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## Namibia in speculation: On future settings, technological bodies and intergalactic space travel in the *Binti* trilogy and the *Namibia* comic series

Renzo Baas\*

### *Abstract*

*Within less than a decade, Namibia became the futuristic setting for two literary series in the mid-2000s. The Binti trilogy, written by Nnedi Okorafor, was released between 2015 and 2018, just after the Namibia (2010-2016) comic book series, produced by Léo, Bertrand Marchal and Daniel Rodolphe, was published. Both series feature a heroine, space travel, attempts to prevent a cosmic war, and linked to this, the destruction of Earth. Both series also give Namibia a central role in the unfolding of these events – although focussing on different aspects and using differing methods to achieve this. This article explores the (speculative) bodies presented in both novels, their use of technology, the protagonist's relationships to alien characters, and the role Namibia as a specific geopolitical space plays in these stories. The aim is to understand some of the reasoning behind choosing a former colony as the place of space travel, alien invasions, and superior technology. This in turn may help in offering strategies that allow Namibians to negotiate the country's violent and traumatic past.*

### Introduction

In her 2017 TED talk titled “Sci-fi stories that imagine a future Africa”, Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor asks “what if an African girl from a traditional family, in a part of future Africa, is accepted into the finest university in the galaxy – planets away? What if she decides to go?” (00:00:13-00:00:26). This is the premise for her novel *Binti* (2015), in which Binti,<sup>1</sup> a young Himba<sup>2</sup> girl in a distant future, leaves her earthly community to attend the distant planet institution, Oomza University. Her decision to travel across the

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<sup>1</sup> Binti is the Kiswahili word for ‘daughter’ – an aspect that is relevant to her position within the Himba community as well as her position vis-à-vis more powerful characters, such as professors, the Meduse chief, the Enyi Zinariya, and others.

<sup>2</sup> The Himba is a Namibian indigenous group, based mainly in the inhospitable north-western parts of Namibia and are part of the larger Herero societies. The Herero were nearly eradicated after a colonial war with the German colonial administration, with an estimated 80% of the Herero population being killed or dying while fighting, fleeing through the Omaheke desert, and in captivity in the countrywide network of concentration camps.

universe not only offers her the chance to learn from an assortment of other gifted life forms, but it is also a traumatic voyage in which she witnesses extra-terrestrial violence and experiences assaults against her own body. These events have lasting effects on her understanding of the self, her physiognomy, and her sense of belonging. All of this takes place against the backdrop of a looming inter-planetary war, with high stakes for the young protagonist.

A number of centuries earlier, British special agent Kathy Austin travels to 1940s Namibia to investigate strange sightings and to then play a pivotal role in preventing an impending alien invasion. In the comic book series *Namibia* (2010-2016), Austin is confronted with oversized insects, resurrected Nazi war criminals, a rapidly aging local population, clones, and the threat of a worldwide cult. She is assisted by MI5, fellow international agent Vladimir Irmanius,<sup>3</sup> as well as benevolent aliens, and ultimately ends up being the only link between the foiled invasion and the events preceding it. *Namibia* marks Austin's return to comic book literature (she already appeared in Leo, Rudolphe, and Marchand's *Kenya* (2001-2008), and her second encounter with beings from outer space.

It seems quite a remarkable coincidence that within the span of roughly eight years, a trilogy and a comic book series about a futuristic or speculative Namibia were published. Remarkable in the sense that Namibia has not really been home to its own brand of SF literature since independence in the early 1990s. This is not to say that there is no SF in Namibia but rather that it has featured in other media, such as film<sup>4</sup>, art<sup>5</sup>, and music<sup>6</sup>. This also does not mean that Namibia has not previously featured in SF. Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), for example, places the Herero – survivors of the German colonial genocide – in an alternative history.<sup>7</sup> Paul A. Bové describes the fictionalised Herero, now living in Germany, as a conflict between the “Schwarzkommando committed to forming a new nation around the [V2] Rocket and those ‘Empty Ones’ who continue the logic of genocidal resistance by practicing abortion and tribal suicide”.<sup>8</sup> The “Empty Ones” can be read as an analogue to the Herero that were imprisoned in the concentration camps after the colonial war had ended, where suicides and a rapidly declining birth rates meant a deterioration of the already dwindling Herero population. This reflects a sort of

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<sup>3</sup> He is a character, like Kathy Austin's uncle Sir Charles, who already featured in *Kenya* (2001-2008).

<sup>4</sup> The film *itandu* (2019) was recently released by director Lavinia Tukuhole Tunga Kapewasha and deals with a post-apocalyptic Namibia ravaged by a virus.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the works by Masiyaleti Mbewe or Nambowa Malua. The Goethe Institute Windhoek, in collaboration with the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced Studies, hosted the exhibition *Future Africa: Visions in Time* in 2018 and included Namibian and international artists.

<sup>6</sup> This ranges from naming conventions (Children of Pluto) to what can be termed Afrofuturist content and aesthetics (for example the band Black Vulcanite). For a current take on Afrofuturism in Namibia, see Adetoun and Michael Küppers-Adebisi, “Afrofuturistischer Kampf der Narrative”, in: Henning Melber and Kirstin Platt, (eds.), *Koloniale Vergangenheit – Postkoloniale Zukunft? Die deutsch-namibischen Beziehungen neu denken*, Frankfurt am Main, Brandes und Apsel, 2022: 137-162.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York, Viking, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Paul A. Bové, “History and Fiction: The Narrative Voices of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*”, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 50 (3), 2004: 657-680 (663).

death wish on behalf of the imprisoned Herero community, a death wish that can be interpreted as a form of sovereignty over their own lives and thus their own fates. In this case, Pynchon weaves together historic events (the constant near-extermination of the Herero in connection with Germany's war machine) within a very complex relationship between the previously colonised Herero and their German colonisers, one in which Nazi Germany repeats its eradicating approach to its enemies (in this case other European nations). The narrative uncovers Herero forms of resistance to colonial occupation and places these in an alternative environment in which they are forcefully reactivated.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I explore *Binti* and *Namibia* with this in mind as both offer different approaches to a futuristic setting while referencing the colonial and genocidal past. This is reflected, for example, in the ways the Namibian communities feature within the narratives – either being a singular reference (the Himba in *Binti*) or a homogenous mass (the local population in *Namibia*). How are local actors positioned as belonging to 'Namibia', and what influence do they carry? How much agency do they have and in what form do they participate in the narrated events? This is relevant as black characters are almost entirely absent in *Namibia* while they play a pivotal role in *Binti*. These questions are also vital when linking the trilogy and the series to their futuristic potential as well as understanding how a country that has had such a violent past becomes the host for futuristic or speculative imaginings and violence. In this article I am interested in how the relationship between the body and 'augmentation' is treated in the *Binti* trilogy and the *Namibia* series, while also focusing on what role the setting of Namibia plays within this relationship.

Although Okorafor aims to decentre the West in her writings and would rather engage with African perspectives, the entangled histories of Europe, the USA, and Africa necessitate some common historic references. This does not exclude questions of dominance, hegemony, or cultural hierarchies, all of which are rooted in past encounters. With *Namibia* being set in post-World War 2 Namibia (which is relevant from a Namibian and world perspective), and *Binti* focusing on a marginalised (even in the future) ethnic minority in Namibia, the setting echoes a number of real-world actualities. As I will show, this will not only be "a significant distortion of the present" as Samuel R. Delany understands SF's function, but it will also highlight important moments of the past.<sup>10</sup>

With numerous overlaps in terms of themes and motifs, these two series offer fertile ground for juxtaposition, while also being vastly different in terms of narrativity and tone. Their shared geographical setting, their female protagonists, and their close publication dates offer a unique opportunity for this analysis. The article begins with an introduction to the two primary texts and the most relevant events for my analysis, before it turns to a discussion of SF in terms of its markers and echoes in the chosen texts. I will then explore

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<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the link between *Gravity's Rainbow* and its historical allusions see Andreas Selmecki and Dag Henrichsen, *Das Schwarzkommando. Thomas Pynchon und die Geschichte der Herero*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel R. Delany, "Dichtung and Science Fiction", in: idem, *Starboard Wine. More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1984: 153-184 (176).

the significance of speculative bodies in more detail, particularly in terms of the geopolitical context in which the bodies are situated.

