

Queering Utopian Space through TranSFormations in *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*

Humaira Daud, Simon Fraser University

Introduction

Africanfuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor, reflecting on her paralysis from the waist down, states, “I wasn’t diminished by my limitations. I’ve become more, greater” (*Broken* 83). Okorafor’s body—that she refers to as her “cyborg self” (81)—had become hybrid against her own will. The main protagonist in Okorafor’s *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (B:TCT¹) also deals with her body being tranSFormed² into something entirely new and unfamiliar, as by the end of the trilogy her DNA becomes a mix of “Himba, Enyi Zinariya, and Meduse... and some, but not much, New Fish” (B:NM 347).

We can identify the trilogy with a number of genres, namely science fiction (SF), space opera, speculative fiction, and, as coined by Nnedi Okorafor herself, Africanfuturist (“Africanfuturism”). Okorafor’s texts challenge tropes that are common to SF, and she coined “Africanfuturism” as a way to describe literature more directly rooted in aspects of “African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view” than Afrofuturism (“Africanfuturism”). Science fiction is distinct in its ability to represent worlds where sexual orientations and gender do not have to be confined to the binaries and social constructs of our world. However, SF worlds that have few or no connections to current real-world gender identities and challenges may be less successful in giving Queer readers relatable characters or experiences.

Current publications have not yet focused on the connection between identity, body, and utopianism in *B:TCT*. Bettina Burger, in “Math and Magic: Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* Trilogy and its Challenge to the Dominance of Western Science in Science Fiction,” does use Donna Haraway’s concept of a “multispecies

¹ *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (B:TCT) contains three novellas and one short story, and quotations from works in this trilogy will be listed in-text as abbreviations: *B* for *Binti*, *B:H* for *Binti: Home*, *B:NM* for *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, along with “B:SF” for “*Binti: Sacred Fire*.”

² See page 3.

muddle” as a way to describe the network of connections that Binti has by the end of the first novella (365). However, Burger focuses more on the technological aspects of these relationships rather than their potential as Queer relationships. Piu Chowdhury’s MA thesis “Alternative Futurities in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* and Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*” does consider futurity in relation to Okorafor’s depiction of Himba culture but focuses on Africanfuturism rather than the possibility for Queer futurity. I aim to extend these conversations on technology and the body to Queer utopianism and consider how Okorafor’s personal writings on her own cyborg identity are reflected in *B:TCT*. Analogies for Queerness may be problematic for readers, as the author could have simply showcased actual representation for these social groups rather than depicting it in the form of an analogy. Nnedi Okorafor challenges such analogies by reclaiming Queer utopias in the science fiction genre in *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*. The connection she creates between technology and the body allows for Binti to develop an identity that challenges heteronormativity.

The SF Genre: Hard vs Soft SF and the Potential of SF Queer Utopias

SF is a genre that some may say bears a “burden of representation” (O’Brien qtd. in Šporčič 64) due to its reflection of real-world social, political, economic, and cultural issues. However, some SF can be quite conservative despite the genre’s revolutionary allegorical potential. Anamarija Šporčič in “The Ir(Relevance) of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers” critiques the “outwardly conservative subgenre of science fiction” (61) when its attempt to create a utopia may only cater to a white, cis-het male audience. This has resulted in a majority of the SF genre depicting *male* utopias, which was a trend that was not broken until the “New Wave” in the 1960s. Then, SF media shifted from “hard” SF that had a heavy focus on science, space, and masculinized worlds, to “soft” SF that considered sciences such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, and Economics, exploring “the ‘inner space’ of both individual people and entire cultures” (Calvin 50–51). “Soft” SF can be a way of challenging masculine heteronormative conventions by recontextualizing certain elements to critique real-world politics and create something that is more aligned with a *Queer* utopia.

Since SF is not confined to the binaries of gender and sexuality of the real world, it has the potential for representation that can take the form of a Queer utopian society. Noteworthy in research of Queer utopias is José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, where he discusses the potentials and drawbacks of imagining Queer utopias. Muñoz begins by defining “Queer” as a humble state of being that

