofuturism varies depending on artist, critic, or time period. However, Black cultures are by many definitions important to the genre. Ingrid LaFleur defines Afrofuturism as "way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens" (quoted in Womack 2013, 9). Lee's and Kirby's Black Panther, by this definition, would not qualify as a work of Afrofuturism, despite the portrayal of a futuristic environment that includes Black people. Even if they were not interested in weaving any authentic African cultures into the narrative and intended to create a wholly new world and culture instead, their Wakanda of the 1960s was closer to a recreation of "Africa" in western media than a creative depiction of a futuristic society. As a result, Wakanda, as imagined by Lee and Kirby, is created in contrast to the usual environments of *Fantastic Four*; the high-rises and built-up metropolis are swapped for a pastoral nation surrounded by jungle. Yet whilst these issues of *Fantastic Four* are not examples of Afrofuturism, the comics and the Black Panther character have been the basis for recreation and reimagination by Black creatives since the 1960s and have been included in many discussions of Afrofuturism since 2016, some of which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Furthermore, these *Fantastic Four* issues often cater to the gaze of white, western fans instead of addressing their false assumptions, which seemed to be Lee's and Kirby's

intention. Indeed, the narration alongside the panel in Figure 2.2 invites readers to "do what few western men have ever done […] Let us gaze upon the enthroned figure of him who rules the Wakandans" (Lee and Kirby 1966a). Rather than challenging misconceptions and highlighting the agency of the Black Panther and Wakandans, the narration uses the exoticism of the location to capture the reader's attention, centring the gaze of the predominantly white, western, male audience. The agency of the Black Panther, and Wakanda in general, is still directed by the American Fantastic Four. After T'Challa triumphs against his nemesis Ulysses Klaw in *Fantastic Four* #53, he seems uncertain about his purpose, stating: "I cannot believe the Black Panther will stalk no more" (Lee and Kirby 1966b). In response, the Fantastic Four place their hands on T'Challa's shoulder and urge him to become a "dedicated, powerful fighter against injustice!" (see Figure 2.4). By the time Lee and Kirby were producing these issues of *Fantastic Four*, countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and the Democratic Republic of Congo had already declared their independence. Yet, T'Challa seems unable to envisage a role for himself and Wakanda in providing assistance to the citizens of other African countries, despite the proximity of African anticolonial struggles in real life during this period. Instead of exploring African independence through Wakanda, as the later *Black Panther* comics by Reginald Hudlin did, the *Fantastic Four* issues remained an example of Africa, and by extension Black futures, viewed through the gaze of the west. This limited conception of Black agency continues in the exchanges between characters regarding Wakanda's access to consumer goods, which is highlighted as an indicator of the nation's progress.

Utopian science fiction was a popular trend just before Lee and Kirby wrote the comic that introduced Wakanda and Black Panther to Marvel fans. Science fiction of the 1950s and into the early 1960s was "widely utopian in character" and a result of the "economic prosperity and the postwar political dominance of the US" (Lemieux and Rosenthall 1985, 150).[18] Lemieux and Rosenthall use the term "technological utopias" to refer to some of the popular science fiction literature of the 1950s, which explored the ways new technology could support utopian societies. This type of utopian science fiction appears to have influenced Lee's and Kirby's vision of Wakanda; in Figure

Figure 2.4 The Fantastic Four inspire the Black Panther to action.

2.5, the Fantastic Four observe Wakanda, noting the numerous chrome wires and tubes. These features are purely aesthetic, though the characters describe this part of Wakanda as an impressive "man-made jungle" in which "the entire topography and flora are electronically controlled mechanical apparatus!" This reminds the reader that Wakanda is technologically advanced yet hidden somewhere in an unidentified African jungle.

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[18] This is not to say that utopian science fiction was the only type of speculative literature during this period, and this did change by the mid-1960s when science fiction gradually became more dystopian, influenced by the ongoing civil rights and anti-war movements. However, utopian science fiction was more common around the time Lee and Kirby were creating Wakanda.

Although Wakanda is intended to be a speculation about an idyllic Africa that has been able to flourish without western influence, the utopian aspects of the country are often visually represented through consumer goods and displays of extravagant wealth, whilst the nation's political or social infrastructure is barely mentioned. The Fantastic Four make numerous remarks about the Black Panther's access to consumer electronics and home furnishings in order to highlight the wealth of Wakanda as a whole. In issue #53, Black Panther rewards the Fantastic Four's triumph over his attempted ambush of them with a "heroes' ceremony" and welcomes them to his palace. The team are in awe of the consumer goods such as the "elaborate stereo music system – complete
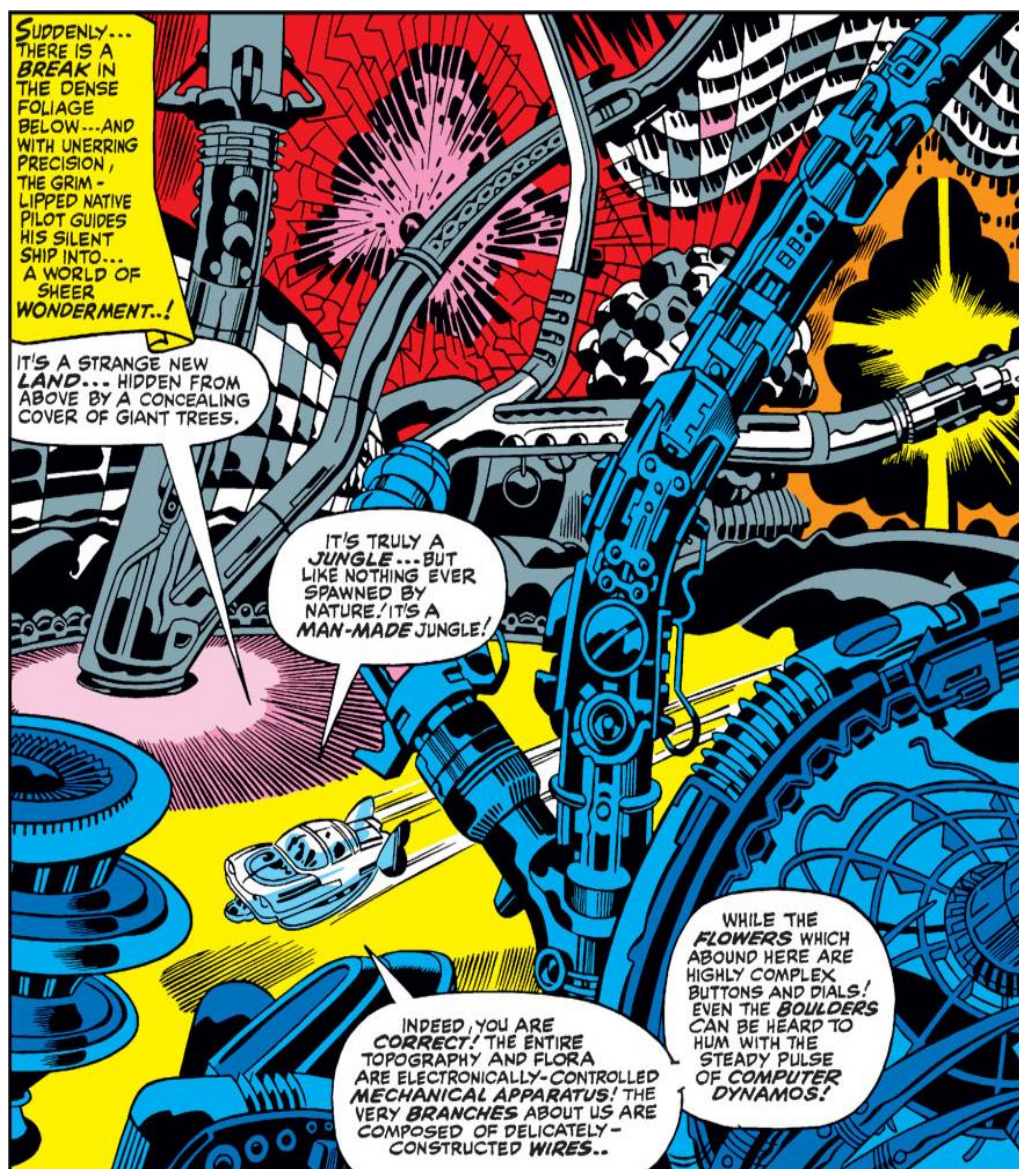

Figure 2.5 The Fantastic Four fly through the "man-made jungle."

with tape recorder!" (see Figure 2.6), which is at once a piece of technology that would have been familiar to most readers in the 1960s but surpasses the everyday audio system by being "elaborate." In response to the Fantastic Four's surprise, T'Challa explains while casually lighting a cigarette that "I can afford to pamper myself – to indulge every whim – enjoy every luxury! I'm one of the richest men in the world!" The Human Torch likens Black Panther to Hugh Hefner, which conjures images of a wealthy, playboy lifestyle that would have certainly challenged dominant images of Africa at the time, but also reinforced the relationship between utopian Black futures and access to excessive wealth, catering to a consumerist and western perception of a utopian lifestyle. Lund notes Wakanda's acceptance of capitalism in this narrative, arguing that the initial comics thus offer an "Americanised" Africa.

What does this say about Black futurity? At least for Lee and Kirby, it seems to indicate that a positive or progressive future for Black Africans remains rooted in a capitalist ideology that mirrors that of the US; the country's access to wealth and ownership of technology are more valued than its collective expertise in using vibranium in their communication devices, health care, and weaponry. Despite Wakanda's advancement as a nation, it is still following the economic principles of the US rather than developing its own distinctive economic and social structures. Again, the lack of a "black cultural lens" that is integral to Afrofuturism is notably absent – these initial comics, aside from the

Figure 2.6 Black Panther welcomes the Fantastic Four into his private quarters.

idea of Wakanda, do not really offer new or diverse perspectives on the future, even though the introduction of the first Black superhero was a form of innovation in the world of comics.

Wakandans and "inferior outworlders": Isolation in *Jungle Action*

After his somewhat complicated introduction into the Marvel comic universe, Black Panther appeared in various other Marvel comics, such as *Tales of Suspense* (1959-1968), *Avengers* (1963-), and *Jungle Action* (1972-1976). *Jungle Action* is often considered Black Panther's first solo comic as he is the main protagonist rather than a supporting character. *Jungle Action* was first published by Atlas Comics in the 1950s, which then became part of Marvel who reprinted and redistributed the comic in the early 1970s. The comic told various stories that were all evocative of Tarzan films, and the protagonists of the narrative were, in the words of writer Don McGregor, "playing Great white God to the poor black natives" (Stewart 2008, 57). Lee's and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* #52-53 offered something completely new to western audiences; however, they struggled to avoid recreating colonial imagery. It is also unsurprising that this imagery continued into the *Jungle Action* comics considering the title's previous storylines. The first issue of *Jungle Action* included a story starring "Lorna the Jungle Queen" in which a white, blonde-haired woman is rescued by a giant gorilla and later saves the gorilla from the local "warriors of Itibi" who perceive it as a threat (Rico et al. 2011). Alongside the "Lorna, the Jungle Queen" narrative, two other stories following "Tharn the Magnificent" and "Jann of the Jungle" tell a similar tale of white men or women saving "the helpless jungle people" (Rico et al. 2011). These stories were retellings of the narratives that appeared in the *Jungle Action* comics of the 1950s. However, *Jungle Action* #5 was a new, standalone Black Panther story, with the official *Jungle Action* Black Panther narrative beginning in the sixth issue.

Marvel asked Don McGregor, a white proof-reader for the *Jungle Action* series, if he would become the writer and take the title in a new direction. Prior to starting, McGregor had asked Marvel, "What's with all the blonde jungle gods and goddesses in Africa?" (Stewart 2008, 59),

indicating an awareness of the absence of Black characters which he hoped to rectify. Despite the questionable title, the *Jungle Action* issues added depth to Black Panther's character. T'Challa was not just the aloof royal, but rather a character that struggled to balance the traditions of an isolated Wakanda with his involvement in American affairs through his love interest, Monica Lynne. The *Jungle Action* series also expanded Wakanda, depicting a more complex nation than the sketchily depicted Wakanda that had appeared briefly in the 1960s issues of *Fantastic Four*. *Jungle Action* issues #6-7 featured a map of Wakanda and expanded the country from a palace surrounded by generic straw huts into a larger nation. Yet McGregor's depiction of the high-tech African country continued to appear visually as a pastoral village, seemingly ignoring the nation's access to advanced technology unless it was necessary for the storyline. The 1970s *Jungle Action: Black Panther* comics also involved a Black artist, Billy Graham, for the first time. Described as one of the "earliest African-American artists" in comics (Stewart, 2008, 58),[19] Graham became a noteworthy comic artist after pencilling and inking the pages of Marvel's other Black superhero comic, *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* (1972-1974).

The *Jungle Action* comics featuring Black Panther were "centred […] on the Wakandans, T'Challa's tribe, and the burden of being their king" (Stewart 2008, 60). This narrative theme concerning T'Challa's unwillingness to be the monarch of Wakanda reoccurs in later comics, particularly the recent narratives written by Ta-Nehisi Coates which I discuss later. In McGregor's run, T'Challa's ambivalence about being Wakanda's monarch is a result of his relationship with Monica Lynne, an African American singer. Lynne's presence is perceived by some Wakandans as an indication that T'Challa is rejecting his nation's traditions. T'Challa's relationship with an "inferior outworlder" (McGregor, *Jungle Action* #6) is a point of growing tension throughout the comics, and T'Challa is aware that Monica has "faced great hostility, since she's been my guest" (McGregor,

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[19] There is no indication as to whether Graham had any involvement in the storyline, and it is therefore difficult to credit the *Jungle Action* comics as a Black-authored text in the same way that the narratives by Reginald Hudlin, Christopher Priest, Roxane Gay, and Ta-Nehisi Coates are undoubtedly written by Black authors.

Jungle Action #7) at the palace. Wakanda's citizens are repeatedly shown as unwelcoming of

Monica's presence, often referring to her only as "outworlder" rather than by name, despite her

efforts to fit in with Wakandan culture. One of the reoccurring criticisms about Wakanda and the

kind of Black futurity it depicts is that it is founded upon isolation. The Wakandans seem to have the

technology and knowledge of the outside world yet the nation, for most of the comics prior to the

1990s and the film adaptation, remains hidden from the rest of the world. This is usually explained

as a necessary defensive strategy that has saved Wakanda from being exploited by other countries

for resources, particularly vibranium. Yet it also means that the rest of Africa and the African

diaspora are cut off from the idyllic and prosperous futurity Wakanda holds and that this future is

only available for a small number of Black people who are, in *Jungle Action*, extremely resistant to

sharing it with others.

This debate surrounding the morality of Wakanda's isolation is also explored in the film

adaptation. Momtaza Mehri discusses Wakandan isolation in reference to the film, though this can

also be applied to the McGregor *Jungle Action* run:

> On first viewing, Wakanda thrilled me. It then left me with a deep sadness I
> couldn't quite explain. Wakanda's isolationism, when thrown into sharp relief,
> implies its ruling elite did not intervene during the transatlantic slave trade, the
> Scramble for Africa and ensuing colonization by European powers, apartheid, the
> assassinations of anti-imperialist leaders, neo-colonial exploitation, Jim/Jane
> Crow, mass incarceration across the diaspora, the AIDS crisis, or even genocide.
> (2018)

How can the nation remain uninvolved while its neighbouring countries struggle against imperialism

and neo-colonialism, and the broader diaspora have to navigate racism and inequality? The future

offered by Wakanda is one that excludes the majority of Black people and is unwelcoming to

"outsiders." Whilst the distinction between Wakandans and "others" becomes a significant issue in

the film adaptation, these issues of *Jungle Action* indicate that the Black futurity envisaged in the

Marvel universe continues to create borders that exclude the diaspora from life in a futuristic nation.

Afrofuturism is considered a way of including visions of Black futures that have previously been

absent from many speculative narratives. In these visions, Black cultural expression in its various forms is imperative. However, in *Jungle Action* the treatment of Monica Lynne shows that only some cultures are deemed worthy of being included in this Black future.
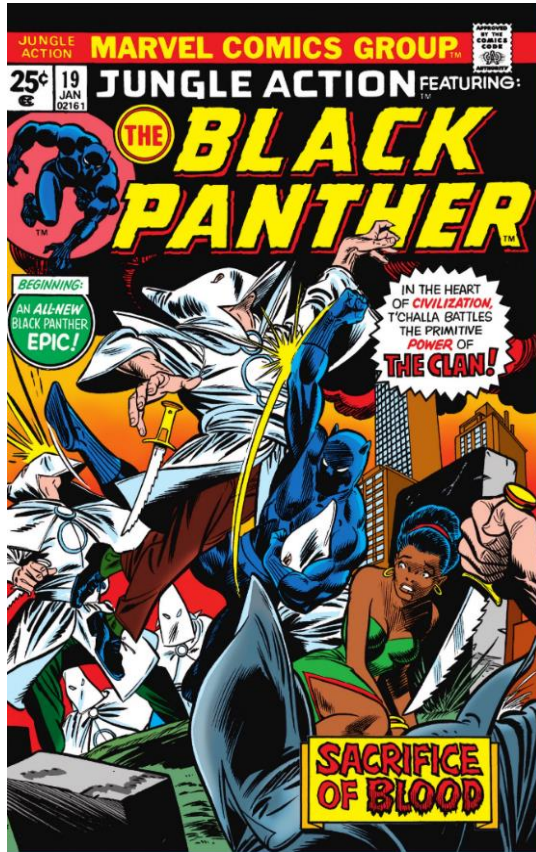

Figure 2.7: The cover of Jungle Action #19 (1975) showing Black Panther fighting members of the KKK to protect Monica Lynne.

However, McGregor's later *Jungle Action* comics tentatively addressed the lack of support from Wakanda for the Black diaspora, focussing on racism in the US. These issues signalled a departure from the escapism that had characterised many of McGregor's previous issues (some of which included T'Challa fighting dinosaurs and were reminiscent of previous *Jungle Action* stories), as well as Lee's and Kirby's introduction of Black Panther into Marvel Comics. In *Jungle Action* #19 (1975), Black Panther heads to the US with Monica Lynne, following the suspicious death of her sister. During T'Challa's investigation he encounters the "primitive" Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and has to fight them

to save himself and Monica Lynne (see Figures 2.7 and 2.8).[20]

This storyline continues for four issues and revolves around the KKK who have targeted Monica Lynne's family, and Black Panther aims to defend them. The memorable image in *Jungle Action* #22 features Black Panther, strapped to a burning cross by the KKK, struggling to free himself

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[20] McGregor recalls being asked where all the white characters were in his issues (Stewart 2008, 60), though Marvel had instructed him to set the comic in Africa, where there would, presumably, be predominantly Black characters. The KKK plotline introduced more white characters but also the subject of racism which had been broached in *Fantastic Four* #119 (1971) in which T'Challa travels to the US but is arrested and imprisoned for thirty days for not carrying an identification card and being assumed by authorities to be a member of the Black Panther Party. See Brian Cronin, "When Black Panther Re-Named Himself 'Black Leopard'" https://www.cbr.com/black-panther-black-leopard-renamed/ (accessed 15 April 2020).

and retaliating by using the cross he is strapped to as a weapon against the hooded "fanatics" (see

Figure 2.8) (McGregor, Graham, and Buckler 1975). These issues were the first instances where

white supremacy appeared explicitly in a *Black Panther* storyline. White supremacy and racism had

been repeatedly challenged by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements throughout the 1950s-

1970s but remained a pervasive issue. That *Jungle Action* depicted Black Panther fighting the KKK

was a dramatic change to Marvel's previous attempts to distance the character from contemporary

American politics.

Nevertheless, the question of Wakanda's distance from the African diaspora arises again in

this storyline. T'Challa is confronted with the violent and deadly nature of white supremacy first-

hand in the fight against the KKK members, who almost best him despite his powers and strength.

During his battle against them, he focuses on defending himself, Monica Lynne, and her family.

There is no larger intervention in combatting white supremacy more broadly nor any pledge to lend

Figure 2.8: Strapped to a burning cross, Black Panther charges at the fanatics.

Wakanda's aid to the struggle. T'Challa has the power to offer Wakandan support in the fight against

racism in America, which indeed he does in later comics and the film adaptation, yet in McGregor's

run T'Challa only confronts racism and white supremacy when he or the Lynne family are personally

threatened. The storyline is certainly poignant but also highlights the limits of the *Jungle Action*

comics as an exploration of Black futurity or even contemporary Black politics and experience.

Wakanda's prosperity and progressive future are once again limited to a very select group that

remains isolated and uninvolved in the larger issues that other Black communities across the

diaspora have to face, in this case, the existence of violent white supremacy in the US.

McGregor's *Jungle Action* narrative was cancelled in 1976 due to "low sales" (Stewart 2008,

61). Stewart notes that *Jungle Action* "wasn't connected to the rest of the Marvel universe" which

may have had a negative impact on sales figures (2008, 61).[21] Shortly after *Jungle Action*'s

cancellation, Jack Kirby began a new *Black Panther* arc. Kirby was writer, artist, and editor for the

Black Panther comics, and therefore had complete creative control of the narrative. He had not read

McGregor's comics, so the new series was a complete departure from the previous narrative and

was more of a typical superhero story, though elements of the *Jungle Action* title reappeared.[22]

McGregor's and Kirby's narratives were the longest running comics focused on the Black Panther,

though the character appeared in other Marvel titles. However, none of these narratives involved

Black creatives and despite the considerations of race and racism on the pages of *Jungle Action,*

there seemed to be few changes in Marvel's hiring policies. This absence of Black creatives is most

apparent when considering the culture of Wakanda, which continued to be devoid of recognisable

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[21] Most of Marvel's heroes or heroic teams interacted with other characters from different comics and the storylines of multiple publications intertwined to create what is now referred to as the Marvel universe. In some comics, particularly those published by Marvel or DC, captions within the narrative direct readers to another comic title. These are either to add more depth to the narrative or as "crossovers" which signal a momentous event within the wider, multi-comic narrative. Both methods encourage readers to discover other titles that they may have otherwise been uninterested in or had not read before and became a way to sell more comic titles to readers. This practice continues in some Marvel and DC titles though independent publishers rarely do this.
[22] Some fans were unhappy with the abrupt change (Stewart 2008, 62). There is usually a time period between retellings of a series, yet Kirby's began a few months after McGregor's *Jungle Action* was cancelled.

cultural influences from African countries or diasporic cultures until the 1990s. In the 1960s and 1970s the *Fantastic Four* issues and *Jungle Action* series went as far as imagining a Black superhero and a distinct Black future presence through the creation of Wakanda. But in many ways, this future was limited by its isolation from the rest of Africa and the Black diaspora. However, since the 1990s Black writers and artists have exerted greater creative control of Black Panther and Wakanda, and while they have not always challenged Wakanda's isolation, there are greater attempts to depict Black Panther and Wakanda interacting with the rest of the world, and this begins with Christopher Priest's *Black Panther* series and the subsequent iteration by Reginald Hudlin. Priest and Hudlin approach Wakanda's involvement in international politics in different ways, yet they both move away from the isolated, utopian Wakanda depicted in the previous comics.

Involving Wakanda in international politics: Priest's and Hudlin's Approaches to Geopolitics

Whether Marvel were under pressure to source Black creative teams for the *Black Panther* comics is unclear, yet from the late 1990s, more Black creatives have been involved in crafting new *Black Panther* narratives. Comic book writer Christopher Priest reimagined *Black Panther* in a new arc that began in 1998. Around this time, Marvel were struggling financially and trying to appeal to new readers with "edgier stories about classic characters" (Riesman 2018). Priest had been involved in the world of comics from the 1970s and had worked for Marvel's rival, DC Comics, on various titles. He was also instrumental in the formation of Milestone Media, a semi-independent comic book company established and owned by Black American writers and artists.[23] In the 1980s, he became the "first black writer to work full time at either Marvel or DC" (Riesman 2018), which gives a further indication of the lack of Black creatives hired in the comics industry, something that has changed

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[23] Milestone Media produced multiple comic titles with Black protagonists. Milestone's status as an independent company is difficult to ascertain as the company had a distribution deal with DC Comics which ensured an international distribution though it is unclear as to how much control DC had over Milestone's narratives and characters. DC Comics now appear to own the rights to the characters as Milestone Media no longer exists as a company, though legal ownership is also unclear.

only recently. Priest has been critical of the comics industry's hiring practices: "'When I read these self-congratulatory histories of Marvel and DC, they completely omit not just me but other persons of color or firsts,' […] 'Who was the first woman editor? Who was the first woman penciler? And I think part of it is that the people who were assembling these histories of it just didn't think it was important. But these things do count, and they really do matter'" (Riesman 2018). Priest was one of few Black creatives to work on Marvel's Luke Cage comic, *Power Man and Iron Fist*, in the 1980s and had also written for DC's *Green Lantern* series.

Instead of setting the new *Black Panther* series in Wakanda, Priest's *Black Panther* began in the US, through the perspective Everett Ross, an inept FBI agent who also appears in the film adaptation. Ross is responsible for escorting Black Panther, who has arrived in the US in response to a scandal with the Tomorrow Fund, a grant from Wakanda to the US to aid poor communities (Priest and Quesada 1998). The poster child for the Tomorrow Fund has been murdered, and T'Challa flies to the US to investigate. T'Challa and Agent Ross later discover that the scandal was part of a plan orchestrated by the US to make T'Challa leave Wakanda as the country tried to aid refugees fleeing from nearby countries, thus destabilising Wakanda and allowing the US to intervene and steal the nation's resources. This overarching plot about Wakanda and international relations is a recurring theme in later *Black Panther* comics and is one area where discussions about Black futurity often arise. However, the series does not substantially engage with Black futurity, though there is a focus on Wakanda as an example of a 'better' world. As Hudlin's series takes place predominantly in the US and does not consider the future of Wakanda following the nation's involvement in the US, it is difficult to ascertain whether the series can be considered an example of Afrofuturism. The commentary concerning western countries intentionally destabilising others to justify their involvement and access to resources does not alone indicate Afrofuturist thought. Instead, Hudlin's approach partly justifies Wakanda's isolation – had T'Challa not established a charity in the US, it would have been less likely that Wakanda would be invaded. The series predominantly focuses on the characters which also limits any considerations of Black futurity because these issues are never

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foremost in the mind of Agent Ross, whose own preconceptions about Wakanda arise throughout

the series, such as him dismissively referring to it as "a little country" that cannot match the might of

"developed nations" (Priest and Velluto 2015). Though it was released shortly after Priest's

narrative, Reginald Hudlin's *Black Panther* series further develops Wakanda's involvement in

geopolitics.

In 2005, Reginald Hudlin wrote a new *Black Panther* narrative, beginning with the first

volume titled "Who is the Black Panther?" Hudlin was already a successful screenwriter and, at the

time of writing *Black Panther*, was president of Black Entertainment Television (BET), an American

network that was initially created to broadcast programmes intended for Black audiences.[24] Under

Hudlin, *Black Panther* began anew, and Wakanda was once again a semi-isolated nation. The 2005

comic was made for new readers who may have been unfamiliar with the character or unable to

access previous issues.[25] Hudlin was a well-known name outside of the comic publishing world and

his involvement with *Black Panther* seems to begin a trend for Marvel in which the company hires

well-known Black writers or creatives from other fields to write new narratives for pre-existing

characters.[26] The recent *Black Panther* comics have all been written by relatively high-profile Black

authors of non-fiction, contemporary fiction, or science-fiction who have not been involved in

comics previously.

Hudlin's *Black Panther* series returned to Wakanda and established a history of the nation

(2005). Previous comics had only ventured into the past to show the death of T'Challa's father and

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[24] Hudlin was known for his comedic writing in films such as *House Party* (1990) and *The Great White Hype* (1996); BET began as a way of addressing a need for Black representation on television. However, by the 1990s, it became a way of advertising to a majority Black audience, as Smith-Shomade argues, noting that "they [Black Americans] are both purchased by advertisers and displayed on cable" ('Target Market Black: BET and the Branding of African America', 183). The channel has also been criticised for representing Black American identity in specific and narrow ways that cater "to essentialised notions of blackness" and became intent on appealing to white audiences (2007, 185).

[25] The Christopher Priest collections of *Black Panther* were only released in 2015-2016 and the individual issues would have been difficult for interested readers to access after the initial release.

[26] Marvel have also done this for the *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* series (2018-) which are written by Arab American author Saladin Ahmed, and *Shuri* (2018-2019) by author Nnedi Okorafor. DC Comics are also following a similar path and have hired author N. K. Jemisin to write the new *Green Lantern* series (2019-2021).

had never provided Wakanda with any notable historical presence. Under Hudlin, Wakanda is given

a history that stretches from the fifth century to the present, and this history later becomes a

foundation that Coates' comics build upon. The first pages of issue #1 show ancient Wakanda's

fierce defence against an invasion from a neighbouring country. The narrative then leaps ahead to

the 19th century, as an army from South Africa, which was under British colonial rule at the time,

attempts to invade Wakanda. The Black Panther uses a robot to battle the army singlehandedly, who

then beg for forgiveness and flee. Hudlin does not distance Wakanda from the nation's proximity to

slavery and colonialism in the same way as other creative teams and includes this history from the

onset. However, there is again an avoidance, whether intentional or not, of addressing Wakanda's

role. Did Wakanda aid neighbouring countries covertly? Or did it remain isolated, only intervening

when the colonial power threatened Wakanda's borders? It is not possible to know conclusively

because, whilst Hudlin shows that Wakanda existed during the colonial era, there is no deeper

exploration of Wakandan history or Black Panther's role during these events. The story of the

attempted invasion suggests that Wakanda only resisted colonialism if it was itself directly affected.

Wakanda, historically, has not formed any connections with surrounding countries and is, in a way,

cut off from the wider African continent and diaspora. Again, the isolation reaffirms this idea that

Wakanda, which is a symbolic representation of Black futurity, has been limited to only a small

amount of people. The borders allowed protection of the country's inhabitants but also prevented

any sharing of expertise or resources with others. However, the comic later depicts a Wakanda that

has become more involved in global affairs during the reign of T'Challa and his father.

Issue #3 includes a flashback to a "global economic conference" and depicts Wakanda's

increasing prominence amongst other countries. No longer completely hidden, the nation has been

invited to the conference by global superpowers, such as the US, the UK, and France, not in order to

establish a partnership or ask for guidance, but because of Wakanda's resources. The conference

begins and a narrative panel informs the reader:

> Third world countries aren't normally invited to the real meetings like this. That's what the UN is for – a place for the powerless to whine about the white man.
> (Hudlin and Romita, Jr. 2005)

Like Lee's and Kirby's attempts to confront western perceptions, Hudlin's comics faced a similar challenge. Hudlin was confronted with the assumption of many western readers that Africa as a continent was completely poverty-stricken and reliant on western benevolence for any social or technological development. The now dated term 'third world' was used by the delegate who assumed that any African country must be poverty stricken or underdeveloped when compared to 'developed' or 'first world' countries.[27] Whilst other Black Panther comics, such as the *Fantastic Four* issues of the 1960s, depicted a tension between Wakanda and the west, it was framed through individual conflicts, predominantly through the reoccurring battle between Black Panther and Ulysses Klaw. Though Hudlin retells the story of this rivalry, his comics attempt to show that Klaw's invasion is symptomatic of larger power relations between Wakanda – and by extension Africa – and the western world. Hudlin's narrative shows that, because of Wakanda's technological advancement and resources, it is under persistent attacks. His narrative engages with Wakanda's isolation and justifies it as a defensive strategy to preserve the nation's future even though this is at the expense of aiding other countries and potentially helping to address inequalities that T'Chaka later criticises the western world for allowing to continue.

The interest of these global superpowers is, again, driven by interest in Wakanda's resources, described as "untouched petroleum deposits … medical cures unknown to the western world … and vibranium … the rarest most valuable mineral on earth" (Hudlin and Romita, Jr. 2005). The other delegates make numerous offers for a supply of vibranium, believing that Wakanda's assumed poverty will lead to a trade deal that primarily benefits the economic interests of the western representatives. However, T'Chaka refuses all offers, stating that the "spiritual

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[27] Tomlinson's "What Was the Third World?" notes that the term "third world" came to be associated with poverty in Asian, African, and Latin American countries. However this hid the fact that "rich and poor people, empowered and disempowered citizens" reside in all countries (2003, 308).

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advancement" of the west has to improve; in other words, western nations have to prove they are of good moral standing before Wakanda will share vibranium. He goes on further to criticise the conference delegates for only focussing on "profit and power" and points out that these countries, with their access to wealth, technology, and scientific advances could have solved many of society's problems but "there's too much money to be made in misery" (Hudlin and Romita, Jr. 2005). In response, a western delegate refers to T'Chaka as "a socialist with a crown on his head" (Hudlin and Romita, Jr. 2005). The fact that Wakanda is a monarchy has often been criticised for being socially regressive, yet Hudlin's narrative aims to refute these criticisms by emphasising the monarchy's refusal to participate in western capitalism. T'Chaka's claim that capitalism is actually holding these countries back is quite a powerful sentiment, particularly for a series that in earlier issues had used displays of wealth and consumer goods to indicate advancement.