## Binti

The *Binti* trilogy consists of *Binti* (B, 2015), *Binti: Home* (BH, 2017) and *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (NM, 2018) and is the story of a Himba girl from the Namib Desert, who secretly leaves her home village to attend Oomza University on a far away planet. Aboard the ship (a gigantic modified living fish) Binti and the other Khoush<sup>11</sup> are brutally attacked by the Meduse, a jellyfish-like alien species<sup>12</sup> who are the mortal enemies of the Khoush. After having killed everyone on the ship, except for Binti and the pilot, the Meduse reveal that they intend to attack Oomza University in order to retrieve their chief's stinger which was forcefully removed from him and is currently on display in the university museum. After offering to mediate between the Meduse and the university's council, Binti is stung by one of her captors and is able to communicate with the Meduse without the technological assistance of her *edan* trinket, while her hair transforms into Meduse tentacles. After successful negotiations, the university returns the chief's stinger and grants a young Meduse named Okwu – who has become Binti's close friend – a university place.<sup>13</sup>

After settling into her life at Oomza University and completing her first year of studies, Binti decides to return home to visit her family. She takes Okwu with her, who has become the ambassador of the peace between Khoush and Meduse. They both receive a somewhat hostile reception and Binti has difficulties reconnecting with her family. After a family feud, the Enyi Zinariya<sup>14</sup> appear at Binti's home – called "The Root" – and convince Binti's parents to hand her over to them.<sup>15</sup> Okwu stays with Binti's family while she is away. She is told about her family's past and her abilities and finds out that her father is a descendant of the Enyi Zinariya and that she has inherited their ability to communicate and connect with all living organisms in the universe via hand signals. After she receives a message from her father, detailing an attack by the Khoush on their home, Binti and her Enyi acquaintance Mwenyi return to The Root – to find it burnt down and Okwu missing.

It turns out that the Khoush attacked her family because of Okwu's presence, thus reigniting the interplanetary feud. Binti, together with Mwenyi, attempts to stop the war by bringing the Khoush and Meduse together to renegotiate the peace. She finds out that her family is alive, having hidden in one of the rooms in the foundation of the Root. She is also able to find Okwu, who hid in the waters near her home. Binti, Okwu, Mwenyi, and the Himba community manage to get the Khoush and the Meduse to agree to a ceasefire, but

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<sup>11</sup> The Khoush are the majority and hegemonic cultural group on Earth in this novel.

<sup>12</sup> 'Alien' in terms of coming from another planet than Binti.

<sup>13</sup> This is particularly interesting in light of recent debates around the restitution of Namibian objects and human remains in German museums and private collections.

<sup>14</sup> The Enyi Zinariya are a reclusive desert community that carries alien DNA.

<sup>15</sup> Binti's parents are familiar with the Zinariya and know that it is a formative experience for her and that she is in no danger.

fighting breaks out again unexpectedly and Binti is killed. She is loaded onto New Fish – the offspring of the original Fish space ship – by her friends, who then fly her to the rings of Saturn. On the way there, microbes from New Fish regenerate Binti and she is paired with the spaceship.<sup>16</sup> She returns to Oomza University, who offer Mwenyi a place to study but which he declines. The narrative ends with Binti making her ochre paste, *otjize*<sup>17</sup>, and laughing with her friends at Oomza University.

## Namibia

*Namibia*, like its predecessor *Kenya*, is told over the course of five comic books, referred to only as Episode 1 to Episode 5. It follows the story of the white British special agent Kathy Austin as she uncovers strange occurrences and events in the former German colony of Namibia.<sup>18</sup> After the chance sighting of Nazi war criminal Hermann Göring who was believed to be dead, MI5 send a special agent to investigate his reappearance. Kathy Austin, who is assisted by the retired Major Bowley, a white supremacist and misogynist, arrives in Namibia. She meets Bob Macdonald, a black UN emissary, when checking in at her hotel. He joins Austin and Bowley on their visit to the site of the initial sighting of Göring. On their way there they come across rapidly aging locals. When they reach the place where Göring was sighted they are attacked by giant mosquitoes. The swarm flies off to an abandoned mine and disappears. Later, the three enter a bar and encounter Göring. After Macdonald confronts and briefly touches him, Göring disintegrates.

Later on, Austin, Bowley, and Macdonald take a father and his aged son to a medical facility, where members of a Nazi cadre begin to observe them. When they reach Göring's grave,<sup>19</sup> the Nazis attack the group, when a swarm of large ants attack both groups. After the attack, the ants run into the same abandoned mine as the mosquitoes from earlier. The British army raid the mine but do not find anything out of the ordinary. Austin and Bowley stay behind and are joined by Jules, who appears to be a local. He tells them to go into the mine and gives them a charm. Austin takes it but Bowley refuses to accept it. In the mine, the two find highly advanced technology before being ambushed by shadowy figures. Sir Charles then receives information that Austin and Bowley have been involved in a car crash: Austin survives and is in a coma, while Bowley is found dead at the scene.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Pairing' is the term used by Binti to explain her new relationship to Third Fish – their DNA having been shared and exchanged, now meaning that they are unable to be apart.

<sup>17</sup> *Otjize* is an ochre paste that Himba women in Namibia traditionally produce from the clay in the area and apply to their skin and hair. It serves a number of functions, ranging from protective, to aesthetic, to ritualistic. For Binti, it is "[o]ily clay that sang of sweet flowers, desert wind, and soil. *Home*, I thought, tears stinging my eyes" (B :38, emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> In the series, the country is never referred to by its official name of South West Africa, its name after it became a Mandate Territory under South African administration from 1919 until independence in 1990.

<sup>19</sup> This is a plot device, as Göring was never buried in Namibia. There is, however, a strong link between him and Namibia as his father, Heinrich Ernst Göring, was the first Commissioner of the German colony of German South West Africa.

Austin is recovering in a hospital in Lüderitz when Jules administers a serum to her, healing her immediately. She is discharged from the hospital without any aftereffects. Austin once more enters the abandoned mine joined by a guardian sent from the UK who, it turns out, has been replaced by an alien imposter. Their search bears no results. A Nazi cadre, which has been observing them, attacks Austin and her assistant. The Nazis are killed by what appear to be alien figures and their death made to look like an internal conflict. While flying back to the UK from Namibia via Cairo, she meets Macdonald and is then able to ditch the imposter.

When returning to Namibia the plane carrying Austin and Sir Charles is surprised by a UFO and is forced to land in the desert. It is revealed that Bob Macdonald and Fuchs, his associate, are aliens who are trying to help humans prevent an alien invasion. They plan to destroy the six secret laboratories the invading aliens have set up around the world. Jules is captured by the alien enemy and executed. Bob experiences Jules' pain, which is an indication that their presence has been discovered and that the invasion has begun. After Austin is attacked by a group of men, Irmanius saves her. Together with Fuchs and Irmanius, Austin again returns to the abandoned mine with the intention of gathering information on the capabilities of the laboratory. Back in England, Sir Charles meets with Churchill in order to form an alliance with other powerful nations and to organise against the alien invasion.