“does not yet exist” in order to prevent neoliberal ideologies and popular culture from diminishing Queerness (22). In other words, if this state of being does not yet exist, then it is impossible to marginalise or appropriate Queerness. There are many ways of thinking about Queer utopias, which Muñoz splits up into utopian idealism and utopian futurity, each having varying forms of either affirmative or ineffectual representation. Muñoz is cautious about utopian thinking, since it can be misinterpreted for “being naively romantic” (27). Futurity on the other hand can be claimed through SF, since imagining “alternative futures” (Campbell 131) can include Queer voices that would otherwise be left out. SF Queer futurity offers a way to challenge the notion that futurity must be heterosexual, given the general belief that Queer people are unable to bear children (Muñoz 49). Queer utopias, if done right, can enact change in ways that are not confined to a “blueprint” or “fixed scheme” (97). However, Muñoz cautions against utopian ideals that are disconnected from real-world politics and history (Campbell 131) and exhibit a “banal optimism” (Muñoz 3) that renders such interpretations meaningless. Instead, concrete utopias recognize the value in a Queer world that moves past a complete fantasy and is instead “relational to historically situated struggles” (Muñoz 3).

Nnedi Okorafor describes such historically situated stories in her own works as an “organic fantasy.” Organic fantasy requires a method, purpose, and realness (“Organic Fantasy” 277), and, most importantly, “emerges from the very nature of its story” (275). In this sense, we can see *B:TCT* as a combination of an organic fantasy and Queer utopia because it uses SF to represent the real world and “make something familiar strange” (278).

TranSFormations and Haraway

My coining of the term “tranSFormation” highlights how transformations can be unique in the science fiction genre, given its ability to create fictional identities that are rooted in the real world but not confined to human binaries. Binti’s tranSFormations are a sort of cyborg identity, as by the end of the third novella her human identity is mixed with bio machine and alien nanotechnology. In Donna Haraway’s essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway identifies various definitions of the cyborg, most relevant being “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality [...] [and] fiction” (5). A cyborg is utopian in the sense that it “does not dream of community on the model of the organic family” (9), aligning well with the potential of Queer utopian futurity.

The cyborg, while created as an “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” (Haraway 9), inherently challenges heteronormative binaries of sexuality and gender. Haraway’s is an influential take on cyberfeminism and the cyborg.³ While hard SF media that embodies more conservative male-centred worlds may still confine cyborg identities to real-world gender binaries, Queer utopias have the potential to reimagine identities through the cyborg.

Technology serves as a point of pride for Binti on both sides of her family, with her mother’s passing down the gift of mathematical sight allowing her to become a master harmonizer, and her father passing down the once shameful blood of the Enyi Zinariya that allows her to utilize the microtechnology of the Zinariya. Technology and the ability to utilize it are thus key aspects of her identity. However, technology is also a source of *intrusion*, beginning with the security protocols she must undergo upon boarding the ship in the first book. First, the security scans her astrolabe, which Binti describes as “a full deep scan” that allows “access to [her] entire life” (*Binti* 4). Technology is effectively tied to her very identity, along with her *edan* and “its stellated cube shape, [...] strange symbols [...] [and] intricate loops and swirls of blue and black and white” (7), that are so advanced that even she cannot decode such technology. The *edan*, another piece of technology that comes from her father’s side of the family, later protects her when she “pray[s] to a metal even [her] father had been unable to identify” (11) during the Meduse’s genocide of the Oomza University students. In this case, Okorafor paradoxically presents technology as a form of intrusion, as well as a source of protection, similarly to how she presents herself as cyborg. Okorafor identifies with Binti as someone who was forcefully “broken by, and changed by the unknown” (*Broken* 85). This identity, while not consensually endowed upon the both of them, has both intruded into what they were once familiar with and became a part of their new identity.

Okorafor views her own paralysis as both science and technology having failed her.⁴ Science was once a passion for Okorafor, as she majored in pre-med before switching over to rhetoric (*Broken* 74–78). Although “science had failed [her]” (73)

³ I do not agree with all of her notions, especially her suggestion of viewing women of colour as a “cyborg identity” given their subjectivity formed “from fusions of ‘outsider’ identities” (Haraway 54), which dehumanises people of colour despite its explanation of internalising other’s perceptions of the self, just as Judith Butler’s theories of queer performativity “inhabit[s] rather abstract spaces” and is difficult to put into practice (Šporčić 64). Haraway’s theories on the cyborg are rather abstract, but they make for intriguing perspectives when applied to fictional worlds.