Hudlin's narrative therefore contrasts starkly with the emphasis on material wealth in the *Fantastic Four* comics. Rather than framing the level of Wakanda's advancement through access to consumer goods as Lee and Kirby did, Hudlin represents the agency of Wakanda through its refusal to participate in global trade. The act of refusal, defined by Tina Campt as "the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented" (2019, 83), can be applied here;

Figure 2.9: T'Chaka responds to the anger of a delegate during the financial conference.

T'Chaka refuses to sell and share resources with countries that are only concerned with profit, and in refusing to participate in the hierarchical power structure of the rest of the world, indicates Wakanda's strength. This power is also demonstrated in a panel (see Figure 2.9) which shows T'Chaka looking down on one of the delegates. The refusal to involve Wakanda with profit-driven countries is Hudlin's way of arguing that "the United States is not the solution but a

central problem" (Posada 2019, 9). This was briefly considered in Christopher Priest's series through the presence of FBI Agent Ross, though Hudlin develops this idea further. Instead of emulating the powerful but often corrupt western nations, Wakanda, under the leadership of T'Chaka and then T'Challa creates its own approach to governance. This exchange highlights the potential risk of recreating or reinforcing a pre-existing, unequal power structure; during the time Hudlin was writing, post-apartheid South Africa was encountering further financial and social inequalities.[28] Even though the end of apartheid was supposed to signal a significant change in South Africa, some have argued that "the real effects of racial inequality and systemic racism have yet to be properly attended" (Gumede 2015, 143). In many ways, post-apartheid governments have been unwilling or unable to avoid reinforcing racial and social hierarchies. Hudlin's Wakanda, like Priest's, chooses to remain isolated but there is a stronger emphasis on the justification of the nation's refusal to participate in international politics. Whilst Wakanda's resources could lead to a better world, T'Chaka is aware that sharing the nation's scientific and technological advances through existing power structures will only improve the lives of the wealthy and powerful. A similar situation arises in the film adaptation, in which T'Challa chooses to follow this path and work with the United Nations.

"Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows": Challenging isolation on screen

Marvel's film adaptation of *Black Panther* was a retelling of the characters' origin story. The film introduced Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman) and Wakanda to audiences who may have been unfamiliar with the previous comics. The narrative of the film revisited the debate surrounding whether Wakanda should involve itself in the struggle of other nations and peoples or remain isolated as a defensive strategy to ensure the preservation of its cultural traditions. Whilst Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis) is reimagined in this adaptation,[29] the main antagonist is Erik "Killmonger"

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[28] For an overview of the social, financial, and political developments in South Africa after apartheid, please see chapter six of *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* by Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger (2016).
[29] The spelling of Klaw changes to Klaue in the film adaptation.

Stevens (Michael B. Jordan), T'Challa's cousin who is crowned Black Panther and king after he

defeats T'Challa in combat. Killmonger wants to aid the Black diaspora by distributing Wakanda's

advanced weaponry to the "War Dogs," Wakanda's global network of spies. He is treated as an

outsider despite his rightful claim to the Wakandan throne because he has been raised in the US and

never visited Wakanda. However, T'Challa with the help of his ex-girlfriend Nakia (Lupita N'yongo),

his technological expert and sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) and his mother Ramonda (Angela Bassett), is

able to triumph over Killmonger, and appears to kill him during combat.[30] The film's narrative

borrowed elements from previous comic runs weaving them into Marvel's Cinematic Universe.

Killmonger first appeared in Don McGregor's *Jungle Action* during the 1970s,[31] though the

Figure 2.10 Killmonger as he first appears in Jungle Action #6 (1973) and the character in the 2018 film adaptation played by Michael B. Jordan.

appearance of the character changes significantly (see Figure 2.10). Highly intelligent, Stevens, or

Killmonger, graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and joined the US Navy SEALS

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[30] Killmonger refuses the medical aid from T'Challa and appears to collapse. Fans have speculated that the character will still appear in the sequel to *Black Panther* that is due to be released in 2022.

[31] Under McGregor, Killmonger was similarly violent, described as "bitter" and "an outcast" (McGregor, Jungle Action #8), and intent on taking over Wakanda. The character also appears in subsequent *Black Panther* narratives.

where he was celebrated for having a high kill count. However, his tragic backstory is shown as the root of his militaristic approach to Black futurity. His father, N'Jobu, was the brother of T'Chaka (T'Challa's father), the King of Wakanda and Black Panther. N'Jobu was radicalised on a spy mission to California and secretly planned to arm Black communities in the US after seeing the effects of drugs and police brutality first-hand. T'Chaka opposed N'Jobu's plan and killed him, leaving the young Erik behind without his father, and presumably his mother, who is never mentioned or depicted in the film. Killmonger inherits his father's angry radicalism and is thus the antithesis of T'Challa, who is unambiguously heroic, despite his ambiguous first appearance in 1966. In the film adaptation, T'Challa aims to be a 'good king' and follow in the footsteps of his father until he realises that T'Chaka's isolationist policies have entailed abandonment of Black communities in other parts of the world. However, T'Challa is poised, and thoughtful, contrasting with the anger and chaos Killmonger exudes. Whilst the audience is supposed to be sympathetic to Killmonger's desire to provide weapons and technology so that Black populations outside of Wakanda can prepare for armed resistance, T'Challa is ultimately positioned by the film as the 'good guy' whose approach to the question of assisting Black communities is less about creating a new world order through armed revolution than about assisting Black communities through local community organising and government programmes that are intended to lead to peaceful change.

The contrast between T'Challa and Killmonger is apparent when their views for the future of Wakanda and the Black diaspora are considered. Following Killmonger's victory against T'Challa in combat, he meets the heads of Wakanda's five tribes; he asks them where they were during the various revolutions and political struggles which could have benefited from Wakanda's economic and technological support. He is met with silence as the leaders either look down in shame or stare into the distance, unwilling to defend their non-interventionist stance. This is mirrored in a flashback to the 1990s, as N'Jobu pleads to T'Chaka for his support by describing his view of the racial tensions in the US:

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> I observed for as long as I could. Their [Black Americans] leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated. All over the planet, our people suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back. With vibranium weapons, they could overthrow every country and Wakanda could rule them all the right way. (Coogler 2018)

This observation touches on the rising use of crack cocaine in impoverished US cities from the late 1970s into the 1990s. This, in part, fuelled the War on Drugs and the "over-policing" that N'Jobu mentions, as "the new laws against crack helped to drive the most massive wave of imprisonment in the history of the United States" (Reinarman and Levine 2004). The assault on Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department also occurred during the 1990s, bringing greater public attention to the issue of racialised police brutality as the media followed the case, leading to the Los Angeles uprising of 1992 after King's assailants were acquitted by an all-white jury. N'Jobu's short observation speaks to these key events and many adult and teenage viewers can make connections to both historical and contemporary struggles against racism and white supremacy.

N'Jobu's observation calls attention to the limited developments made by various social and political movements, as one critic notes (Lebron 2018); it also highlights his own limited vision. He argues that the future of the Black diaspora is dependent on the intervention of a single individual, Wakanda's monarch, rather than a collective, democratic, self-actualisation strategy that offers alternatives to hierarchical forms of governance. Killmonger shares a similar vision, one that initially seems to be a radical change that benefits Black people by supporting the various struggles of different communities across the diaspora. Yet his vision of the future is one that, in its emphasis on violent confrontation and Wakandan expansion, recreates a colonial and imperial logic. Following his defeat of T'Challa, Killmonger describes his plan to arm Black communities across the world: "I know how colonisers think. So we're gonna use their own strategy against them" (Coogler 2018). His approach is further framed by his assurance that "the sun will never set on the Wakandan empire," aligning his plan for the future of the Black diaspora with imperialism, and by extension, the brutality

of empire-building.[32] N'Jobu's and Killmonger's vision for the future of the Black diaspora rests on a bellicose revolution that purports to 'liberate' Black people and end the suffering of many communities. Yet the ultimate vision is not actual freedom but the overarching control of Wakanda. What N'Jobu and later Killmonger propose, is a reductive view of Black communities and Black identities that subordinates their variety in favour of forming another empire.

The interventions of T'Chaka and T'Challa, who propose more 'moderate' visions of Black futurity, prevent N'Jobu's and Killmonger's vision of a Black empire from being realised.[33] T'Chaka kills N'Jobu because the latter has been 'radicalised' and Killmonger is left behind in California. T'Chaka's successor, T'Challa, like his father, believes that Wakanda is distinct from the Black diaspora and should not intervene on its behalf. When Killmonger arrives at Wakanda for the first time and describes his plan to 'liberate' the diaspora, T'Challa responds:

> Our weapons will not be used to wage war on the world. It is not our way to be judge, jury, and executioner for people who are not our own. (Coogler 2018)

T'Challa shows disdain towards violence, but this is partly because, unlike Killmonger he sees Wakanda as distinct from the rest of the African diaspora. Diasporic identity is indeed complicated and, as Stuart Hall notes, whilst there are shared histories and cultures, there is also a "deep and significant *difference* which constitute[s] 'what we really are' or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (1990, 225). Whilst Killmonger is informed by the commonalities across the diaspora, T'Challa focuses instead on the differences. He does not view Wakanda as being a part of the diaspora and does not share Killmonger's sense of responsibility towards other Black communities. T'Challa's view is precisely why the film was criticised for portraying a depiction of Black futurity that was only accessible to a small number. Momtaza Mehri argues that the film and

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[32] "The sun will never set on the British empire" was used to boast about the amount of territory the British had colonised and claimed as their own during the 19th and 20th century.
[33] N'Jobu's and Killmonger's vision of Wakanda as an empire is a theme that continues in Ta-Nehisi Coates' Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda comics that will be explored later in this chapter.

other "Afrofuturisms that replicate our current world's anti-human and anti-Black configurations […] are only the evidence of our impoverished imaginations. We can do better than counter-futures that are still enthralled by the power structures of the present" (Mehri 2018). However, T'Challa's views change over the course of the film, due in part to Killmonger's influence but also the conversations he has with his ancestors. Both T'Challa and Killmonger are able to reach the ancestral plane where they can converse with previous Black Panthers and their dead relatives. T'Challa's character arc climaxes with him passionately criticising the actions of his father and previous Black Panthers: "You were wrong! All of you were wrong to turn your backs on the rest of the world!" This scene demonstrates T'Challa's understanding that Wakanda cannot remain isolated and has a responsibility to the rest of the world.

The final scene of the film implies a grassroots change beginning in the neighbourhood Erik had grown up in, Oakland, California, which appears to offer a radical step towards aiding Black communities in another form to that proposed by the antagonists. T'Challa chooses the former home of Erik and N'Jobu as the site of the first Wakandan International Outreach Centre, which will involve social outreach lead by Nakia as well as a scientific and information exchange unit organised by Shuri. The futurity that Wakandan resources can bring about is placed in an ordinary Black neighbourhood, not directly into the hands of politicians or organisations, though it is still organised by Wakanda. The relationship between the Wakandan monarchy and these local community groups is not developed any further as the film concludes here, building anticipation for the sequel. Nevertheless, T'Challa's decision to establish these groups indicates his understanding of the role Wakanda could play in global affairs through the sharing of knowledge and resources. This is a marked change to his attitude earlier in the film. The future imagined by Killmonger and N'Jobu and the UN- and CIA-administered future that T'Challa favours became a subject of intense debate amongst fans and critics of *Black Panther*. Numerous opinion pieces and blog posts about whether Killmonger was right appeared following the film's release (Faruqi 2018), as did the discussions about the film as a depiction of Black joy (Brown 2018; Roderique 2019). Other critics such as

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Momtaza Mehri found the vision of *Black Panther* too constrained and argued that it offers a limited Black futurity that is unable to avoid historical and contemporary structures of inequality.

As Mehri notes, neither Killmonger's nor T'Challa's vision offers a radical alternative to the present, and both either recreate or continue existing "power structures." It is unsurprising that the futurity offered in *Black Panther* is far from the radical vision some viewers hoped to see. Christopher Lebron argues that the film did not engage with Black liberation and argues: "the bad guy is the one who thinks Wakanda is being selfish in its secret liberation; the bad guy is the one who will no longer stand for patience and moderation—he thinks liberation is many, many decades overdue. And the black hero snuffs him out" (Lebron 2018). Whilst this oversimplifies the narrative somewhat, Lebron observes that a mediation between Killmonger's and T'Challa's vision of the future would have been preferable rather than the binary decision the viewer is presented with. Though Marvel try to cultivate a progressive identity through the creative teams they hire, it remains a large corporation that aims to make a substantial profit from the entertaining films, television series', comics, and merchandise that they produce. It would be unlikely that such a company would have depicted any form of Black futurity that could be interpreted as radical, which is what some critics had hoped for.

However, I would argue that the film and the debate amongst fans and viewers is also about belonging and identity within the Black diaspora rather than whether 'Killmonger was right.' Kilmonger's vision, though extreme, is guided by his belief that Wakanda has a duty to the rest of African diaspora because it is a part of it. Both he and N'Jobu have experienced life outside of Wakanda and are aware of the potential aid the nation could provide. By contrast, T'Chaka and T'Challa thought of Wakanda as distinct and separate from the diaspora, and as a result, they were not bound by the same sense of duty that guided N'Jobu and Killmonger. Whilst much of the debate surrounding the film was concerned with the approach to Black futurity and liberation, whether through militant revolution or through peaceful community development, the film also raises questions about the responsibility shared between members of the diaspora. Does Wakanda have

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an obligation to ensure the futurity of the Black diaspora? Can the nation be considered part of the diaspora when it has been cut off for centuries? And how would Wakanda justify its isolation not just to the diaspora but also to neighbouring African countries? The film tries to address how the Black diaspora will approach futurity, whether as individual nations and communities or as a larger, global community.

As well as the comics by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Marvel produced various merchandise in conjunction with the film. This included a free, eight issue-comic series called *Black Panther: Soul of a Machine* by Fabian Nicieza and Andrea Divito. Here, Black Panther escorts Wakandan scientists to a meeting in Japan that is disrupted by a typical comic book villain, Machinesmith. This series was not part of the existing *Black Panther* series but a promotional spin-off that linked Black Panther and the world of Wakanda with the Lexus LC500 and LS500, a flagship coupe and flagship sedan respectively.[34] Many of the comic covers featured the car in some way and it was frequently driven by Black Panther throughout the narrative (see Figure 2.11). Lexus media manager MaryJane Kroll described Lexus and Marvel's comic collaboration:

> Once again the alignment between and Lexus and the high tech world of Wakanda proved to create a great platform for the story with the famed Lexus Takumi master craftsmen also being featured prominently as heroes. (Sylt 2018)

The LC500 also appears in the high-speed chase between T'Challa and Klaue in the early scenes of the film. The Lexus' inclusion in the film is seemingly innocuous. There is often intentional product placement in films, and Marvel films are no
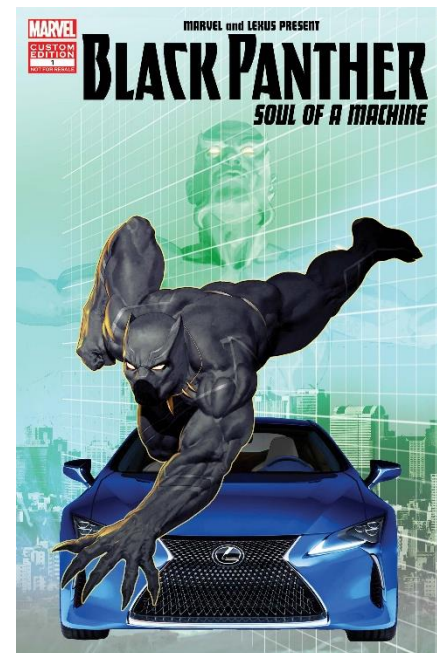
Figure 2.11 The cover of issue #1 of Black Panther: Soul of a Machine features the superhero with a Lexus.

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[34] Most Marvel film releases have related merchandise and include substantial product placements. This often includes figurines, both collectible and as toys aimed at children, clothing (e.g., t-shirts, nightwear, costumes), accessories, and small electronic items such as headphones. Any films, including Marvel's, that require cars for specific action scenes will usually include a vehicle manufactured by a recognisable company. However, the advertising campaign related to *Black Panther* is a first for Marvel films.

different. Yet, the relationship between the luxury car and *Black Panther* is more explicit than simple

product placement. The related advertisement that was shown during TV coverage of the 2018

Super Bowl was strongly linked to the film narrative by showing Black Panther in pursuit of a

vibranium thief. Following the success of his mission, his mask retracts, revealing the face of

Chadwick Boseman. The advert merges the fiction of the Marvel comic and cinematic universe with

'reality', in the form of the Lexus LC500 or LS500.

The advertisement and associated comic reveal an uncomfortable relationship between

Black Panther as a way of exploring Black futurity, and popular culture as a consumerist product. The

Black Panther comics and film adaptation are important as ways of representing the possibilities of

Black futurity that are often absent from other popular narratives, yet the investment of large

corporations is often needed to ensure broad distribution, and pays for the artistic labour of the

creatives involved. As a result, Black-authored speculative works often have to prove their worth in

the marketplace and by extension "the value of Black-themed commercial products" (Guthrie 2019,

17). The Lexus/Marvel collaboration is an example of the commodification of Black culture, in which

both companies have used the film as an opportunity to sell a completely unrelated luxury

product.[35] Whilst this collaboration is not directly harmful, it does expose the bind in which any

potential Afrofuturist content created by large companies such as Marvel becomes caught. The

wider audiences and increased funding for such films, books, or comics are offset by the

commodification of not just contemporary Black culture but also the exploration of Black futurity.

While the commodification of the film, its awkward handling of notions of extremism

through Killmonger's vision of a Wakandan empire, and the limited scope of the film's vision of

futurity are significant issues with the adaptation, it is nonetheless important to examine the

significance of the film's release. Marvel films have not been heralded for diverse representation as,

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[35] As I have mentioned previously, this tension exists in most forms of socially conscious popular culture, not just Afrofuturism alone.

prior to *Black Panther*, Black characters have mostly been sidekicks or background characters.[36]

Black Panther was certainly a new direction for Marvel films. As a result, the film adaptation of Black Panther carries the "burden of representation" (Mercer 1994, 234) where superhero films and, to an extent, science fiction or fantasy films, are considered. Mercer used this phrase to highlight the complexities of Black representation in media or genres where such representation is lacking or non-existent. He states: "If there is likely to be only the one opportunity to make your voice heard, is it not the case that there will be an intolerable imperative to try and say everything there is to be said, all in one mouthful?" (Mercer 1994, 234). Mercer's discussion is applicable to *Black Panther* as it is the first Marvel superhero narrative with a Black protagonist and antagonist and currently the only one that has approached the complexities of Black diasporic futurity and the relationship between diasporic communities. To explore such a sensitive and complex topic in a film that is part of a pre-existing cinematic universe and supposed to be popular and entertaining is a difficult task that director Ryan Coogler choose to undertake. Though the future depicted in *Black Panther* is far from radical, the existence of the film and its depiction of a futuristic African nation was wholly enjoyable and nothing short of inspiring for many viewers.

The release of the film became an event for Black cosplayers to wear *Black Panther* inspired costumes and pose for pictures at screenings (Nittle 2018).[37] The Boys and Girls Club of Harlem (BGCHarlem) was one of many community organisations that started a GoFundMe campaign for donations to take groups of children to the screening of the film and were successful in securing funds ('Help Children See "Black Panther" Organised by Frederick Joseph' 2018). The film was perceived as inspiring for children who rarely see Black superheroes on screen. Carl Anka describes the importance of *Black Panther* as a film that "isn't a story of black pain or trauma. There are no

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[36] The *Luke Cage* television series is Marvel's other adaptation with a predominantly Black cast.

[37] Cosplay is the act of dressing up as a favourite character from a form of popular culture, often a work of science fiction or fantasy, usually in convention spaces, though fans also dress up for other events. They are a mixture of bought and handmade costumes and those participating in cosplay often act or pose for pictures in ways that are identifiable with their chosen character.

gratuitous shots of black bodies being destroyed." Anka attended a premier of *Black Panther*,

describing it as follows:

> It felt like more than the latest instalment in Disney's money-spinning Marvel machine. It felt like a grand coming together of blackness, akin to a wedding, Christening [*sic*], or family gathering. Black people of disparate identities, stories and family trees assembling in one large location to share and enjoy a piece of art, and coming away empowered. It feels silly to use a fictional location of a comic book as a rallying call for blackness, but at the premiere, as the final credits rolled and we all returned to our lives, it felt like something had changed. A small part of the film had empowered all of us to know we were just as capable. We could be heroes. We could be the protagonists in the stories of our own lives. (2018)

Anka is aware of the economic implications of the film due to its place within the wider Marvel

Entertainment brand, yet he also notes the power of the film for him and those around him. The

communal feeling articulated by Anka also appears in the numerous photographs of Black cosplayers

and attendees who wore traditional African attire for the showings which were circulated on social

media sites. In many ways, the cinema release of *Black Panther* became a shared experience for

many people across the diaspora. The film was criticised for reducing African cultures to a visual

aesthetic, but it was also well received across the continent (Edoro and Shringarpure 2018; Hedges-

Stocks 2018). Despite its flaws and the subsequent lamentations from various critics that the film did

not live up to expectations, many fans saw the film as a hopeful and extraordinary speculation about

a futuristic African nation that surpassed western perceptions of progress.

In particular, viewers were captured by the presence of dark-skinned characters who were

central figures, many of whom were women. Shuri (Letitia Wright), T'Challa's younger sister, is a

pivotal character because of her inventions which frequently aid Black Panther and other

Wakandans in battle. Similarly, the Dora Milaje, a select group of women from Wakandan tribes, are

the special forces for the nation and integral to Wakanda's defence against Killmonger.

Representations of dark-skinned characters have often been unfavourable in popular culture, as a

marker of inferiority because dark skin does not adhere to western beauty standards, which favour

pale skin.[38] However, the portrayal of Shuri and the Dora Milaje in *Black Panther* was one of its most praiseworthy interventions into the Marvel universe.

It is also important to recognise that *Black Panther*, for all its flaws, is also one of few mainstream expressions of Black joy. Many films and television series make use of Black pain and violence against Black bodies. These depictions are often a reimagining of particular experiences (such as slavery, as in *Twelve Years a Slave*) which have involved Black pain. They are also, as Lindsey Addawoo highlights, recreated in fictional, futuristic settings such as the popular Netflix series, *Black Mirror* (2018a). Addawoo notes that episodes of *Black Mirror* and other programmes present stories in which "Black pain, Black trauma, and Black bodies are meant to be on literal display for an audience's enjoyment" (Addawoo 2018a). She continues: "Black people dying at the hands of injustice has become so commonplace that our world feels simulated, too." Whilst these narratives and experiences are important, there is not a strong counternarrative that equally publicises Black joy. As a result, the depictions of Black suffering can feel almost inescapable as they appear in dramatisations and the very real stories, videos, and images that appear in the news or on social media. Understanding the prevalence of Black pain in the media we consume, further highlights the importance of *Black Panther.* The characters do go through various struggles, but parts of the film, such as the early scenes in which the audience see Wakanda for the first time and the waterfall scene before the battle between T'Challa and M'Baku (see figure 2. 3) are celebratory of Black identities and the potential of Black futurity that is all the more valuable as such depictions are often absent in speculative fiction.

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[38] Casting for television and film roles have often been criticised for hiring light-skinned Black actors when the role should have been a dark-skinned character. A recent example of this was in the call to cast Black women in the film *Straight Outta Compton* which assigned roles based on the skin colour of respondents (Cadet 2014).

Challenging Wakanda's Flaws in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, a well-known journalist and critic, began writing the new iteration of *Black Panther* between 2016-2018 and the ongoing series *Black Panther: The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* (2018-2021). The first volume of *Black Panther* under Coates as lead writer and artist Brian Stelfreeze was intended to be a starting point to entice new readers who may have not read any of Marvel's other publications or other *Black Panther* comics, but wanted to familiarise themselves with the character prior to the film's highly anticipated release. However, the narrative in the 2016 comic series is markedly different to that depicted in the film; where the film adaptation was about how Wakanda would become involved in global affairs and undo years of isolation, the comics explore how Wakanda copes with internal conflict on a large scale. Whilst the film shows Wakandan stability, Coates' comics depict Wakanda on the brink of collapse. It is difficult to know precisely why the film and Coates' comic narrative differ even though the comic series was intended to generate interest in the film. However, it is likely that had the film depicted a fractured Wakanda and echoed the comic series, it would not have had the same level of commercial success. As mentioned previously, the film drew in audiences partly because of its celebratory portrayal of Black cultures in a futuristic environment. It is doubtful that Coates' narrative of Wakanda's disintegration would appeal to as wide an audience, particularly to those who enjoy the escapism of Marvel films.

The first four issues, subtitled *A Nation Under Our Feet* after the book by Steven Hahn introduces a Wakanda that differs from any other narrative arc; rather than the prosperous,[39] stable nation that had previously been so popular, the Wakanda that Coates and Stelfreeze depict is one that is falling apart. The nation has been devasted by a flood caused by Marvel's Atlantean anti-hero, Namor, though the cause of the flood is not explored until later issues. Alongside this external threat, Wakanda is struggling internally. There is a rift within the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's all-woman

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[39] Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet* is a Pulitzer prize-winning book about Black Americans in the Southern states from slavery to emancipation. Other indicators of Coates' literary influences appear throughout the series, such as Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (Emails to the Editors, *Black Panther* #6).

special forces, and Wakanda loses a contingent of the Dora Milaje as they rebel against the rule of

the monarchy. The Captain of the Dora Milaje, Aneka, had been imprisoned for assassinating a

chieftain who had been sexually assaulting young girls (Coates 2016). Ramonda, T'Challa's

stepmother, sentences Aneka to death for not upholding the "standard" the Dora Milaje are

supposed to adhere to. Alongside the fragmentation of Wakanda's elite bodyguards, internal conflict

erupts, involving revolution against monarchical rule and a challenge to the current social order of

Wakanda. This revolution is led by a shaman, Tetu, and a mysterious woman named Zenzi, who has

the power to amplify the emotions of those she wants to control. The duo uses the anger and

resentment of Wakanda's citizens to turn them into violent mobs that fight T'Challa and his forces.

Coates' storyline thus challenges the assumption that T'Challa is a hero and rightful king by

dwelling on forces and characters who question the utility of the monarchy and defy its authority.

Monarchical rule has often seemed to contradict Wakanda's claim to be an advanced nation. Though

the Dora Milaje eventually return to the monarchy and the uprising is quelled, many of Wakanda's

citizens are affected. This comic run ends with the formation of a council comprising the heads of

different cities, similar to the tribal leaders' council that appears in the film. Wakanda does not

become a democracy, and the monarchy continues to hold the majority of the power, yet it appears

to be a markedly different governing body that is formed in response to the aforementioned political

dissension.

Coates' *Black Panther* comics were published from April 2016 to April 2018, around the end

of Barack Obama's presidency and into the beginning of Donald Trump's. Coates was clear about his

intention in writing *Black Panther*, not wanting it to be didactic or heavy-handedly include Black

history or current racial tensions within the narrative. He writes:

> T'Challa won't be yelling, "Hands Up! Don't Shoot!" There will be no policy
> papers on the slave trade, nor any overly-earnest, sepia-tinged "Black History
> Month" style of story-telling. The culture and politics can't be on top; they have
> to be baked in. (2015)

However, there are parallels between the tragedy he sees in the end of the Obama era and the disintegration of Wakanda. His essay collection *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017) features one essay from each year of Obama's presidency and introduces each with notes that contextualise his writing and his thoughts at the time of the collection's publication. Coates is initially cautiously optimistic about Obama's presidency and asks whether America was finally changing for the better. He refers to "the suddenly transracial spirit" that seemed to indicate a positive societal change in the US in 2008 (2018d, 63), though the election of Obama did little to challenge racism. In "Notes from the Eight Year," Coates chastises his earlier optimism and naivete for believing in what seemed like the US's progress, stating: "The worst really is possible. My aim is to never be caught, as the rappers say, acting like it can't happen" (Coates 2018d, 290). This mindset characterises Coates' *Black Panther* narrative, both the 2016-2018 *Black Panther* series and the ongoing *Black Panther: Intergalactic Empire* series.

Following Tetu's attempt to overthrow the Wakandan monarchy and the dissatisfaction of the Dora Milaje with their leader, Wakanda undergoes a transformation. The monarchy continues to reign but there are concerted efforts to move the nation towards a democracy. T'Challa calls for representatives of the different cities that make up Wakanda and they are treated as delegates who are able to raise issues, ask for assistance, and generally have an input into the way the country is run. It is by no means a complete democracy, as Ramonda points out in *Black Panther* #16, where she asserts that "Wakanda is not yet that democratic" after an elected councillor insists on discussing an issue plaguing a Wakandan city (Coates 2017c). The royal family maintain their control of the nation and seem to be able to decide when to approach the issues these delegates put forth. Whilst this change is significant for Wakanda because the monarchy has been a beacon of

Wakandan culture for much of its history, there are few real changes to the social order of Wakanda.[40] Monarchical power remains the form of governance by the end of the series.

Wakanda's hesitance to alter monarchical rule is caused by the royal family's focus on preserving culture rather than adapting their cultural traditions to suit new forms of governance. Coates touches on this in *We Were Eight Years in Power* when discussing Bill Cosby and his "race-based Black conservatism" concerning the preservation of a mythologised Black culture: "I know now that all people hunger for a noble, unsullied past […] I know now that that hunger is a retreat from the knotty present into myth and that what ultimately awaits those who retreat into fairy tales, who seek refuge in the mad pursuit to be made great again, in the image of greatness that never was, is tragedy" (Coates 2018d, 10). The fear of losing or having the culture change becomes a barrier to altering practices that may not be useful but are considered traditional. Coates grapples with the limitations of Wakanda – it has been presented as a futuristic and advanced nation that has been critical of the inequalities that impact the rest of the world. Yet, Wakanda has been unable to avoid replicating those same inequalities within its own borders.

The change in Wakanda's leadership structure is an interesting development, another way that Coates has distinguished his series from the previous narratives. However, there is no in-depth look at Wakandan politics as it adjusts to this wide-reaching change. This is initially surprising as Coates' early comics show the many struggles Wakanda is engaged in, to the point where it seems the nation will not recover. As discussed previously in this chapter, Coates does explore the political implications of T'Challa's rule and the growing tensions amongst dissatisfied groups earlier in the arc. Yet, there is little reference to the changes in governance as the *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet* three-volume arc draws to a close. There are hints of the change through the conversations between T'Challa, Aneka, and Ayo, who are still hesitant to follow T'Challa's leadership despite his

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[40] It is also important to note that T'Challa and Shuri are both highly skilled characters, frequently noted as some of the most intelligent individuals within the Marvel universe, so they are qualified for their leadership roles though they also inherit them.

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promise to democratise Wakanda slowly (Coates 2017a). Nevertheless, the characters are preoccupied with monstrous beings that have suddenly appeared in Wakanda and an invasion by Ulysses Klaw who appears briefly towards the end of the narrative. This change in Wakandan governance is largely absent from the remainder of the narrative, which focuses on Wakanda's origin story.

Unresolved endings allow the reader to imagine their own outcomes but another explanation as to why Coates' *Black Panther* and other Afrofuturist texts have open endings, is that imagining potential Black futures that do not recreate the issues of the present is a difficult task considering the ongoing presence of anti-Black racism, and broader issues surrounding inequality. Open endings seem to be a reoccurring feature in considerations of Black futurity; as discussed in chapter two below, Janelle Monáe's 2018 album and "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer,* concludes by following the protagonists' escape from a mind-wiping facility. The future appears to be hopeful and offers a positive change, yet there is no detailed exploration of this future. Like *Dirty Computer*, Wakanda seems to be changing for the benefit of overlooked communities though the readers do not get to see this change fully realised. Similarly, the future posited in the film adaptation of *Black Panther* is partially left to the speculations of the viewers. The film ends with T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye attending a press conference at the United Nations, offering their—and by extension, Wakandan—aid to the rest of the world. This is a solution, as in Coates' comic, that is brought about by an external threat of Wakanda's destruction. It highlights Wakanda's position in the world; somebody in the crowd asks if they (the UN) can help. In response, T'Challa smiles and says, "It's what we can do to help you." The idea that a hidden African country could solve some of the world's worst problems is intended to be a powerful and hopeful message, an example of Wakanda's exceptionalism that defies western assumptions about African countries that can be traced back to the *Fantastic Four* comics of the 1960s and the *Black Panther* comics by Reginald Hudlin.

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Yet the decision to share funds and technology is organised through the UN, an organisation that is "controlled by Western powers" and less likely to aid countries on the same continent as Wakanda (Andrews 2019, 23). The future imagined in the film remains tied to the existing institutions and ideological baggage of our present political era, with the role of the UN, not to mention that of the CIA through Agent Ross. The futurity envisioned in the film adaptation of *Black Panther* seems to follow a path that viewers and critics would find familiar, one that is structured by existing institutions and established political discourse. However, Coates' 'ending' to the *Black Panther* comics is open. It avoids limiting the futurity imagined in *Black Panther* and does not unintentionally recreate the problems of the past. Open endings are not only a feature of Afrofuturist texts, but also appear in most forms of speculative fiction. However, the hesitancy to depict a clear destiny for Black futurity seems to be a commonality within Afrofuturist and Black speculative fiction, despite the scarcity of depictions of Black futurity. This makes the absence of closed endings more apparent and implies that it is intentional. Why, then, are creatives hesitant to depict Black futures in a definitive way? Why are endings so often vague and open? Can a settled vision of Black futurity be depicted?