In the laboratory, Austin and Irmanius come upon large vials containing what appears to be manufactured humans or clones, explaining the reappearance of Göring and his subsequent disintegration. They continue on their mission and reach a room with a large stockpile of missiles, reporting this back to Fuchs. In Switzerland, Churchill and Sir Charles, together with Macdonald, meet with Stalin and someone who appears to be US President Truman with the intention of creating an 'Earth army'. Although reluctant at first, Stalin accepts the proposal when he sees the images of the missile stockpile. Austin and Irmanius manage to escape the underground laboratory and are flown to a military airbase, which is then attacked. The uncovered missiles are launched, destroying most of the base as well as destroying the plane carrying Austin and Irmanius. Fuchs and his allies save the two, with Irmanius being resurrected from the dead. Austin is told that the invasion has been foiled but that humans will not remember it. Instead humanity would "remember" these events as man-made/natural disasters, meaning that Austin would be the only human to have a complete recollection of all events. The narrative ends with Irmanius recovering, Austin confirming a "memory" he has, and them sharing a kiss.

## Science and speculative fiction

Based on their main plot features and the tropes they work with, *Binti* and *Namibia* are SF narratives. SF, as the author and theorist Samuel R. Delany writes, is a relatively young literary genre. According to him, one can trace its emergence as a named concept back



to the 1920s, and a slightly further back as a literary genre.<sup>20</sup> It does not, however, go back as far as, for example Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)<sup>21</sup> as argued by Brian Aldiss. In Delany's understanding, SF does not predict the future but (re)conceptualizes familiar objects, concepts, images, and language and recodifies these in a futuristic setting:

[t]he various verbal devices SF writers use to lay out, sketch in, and colour their alternate worlds, as well as the verbal constructs that directly play between the world and the story, constitute the major distinctions between SF and the mundane text, altering the reading of the various rhetorical figures that appear in both texts and generating the different rhetorical figures for each kind of text.<sup>22</sup>

To rethink certain positions in different temporal settings (often) proves helpful for such experimentation, or as Shaden Adel Nasser argues, SF "explores the real world through *unreality*".<sup>23</sup>

Delany, an SF author himself, is both part of the general and classic canon of SF literature, and also one of the key reference points for what has been defined as 'Afrofuturism'. The term Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in 1994<sup>24</sup> and was used conceptually to bring together quite disparate methods and means by African-American and African-Diasporic artists, writers and cultural critics to narrate and relate to the future, to history, and to technology. One could trace early forms of Afrofuturism back to the 1970s when Parliament Funkadelic released their album *The Mothership Connection* (1975), when Sun Ra and his Orkestra propagated and lived out the myth that they were space travellers from Saturn, and when Lee Scratch Perry established his Black Ark. Their space travel aesthetics and connection to the extra-terrestrial created a direct link between the African diaspora and outer space and formed a new understanding of black-diasporic life as one of alienation and estrangement.<sup>25</sup>

In recent years African authors, artists, musicians, and theorists argued for an expanded understanding of Afrofuturism, one that would include SF interventions from the African continent. As a result, concepts such as Magic Realism, mythology, shape shifting, oral

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<sup>20</sup> Samuel R. Delany, "Science Fiction and Criticism: The *Diacritics* Interview" in: idem, *Silent Interviews*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press, 1994: 26.

<sup>21</sup> This is debatable, although the argument presented for understanding *Frankenstein* as an SF novel comes down to its difference to its other contemporary novels of the Gothic Horror genre, rather than to its own 'sci-fi-ness'.

<sup>22</sup> Delany, "Science Fiction": 29.

<sup>23</sup> Shaden Adel Shaden, "Reimagining African Identity through Afrofuturism: A Reading of Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* 2015", *Journal of Scientific Research in Arts, Language & Literature*, 22 (1), 2021: 166-176 (167, emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> Dery defines this term within a predominantly Black American context and fails to include contributions from other geopolitical contexts (cf. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose", in: Mark Dery, (ed.), *Flame Wars. The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1994: 181-232 (180).

<sup>25</sup> For an audiovisual take on the emergence of Afrofuturist practices see John Akomfrah's seminal essay film "The Last Angel of History" (New York, First Run/Icarus Films, 1996).

traditions, and the spiritual<sup>26</sup> would begin to feature in a renewed definition of Afrofuturism, and with it questions regarding technology, the future (and Africa's place in it), and how the past is renegotiated. What is to be considered Afrofuturist and how to identify and define it is the source of many debates and discussions.<sup>27</sup> Okorafor, for example, has rejected the term Afrofuturism for her own work and has described her approach instead as Africanfuturism. According to her, Africanfuturism does not centre the West (which was the case for early Afrofuturism at least as it dealt with the Middle Passage, alienation from mainstream American and diasporic society, and/ or life on the periphery of Western futures), but rather focuses on African practices and stories.<sup>28</sup> In this understanding, then, her SF narratives can be seen as a pressure point of Afrofuturism but also to SF more generally. Through this, Okorafor and others challenge normative SF tropes and point to a long history and tradition of popular SF which centre Western phantasies of colonial expansion, subjugation and, linked to this, imaginings of the figure of the alien.<sup>29</sup>

Joshua Ya Burnett further identifies the SF author's responsibility to create a new world, replete with its own systems, laws, and rules.<sup>30</sup> This has been received academically in the way of different concepts, from worldmaking<sup>31</sup> to fictioning<sup>32</sup> to the more recent worlding<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> This is in reference to Wanuri Kahiu's definition of Afrofuturism: "Afrofuturism is considered what speculative fiction, myths, legends, science fiction, and those stories of that genre are to African-Americans, Africans, African Diaspora, and Black people in general" (TED, "Afrofuturism in Popular Culture: Wanuri Kahiu at TEDxNairobi", YouTube, uploaded by TEDXTalks, 14 Sept. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY), 00:00:20 - 00:00:37).

<sup>27</sup> This begins with questions such as who (and what) is considered Afrofuturist, who is allowed to define the term, and what the term can mean. For more on this, see for example Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts", *Social Text*, 71, 20 (2), 2002: 1-15; "Afrofuturism in Popular Culture: Wanuri Kahiu at TEDxNairobi", YouTube, uploaded by TEDXTalks, 14 Sept. 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY); John Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History*, New York, First Run/Icarus Films, 1996; or "We Need Prayers - Episode 05: This One Went to Market", YouTube, uploaded by The Nest Collective, 18 June 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-Q4utKJRH0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-Q4utKJRH0)

<sup>28</sup> This is taken from her blog, *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, "Africanfuturism defined", <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/>

<sup>29</sup> The alien indeed portrays the West's interest in the racialised 'Other' and their domination, as exemplified by John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2008). For further discussion on the relationship between SF, imperialism and colonialism see, for example Greg Grewell, "Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future", *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 55 (2): 25; David M. Higgins, *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*, Iowa, University of Iowa Press, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Joshua Ya Burnett, "'Isn't Realist Fiction Enough?: On African Speculative Fiction", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 52 (3), 2019: 119-135.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

<sup>32</sup> See for example David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Donna Haraway's lecture "Carrier Bags for Worlding" at the Index Art Book Fair, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/407645200>; Anna Tsing, "Worlding the Matsutake Diaspora: Or Can Actor-Network

These concepts allow for an investigation into a number of different approaches to how a speculative world is constructed and maintained, but also as to who is creating this world and who is given the resources to navigate it. Nelson Goodman, for example, links the 'imagined' world to the world/s that have come before it, arguing that

[m]uch but by no means all worldmaking consists of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly: on the one hand, of dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into subspecies, analysing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions; on the other hand, of composing wholes and kinds out of parts and members and subclasses, combining features into complexes, and making connections.<sup>34</sup>