⁴ Okorafor received surgery for scoliosis but was left paralyzed from the waist down. Her unsuccessful surgery resulted in her “los[ing] her faith in science” (*Broken* 8) which she also refers to as a case of “technology and science gone awry” (72).

and was something she wanted to leave in the past, there were aspects of her old lifestyle that would still bring her comfort. Since she regularly played tennis before her surgery, she describes her “heightened state of being” on the tennis court as “treeing” (57). Treeing was her ability to “do no wrong” and sometimes involved “predict[ing] the future” (57). Treeing was her “superpower,” and Okorafor expresses that she integrates similar abilities into her characters based on this experience. Binti often switches to a trance of mathematical sight that is also referred to as treeing. Despite the changes that she goes through both mentally and physically, she is able to rely on treeing during moments of distress. Both Okorafor and Binti have been physically altered in ways that fuse technology, which Okorafor identifies as her body being able to “move about the world with ease and agility [...] [n]ot as [she] used to in the first part of [her] life, but as a cyborg” (*Broken* 6). The bodily changes Okorafor and Binti have gone through have left them to navigate the world in ways that are different than their past lives, but still enable them to continue or further enhance traditions from their past.

After her stabbing by the Meduse’s stinger, Binti undergoes significant mental and physical tranSFormations. Due to such changes, like Okorafor, Binti has “ended one lifetime and begun another” (*Broken* 61). While she faces PTSD from the genocide of her fellow classmates, her *ofjitzę*-covered hair is now transformed to *okuoko*, tentacles that “glow [...] a strong deep blue” (*Binti* 50), physically altering her into a “strange body” (50). Okorafor shows that Binti’s physical changes are significant but, unlike her classmate Haifa’s transition from male to female, Haifa herself says “maybe [they] *can’t* really compare” (*B:SF* 65) themselves, since Binti underwent this transition against her will. Okorafor directly refutes the possibility of a Queer reading for the aspects of her tranSFormations that are rooted in trauma. Binti’s bodily changes are not an analogy for being transgender, but instead, something entirely new and unique to her own identity.

Challenging Monogamy and Organic Fantasy

In SF, the cyborg may not only be imagined as a human-technological hybrid, but also as an alien body. Aliens, like cyborgs, are not limited to replicating the human body and thus have the “potential for transcending the gender binary all the greater” (Šporčič 61). Okwu is the one who will give birth to any children Binti has in the future, with her baby having *okuoko* due to the strong Meduse DNA, passing down Zinariya microbes, and possibly linking the child to New Fish as well (*B:NM* 347–348). While her nascent heteronormative relationship

with Heru in Book One resembles many of the relationship conventions of our world, it is cut short, and her connection to Okwu and New Fish are more representative of “queer visions of the future” (Kurowicka 72) that lack romantic and sexual desires. Heru was someone that Binti felt attracted to: she expresses how “looking at Heru made [her] heart beat too fast and [her] words escaped [her]” (*Binti* 10). Later, Binti’s romantic, aesthetic, and/or sexual attraction for Mwinyi are expressed by her “kiss[ing] him on the neck and soon [finding] [her] way to his lips” (*B:NM* 353). The biological nanoids that are part of the Enyi Zinariya’s DNA allows for an enriched Queer connection between Binti and Mwinyi, another transFormation. This technology allows for a connection that is only possible through the cyborg. Burger describes how the biological nanoids that are part of the Enyi Zinariya’s DNA makes them part alien and part human (373). While Burger does not use the word “cyborg,” the combination of technology with human and an alien species conforms to the new possibilities that the cyborg allows. In this way, even the seemingly heteronormative element of the final relationship group is queered.

Okorafor challenges the heterosexual futurities that Muñoz is cautious of and instead imagines a future that is reflective of a Queer utopia or ideal. The four-way relationship of Binti, Okwu, Mwinyi, and New Fish could be described as “polyamorous,” which Krista Benson defines as a “claimed identity” and a “description of certain kinds of intimate relationships” that can vary from person to person (25). I would avoid coming to this conclusion since Okorafor herself does not overtly label them as polyamorous, and instead, view it as an enriched Queer connection.

What is most distinct about the alien species in *B:TCT* is their lack of physical attributes that resemble humans. When waiting to board the Third Fish for a second time, Binti explains how “just from standing in line and looking around, [she] saw people of many shapes, sizes, organisms, wavelengths, and tribes here” (*B:H* 117). While other alien species are only briefly described, the Meduse serve as a significant part of *B:TCT* and do not conform to human-like attributes that we are more familiar with. The Meduse are jellyfish-like beings with transparent domes that have “flesh thin as fine silk, [...] [and] long tentacles spilling down to the floor like a series of gigantic ghostly noodles” (*Binti* 12). Okwu is often referred to by the pronoun “it,” and, while another Meduse’s voice is described as “a solid oily low voice” (21), Okwu’s voice is distinctly “high-pitched, almost female” (22). Other than this one instance, Okwu is rarely compared to certain sex categories by Binti herself, but others often apply heteronormative and sexual