Afrofuturism, like many other works of science fiction, is wary of the assumption that the future will be progressive or an improvement on the present in any way. Whilst the earlier comics that featured Black Panther and depicted Wakanda subscribed to this idealist future, Coates has avoided this. Instead, his approach is similar to other explorations of Black futurity, one that does not assume the future will be any more welcoming for the Black diaspora than the past or present. Coates questions this idea of progression throughout the series. By the fifth volume of *Black Panther*, the origin of Wakanda is brought into question. Readers have been told from the first issues that Wakanda and its citizens strive for exceptionalism, as beacons of intelligence, skill, and creativity. Yet, the new origin story under Coates offers a view into the distant past, as the "pilgrims" who eventually become Wakandans encounter an alien race. Though they cooperate for a time, the aliens "offended the originators and so there was war" (Coates 2017e). The Originators are

portrayed as monstrous creatures, with multiple heads and limbs (see Figure 12.2). A griot guides

T'Challa and Shuri through this history, explaining that some of the Wakandans who fought the

Originators ascended into godhood, including the god, Bast, to whom many Wakandans including

the royal family, are devoted (Coates 2017d). At the revelation that Wakanda was built on the

foundation of oppression and genocide, T'Challa expresses his shock. In response, the griot asks,

"Did you truly believe that a great nation could be built without another underfoot? Or did you

believe that your young gods were somehow more sound than all others?" Coates alters the

common perception of Wakanda as a positive beacon, choosing to highlight that the nation's

technological advancement and general prosperity is a result of another group's subjugation. In

Coates' origin story, the reader and T'Challa learn that Wakanda was founded on racism and

colonialism, not in defiance of them. This continues into Coates subsequent *Black Panther* arc.

Figure 2.12 The originators and their initial encounter with the pilgrims.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' role as writer for *Black Panther* continued in 2018, with the arc *Black*

Panther: The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda with artwork initially by Danial Acuna, though

different art teams become involved in the series. This plot sharply diverges from Coates' previous

arc, as part of Marvel's "fresh start" (Gerding 2018), though it does follow the events in the comic,

Shuri (2018-) by Nnedi Okorafor and Leonardo Romero. The new series is set two thousand years into the future. Wakanda is no longer an African nation, but rather an intergalactic empire that spans multiple galaxies. Though there is a departure from Coates' previous series, the comics follow the revelation that Wakanda and, by extension, T'Challa's ancestors, were themselves colonisers who banished the Originators. Building on this new understanding of Wakanda and the implications of being guilty of the same atrocities as the countries derided by Wakanda in previous arcs, Coates' run alters the reader's perspective of Wakanda as a utopian, progressive nation.

In the *Intergalactic Empire,* T'Challa is neither Black Panther nor Wakanda's king;[41] rather, he is an enslaved and unnamed man whose memories have been stolen by the empire. He is forced to work in a vibranium mine with other aliens who are all described as "assets" of Emperor N'Jadaka (Coates 2018a). This unnamed man, after numerous conflicts with the guards, is confined to a holding area just as the rebels attack the mine. The rebels, known as the Maroons, are a multispecies resistance group who aim to overthrow the empire and return the memories that have been stolen.[42] As part of the Wakandan empire's custom, theft of memories and knowledge alongside brute force is their method of conquering various galaxies and there is an established caste system that places the Imperials of Wakandan heritage and the top, and the Nameless, those who have been enslaved and had their memories as well as their names stolen, at the bottom. Control of knowledge prevents serious uprisings and stops the colonised groups from working together. T'Challa's presence, however, is perceived as a potential threat to the current order of the empire. As the emperor knows, the T'Challa of legend is destined to overthrow him as the "avatar of Bast," thwarting N'Jadaka's plan to ascend into godhood. After being rescued T'Challa joins the

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[41] Many of the characters from previous arcs make an appearance, though it is explained in the comic that the history of Wakanda and its presence on earth are part of the cultural history of the empire, and many people are named after the key characters. Some of the characters are sceptical that the person they rescue is actually the T'Challa of legend as many people share the name.

[42] The series is evocative of the diasporic experiences of enslaved Africans. Coates takes inspiration from Maroons, enslaved Africans who escaped and formed their own settlements in the Americas and the Caribbean. In *The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda*, the Maroons travel in a spaceship called The Mackandal. Though the origins of the name are not mentioned in the comic, Francois Makandal was a Haitian Maroon leader in the 18th century.

Maroons and aids them in their fight against the empire and N'Jadaka's rule (Coates 2018c). Eventually, Black Panther's memory is restored, and he is able to return to his timeline, establishing a link between the empire and the country in the present day.

The Wakanda in this series has followed the militaristic plan alluded to by Killmonger in the film adaptation and taken it further; Wakanda now enslaves, colonises, and oppresses others for the benefit of one group, the Imperials, Wakandans who "claim to be the blood descendants of the founders of the intergalactic empire" (Coates 2018a). By making Wakanda recreate the atrocities of previous imperial nations, Coates is highlighting once more that Black futurity is not automatically progressive or an improvement on the present. His depiction of future-Wakanda emphasises the importance of questioning what makes a progressive future. Wakanda, in various arcs has been a beacon of futurity because of its technological advancement and the (mostly) egalitarian society which is celebrated by fans. However, in *A Nation Under Our Feet* and more explicitly in *Intergalactic Empire*, Coates challenges this positive, almost utopian futurity by showing that the Wakandans were no more moral or advanced than any other society and are just as susceptible to colonialist ideologies. In fact, their access to technology and advanced expertise makes them more efficient at colonising others.

This is most apparent in their ability to literally steal memories and knowledge. The importance of memory is a reoccurring theme within the series and the restoration of memories becomes one of the main goals for the Maroons. Like the other enslaved communities who are known as the "Nameless," T'Challa initially does not have access to his memories or to knowledge. Nakia, an Imperial who joined the Maroons, explains that this stolen knowledge is kept in the "Imperial Archive" (see Figure 2.13) and is used for the benefit of the empire and its favoured social group, the Imperials, but also ensures the oppressed groups are unable to challenge the oppressors (Coates 2018b).

As a result of this theft of knowledge and culture, the life of the Imperial class is mostly utopian aside from the dictatorial rule of the emperor: "total freedom from want, from desire. All life one great party. And there was only one rule: obey" (Coates and Walker 2019). T'Challa had a similar experience; once his memories are restored he recalls being accepted by N'Jadaka and describes seeing the benefits of the

Figure 2.13 Nakia discusses the Imperial Archive.

empire: "I was given a tour of the empire. The wonders I saw … Billions of citizens living in happiness, wealth and splendour" (Coates and Sprouse 2019). Whilst this utopian future is beneficial for one group, scores of others are made to suffer. This depiction of the Intergalactic Empire complicates our understanding of utopias and asks whether they are possible for everyone or dependant on the subjugation of others. Coates also shows that even heroic figures are not infallible, as T'Challa is hesitant to accept that the empire was founded on colonial principles: "confronted with that crime, I

looked away. I indulged in a dream … until I was expelled from it and forced to see the truth (Coates and Sprouse 2019). T'Challa had become complicit in the suffering of others because the evidence of oppression and slavery were not immediately present in the empire he became familiar with. Ororo (also known as Storm from Marvel's *X-Men* series) points out that "empires built on slavery are very good at concealing this fact. That the concealing, the lie, is part of the enslaving" (Coates and Sprouse 2019). Coates' comics are as much about the past and present as they are about the future. Ororo's statement can easily be applied to a number of countries who deny the significance enslaved labour has had in their formation.

Before Coates began writing the *Black Panther* series, Wakanda was always depicted as a utopian nation or an "African Shangri-La" because it was futuristic, entirely self-sustaining and its citizens mostly free from the kinds of struggles found in most other countries (Nama 2009, 137). Previous creative teams had not considered how Wakanda had come into being until Coates whose narrative about Wakanda's subjugation and war with the Originators complicates and questions the view of Wakanda as an African Shangri-La. Coates' *Intergalactic Empire* run recreates this narrative in greater detail and explores further the idea that utopias require labour and are often formed through the subjugation of an "other." The *Intergalactic Empire* series is similar to many other Afrofuturist texts that challenge the idea of futures considered "progressive" or utopian. Wakanda has often been depicted as a utopian environment by appealing to American ideas of the futuristic that were dominant during the 1960s, predominantly through gadgetry and technology. However, Coates makes it clear that utopias, even those made by and for the Black diaspora, are not perfect and have complex and often shameful histories. As discussed earlier, Nakia offers an insight into the benefits of being part of the favoured groups. As readers, we are confronted with the groups forced to labour for the empire but who do not enjoy the benefits bestowed on the favoured communities. The empire appears to be oppressive, but also enticing because it promises to offer a life of pleasure in return for subservience to the emperor. A 'better' future in this instance is only available for the few – the series can be considered a warning that challenges utopianism and highlights the need for

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Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction more broadly to depict futures that do not recreate inequalities.

By providing a survey of the multiple iterations of the *Black Panther* comics and the recent film adaptation, I have demonstrated the changing perspectives about Wakanda's isolationism. The 'better' world offered in the Wakanda depicted early comics of the 1960s to those in the early 2000s appears utopian but is limited by the nation's reclusiveness. These comics raise the question: what use is a better world if it is only for a select few? This is not to say *Black Panther* offers a speculation of futurity that is wholly negative. The film adaptation in particular has introduced new audiences to Black speculative fiction and brought Afrofuturism more firmly into mainstream popular culture, though this also impacted the type of Black futurity the film could portray: it is unlikely that a better world formed by the revolutionary programme organised by Killmonger would have been as commercially successful. Mehri writes: "I will watch Black Panther again, but I will continue to dream bigger dreams than it can give me" (Mehri 2018). The futurity depicted in *Black Panther* is selective, but this can also inspire others to imagine a better world that avoids the limitations Wakanda represents.

Chapter 2: Otherness and Black Joy in Janelle Monáe's Discography

In 2018, singer, songwriter, performer, and actor, Janelle Monáe, released the album *Dirty Computer.* The album and accompanying film, or "emotion picture",[1] were well received, reaching no. 6 in *Billboard's* Top 200 chart, and earning a 2019 Grammy nomination (*Billboard Top 200*, 12 May 2018).[2] The album's popularity was in part, due to the portrayal of Black futurity and LGBTQ+ representation in the emotion picture. An oppressive regime seeks to control and ultimately erase 'otherness' in order to establish a better society that is free from conflict. In response, the characters' self-expression becomes part of their resistance as they celebrate their 'othered' identity and fight the restrictive order imposed upon them. Through her music, Monáe represents her own personal experiences of being a Black queer artist, and those of others whose identities have similarly not been easily accepted by friends, family, or colleagues. Monáe has previously stated in an interview for Apple Music, that the album is a response to being othered "for the first time" (Beats 1 on Apple Music). Yet, as I will demonstrate, the act of being othered is, for Monáe, not completely negative, but something to celebrate.

This chapter argues that Monáe depicts the expression of Black and queer[3] identity as the 'other' but celebrates alterity through the way the protagonists find happiness in otherwise

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[1] In an interview for the *Chicago Tribune* following the release of her second album, Monáe explains the concept of her emotion pictures: "I enjoy creating musicals, and having songs that feel movie-esque. We named this an 'emotion-picture'" (Kot 2010).

[2] This chart is available on the *Billboard* site: https://www.billboard.com/charts/billboard-200/2018-05-12 (accessed 22 May 2019). All of Monáe's albums have reached the top 5 of *Billboard's* R&B chart, whilst her most recent two albums have reached the top ten within the general *Billboard* 200 chart. Monáe can be considred a mainstream artist, and has achieved chart successes However, many YouTube comments refer to her lack of recognition in mainstream popular music or believe that her artistry is freer because she operates outside of a narrow mainstream. Whether this is correct is difficult to understand as Monáe is rarely considered an indie artist.

[3] Monáe is non-binary and uses she/her and they/them pronouns (Mier 2022). Throughout this chapter I have referred to Monáe as "queer" as she has described herself as such in interviews and articles (the interview in *Rolling Stone,* 26 April 2018 was the first public instance of her self-identifying as queer). The term has a contentious history and the meaning differs over time and in different places; it has been and continues to be used as an offensive word to refer to any lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual individuals (Barker and Scheele 2016, 17–36). Some, like Monáe, self-identify as queer as an act of reclamation and as a way of challenging "fixed identity categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, etc." (Barker and Scheele 2016, 29–30). Michael Warner discusses the complexity of labelling sexuality and the implication of using "queer" in the introduction

dystopian futures. The characters continue to resist the societies that control their existence, but

Monáe places equal emphasis on their ability to find joy in their difficult lives, ultimately connecting

Black joy and Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is often concerned with speculating about a 'better' future

in some way. For Monáe, her better future is one that is shaped by Black and queer communities

who seek to build a society that redresses the issues that have negatively impacted their lives. Whilst

there is no comprehensive depiction of the future that Monáe or the character she portrays in the

emotion picture wants to bring about, it is one that rejects ideas of assimilation and adherence to

the societal norms that plague the fictional world. This refusal to conform or change to fit a narrow

standard, is a reoccurring theme within Monáe's work, and fans have been particularly receptive to

this message. This is most apparent regarding *Dirty Computer*; however, otherness and Black joy are

reoccurring themes within Monáe's music and appear in her previous albums. This chapter relies on

close analysis of the lyrics as well as the visual aspects of the music, including the music videos and

album covers. I will also refer to public fan responses in the form of YouTube comments, and two

printed fanzines: *"I Defy Every Label": A Janelle Monáe Fanzine* by Charlotte Bailey and the *Janelle

Monáe Dirty Computer Fanzine* compiled by Sammy Boras. The *Dirty Computer Fanzine* is a selection

of work created by various artists in response to a call for submissions by Boras and includes one

essay. Bailey's zine is a comic about a rebelling android, with a page about her personal response to

Monáe's music. These fanzines offer an indication about the way fans have been inspired or

influenced by Monáe and her visions of Black futurity.

Despite the connection between Afrofuturism and her music, there is little evidence of

Monáe referring to the genre to describe herself or her work until the recent publication of the short

story collection *The Memory Librarian: And Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022).[4] This is a

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to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer politics and Social Theory* (University of Minnesota Press: 2004), in which he argues that "the preference for 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization" (xxvi), or, in other words, a way of rejecting rigid identities.

[4] The description for *The Memory Librarian* clearly refers to *Dirty Computer* as an "Afrofuturistic world." The collection of short stories by Monáe and other collaborators further develops the narrative in *Dirty Computer*. As *The Memory Librarian* was published shortly after the completion of this thesis, only the *Dirty Computer* album is considered in this chapter.

reoccurring feature of Afrofuturism, as many texts are labelled as examples of the genre without 'Afrofuturism' being used by the author. In some cases, the authors are unaware of the meaning of Afrofuturism. Though Monáe has recently used the term to describe her work, fans and critics are largely responsible for her association with Afrofuturism. I similarly consider Monáe's music as Afrofuturist because it imagines a 'better' future for Black communities. Monáe's musical works speculates about Black LGBTQ+ futurity, which has often been absent from Afrofuturism, in both fiction and scholarship. Afrofuturism often focusses on the importance of depicting the multiplicity of Black identities, yet Black LGBTQ+ identities have often been absent until recently. José Esteban Muñoz argues that "Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (2009, 1).

The links between Afrofuturism and Queer studies are further pronounced when considering E. Patrick Johnson's formulation of "quare" studies:

> While strategically galvanised around identity, quare studies should be committed to interrogating identity claims that exclude rather than include. I am thinking here of black nationalist claims of 'black authenticity' that exclude, categorically, homosexual identities. (Johnson 2005, 136)

Often, ideas of Black authenticity are related to class distinctions, yet Johnson raises an important observation about the way authenticity can set narrow parameters for the expression of Black sexuality. He refers to homosexuality, but Black authenticity can similarly exclude bisexuality, and any expressions of gender that are not cis. The importance of challenging narrow ideas of Blackness for quare studies is shared with Afrofuturism, a genre that frequently critiques ideas of Black authenticity through genre fiction. Whilst Afrofuturism has not intentionally excluded non-heterosexual perspectives, the underrepresentation of these perspectives is noticeable because the genre aims to imagine Black futurity in multiple ways. The absence of Black LGBTQ+ futurity has meant certain futures have previously been excluded from speculative fiction. Caleb Royal McKinley-Portee has argued that this lack of discussion surrounding Afrofuturism and queer identities is

particularly noticeable when considering author Samuel R. Delany (2017, 64). Delany is a popular

science fiction author who has been associated with the founding of literary Afrofuturism, but whose

identity as a Black, gay man is rarely considered a lens through which to analyse his work.[5] Whilst

fictional representations of Black, queer identities in popular Afrofuturism are slowly changing, with

works such as the podcast *Adventures in New America* (2018-2019)*,* the short-lived *World of*

Wakanda (2016-2017) comic book series, and *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) by Rivers Solomon,

there is still scope for further scholarship about Afrofuturism and LGBTQ+ futures.

Understanding Black Joy

As well as exploring Black, queer futurity, the improved future Monáe imagines also centres Black

joy as the characters she portrays attempt to shape their environment to accept them rather than

demonise the relationships between androids and humans or the non-conformity of "dirty

computers." 'Black joy' is not a recent phenomenon though it has gained attention recently through

the spread of the hashtag #blackjoy on social media sites. There does not appear to be one clear

definition, however Black joy:

> exists despite the many obstacles we face because we have been and continue to
> be intentional about maintaining it. It coexists with every other occurrence that
> has happened to and been imposed upon us. Our predecessors have indulged in
> it in many different ways; we are merely the current generation who get to add
> our voices in defining what it means. (Asani 2020)

Other phrases such as #blackgirlmagic and #blackboyjoy share similar meanings and a common goal:

> [The] joyful posts shared via these hashtags celebrate Black life in ways that
> challenge mainstream media's attempts to fix Black people and Black life into a
> position of death and despair; assert Black people as fully human, capable of
> experiencing and expressing a full, dynamic range of emotion; and capture,

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[5] Alongside McKinley-Portee's research, there is limited research about the relationship between LGBTQ+ identity and Afrofuturism. Clayton D. Colmon's work on Delany's book, *Aye, and Gomorrah* (1967) shows how the book helped to "expand afrofuturism's discursive potential by sublimating race and embracing representations of queer utopia, sexuality, desire, and posthumanity." Along similar lines, Reynaldo Anderson investigates "the intersection of Afrofuturism, black queer politics, and disco as an antecedent to electronic dance music" through the music of Sylvester James (2013).

share, and circulate expressions of Black life without concern for the white gaze.
(Lu and Steele 2019, 7)

Lu and Stelle argue that "by circulating content that spans multiple platforms simultaneously, Black users share and cultivate joy in ways that counter and resist the seemingly omnipresent images of Black death that surround us" (2019, 9).

Black joy has been described as "resistance" because it opposes the images of death and pain that are frequently circulated on social media sites. These images are important as they help to make the experiences of racism —from microaggressions to fatal incidents that lead to global protests—visible. Narratives that include Black suffering or pain are also prominent in popular culture,[6] and the prominence of these images can be overwhelming. Hashtags like #blackjoy, #blackout, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackboyjoy seek to counter the imagery of pain and suffering with depictions of joy. These hashtags are not intended to dismiss the utility of images that depict Black trauma and pain, but rather to ensure that those are not the only images being circulated. Black joy is not usually connected to an identifiable political stance. It does not necessarily lead to political action or participation in social movements. However, it is a tool that allows people to find joy amidst painful, disruptive, and difficult environments. Similar to Afrofuturism, it potentially helps people to think of a better future which can in turn, inform the actions they take whether they are directly linked to activism or through voting, which Monáe refers to in *Dirty Computer.* There has not been thorough research into the relationship between Afrofuturism, Black speculative fiction, and Black joy. However, this chapter seeks to investigate the ways they intertwine. Monáe's music has combined the two approaches; the futures depicted in the albums and music videos are often dystopian futuristic environments, yet she depicts characters who are able to find uplifting experiences in a challenging world and are able to channel these feelings of joy and happiness into

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[6] The "Black Museum" episode in the fourth season of *Black Mirror* (2017) was criticised for displaying Black pain: "the age-old message remains ironically regressive; that Black pain, Black trauma, and Black bodies are meant to be on literal display for an audience's enjoyment" (Addawoo 2018b).

enacting change with the hope of creating a future that allows these joyful expressions to exist without the undercurrent of fear that characterises the fictional worlds Monáe imagines. As discussed in the thesis introduction, otherness is a common theme within Afrofuturism, and is a lens commonly used to explore the experiences of being Black in the western world. Monáe similarly considers the 'other' through her android figure. However, her music demonstrates the ways in which otherness is interconnected with Black joy as her music and videos, particularly the recent *Dirty Computer* visual album, celebrate alterity.

The Android Other

Monáe's first EP introduced the android allegory for which she eventually became well-known for. *Metropolis* (2007) was about the forbidden love between the android, Cindi Mayweather and the human, Anthony Greendown. The Metropolis authorities hear about the romance between Mayweather and Greendown, believe Mayweather has "malfunctioned" and send bounty hunters after her. This begins "The Chase," in which bounty hunters are urged by a cheerful audio announcement on the first *Metropolis* track, to use "chainsaws and electro-daggers" to disassemble Mayweather. The EP cover (see Figure 2.1) shows the result of this chase, with Monáe/Mayweather missing a forearm and leg, and showing exposed wiring as if she has been violently pulled apart. Similar to popular representations of humanoid robots and androids, Mayweather is drawn as metallic white

Figure 3.1 The cover of the Metropolis (Suite I: The Chase) EP (2007) shows Janelle Monáe as Cindi Mayweather. The android has been damaged by pursuers attempting to dismantle her.

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with exposed circuitry and lines that indicate where her body has been assembled, emphasising the manufactured quality of the android. Despite being partially dismantled, the android on the cover introduces the technologically advanced world Monáe builds throughout her first three albums and visualises the ill-treatment of the androids which shapes the narrative of the following albums.

The ArchAndroid (2010) album represents the second chapter of Cindi Mayweather's narrative and tells of her attempts to evade the pursuing bounty hunters, and her eventual capture and imprisonment at an asylum called the "Palace of the Dogs." The album fluctuates between her thinking about the fleeting moments she shared with her human lover Anthony Greendown prior to her capture, the significance of an android uprising, and speculations about a utopian future formed by this uprising, in which androids and humans are free to live as equals. The narrative, formed predominantly through the song lyrics focuses on Mayweather as she acknowledges her role as the "the one" or "ArchAndroid," a messianic figure who will "lead the androids to freedom" (SoulCulture 2009). The album varies stylistically and covers R&B, soul, psychedelic rock, folk, and funk, which flaunts Monáe's musical versatility but is also used to reflect the emotion or intention of each song.

The final instalment of the android suite, Electric Lady (2013), does not continue the android narrative in a substantial way through the music. Rather, it is predominantly expressed in the album's liner notes. The Electric Lady notes open with a letter from the vice chancellor of the Palace of the Dogs Arts Asylum, which had previously imprisoned Mayweather. The letter details the reason for the release of the album "because it contained Cindi's truest autobiographical feelings about her dangerous love affair with Anthony Greendown, but also because it seems to contain within its frequencies some sort of mystical battle plan" (Electric Lady liner notes, 2013). There are no videos that depict Monáe as an android, and the overtly science fiction visual effects that were present in the previous music videos are absent from those released alongside the 2013 album, only appearing in the CD and vinyl artwork. As a result, this album is not closely analysed in this chapter.

Race, Class, and Otherness in the Android Suite

Monáe's first EP was inspired by and named after one of the earliest feature-length science fiction films, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Lang's ambitious, quasi-Marxist film was about an unequal society in which an idyllic surface world relied upon the exploitation of poor, underground workers. The lives of the wealthy characters are juxtaposed with the subterranean workers who are forced to keep "the machine" functioning for the surface dwellers. The film's romance between the son of the world's leader and a subterranean worker is reflected in Monáe's android/human relationship. Alongside this forbidden romance, which has been interpreted by scholars English and Kim as an invocation of "the struggle for interracial marriages of the past and struggles for same-sex marriage in the present" (2013, 224), the representation of economic disparity was a prominent theme within the album that has not been extensively explored in existing scholarship. Inequality in *Metropolis* and indeed the following albums in the android series, *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *Electric Lady* (2013), is not solely a result of race-based othering, but also includes sexuality and class. Whilst representations of class are prevalent in genre fiction, they are less so in Afrofuturism. Race and gender are often the focus for Afrofuturist scholars and creators, and if class is represented, it is as a consequence of either race or gender, or both. Many works of Afrofuturism are concerned with race but do not discuss class without returning to race (e.g., Black people are poor because they're Black; the rich are rich because they are white). The focus on race and oversight of class, Reed argues, is less radical than movements or works that acknowledge the multiplicity of the working class which, especially recently, has been framed as predominantly white and a "synonym for backwardness and bigotry" to explain voting patterns in US elections (Reed 2018, 113). Monáe is vocal about the difficulties of being Black and queer; however, the *Metropolis* album is an example of Afrofuturism that represents class and economic inequality as much as race and gender.

Monáe's consideration of class-related othering is unsurprising as she has highlighted her experiences of being raised in a working-class household and has mentioned the influence of her mother who was a custodian, her truck-driver father, and her step-father who was a post-office

worker (Wilson 2013). This is not to say other contemporary artists are not influenced by their early

life or experiences prior to the economic wealth that often comes with popular music success, but

rather that Monáe has included class distinctions into the *Metropolis* narrative and highlights the

issues that arise from inequalities caused by capitalism in her following albums. Monáe's working

class experiences also shaped her own self-fashioning techniques; in an interview for *Huffington Post*

she states: "…a lot of it had to do with me wanting to have a uniform like the working class, like my

mom and my grandmother" (Wilson 2013). Monáe's typical style until the release of her second

studio album consisted of classic black and white suits, monochrome oxfords, and coiffed hair. The

suits became a recognisable style for Monáe, as she dressed in a way that was uncommon for most

popular musicians at the time and became a recognisable, visible marker of her class identity.

In *Metropolis*, the androids are considered expensive commodities that are bought and sold

by wealthy humans. Whilst this has been interpreted as a reimagining of the slave auction which I

discuss later, the androids can be interpreted as a representation of the working class. Though

Monáe provides no in-depth explanation of the social structure of Metropolis, it is implied that

humans are reliant on the labour of androids. They do the menial work that humans previously did

for a wage, but are also forced to provide entertainment and are used as tools of war (see Figure

3.2). Some models like the oversized 'Emily Empire' are made for a specific function, but many

androids also appear as frivolous statement pieces that allow the super-rich to flaunt their wealth and status amongst other wealthy people.

Figure 3.2 The Emily Empire android model from the "Many Moons" music video indicates that androids are used for warfare by wealthy owners.

Monáe's android character adheres to the common understanding of the robot in science fiction as a tool to reduce the need for human labour.[7] As the androids are manufactured, they are not considered human and the emotions Mayweather experiences, particularly her love for the Greendown and her desire for freedom, are considered malfunctions. Despite their expense, androids are considered expendable, and when Cindi Mayweather's emotions and behaviour are recognised, she is chased and brutally attacked. This is justified because she is the 'other'; android labour is integral to Metropolis but, as they are considered non-human, androids can be discarded. This dehumanisation of the android evokes not just chattel slavery but also the treatment of working-class people. Monáe draws upon the experiences of strenuous labour that is underpaid or unpaid, and is undertaken for companies that do not value their workers because they are considered replaceable,[8] highlighting through the allegorical android narrative the ways working class identity is 'othered'.

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[7] "Robot" was first used to label what we would now refer to as an android (robots who appear human), in the play R.U.R: Rossum's Universal Robots (1920) by Czech writer, Karel Čapek. "Robot" translates to "forced labour."

[8] One writer describes her experience working at Amazon that bears a striking resemblance to the android Monáe imagines: "Technology has enabled employers to enforce a work pace with no room for inefficiency, squeezing every ounce of downtime out of workers' days. The scan gun I used to do my job was also my own personal digital manager. Every single thing I did was monitored and timed. After I completed a task, the scan

'Mr President,' another song on the *Metropolis* EP, refers to the class structure of the fictional world, whilst also criticising the US government, specifically the Bush administration. The song is about the struggles of living in Metropolis, particularly the difficulty of affording to live there. Being able to pay for basic needs of housing, education, and sustenance appears to be a common struggle for most humans. Their labour has been replaced with the labour of the androids who presumably work for no wages as they are not recognised as human, and are dismantled if they seem to question the status quo. Identifying the President as both the cause of and potential solution to this problem, Mayweather criticises the politicians of Metropolis, and by extension, the US, for prioritising wars over the survival and wellbeing of the majority of society. Mayweather criticises "Our nation's greed," and seems to argue for a redistribution of wealth alongside allowing relationships between humans and androids.

As well as class, *Metropolis* is unsurprisingly influenced by race and the history of enslavement, which is most apparent in the music video for 'Many Moons' (2009). Though it is the only music video to be released from that EP, the six-minute video is, however, as elaborate as some of Monáe's later videos and offers a visual portrayal of Cindi Mayweather's narrative. The androids are forced to dance and appear joyous for the amusement of their owners. Monáe/Mayweather is made to perform at the "Annual Android Auction," where wealthy Metropolis citizens bid on the latest android models. Whilst dance is often thought of as a form of self-expression and freedom, the androids perform solely for the pleasure of their owners. The first verse of the song hints at the androids' desire for freedom which has been "erased and thrown away." The remainder of the song is a call to arms, urging androids and their supporters to fight against the norms that have allowed others to benefit from their oppression: "You gotta ooo ah ah like a panther" highlights the radical ideas of an android rebellion by invoking the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence.

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gun not only immediately gave me a new one but also started counting down the seconds I had left to do it" (Guendelsberger 2019).

Monáe/Mayweather reminds them: "The silver bullet's in your hand and the war's heating up," emphasising the androids' agency and ability to fight for their freedom.

The auction in the music video for 'Many Moons' could be mistaken for a high-end fashion show as the androids walk along a runway for the potential buyers. As the auction progresses, the wealthy audience bids ever-increasing amounts for the "top of the line" "Alpha Platinum 9000," a presumably newer or updated model of android. The video cuts between the android singing and dancing at the centre of the auction, those parading along the catwalk, and those being prepared for the auction. Distracted by the forced removal of one bidder, and the androids on show, the audience are unaware of the malfunctioning Mayweather. Her dancing becomes frenzied, as she chants seemingly unconnected words and short phrases. They string together stereotypical racist epithets ("Black girl, bad hair / Broad nose, cold stare"), historical and political events ("White house, Jim Crow"), poverty ("Spoiled milk, stale bread / Welfare, bubonic plague") and the personal fears Monáe has referred to in previous interviews ("Outcast, weirdo"). Monáe/Mayweather's expressive face is superimposed with short clips of soldiers walking and bombs exploding, part of the warfare/resistance motifs that reoccur in *The ArchAndroid*. The audience within the video are initially entertained, believing it all to be part of a programmed performance, but they quickly realise the model is dysfunctional and watch in surprise as Mayweather twitches mid-air. Her mind seems to be racing as these fractured thoughts and phrases cause her to overload. As she dances, Mayweather floats into the air. The song ends as Mayweather's soul or consciousness ascends to a paradise or "Shangri la," overseen by another Alpha Platinum 9000 android on a white horse. Mayweather's eyes briefly glow a bright blue before dimming as she goes offline. The video ends with a quote from Mayweather: "I imagined many moons in the sky lighting the way to freedom," which Jones has interpreted as a further example of the way Monáe "remix[es] references to the slave on the auction block and their escape North using stars and other astronomical features with the technology of the cyborg" (2018b, 53).

The androids are portrayed as a group of exploited 'others' that have no rights, yet their labour is needed for Metropolis to function as the idyllic utopia, at least for the wealthy. The slave auction setting is intended to be a reimagining of enslavement in the US and the dehumanising nature of auction block. The auction in 'Many Moons' functions as a reinterpretation of a part of Black history within a futuristic setting. The video and the overall narrative about androids fighting for acknowledgment of their humanity, value, and protesting their lack of freedom are examples of the way Monáe's music initially aligned to "traditional" Afrofuturism. Yet *Metropolis* is more concerned with highlighting the otherness of the android, and the ways they are oppressed by the ruling, upper class humans. There are hints at an android resistance throughout *Metropolis* that are central to the narrative in *The ArchAndroid*. Inspired by her relationship with Anthony Greendown, Cindi Mayweather channels the joys she has felt being free from her owners to direct her attempts to enact change within Metropolis. Though Black joy as a form of resistance is difficult to determine, Monáe's second album emphasises the relationship between the two. The song 'Locked Inside' mentions the joyful time Cindi Mayweather has spent with Greendown, though it is marred by their need to avoid their pursuers:

> But I'm asking you will you stay with me
>
> In this land where we are free
>
> And I know it's rough and you've had enough
>
> But one day we'll be happy
>
> And when I look into the future
>
> I see danger in its eyes

Monáe highlights the ability to find pleasure and joy within otherwise difficult circumstances. As well as finding enjoyment amidst a dystopian society, these positive experiences are channelled into Mayweather's activism. 'Locked Inside' ends with Mayweather's decision to fight for change:

> I can make a change

I can start a fire

The pleasure she sings about at the beginning of the song has influenced her understanding that she

can change the treatment of androids in Metropolis. Joy becomes a way of accepting her forbidden

relationship with a human and that fighting the oppression of androids in general does not have to

end in tragedy. In fact, joy and pleasure inspire Mayweather to shape a future that prioritises these

experiences. The relationship between Black joy and resistance raised in the android suite becomes

central to Monáe's speculations about the future in *Dirty Computer*.