Goodman understands the creation of worlds as a kind of toolbox that offers the resources for such an endeavour, often historically constituted and inter-referential. However, this is not always the case, as he states, but should be understood as a general approach to this exercise. Similarly, Donna Haraway focuses on the idea of worlding, in which she explores how worlds are constituted. She argues that

it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties.<sup>35</sup>

Important in this way of thinking are questions of agency of 'in-agent' agents (the *edan* in *Binti*) or the voice of the unintelligible (the elephants; the wild dogs and hyenas in *Binti*). How a world is structured is just as important as who is part of this structure and who is allowed to act within this structure. For Haraway especially, but for Goodman as well, SF proves to be an excellent mode of storytelling that offers the creation of new worlds while interrogating how these worlds are generated.<sup>36</sup>

## Speculative worlds and speculative bodies

SF worlds have historically had a strong focus on the body, both normalised and deviant. This focus has generated concepts such as aliens, cyborgs, clones, hybrids, and a host of other 'bodies'. The presence of these bodies makes SF distinct and instantly recognisable while continuously testing the boundaries of what it means to be human, both now and in the future. It is therefore crucial to look at how bodies are formed, how

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Theory Experiment With Holism?", in: Ton Otto and Nils Bubandt, (eds.), *Experiments in Holism: Theory and Practice in Contemporary Anthropology*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011: 47-66; João de Pina-Cabral, *World: An Anthropological Examination*, Chicago, Hau Books, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Goodman, *Ways*: 4.

<sup>35</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "Playing String Figures with Companion Species", in: idem, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016: 7-29 (12).

<sup>36</sup> In her speech "SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far" (2020) after receiving the Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA), she goes into great detail concerning SF's impact on her research and thought processes. For her, SF represents more than its abbreviation as a literary genre. She also understands SF to mean "science fact", "so far" and "string figures". These different forms of SF point to a wide range of applications, although these are also linked somehow. . Accessible under <https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-haraway/>

they are conceptualised in relation to the human and non-human entities, what processes of othering take place, and the role technology plays. The importance of the robotic love interest in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), for example, or the Morlocks in H.G. Well's *The Time Machine* (1895) reflect on the importance of industrialisation and mechanised labour to this fascination with future bodies. As such, SF brings to the fore an interest in biotechnology and bodies that traverse or transgress traditional biological boundaries. The (Western speculative) body, in connection with technology – sometimes even as technology –, becomes one of the key SF tropes.

One of the most iconic and recognisable technobodies in SF is the cyborg, a human-machine hybrid. According to Donna Haraway, “[a] cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”.<sup>37</sup> The cyborg embodies both what makes one human *and* what the human could become. It is both real and fictitious, blurring perceived boundaries. However, the cyborg also represents the body of the ‘other’, a body that is as deviant as it is normative and therefore elicits both identification and alienation. This becomes relevant when looking at the two protagonists of *Binti* and *Namibia*, especially with regards to the extent of their augmentation. The discussion of this concept forms the bulk of my analysis of the two narratives, especially when examining which bodies are perceived as intelligible and which are sanctioned or ostracised.

What makes Binti's continuous evolution so fascinating is her capacity to incorporate or include the DNA of the communities she encounters. In a way, this mirrors the cyborg trope in terms of identity, of belonging, and of transgressing boundaries. Binti retains her Himba identity but she also expands this identity by accepting and working through the intrusion of other species into her own bodily make-up. Her body is – once in each novella – augmented through technology that is forcibly imposed onto her body. Technology in this sense is understood as forms of augmentation that enhance her biology (such as the Meduse *okuoko* and her Enyi Zinariya capabilities). Although Binti is scared of these enhancements and what they might mean to her fully being accepted as Himba, they become part of her and how she begins to view her immediate world as well as her place in the universe. It is only through her connection to others that Binti feels and becomes powerful, and that she is able to effect change, even if limited.

In the #PurdueEnglishBigRead podcast titled “Marginalised Voices in Binti and Beyond” in which Erika Gotfredson, Juanita Crider, and Malik Raymond discuss the *Binti* trilogy, Raymond focuses on the interactions that transform Binti, pointing out that

her interactions with other people is forcing her to not just learn about new people, but unlearn previous stereotypes and prejudices she's had about other people because she is incorporating, whether it's the Meduse or the Enyi Zinariya

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<sup>37</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016: 5.

people, incorporating them into her identity as well. And she is all of these things.<sup>38</sup>

Binti is all of these things because of her (forced) interactions with the different groups she was either unaware of or had no previous contact with (the Meduse) or with those she deemed beneath her (Enyi Zinariya). Her physical transformations affect her worldview and how she understands her role within a) her own society and b) the wider universe and its myriad of life forms. Her transmuted body also affects her relationship to aspects of her own culture and technology, as these are challenged by the acquisition of newer and different forms of being-in-the-universe: her hair, marker of her cultural belonging and deep connection to mathematics, is replaced by tentacles, while her astrolabe, the Himba tool for universal communication, becomes near-obsolete due to her Zinariya and Meduse communication capabilities.

With regard to technology, Beth Coleman argues “anthropologists and philosophers alike deem technology as a characteristic of mankind, a prosthesis that cannot be removed from the species”.<sup>39</sup> This anthropocentric understanding of technology that Coleman spells out also means that there are no human cultures that cannot be deemed technological. What might be used to discriminate between cultures, then, is the scale or scope of this technology (throwing a pebble versus shooting a laser gun, for example) – but never its absence. Technology must therefore also always be located by seeing its relationship to the human. As Coleman argues, “the ability to render results rests with the maker, not the tool”, thus placing humans as the force behind the wielding of tools.<sup>40</sup>

And yet, the *Binti* trilogy does not cleanly separate between human and non-human uses of technology. There are numerous occasions where non-human agents ‘render results’ by using tools or exercise some form of agency. Binti is, for example, ‘found’ by the *edan*, not the other way around.<sup>41</sup> Although the majority of these occasions feature extra-terrestrials and their use of technology, animals and plants also seem to have technological agency,<sup>42</sup> communicating on their own terms and being viewed as equals to their human counterparts on a number of occasions. The Enyi Zinariya, and especially Mwenyi, are sensitive of this. He communicates with elephants as well as wild dogs and hyenas, and understands them as beings with a distinct culture, self-awareness, and place in the universe. This also applies to the people Binti meets on her way to Oomza University

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<sup>38</sup> Purdue University, “Marginalised Voices in Binti and Beyond”, with Juanita Crider, Erika Gotfredson and Malik Raymond, #ThePurdueBigRead, 22.09.2021, 00:16:57-00:17:19, <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/the-big-read/audio/podcast1v1.mp3>.

<sup>39</sup> Beth Coleman, “Race as Technology”, *Camera Obscura*, 1 May 2009; 24 (1), (70): 177-207 (184).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.: 178.

<sup>41</sup> Binti’s grandmother describes what the Enyi Zinariya see the *edan* as: “The thing you have, the Himba will call it an *edan*, but we call it a god stone. *You’re blessed it’s found you*” (Binti Home :112, emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> Agency for non-human agents appears to be a feature in Okorafor’s writing, with animals and plants having the ability ‘to do’ and thus influence their environment – and even world – through their own abilities. In *Lagoon* (2014), aquatic animals start sabotaging oil pipelines in the Niger Delta Basin, while in *LaGuardia* (2019), plants travel through space and are able to exist side-by-side with humans.

as well as the 'species' she meets there, who are all interested in studying and creating new forms of technology. Speculative bodies are thus formed at the intersection between the (human) body, science, and the environment. Through the interaction with science, human bodies are always already technobodies. For this article, however, I will interrogate the body's relationship to science fictional technology, either through its application in producing (new) bodies or its intervention in an existing body and how it affects both the physiognomy and the mental state of the host, thus creating a (somewhat messy) distinction between *speculative bodies* (those interacting with science fictional technology) and *technobodies* (those interacting with real-world technology).