conventions onto it, such as a Khoush man who accuses Binti's father of "having a daughter who'd even mated with a Meduse" (*B:NM* 250). Okwu is often falsely seen as Binti's companion in the sense of her being the "wife of a Meduse" (267), but when Binti temporarily dies, Okwu is not able to "bear to part with its partner" (313). Despite its lack of human-like physical attributes, Okwu is still placed within human gendered categories by other characters that place patriarchal views onto Binti's relationships. But Okwu offers a unique way for reproduction to take place with regard to the cyborg body. Like Muñoz suggests, futurity has the potential to empower Queer identities such as being able to bear children (Muñoz 49). In contrast, Haraway views the cyborg as separate from "organic reproduction" and instead taking part in "cyborg replication" (Haraway 6). Okorafor is able to incorporate both aspects of Queer futurity and the inability of the cyborg body to give birth. While Binti cannot give birth, it is Okwu, one part of her new familial partnership who allows her to reproduce. In this case, the world of *B:TCT* is not a Queer utopian society in the sense that it completely lacks sexual and gender binaries that resemble the real-world, but such binaries are still used to critique heteronormative conventions through the addition of other beings such as the Meduse.

In Binti's connection with Okwu through her *okuoko*, her tranSFormation not only creates bodily differences, but what Anne Balsamo describes as an alternative to the gendered history of technology through the "means of communication and connection with other bodies" ("Feminism" qtd. in Melzer 295). In this case, Binti's *okuoko* are not a form of technology, but her connection and resemblance to an alien body functions as an escape from a hetero-cis gender body ("Feminism" qtd. in Melzer 295). Due to Okwu and its kind being non-binary, Binti's *okuoko* enhances her body in ways that are more androgynous⁵ than equated to gender binaries. Through her connection with Okwu, Binti has now formed a new relationship that is not rooted in romantic or sexual attraction but is still significant and enduring.

Digressing even further from the human body, the Third Fish and New Fish are living beings who represent entirely new conceptions of the physical self. A common trope in SF media is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and how some of the characters view AI as sentient beings, or even robots being given human characteristics. Elana Gomel in "Science (Fiction) and Posthuman Ethics: Redefining the Human," discusses how SF has the ability to address posthuman

⁵ A more recent definition defines androgyny as "the state or quality of being neither clearly male nor clearly female in appearance" ("Androgyny").

ethics through the integration of identities that are not confined to realities we are already familiar with. Gomel proposes that “truly alien” subjects are the most challenging to represent since they are so “qualitatively different” from us. Thus, they must share some similarities to our “shared reality” (351), and possibly even simulate other well-known elements in the SF genre. In addition to the bond that she forms with Okwu, Binti and the Third Fish have the shared trauma of the genocide of the Oomza Uni students, allowing her to see Binti’s soul (*B:NM* 317). New Fish, like the Third Fish, is a Miri 12, which is a living technology that is closely related to a shrimp, with a natural exoskeleton that is genetically enhanced to grow three breathing chambers (*Binti* 8). However, the New Fish is much smaller in size with an “overly cheerful demeanor” (*B:NM* 313), and, unlike Okwu, is referred to by the pronouns “she” and “her” and described as “*Third Fish’s daughter*” (316). New Fish is able to revive Binti within her breathing chamber in a process called “deep Miri” (321), in which her microbes blend with Binti’s genes.

Given this bond or “union” (*B:NM* 317), Binti and New Fish must always stay in proximity to each other (346). Dustin Crowley, in “Binti’s R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies,” describes how very little distinction is made between species that are “‘naturally’ evolved or technologically engineered” (246) within *B:TCT*, effectively blurring the lines between each species. These blurred lines allow for the tranSFormation of her body to take place in a world that may not accept these differences, but still confirms the existence of unique connections with alien species like the Meduse or the Miri 12. The connections, relationships, and tranSFormation that take place in *B:TCT* do not take place simply for the sake of providing us as readers with something new and strange, but instead are a way to methodologically provide an alternative future that challenges typical ways of thinking about relationships. However, Mwinyi *does* conform to physical connections of desire and depicts a relationship that follows the romantic heteronormative conventions of the real-world. Binti frequently expresses her desire to kiss Mwinyi, showing that the shared identity of Binti, Okwu, and New Fish combines asexual and aromantic orientations with a relationship that contains romantic and possibly sexual desire. Thus, these Queer utopian relationships are made up of some real-world conservative conventions, while still challenging gender binaries and orientations. Okorafor does not present a banal optimism that would become meaningless due to its disconnect from the real world (Muñoz 3); she instead imagines a utopia that combines familiar elements of heteronormative relationships with Queer utopian ideals.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Identity