Resistance and Joy in *Dirty Computer* (2018)

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* signals a departure from the allegorical android 'other' that characterised

her previous albums. The album is less subtle and identifies groups or communities that have been,

or continue to be, othered.[9] Monáe does not rely on the monstrous, alien or non-human as a form of

representation which was a popular theme within Afrofuturism at the time the android albums were

produced. The monstrous or alien 'other' is a common speculative fiction trope that often allows

anxieties regarding social and political issues to be projected onto a fictional, often monstrous

figure.[10] Whilst this narrative device has been used to criticise inequality in its many forms, the need

for the racial, sexual, or gendered 'other' to be represented as a monster rather than as a human can

further dehumanise groups whose humanity is often called into question. Is the suffering or

exploitation of certain groups only understandable through the guise of an alien or monster? Can

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[9] As well as representing the persecution of alterity in its many forms, *Dirty Computer* (2018) is an example of Monáe's "personalised Afrofuture" (S. Robinson 2018) that is shaped by and a response to her current anxieties about being Black and queer: "'A lot of this album,' she says, 'is a reaction to the sting of what it means to hear people in my family say, 'All gay people are going to hell'" (Spanos 2018).

[10] An example of this is H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898) in which the Martians endanger human life with the intention of taking over the planet. In *War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination,* Howard Bruce Franklin argues that the alien invasion represented British colonialism. He argues that "Wells…tries to jolt the reader into confronting their own imperialist outlook," albeit without explicitly identifying the invading aliens as British colonial forces (2008, 65).

using aliens or monsters to signify the racial and sexual 'other' allow the experiences of the 'other' in the real world to be ignored or disregarded?

Instead of continuing with these familiar tropes, Monáe's *Dirty Computer,* builds on the direction of *Electric Lady* and is clearer about the communities being represented as the 'other'. From the subtle identification of the "Queer community, untouchables, emigrants, excommunicated, and negroid" in the song 'Q.U.E.E.N' (2013), to the more obvious portrayal of Black queer romance in *Dirty Computer*, Monáe has intentionally moved away from the allegorical devices used by some speculative fiction creators. By presenting the 'other' as human in *Dirty Computer*, Monáe "questions the presumption that the other is alien" (Kilgore 2010, 18). In other words, the inhumanity of the 'other' or "dirty computers," is shown to be a fabrication that the dominant society has used to justify the inhumane treatment of supposed non-conformers. The "dirty computers," despite being human, are treated as monstrous figures that are dehumanised because of their sexuality. Their dehumanisation provides an excuse for The House of the New Dawn's invasive regime, which attempts to erase queerness in order to maintain a strict social order.

Whilst *Dirty Computer* is a departure from the android allegories of her earlier work, Monáe continues to play with the interwoven themes of technology and humanity. Many of the sci-fi motifs that have been praised by critics are most evident in the 48-minute film, which consists of several music videos and transitional scenes that tell the story of Jane 57821.[11] The language used to discuss technology has been applied to humans: any 'strange' self-fashioning techniques or celebration of sexuality have been identified as "bugs and viruses" which are, supposedly, the cause of societal ills. In the opening scenes of the film, Monáe's voiceover introduces the setting of *Dirty Computer*:

> They started calling us computers. People began vanishing – and the Cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all.

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[11] Jane 57821 is also the name of the android in Monáe's first three albums and connects *Dirty Computer* to the android Suites though the narratives are separate.

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The album is set in near-future America ruled by an oppressive government referred to only as "they" throughout the emotion picture, an indication that the main protagonist does not know who is behind the regime. This ruling body exerts control by identifying individuals and groups as either dirty or clean. Those labelled as 'dirty computers' include anyone who questions the authority of the rulers, and non-conformers who defy the abstract notions of purity that are promoted as the norm. In the emotion picture, anyone within the LGBTQ+ spectrum as well as any individuals who are deemed to be too expressive or too 'strange', are identified as unclean, captured by the police or government agents, and taken to a facility called House of the New Dawn, to have their memories and any other impurities wiped away using a computer programme called "NEVERMIND." Monáe's character, Jane 57821, is captured, as are her friends/lovers, Zen (Tessa Thompson) and Ché (Jayson Aaron). The music videos within the emotion picture are presented as individual memories of Jane, which the viewer sees as the NEVERMIND programme searches and erases them.

The *Dirty Computer* album is divided, Monáe has explained, into four sections. "The reckoning" introduces "what it means to be a dirty computer" and establishes the way otherness is prosecuted in the future US; in an interview, Monáe explains that she was inspired by her own experiences of having her identity reduced to derogatory language (Beats 1 on Apple Music 2018). The following section of the album is a "celebration" of alterity and embodies Black joy as characters celebrate their identities despite the risks that this entails. The majority of *Dirty Computer* consists of tracks that value self-expression and identities that are viewed as deviations from a white, heterosexual norm, and celebrates the perseverance of LGBTQ+ identity in oppressive environments. Monáe devotes a section to the "fear of going against the status quo" (92Q Jams 2018), a theme which has arisen in her other releases. The album ends with the "reclamation" of "being American and a dirty computer," projecting a future where identities commonly described as oppositional or undesirable, become compatible with being 'American'. The remainder of this chapter will be focussed on the themes of celebration and reclamation within *Dirty Computer* as this is where Monáe's vision of the future is most apparent.
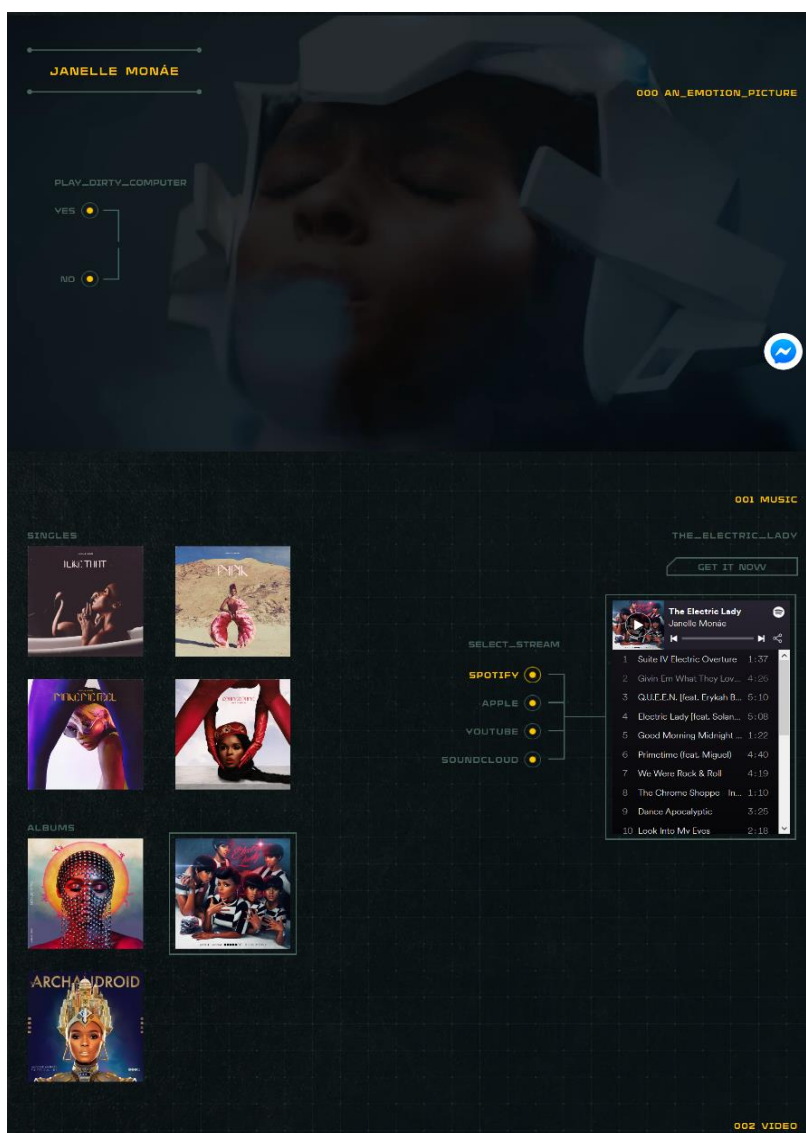

Figure 3.3 Janelle Monáe's website following the release of Dirty Computer *which recreates the layout of old websites, accessed 21 May 2019.*

As I have mentioned previously, *Dirty Computer*'s

representation of the other is not through an alien or monster character but rather through the technological language used to dehumanise any non-conformists, reducing the human to a unit of machinery that can be subjected to the ideologies of those in power. The emotion picture plays with the idea of RAM, or Random-Access Memory, which stores data on computers, phones, tablets, and other electrical devices. Monáe incorporates this technological imagery within her website. The site, captured in Figure 3.3, consists of one page arranged in a similar way to websites from the 1990s-2000s. External links are highlighted by yellow circuitry. Short GIF's of some of the *Dirty Computer* music videos play simultaneously, again to recreate the interface used in film. The site is reminiscent of "NEVERMIND," the programme in the emotion picture that is used to erase memories. The user is made to feel like they can access these memories in a similar way to those who work in the memory-wiping facility.

There is no real threat of physical violence in the near-future, dystopian US, save for the violence of being captured by a police force that uses flying surveillance robots to identify the "dirty computers." The constant feeling of being watched, the risk of being discovered, and forced to go through the memory erasure programme at the House of New Dawn is intended to be psychologically damaging. Having to suppress part of their personality and their sexuality, the dirty computers are forced to hide away to avoid capture or express themselves and potentially face the cleaning process. This psychological violence hints at the similarities between the memory wiping facility and conversion therapy, a widely discredited practice that "refers to any form of treatment or psychotherapy which aims to change a person's sexual orientation or to suppress a person's gender identity. It is based on an assumption that being lesbian, gay, bi or trans is a mental illness that can be 'cured'" ('Conversion Therapy' 2015). As well as being disproven as a form of 'treatment', the effects of going through this process have been shown as detrimental to an individual's mental health (Stephenson 2019).[12] There are similarities between the memory wiping and conversion

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[12] Conversion therapy is slowly being outlawed, though it remains a fear for many who are part of LGBTQ+ communities. It is illegal in 18 US states and various counties. It is legal in the UK, though the government

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therapy. Like conversion therapy, the NEVERMIND programme is created with the intention of erasing any identity that does not adhere to a perceived norm and is used to control the expression of LGBTQ+ and gender non-conformity. Dirty Computers, prior to being captured, celebrate the aspects of their identity that are demonised by the House of the New Dawn.

As well as being described as pieces of technology, the process of memory-wiping contributes to the dehumanising eradication of the other. Jane, along with two other people, is suspended upside down from the ceiling of an empty room. Tubes are wound around their bodies and brightly coloured liquid is drained from them. The voiceover describes the House of the New Dawn as:

> This place where they drained us of our dirt and all the things that made us
> special. And just when you thought you could remember something, just when
> you thought you could see the past clearly, they would hit you with NEVERMIND.

The erasure of their difference is depicted as a physical as well as mental process. The liquid drained from each person is shown swirling around in a bucket, presumably to be thrown out after the process is finished. Though the characters in the video do not appear to be in pain, Jane's voice-over sounds distraught from the emotional toll. While suspended, a short sample of the song 'Take a Byte' plays. The song seems to taunt those overseeing the NEVERMIND programme: "Your code is programmed not to love me, but you can't pretend, Oh, what a surprise." In the emotion picture, Jane makes direct eye contact with the camera and the programme operators, remaining defiant even whilst suffering through the mind-wiping process. The same language that is used by the ruling government and the House of the New Dawn to dehumanise the dirty computers is adopted in 'Take a Byte' to entice the listener to submit to their desires and resist the need to suppress their true

announced in 2021 that it "will introduce a ban on the practice of so-called conversion therapy"('Open Consultation Overview: Banning Conversion Therapy' 2021).

identity. By embracing her identity as a "dirty computer," Jane can cause the fall of man, or, in the world of *Dirty Computer*, an end to the cleansing. Finding pleasure in her identity and her refusal to transform into the "pure" ideal is imperative in the future that Jane wants to create in *Dirty Computer*. Whilst joy is not enough on its own to change the dystopian world, it is the joyous memories Jane is able to hold onto become a source of strength and eventually guide her to destroying the House of the New Dawn.

In the emotion picture, the technological language used to dehumanise defiant individuals is not applied to those who have been through the cleaning programme. Instead, they are bestowed with labels that are synonymous with light; the character Zen is the first to go through the facility

Figure 3.4 Screenshots of the Dirty Computer emotion picture. These frames show Jane/Monáe's appearance before and after being captured.

and is given the role of "torch," someone responsible with guiding "dirty computers" through the process of becoming clean. Their clothes similarly reflect this change from "dirty computer" to "clean" human, as everyone within the facility is dressed in plain white clothing adorned only with gold geometric headdresses and bracelets that could be interpreted as a cage. This is a direct contrast to the "dirty computers" introduced early in the film. They are recognisable by their elaborate clothing which borrows from various subcultures such as goth, punk, and the New Romantics, a subculture that was popular during the 1980s. In the first accessed memory, Jane wears a studded leather jacket, bold rainbow eyeshadow, and her hair is arranged in large bantu knots (see Figure 3.4). Neither Jane's appearance nor that of her friends, is particularly shocking in themselves, yet they are in stark contrast to the clothes the characters are forced to wear following their capture. The dark colours are later replaced with a brilliant white, form-fitting jumpsuit and her hair braided into a simple ponytail. The erasure of the "dirty computer" is not just technological but occurs through the removal of any items that mark the wearer as different. In this future US, part of the persecution of dirty computers lies in the denial of their self-expression through their self-fashioning techniques. Something as simple as clothing has become, in the future Monáe envisions, a site of control for the rulers. By dressing in a way that defies the strict norm, clothing becomes a form of resistance because the dirty computers derive pleasure from choosing their appearance.

Monáe's earlier albums do discuss the importance of self-expression; as I have mentioned previously, the android Cindi Mayweather is forced to dance for the enjoyment of others rather than as an act of her own self-expression. This aspect of the android is a focal point in Charlotte Bailey's fanzine, *I Defy Every Label,* in which Bailey continues the narrative of an android who, due to its programming, always dances if a human requests a performance. The android, another Alpha Platinum 9000 like Cindi Mayweather, describes herself as "a rebel that can't rebel" because she has to dance when commanded rather than perform under her own volition. Monáe's music repeatedly links the ability to express oneself with freedom. This continues in *Dirty Computer* in which self-expression – in this case, freedom to express individual sexuality that defies a heterosexual norm —

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is an act of resistance. This is particularly significant as sexuality can be expressed through self-fashioning techniques.[13] Throughout *Dirty Computer*, self-expression becomes central to the act of resisting the societal norm and the processes imposed at the New Dawn facility. This is most clear in the music videos 'Django Jane' and 'PYNK' which respectively celebrate blackness and sexuality.

'Django Jane' is the sixth track on *Dirty Computer.* It differs from the rest of the album as Monáe raps the whole song which consists of one continuous verse. The song is boastful, similar to many rap songs, as Monáe brags about "box office numbers" and various awards. "Django Jane" is a feminist anthem in which Monáe tells listeners to "hit the mute button, let the vagina have a monologue." The music video consists of Monáe dressed in brightly coloured suits and wearing a headdress whilst her backing dancers are dressed in black leather jackets and red berets, evoking the Black Panther uniform of the 1960s and 1970s. "Django Jane" talks about assertiveness and borrows aspects of the Black Panther Party's iconic appearance; the group is known for their radicalism, the patriarchal perspectives of some members, and the eschewing of Black queerness.[14] Monáe does not necessarily indicate whether she shares the political stances espoused by the Black Panthers. This is not to say Monáe reduces the Black Panthers to a visual aesthetic, but rather that she is inspired by the natural hair and the "Black is Beautiful" message that celebrated Black culture and identity. Monáe combines the seemingly incompatible Black Panthers with her own feminist stance and her identity as a queer, non-binary person, within one video. It is a further example of

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[13] Whilst sexuality is not a visible marker of difference in the same way race or ethnicity is, popular culture artists often find ways to represent various sexualities; though Monáe never refers to the "dirty computers" with familiar language such as lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual, she portrays sexuality visually such as her character Jane running between her lovers, Zen and Che in "Make Me Feel." The characters'—and by extension, Monáe's—sexuality is inextricably tied to her self-expression and, as a result of the oppressive conditions facilitated by the House of the New Dawn, the expression of non-heterosexual love becomes an act of resistance, one that runs the risk of capture and erasure.

[14] The homophobic language used by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* regarding author James Baldwin is frequently noted as an example of the homophobia within the Black Panther Party. However, the Black Panthers' stance on sexuality was complex (for further discussion, see Ronald K. Porter's "A Rainbow in Black: The Gay Politics of the Black Panther Party," *Counterpoints* 367, 2012).

the way Monáe's Afrofuturism remixes aspects of the past with her own contemporary ideals in order to imagine an improved future.

'PYNK' was one of a few tracks released shortly before the album in late April 2018. The track, featuring singer Grimes, is described by Monáe as a "brash celebration of creation, self love, sexuality and pussy power!" in the initial YouTube video description. The music video set in a secluded area of the future US, away from the urban landscape that appears at the beginning of the emotion picture. Monáe and her dancers drive in a hover car between a house, diner, and the middle of a desert, performing numerous dance sequences. The dancers are also different skin tones; Monáe appears to be avoiding a common issue within music videos which frequently include lighter skinned performers. Part of the music video is set in a sparse desert where Monáe and her backup dancers perform, with some wearing "Puffy, pink silk pants with tulle layering, that look just like a vagina" (see Figure 3.5) (Cadogan and Bulut 2018). In various tweets following the music videos' release, Monáe and *Dirty Computer* co-star Tessa Thompson explained that the dancers were intended to represent women "no matter if you have a vagina or not" (Janelle Monáe, Cindi Mayweather 👽 👩🏾‍🚀 🤖 🚀 2018). As well as the message of embracing sexuality, the trousers were also a way of representing transgender women within Monáe's futuristic world. As I have discussed

Figure 3.5 Monáe and the backing dancers in "PYNK". They represent cisgender individuals (those wearing trousers) and transgender individuals (those without trousers).

earlier, Afrofuturism as a genre, despite being varied, has only included nominal representation of LGBTQ+ identities until recently. Monáe's album, and in particular 'PYNK', represents a turning point for contemporary Afrofuturism, in which depictions of different genders and sexualities intersect with portrayals of Black identity.

Self-expression is depicted as a form of resistance in the emotion picture, though there is no assumption that self-expression alone can be used to bring about positive changes that benefit othered individuals and communities. Instead, *Dirty Computer* focuses on Black joy, which, whilst considered a form of resistance for some, is predominantly concerned with providing images that counter those of Black pain and suffering. *Dirty Computer* has resonated with fans such as Michael-Michelle, whose essay contribution to the *Dirty Computer Fanzine* discusses a few of the reasons why Monáe's music has been particularly important to her:

> For me, personally, her use of Afrofuturism to reconceptualize the black woman
>
> and black queer experience in an alternative reality erases that feeling of
>
> otherness. It means that despite my mental health and our political climate being
>
> dim – we can determine our own destiny and exist in a better future against all
>
> odds, turning her fiction into reality. (Michelle 2018, 7)

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* is not intended to be the album that ends inequality, but its emphasis on the pleasure that can be found in difference is integral to those who have been or continue to be criticised for challenging heteronormativity and gender binaries. Though there is a general leaning towards acceptance of different races, sexualities, and genders, this does not necessarily signal meaningful change. For example, institutions and corporations can frame themselves as supporting of equality in its many forms (such as the tendency of large businesses to incorporate a rainbow in their marketing during pride celebrations), without the risk of financial losses. Alongside support which superficially values difference without trying to enforce meaningful changes to reduce inequalities more broadly, the level of acceptance for individual members of LGBTQ+ communities

can vary with some being unable to express their gender or sexuality when amongst friends, family, or colleagues.[15] Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, like many Afrofuturist creations, will not bring about actual change. However, the value of these works lies in their ability to represent voices or perspectives that have been or continue to be unheard, and offer narratives in which the futurity of Black communities, in this case Black LGBTQ+ communities specifically, is depicted as potentially joyous rather than a continuation of Black pain and suffering.

Imagining a Better Future for Dirty Computers

Dirty Computer does not visually depict the world Jane wants to see. Instead, the emotion picture has an elusive ending that allows viewers to speculate further. The closing scenes of the video occur after Jane has supposedly been taken for the final cleaning process. The camera pans along a corridor through a set of double doors, into a room in which Che is lying on a stretcher. He is confused to see Jane, who does not appear to recognise him and introduces herself as a "torch" named "Mary Apple 54." The viewer is led to believe the erasure of her identity is complete and she has become a member of the New Dawn. The title and credits roll as if this is the end: that there is no future for black, queer identity in the hostile future of the US, outside of one that relies on forced assimilation.

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[15] A national UK survey notes that 40% of survey respondents had received experienced "LGBT hate incidents." The survey "also found more than two-thirds of LGBT people avoid holding hands in public, for fear of negative reactions." (*BBC News*, 3 July 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44686374). Furthermore, transgender and non-binary people are likely to face violence, unemployment, police harassment and physical and sexual assault (Jack Harrison, Jaime Grant, Jody L. Herman, "A Gender Not Listed Here: Genderqueer, Gender Rebels, and OtherWise in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey"). Though these surveys offer only a couple of examples, they highlight the lived experiences of many who are not cisgender and/or part of the LGBQ+ spectrum, experiences which are obfuscated by what appears to be a general acceptance of gender non-conformity or non-heterosexual relationships.

Monáe could have ended the emotion picture here and provided an album that speculated about a bleak futurity in which resistance and the struggle of persecuted "dirty computers" did little to challenge the power structure that values similarity and purity. *Dirty Computer* could have become a commentary on the futility of resistance, at least in the form of self-expression, as a way of fighting against a ruling body that seems to have overwhelming control. However, the post-credit scene and the song "Americans" counters this bleak vision of the future, by offering a hopeful end to the album. In the emotion picture, the post-credit scene begins with a torch wearing a gold and black gas mask, entering the room where Jane is welcoming Che. As the doors shut behind the figure, she throws a spare gas mask towards Jane and Che who is lying on the stretcher. The figure, it is revealed, is Zen, who simply says "let's go" as the final song from the album plays in the background. The three are shown surrounded by a thick smoke, which spreads throughout the facility and sedates anyone who breathes it in. Jane and Zen, supporting Che between them, exit the facility, walking past the sleeping bodies of New Dawn workers. The exit is illuminated by a brilliant white light; the viewer cannot see what is beyond the door. As Zen and Che walk through the door, they move out of shot. The film ends as Jane/Monáe, illuminated in the doorway, turns to look back over her shoulder at the corridor, and at the viewer. She does not look apprehensive or worried at being caught, but rather defiant (see Fig 3.6). Jane gives a lingering look at the House of the New Dawn facility and moves forward out of the camera's focus and into the light.
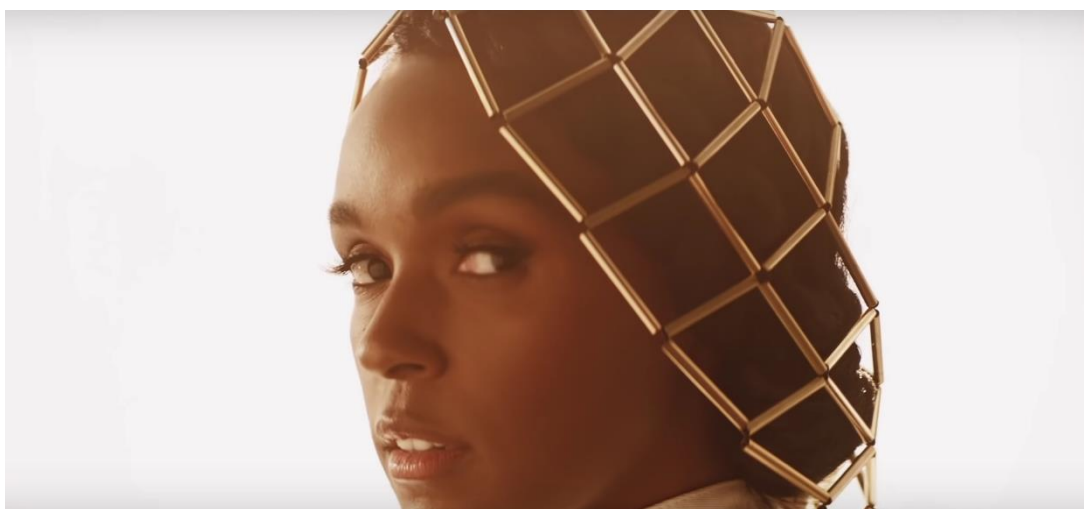

Figure 3.6 Jane (Janelle Monáe) in the closing scene of the Dirty Computer *emotion picture.*

In these scenes, Jane rejects the future envisioned by the House of the New Dawn, which only allowed her to be part of it if she became "clean." Jane's vision of the future is one that resists being incorporated or accepted by a regime that has only harmed her and other dirty computers. From the beginning, the dirty computers have tried to express themselves in spite of the consequences. To try to compromise by working with the workers at the House of the New Dawn would, potentially, lead to a future that still required dirty computers to suppress some of their "bugs and viruses." The final song, "Americans," offers a glimpse into a future that is built by and for excluded communities and counters the future that relied on their erasure or subjugation.

‘Americans’ is both about the America in *Dirty Computer* and the current political and social climate. The song seeks to reclaim an American identity that encompasses a variety of communities, rather than a narrow or "pure" identity that is unattainable for many. The first bridge describes an outdated description of an ‘ideal’ American individual, largely shaped by ethnoculturalist ideas of American identity:

> I like my woman in the kitchen
> I teach my children superstitions
> I keep my two guns on by blue nightstand
> A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes
> But she'll never ever wear my pants

The ‘true’ American Monáe rallies against is overtly masculine and one in which women are subordinate, prevented from "wearing the pants" or having any authority. The chorus also includes the lines, "Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land," and speaks to the conservative view that racial and sexual others are a threat to the "constitutive norms" that dictate ideas of what American identity is and is not (Schildkraut 2007, 598). The bridge and chorus establish the false and idealised ‘America’ formed by conservative, patriarchal values which Monáe believes requires change in order to represent the multiplicity of America.

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Spoken words are interspersed within 'Americans', with the final bridge forming a closing sermon. Some listeners initially believed the bridge was a snippet of a Martin Luther King speech. However, it is both written and spoken by Reverend Dr. Sean McMillan, who also speaks in an earlier song 'Crazy, Classic Life'. The connection to a civil rights era speech is intentional and connects the present-day struggles mentioned in the song, with historical calls for change. The bridge passionately speaks about a variety of social issues which Monáe has previously spoken about in interviews or talks, or approached in her music:

> Until women can get equal pay for equal work
> This is not my America
> Until same-gender loving people can be who they are
> This is not my America
> Until black people can come home from a police stop without being shot in the head
> This is not my America, huh!
> Until poor whites can get a shot at being successful
> This is not my America
> I can't hear nobody talkin' to me

Part of the bridge repeats the central focus of *Dirty Computer,* particularly the freedom for LGBTQ+ individuals to "be who they are." Whilst the complexities of LGBTQ+ struggles are somewhat reduced to "same-gender loving people," which does not acknowledge the experiences of transgender and non-binary people, the prospect of an America without the persecution that is presented in the *Dirty Computer* narrative or the difficulties for many LGBTQ+ people in the present, is intended to be an improvement. The future Monáe envisions does not offer a radical change with regards to class, in the same way that *Metropolis* and *The ArchAndroid* considered an android resistance as a solution to class inequality and the demonisation of human/android relationships. The line "Until poor whites can get a shot at being successful" implies that the future will remain similar to the present, but with greater financial security. However, the bridge is an attempt to unify groups in the US that have been or remain neglected, which has prevented them from improving

their socio-economic status. The bridge connects these otherwise disparate groups that have been unable to improve their quality of life. This unification opposes the concern surrounding identity politics, which have been accused of dividing groups that would collectively be stronger.

In "Mapping the Margins," Crenshaw highlights the importance of acknowledging the ways race, class, gender, and sexuality intertwine and impact the experiences of those who are impacted by multiple social issues simultaneously.[16] Monáe's 'Americans' similarly intertwines a critique of capitalism with criticism of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. The closing track suggests that a better America is one that caters to othered communities. The final lyrics of 'Americans' asks listeners to "Please sign your name on the dotted line," referring to the importance of participating in voting in US elections and participating in politics, in order to shape the future that Black, LGBTQ+ communities need. Whilst Monáe's music is not necessarily a work of activism, *Dirty Computer* highlights the relationship between the speculative and the real; the act of imagining an improved future can drive viewers, listeners, and fans, to try to participate as activists, voters, or politicians, and create the conditions needed to form an equal future. There is no guarantee that this will result in an improvement, but it does try to inspire action.

Janelle Monáe's music offers another interpretation of Afrofuturism, one that prioritises the depiction of Black joy and pleasure. Otherness has often been a part of the genre through comparisons between the alien and Black identity, and Monáe continues this by celebrating otherness, particularly the experience of being the 'other' for Black, queer individuals, and in doing so, begins to add to the representation of Black, queer futurity in Afrofuturism. The worlds Monáe imagines are dystopian, reliant upon the exploitation of certain groups – on androids or dirty computers. However, the protagonists Cindi Mayweather and Jane, inspired by the joyful and

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[16] Crenshaw argues that "recognising that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics (1991, 1299).

pleasurable experiences they are able to have despite their bleak surroundings, aim to build a better

society that values these experiences without relying on the suffering of 'others'. This ability to

imagine a better world in the middle of a dystopia is discussed further in the following chapter on N.

K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy.

Chapter 3: New Worlds in an Environmental Dystopia: N. K. Jemisin's

The Broken Earth Trilogy

In 2018, N. K. Jemisin became the first author to win three consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel. *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017), consisting of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017),[1] is currently the only series in which each book has received this prestigious accolade.[2] In an interview, Jemisin discussed the influences behind the series: "I'm drawing on the human history of structural oppression, as well as my feelings about this moment in American history" (Flood 2020). Throughout the trilogy, Jemisin shows that the societies within her fictional world have relied on a form of oppression or enslavement of one group to ensure that another group can have access to substantial resources. The brutality inflicted by the dominant group is not an unfortunate circumstance but intentional, reducing the chances of societal changes that could challenge the privileges enjoyed by the dominant group. This chapter will examine how Jemisin's characters acknowledge this repeating cycle and try to build a future that disrupts and eventually breaks this reliance on the exploitation of one group for the benefit of another. Using the ideas surrounding change raised in Octavia E. Butler's Earthseed series, this chapter will consider the ways seemingly powerless characters are able to view the chaos of a dying world as an opportunity to bring a complete end to the oppressive world and as a foundation on which an improved future can be shaped. This idea of building a new society amid a dystopian or dying world is an integral part of Afrofuturism that is prominent in Jemisin's trilogy.

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[1] References to these titles will be abbreviated throughout the chapter as follows: *The Fifth Season* (*TFH*), *The Obelisk Gate* (*TOS*), *The Stone Sky* (*TSS*).

[2] The Hugo Award is one of the most prestigious awards for science fiction and fantasy works. Anyone with a membership to World Science Fiction Society is able to nominate and vote for their preferred title. The Hugo Awards cover a range of categories; as well as awards for literary works such as Best Novel and Best Graphic Story, awards are also given for Best Dramatic Presentation and, from 2021, Best Video Game (Kevin 2020). The Nebula Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award are also highly regarded awards for Science-Fiction and Fantasy.

