Prophecies, Prejudice and The Power of Rewriting

An Analysis of the Representation and Trans-coding of Gender Stereotypes in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

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Introduction

A post-apocalyptic future, magical shape-shifting powers, and relationship drama during a quest through the desert: as unlikely as this combination of subjects sounds, all of them can be found in Nnedi Okorafor's award-winning novel *Who Fears Death*. The novel, published in 2010, tells the story of Onyesonwu, a child of rape who over the course of the story learns more about who she is and what her destiny in life is. The novel takes place in a country known as the Seven Rivers Kingdom, which is a future, post-apocalyptic Sudan (Okorafor 413). Although the nature of the event that caused the country's demise remains unexplained, its repercussions are apparent in the novel. The descendants of the scientists that were responsible for the country's current state are known as the Okeke. They are deemed inferior to the other large community in the Seven Rivers Kingdom, the lighter-skinned Nuru. This results in institutionalised racism, and recurring mental and physical violence. Onyesonwu's Okeke mother is one of the many Okeke women who were raped by a Nuru man. Mixed-race children like Onyesonwu, known as *Ewu*, are seen as outsiders in both Nuru and Okeke communities. The novel combines this bleak future with a prominent role for supernatural creatures, powerful sorcery, and traditional West-African witchcraft known as juju. Onyesonwu discovers that she possesses magical powers, and that it is her destiny to defeat her Nuru birth father and rewrite the past, present, and future to ensure justice for the Seven Rivers Kingdom.

Speculative Fiction and Diversity

Who Fears Death can be seen as an example of speculative fiction. Speculative fiction can broadly be defined as "works presenting modes of being that contrast with their audience's understanding of ordinary reality" (Gill 73). It is about what would happen if certain conditions of our world were changed (Gill 73). Anything can happen in a work of

speculative fiction, as the logics of the worlds that are depicted are (partially) different from our own; speculative fiction stands "in contrast with the operation rules of the normal world" (Gill 73). Because of its broad definition speculative fiction is inherently diverse, since the amount of possible topics that can be included is theoretically limitless. The broad range of subjects in *Who Fears Death* is reflective of this.

Even when placed within a genre where anything is possible, *Who Fears Death* is a novel that stands out. For a genre that is known for its inexhaustible possibilities, speculative fiction is remarkably homogeneous when it comes to questions of gender and ethnicity. White male writers form the vast majority in the genre, and people of color (and much less women of color) are largely absent from mainstream imaginations of the future. Notable exceptions are writers Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, who are well-known authors in speculative fiction. However, these authors find themselves in a different position from their white colleagues. Samuel Delaney, one of the most important African-American speculative fiction writers of the twentieth century (Womack 121), wrote about the racial prejudice that he experienced in his career, and states that expressions of racial prejudice, regardless of intentions or the individuals involved, was and continues to be present in the genre (Delany 2000). Because writers of color are generally not very visible in speculative fiction, they are either excluded from mainstream speculative fiction, or explicitly branded as 'other', i.e. as black science fiction writers (Delany 2000). Although there have been improvements in the matter of diversity in speculative fiction, and it has increasingly become a topic of conversation within the genre, diversity in representations of possible futures continues to be an issue. To illustrate: of the one hundred writers involved in the nominated works for the Hugo awards for best science fiction and fantasy novels in 2015, only three writers were non-white (Brown 2015). *Who Fears Death* is a notable exception to the rule as it is an example of a narrative of the future that is written by a Nigerian-American woman and centres on an

African female character. Everything that distinguishes *Who Fears Death* from more mainstream speculative fiction –a female protagonist, direct address of issues of gender and racism, the novel's location in Africa- is centralized in the character of Onyesonwu. For this reason this thesis will focus on her character.