In both series, the reader is confronted with a plethora of speculative bodies: bodies that are deeply connected to some form of speculative technology. They are understood as bodies that have been altered, augmented, or enhanced in some way – including bodies that have been produced. I will be focussing on biological enhancement exclusively, i.e. how technology intervenes in the chemical and biological make-up of the host's body. This is culture (and species) -dependent and further complicated when there is some form of hybridisation between species. The Meduse stinger, for example, is understood as a weapon, as a form of biotechnology,<sup>43</sup> yet to the Meduse it is merely an appendage and is not separate from their being. Their bodies *are* technology, are the object of research, of scientific inquiry, and are sites of knowledge production. Binti initially reduces them to a killing force out for revenge but then unpacks their reasoning as a response to a violence that is deeply rooted in colonial modes of (scientific) knowledge production and exhibitionism.<sup>44</sup> The body thus becomes the site of the past *and* the future, where both knowledge production and history collide.

The *Binti* trilogy can be read as a coming-of-age story or a *Bildungsroman*, as Juanita Crider argues, in which a young person (in this case a teenage Himba girl) is on the threshold of adulthood and navigates the complex space between her past and possible futures.<sup>45</sup> As the plot progresses, Binti realises that she is "becoming more again" (NM: 169) via the encounters she has and the long-term effects these have on her (changing) body. However, in order to engage with the idea of the speculative body, a body that is intimately linked to technology, bodily augmentation and transformation, and is noticeably changed through interactions with the non-human, I want to point to the 'ship' that carries

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<sup>43</sup> Even so far as it is displayed at Oomza University and studied in relation to how it can be reproduced and how knowledge about the stinger can be utilised in order to create new advanced weapons.

<sup>44</sup> A number of articles have already provided the important link of the display of the Meduse chief stinger to the exhibits of Sarah Baartman, as well as the collection of Herero and Nama bones and skulls by German institutions. In these cases, the elements of the bodies are used as objects of inquiry, transforming them from their existence as living beings to mere material objects. See for example S. R. Toliver, "Afrocarnival: Celebrating Black Bodies and Critiquing Oppressive Bodies in Afrofuturist Literature", *Children's Literature in Education*, 52, 2020: 132-148; Ya Burnett, "Realist Fiction"; and Vajra Chandrasekera, "Binti by Nnedi Okorafor", *Strange Horizons*, 02.2016, <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/binti-by-nnedi-okorafor/>

<sup>45</sup> Cf the #PurdueEnglishBigRead podcast mentioned earlier.

Binti from Earth to Oomza. Although Binti recognises the 'ship', the organism known as Miri, from its ubiquitous presence as a form of transportation, she has never actually been in one. She is amazed by the science behind it and how Khoush engineers have transformed a living organism into a vessel that can carry people across the galaxy.<sup>46</sup>

This ship was a magnificent piece of living technology. Third Fish was a Miri 12, a type of ship closely related to the shrimp. Miri<sup>47</sup> 12s were stable calm creatures with natural exoskeletons that could withstand the harshness of space. They were genetically enhanced to grow three breathing chambers within their bodies.

Scientists planted rapidly growing plants within these three enormous rooms that only produced oxygen from the CO<sub>2</sub> directed in from other parts of the ship, but also absorbed benzene, formaldehyde, and trichloroethylene. This was some of the most amazing technology I'd ever read about. (B: 19f.)

Science transforms what appears to be an organic being into something that serves a human end-function, namely interplanetary transport. Furthermore, the fish itself has been changed so that it has an integrated ecosystem able to support human life. Khoush engineers have transformed the body in such a way that it has become the main mode of transport for humans between different planets. This transformation of the body – long-term and irreversible – foreshadows Binti's own alterations. It is aboard this ship that she undergoes her first such transmutation, with the Meduse changing her DNA forever. Based on this, there is an interest in permanence in the novellas, meaning that effects remain, that consequences are real.

Although her transformation takes place under violent and non-consensual circumstances, it creates a moment in which Binti questions the limits and limitations of her Himba identity while coming to terms with her new hybrid body. This becomes particularly apparent when Binti helps the Meduse retrieve their chief's stinger. The university, as a centre of authority and knowledge production, avoids a direct confrontation with the Meduse, yet also avoids any form of sincere responsibility. In turn, the Meduse avoid any form of punishment for the massacre committed aboard the ship. The two parties resolve this historic transgression without taking any major risks, with Binti doing most of the political, ethical, and emotional labour. Emily S. Davis argues that Binti's transformation, is "an important move in the series, because it positions her to demand the stinger as part of her own intellectual and cultural heritage rather than acting purely as an outsider in the situation".<sup>48</sup> With Binti becoming partly Meduse, she is invested in injustices against them and has a personal stake in resolving any conflicts involving them – to her own detriment, as the final part of the trilogy reveals.

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<sup>46</sup> The ship as a living organism is also a key feature in Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn* (New York, Warner Books, 1987) and it would be interesting for further research to discuss the books in relation to each other.

<sup>47</sup> At another point, Binti mentions that the Miri "are probably the finest technology, the finest *creature*, this planet has ever produced" (*Night Masquerade*: 50, emphasis in original).

<sup>48</sup> Emily S. Davis, "Decolonizing Knowledge in Nnedi Okorafor's Binti Trilogy", in: Alexandra S. Moore and Samantha Pinto, (eds.), *Writing Beyond the State. Post-Sovereign Approaches to Human Rights in Literary Studies*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2020: 43-63 (46).

There is another moment in which, against her will, Binti's body undergoes irreversible modifications, again changing her. This occurs when she 'releases' her innate alien powers the moment she is forced to go into the desert with her grandmother's people (from the paternal side), the Enyi Zinariya. She learns to communicate with all the universe's life forms and is able to send messages across the galaxy via hand signals.<sup>49</sup> Following this development and the later introduction of regenerative cells from New Fish into her own – deceased – body, Binti herself states that she has become “so much” (NM: 192), pointing to a synergy between the violence of her bodily augmentation and her sense of herself.

Binti finds herself opening up to new communities, sees their struggles and their value systems as hers, and creates intimate bonds with them. This is interesting as she comes from a community that does not travel (B: 12f.), a community that is connected to the universe through technology, but chooses to remain secluded and disconnected. In this sense, Binti goes against her people's entrenched beliefs and travels across the galaxy. And yet, she does not abandon or supplant her own Himba identity, rituals, or traditions. These augmentations *add* to her experience of the universe, they *add* to her connections to other peoples and even species. Her on-going bodily transmutations enable her to produce permanent unions to other life forms, some so strong that she is unable to move away from them without the risk of dying, as in the case of New Fish. Furthermore, Okwu and Mwenyi become central to her adventures and changes, pointing to the fact that her connections also have a deep social or emotional layer.

The bodily intrusions that Binti experiences are somewhat mirrored by Kathy Austin in the five episodes of *Namibia*, although here the focus is less on their permanence. The narrative itself focuses mainly on re-establishing a Todorovian equilibrium:<sup>50</sup> a pre-invasion state of the world. The protagonist remains consistent and stable in her appearance until the ultimate scene. At one point, she is given a quick-healing serum that saves her life but leaves no trace. At another point, she experiences hallucinations caused by a cloned alien imposter. In Episode 5, when the world is safe again and the benevolent aliens are healing Austin, it is revealed that she is the only earthly character with knowledge of the events of the story. In other words she becomes a living archive of the event. As this revelation remains her secret, it does not change her identity (she remains Kathy Austin, special agent) nor does it affect her relationship with other life forms,

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<sup>49</sup> The use of hand signal as communication device is interesting as it questions technology in relation to what is already available to us and how it can be used differently rather than in relation to future enhancements and devices. For a similar discussion of technology, see for example, Henriette Gunkel and Daniel Kojo Schrade. “Scavenging the Future of the Archive: A Conversation between Daniel Kojo Schrade and Henriette Gunkel”, in: Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed and Simon O'Sullivan, (eds.), *Futures & Fictions. Essays and Conversations that Explore Alternative Narratives and Image Worlds that Might Be Pitched Against the Impasses of our Neo-Liberal Present*, London, Repeater, 2017: 193-211.