In her 2018 Hugo Award acceptance speech, Jemisin mentioned the significance of her record-breaking win, in terms of her own hard work and dealing with the hostility she has faced from science fiction and fantasy (SFF) fans and authors. She was one of the authors targeted by a group known as the 'Sad/Rabid Puppies.' The group, though probably representative of a small number of speculative fiction fans, were vocal about the increasing push for diversity in genre fiction. The increasing prominence in SFF of authors whose books centred on the experiences of marginalised groups or seemed to have a message concerned with environmental, social, or political changes was, they argued, an indicator of the supposed marginalisation of authors who wanted to write apolitical, escapist fiction. Whilst the Sad/Rabid Puppies were focused on genre fiction, particularly science fiction and fantasy, similar arguments have occurred in different areas of popular culture.[3]

The Sad/Rabid Puppies were particularly vocal between 2013-2016, coinciding with the nomination of Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* for the Hugo Best Novel award, which it won in 2016. The Rabid Puppies campaign can be characterised by a blog post by Larry Correa and the expulsion of writer Theodore Beale from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) (Romano 2018). In 2013 Correia argued that books like his that are "unabashed pulp action" were not receiving the acclaim they deserved. In the same post, he urged his followers to purchase a membership for The World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) which would allow them to vote for his book and "poke the establishment in the eye" (2013). Similar Sad Puppy campaigns for other authors in various award categories led to their achieving nominations over the three-year period but no awards. In the same year, fellow Rabid Puppy Theodore Beale, also known as Vox Day, ran for president of SFWA. Beale was unsuccessful, receiving ten percent or approximately fifty of SFWA's membership ballots (Jemisin 2013). As Jemisin notes in a speech she gave at the speculative fiction convention, Continuum, that Beale was able to secure even ten percent of votes when he has been

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[3] #Gamergate similarly used a criticism of game journalism to attack women in the gaming industry. Criticisms of Marvel's characters of colour and female characters have also been prominent from the 2010s; see the previous chapter on *Black Panther* for more information.

identified as a "misogynist, racist, anti-Semite" was indicative of a broader issue within genre fiction, and reflective of the global political climate (2013).[4]

The Sad/Rabid Puppies' response to the significance of Jemisin's work and the success of *The Broken Earth* trilogy is indicative of a wider rift between those that believe speculative fiction needs to address race, gender, sexuality, and climate change and those who see any consideration of such topics as bringing politics into a form that is supposedly apolitical. Like comics which have had a long history of addressing political concerns, speculative fiction is no different despite the claims of the Sad/Rabid Puppies. Their campaign under the guise of 'keeping politics out of genre fiction' was an attempt to discredit authors like Jemisin, whose works are overtly political and consider the interconnections of racial and environmental injustice. The Hugo Award ceremony became a moment in which she could "lift a massive, shining rocket shaped finger in their direction" ('N.K. Jemisin's 2018 Hugo Award Best Novel Acceptance Speech' 2018). The series contributed to the changing landscape of science fiction and fantasy, effectively placing narratives that centre Black lives, experiences, and futures in mainstream genre fiction.

Jemisin, like many other creators, does not explicitly refer to her work as Afrofuturist: "I don't traffic in labels and names. That for me is a thing of academics. I write what I write, people put whatever label onto it that they want" ('What Was, What Is & What Will Be: A Cross-Genre Look at Afrofuturism' 2019). She does not appear to wholly reject the term, but nonetheless does not find such labels helpful in describing her own work. As discussed in the thesis introduction, the labelling of art as Afrofuturist is often done by the critics, scholars, or more recently, fans, rather than by the artist themselves. However, Jemisin's comment raises the issue of the purpose of Afrofuturism as a term; if it is a "thing of academics" as Jemisin notes, can it be useful outside of academic research? Or does Afrofuturism remain an academic concept despite increasing use of the term by fans who

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[4] Following Jemisin's speech, Beale responded in a blog post where he attacked various authors and editors, and explicitly expressed white supremacist views (quoted in El-Mohtar 2013). Beale argued that "genetic science presently suggests that we are not equally homo sapiens sapiens [*sic*]" and referred to Jemisin as not being "fully civilized." This blog post led to his expulsion from SFWA as well as further Rabid Puppy campaigns.

want to label their interests and the prominence of #afrofuturism on social media? Jemisin clarifies

her statement in another interview by explaining that for her, Afrofuturism has often been framed

as a visual aesthetic, and she refers to the music of Parliament Funkadelic, Zapp & Roger, and the

film *Brother from Another Planet*, as works that she associates with Afrofuturism. She has not

considered non-visual examples, such as her own novels and short stories, as examples of a textual

expression of Afrofuturism. Nevertheless, Jemisin's work, particularly *The Broken Earth* series, the

ongoing comic series *Far Sector* (2019-) (Holmon 2019), and the short story collection, *How Long 'Til

Black Future Month?* (2018) have led to her being associated with Afrofuturism by critics because

her work has "expanded and matured" the science fiction and fantasy world (Woods 2019). As I have

discussed throughout the thesis, Afrofuturism is difficult to define, and the basis on which certain

texts are included within the genre is often unclear (Lavender and Yaszek 2020, 1). But Jemisin's

work, particularly *The Broken Earth* trilogy, appears to have been included within the genre because

it depicts a unique future world in which protagonists who would be considered Black by readers,

are integral to the narrative.[5]

Jemisin's *Broken Earth* imagines a future inhabited by Black people but also involves Black

people in shaping a future that attempts to take an alternative path. The story begins with a

mother's journey to find her daughter after she is kidnapped just as a fifth season begins. Fifth

seasons are reoccurring environmental disasters, caused by a sentient Earth, that frequently ravage

The Stillness, the continent on which the characters live. Humanity is reliant on a group called

orogenes, people who can manipulate seismic energy. The main protagonists—Essun, her daughter

Nassun, and her mentor, Alabaster—all have these abilities, and eventually learn to manipulate

magic, making them very powerful. Orogenes are a necessity for The Stillness, yet they are

considered non-human. They are policed by Guardians and treated poorly by 'stills', humans without

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[5] In the series, the characters' race, ethnicity, or religion is not frequently remarked upon, though the main
characters are described as having dark brown skin and tightly coiled hair. Whilst there is a normative ideal in
terms of beauty standards, the main determining factor of individual status is whether they have orogenic or
magical abilities.

orogenic powers. The series explores how the societal inequalities amongst these groups are interwoven with the environmental disasters. In order to build a fairer society, in which orogenes are recognised and treated as citizens of The Stillness, a solution to both concerns is required. Essun, Nassun, and Alabaster experience The Stillness' oppressive regime in slightly different ways, and this in turn shapes how they conceive of a future, whether that be a complete end to The Stillness, or a more hopeful restructuring of the relationship between orogenes, stills, and the humanoid stone eaters that live alongside them.

Like Janelle Monáe and Nnedi Okorafor, whose works I discuss in chapters two and four of this thesis, Jemisin's novels imagine a future that centres and is shaped by Black characters. Though popular science fiction and fantasy has predominantly been a form of social commentary, Jemisin's triple Hugo award win for Best Novel was, at least to the participants and supporters of the Puppies campaign, a reinforcement of mainstream audiences prioritising left-leaning social commentary over escapism and supposedly apolitical genre fiction. Whilst the main protagonists of *The Broken Earth* series are Black, and parallels between the books and Black diasporic history are evident, Jemisin notes that she is "drawing on the human history of structural oppression" more broadly ('N.K. Jemisin's 2018 Hugo Award Best Novel Acceptance Speech' 2018). I have chosen to examine Jemisin's work because she forms a part of mainstream speculative fiction by Black authors. By mainstream, I mean that her work has been rightly recognised by the wider, global science fiction and fantasy community and is highly acclaimed, as the numerous awards Jemisin's books have been nominated for and won attest. I have discussed the presence of Afrofuturism in mainstream popular culture in more depth in the thesis introduction, and Jemisin's stories can be considered one of the prominent examples of Afrofuturism in popular literature and the multiple Hugo Awards have

brought more attention to the series, as has the recent announcement of Jemisin receiving a

MacArthur Fellows Grant in 2020.[6]

Jemisin's growing presence in the world of speculative fiction has recently led to scholarly

attention. Taking an ecocritical lens, Alistair Iles proposes that *The Broken Earth* series is an indicator

of the way speculative fiction can be used to change current approaches to the global environmental

crisis. Iles argues that the solutions proposed by policy makers are often reliant on technological

advances rather than societal change, and the relationship marginalised groups have with the earth

is rarely reflected in environmental policy. Part of Iles' research examines Jemisin's depiction of the

intelligence of the earth in the series; he notes that the "books evoke an ecocentric perspective in

which Earth's presence and power must be respected, not despoiled" (2019, 14). This chapter will

also reflect upon the series' portrayal of earth's sentience, building on Iles' argument by examining

the significance of an ecocritical lens within Afrofuturism and Black Speculative fiction, which is

rarely remarked upon in scholarly research.

Kirsten Dillender also explores *The Broken Earth* trilogy as a series that disrupts the idea of

linear progression concerning racial equality and ultimately imagines a world that depicts "black

futures that *truly* transcend structural racism" (2020, 131) as the world in the series changes

dramatically by the end of the final book.[7] Dillender views the treatment of orogenes as an allegory

for anti-Black racism. However, this chapter will interrogate the series' approach to oppression more

broadly. Jemisin has stated in a Reddit AskMeAnything (AMA) post that although all of her books

feature Black characters, and she is partly informed by African American history, *The Broken Earth*

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[6] The MacArthur Fellows Grant is ('MacArthur Fellows Program Strategy - MacArthur Foundation' n.d.)a prestigious award "intended to encourage people of outstanding talent to pursue their own creative, intellectual, and professional inclinations"('MacArthur Fellows Program Strategy - MacArthur Foundation' n.d.). Octavia E. Butler also received the grant in 1995.
[7] Dillender does not offer a definition of "structural racism," but regarding N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, it refers to the way orogenes are not recognised as humans within The Stillness and have little autonomy which Dillender may consider reminiscent of the experiences of Black Americans.

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trilogy is not intentionally reflective of specific forms of oppression, but "oppression, period"

(anotherjemisin 2017). In response to a fan's question on the forum site, Jemisin explains:

> The Guardians are basically the designers and enforcers of any bigoted system –
>
> racists in a white supremacist society, sexually repressive church in a
>
> homophobic/anti-queer society, misogynists in a sexist society. So you can read
>
> Schaffa [a secondary character] as an (eventually) anti-racist white guy in a racist
>
> society if you want, but just remember it's not that simple." (anotherjemisin
>
> 2017)

Dillender concludes with an examination of the destructive fifth season caused by one of the main

characters, and argues that this part of the series is an example of the ways "Afrofuturism is couched

within – and perhaps even born of – Afro-Pessimism" (2020, 146). In the series, destruction becomes

one of the few ways of ending the seemingly endless cycle of oppression which humanity has relied

upon. This chapter will consider the tension between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism, expanding

Dillender's argument by examining two approaches to futurity contained in Jemisin's series: one that

can be read as a representation of an Afropessimist perspective, focussing on destruction as the

solution to The Stillness' injustice and instability; and an alternative Afrofuturist vision of the future

which emphasises inter-group collaboration and using the destruction as a foundation to build an

improved future.

The concept of change is also integral to the *Broken Earth* series and its Afrofuturist vision.

Other works that I have examined elsewhere in the thesis – such as Monáe 's music and visual

albums – also focus heavily on change; they are often about bringing about a change in the way

society is structured through protesting or defying oppressive systems. *The Broken Earth* series also

includes this as the protagonists try to enact change for an improved future that intentionally tries to

avoid relying on any form of enslavement or oppression. However, the series is also about building

resilience to change. The environmental changes that frequently affect Jemisin's world shape the

way many of the characters approach building a future. They have to survive a hostile society as well as an ecologically unstable world. The series' exploration of adapting to change is reminiscent of the Earthseed belief system from Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* series, in which the protagonist builds a philosophy called Earthseed that focuses on resilience and adapting to the changing social, political, and environmental landscape of a dystopian US. This chapter is not a comparative study of Butler and Jemisin but instead places Butler's *Parable* series in conversation with *The Broken Earth*. I argue that, like Butler's *Parable* series, Jemisin frames the dystopian world of the Stillness as one that contains the possibility for oppressed groups to build a sustainable and equitable society. Throughout the series, the impact of the oppressive society and environmental disasters leads to two ways of imagining the future: one that could be considered Afropessimist; and another that attempts to build an improved future without these longstanding issues. By examining Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series through the multiple lenses of Butler and her *Parable* series, ecocriticism, and Afropessimism, this chapter explores the way dystopia is framed as a foundation for an Afrofuturist perspective for the future.

Orogenes and Contested Humanity

There is a pattern of dehumanisation that characterises the world Jemisin creates in the *Broken Earth* series; and through this, Jemisin explores the way that the category of the human is defined, awarded to some and denied to others. Orogenes are legally described as non-human in a law that governs The Stillness. It declares that "any degree of orogenic ability must be assumed to negate its [the orogene's] corresponding personhood. They are rightfully to be held and regarded as an inferior and dependant species" (*TOS*, 258). This law was formed a thousand years before the beginning of *The Fifth Season* yet, despite the age of this law, it continues to dictate the treatment of orogenes until the end of the final book.

Similarly, in an ancient civilisation preceding The Stillness, a group of 'tuners' with similar orogenic powers were forced to maintain a constant supply of magic to the nation, Syl Anagist. Even compliance with their overseers does not guarantee they won't be killed: "The others questioned and were decommissioned for it. Obeyed without question, and were decommissioned for it. Bargained. Gave up. Helped. Despaired. We have tried everything, done all they asked and more, and yet now there are only six of us left" (*TSS,* 110). The thousands of tuners who are "decommissioned" are sent to the "briar patch" where they are kept barely alive in order to generate magic that the empire extracts. The briar patch is similar to the punishment inflicted on node maintainers that the series protagonists, Syenite and Alabaster, encounter.[8] Syenite and Alabaster have had to demonstrate their fine control to progress within the Fulcrum, a training institute that ensures orogenes comply with the laws of The Stillness. Orogenes who are unable to control their powers are classified as a risk to society by the Fulcrum. Yet their orogeny is still useful, so the Fulcrum uses these orogenes as node maintainers. Alabaster takes Syenite to one of the outposts after they trace a large earthquake to it. Like many Fulcrum-trained orogenes, Syenite does not know what happens in the node stations, only that orogenes without the control the Fulcrum requires are sent to work there. Alabaster informs her that node maintainers are forced to undergo an operation that overrides their will but still allows them to use orogeny to prevent earthquakes. At the station, Syenite is confronted with one of Alabaster's children, strapped into a chair and being fed through a tube because of this operation.

The node maintainers are another way the society of The Stillness dehumanises orogenes, viewing them only as tools. Understanding the treatment of node maintainers is a pivotal moment for Syenite in learning about the inequalities of The Stillness and highlights the impossibility of a future for orogenes as part of the current societal structure. Alabaster tells Syenite, "You think any

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[8] Syenite, Damaya, and Essun are the same person. The trilogy is narrated by multiple characters, and in the case of *The Fifth Season*, Essun is the narrator at different times in her life in which she goes by different names.

of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not" (*TFS*, 143), highlighting the impossibility of orogenes having a full life in the current system. The realisation of what happens to orogenes who are unable to show full control of their powers further emphasises the reoccurring pattern of oppression that has characterised The Stillness at different times, a pattern that would continue if Alabaster did not start the chain of destruction that ultimately ends the societal structure of The Stillness. The repeating pattern of oppression is not specific to the Sanzed Empire with which Syenite/Essun is familiar, but is ingrained into the civilisations that succeed it and follow the same path.

Throughout the trilogy, it is evident that The Stillness and the ancient empire Syl Anagist, which is explored in the final book, are both reliant on the exploitation of people who are conveniently defined as non-human to justify their ill-treatment. Like Monáe 's android suite albums which explore the oppression of and reliance on android labour, *The Broken Earth* depicts a similar reliance on the labour of oppressed tuners and orogenes. Humanity's safety depends on orogenes endangering their lives to control the environment, and entails the imprisonment of the node maintainers.[9] The trilogy explores this mistreatment to question the sustainability of a society that relies on some form of exploitation. This repeated process of dehumanisation and oppression is integral to the Stillness and Syl Anagist and is ultimately the reason they will have to end: "some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don't lament when these worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place" (*TSS,* 7). The organisation of The Stillness prevents orogenes from being able to create a future outside of working for the Fulcrum, the alternatives to which are death or enslavement. The Stillness is not hospitable to orogenes' existence though it requires their power to quell shakes and maintain some level of stability.

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[9] Short snippets of the lore and history of The Stillness included at the end of different chapters in *The Stone Sky* provide examples of historical events in which orogenes, believing themselves to be part of as well as responsible for saving humanity, sacrifice themselves to prevent environmental catastrophes. For example, "three senior orogenes" who were able to move a whole city to prevent it from falling into a sinkhole, died in the process (*TSS,* 129). They are not named or remembered for their sacrifice because they are considered nothing more than tools.

Alabaster, Essun, and Hoa, a stone eater who joins Essun on her journey in the first book, want to be recognised by the nations they serve and want to be treated as equal citizens rather than tools. They do not necessarily want to be considered human, as their powers and abilities do make them different to stills. Rather, they aim to be treated as equals to stills, while having their difference recognised and accepted. However, the conditions they have to endure compel these characters to use their powers to destroy the empires that have implemented their oppression or allowed it to continue.

The categorisation of 'human' is challenged further by the existence of stone eaters. Until *The Obelisk Gate,* the reader forms their opinion about the alien-ness of stone eaters because the only perspectives presented are those of stills or orogenes who perceive stone eaters as non-human, mysterious others. Their ability to move through the earth, their slow movement, statue-like appearance, and their near immortality separate them from humanity. However, in *The Obelisk Gate,* Hoa tells Essun that he and other stone eaters see themselves as human (*TOS,* 281). The first stone eaters were initially tuners, who, despite Syl Anagist's declarations that they were not human, perceived themselves as human. This realisation causes Essun to change her perspective on stone eaters, to "let go of the part of yourself that wants to treat him as something frightening, something other. He's Hoa" (*TOS*, 282-283). As well as showing that she is capable of recognising the humanity of others despite her own humanity being denied by stills, Essun's exchange with Hoa demonstrates the importance of unlearning the idea that 'human' is a fixed concept. Early scholarship raised the topic of Afrofuturism as a way of avoiding the unfavourable concept of humanity, as 'human' has often been moulded around narrow, specific identities. This unlearning leads to more fruitful collaboration between stone eaters, orogenes, and stills wherein they can rely on each other's skills for survival – a necessity for characters to correct the ecological problems caused by Father Earth, the term used by Jemisin to signify the sentience of the planet.

This recurring pattern of dehumanisation and debate surrounding who is or is not human becomes the driving force in enacting change, challenging the empire's reliance on exploitation, and revising the definition of humanity. Orogenes like Alabaster and, later, Essun are not interested in changing the Stillness' understanding of the human to be inclusive of orogenes. As mentioned in the thesis introduction, a key Afrofuturist theorist, Kodwo Eshun, described the human as "a pointless and treacherous category" (1998, 005). [10] Though Eshun was discussing what he described as "Alien Music" rather than Afrofuturism, his research has shaped the development of Afrofuturism and his dismissal of the 'human' is one perspective of an ongoing discussion about what it means to be human, and how Blackness intersects with humanness. These discussions about Blackness and humanity indicate a relationship between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism which Dillender notes in a discussion about *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2020, 146). However, not all Afrofuturist works eschew humanity as forcefully as Eshun does in *More Brilliant than the Sun*. Indeed, *The Broken Earth* trilogy considers the complexity of orogenes' acceptance of a 'human' identity. In other words, how can orogenes be included in this category when their exploitation has also been tied to their exclusion from humanity? Is it possible to reconcile this and alter the meaning of humanity to be more expansive? The series does not offer any kind of conclusion about what humanity is or can be, but shows the falsity of rigid conceptualisations of human, still, orogene, and stone eater.

The limitations of The Stillness' rigid definitions of human, orogene, and stone eater identity are exemplified in the transformation of orogenes and tuners into stone eaters. At the beginning of *The Obelisk Gate,* Alabaster is slowly turning into stone, a painful transformation that quickens whenever he uses magic or orogeny. Shortly after Alabaster's 'death', Essun sees an unfamiliar stone eater in her community and realises that it is Alabaster. From Essun's perspective, she has witnessed someone she thought to be an orogene become something she had thought of as distinctly 'other'. Essun begins a similar transformation in *The Stone Sky* after preventing an invasion of Castrima, an

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[10] See the thesis introduction for further discussion about Eshun's scholarship and the link between posthumanism and Afrofuturism.

underground community (known as a comm) she had joined on the journey to find her daughter. Throughout the final book, parts of Essun turn to stone as she has to use her powers to ensure the now-displaced community remains safe. The finale of *The Stone Sky* results in Essun's complete transformation into stone, and eventually she too becomes a stone eater. Both Alabaster's and Essun's transformation into stone eaters emphasise the fluidity between stone eater, orogene, and still; identities considered distinctly different and somewhat separate are actually interwoven. Like many Afrofuturist works, the trilogy demonstrates the inaccuracies that arise from thinking about identities as rigid binaries. Orogenic powers are not always apparent, and children are considered stills until their powers become obvious. Moreover, Orogenes, if they are able to learn how to manipulate magic, ultimately turn into stone eaters, some of whom consider themselves human because they were in the past. Thus, Jemisin suggests that rigid definitions of identity can place arbitrary barriers between people and hinder development towards a future that improves on the present.

Whilst the series does not dismiss the utility that having separate identities can have, it does challenge the idea that identities can be separated entirely. This belief has made the society of The Stillness more divided; the issues that affect orogenes, stills, and stone eaters are connected as they all stem from the relationship with Father Earth. However, because these groups are unaware of these connections, there is no sense of a shared struggle, at least until Alabaster's destruction starts the fifth season and forces them to address these divisions. The final book in the series, *The Stone Sky*, does not culminate in a concrete declaration about what 'human' means in The Stillness or even a declaration that orogenes and stone eaters should be recognised as part of humanity. Instead, there is a focus on the malleability of and connections between supposedly distinct identities. Eventually, the main characters are able to move past the boundaries that have divided orogenes, stone eaters, and stills. This division is a substantial obstacle and by overcoming this artificial divide, orogenes, stills, and stone eaters are able to work together to return the Moon to its orbit and appease Father Earth. But uncovering the way different identities are intertwined also becomes a

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necessity for stills, orogenes, and stone eaters to survive the remainder of the fifth season and, ultimately, rebuild after the extreme environmental conditions subside. The focus on pushing past boundaries is a core part of contemporary Afrofuturism that emphasises the need for different groups to collaborate in order to create a future that addresses and corrects the inequalities of the past and present. Although *The Broken Earth* trilogy emphasises the significance of collaboration in developing an improved future, there is also an awareness of how difficult it is for these groups to overcome the divisiveness that has characterised much of their lives. This blended community does not materialise until the fifth season threatens humanity's survival.

Imagining Change in Butler's *Parable* series and Jemisin's *The Broken Earth*

The main protagonists of the Broken Earth series, Syenite/Essun and Alabaster, initially believe nothing about the world they inhabit can change and improve for orogenes. As mentioned in the previous section, orogenes are responsible for maintaining the ecological stability of The Stillness but are oppressed by the very same people they work for. The oppression of orogenes is an integral part of the way The Stillness is organised. Their labour is a necessity, but if orogenes were to learn how to use their abilities to their full potential, it could disrupt the societal organisation of The Stillness by reducing the power of the ruling stills and the Guardians, who are agents of Father Earth. For orogenes to be treated equally, a substantial change to the way The Stillness has viewed orogenes for centuries is necessary—a seemingly impossible challenge which makes imagining and potentially building a better world difficult for the protagonists. The idea of The Stillness changing for the benefit of all, including orogenes, seems implausible. In one instance, Alabaster tells Syenite to "stop looking for anything better than this" (*TFS*, 371), referring to their time on an isolated island called Meov that is separate from the mainland and is led by ferals, those with orogenic power but not trained by the Fulcrum. Alabaster sees their life at that point in the narrative as the best it could possibly be because it is somewhat separated from the reach of the mainland and the struggles they

have had to endure there. They have more freedom and are accepted by the community who are used to orogenes and place them in positions of power. However, this illusion of distance from the Fulcrum-controlled mainland is eventually shattered as Guardians and Fulcrum-trained orogenes attack the settlement, ultimately destroying Meov and most of its inhabitants.

Syenite/Essun expresses a need for "A way to change things. Because this is not right" (*TFS*, 371). She is desperate for a different world, a change that she can direct or help to direct for herself and by extension, other orogenes. This expression of wanting change echoes a similar "yearning" voiced by Octavia E. Butler's character, Lauren Olamina, in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), the first epistolary novel in the *Earthseed* duology. Lauren writes, "There has to be more that we can do, a better destiny that we can shape. Another place. Another way. Something!" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 76). In the following entry, Lauren names the religion or philosophy that she has alluded to in previous entries. Earthseed is a "belief-system" (77), its core idea being that the only certainty in life is change:

> All that you touch,
>
> You Change.
>
> All that you Change, Changes you.
>
> The only lasting truth Is Change.
>
> God Is Change. (79)

These and other short verses that define Earthseed and its followers are dispersed throughout the novel, and together, they form "Earthseed: Book of the Living" and eventually a community, also called Earthseed. As well as adapting to change, Lauren describes the ultimate destiny of Earthseed, which is "to take root among the stars" (84). This focus on the promise of space being a new, potentially better frontier for humanity indicates that futurity is a core part of Earthseed. This phrase does imply space is a place for humans to colonise, yet the series poses this escape to space as a

new beginning for people who have had to endure a dystopian US rather than a way of acquiring land or resources.

As mentioned in the thesis introduction, Octavia E. Butler's works are often referred to as early examples of Afrofuturism, as they depict Black characters, specifically Black women, in some form of futuristic or otherworldly environment. The *Earthseed* series, as with many other examples of Afrofuturism, imagines a future experienced by a young Black woman, particularly the strategies she uses to cope in a dystopian future where her race, gender, and disability further complicate her ability to survive.[11] In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler imagines a dystopian future but uses Earthseed to convey what Jim Miller has called "a post-apocalyptic hoping" (Miller 1998, 336) in which the main characters try to imagine and create a future despite their chaotic surroundings.

The core ideas within Butler's Earthseed belief system are also present in *The Broken Earth* trilogy and perhaps indicate the importance of "post-apocalyptic hoping" in dystopian environments within Afrofuturist texts (Miller 1998, 336). Earthseed is about adapting to but also shaping change. Whilst this is a simple concept—that people can exert some agency over change as well as be altered by change—Earthseed is powerful because it is founded and formed by people who have lost their families, homes, and communities, and who have had to face poverty, abuse, and loss. The characters are unable to prevent this loss and could be described as powerless. Yet Earthseed becomes a way for the characters to gain some control and a direction through the teachings of acceptance and adaptability as well as a long-term goal of establishing human colonies in space. The idea that they have the ability to shape or mould change to suit their individual and communal needs provides a modicum of control in a challenging world. Earthseed's focus on change becomes a way of building a different society on the ruins of a dying one.

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[11] For further discussion about disability in Butler's *Parable* series, please see chapter three of Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined* (2018).

This idea that change affects everyone but can also be shaped in some way by all, regardless of their status, is similarly integral to *The Broken Earth* trilogy. Jemisin was not directly influenced by Butler, but collaboration and change are common topics in both of their works, further indicating that these themes can be considered core aspects of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Fiction.[12] Although the protagonists have to face the hostility from both their surrounding physical environments and from other humans, Syenite/Essun, Alabaster, and Nassun begin to shape the changes they want to see. Each character becomes a proponent of a different form of change and the series does not attempt to frame any of them as the correct solution to the environmental and social disasters that characterise the world.[13] While Butler and Jemisin address colonialism at times, their focus is often on surviving environmental disasters and the impact this has on social relations, rather than coping with invading outsiders. The dystopian worlds created by Jemisin and Butler are more concerned about the possibilities these environments present for marginalised communities to organise and create a different and better society in the collapse of the unsustainable world that had caused their suffering.

Butler's and Jemisin's approach towards utopianism in the middle of a dystopia is applicable to Afrofuturism more broadly. Mark Sinker discusses the importance of dystopia, or "Armageddon"[14] in Black-authored speculative fiction:

> The central fact in Black Science Fiction […] is an acknowledgement that
>
> Apocalypse already happened […] Black SF writers – Samuel Delany, Octavia
>
> Butler – write about worlds after catastrophic disaster; about the modalities of

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[12] Despite the parallels between their work, Jemisin has stated that Butler inspired her to become a writer and is a "career influence" but did not directly influence her "subject matter and writing style" (Jemisin 2011).

[13] The idea of marginalised communities building a future on the ruins of the oppressive society is not particular to Butler or Jemisin and can be found in some postcolonial utopianism, which "is suffused with future thinking, with a utopian hope for the future, a belief in the reality of liberation, in the possibility of justice and equality" (Ashcroft 2012, 2).

[14] Sinker does not use the term 'Afrofuturism' though many scholars and critics view his article in *The Wire* as an early speculation about the genre.

identity without hope of resolution, where race and nation and neighbourhood

and family are none of them enough to obviate betrayal. (1992)

Sinker refers to what Tobias C. van Veen later theorised as "The Armageddon Effect," viewing the period of African enslavement as the end of the world in which "total cultural destruction and dehumanisation under slavery had already happened" (2016, 65). Both Sinker and van Veen conclude that the Armageddon Effect seems to have led towards the conceptualisation of Afrofuturism; indeed, many of the works examined in this thesis do depict the end of a world or nation in some form. However, Afrofuturism is not just about the end of the world, but also what Butler, Monáe, and Jemisin depict in their work: these artists view dystopia as an opportunity to create a new society, with different values and societal systems that break the cycle of oppression, enslavement, and inequality that has characterised their fictional worlds as well as their realities. Butler and Jemisin depict a dystopian world but also mediate the relentless struggle their characters face with visions of a better future. As Kim Stanley Robinson has argued, "It's crucial to keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how they might get better" (K. S. Robinson 2018). In keeping with this, Butler and Jemisin do not give up on the idea that the worlds can be changed and improved for the better. For both writers, Afrofuturism is not just about the apocalypse but the importance of change – a concept that is important to the Earthseed and *The Broken Earth* series.

The Fifth Season depicts the events leading up to and shortly after a large quake which signals the beginning of another Season—a period of environmental crisis and disaster. At the end of the book, Alabaster admits to having caused the beginning the Season. Using the energy stored in the obelisks and the orogenic power of the enslaved node maintainers, he causes a dramatic seismic event in Yuemenes, the capital city. He reaches for the city, the mantle of the earth that it rests on and the power of the obelisks, and "then *he breaks it*" (Jemisin 2016, 7). This sets off a wave of seismic disturbances that radiate from the ruined city throughout the Stillness. Ash begins to fall

from the sky continuously, blocking the sunlight and changing the weather. Whilst the consequences of this are detrimental to his own health and cause his painful transformation into stone, he views this destruction as a necessary step towards changing the society of The Stillness. Previously, Alabaster had told Syen that "The world is what it is. Unless you destroy it and start all over again, there's no changing it" (*TFS,* 371). So he uses orogeny and magic, "with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed, and brutalized out of him" (2016, 6), and directs it against the city, specifically targeting the Fulcrum.

Alabaster's destruction of the capital city, Yumenes, is his way of trying to prevent the cycle of oppression that has affected orogenes for thousands of years, caused by historical attempts to exploit Earth's resources, and Earth's subsequent retaliation. Alabaster's act of destruction is due to his own personal experiences but also comes from his understanding of the Earth's sentience and its anger at humanity for trying to extract magic from its core. The only way to appease the Earth is to start a fifth season that is likely to end humanity's existence, a perspective that is present in some strains of Deep Ecology which argue "that humanity was a planetary disease that would run its course and then die back or die out" (Canavan and Stanley Robinson 2014, 256).[15] As Gerry Canavan has argued, many works of ecocritical speculative fiction are "salvific," showing "that the nightmare of exploitation, and our own complicity in these practices, might somehow be stopped, despite our inability to change" (Canavan 2014, 14). Alabaster's destruction of the Fulcrum can also be seen as salvific, but only indirectly, as his actions force people to change in order to survive the long fifth season.

This is not to say that Jemisin supports Deep Ecology, but there is a close parallel between the series and some perspectives found in the philosophy. Ecocriticism is a substantial part of the series and, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, leads to different approaches: one that

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[15] *The Broken Earth* series as a work of Afrofuturist ecocriticism will be explored in further depth later in the chapter.

could be considered Afrofuturist and another that indicates a more Afropessimist perspective.

Afropessimist thought broadly argues that anti-Black racism is embedded and cannot be changed

(Sexton 2016, 5).[16] Alabaster's act of destruction might be seen as one example of Afropessimism in

The Broken Earth and is shaped in part by the environmental disasters that plague The Stillness.

Alabaster believes that orogenes will always be oppressed because they are needed to control the

environment and environmental issues are impossible to correct because the Earth despises

humanity due to humans' hunger for natural resources. Rather than allow the orogenes' suffering to

continue, and because he believes nothing can be changed, Alabaster decides that wiping out all life

on The Stillness is the best solution. Nevertheless, Alabaster's pessimism is challenged by the more

constructive, even utopian, vision of communities of orogenes, stills, and stone eaters relying on

each other and working together to survive.

Creating New Communities

In the first instalment of the series, Essun embarks on a journey to find her missing daughter,

Nassun, after she is kidnapped by her father, Jija. Like other stills, Jija fears orogenes, and following

his discovery that his two children and his wife are all orogenes, he murders his son and takes

Nassun to a remote settlement that is rumoured to 'heal' all orogenes by taking away their abilities.