The construction of Onyesonwu's identity through characterization in *Who Fears Death* will be at the core of this thesis. I will specifically focus on issues of gender, ethnicity, and the ways in which the two intersect. In order to theorize the way texts can engage with stereotypes, I will use Stuart Hall's work on representation and stereotypes (Hall 1997). The focus will lie on the ways in which the novel engages with gender stereotypes, gender and racial prejudice, and how it presents the intersection between gender and ethnicity. I shall do this on the level of characterization and narrative structure, and emphasize issues of focalisation and narration in my analysis of the novel. With a close-reading character analysis, the following research question will be answered: *In what ways does the character of Onyesonwu in Who Fears Death challenge gender and racial stereotypes, and how is this represented in the novel?*

This thesis is comprised of three chapters. The first chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the novel's cultural context and the concept of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is a cultural and theoretical movement that focuses on African-American and African diasporic imaginations of the future. It puts often-marginalized authors and topics in the spotlight, and celebrates the works of non-white authors who challenge the conventions and norms of the genre. Afrofuturists challenge expectations and stereotypes of ethnicity, gender, and, on a broader scale, the genre of speculative fiction. I will use *Who Fears Death* as an example of the ways in which Afrofuturism engages with prejudice and stereotypes. In order to think more abstractly about stereotypes, their construction, and the possible ways in which they can be undermined, I will also use the first chapter of this thesis to elaborate on Stuart Hall's

theory on stereotypes. Historically, as Hall argues, people of color have been represented

within a "racialized regime of representation" (Hall 249). This racialized regime is expressed

in stereotypes, in which assumptions and essentializing views are presented as natural. In

Afrofuturism, it is emphasized that what it means to be black is not confined to interaction

with these negative stereotypes (Womack 11). Afrofuturist art and theory stresses the

importance of challenging the conventions of mainstream and stereotypical representation

(Womack 15-6). Because stereotypes are such an integral part of the representation of people

of color, it is useful to analyse in what ways specific stereotypes are engaged with in

Afrofuturism. Hall's theory will therefore be used as a tool to think more in-depth about the

different ways in which *Who Fears Death,* as an Afrofuturist novel, engages with stereotypes

and in what ways Hall's different strategies are used in the novel. With this theoretical

framework in mind, the consecutive chapter will consist of an analysis *Who Fears Death*.

This second chapter will be dedicated to the analysis and interpretation of the construction of

identity and reversal of stereotypes in *Who Fears Death*. By doing a close-reading analysis, I

will examine how gender stereotypes are challenged or dismantled by looking at the way

Onyesonwu is characterized and represented in the novel. The third and final chapter will

revisit the research question and will zoom out to the broader context of speculative fiction,

returning to the question of female African diasporic authors in Afrofuturism and in

speculative fiction in general. I will argue that *Who Fears Death* is an example of Afrofuturist

fiction that offers a new way of self-representation for women of color, in which femininity,

sexism and gender stereotypes are addressed directly in imaginations of the future.

Chapter One: Afrofuturism and Stereotyping

Speculative fiction is a genre in which anything can happen, and that can encompass many different genres and topics. It is impossible to pinpoint precisely what the first work of speculative fiction is, since it is a genre that is difficult to define. Nineteenth-century works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* or H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* can be seen as early works of speculative fiction. The genre gained more popularity throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, and is now a popular and important transnational cultural genre in all media (Canavan & Link 10). From World War I onwards, works of speculative fiction have been created by authors who wanted the narrative freedom to express and explore new ideas in provocative and innovative ways, as well as critique contemporary culture (Canavan & Link 10). In many ways speculative fiction functions as an umbrella term that encompasses genres ranging from science fiction to fantasy and from horror to steampunk. With this interpretation of the genre, texts ranging from George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or, on a completely different side of the spectrum, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series fall into the category of speculative fiction. Because of its broad variety of genres and topics, the genre is very inclusive. However, despite the diversity of its genres and subjects, speculative fiction is very uniform when it comes to the representation and inclusion of minorities. The genre is dominated by white men, which results in women and non-white men and women being seemingly absent from the genre and therefore not represented in the imaginations of the future. When present, characters of color rarely feature as the main protagonist. Speculative fiction presents a 'colorblind' future where racism no longer exists (Bould 177). This overrepresentation of white people and whiteness in speculative fiction is problematic, as this makes it seem as if in the future, only white people exist. Furthermore, with little to no representation of people of color, issues of race or ethnicity become unnecessary and simply

impossible to discuss. Speculative fiction confronts neither the structural issues of racism in excluding people of color and the topic of racism, nor the genre's own complicity in the matter (Bould 180). Racial prejudice is not addressed or engaged with in mainstream speculative fiction, simply because in a future where only white people are represented, such discussions are unnecessary.