<sup>50</sup> In his article “The 2 Principles of Narrative” (*Diacritics*, 1 (1), 1971: 37-44), Tzvetan Todorov argues that stories begin in a state of equilibrium, there is then a disturbance of said equilibrium, followed by a return to the initial equilibrium (although the state it is not identical).



characters, or the events themselves.<sup>51</sup> Austin in fact does not experience the “becoming more” that Binti refers to, nor is it addressed or explored in the series. The previous occasions of change regarding her body and mind are done without her consent and without her knowledge, yet they are never reflected upon and their impact never acknowledged.

In a way, Austin’s body can be perceived as a medicalised body, a body whose changes all occur in spaces sanctioned for this, i.e. the hospital environment.<sup>52</sup> When Jules gives her the serum, she is in hospital recovering from a ‘car crash’. When the benevolent aliens save her, the setting resembles a hospital or medical facility. In this case, there is a sort of sanitized form of bodily transformation, one that does not affect the body long-term but can rather be seen as a quick fix, as medicinal intervention. The modification is immediate and addresses a specific problem. Therefore, it is not necessary to analyse or question it; its acceptance is in its functionality. As there are no (negative) side effects, the alteration is constructed as part of the mission and attempts to save the world, and never as moments to reflect on alien technology and how it impacts – and possibly changes – the human body or self-perception.<sup>53</sup>

Austin is not the only speculative body in the series. The invading alien army makes use of cloned earthlings, a secret that Austin and Irmanius uncover when they revisit the hidden lab in Namibia. They encounter large vials containing half-formed people, who are then employed to disrupt relationships (e.g. Austin and her handler), to engage with the human population (e.g. Göring) as well as to carry out specific missions (e.g. the manipulation of Pastor Jones). The clones are manufactured life forms, emerging from a space that intersects biology with high technology. The clone is an interesting figure as it complicates the understanding of human and non-human, especially as the clones possess only visual similarities. Once there has been interaction with them, the clones in *Namibia* dissolve and disappear. Furthermore, they offer an insight into the fragile nature of human interactions, as the clones mimic these interactions on the one hand (showing interest, conversing naturally, being able to kill), yet they are also ahistorical<sup>54</sup> and therefore must fail in the long run. This is showcased most vividly when Göring is depicted conversing and laughing with black Namibian locals in a bar (1, 47f.) – an action unimaginable for a top ranking former Nazi official in the context of Germany’s colonial history in Namibia.

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<sup>51</sup> Although it might be explored in her preceding adventure, *Amazonia* (2017-2020), there is no indication of this in the ending of *Namibia* Episode 5.

<sup>52</sup> Thank you to Moussa Traore (University of Cape Coast) for pointing this important difference between the two main characters out to me.

<sup>53</sup> This is true for others who are confronted with this technology. After releasing Austin, a doctor remarks that there does not seem to be any after-effects from her accident, but there is no medical or professional interest in following up on this.

<sup>54</sup> I use ahistorical in the sense that the clone is itself unaware of its historical position – in this case Göring has a strong link to the colonies and violence towards ‘Others’, yet the clone is unaware of this.

## Knowing where you are

It is interesting to compare how the setting affects the narrative and to what extent it is in fact relevant to the plot or character development as well as its relevance in understanding the characters and their relationship to the outside world or even to the universe.<sup>55</sup> Can the setting be described as inhibiting or liberating? An analogy or mere background? Is it even relevant? I argue that each text answers these questions differently, changing focus on Namibia from analogy (*Binti*) to pure setting (*Namibia*). Although Namibia is never mentioned in *Binti* as such, it is continuously hinted at through the character of Binti, through her *otjize*, and through her undeniable link to the desert.<sup>56</sup> This is strengthened through the repetition of her name (something she does when expanding her own physical identity), and thus reiterating where she originates: “I am Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of *Namib*” (B: 32, emphasis mine). She later adds “Meduse Enyi Zinariya of Osemba” (BH: 92) and “New Fish” (BH: 169) to this. Here, Binti references her geographical environment as her place of belonging and not a nation state or national context. The desert is more relevant to her identity than the larger national context she is part of. It requires the reader’s knowledge of specific markers to identify the region as a country that actually exists. Okorafor does, however, offer the strongest hint by making her protagonist Himba – thus allowing the creation of the world around her. This takes the form, for example, of Binti’s people living in the desert.

This landscape and environment influence both Himba identity and mobility, reflected in Binti’s unique ‘escape’ to another planet as well as her use of *otjize*. Other travellers on Third Fish comment on her *otjize* (“I hear it smells like shit because it *is* shit”, B: 16). However, it is also what saves her when she uses it to heal both Okwu and the chief after he reattaches his stinger. Throughout the novel, the *otjize*’s importance is repeated, linking it to acts of healing, to Himba identity, and Binti’s home. Most of the novellas do not labour on establishing the setting as purely Namibian, but rather focus on creating a setting in which a member of a Namibian community (one that survived colonial occupation twice) can be part of the universe.<sup>57</sup> These clues point to a community that is marginalized both in present-day Namibia and its future space, but conceptualizes this community as resilient and resistant.

Bettina Burger shows that the desert

[i]s not depicted as a hostile place in the narrative. Instead of being portrayed as primitive or empty, it is shown to be a place of refuge for Binti [...] as well as

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<sup>55</sup> Although it can be argued that Namibia-as-setting is quite negligible for both the trilogy and the series, I am interested in the novel choice of using a futuristic Namibia to narrate stories about aliens, war, and high technology.

<sup>56</sup> This would be the north-western parts of Namibia, referred to as Kaokoland or the Kaokoveld. It overlaps with the desert biotope but does have a number of rivers and other relevant bodies of water that prevent it from being considered a ‘pure’ desert.

<sup>57</sup> Okwu’s words to Binti also reflect on the Himba’s resilience – in both the fictional as well as real world – when he says “Your people are not the type to survive war” (*Night Masquerade*: 81), disproven by their place in a futuristic Namibia as well as Binti’s escape to Oomza University.

a place of communal living [...] where various kinds of science research are undertaken by the Enyi Zinariya [...]. It is also the place of first contact between humans and aliens, in this case the ancestors of the Enyi Zinariya and the golden people, with whom they merge [...].<sup>58</sup>

The novellas make no direct reference to the German colonial genocide that the Himba as part of the Herero community in Namibia survived. By focussing on the Himba in a futuristic setting however, Okorafor situates the Herero community in a future they were never meant to survive to experience. The bodily transformation and enhancement, inter-planetary travel, etc. take place without turning away from or leaving behind the past, as Nasser points out: “Okorafor’s exploration of the past through tradition, beliefs, and mythology attributes Africa a space in the future”.<sup>59</sup> In this way, Okorafor emphasizes the means of survival through practices passed on from generation to generation while also providing means and moments for the community to expand its understanding of its own culture. However, it is not only Binti who relies on her Himba traditions and rituals to navigate her new identities. As the war between Khoush and Meduse looms over the small Himba community, Binti, the village elders, as well as Mwenyi and Okwu call an *Okuruwo*, a ritual “only called when the lifeblood of the Himba people was in grave danger” (NM: 66). With the Himba unified and acting as mediators, Binti hopes to bring peace to the Khoush and Meduse once more.