On Essun's journey, she arrives at a community or 'comm' hidden underground. Initially, it appears

to be abandoned, but when the leader greets them and introduces herself as "Ykka Rogga Castrima,"

there is an immediate understanding that the comm is something different to the other

communities in The Stillness. "Rogga" is a derogatory term for orogene; that someone would include

rogga in their name as part of their caste is shocking to Essun: "Naming yourself *rogga* is like naming

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[16] Anti-blackness is not necessarily a prominent focus of this chapter or *The Broken Earth* series, and Jemisin has rejected the idea that *The Broken Earth* is solely about racial oppression (anotherjemisin 2017). However, there are similarities between anti-Black racism and the treatment of orogenes which Dillender has noted in "Land and Pessimistic Futures in Contemporary African American Speculative Fiction" (2020).

yourself *pile of shit*. It's a slap in the face. It's a statement – of what, you can't tell" (*TFS,* 268). Essun is surprised again by Ykka's role as the leader of Castrima; orogenes are depended upon for the maintenance of The Stillness, but they have no real social or political power. Orogenic power is often associated with destruction, and this destructive power is all that the reader encounters until Essun reaches Castrima, where orogeny is used to build rather than destroy (*TFS,* 332).

Ykka's leadership further challenges Essun's understanding of the world she lives in, as does Castrima as a comm. Castrima is built into a geode surrounded by glowing crystals that are used as living quarters and is a ruin of a previous civilisation that has risen and fallen in the history of The Stillness. It is inhabited by stills, orogenes, and stone eaters, all seemingly living in relative peace. Ykka describes the comm as "something unique. We're trying something different here" (*TFS,* 273). That these groups live harmoniously and work together is a direct flouting of the Empire's laws. Orogenes are supposed to be reported to the national Fulcrum if their powers are obvious at a young age, and remain under the Fulcrum's constant watch throughout adulthood. Stills are supposed to view orogenes as tools that are dangerous and destructive but, when controlled by the Guardians, useful for reducing the seismic activity of the land. Yet in Castrima neither group is guided by these prejudices. Castrima becomes an example of the importance of unlearning prejudices that have been used to justify oppression; this becomes a form of personal healing and a step towards establishing a future that is more hospitable to marginalised groups.

Nevertheless, Jemisin does not present Castrima as a utopia. The tension between stills and orogenes remains a risk to the order of the comm and raises the question: can a future develop alongside prejudices that have become embedded in society? Essun overhears one inhabitant who complains about the amount of orogenes in Castrima, saying, "Gotta be a few good ones. But the rest? We only need *one*" (TOS, 125). Though Ykka reassures Essun that it is not about her status as an orogene but more about her role in the comm, Essun initially thinks the long-standing prejudices against orogenes will continue to impact her life in Castrima as they have throughout her existence

elsewhere in The Stillness. However, ultimately, the citizens of Castrima remain together even after the comm is attacked, and they are forced to travel to another settlement. But Jemisin also shows that the ill-treatment of orogenes over the past thousand years is impossible to put aside and therefore impacts on how orogenes and stills interact within the comm. Castrima is an example of a community that tries to avoid the cycle of oppression but must also navigate the complex relations between orogenes and stills that have been distorted by a legacy of prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping.

The survival of Castrima is dependent on a diverse labour force made up of orogenes, stills, and stone eaters. Though these identities are more malleable than most characters initially think, certain abilities are specific to each and these skills are needed for the comm to survive. Orogenes are needed to supply air, water, and light to the comm; in return, stills have a relatively safe haven from the dangers of the impending fifth season, but they are also required for farming and general maintenance of the comm as there is not a large number of orogenes. Stone eaters also provide assistance to the comm, helping to protect the inhabitants. Castrima is one community in *The Broken Earth* trilogy that embodies the importance of diversity in survival that is mentioned in Butler's Earthseed belief system:

> Embrace diversity.
>
> Unite –
>
> or be divided,
>
> robbed,
>
> ruled,
>
> killed
>
> By those you see as prey.
>
> Embrace diversity
>
> Or be destroyed. (Butler 2007a, 196)

To Butler, and to Jemisin, diversity and unity are needed for survival. Whilst diversity is currently a prominent objective within and outside of popular culture, it is often about shallow representation rather than developing lasting change. However, both Butler's and Jemisin's framing of diversity is that it is necessary for a future characterised by environmental sustainability and social justice. The Earthseed community in the *Parable* series consists of different races, religions, and family structures, but all inhabitants share a common goal and depend on each other for survival. Similarly, orogenes, stills, and stone eaters rely on each other for Castrima to function; their shared objective is to survive the impending fifth season. Like Earthseed, Castrima's foundation of diversity and unity is a completely different path to the majority of The Stillness which is characterised by a rift between stills and orogenes. There, collaboration between stills and orogenes is harshly punished and Fulcrum orogenes are killed at the beginning of a Season, further preventing any kind of unification between the two groups during times of climate disaster. The dominant belief is that orogenes are supposedly not useful during fifth seasons and are considered a potential drain on limited resources. In contrast, Castrima flouts this assumption because orogenes are integral for all to survive the impending season.

The end of *The Obelisk Gate* reignites these age-old tensions between stills and orogenes as Castrima, threatened by a nearby comm, Rennanis, is given an ultimatum from a stone eater: Castrima can join Rennanis where they have plenty of food and shelter, but the comm has "no use for orogenes" (*TOS*, 252). One of the main hurdles Castrima begins to face is a meat shortage, as animals have either been driven away or preyed upon by others as the Season progresses. The offer of potentially plentiful supplies is enough to fracture the fragile comm, and Ykka insists that orogenes not retaliate if they are attacked to prevent a wider battle within Castrima (*TOS*, 296). She also calls for a democratic vote to decide how to answer Rennanis' offer, until Essun, affected by the death of Alabaster and an attack of a still on an orogene child, threatens the comm. She offers her own ultimatum: people can leave or stay but there will be "No *voting* on who gets to be people" (*TOS,* 335).

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Rennanis is therefore able to use the lesser status of orogenes and the growing danger posed by the fifth season to ignite the uneasiness felt by some stills about living alongside a group that has always been considered as lesser. Castrima does not fall, but the comm struggles with integration and social stability because of the legacy of dehumanisation of orogenes. Creating a new society that retains the views and perceptions of the previous one will only continue the oppression of marginalised groups. Like some iterations of the *Black Panther* comics and Monáe's *Dirty Computer,* Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* highlights the need to create new systems rather than amendments to an existing one, a necessary step to ensure the futurity of marginalised groups. As mentioned previously, in the *Parable* series, Butler demonstrates how, even in the midst of a collapsing society, new futures can be crafted, that the crisis of a dystopia can become a foundation on which a new and different society can be built. Lauren uses Earthseed to start building this new society. Similarly, Jemisin's *Broken Earth* frames the chaos of the fifth season as a threat to humanity's existence but also an opportunity for change, for a future that is an improvement on the present. This is apparent in the depiction of Castrima and the importance of orogenes, stills, and stone eaters working together. In order for this future to exist, unlearning the prejudices that have led to a divisive society and working towards a common goal are imperative for survival, as dominant groups are forced to depend on 'others' or 'outsiders' for support. The dystopian world forces the formerly divided groups into a shared community.

Changing humanity's relationship with Father Earth

Improving the relationship between humans and their planet is framed as the solution to the ill treatment of orogenes and a way to break the cycle of oppression that is traced back to the early history of The Stillness. The centrality of environmental change in the series indicates another perspective in Afrofuturist thought, one that explores the entangled issues of oppression and climate change, of social justice and environmental awareness and sustainability. Throughout this

thesis, I have discussed the importance of speculating about Black futurity and the issues these speculations often have to grapple with. One such issue that has largely been absent from the sources explored so far is the environment and climate change. The fifth season, as it begins in the first instalment of *The Broken Earth* series, is an ecological and environmental crisis that seems to signal the end of the world. The prologue establishes that this fifth season will last for a thousand years. There does not seem to be a future for the Stillness as the effects of Alabaster's destruction, referred to as 'The Rift', spread from the capital. Yet, the series shows that even a dying world can be viewed as a possibility for change to a more just and potentially improved future. This is the crux of Jemisin's series. The characters, particularly Essun and Alabaster, have their own motivations for changing the world: Essun wants to save her last child, and Alabaster wants to end the world that has taken away his and his children's lives. Yet in their different ways, they also express a desire to build a future that is hospitable and safe for orogenes. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the empire uses orogenes who are considered weak or defiant as node-maintainers, as tools to prevent quakes from endangering citizens, especially those in the capital or large cities. Alabaster is aware that at least one of his children became a node maintainer which has an impact on his perception of the future. The end of the world gives him and Essun a chance to create a different society that neither causes or has to cope with the environmental issues that have plagued humanity for centuries. Though they have different perspectives about whether the world can be fixed, they both realise that there has to be a permanent solution to the fifth seasons, rather than the temporary fix of using orogenes to prevent the disasters as they occur. Both understand that it is impossible for orogenes to be treated equally as long as their labour and talents must be exploited and coerced to provide environmental stability. Finding a solution to the environmental problems is as central to establishing an improved and stable future as forming less divided communities.

Speculative works that explore climate change, recently labelled as 'cli-fi', are prevalent in science fiction. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003-2013) are popular considerations of futures affected by catastrophic climate change.

Whilst climate fiction as a tradition in science fiction has been present from around the mid-20th

century (Milner and Burgmann 2020, chap. 1), exploration of climate change as an anthropogenic

problem is relatively new in genre fiction and a reflection of scientific development (Milner and

Burgmann 2020, 21). Though this chapter does not examine the educational impact of *The Broken*

Earth trilogy as a way of informing readers about the potential consequences of climate change,[17] it

does focus on the series as an example of Afrofuturism or Black speculative fiction that shows the

interconnectedness of oppression, inequality, and climate disasters. Research is emerging about this

relationship between climate fiction and Afrofuturism; Alistair Iles (2019) has written about *The*

Broken Earth trilogy and the significance of science fiction in influencing scientific fields and

sustainability, arguing that the series shows that investment in technological solutions to the climate

crisis is wasted if humanity remains dependant on the oppression of different communities (2019,

11).

Although climate change has not been a common focus in Afrofuturism, there are a growing

number of examples, indicating a potential development in Black Speculative Fiction as climate

change becomes more of a prevalent topic. Sherri L. Smith's novel *Orleans* (2013), about New

Orleans after a series of severe hurricanes, is a recent example of Afrofuturist, Young Adult climate

fiction. Octavia E. Butler's popular *Parable* duology (1993, 1998), which depicts a future US afflicted

by firestorms and scarcity of water and food as well as the impact this has on the political and social

landscape, has gained renewed attention in the past couple of years, as has Butler's interest in

climate change (Sheehan 2020; Streeby 2019, 72).[18] Smith and Butler imagine potential catastrophes

caused by climate change and explore the survival mechanisms characters develop. They do not

pose any solutions to climate change specifically; Butler's *Parable* series speculates about

technological development and space colonisation led by the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, as a long-

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[17] For an analysis on the potential educational impact of *The Broken Earth* trilogy, please see Alistair Iles'
'Repairing the Broken Earth: N.K. Jemisin on Race and Environment in Transitions' (2019).
[18] Visual artist John Akomfrah, whose various installations have been associated with both Afrofuturism and
climate change, is a further example of this relationship in another medium (Peterson 2020).

term solution, ushering in a new era labelled by LeMenager as the "Black Anthropocene" (2017). Earth is imagined as unsalvageable, as "America's violent, extractive history has written itself onto the very geology of the planet" (LeMenager 2017). The technological development in preparation for an exodus to space is part of the reason the *Parable* series is described as a work of Afrofuturism.[19] However, *The Broken Earth* offers an alternative to this idea: rather than abandoning Earth for the challenges of space, the series considers the necessity of humanity taking an active role in reversing the effects of climate change to create a more hospitable future environment on the planet.

Technological development is increasingly difficult as the fifth seasons have destabilised the environment to the point where research is disrupted. The *Broken Earth* trilogy, unlike Butler's *Parable* series and many other works of Afrofuturism or Black Speculative Fiction, is critical of a technological solution to climate disasters. In Butler's *Parable* series, the long-term goal is to colonise Mars and a viable future is therefore reliant on technological development. Technology is often posited as the solution to environmental crisis, though this perspective is increasingly criticised as technology alone cannot fix the environment.[20] *The Broken Earth* series does not indicate technological advancement as the solution to the environmental crisis, though many scientists in The Stillness, called geomests, do share this belief.

As well as rejecting technological solutions for the unstable environment, Jemisin similarly avoids the common trope of colonising new worlds as a means of creating a viable future. Space colonisation is a popular trope in science fiction, and older works of Afrofuturism or Black Speculative Fiction often portray establishing a colony either on a different planet or within an existing country as the solution to racism and inequality. Afrofuturist texts such as Sutton E. Griggs'

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[19] The idea of space as a new beginning for the Black diaspora has been woven into Afrofuturism, partly a result of jazz musician Sun Ra's importance in the genre.
[20] Research undertaken by the European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC) concluded that the Paris Agreement's reliance on "negative emission technologies" has a "limited realistic potential to remove carbon from the atmosphere and not at the scale envisaged in some climate scenarios" (Courvoisier, European Academies Science Advisory Council, and Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher Leopoldina 2018, 1).

Imperio in Imperium (1899),[21] and Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (1974), both depict the pinnacle of

Black futurity as an isolated, self-sufficient nation much like Wakanda in the *Black Panther* comics as

discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.[22] Like wider trends in speculative fiction,[23] contemporary

Afrofuturism proposes collaboration here on Earth as the solution rather than leaving for a new

frontier.

This indicates the way Afrofuturism has changed over the past decade, or that there are now

more varied strands of Afrofuturism in current popular culture. The texts mentioned above imagined

futures inspired by separatism; they depict Black communities isolating from the rest of the world.

Yet, in the *Broken Earth* series, cooperation between humanity in its various forms (orogene, still,

and stone eater) is the only possible solution to repair the relationship with Father Earth; orogenes

do not attempt to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Alongside criticism of a

technological solution to the world's ills, then, Jemisin also rejects the separatism that has previously

been a popular theme in Black Speculative Fiction. Whilst Jemisin has not directly spoken about this,

the trilogy, as we have seen, emphasises the importance of collaboration; fixing the broken earth

would have been impossible for a single group to accomplish alone. Jemisin seems to imply that a

similar approach is needed in reality, as the climate crisis relies on a coordinated global effort to

address the worst of the environmental issues alongside inequality.

This focus on fixing Earth is considered a solution throughout the second and third books in

the series. Throughout the first instalment, *The Fifth Season*, the environment is usually described as

a pervasive threat to the communities of The Stillness, and to orogenes like Syenite/Essun and

Alabaster who are compelled to risk their lives to create temporary environmental stability. They are

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[21] *Imperio in Imperium* has been considered an early example of Black-authored speculative fiction by Lisa Yaszek (2016, 60).

[22] As discussed in the previous chapter, the separatism in *Black Panther* is challenged in recent iterations of the comic and to an extent, in the film adaptation.

[23] Collaboration between different groups is reflected in science fiction more broadly; Becky Chambers' *Wayfarers* series (2015-2021) is a popular example of humans working with different aliens across the galaxy. The recent *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-) series and the *Mass Effect* franchise (2007-2017) are further examples of this trend surrounding collaboration rather than war or colonisation.

initially responsible for quelling earthquakes in their position as Fulcrum-trained orogenes, so their concerns about the unstable environment of the continent are a central plot point in the first book. Their plan to fix the Earth permanently is developed in *The Obelisk Gate*, though the root cause of these environmental issues is unclear to the reader and the protagonists until the final book. *The Stone Sky* uncovers the role humans have had in creating the reoccurring fifth seasons and depicts the dominant class's attempts to hide this history through myth and by using orogenes as scapegoats.

Chapters in *The Stone Sky* alternate between the perspectives of Essun and Nassun as they make their separate ways to Corepoint, the ruins of the ancient empire, Syl Anagist. In between their narratives are chapters that describe Syl Anagist and the events leading up to the 'Shattering,' the first fifth season. These chapters, told by the stone eater, Hoa, detail his and the other tuners' revolt against the empire and the resistance of the sentient planet, Father Earth, against humanity's attempt to exploit its resources. In the previous books, the only information about the origins of the Fifth Season are myths that state, "it was the orogenes who did something that even Earth could not forgive: They destroyed his only child. No lorist that Syenite has ever talked to knows what this cryptic phrase means" (*TFS*, 380). This is partly true, as tuners were predecessors to orogenes, who threw the moon out of orbit in order to save humanity from an angry Father Earth, as it tried to stop humanity from extracting magic. The Syl Anagist empire, in its goal to expand further, required a greater supply of magic, its main power source. A group of Syl Anagistines called conductors find the Earth's core to be a valuable source of magic that has the potential to power the empire and facilitate its expansion. However, Hoa realises this plan is unsustainable as the magic supply, even from the Earth's core, is finite, and the expansion of the empire will mean an ever-increasing demand for magic that could not possibly be met (*TSS*, 334). Unaware of (or willing to ignore) the consequences, the conductors continue with their plan. An unnamed woman managing the extraction shows Hoa a piece of the Earth they had extracted previously, describing it as "a sample of the world's own heart" (*TSS*, 326). She views it as a marker of Syl Anagist's ingenuity and an

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indicator of the empire's prosperous future, unaware of the risk that extracting these finite

resources will pose to humanity's future. As a tuner, Hoa's perspective is the opposite; he can sense

the Earth more fully: "*It is angry,* I think again, without really knowing why these words come to me.

It will do what it has to do" (*TSS,* 327). Though Hoa initially does not understand Earth's sentience,

he tells the woman in charge that the earth is "angry." She dismisses Hoa's statement, as do the

conductors. Hoa is just a lowly tuner, a tool of the empire rather than a citizen; therefore, his

perspective means little to those in charge.

The tuners' understanding of Father Earth and its sentience comes from their

magical/orogenic abilities and is difficult for non-tuners to comprehend. Yet, if the conductors

perceived tuners as people rather than tools and worked with them rather than enslaved them, the

fractured relationship between humanity and Earth might have been avoided. The dismissal of Hoa's

concerns and knowledge about Father Earth parallels the intentional disregard of Indigenous

peoples' expertise about the environment, both currently and historically. As Green and

Raygorodetsky have noted, "Indigenous people living on their traditional lands bear little

responsibility for current and future projected consequences of a changing climate. Despite this,

they are likely to suffer the most from direct and indirect climate change due to their close

connection to the natural world and their reduced social–ecological resilience—consequence of

centuries of oppressive policies imposed on them by dominant non-Indigenous societies" (2010,

239). Furthermore, the idea that Earth is sentient is similar to some Indigenous epistemologies; as

Troy has noted, "in Indigenous philosophies, all elements of the natural world are animated. Every

rock, mountain, river, plant and animal all are sentient, having individual personalities and a life

force" (2019). The conductors' ignorance is a further example of the intertwining issues of

environmental change and oppression because their perceived superiority leads them to ignore the

environmental information and understanding gathered by the tuners.

Confronted with the conductors' insistence on extracting the Earth's core, Hoa becomes aware of the limitation of Syl Anagist's vision of expansion and prosperity: "There's not enough magic to be had just from plants and geoengineered fauna; *someone* must suffer, if the rest are to enjoy luxury" (*TSS*, 334). Syl Anagist's economic success relies on the subjugation of tuners to maintain the power supply, as I discussed earlier in the chapter. The future of the nation is, until the tuners intervene, dependant on the depletion of a sentient Earth. The conductors are concerned solely with an image of the future that is prosperous for them, yet this is a result of the labour of the tuners and exploitation of the environment. This process of attaining a greater supply of magic is evocative of extractivism, which views natural resources as "'awaiting' exploitation and which, through such exploitation, are depleted rather than sustained, nurtured or reproduced. Extractivism turns resources (be they natural or social) into finite products" (Ye et al. 2020, 158). The growth that Syl Anagist's leadership demands relies on a limited magic supply, the extraction of which would damage the Earth; there are no attempts to look for alternative power sources or limit the further expansion of the empire. Syl Anagist's short-term thinking is reflective of similar governmental policies throughout the world that have been hesitant to change infrastructure and business practices in favour of appropriate environmental policies.[24] The prioritisation of economic growth and financial gain, which characterises our own present reality, causes Syl Anagist's downfall.

Hoa's realisation about Earth's sentience and the later attempts of Essun and Alabaster to appease Earth challenge the anthropocentric futures that are common in Afrofuturism.[25] Works like Butler's *Parable* series, and the other texts I have examined in the thesis, rarely consider non-human life. In the *Parable* series, animals are only mentioned when they pose a threat to human life. However, Nicky Drayden's *Escaping Exodus* series (2019-) is one of few Afrofuturist works in which the disregard of non-human life, specifically those of large, space-faring animals, is challenged

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[24] For research concerning the economy and climate change, see Kate Aronoff et al., *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (2019).

[25] Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* series is another example of Black Speculative Fiction and Africanfuturism that imagines a less anthropocentric future. Please see Chapter four for an analysis of the series.

throughout the narrative. Initially, in the series' first instalment, *The Fifth Season*, Father Earth is presented as an antagonist, the cause of the instability of The Stillness, who seems intent on eradicating humanity, orogenes and stills alike. The reader is led to believe that Father Earth's anger is unjustified, and there are no clear indicators that the people of the Stillness are exploiting natural resources. Jemisin refers to Earth paternally, opposing the maternal perspective in mythology and speculative fiction that commonly depicts Earth as nurturing or caring and thus feminine. Thus, "Father Earth" implies the opposite of a benevolent and sustaining "Mother Earth".[26]

However, as the series progresses, we come to understand that it is humanity's exploitative and unsustainable relationship with Earth – rather than Earth's resentful personality – that is the cause of environmental stability. A fragment of lore from *The Fifth Season* provides a partial history of the Earth: "The people became what Father Earth needed, and then more than He needed. Then we turned on Him, and He has burned with hatred for us ever since" (*TFS*, 115). Humanity's betrayal is preceded by Father Earth's view that people became "more than he needed," implying that humans may have overpopulated the Earth or that Father Earth may have tried to control humanity via the Guardians, though the relationship between Father Earth and the Guardians is unclear in the series (*TFS*, 115). The Stillness is an unlikely example of a futuristic city as the frequent fifth seasons have disrupted the kind of technological advancements that are often commonplace in science fiction: "they [orogenes] are a weapon not of the Fulcrum, but of the hateful, waiting planet beneath their feet. A planet that wants nothing more than to destroy the life infesting its once-pristine surface" (TFS, 146). Father Earth's anger initially appears disproportionate, and the environment seems pointlessly destructive; but the Syl Anagist chapters in *The Stone Sky* fully explain the reason for Father Earth's anger, and it is here that *The Broken Earth* draws attention to the devastating

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[26] Some supporters of ecofeminism embrace this idea of care and nurturing that is evident when Earth is conceptualised as Mother Nature, though this has been criticised by other ecofeminists such as Sherilyn MacGregor for potentially "reducing women's ethico-political life to care" (2004, 57). See Greta Gaard's "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism" (2011) for an overview of the development of ecofeminism.

human impact on the environment both in the fictional world of the series and in reality. Climate change is not a series of random occurrences, but rather a direct consequence of humanity's relationship with the environment—specifically, the value placed on extracting the Earth's resources regardless of the impact this has on ecological balance and sustainability.

Fixing a Broken Earth

The failure of Syl Anagist can be traced to its mistreatment of Father Earth. The conductors and leadership view Earth solely as a resource to be used for the empire's expansion. Jemisin shows in the concluding chapters of *The Stone Sky* that Earth is more significant than its material value to humans. The trilogy crosses over into Deep Ecology, which argues for the inherent value in non-human life, and is understood as "a way of developing a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities and all of Nature" (Devall 1985, 7). *The Broken Earth* considers that the futurity of humanity relies on acknowledging the importance of non-humans, in this case Father Earth, in order to ensure a future that will be less afflicted by environmental catastrophes which have endangered humanity and stalled their technological development.

In the second book, Essun is reunited with Alabaster who tells her about the Moon, "Father Earth's only child," and the importance of reuniting the two as a permanent solution to the fifth seasons. We learn that the tuners of Syl Anagist, who rebelled against the conductors, tried to save humanity as Father Earth fought against them. Hoa, one of the tuners, took control and directed the magic towards the moon, throwing it out of orbit (*TSS,* 340). As punishment, Father Earth turned the tuners into stone eaters and implanted humans with corestone fragments. Humans with these fragments operated under Father Earth's control, eventually becoming Guardians who supervise and discipline orogenes. The obelisks that were used by the tuners crashed onto earth and started the first and worst fifth season known as the Shattering (*TSS,* 342). Realigning the moon's orbit becomes Essun's, and eventually Nassun's, purpose.

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In order to complete this seemingly impossible task, Essun has to work and collaborate with people whom she would traditionally avoid or who would often avoid her. Orogenes in *The Broken Earth* can be understood as allegories for many groups who have been or are oppressed due to race, sexuality, or class. However, the series expresses the importance of the oppressed communities of orogenes and stone eaters working with the dominant group, the stills, to repair the broken earth. Essun has to rely on stills, other orogenes, commless, those who have exiled or had to leave their community, as well as 'feral' orogenes whom she was taught to look down on as a member of the Fulcrum. Stills such as Lerna and Tonkee are integral to helping Essun capture the moon. Lerna, a doctor from Essun's hometown, becomes a source of emotional support as Essun begins to turn to stone with each use of magic. Tonkee, with her knowledge about the Earth and its recent history, is a source of expertise that Essun must draw on throughout the series. Hoa, a stone eater, also aids Essun's journey, saving her from animals and other stone eaters (*TFS,* 189; *TOS,* 234). When Essun joins Castrima, the comm made up of stills, orogenes, and stone eaters, she has to unlearn her prejudices towards ferals, orogenes who were not taught by the Fulcrum. They all help her to travel to Corepoint and correct the moon's orbit. Though Lerna is killed in the process, Essun relies on his support and that of others to be able to end the fifth seasons.

Essun manages to correct the moon's orbit, and a truce is established by the stone eaters and Father Earth: "We have given it back the moon and thrown the obelisk in as a surety of good faith. But in exchange, the Season must cease" (*TSS*, 392). She is ultimately successful at correcting humanity's relationship with Father Earth due to her own skills as an orogene and because she was able to work with stills and stone eaters. This collaboration between various groups, Jemisin shows, is needed to address climate disasters. It is the fifth season that forces the different groups to cooperate, as they have in Castrima, a necessity for survival as mentioned in Butler's Earthseed philosophy. This collaboration alongside appeasing Father Earth also shows the value of non-humans to building an improved future. Reuniting Earth with the moon is not just a truce that enables humanity to inhabit a more hospitable Earth; it is also an acknowledgement of the importance of

Earth's perspective, feelings, and existence. Jemisin shows that Earth's feelings and point of view must be included in any policies or plans regarding humanity's future; indeed, it is Syl Anagist's failure to think of Earth that contributes to the empire's destruction and results in the reoccurring fifth seasons.

The future imagined in *The Broken Earth* illustrates, therefore, the interconnectedness of oppression and environmental destruction. Because of the ancient empire's attempt to extract resources relentlessly from Father Earth, humanity is condemned to survive in unstable environments. The myths shared by the Empire and Guardians that blame orogenes for this have, in turn, been used to justify their oppression. Yet rather than implying that solving environmental issues will automatically fix social inequalities, Jemisin suggests that the process of stabilising the environment becomes an "opportunity" for citizens of The Stillness to unlearn the mythology about orogenes by working with them (*TSS,* 394). As discussed earlier, orogenes, stills, and stone eaters in Castrima are forced to work together to ensure their collective survival, and this reliance on each other allows them to appease Father Earth. Overall, Jemisin stresses the interconnectedness between societal and environmental issues and the necessity of finding a joint solution rather than treating them as separate problems; a fix for the environment would not necessarily correct the inequalities between orogenes, stone eaters, and stills nor would a solution to the divisive society correct the relationship between humanity and Father Earth*.*

Afrofuturist and Afropessimist Paths Towards a Future

The *Broken Earth* series raises questions about how to create a different future and what the future should be like. Whilst there is a general understanding that the world needs to change because of its environmental and social problems, Essun and her daughter, Nassun, have different ideas about how to change The Stillness: neither idea is presented as the correct or better option. In this respect, the trilogy is heteroglossic as multiple perspectives are presented in the narrative (Bakhtin and Holquist

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1981, 263), and Jemisin allows the reader to draw their own conclusion about whether Essun or Nassun's approach is the most appropriate. Unlike the *Black Panther* comics and film adaptation, which present a definitive statement about right and wrong, *The Broken Earth* trilogy demonstrates varying approaches to futurity.

The Stone Sky ends with a battle between mother and daughter as they try to use the magic in the obelisks to change the world. They have conflicting ideas about what the future should be, but both believe that the future they want to build is an improvement on the present. As the two face each other, and become aware that they cannot both survive the confrontation, Essun, refusing to see another one of her children killed, concedes to Nassun's power. In the process, Essun's transformation into stone is completed and she later becomes a stone eater like Alabaster.

Nassun's belief, similar to Alabaster's, can be viewed as a form of Afropessimism. She understands that The Stillness, as it is, needs to be completely destroyed. Her plan is to take the moon and put it on a collision course with Earth, destroying Earth, the Moon, and humanity in the process. She believes that she "can't make anything better. But I can at least make the bad things stop" (*TSS*, 345), and the only way to ensure that the seemingly never-ending cycle of oppression finally concludes is to end the world completely. Nassun concludes that there is no alternative to destruction that would allow orogenes to live fully as people rather than tools, and that nothing can undo the suffering she and other orogenes have encountered. However, during Nassun's journey to Corepoint with Schaffa, the Guardian, his corestone is removed by Father Earth as it tries to prevent Nassun's plan to collide the Moon with Father Earth. The removal of the corestone also takes away Schaffa's strength and skill, and he slowly dies. Driven by her will to save Schaffa's life, Nassun decides to use the network of obelisks to turn everyone into stone eaters which would make humanity immortal, and the small distinction between stills, orogenes, and Guardians would also disappear.

Nassun's plan for the future of The Stillness could indicate a connection between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism. Afropessimism is described by Jared Sexton as "an analysis […] of how anti-black fantasies attain objective value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture as well" (2016). In other words, Afropessimism considers the ways anti-Blackness is baked into all facets of everyday life, and is therefore impossible to change without overhauling global political, social, and economic systems. Nassun similarly sees the impossibility of orogenes living in The Stillness as humans with the same rights as stills. Though this is borne out of Nassun's own traumatic experiences, Alabaster had arrived at the same conclusions in the first two books, which is why he lashed out destructively, causing the fifth season, and destroying the capital city and the Fulcrum in the process.

Dillender argues that Alabaster's destruction of the city begins the process of "reclaiming a future that could not have existed the way things were" and is an example of the way "Afrofuturism is couched within – and perhaps even born of – Afro-Pessimism" (2020, 146). Dillender's argument could also be extended to include Nassun's decision to force the Moon to collide with Earth. A connection between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism is therefore plausible, as both Alabaster and Nassun resort to destruction as the solution to what they see as unsolvable problems of oppression and inequality; Alabaster's orogeny caused the fifth season that would last a thousand years and see much of humanity suffer a slow death, and Nassun's decision to collide the Moon with Earth would destroy humanity as well as Father Earth. Both characters seek an end to the oppressive societies that they, like the past tuners, have had to endure. And they have no plan to build; the futures they ultimately bring about would see the extinction of humanity rather than the formation of a different, new society.

This is not to say their plans are purposely included to show the 'wrong' decisions: as mentioned previously, *The Stone Sky*, like the rest of the series, does not try to frame characters or their decisions as right or wrong in the same way that *Black Panther*, as a superhero narrative,

creates a binary opposition between Killmonger's and T'Challa's approaches to Black liberation. Neither Nassun, Alabaster, nor even Father Earth are villainised in the series. Indeed, Alabaster's and Essun's focus on destruction is representative of the ways they have been taught to use orogeny in the Fulcrum, which teaches orogenes how to prevent ecological disasters and intentionally neglects to inform orogenes about how their powers can be used to collaborate with others. Their focus on destruction in some senses contradicts Afrofuturist thought, because there is no future to speak of. By contrast, Essun takes a more constructive approach. After learning that orogeny can be used to build as well as destroy, she makes the decision to reinstate the Moon's orbit to appease Father Earth, end the fifth seasons completely and try, at times unwillingly, to collaborate with others to build a future that is distinctly different from the past and allows orogenes to participate fully in society and be recognised and valued. Essun's transformation from an apathetic Fulcrum-trained orogene into an agent for change with a positive vision of futurity is a significant part of the series' Afrofuturism.