However, speculative fiction is never just about the future. With the power of imagination, creating possible futures can critique the present and maybe even change it (Womack 44). There is a long tradition of African-American and African diasporic writers using speculative fiction to spark social change, as well as to change the genre itself. Speculative fiction has been and continues to be expanded as it becomes more diverse and inclusive; both the ways in which speculative fiction is produced and read are continually transformed (Barr xv). This is due to the increasing visibility and popularity of speculative fiction written from the margins. One of the places in which this increasingly popular development is prominently visible, both in the arts and in academia, is Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism

Speculative fiction that is produced by African-American and African diasporic writers and artists is classified under the umbrella term 'Afrofuturism'. In his article "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," Mark Dery coins the term by stating: "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno-culture- and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future might, for want of a better term, be called Afro-futurism" (Dery 8). Afrofuturism can be summarized as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Ingrid LaFleur, quot. Womack 9). It combines imaginings of possible futures

with technology, but also with explicit references to mysticisms, African heritage and culture, and issues of racial prejudice and oppression**.** Contemporary Afrofuturists want to explore how race continues to matter to both individuals and communities at large (Yaszek 43). This is done both by envisioning the future and by creating different imaginations of the past, thereby criticizing the present.

Afrofuturists use African diasporic history and culture to both reclaim the history of the past and the history of the future (Yaszek 47). Afrofuturists make frequent use of African mythology, heritage, and culture in their works in order to highlight their cultural importance for people of African descent in the United States. Many Afrofuturist works are produced in a North-American context and for a North-American audience. African-American Afrofuturists seek a connection to an African and African diasporic perspective, and thereby (re)claim African cultures (Womack 91). As an important aspect of Afrofuturism is its emphasis on empowerment and self-representation, it is important to consider who represents whom and from which perspective in Afrofuturist works of art. In the case of *Who Fears Death,* author Nnedi Okorafor was born in the United States to Nigerian (Igbo) parents, and frequently visited Nigeria. While writing with an American perspective, she directly relates to the topics she engages with in her novels. Okorafor comments: "All these issues that I address, they are issues that have been around me nearly all my life. They are real to me. They are not distant. I have known people who have been circumcised; it is something that used to be done in Traditional Igbo culture. I know about genocide, too. […] These are what I write about" (Whitted 208). *Who Fears Death* is illustrative of this statement. It is based on the recurring sexual violence that African women experience in Sudan today, as groups of Arab and Sudanese soldiers target African dark-skinned women as part of a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" (Wax 2004). Okorafor used this very real situation of weaponized sexual violence in Sudan as an entry point into the world of *Who Fears Deat*h. Okorafor is aware of the

distance such topics have from the largely American audience for whom she writes, as she states: "I think American audiences could benefit from stepping out of themselves more often, out of what is familiar" (Whitted 210). Okorafor uses her fiction to present a different perspective, to force her audience out of their comfort zone in the hope of reframing the way they view themselves, the world, its history and its future. Her work epitomizes the ways in which literature can be used to provide readers with a new perspective, represented by a future world, and to possibly change the way her audience think of their own place within it. The possibility of changing the present is created by re-imagining the past and the future. Okorafor writes Afrofuturist literature. Afrofuturism is a movement that encompasses many media, and expressions of Afrofuturism can be found in theory, in visual arts, in literature, and in music. Examples of Afrofuturist works can therefore range from the movie *Space is the Place* (1974) by Sun Ra (who is also one of the movement's most influential musicians), to the music of Janelle Monáe, or to the works of Samuel Delany. Afrofuturists use many different media and genres to express their message of creativity, empowerment, and liberation. In order to tell their stories, Afrofuturist artists combine elements from various genres, such as historical fiction, fantasy and magical realism (Womack 9). In doing so, Afrofuturism not only pushes social boundaries by addressing otherwise marginalized topics, but also the generic boundaries of speculative fiction. Afrofuturism can represent what speculative fiction has traditionally left at the margins. With an Afrofuturist perspective, there can be a better balance between the representation of whiteness and other ethnicities, and an explicit discussion of racism and its repercussions in the past, present and future. With this, Afrofuturism pushes against the boundaries of speculative fiction.