Namibia (in the form of the desert and the presence of the Himba) is described as a place that seems to have undergone little change externally in respect to the present. The societies, in terms of their organisation and traditions, also appear to have remained stagnant. This contrasts with their place within a vast and highly advanced universe in which space travel and inter-planetary communication are the norm. These apparent paradoxes are synthesised through a strong focus on tradition *and* through the characters’ appreciation of technology, even if not always machine or science based. Technology here can also be understood as “alternative systems of thought and knowledge”, to quote Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch.<sup>60</sup> Binti immerses herself in Himba culture, but is also interested in alternative forms of knowledge production, history, and cosmology (the Zinariya, the Meduse). Namibia is employed as a way to discuss other injustices (e.g. the chief’s stinger and restitution, institutional involvement in violence, effects of long histories of war on smaller communities, marginalisation) and interrogates these effects on seemingly powerless individuals. The setting also provides a stage to examine how power dynamics are still entrenched X years into the future and how the attention to difference and strategies of othering still persist.

Namibia – as both analogy and physical space – must be understood as part of a larger setting of circulation and exchange. In *Binti*, for example, it competes with Oomza

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<sup>58</sup> Bettina Burger, “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*, 37 (4), 2020: 364-377 (374).

<sup>59</sup> Nasser, “Reimagining”: 173.

<sup>60</sup> Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch, “Lift Off...” in: eadem, (eds.), *We Travel the Space Ways. Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2019: 21-43 (27).

University for Binti's affections, with her constricting home being juxtaposed with the open format of the institution planet. It is then, through Binti's interaction with the people on Oomza and the renegotiation of positions back home that she is able to understand her own position in the wider universe as well as break with expected roles in her own community.<sup>61</sup> The university, however, does not offer her all the tools to renegotiate her identity, being able only to lay the foundation for such an endeavour, as Emily Davis argues:

[i]t is knowledge work that makes possible new forms of solidarity, new technological innovations, and new social imaginaries. This knowledge work is structured as a collective process, in which economic and intellectual benefits must be shared amongst species, and the range of species themselves expand the boundaries of collectivity past the human to include animal and plant collaborators. Yet, while crucial knowledge work takes place in part of Oomza University, the institution of the university is insufficient on its own. Binti's educational needs exceed the available institutional frameworks, leading her to sources of indigenous and alien knowledge that are then brought back to and transform the universe.<sup>62</sup>

In this sense, it is the encounter with other species and life forms that facilitates Binti's intellectual and emotional becoming, rather than the formal act of learning at an institution. With the main plot arch being Binti's admission to the universe's most prestigious place of learning, encounters with foreign life forms are central to the narrative. This is also repeated twice when Binti realises – after having incorporated foreign DNA into her own – that she has become more. Or to put it in Davis' words: Binti is a character made collective.<sup>63</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that she only achieves this *after* leaving the safety of her home, indicating that her home environment is not sufficient to nurture her desires and needs. Furthermore, Binti's break with a suspicion of 'the outside', rooted in tradition, allows her to experience much more than her relatively confining home community can ever offer.<sup>64</sup>

As the title of the comic series suggests, Namibia as a setting for the story features prominently – but is never fully developed. Within the narrative, Namibia is only interesting in respect to its global inconspicuousness and therefore its potential to 'host' outlandish fantasies.<sup>65</sup> Its continued links to its colonial masters and later Nazi leaders is a mere plot

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<sup>61</sup> One example of this is Binti being visited by the titular Night Masquerade, the mythic and ominous Himba spirit. This is something that should not happen to a) a young Himba girl, and b) someone as 'disobedient' and well-travelled as her.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, "Decolonizing": 46f.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: 57.

<sup>64</sup> This is a topic in Herero (and Nama) oral tales, in which leaving the safe space of the community can often end up having negative or fatal consequences. See for example Sigrid Schmidt, *Tricksters, Monsters and Clever Girls. African Folktales – Texts and Discussions*, Köln, Köppe, 2001). Binti subverts this assumption, even though she faces multiple moments of ostracism and backlash for her decision to leave, most notably from those closest to her, i.e. her family and best friend, Dele.

<sup>65</sup> This may be grounded in colonial ideas of its vastness and 'unexplored-ness' and therefore prospective tropes such as strange people, large riches, or undiscovered species.

device that allows the British to get involved. Göring's sighting is revealed as a chance occurrence and not as an integral part of the alien's plan to invade Earth, as Winston Churchill explains at a meeting of the allies:

In fact it was pure luck! In order to act covertly, the 'visitors' need to take on the appearance and the identities of humans...to do that, they harvest a few cells from the body of a deceased...the graveyard where Göring was buried is the closest to their base in Namibia and the Reichmarschall's grave, one of the most recent ones. (5: 13)

Churchill confirms this by stating that it was “a complete coincidence – they [the ‘visitors’] knew nothing of the man himself! Otherwise they would never have picked him, of course” (ibid.). Arguably, Namibia’s Nazi cadres and their link to a war criminal are subordinated to the larger threat to Earth: aggressive extra-terrestrials – the new and more dangerous ‘others’. They are even exterminated by the invading aliens – however without any political motivation. They were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

All of these point to a very impotent and typified local population – a population that is introduced as adversely affected by the oncoming invasion and as incapable of protecting itself. The local Namibians are shown to suffer, to be the victims of the initial stages of the alien invasion (the accelerated aging, the mutated insects destroying crops), yet they are not given any agency in changing their own fates. Jules and McDonald, the only non-white characters of relevance, turn out to be benevolent aliens, thus disavowing any contribution by black earthlings. It falls to the world’s superpowers (USA, UK, USSR) to prevent the alien invasion – the arena of war just so happens to be Africa and affects Africans. ‘Others’ are framed and maintained as such – they are even denied any real encounters.

*Namibia* seems very much interested in the white saviour protagonist, one that saves Africa and the world from imminent doom. The setting provides (as it later turns out) a flimsy premise by placing a known war criminal in a crop field in Namibia in order to activate Austin and to set the other events into motion. There are a number of instances in which the five Episodes reference Namibia’s history, mainly through its German colonial past and its links to fascist Germany, while relatively accurately describing the conditions the black population live(d) under during the 1940s. Segregation, exclusion, and separate access to a number of spaces and resources are touched upon on a number of occasions with Austin often being the witness to structural racism.

However, even though Earth has been saved and an alien invasion averted, it seems that the ‘old’ Earth – with its inherent systems of inequality and exploitation – remains. There is no indication that the Namibian population will recover from the damage caused by the rapid aging or the destroyed crops, nor are there any signs that the apartheid in Namibia will be eradicated. The victory is ultimately a hollow one, seeing as the destruction and death caused by the invading aliens is not reversed or undone, merely the source of it has been transformed. This could mean that future catastrophes – such as alien attacks – will catch Earth unprepared again, while also hiding the very important fact that a group of benevolent life forms contributed quite substantially to humankind’s survival. *Namibia* furthermore works within a realistic framework of reference as it makes use of existing places (Lüderitz) and incorporates supranational bodies that have at one point in time

actually featured in Namibia. In this series, it is the United Nations. This is offset by the absence of any historical personalities or events that would link it to its geographical locale. It could be argued that we are dealing with an alternative Namibian timeline, one in which Apartheid was never imposed as a system and one in which the name 'Namibia' is already used in the late 1940s (it was only formally used from the mid-1960s).

Another reference to the country Namibia in the series is the proxy war between Britain and Germany on foreign soil. The interest in Göring, for example, brings MI5 to Namibia, where supporters of the fascist German government are armed and organised. In the first three books, at least, the cadre confronts Austin and company, and then has an encounter with the malevolent aliens (which is ironic as they use Göring as a tool for their nefarious plans). The Anglo-German political war finds its zenith in the formation of the earth army, where England is the initiating force (with the backing of the benevolent aliens), but at the exclusion of post-Third Reich Germany. Namibia thus, to some extent, features as a setting for victorious British involvement in a former German territory. The early example of the British army investigating the mysterious mine further points to British involvement in Namibia. At the request of a secret agent, Britain is almost instantly able to send a small army to Namibia, exhibiting a strong interest in placing both military and reconnaissance personnel in its rival's former colony.