Essun believes humanity, which includes orogenes, stone eaters, and stills, is worth saving and views the appeasement of Father Earth as a way to ensure humanity's survival. She learns that it is possible for humanity to build a society collectively that is more hospitable to all people, expanding the principles that guided the comm, Castrima. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Essun's experience of living in Castrima showed the power of collaboration between orogene, still, and stone eater. The future of The Stillness becomes dependent on this collective effort; Essun is supported by a stone eater, stills and other orogenes. Even Nassun's ability to reach Corepoint depends on her working with a Guardian. Like Butler's *Parable* series which emphasised the importance of diversity in survival, Jemisin's *Broken Earth* rests on similar principles. This is not 'diversity' in terms of token representation but rather an acknowledgement that different experiences, skills, and ideas are necessary to humanity's survival. In the series, the survival of Castrima was only possible because the comm consisted of orogenes, stills, and stone eaters who were recognised as equal members of the community.

Unlike Nassun, Essun is often focussed on building a different society rather than destroying it. Whilst her reasons for doing this are centred around the deaths of her children and making the world better for orogene children like her own, she nonetheless remains focussed on developing a new world. As Essun decides to concede to Nassun, Hoa says, "I know what it cost you to give up Alabaster's dream – and your own. You so wanted to make a better world for Nassun. But more than anything else, you want this last child of yours to live" (*TSS,* 385). Even as she awakens as a stone eater following her transformation into stone, Essun's first words are, "I want the world to be better" (*TSS*, 398). There is no indication of what this better world will be. The only certainty is that it will be a distinctly different from The Stillness that had been familiar to Essun as an orogene. Neither Hoa nor Essun imply that the world will revert to the model of past societies like Syl Anagist. Rather, the "better" world will be a different approach based on collaboration between previously divided groups.

After seeing her mother transformed into stone, Nassun decides to use the power of the obelisk gate to return the Moon to its correct orbit, abandoning her plan to turn humanity into stone eaters. The change of Nassun's perspective is quick and alters from one that leans toward Afropessimism and destruction of the current world to one that is closer to Afrofuturism by prioritising the preservation of humanity in its different forms as well as completely altering the caste system that oppresses and dehumanises orogenes. Hoa talks to Nassun about the possibilities that are open to her now that Father Earth has been reunited with the Moon. At his mention of orogenes' supremacy, she is horrified (*TSS*, 395) as this would only continue the cycle of hierarchy and oppression, only with orogenes in the position of power now oppressing stills. Though Nassun rejects this path, Hoa's suggestion reminds the reader that it is still a possibility despite the protagonists' plans to transform The Stillness. It's a reminder to remain vigilant, that positive changes can be reversed, and that an improved future is not immune to the patterns of the past. Nevertheless, the series ends with the proclamation, "This is the way a new world begins" (*TSS*, 398), as Nassun and Essun take different paths towards a shared goal. There is no indication of what this

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world could or would look like, and humanity still has to survive the remnants of the current fifth

season. As with other texts examined in this thesis, improved futures are a goal but are not

necessarily depicted within the text.[27] However, many of the issues that have plagued the Stillness

have ended; the frequent climate disasters and the oppressive role of the Guardians as agents of

Father Earth controlling orogenes are no longer problems. In a sense, the "new world" desired by

Essun and Hoa begins the moment the Moon is returned to Father Earth.

The Broken Earth trilogy considers how environmental issues and inequality are intertwined.

The fifth seasons are caused by humanity's extractivist exploitation of Father Earth. Consequently,

tuners are enslaved because of Syl Anagist's growing need for resources and orogenes are controlled

in order to prevent the environmental disasters that threaten The Stillness. By demonstrating the

relationship between the exploitation of the environment and social injustice, the series indicates

the importance of ecocritical perspectives in Afrofuturism and depictions of Black futurity.

Afrofuturism often addresses and poses solutions to racism, sexism, and economic inequality, but

the climate disaster is usually neglected, despite – as Jemisin has shown – how integral it is to those

other concerns. Scholars have noted this relationship (Agyeman 2008), although climate change,

racism and social inequality are often thought of as separate issues. Yet, by exploring

environmentalism in speculations about Black futurity, Jemisin highlights their interdependence, and

her work can influence how people think about and approach environmental issues.

Any considerations of the future of humanity will also have to grapple with the current

issues concerning climate change and works like The Broken Earth trilogy imagine a future that

addresses environmentalism and social justice, showing that the impending end of the world can

become an opportunity to change society for the better. Changing the relationship humanity has

with Father Earth leads to a stable environment, and in the process of fixing the climate and

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[27] Janelle Monáe's Dirty Computer (2018) and the film adaptation of Black Panther (2018) are examples that imagine an improved world but do not include depictions of what this improved future would be.

surviving the fifth season, orogenes, stone eaters, and stills are forced to collaborate as equals. Though this joint effort is difficult and requires each group to unlearn the myths that have contributed to the divisions between them, the series considers the dystopian Stillness as a time to rebuild and create an improved future. Although Jemisin explores an Afropessimistic solution through Alabaster's and Nassun's goal of destroying The Stillness to end the oppression of orogenes and the environmental problems, the trilogy ultimately concludes with an Afrofuturistic vision of a world in which orogenes, stills, and stone eaters can peacefully and productively coexist without the looming threat of environmental disaster. *The Broken Earth* emphasises the value of collaboration in building this improved future. Unlike past examples of Afrofuturism, Jemisin does not consider isolationism or escape as solutions to environmental and social problems, but shows that a less divisive and more community-driven society is a necessity for a better future world.

Chapter 4: "Not other, but more": Hybrid Identities in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist Fiction

In a 2017 TED talk, author Nnedi Okorafor described Afrofuturism as "simply […] a different type of science fiction," one that has "different ancestors" to the popular western-rooted science fiction (Okorafor 2017b).[1] In between excerpts of two of her books, *Binti* (2015a) and *Lagoon* (2014)*,* which take place in a near and far future Africa respectively, Okorafor discussed Afrofuturism and how her journeys to Nigeria inspired her writing. Okorafor was born in the US to two Nigerian parents, and has spoken about how her family and her own travels to Nigeria influenced her understanding of science fiction (2017b). Though Okorafor described her work as Afrofuturist in the TED talk, her conceptualisation of Afrofuturism was primarily influenced by Africa and therefore less US-centric than most considerations of Afrofuturism. As I have argued throughout this thesis, Afrofuturism is a changing and evolving genre, yet most Afrofuturist texts take place in either a near or far future United States, or are written by Black American authors. The US-centricity of Afrofuturism, whilst it has been criticised by Okorafor, is unsurprising. Indeed, Dery defined Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-*American* themes and addresses African-*American* concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture" (Dery 1994, 180, emphasis added).[2] Nevertheless, during the TED talk, Okorafor used the term Afrofuturism to describe her speculative fiction, which had "different ancestors, African ones" (2017b).

Despite Okorafor's attempt to mould Afrofuturism to fit her own writing, the term proved inadequate. In 2019, she published a blog post titled "Africanfuturism: Defined" (2019b), in which

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[1] In the TED talk, Okorafor mentioned the traditional science fiction of George Orwell, Jules Verne, and Isaac Asimov; Okorafor's fiction spans the adult, young adult, and middle-grade markets. Two of her popular adult books, *Who Fears Death* (2014b) and the Binti novella trilogy, are currently being adapted into television series ('Nnedi's Website' n.d.). As well as Africanfuturist stories, Okorafor describes her more fantastical works, such as the Akata Witch series (2011-) as Africanjujuism, though this term is not yet as widely used, nor has it been defined as extensively as Africanfuturism.

[2] See the thesis introduction for further discussion about Afrofuturism and its US-centricity.

she both coined and defined this term that, she argued, more accurately represented her novels. Okorafor had begun labelling her works as such prior to the blog post as she tried to distance herself from Afrofuturism, a label that had become associated with her novels before she began to use the term. Okorafor's blog entry, which has informed much of this chapter, remains one of few endeavours so far to create a term that encapsulates African speculative fiction, in a similar way to Afrofuturism which attempted to bring together seemingly disparate African American speculative fiction in the 1990s.[3] In the blog post, Okorafor described Africanfuturism as:

> similar to 'Afrofuturism' in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black
> Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is
> that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture,
> history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora,
> and it does not privilege or centre the West. (2019b)

Africanfuturism shares many ideas and themes with Afrofuturism but focuses predominantly on the future of Africa. The majority of Afrofuturist texts are created by and often set in the US; the futures imagined are often inspired by or a reimagining of experiences of slavery and racism in a specifically North American context.[4] But, as author Mohale Mashigo argued shortly before Okorafor wrote her blog post, "Our [African people's] needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe; we actually live on this continent, as opposed to using it as a costume or a stage to play out our ideas" (2018). Though Okorafor is a US citizen, her "Naijamerican" (Nigerian-American) identity is similarly shaped by her family and culture as well as her experiences of visiting Nigeria (Okorafor 2019b). Her parents travelled to the US "in 1969 for school and planned to go back to Nigeria. But then they got stuck here because of the

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[3] It is unclear whether 'Africanfuturism' was intended to be a marketing term as Afrofuturism has recently become. It is a new development in Black speculative fiction, but Okorafor seems to have coined it solely as a way to describe and control the way her work is labelled.
[4] One apparent example explored in this thesis is Janelle Monáe's android albums, which were shaped by the singer's own experiences of racism and being 'othered' (Wilmes 2010). See Chapter Two for further information.

Nigerian Civil War"(Wabuke 2015). Okorafor notes the influence of her travels to Nigeria in shaping

the way she writes science fiction. She describes being "inspired" by her trips with her parents to

Nigeria, particularly as she began to notice the "role of technology in Nigeria" during the late 1990s

(Okorafor 2017b). She recalls, "my Americaness [*sic*] othered me enough to be intrigued by these

things that most Nigerians saw as normal. My intrigue eventually gave birth to stories" (Okorafor

2017b). Afrofuturism is often considered to be a genre that represents the multiplicity of the Black

diaspora; however, Mashigo and Okorafor have noted that, whilst there are relatable and similar

experiences, the futuristic speculations under the Afrofuturist genre do not often place Africa and

African people at the focal point. This absence has highlighted the need for a different term.

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, Afrofuturism has never been

comprehensively defined; however, the key texts that continue to influence how fans, scholars, and

critics view the genre are conceived predominantly through an American lens. To support her

argument, Mashigo criticises the reduction of African cultures to "a costume or a stage" in the *Black

Panther* (2018) film adaptation, echoing some of the critiques that were mentioned in chapter one

above. Despite these criticisms, the depiction of Wakanda, a futuristic African nation in the film,

generated such excitement amongst viewers because Africa and African people are rarely depicted

in any mainstream futuristic fiction, further evidence of the absence Okorafor and Mashigo hope

Africanfuturism will be able to address. Kodwo Eshun has argued that Afrofuturism's "first priority"

should be to alter the often-dystopian projections of Africa's future: "Within an economy that runs

on SF capital and market futurism, Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia. There is always

a reliable trade in market projections for Africa's socioeconomic crises" (2003, 292).[5] Nevertheless,

Afrofuturism has only partially addressed the need for African futuristic fiction. This is another

indication of Africanfuturism's significance, and hopefully, a signal for new direction for Black

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[5] "SF capital" is a term Eshun borrows from Mark Fisher to describe the way predictions and knowledge about the future, often in terms of technological and economic changes, have become marketable goods: "the synergy, the positive feedback between future-orientated media and capital [...]. Information about the future therefore circulates as an increasingly important commodity" (2003, 290).

speculative fiction. Africanfuturism could be similarly criticised for being reductionist, yet it is slightly more focused on one geographic area, as opposed to Afrofuturism which is supposed to be diasporic.[6] As I have discussed throughout this thesis, finding a single term or phrase to describe adequately a wide variety of cultural identities, perspectives, and histories is not usually possible. Africanfuturism is broad but the texts, such as Okorafor's *Binti* and *LaGuardia*, do not seek to represent the entirety of African identity. Okorafor is specific about the setting and the places her characters are from as well as the culture that inspires each narrative.

Okorafor distinguishes Africanfuturism by making it less about the experiences of being Black in the western world, and more about the future of Africans living on the continent, as well as the impact of future Africa on the rest of the world. One of the prominent examples of Africanfuturism is Okorafor's *Binti*, a novella for adult audiences in which the titular character, a teenage Himba girl, decides to attend an intergalactic university, defying many of her cultural traditions in the process. This chapter will explore the way Binti's decision and her subsequent connections to different alien life impact her otherwise isolated culture and transform her cultural traditions and community. Though Okorafor does not refer to transformation and change in her conceptualisation of Africanfuturism, it is a theme integral to the sub-genre. In her TED talk, Okorafor describes Binti's journey as a process of becoming "not other, but more" (Okorafor 2017b), and offers a different perspective on the 'other', which, in Afrofuturism, has often been considered a lens through which to consider Black identities in the US.

Okorafor considers Africanfuturism to be "less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be' while it acknowledges, grapples with and carries 'what has been'" (Okorafor 2019b). Afrofuturism, or at least works which are often labelled as such, often consider alternative histories, or reimagine the past in a future context. For example, we saw

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[6] Please see the thesis introduction for more information about Afrofuturism and whether it is or can be a diasporic genre.

in the second chapter how Monáe draws parallels between the labour of enslaved Black people and the reliance on android labour for the benefit of a small minority of humans. Similarly, *Black Panther* is an example of a retrospective consideration of "what could have been" as various authors and artists speculate about a part of Africa that was never colonised and able to use its own resources rather than have them extracted by colonial forces.[7]

LaGuardia is the second text this chapter discusses. It is a short comic series that appears to be for adult audiences and imagines a 'what can/will be' future in which aliens have landed on earth, specifically Nigeria where they are welcomed,[8] but experience varying degrees of hostility both in Nigeria and in the US as they begin to travel to different countries. Though the brevity of the series prevents a lengthy exploration of human/alien society, it nonetheless depicts the way humanity's fear of aliens, and their perceived ability to change humans into aliens, leads to a social emphasis on strict binaries that attempt to separate the two. The transformation of the main protagonists' DNA due to their contact with alien life challenges this binary. In this way, Okorafor echoes Monáe's and Jemisin's work and attempts to expand configurations of the 'human', a recurring question within many Afrofuturist texts. However, Okorafor differs in her focus on transformation; her protagonists undergo a process of becoming "more" that challenges established human/alien binaries. Thus for Okorafor, amalgamating seemingly distinct identities is integral to building communities that change to reflect the people within them.

Aliens and alienation are common tropes in science fiction and Afrofuturism specifically, however Africanfuturist depictions of the 'alien' are presented differently. Afrofuturism's early conceptualisation commonly referred to experiences of alienation, specifically Black Americans'

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[7] See Chapter One for further discussion about resources and extractivism in *Black Panther*. Nnedi Okorafor has written the following *Black Panther* comics: *Shuri* (2019a) and *Black Panther: Long Live the King* (2018b), but has not referred to them as examples of Africanfuturism, potentially because the whole premise of *Black Panther* is founded upon "what could have been" rather than "what can/will be" which she has noted as integral in defining Africanfuturism.

[8] As with many graphic novels, there is no clear age rating for *LaGuardia*. However, it is not marketed towards children or young adults.

alienation from their ancestry due to slavery. In an article about Black-authored science fiction, Mark Sinker discussed this idea shortly before the term 'Afrofuturism' was coined:

> The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America – and so by extension Europe and Asia – are already in their various ways Alien Nation. (1992)

Furthermore, Van Veen argues that "[r]ather than struggling for (white) humanism, Afrofuturism rejects its supposed necessity as the certitude of ontology. The Armageddon-effect produces Alien Nation – not just as the effect of being estranged by foreign forces, but of strategically mobilising estrangement towards becoming" (2016, 73). Afrofuturism frequently explores alienation caused by slavery and the ongoing struggles against racism, and speculates about this impact on Black identity into the future. Yet while many of the considerations about alienation focus on the historical aspects caused by slavery, they often neglect the experiences of contemporary immigration. But this absence of narratives concerning immigration in Afrofuturist texts is slowly being addressed by Africanfuturism. Whilst the immigration of Black Africans is not necessarily a core feature of Africanfuturist fiction, the ways different places shape identity is integral to Okorafor's writing because of her experience of being Nigerian-American. Okorafor was born in the US, and has described herself as "the child of immigrants, thus my worldview has been shaped by ideas of people who move around, have multiple homes, cultures, have learned to adapt yet retain their identity and barrel forth regardless" (*LG* #1). Furthermore, Okorafor states that Trump's Executive Order 13769, commonly referred to as the 'travel ban' became "powerful fodder" for the *LaGuardia* series (*LG* #1), as the ban aimed to exclude those from certain countries; moreover, the national protests that took place highlighted the impact of the ban on predominantly Muslim countries ('A Licence to Discriminate: Trump's Muslim & Refugee Ban' n.d.). The impact of the Executive Order was swift, and people became literal 'aliens' overnight.

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The human/alien characters in Okorafor's stories highlight the importance of transformation in Africanfuturism but also explore the impact these alterations have on our understanding of humanity and what it means to 'belong' to certain groups, especially when identities change. Similar ideas were explored in the previous chapter on N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* as the protagonists experienced dramatic alterations to their bodies and identities. However, in Africanfuturist texts such as *LaGuardia* and *Binti,* otherness is not solely explored as an aspect of the exploitation or ill treatment of a specific group, as is the case with the oppression of orogenes in the *Broken Earth* series. Instead, otherness is intentionally sought out or welcomed by the main characters; the protagonists grapple with being othered by humans because of their cultural identity but both texts concentrate on their ability to inhabit two, supposedly opposite, identities simultaneously. In *Binti*, the alien becomes synonymous with the pursuit of knowledge, and in *LaGuardia*, the acceptance and presence of aliens in formerly human communities is a continuous theme. Whilst the characters in Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series change from one identity to another as an indication of the malleable nature of identities, Okorafor's texts posit a similar argument in a slightly different way. Her protagonists undergo a change that makes them both human and alien simultaneously, effectively combining two identities once considered incompatible; the protagonists are "not other, but more" because of these alien connections. Okorafor's texts and Africanfuturism more broadly consider otherness through the lens of voluntary migration rather than the forced migration of enslaved Africans which is an integral part of Afrofuturism. This is a further indication of a diverging perspective, distinguishing Africanfuturism from Afrofuturism.

As discussed previously, the growing prevalence of Afrofuturism in mainstream popular culture has led to increased usage of term in popular discourse; Africanfuturism is comparatively new, having only been coined in 2019. It is likely that if the term becomes more commonplace, critics and fans will begin to label African science fiction as such, even if creators do not use – or are perhaps even unaware of – Africanfuturism. Could Africanfuturism become as nebulous a term as Afrofuturism despite Okorafor's clear definition? Or will both terms simply become part of science

fiction as the genre continues to be influenced by considerations of the future that do not centre the western world? This may explain why Okorafor has been hesitant about providing any further clarification about Africanfuturism, stating: "If you want further explanation, you won't get it from me. Of this, I am not a scholar, I am a writer, a creative. This is as far as I will go on the subject. I hope what I have written here gives some clarity" (2019b). Whether this will influence the development of Africanfuturism in the future is unclear, yet it is an indication of a creative defining their own speculative fiction rather than having their work labelled by critics, fans, or scholars which has been the case for the majority of Afrofuturist texts including those discussed in this thesis.

Despite Okorafor's prolific writing, her work has not received substantial scholarly attention.[9] This chapter builds on Gibson Ncube's observation about *Lagoon* (2015), one of Okorafor's most popular novels. Ncube notes the way Okorafor "presents the destabilisation of the established order through an obscuring of the lines between the human and the non-human" (2020, 73), particularly in the figure of the alien shape-shifter who arrives in Lagos. Ncube examines *Lagoon* through a combination of Afrofuturism and Queer Theory to conclude that "*Lagoon* collapses all binaries and presents a space of alterity in which difference is welcomed and not denigrated" (2020, 79). I also examine otherness in the novel, albeit through an Africanfuturist perspective. But while Ncube notes the way Okorafor challenges normative binaries, I focus on her depiction of transformation, in which a human character becomes a human/alien hybrid and how this is portrayed as a necessity in forming an improved future in which identities are considered fluid rather than fixed.

Bettina Burger highlights the interaction between human and alien in her article on the *Binti* trilogy, arguing that the series challenges the "dominance of western science fiction" (2020). Burger refers to Donna Haraway's phrase "multispecies muddle" (2020, 365) to examine the transformations Binti experiences as she connects with different communities, both human and alien. I develop this idea further through Sylvia Wynter's concept of "hybrid beings" (2015, 17) to argue that

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[9] The majority of scholarship discuss *Lagoon* (2015) or the *Binti* series.

Africanfuturist texts such as the *LaGuardia* and *Binti* series approach the 'other' in a different way to Afrofuturist creatives.[10] Rather than exploring the otherness of Black identity in a western society, *LaGuardia* and *Binti* depict protagonists who are themselves considered 'others' but who also seek out the alien 'other' and are altered as a result. Okorafor's texts appear to be influenced by transhumanism, described as "a cultural movement which advocates a philosophy predicated on the argument that humans ought to transcend the limits imposed by our biological heritage" (Ross 2020, 1). Though Okorafor does not refer to transhumanist philosophy explicitly when discussing her works, the texts examined in this chapter present human characters who are transformed into a human/alien hybrid which bestows new and unforeseen abilities. Transhumanism is an umbrella term for multiple viewpoints, but this chapter focuses specifically on ideas of enhancement not through the interaction with technology, but rather through merging with alien 'others', which allows the protagonists to understand and communicate with aliens better but leaves their humanity in question.

Cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter echoes some of the ideas Okorafor explores in her work. She argues that humans should be considered as "hybrid beings," with the result that "you can no longer classify human individuals as well as human groups, as naturally selected (i.e. eugenic) and naturally dysselected (i.e. dysgenic) beings. This goes away. It is no longer meaningful" (Wynter 2015, 17). In other words, once hybridity is recognised and normalised, the need to categorise people as human or non-human is no longer as salient. Afrofuturist works do highlight the limitations of categorisation that has excluded various groups and communities, and often examine the ways hybrid identities undermine the belief that identity is fixed. Nevertheless, Okorafor's Africanfuturist novels offer another perspective concerning this theme. In the previous chapter, I explored whether dystopian worlds can be an opportunity to build something new and, hopefully, better. Neither *Binti* nor *LaGuardia* is dystopian; rather they view the transformation of characters

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[10] Okorafor has referred to *LaGuardia* (cited as *LG*) and *Binti* (cited as *B*) as examples of Africanfuturism (2019; 2019). This chapter focuses on the first *Binti* novella but will also refer to the narrative of the following books *Binti: Home* (2017a) and *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (2018a) (cited as *B:H* and *B:NM* respectively).

into hybrid beings as a step towards building a better future, one that is accepting of changing communities and identities, viewing these changes as part of humanity's development.

The four-issue comic series, *LaGuardia*, subtitled "a very modern immigration story," is set in a far future shortly after various aliens have landed in Lagos, Nigeria and begin travelling and migrating to different countries. Nigeria is largely receptive to alien citizens, and other countries such as the US are more hostile, considering aliens a potential threat. The protagonist, a Nigerian-American woman named Future, leaves Nigeria with one of the last "florals," a plant-like alien, in an attempt to rescue it from an ongoing war between different floral species. She returns to the US with the floral but is also faced with the United States' severe anti-alien immigration policy, which begins to affect Future as her DNA alters due to the contact with the floral.

Binti has a similar narrative as the protagonist, a teenage girl of the Himba ethnic group in a far-future Namibia, receives an offer to study at a prestigious intergalactic university. She accepts, despite the fact that Himba people, especially girls and women, rarely leave their community. Initially, she is the only Himba student, but eventually becomes the only human as the transportation is attacked by the Meduse, a jellyfish-like species. Binti is able to survive the attack and acts as a mediator between the Meduse and the university, temporarily ending a long-standing conflict. In the process, Binti's locs are transformed into Meduse tentacles, connecting her to the aliens that almost ended her life. In their depiction of the transformations of their protagonists, *LaGuardia* and *Binti* illustrate Okorafor's interest in hybridity. The narratives demonstrate the importance of becoming, of humanity changing in order to coexist with and learn from different communities and species, in this case, alien ones. Okorafor's Africanfuturism imagines a future that is better because of, rather than despite, hybridity.

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Transformation: Becoming a "hybrid being"

The protagonists in *Binti* and *LaGuardia* undergo transformations that alter their DNA. They become a human/alien which changes how they perceive themselves and where they belong. In both narratives, Okorafor presents characters being othered because of their cultural identity, a familiar trope in Afrofuturism as authors reimagine the experience of being the 'other' in the western world in various futuristic environments. However, Okorafor complicates alterity by depicting a multi-layered experience of otherness that places being racially or culturally 'othered' by a dominant community alongside the process of merging with another alien species altogether, and thus further challenging the definitions of identity and belonging adhered to by that first dominant community. In this respect, Africanfuturist fiction offers another perspective on alterity that explores the ways an individual can have multiple identities that blend together: becoming "not other, but more," by "leaving but bringing and then becoming more" (Okorafor 2017b).

Binti's journey to the prestigious Oomza University offers a brief indication of how she is othered by other humans. She is Himba, and like the Himba people of Namibia, uses *otjize*, a reddish clay, to cover her skin and hair. She describes it as "red land" (*B*, 13), and it is an important part of Binti's cultural identity. *Otjize* later becomes a way for her to feel connected to her ancestral home and family when living on the faraway university planet. Yet, many of the people Binti encounters on Earth before she leaves view her cultural practices as an indication of backwardness and uncleanliness, with one woman leaning away from her "as if she smelled something foul" (*B*, 11). Most of the humans in the series are Khoush, who are described as pale, often wearing long garments and veils to protect them from the harsh sun (*B*, 11,12). Binti, with her *otjize* and her anklets, is a visible "outsider" (*B*, 12-13). This is reinforced as a Khoush traveller Binti encounters at border security loudly proclaims: "These dirt bathers are a filthy people" and tugs at Binti's hair to see what the *otjize* smells like (*B*, 16). Afro hair is frequently considered a marker of otherness compared to an established idealised norm of straight, long hair. As Emma Daibiri has noted, "when we think about what we are taught constitutes beautiful hair, the characteristics of Afro hair are

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notable only for their absence" (2020, 9). This is no different in Okorafor's future worlds; as expansive as it is, Afro hair continues to be a way Binti remains an outsider when around other humans.[11]

However, Okorafor also depicts Afro hair as an indicator of mathematical prowess that people like the Khoush fail to comprehend fully. Binti is skilled in mathematics which wins her a scholarship.[12] One of the ways mathematics is woven into her culture is through her hair: "The pattern spoke my family's bloodline, culture, and history [...] my father had designed the code and my mother and aunties had shown me how to braid it into my hair" (*B*, 23). Burger considers Binti's hair a confirmation that "her [Okorafor's] Africanfuturist fiction is rooted in African traditions with no need to refer back to an imaginary Western default" (2020, 366–67). Rather than an indication of backwardness, Afro hair becomes a way of expressing cultural identity through codes that can only be understood – or decrypted – by those who share Binti's culture and knowledge of specific mathematical equations. Daibiri reflects on the assumptions made about her because of her Blackness, noting that "no one assumed that counting and coding were embedded somewhere deep within my DNA in the way that my ability to entertain, or to use my body in an athletic way was supposed" (2020, 214). In a similar way, Binti's hair has been considered a marker of her—and her culture's perceived primitiveness. Yet, by challenging this misconception, Okorafor presents Afro hair and Binti's culture as a more "personal" expression of futuristic mathematical and scientific understanding (Burger 2020, 367), rather than a marker of otherness which Binti learns to accept.

Binti's hair remains an important part of her transformation. The Meduse, large jellyfish-like aliens who have a longstanding conflict with the Khoush people, attack the ship as Binti and her fellow Khoush students travel to Oomza University. The Meduse murder all the passengers, sparing Binti only because she possesses a mysterious device she found near her family home, which she

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[11] See Daibiri *Don't Touch My Hair* (2020) for further research about Afro hair.
[12] Burger's article "Math and magic" also discusses the importance of Binti's character in encouraging Black mathematicians (2020, 364–65).

calls an *edan*. She realises the *edan* allows her to communicate with the Meduse and protects her from their attacks. Binti is able to persuade one of the Meduse, Okwu, to convince the Meduse leader to allow her to act as a representative for the Meduse and negotiate with the university on their behalf. They want to reclaim a weapon of theirs that was stolen and placed in a museum on the university planet. The Meduse demand Binti show she can be trusted, and she drops the *edan*, making her vulnerable should they attack. As she lets go, a Meduse stinger plunges into her back, and she loses consciousness. It is initially unclear what has happened as Binti focuses on negotiating with university representatives. However, she notices that some *otjize* has rubbed off her hair, revealing an unwelcome change: "It glowed a strong deep blue like the sky back on earth on a clear day, like Okwu and so many of the other Meduse […] And it was translucent. Soft but tough" (*B*, 81). The Meduse sting turns her hair into tentacles (which she calls *okuoko*). This allows Binti to communicate with the Meduse without any external devices. Okwu justifies the Meduse's decision to change Binti without her consent by simply stating, "because you had to understand us and it was the only way" (*B*, 82). Binti's tentacles allow her to talk to the Meduse which in turn gains their trust and allows her to act as a representative for them in the negotiations with the university. Binti's transformation is an indication of how she is not just "other, but more" (Okorafor 2017b). It allows Binti to communicate, but most importantly, it leads to her creating peace between the Meduse and the Khoush, albeit temporarily. As Binti is able to put forth the Meduse's argument clearly, she persuades the university professors to return the Chief Meduse's stolen stinger and they promise that "the scholars who did this will be found, expelled, and exiled" (*B*, 78). By merging with the alien 'other', Binti can partially address the longstanding conflict between the Meduse and the Khoush.

As noted above, Binti is frequently made to feel like an "outsider" by non-Himba people because of her appearance (*B*, 13) and her partial merging with the Meduse alienates her further. However, this ultimately allows her to establish some peace between the Meduse and Khoush. Okorafor shows the opportunities that arise through Binti's transformation into a Himba/Meduse hybrid being. Alongside the benefit of bringing peace, Binti herself becomes well known and thus

brings the insular Himba culture to the attention of a wider population. Though this is unwanted by most Himba people who value their insularity, through her fame Binti is able to challenge the misconceptions held by the Khoush. Binti also connects humanity and the Meduse. The war between the Khoush and Meduse is not forgotten, yet she begins a dialogue between them. Okorafor therefore presents hybrid identity as a way of bridging the gap between conflicting communities, a necessity to shape a more peaceful future.

Despite Binti's ability to communicate with the Meduse and her attempts to mend the division between them and the Khoush, she struggles with her transformation. The sudden transformation of her hair into *okuoko* alienates her from her own body: "I stood there, in my strange body. If I hadn't been deep in meditation, I would have screamed and screamed" (*B*, 82). She is familiar with being regarded as an outsider by the Khoush and by her community because of her decision to leave the ancestral land, but Binti begins to view her own body as other. Okorafor depicts a complex relationship between Binti and her human/alien identity; the transformation saves Binti's life but is also a constant reminder of her experience on the ship as she witnessed the Meduse murder her friends. Indeed, Binti experiences post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the Meduse attack, contributing to her struggle to accept her hybrid identity. She experiences a "dissonance" (*B:H*, 52) concerning her identity that is further explored in the second book, *Binti: Home,* in which she returns to her family home for her pilgrimage, a rite of passage for Himba girls. As she returns to earth, she describes "feeling people's eyes on my *okuoko* and my *otjize*-covered skin… Even among the many races at Oomza Uni, it had been a long time since I'd felt so alien" (*B:H*, 40). Furthermore, Binti feels alienated from her culture as a result of her actions – leaving home and defying her cultural upbringing. The *okuoko* she now has in place of hair further alienate her from Himba culture as hair is an integral part of expressing familial history. Binti's struggle to adjust to her hybrid identity shows the disorienting experience of such transformations, despite the positive connections that are formed in the process.

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Binti's family find her alien, not just because of her appearance, but also because of her decision to leave home. As Binti mentions in the first novella, Himba "prefer to explore the universe by traveling inward as opposed to outward" (*B*, 21), so her decision to leave for Oomza University changes the way her community view her. Her siblings and friends are relieved that she has returned but angry about her departure in the first place. One of her sisters blames Binti for their father's failing health: "You were supposed to take over the shop…We're all very happy to see you Binti. But you should be ashamed of yourself. Your selfishness nearly got you killed" (*B:H*, 72). Dele, Binti's former close friend, informs her coldly that her actions have changed the way the community view her family. Her sisters and girl cousins are mistreated (*B:H*, 79), and Binti realises "no man wanted a girl who ran away. No man would marry me" (*B:H*, 80). Though not a visible change, leaving earth transformed Binti into something other to her family, friends and community. The patriarchal structure of Himba culture means the behaviour of girls and young women is closely watched and determines their future within Himba society.