An example of this can be found in Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred.* The novel, published in 1979, engages with a re-imagining of history through speculative fiction. Dana, *Kindred's* protagonist, travels through time to a slave plantation in Maryland in the early

1800s, which is of course an extremely dangerous place and period for an African-American woman to be. The novel is an example of how Afrofuturist artists can use common tropes of speculative fiction, in this case time-traveling to an often-romanticized past, to express critique on the present and the way history is generally presented. Written by an African-American woman in a genre that is dominated by white men, and where the history of slavery is not discussed often, Butler's work challenges both social and generic limitations. Butler's work features women of color that are multidimensional and complex, and has therefore inspired other women to claim their position in Afrofuturism (Womack 110). From Butler on, women are increasingly visible and indeed at the forefront of the Afrofuturist movement.

Within Afrofuturism, there is a new and special role to play for women artists, writers and scholars, as Butler's case illustrates. Historically, black women have often drawn the short straw when it comes to inclusion and exclusion, oppression and (self-)representation. They suffered a double marginalization. On a political level, both the American women's movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s neglected to include and acknowledge the specific forms of oppression black women have experienced, and to this day continue to experience (Ducille 39). Women who were not white and middle-class were excluded from the feminist movement, whereas the civil rights movement was masculinist. Neither movement paid attention to the ways in which for black women racism and sexism intersect, and create a specific form of oppression. As a result, the problems black women encountered were neglected and marginalized. This marginalization is noticeable in literature, visual arts, film, and other forms of creative expression. The underrepresentation of women of color in the aforementioned list of nominees for the Hugo Awards, is a recent example of this (Brown 2015).

With Afrofuturism, this is changing: black women in speculative fiction are increasingly visible and valued. Mark Dery's definition of Afrofuturism has been criticized

for being masculinist, which left African-American and African diasporic women in the margins once again (Barr xiv). However, both in- and outside academia, this has been challenged. There is increasingly more attention paid to the role and works of women in Afrofuturism. Examples of this are Marleen S. Barr's *Afrofuture Females* (2008), or, in fiction, the popularity of the works of N.K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson or Tananarive Due. For the first time in history, African-American and African diasporic women can have control over their own creative voice and over the expression of this creativity. In Afrofuturism, women artists get to determine their own voice, outside of masculinist or racist perspectives: while they are obviously influenced and affected by contemporary gender issues, the creations of Afrofuturist women emphasize their individuality. There is a strong desire to think oneself free of the sexism, racism, and other harmful –isms that determined the past and, to an extend, the present (Womack 104). Afrofuturism provides women with an opportunity for self-representation, rather than being represented stereotypically or one-dimensionally by others. Given that existing categories never provided space for black women's creative expression, their work moves beyond societal norms and limitations, and is therefore often described as uncategorizable (Womack 101). Female Afrofuturists are creating their own norms, and "the rest of the world just tries to catch up" (Womack 105). They work to reposition previously excluded fiction written by African-American and African diasporic women, and Afrofuturism can be used to rethink a genre that historically has overrepresented white authors and thereby excluded women of color (Barr xiv-xv). In focusing on individuality and self-representation, Afrofuturist women are creating art in an unprecedented way, thereby defying existing norms and categories. It is not just the position of its female creators that makes Afrofuturism different from earlier speculative fiction or futurisms in the past. Whereas these earlier movements often focused on the female body or on "the woman through the male gaze" (N.K. Jemisin, quot. Womack 111), the femininity and being a

woman are valued differently in Afrofuturism. The movement centralizes the feminine aspect of humanity: the feminine is valued and even prioritized in Afrofuturist works, and is constrained by neither masculinism nor racism (Womack 104). Afrofuturism provides a different way of valuing women both as artists and as representations of women. It moves beyond objectification and simplification. The female characters in Afrofuturist literature are complex, layered, and challenge common stereotypical representations of women of color. Common stereotypical images such as "the mammy" or "the angry black woman" are subverted.