Like Okorafor's own body not being diminished by the limitations of paralysis, but allowing her to "become more, greater" (*Broken* 83), Binti is able to embrace her new identities while still strongly identifying with being Himba. Becoming "more" through her new identity, is "at one of the hearts of Afrofuturism" ("Nnedi Okorafor" 3:20-3:22). She is proud to say her full name, which before was "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib" (*Binti* 16), but later becomes "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka Meduse Enyi Zinariya of Osemba, master harmonizer" (*B:NM* 272). She recognizes that she is still Himba despite the fact that her "hair has become okuoko because of [her] actions and even if [she] [has] Enyi Zinariya blood. Even if [her] DNA is alien" (*B:H* 184). She still questions her identity after this realisation, asking who she is, and insisting that she "[doesn't] want to change, to grow! [...] [she] just want[s] to be" (*B:NM* 348). Thus, identity and acceptance of such an identity is not a simple solution but is a continuous inner conflict. Especially in the case of Binti, she was not given the choice to conform to such identifications but is now forever linked with those of Okwu and New Fish. While *B:TCT* does not depict an overtly Queer relationship, it demonstrates how SF has the potential of portraying Queer analogies in ways that challenge real-world binaries of gender and sexuality. Okorafor embeds trauma and a lack of choice into the tranSFormations that take place in *B:TCT* to showcase how fictional worlds can provide Queer representation in ways that are not completely utopian. Instead, utopian elements can be embedded in ways that are more representative of our own, imperfect world, and the books show us that we can be more even when we have experienced trauma and loss.

Works Cited

- “Androgyny, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8345235350>.
- Benson, Krista L. “Tensions of Subjectivity: The Instability of Queer Polyamorous Identity and Community.” *Sexualities*, vol. 20, no. 1–2, 2017, pp. 24–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716642154>.
- Burger, Bettina. “Math and Magic: Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* Trilogy and its Challenge to the Dominance of Western Science in Science Fiction.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 364–377.
- Calvin, Ritch. “Queer SF.” *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*, edited by Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzsche, Keren Omry, and Wendy G. Pearson, Routledge, 2023, pp. 49–56. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082934-9>.
- Campbell, Payton. “Queer Science Fiction, Queer Relationality, and Utopian Insurgency.” *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*, edited by Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzsche, Keren Omry, Wendy G. Pearson, Routledge, 2023, pp. 131–137. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082934>. Accessed 22 Sep. 2023.
- Chowdhury, Piu. “Alternative Futurities in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* and Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*.” MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 2022, <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/items/894d1992-e439-46eb-88bb-37196afcd8b7>.
- Crowley, Dustin. “*Binti*’s R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies.” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 237–256, <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2018.54>.
- Gomel, Elana. “Science (Fiction) and Posthuman Ethics: Redefining the Human.” *The European Legacy*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2011, pp. 339–354, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2011.575597>.
- Haraway, Donna J. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Manifestly Haraway*, by Haraway and Cary Wolfe, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 3–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1b7x5f6>.
- Muñoz, José E. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 10th ed., 2009, edited by Ann Pellegrini, Tavia Nyong’o, and Joshua Chambers-Letson, New York University Press, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg4nr>.

- Okorafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wabala Zone Blog*, Blogspot, <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>. 19 Oct. 2019. Accessed 15 Nov. 2023.
- . *Broken Places & Outer Spaces: Finding Creativity in the Unexpected*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.
- . *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, Daw Books, 2020.
- . "Organic Fantasy." *African Identities*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2009, pp. 275-286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725840902808967>.
- . "Nnedi Okorafor: Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa | TED." *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, 22 Nov. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt0PiXLvYIU.
- "Polyamory, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2281219507>.
- Šporčič, Anamarija. "The Ir(Relevance) of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers." *Elope*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2018, pp. 51-67. <https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.15.1.51-67>.

Acknowledgments

Thank you, Professor Nicky Didicher, who gave the suggestion to turn my accidental word "tranSFormation" into a new term to link the science fiction genre with transformations.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).