Okorafor emphasises the importance of cultural identity and traditional African culture, but also considers how Himba cultural practices simultaneously enrich and constrain Binti's life. Binti's family are punished because of her perceived defiance, and she is largely treated as a pariah. Yet, her desire to learn from alien 'outsiders' is considered a rejection of her culture. The ill treatment experienced by Binti and her family could be considered a criticism of the culture itself. Crowley notes that "Binti's own broadened understanding through her travels and growth […] increasingly discredits Himba insularity as insufficient" (Crowley 2019, 249). However, Okorafor seems to be criticising rigid thinking in general, rather than attempting to critique the narrowness of 'traditional' cultures. Instead, there are conflicting values: the Himba value insularity which could be considered a hinderance to Binti's development. Yet Binti still remains connected to other aspects of her Himba identity. She continues to use *otjize* while at university and manages to source the ingredients from a forest on the university planet (*B*, 90). On her return to earth, Binti participates in the pilgrimage, a rite of passage for teenage girls. Though she is able to involve herself in these activities, the

inflexibility of Himba culture becomes a barrier that makes her feel like an outsider. The Himba's

insularity is not the issue; rather, it is their avoidance of and resistance to inevitable change that

prevents them from becoming "more" (Okorafor 2017b).

In the following novellas, Binti undergoes further transformations that separate her further

from Himba culture. In *Home,* she discovers her connection to an alien species called the Zinariya

through her father's family. She meets her paternal grandmother for the first time, who tells her the

history of their tribe, the Enyi Zinariya, whom most Himba – including Binti – mockingly call the

"Desert People" though their technology is more advanced. Her grandmother tells her, "we have

technology that puts yours to shame and we've had it for centuries" (*B:H*, 127) as a result of an

encounter with aliens, the Zinariya, "a golden people" (*B:H*, 128) who give them a drink containing

"biological nanoids" (*B:H*, 129). This allows the Enyi Zinariya to access a virtual platform that allows

them to communicate with all who share this alien connection, and some are able to communicate

with animals. This special ability is misunderstood by most Himba people who consider their

neighbours "primitive and mentally unstable" (*B:H*, 96). They only see the hand gestures of the Enyi

Zinariya as they interact with the invisible virtual platform and believe "they have no control of their

hands," considering it a possible "neurological condition" (*B:*H, 96). Binti and other Himba encounter

prejudiced Khoush who view their culture as backwards, but prior to encountering her grandmother,

Binti exhibits similar behaviour towards the Enyi Zinariya. Upon realising this she feels remorse at

how her unfounded judgements contributed to her lack of understanding: "I felt a sting of shame as I

realised why I hadn't understood something so obvious. My own prejudice" (*B:H*, 129). However, by

learning from and connecting with the Enyi Zinariya, she grasps her own culture's lack of

understanding of these 'others'. The two communities remain separate, yet Binti's hybrid presence

as both Himba and Enyi Zinariya is a step towards weakening the barriers that have divided them as

she is an indication that they can coexist and even learn from each other.

In *The Night Masquerade*, Binti undergoes a further transformation, developing a connection with a large creature called New Fish, a kind of sentient ship known as a Miri 12. In the final book, Binti manages to establish a peace agreement between the Khoush and Meduse. Yet the hostilities reignite and, caught in the crossfire, Binti is shot multiple times and dies. The Meduse, Okwu, and Binti's Enyi Zinariya friend Mwinyi decide to release her remains into space. But Binti is revived by contact with the sentient ship, New Fish, and comes to share New Fish's consciousness and ability to fly through space. In exchange, New Fish absorbs some of Binti's genetic material and develops an ability to use the Zinariya virtual platform. Binti's transformation not only saves her life but also gives her access to new ways of perceiving the world and new technologies with which to act upon it. Though Binti encounters many hardships with each of her transformations, she is able to learn from different aliens and cultures as well as share her new-found knowledge, all of which would be impossible without her first undergoing the transformations that alter her identity, a process that makes her receptive to 'alien' ways of thinking.

Through Binti's transformations, Okorafor depicts being or becoming "more" as a way to connect divided communities but acknowledges the difficulty and discomfort that is part of this process. Binti's cosmopolitanism, as someone who leaves and returns to her ancestral land as a changed person, challenges the Himba's insularity, and by extension, their long cultural history. The negative impact this has on Binti and her family is a result of the Himba's rigid thinking. Similarly, Binti's struggle to accept the sudden transformation of her body into an alien/human hybrid strains her mental wellbeing and impacts her relationships. Despite this, Binti's hybrid Himba/Meduse identity weakens the binary that has helped to justify the longstanding war between the Meduse and the Khoush. Okorafor shows that in reconsidering these supposedly fixed identity constructs, new relationships can be built, bridging the gap between the human and alien other. For Okorafor, Africanfuturism is not about eliminating otherness, and it goes further than merely accepting alterity: the connections with the other lead to the formation of something new, something 'more'

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which is apparent in the way Binti shares her culture with the Meduse but also learns from and becomes part of the Meduse.

Like *Binti*, the main protagonist in the *LaGuardia* series is transformed without her consent. Rather than being violently changed by her captors, Future is altered due to her contact with a plant-like alien, known as a floral, which changes her DNA. Her partner, Citizen Raphael, gives what he believes is a plant to Future as a gift.[13] On realising the plant is sentient, Future tries to save it as an ongoing war between botanicals – which most humans are unaware of – threatens the existence of its species. The alien, named "Letme Live," describes this otherwise unseen war as a "genocide" and until the final issue of the series believes that it is the last remaining botanical of its species (*LG* #3). Future leaves Nigeria with Letme, and smuggles the alien into the US, arriving in New York to live with her grandmother, a prominent immigration lawyer who specialises in alien immigration. The US's forceful anti-alien laws limit the number of aliens in the country; therefore, Future believes it is less likely to become another site for the botanical war. However, Future discovers she is pregnant by Citizen, whose DNA has also been altered by contact with Letme Live. Both she and her baby now share this botanical alien's DNA.

Future's transformation in *LaGuardia* is more subtle than Binti's as her outward appearance changes in a less apparent way. Nevertheless, she and Citizen undergo a similar evolution into human/alien "hybrid beings" (Wynter 2015, 17). Both notice that their hair is turning green (*LG* #1; *LG* #4).[14] As in *Binti*, Okorafor reimagines Afro hair as a marker of alien identity. Although neither character's outward appearance alters further, they are aware that they are now not only human but also part botanical. But they have different perspectives about aliens, and approach their new hybrid identity in divergent ways. Future initially hides her emerging green hair with a headwrap.

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[13] Many of the characters in *LaGuardia* have allegorical names; Future and her connection to botanical aliens can be considered the future of humanity within the series as aliens and humans form communities. This is common for Okorafor's writing style as some of the characters in her other works have similarly allegorical names. In *The Book of Phoenix* (2015b) for example, the protagonist Phoenix dies and is reborn multiple times.
[14] *LaGuardia*, like many comics, does not have page numbers but the issue number will be referenced.

Her vivid green locs are only revealed to the reader when she goes into labour and takes her headwrap off at the hospital (*LG* #3). It is hinted that due to the strong anti-alien laws and prejudice, Future initially feels she must hide this transformation. However, she later embraces this visible change by wearing her hair up, exposing the visible green roots. By the end of the final issue, her hair is completely green, and she leaves her hair uncovered (see Figure 4.1).

In contrast to Future's openness to her botanical DNA, her partner, Citizen, hides his transformation. Initially he clips the stray green hairs that sprout in his beard. His involvement with an anti-alien movement in Nigeria makes it dangerous for him to have any visible, potentially alien, characteristics. Citizen struggles with his changing identity because of his involvement with the protest group known as the Neo-Biafran movement which believes that aliens should be excluded from Lagos (*LG* #1). Guided by Nigerian history, Okorafor imagines a continuation of the Biafran Movement in a future Lagos. The secession of Biafra and the resulting Nigerian Civil War of 1967 led to an estimated death toll of approximately one to two million people, predominantly "from hunger and disease after the Nigerian government imposed a land and sea blockade that resulted in famine" (Ilo 2020).[15] The Biafran War continues to have an impact in far-future Nigeria; the Neo-Biafran movement wants aliens to leave Lagos (*LG* #4), as the discrimination towards Igbo people remains an issue but aliens appear to have been easily accepted into Nigerian

Figure 4.1 Future with her completely green hair in an elaborate style that draws attention to her hair and alien identity (LG #4)

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[15] During the war, the Nigerian government established a blockade preventing food supplies from reaching Biafra and many people died of starvation.

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society. One of Future's alien neighbours, Payment,[16] encounters Citizen's xenophobia. Though

aliens are accepted in Nigeria, they have had little impact on Nigeria's past, but are considered by

the Neo-Biafran Movement to be the reason why Igbo people continue to be mistreated. Payment

argues, "Now that extraterrestrials have arrived you all hate us because you're stuck in your ugly

past" (*LG* #4). After his contact with various botanical aliens, Citizen admits that the Movement and

its anti-alien rhetoric is misguided: "The Neo-Biafran Movement was born from rightful purpose. The

uptick in discrimination toward Igbos in the southeast was being ignored just like years ago. But the

movement had grown too rigid. Ironically, we were losing our humanity too" (*LG* #4). As well as

imagining the continued impact of the Biafran War, Okorafor depicts the complexity of

transformation and the process of becoming the other. Citizen struggles with the idea that his new,

botanical alien identity is often more accepted in Nigeria than his Igbo identity, yet the Neo-Biafran

Movement he was once part of would reject him for his 'alienness'. His new hybrid identity

therefore complicates his sense of belonging, which I will discuss below.

In *LaGuardia* prejudices are portrayed as barriers to positive change because they exclude

otherness and prevent the formation of communities of hybrid beings. The series briefly mentions

that humans have benefited from the contributions of various aliens, alluding to technological

advances and economic developments that have had a positive and global impact: "Nigeria

welcomed the people from around the universe and we have been better and happier for it" (*LG* #1).

Yet there is constant vocal and, at times, violent opposition to alien citizenship, both in the US and

Nigeria. After Future leaves Nigeria, botanical aliens begin to travel to Citizen's balcony. He

begrudgingly looks after them but complains that they "show up unannounced and stay indefinitely"

(*LG* #1). However, his decision to care for them indicates his acceptance of alien life. Members of the

Neo-Biafran Movement become aware that there are aliens living on Citizen's balcony, and set fire

to it, murdering the botanicals that had found safety there. Citizen describes returning to his home

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[16] In the first issue, it is explained that most aliens take the names of common words as they are "easy to remember" (*LG* #1).

in Lagos and finding the balcony ablaze (see Figure 4.2): "They [the Neo-Biafran Movement] viewed it as killing a contamination. But it was… it was murder. It was only a matter of time before they came for me, a contaminated Neo-Biafran" (*LG* #4). Despite being part of the movement, he decides it is "too rigid" (*LG* #4) and flees to the US. His understanding of the malleability of human identity, that it can change and become part alien, only becomes apparent with his own transformation by Letme Live's spores. This change, though it is not as obvious as Binti's transformation into a human/Meduse hybrid, leads to Citizen developing an understanding of and respect for aliens that may not have occurred without his interaction with Letme Live and the other botanicals that lived on his balcony.

Figure 4.2 Citizen returns to his apartment to find Neo-Biafra supporters have set his balcony alight, intentionally killing the botanical aliens who were living there (LG #4).

Yet Citizen continues to struggle to accept his own changed identity as his alienness separates him from the Neo-Biafran Movement with which he had been so involved. He also finds it difficult to be surrounded by aliens in the apartment block. When he sees some of the alien residents playing with his son, he snatches his child away and angrily asks Future, "hasn't our son been exposed to enough?" (*LG*, #4). Both Future and her grandmother challenge his view as does the alien, Payment. However, his treatment of alien 'others' is an indicator that he has not fully

accepted his own hybrid identity. Future's and Citizen's child, Future Citizen Lives, does not appear

to be anything other than human despite being born with botanical DNA. Though Future is relieved

that he is healthy and looks like both of his parents, she also tells Citizen that she is "happy to have

whatever is in them [her alien friends]…in our child…in me. I'm happy with what I am now. Aren't

you?" (*LG*, #4). Citizen is less content with his own and his child's hybridity. Although he realises that

the Neo-Biafran Movement had begun to "lose [their] humanity" (*LG* #4), his reaction to the aliens

interacting with his child shows the continued impact of his participation in the Neo-Biafran

Movement. Thus, Citizen still considers humans and aliens to be divided even though he and his

family are now humans with alien DNA. He continues to shave his hair and beard to hide his green

hair and his alien identity, causing Payment to note: "You can shave your beard but we all know it

would be green" (*LG* #4). In other words, though he appears to be completely human, those around

him know Citizen is, at least partly, a botanical alien. Again, Okorafor emphasises the discomfort of

"becoming more" as the transformation into a "hybrid being" upends the rigid categories that have

otherwise shaped Citizen's life and informed the way he perceives his own identity. Ultimately,

Citizen is forced into acknowledging the rights of the aliens around him. His physical and ideological

transformation suggests that the meaning of 'citizenship' itself is expanding as aliens and humans

interact.

In contrast to Citizen, Future is open to aliens and their various cultures from the beginning

of the series, believing they have a right to travel and be recognised as citizens of earth. This

perspective means she also accepts her own hybrid identity and that of her child. Okorafor

characterises Future as an example of the attitudes or beliefs needed to ensure an improved future,

one that is receptive to new and changing identities. In this respect, *LaGuardia* is optimistic, showing

that identity transformations can change the perspective even of those who are hostile to supposed

'others'. In the final issue, other botanical extraterrestrials arrive at Future's home, having been

called there by "Letme's child" (*LG*, #4). Future's and Citizen's child is recognised by the other

botanicals because he shares part of their genetic material. The baby's ability to call to other

botanical aliens is an indication of the way communication between different groups is enhanced by

hybrid identities. The malleability of identity is a reoccurring theme in Black Speculative Fiction and

Afrofuturism, as I have shown in the previous chapter about N. K. Jemisin. However, in

Africanfuturist texts such as *Binti* and *LaGuardia,* the idea of flexible identity is taken further as the

main protagonists undergo a process of becoming "more" than human by transforming into

alien/human hybrids.

Belonging as an Alien/Human

The transformations Binti and Future undergo alter their appearance and genetic material and

weaken the supposed binary between human and alien; if people can be two, supposedly distinct

identities, where do they belong? Whilst Okorafor presents becoming a "hybrid being" as a way of

connecting different communities and overcoming hostility and misunderstanding, her narratives

also depict the additional difficulty of finding a community as a "hybrid being" (Wynter 2015, 17).

Transhumanism often considers the way humans supersede limitations through augmentations and

enhancements, but also explores the implications these changes have on our understanding of the

'human' (Ross 2020, 12). Indeed, Binti's presence becomes a contributing factor to the war between

the Khoush and Meduse, serving as a warning about the risks of believing identities can be easily

compartmentalised and separated. *LaGuardia*, *Binti*, and Africanfuturism more broadly, depict

hybridity as a challenge to the belief that identity is rigid, and highlight the need to make

communities more flexible or create new communities that reflect these fluid identities.

In *Binti*, the titular character and those around her struggle to reconcile her transformation

with her identity as a Himba and as a human. As mentioned earlier, Binti's decision to leave her

community to go to university leads to hostility from the prominent leaders of Himba society and

her friends and family. The Himba council, elders who govern the community, abandon Binti after

agreeing to help her form the truce between the Meduse and the Khoush. Binti asks the Himba

council to "call on the Himba deep culture" to prevent the Khoush-Meduse war (*B:NM*, 82). Deep culture "communes with the mathematics that dwell within all things and only the collective of Himba Councils could evoke it" (*B:NM*, 82) and appears to be a powerful way of creating harmony between others, which merges the fantastical and scientific (Burger 2020, 366). But the Himba Council deceive Binti by facilitating negotiations between the Khoush and Meduse but choosing not to attend the talks between the leaders, intentionally leaving Binti to face the armies alone (*B:NM*, 125). Her connections to aliens but most importantly her decision to "abandon her family" and defy the inward-looking Himba culture contribute to Binti's otherness in the eyes of the council for whom she is another outsider. The council believe that as the war does not directly involve the Himba community, they can avoid it by returning to a nomadic lifestyle (*B:NM*, 82). However, Binti is aware of the impact a war between the Khoush and Meduse could have on her Himba community, and understands that their insularity does not protect them. Despite her attempts to save her community, its leaders no longer recognise her connection to Himba society.

Binti's rejection by the Himba elders causes her to endeavour to form a new identity that acknowledges her connections to the Himba, the Meduse, the Enyi Zinariya, and the sentient ship, New Fish. At Oomza University, she is able to be all of her identities at once without being forced to value one connection over the other or ignore aspects of her identity that seem to conflict with the practices of another. She is frequently othered by humans on earth. Yet, the academics and students around her find her identity interesting or familiar. Some are aware of Himba culture and others also have similar connections with spacecraft (*B:NM*, 184). Though her human/Meduse physiology is new even to the galaxy's top scholars, they learn about the connection Binti has with Okwu. She considers the accepting ethos of Oomza University a welcome respite: "The way people at Oomza Uni were so diverse and everyone handled that as if it were normal continued to surprise me. It was so unlike Earth where wars were fought over and because of differences and most couldn't relate to anyone unless they were similar" (*B:NM*, 102).

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Though she is able to form a community at the university, Binti struggles to accept her non-human identity, particularly after her physician informs her that should she have children, Okwu would give birth and the child would also have *okuoko* like her (*B:NM*, 192). She asks the doctor whether she is still human considering the ways her physiology, not to mention her cultural identity, have changed: "what *am* I? I'm so much" (*B:NM*, 192), a poignant question that returns to Okorafor's idea of "becoming more" as central to Africanfuturism. Binti's difficulty with becoming "so much" (*B: NM*, 192) is caused by her assumption that her transformations have severed her connection to Himba culture, echoing the perspective of the Himba council. However, her physician notes that, in line with her culture, her connection to others means her "family is bigger than any Himba girl's ever was" (*B:NM*, 194). The physician offers a different perspective, one that sees Binti's new connections as further expression of Himba culture. By connecting with these aliens, she is not rejected or excluded from the Himba culture but has expanded it by adding the perspectives of the Meduse, the Enyi Zinariya and the sentient ship, New Fish. That Binti's children would also have these connections and be part-Meduse, Enyi Zinariya and New Fish further indicates that hybrid identities will remain a significant part of future societies; thus, Okorafor seems to suggest, communities will need to adapt to these developments.

Unlike Binti, Future has access to a community that accepts her human/alien identity immediately as she arrives at her grandmother's home. When she returns to the US, she lives with her grandmother in an apartment block of humans and extraterrestrials. Her grandmother has been a lawyer for many of them (*LG* #1). There are disagreements and misunderstandings, particularly between the alien, Payment, and Citizen after he moves in with Future (*LG* #4). However, their identity as human/botanical is easily recognised and accepted by their surrounding friends, family, and neighbours. Nevertheless, Future and her partner Citizen share a similar, personal difficulty in understanding where they belong. Part of that difficulty comes from their location: the hostility of the US towards aliens means their citizenship in the country could be jeopardised should their alien identity be discovered. Aliens are excluded from many hospitals, their travel is severely restricted, and

many feel unsafe in public as the government's disdain towards aliens becomes a justification for some humans to act aggressively.

Although Future and Citizen are relatively privileged as their alien identity is not immediately obvious to casual observers, there is a persistent fear of their alien identity being discovered should they be tested when travelling or if they require medical attention. The health care of aliens is a reoccurring issue throughout the series. Many hospitals in the US have become "human only" (*LG* #2). This means Future is uncertain about where she can be treated: "Where are human beings with alien DNA supposed to go?" (*LG* #2). But in the final issue, Future is asked to become an advisor at the local hospital, advocating for aliens in health care. The head doctor tells her he is not "a fan of goddamn aliens" but follows with "if you don't move into the future, you get left behind" (*LG*, #4). It is unclear whether his motives for changing the hospital's policy is motivated by any other factors, such as the economic benefit of treating aliens. However, Okorafor shows that, however begrudgingly, a small change in attitude can have a substantial impact. Because of these changes, aliens will now be able to be treated at another hospital instead of having to travel further afield, potentially putting themselves at greater risk of being discovered. It is an optimistic view about the future, recognising the small changes that contribute to weakening the barrier between the human and alien other. In general, though, hybridity is not recognised; the presence of alien DNA is equated to the non-human. When Future suddenly goes into labour, she is fearful of going to the nearest hospital and tells her neighbour, "They can't find out" (*LG* #3). Okorafor suggests that, in the current political climate, the nuances of alien/human identity are ignored in favour of simplistic but inaccurate definitions. These rules and exclusions that attempt to delineate the human from the other are most apparent in the alien travel ban.

Whilst Okorafor presents Future's alien and human community as uncommon, there are hints throughout the series that similar communities exist throughout the city and that the government's investment in dividing aliens from humans can be overcome, albeit in small ways. In issue #2, a ban to prevent aliens from travelling to the US has been enacted. Three students are detained because they travelled from Sudan and are considered potential aliens. As one of the characters says, "if you're an African or an alien that airport is like sneaking through the gates of hell," as African is equated to 'alien' by US immigration policy (*LG* #1). Throughout the series, LaGuardia airport is depicted as a threshold that determines who does and does not belong in the US. Future's grandmother, an immigration lawyer, is called to help the students enter the country before the ban legally begins. As they leave the airport, they are confronted with a large number of protestors arguing for and against the travel ban. The pro-alien protestors, with their messages of "ban the ban" and "you are welcome" face the supporters who believe aliens should "go back home" in order to "keep our country clean" (*LG* #2) (see Figure 4.3). The scenes are reminiscent of the travel ban protests that took place in the US in 2017 after Executive Order 13769 was passed. On the journey to their apartment, the characters are met with more anti-travel ban human and alien protestors. The protest shows aliens and humans working together despite the laws that divide

Figure 4.3 Future, her grandmother, and the three students leave the airport surrounded by protestors (LG #2).

them, indicating the potential for communities similar to Future's around New York. The banners

declaring "all people are people" and "we all belong" demonstrate a shared belief that

extraterrestrials have a right to live and be a part of the US, and that there are many humans willing

to oppose the ban. The protests against the travel ban, both real and imagined, in *LaGuardia* reflect

the opposition to restrictions that seek to strengthen divisions between communities by identifying

and excluding 'others'.

In *Binti* and *LaGuardia*, the protagonists are able to find or create their own small

community which recognises their hybrid identity. In this way, Okorafor emphasises the importance

of not just challenging rigid identities but also creating communities that acknowledge and accept

alien and human identities in equal measure. The process of transforming and becoming "not other,

but more" highlights the false rigidity of strict identity categories as the characters are able to exist

as alien and human simultaneously. Okorafor, again, notes the importance of expanding or making

the 'human' a more flexible construct to ensure that it changes and develops alongside the

inevitable changes humanity experiences.

Okorafor's narratives show that the multiplicity of Black Diasporic identities are integral to

Africanfuturism, particularly the experience of having connections to multiple places through family

and cultural heritage, which is largely inspired by Okorafor's Nigerian-American identity.

Africanfuturism highlights the way "leaving but bringing and becoming more" both changes and

connects seemingly distant identities. These changes do not mean a loss of identity or having to

decide on one identity over the other by minimising the complexity of being a "hybrid being"

(Wynter 2015, 17). Instead, Okorafor presents Africanfuturist fiction as a way of placing Africa and

African people at the centre of speculative fiction and noting the Diasporic networks that exist as

people immigrate, travel, and form communities with others who might be distant and very

different from their point of origin.

Conclusion: The Future of Black Futurity in Speculative Fiction

This thesis has aimed to explore how Black authors and artists have imagined Black futures in response to an absence of both in science fiction and fantasy. This absence implied that there would be no Black people in the future, as if Black people had no future. Though authors Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delaney made substantial contributions to Black speculative fiction writing in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, two authors alone could not correct this absence. However, since the term Afrofuturism was first coined in 1994, and in the last decade especially, Black authors and creatives have made significant contributions to speculative fiction across a range of cultural forms, from music, to comics, to film, as well as literature. The growing presence of Black authors in speculative fiction has frequently been understood through the lens of Afrofuturism, a term first used by Mark Dery. This thesis acknowledges the limitations and ambiguities of Afrofuturism as a concept but argues that these ambiguities grant a degree of flexibility to the way the term is understood and applied. This allows creatives to speculate about Black futurity in a number of ways without limiting artistic expression. The emergence of Afrofuturism into mainstream media has impacted popular expectations of what the genre is or should be. However, it is not intended to be a formulaic approach to speculative fiction.

The texts I have examined in each chapter above illustrate different approaches to Afrofuturism, not just in the type of media utilised but also in the kinds of futures imagined. The first chapter examines the changing depiction of Black futurity in *Black Panther* from the 1960s comics to the current comics and recent film adaptation. In its earliest iterations in Marvel comics of the 1960s, the isolated nation of Wakanda was considered a better world due to its technological advances and economic wealth. However, recent comics and the 2018 film adaptation criticised the isolationism that previous authors of Black Panther stories celebrated, because they argue such isolationism limits access to this better world for the majority of people. The second chapter considers Janelle Monáe's discography and her narratives of survival in dystopian worlds. Whilst

Monáe's music does not depict a better world, the characters Cindi Mayweather and Jane 57821, in response to their persecution, imagine and plan to shape a future founded on joy and pleasure. Similarly, N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, explored in chapter three, portrays a dystopia in which the protagonists have conflicting ideas about the future, indicating a tension between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism. These differing approaches to Black futurity are shaped by the characters' experiences of oppression and inequality based on rigid conceptualisations of the human which exclude 'others'. The final chapter also explores the destructive impact of fixed identities in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist fiction. A better world in Okorafor's fiction is one in which clearly separate identities constructed through binary oppositions become unstable, entangled with one another, and difficult to separate. Together, the texts analysed in all four chapters demonstrate the range of Afrofuturism and the creative vitality of Black speculative fiction but also begin to address the absence of Black futurity.

Scholarship about Afrofuturism is largely concerned with introducing the genre to new audiences in accessible ways and with historicising the genre, tracing the development of Afrofuturist ideas before the term was coined in the 1990s.[1] Recent research has also theorised Afrofuturism, attempting to understand what aspects of speculative fiction make a text 'Afrofuturist'. In the chapters above I explore the reasons why texts have been labelled as examples of Afrofuturism, often without the author themselves using or endorsing the term. However, understanding why a text is or is not Afrofuturist has not been my main concern. Instead of identifying what is or is not Afrofuturist, I have explored the varying expressions of the genre in contemporary speculative fiction. As I have discussed throughout the thesis, Afrofuturism is not easily reduced to specific themes or approaches. It is a constantly changing and developing genre and, therefore, it is difficult to provide a firm definition. However, this flexibility means there is no

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[1] Ytasha Womack's *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy* (2013) remains one of the most accessible introductory texts. Lisa Yaszek's "Afrofuturism in American Science Fiction" and Isiah Lavender III's *Afrofuturism Rising* (2019) both examine the literary history of the genre.

single way to create Afrofuturist art, which facilitates a broad range of perspectives on and approaches to Black futurity. Yet I have argued that the shared characteristic across Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction is the question of what a 'better' world is. In each chapter I have demonstrated that the idea of an improved future is approached in a variety of ways by different authors even though they all share the 'Afrofuturist' label that has been attributed by fans and critics.

This thesis has considered Afrofuturism in mainstream film, comics, literature, and music. However, examinations of the genre in other media would further contribute to understanding of the genre. Afrofuturism in contemporary art has not been substantially researched. This is surprising as the genre is frequently expressed visually. Though Mark Dery, in his early theorising about Afrofuturism, referred to the art of Jean Michel-Basquiat, further research about Afrofuturist art is required. Thus far, Reynaldo Anderson's *The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Black Futurity, Art+Design* is one of few explorations of the genre in these media. Contemporary Afrofuturist art was outside the scope of this thesis but works such as Kiluanji Kia Henda's photographic series *Icarus 13: The First Journey to the Sun* and visual artist Lina Iris Viktor's *Dark Continent* could be the subject of future research. As well as visual art, explorations of Afrofuturism in narrative podcast series such as *Obsidian*,[2] could be a topic of further analysis of Afrofuturism in independent or non-mainstream popular culture.

Mainstream popular culture is more likely to receive greater attention and financial support, yet it is also likely that the messages and meanings of productions released by large companies such as Marvel or Amazon will be impacted by the corporate priorities of those media giants. The development of Afrofuturism and its increasing presence in popular culture, largely influenced by the commercial success of the film adaptation of *Black Panther* (2018), has shown that there is an audience for mainstream Black speculative fiction. Mainstream Afrofuturism could potentially be a

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[2] *Obsidian* is described as being "based in Afrofuturism" by the creators ('Obsidian Podcast' n.d.).

lucrative direction for entertainment companies.[3] Whilst Afrofuturism's entry into mainstream popular culture is partly beneficial as new audiences are introduced to and engage with the genre, it is likely that aspects of the genre would be shaped by the need for big-budget productions to be economically successful, which is often achieved by appealing to as wide an audience as possible. The disappointment some viewers expressed concerning *Black Panther*'s critical treatment of the approach to Black futurity espoused by Erik Killmonger is an example of the limitations of being part of mainstream popular culture (Lebron 2018). That Disney would include a favourable depiction of Black radicalism seemed unlikely before the film's release. Thus, audiences who want Afrofuturism to depict a full spectrum of approaches to Black futurity may find that mainstream Afrofuturism fails to depict radical political ideologies favourably.

Furthermore, the growing awareness about Afrofuturism has made it a popular marketing term. This is useful and helps to direct audiences to further literature, music, or films, but it can also impose limitations on what Afrofuturism is. In other words, Afrofuturism could become associated with a specific approach to speculative fiction directed by the companies that seek to make money from the genre. Consequently, texts that offer alternative perspectives may not be considered 'Afrofuturist' because they do not neatly fit a preconceived expectation of what Afrofuturism is, as presented within popular culture. Reducing Afrofuturism to specific themes or approaches would mean that the genre is no longer as expansive or flexible. As discussed throughout this thesis, finding a balance between the benefit of reaching wider audiences with mainstream Afrofuturism and maintaining the variety of approaches to the genre which I have explored in my chapters, is an ongoing issue for Black speculative fiction.

One of the core limitations of my research is that even though each text I analyse offers a different perspective on Black futurity, they are predominantly created by Black Americans. Though

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[3] Planned future television adaptations of Octavia E. Butler's, N. K. Jemisin's, and Nnedi Okorafor's work indicate that the entertainment industry is already developing new programming to appeal to audiences interested in Black speculative fiction.

the final chapter partly addresses this by focussing on Africanfuturism in Nnedi Okorafor's literature, the thesis recreates the US-centricity that is often present in Black speculative fiction. This is not to say that Black American speculative fiction is monolithic, but rather that Afrofuturism is not as diasporic as it could be. This is particularly true regarding Afrofuturism within mainstream popular culture. American popular culture is internationally distributed which partly explains why Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction more broadly are often shaped by American artists and authors. This is not particular to contemporary Afrofuturism, but a continuation of the issues raised in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[4] Whether Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism will eventually merge together or whether another term to describe these forms and their relationship to each other will come into favour is unclear. Currently, Afrofuturism's US-centricity remains an issue and, as Nnedi Okorafor argues, this necessitates 'Africanfuturism'. As with Afrofuturism, though, there is apprehension that if Africanfuturism becomes widely used, its meaning will change, and the importance of popularising African speculative fiction writers and artists will become limited by prioritising only what is considered financially profitable. Furthermore, the development of Africanfuturism may also lead to the creation and use of other terms to further address the US-centricity of Afrofuturism. Currently, the term Caribbean Futurism is infrequently used to label Afrofuturist work created by Caribbean artists.[5] Though Caribbean Futurism is rarely used as an alternative to Afrofuturism, it has the potential to develop further the diasporic aspects of Black speculative fiction by highlighting the multiplicity of perspectives about Black futurity. Although new terms could make Afrofuturism less prominent, the aim has always been for Black creatives to add their voices and experiences to genre fiction. The economic impact will remain a prominent issue, yet whether Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, AfroDiasporic Futurism or any other terminology is in

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[4] Kodwo Eshun has argued that: "an Afrofuturist art project might work on the exposure and reframing of futurisms that act to forecast and fix African dystopia" in (2003, 293). In 1998 he referred to "AfroDiasporic Futurism" rather than Afrofuturism (1998, 002), an indication that there was a call for Afrofuturism to become more diasporic shortly after the term was first used.

[5] It is unclear who coined 'Caribbean Futurism' or when the term was first used. As there has been little analysis of Caribbean Futurism, it is difficult to ascertain whether this is an artistic approach to Black futurity or a genre that is also a distinctly different theoretical approach to Afrofuturism.

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favour is less consequential than the fact that these terms acknowledge and draw attention to the artists, fans and critics sharing their understanding of Black futurity, and in the process, redressing the absence of Black futurity in popular culture.

Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek recently described the "death of Afrofuturism," referring to the various new terms that have recently been coined to describe Black speculative fiction (2020, 4). They argue that despite the creation of new words and phrases, Afrofuturism has had a substantial impact on science fiction and fantasy (Lavender and Yaszek 2020, 4). Even if Afrofuturism as a term falls out of favour or a more accurate term that better encompasses the variety of Black speculative fiction is eventually coined, the impact of the ideas expressed in the texts I have explored in this thesis, as well as others, has already begun to address the absence of Black futurity in genre fiction. Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction emphasise possibility—the possibility of Black futures and the various, often hopeful, directions they can take, as an alternative to dystopian predictions (Eshun 2003, 293). Afrofuturism has challenged the absence of Black futurity in popular culture and in turn, has expanded ideas of what the future can be.

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