Afrofuturism is strongly connected to rewriting existing prejudices, expectations, and stereotypes. In order to get a better understanding of the different techniques that can be used to contest stereotypical modes of representation, this thesis will connect Afrofuturism to Stuart Hall's theory on stereotypes. I will describe below the possible ways in which one, according to Hall, can undermine these stereotypes in art. The following chapter will then outline the ways in which *Who Fears Death,* as an example of Afrofuturist literature, employs these strategies and how they can be recognized in a work of literature. The theoretical and cultural framework Afrofuturism and Hall's theory provide will be specifically used to discuss in what ways the novel engages with gender stereotypes

Stereotyping

The theoretical concept around which this research will revolve is Stuart Hall's concept of stereotyping, and the possible strategies for reversing these stereotypes (Hall 1997). While Hall's work is focused on the reversal of racial stereotypes, he assures that his strategies can be used for any instance in which there is a dimension of difference and an unequal distribution of power (Hall 225). Hall's theory can therefore also be applied to stereotypical representations of gender, class, disability, or sexuality (or combinations thereof).

Stereotyping is a representational practice that reduces people to a few simple, supposedly natural characteristics (257). Hall explains that stereotyping is an essentializing and objectifying practice that presents members of a minority group as flat and one-dimensional. The basis for stereotyping is difference: specific traits are recognized as different from and inferior to 'the norm'. People are reduced to these particular traits, which are exaggerated and simplified. Hall contends that stereotyping reinforces itself: stereotypes are constructed and reaffirmed over and over again. The normal is separated from the abnormal, and everything that is a part of this 'abnormal' is excluded and marginalized within symbolically fixed boundaries (258). Stereotyping is an expression of symbolic power and is used to maintain the social and symbolic order. No one can step outside of these stereotypes because power is circular, which Hall clarifies by stating: "Everyone –the powerful and the powerless- is caught up, though not on equal terms, in power's circulation. No one –neither its apparent victims nor its agents- can stand wholly outside its field of operation" (261). The process of stereotyping is all-encompassing, and forms a system that no one can fully escape from. Hall argues that regardless of intentions or individual beliefs, people think and express themselves through stereotypes. While this might sound bleak, he presents several strategies with which stereotypes can be challenged or reversed, despite this circularity of power. Hall argues that this is because meaning is never fixed, and can therefore always be changed (269). One can always interpret a work of art differently, and therefore create a different meaning. Even representations that are presented as fixed by nature can be given an alternative meaning and be re-appropriated. Hall sees these actions of reversal as examples of trans-coding, which he defines as "taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings" (269).

Hall names three possible strategies of contesting stereotypes. The first option is replacing a negative representation with a positive one. While representing 'the other' in a positive way can be good thing and certainly a welcome change, Hall formulates criticism to