## Conclusion

For a very brief point in time in the mid-2000s, Namibia became the site of two futures and all the splendour, wonder, strangeness this brings with it. It became an inter-planetary battleground and the site of Earth's fate. Two female protagonists, special and unique in their respective environments, navigate a planet – and later a universe – that appears hostile to them. It is through inter-life forms, connections and the impact they have on the body, that Earth could be saved and new networks forged. It also allows the marginal to become central to events while bodies that are considered different or deviant become the fulcrum of the narratives.

Binti represents a multi-species becoming, a body that not only disrupts an established bodily order in terms of cultural and physical difference, but also creates an intergalactic network of communities. Her DNA incorporates various cultural groups and life forms, creating powerful links to these groups. Binti's body thus becomes a networked site in which the violence of encounter, new communities, and affective change register. This is contrasted by the archive-body of Kathy Austin,<sup>66</sup> who survives a possible earthen apocalypse and is the only human to retain any memory of the events. Her body represents a normative understanding of the white body, having undergone a number of fleeting and

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<sup>66</sup> I refer to Austin's body as an archive for two reasons: 1) because she is the only human alive with a recollection of events, but more importantly, 2) because of her position within the formal apparatus of information procurement of MI5. This means that she could, theoretically, be debriefed or forced to relay the series of events that led up to the multiple disasters on earth and their proper sources and can thus be 'accessed'.

unobservable physical and physiological transformations. No one is able to recognise or perceive any difference in the Kathy Austin who begins the investigation and the Kathy Austin who ascends to become the singular witness to everything.

In both *Namibia* and *Binti*, Namibia's colonial history is either directly addressed or referred to by centring one of communities that survived the genocide against the Herero and Nama as the only relevant human community in this future setting. Binti, a member of the Himba community who live and thrive in a desert environment, ascends from a peripheral member of her society to an amalgamation of different life forms that span the universe. She embodies a synergy between seclusion and worldliness by remaining committed to her roots (her use of *otjize*, her family ties, her dress), but always being open to encounters and the transformation they produce (with the Meduse, the Enyi Zinariya, the Miri, Oomza University). She further epitomises an inter- and multi-species approach to being in the world that is not exclusively anthropocentric.

*Namibia* has a strong focus on Namibia's colonial past and points to its lingering afterlife in the form of the Herman Göring's presence and the Nazi cadre Kathy Austin confronts. However, the lasting connection to the coloniser's fascist past and the continuity this presents are quite reflective of contemporary Namibia, which has a host of right wing and Neo-Nazi-aligned organisations.<sup>67</sup> There is also a lingering colonial nostalgia among much of Namibia's white population with colonial artefacts still circulating, such as postcards, memorabilia, and literature. This is contrasted by a genocide revisionism or outright denial with a very stand-offish attitude towards questions of guilt and reparations.

One main distinction between the two 'series' is how they deal with, on the one hand, the link between the body and technology and, on the other, the encounter with those who are considered 'other'. Although both narratives focus on singular protagonists (who themselves are marginalised in their own right), their confrontation with threats, and a host of 'others' is where they diverge most significantly. The fact that Kathy Austin emerges from all events without any real change (except distinct knowledge of the series' events) contrasts strongly with Binti's experience. Every encounter changes her and these changes are permanent. She exhibits them physically in the form of Meduse *okuoku*, the Enyi Zinariya's form of communication, and her inseparable genetic link to New Fish.

The main difference between how the texts deal with both history and human-human but also multi-species encounters is reflected in how they constitute the speculative body in these worldmaking narratives. Binti's focus on history is not necessarily situated in actual events, much of the work here is done through allusion. The most striking example is the theft of the Meduse chief's stinger and the display of it at Oomza University. This is a critique of two European forms of exhibitionism, one on the level of the museum (stolen

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<sup>67</sup> Examples of these include "Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen" and the "Hilfskomitee Südliches Afrika". I don't want to go into too much detail at this point because it is not a focus for either primary text, but it is relevant to realise that there is a strong continuity between colonial and apartheid Namibia and fascist Germany up to today.

art, artefacts, relics from former colonies),<sup>68</sup> and the other on the basis of the human (“living villages”, world exhibitions that display people from former colonies). This is further underlined through the hierarchical relationship between the Himba and the Khoush – one that also reflects on the afterlife of colonial discourse and power relations beyond the present.

*Namibia* never really succeeds in creating a relevant historic context for its narrative. Although Namibia’s colonial past is referenced and its continued Nazi connections are clearly displayed, they play no role within the larger narrative. Even this quite relevant foray into world history is fleeting, while the focus on Namibians as inhabitants of the main setting is negligible. Furthermore, there is no real reason for the alien invasion to take place in Namibia – this connection is never explored. It reproduces certain colonial tropes (helpless ‘native’ inhabitants, European paternalism), yet these are constantly subordinated to the main narrative plot: the alien invasion.

In *Namibia* encounters often remain superficial. The first example is Austin meeting Major Bowley, who is a misogynist and a xenophobe. Their professional relationship ends with the start of Episode 1, and he is never mentioned again. The Nazi cadre, Göring, the locals, or Dr Pepco only feature briefly, and are then disposed of. This also means that the relations between characters are fleeting and are not carried through the plot. In the end, only one relationship goes beyond the narrative, namely that of Austin and Irmanius, a relationship that is built on a lie.<sup>69</sup>

*Binti* offers a liberating look at how Namibians – marginalised in the world, but also suffering marginality within their own country – can still participate in the events that define and shape the universe. They critique their own traditions (the ones that are constraining) while embracing influences from all over the universe. *Namibia* appears to be a modernised colonial novel in the sense that it uses Namibia and its people as a backdrop to promote a Western heroine. There are moments in which misogyny and racism are addressed, yet structural violence and power relations are never confronted or investigated; they are naturalized and hence constituted as unavoidable. Even when power relations are treated as a general problem and are identified as exploitative, such as the scene with Dr Pepco,<sup>70</sup> they are framed within a comic/absurd exchange so that the critique loses all potency.

So while Namibia can now be said to have entered the literary futures, these two series show that the past itself is a vital resource in constructing these futures. However,

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<sup>68</sup> For more, see for example Felwine Sarr und Bénédicte Savoy, *Zurückgeben: Über die Restitution afrikanischer Kulturgüter*, Berlin, Matthes & Seitz, 2019; and Bénédicte Savoy, *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst. Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage*, München, Beck, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> After recovering in a hospital after having been resurrected, Irmanius asks Austin “[w]hat happened exactly?” to which she replies that “[y]ou fell into mineshaft. You had to be carried out, remember?” (5: 48).

<sup>70</sup> Before stating that “the population’s dying and nobody cares! We raised every kind of hell we could, but aside from a journalist or two, no one gives a toss! . . . unlucky for them they were black” he introduces himself as “I’m Dr Pepco. ‘Pep’ as in ‘Pepsi’, ‘Co’ as ‘Cola’ . . . Both as foul as the other” (2: 15).



questions around agency, 'othering', and power relations need to be addressed within this context when using a former colony as the backdrop for a narrative. This is especially true when one of the main characters has a distinct historical privilege and responsibility, i.e. being a white former imperial agent, who transcends to become the keeper of an unparalleled historical event. The marginalisation of already-marginalised characters needs to be considered as well – especially when they have limited opportunities to contribute to the narrative themselves.

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