this approach: "To reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it. Escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme […] may simply mean being trapped in this stereotypical 'other'" (272). The oppositional structure that is the basis for the stereotype remains intact when using this strategy; one could argue that one stereotype is simply replaced with another (272). The second strategy of resistance Hall describes emphasizes the creation of more diverse images that are both positive and negative. This is an "attempt to substitute a range of 'positive' images of black people, black life and culture for the 'negative' imagery which continues to dominate popular representation" (272). Hall describes that within this second strategy, diversity is accepted and even celebrated rather than seen as a harmful diversion from what is seen as normal. This strategy turns the binary opposition upside down, in the subordinate is privileged, and the negative is read as positive (272). The range and complexity of representations of ethnic difference is expanded, which challenges the reductionism and simplification of past stereotypes (272). However, the strategy of expanding the range of ethnic representations can be problematic. As Hall argues, the problem with this second strategy is that an increased diversity, does not necessarily mean a displacement of the negative (274). The binary oppositions themselves remain in place and continue to frame meaning. Hall summarizes: "The strategy challenges binaries- but it does not undermine them" (274). Hall names the phrase 'Black is Beautiful', and the cultural movement it inspired as an example of this strategy (272-3). The phrase was used in the 1960s to critique the notion that black skin color, hair, or facial features are inherently unappealing. Hall uses this example to illustrate the second strategy of trans-coding: what was once deemed negative, is reversed and seen as positive; a negative image is deemed positive. Nevertheless, he insists, the binary opposition between black on the one hand and white on the other, is contested, but not displaced (273). Neither the first nor the second strategy manages to dismantle the structural binary opposition that is the basis and justification for stereotypical representations.

Hall's third counter-strategy does attempt to challenge the complexities in representation from within and deconstruct the binary opposition. Here one does not focus on creating new or alternative representational content, but on challenging stereotypes within forms of representation. As Hall explains: "It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories" (274). This strategy involves making stereotypes work against themselves. The dichotomy is questioned by emphasizing the complexity and ambiguity of representation. Within the artwork, the stereotyping practice itself is questioned. Hall emphasizes that this questioning of the stereotype happens from within the artwork: there is a sense of awareness of the stereotype that means that it can be challenged. Literature can be a particularly useful way of doing this: it can provide its audience with a new perspective on the world as they know it. Furthermore, as this perspective is expressed within the artwork itself, it is rendered possible to directly address and contest stereotypes within the literature.

The following chapter will focus on the ways in which *Who Fears Death* engages with stereotypes and how it reverses them. The novel can be seen as an example of an Afrofuturist work of self-representation; it is a text in which an African woman is complexly represented by an African diasporic author. Onyesonwu is placed at the heart of the narrative rather than in the margins**.** The novel emphasizes identity, not just in terms of gender or ethnicity, but particularly the intersection of those two. There is a clearly visible emphasis on the feminine in *Who Fears Death*, as the novel is primarily told from the perspective of a young female character, namely Onyesonwu. The following chapter will discuss how *Who Fears Death* uses Hall's three strategies to reverse stereotypes, and how this is represented in the character of Onyesonwu.

Chapter Two: Stereotypes and Trans-coding in *Who Fears Death*

Thus far there has been little research on *Who Fears Death*. The scholarly attention that the

novel has received from the perspective of comparative literature mainly focuses on the way

questions of ethnicity and racism are represented and reconfigured in this novel (Dijkstra

2015). However, in solely focusing on ethnicity, one obscures the fact that *Who Fears Death*

is also about gender identity, gender-related oppression, and sexism. The novel is not just

about racism or just about sexism, but represents the specific combination of the two and the

way this is experienced by the female characters in the novel, in particular by Onyesonwu.

This thesis focuses on the ways in which the novel addresses questions of gender and sexism,

and how it engages with gender roles and gender stereotypes. In this chapter I will take a

closer look at the characterization of *Who Fears Death*'s main character Onyesonwu. In what

ways does Onyesonwu's character confirm or challenge gender stereotypes?

Who Fears Death tells Onyesonwu's life story and follows her as she grows up and fulfils

her destiny in a future desert country, which is a post-apocalyptic Sudan. Onyesonwu, whose

name translates as 'Who Fears Death', is *Ewu*, which means she is a child born of rape. In her

society, there are two major communities: the Okeke and the lighter-skinned Nuru. Because

of what is written in the Great Book, the country's account of its history and religion, Okeke

are seen as inferior to Nuru. This results in slavery, recurring (sexual) violence, and

institutionalised racism. After several years in the desert Onyesonwu and her mother move to

the city of Jwahir, where Onyesonwu grows up an outcast because of her skin color (which

clearly indicates that she is born of rape). While she is growing up and managing life as *Ewu*,

Onyesonwu finds herself in several strange, magical situations. At age eleven, she finds

herself suddenly naked in a tree during a thunderstorm with no recollection of how exactly

she got there. Additionally, during a circumcision ritual known as the Eleventh Rite,

Onyesonwu has an out-of-body experience and sees a large red eye, while she seems

transparent to the other women in the room. Onyesonwu clearly has magical abilities, but she initially has no means to control them. However, when she meets fellow *Ewu* Mwita and his tutor Aro, Onyesonwu finally gets help in the discovery and mastery of her magic. At age nineteen, Onyesonwu is forced to leave Jwahir to fulfil a prophecy that states that a sorcerer will change the writings of the Great Book and better the world. The sorcerers Aro and Sola tell Onyesonwu just before she leaves that she is in fact the sorcerer the prophecy refers to. Due to their own prejudice they initially refused to accept that the prophecy refers to a woman. However, over time they were forced to acknowledge the truth: Onyesonwu is the sorcerer that has to save the Okeke from the oppression and slavery they experience. With this new knowledge of her destiny, Onyesonwu travels through the desert with Mwita and her three best friends to face her fate and confront her biological father, Daib, who wants to kill his daughter and destroy all Okeke. Onyesonwu manages to defeat Daib, avenge her mother's rape and change what is written in the Great Book, thereby ensuring freedom for the Okeke. However, she has to pay a great cost for her actions. Her travelling companions are killed, and Onyesonwu herself is sentenced to be stoned to death. After her execution, Onyesonwu appears to have either defeated death or to live on in an alternate shape. The text is ambiguous on this, as the narrator states: "What happened when those rocks hit her head? I'm still asking that. […] I dare not mention it all. Those things are only for those of us who were there, the witnesses" (412). It is Onyesonwu's destiny to live on and reunite with Mwita. As the final sentences of the novel explain: "Is it not understandable that she'd want to *live* in the very world she helped remake? That indeed is a more logical destiny" (416).

Narration and Focalization

For the most part the story of *Who Fears Death* is narrated by Onyesonwu. She recounts her life story in the first person singular, while a Nuru soldier who will lead Onyesonwu to her

execution is recording her tale (262). Onyesonwu tells him a story that starts with early childhood and ends in the present. The recording guard is addressed directly several times throughout the text, starting with the opening chapter, where Onyesonwu states: "*That was four years ago. Now see me*" (6). The final chapters of *Who Fears Death* depict what happens after Onyesonwu's execution, and are narrated by different characters. These homodiegetic narrators are the Nuru guard recording Onyesonwu's story, the sorcerers Sola and Aro, and Onyesonwu's mother Najeeba. Onyesonwu is the protagonist of the story, and it is therefore through her perspective and focalization that the reader learns what happened. The reader accesses Onyesonwu's character through her own narration, and does not see her through anyone else's eyes until the final chapters. The characterizations in the final chapters of the text work more as a reaffirmation of what the reader has already learned from Onyesonwu's own narrative, rather than that they provide any new insights in her character.

The fact that Onyesonwu is the one to tell her own story and present her own characterization is important to emphasize, as it influences the way in which *Who Fears Death* engages with the representation of gender, sexism, and gender stereotypes. The novel presents an inside perspective on a young African woman as she grows up, goes on an incredible and difficult journey, and ultimately saves her country. Because of the first-person narration, Onyesonwu's character is not objectified or seen through a male or racist lens. As Okorafor herself has stated, "Many African male authors tend to portray African women and girls as being invisible, voiceless, or marginal" (Okorafor 2008). *Who Fears Death* can be seen as Okorafor's direct response to the misrepresentation of African-American or African diasporic women by men. By making Onyesonwu the protagonist of the story and by telling it from her own perspective, Onyesonwu is given a voice. The narrative structure of the novel renders it possible to give a character that could have been left in the margins a place at the heart of the narrative. Furthermore, by letting Onyesonwu tell her own story, there is the

possibility for inclusion of topics that are specific to women, and even more to African women, that are usually excluded. This provides a new way to engage with questions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. This brings to mind Ytasha Womack's discussion of women in Afrofuturism, and the way they "develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female expectations" (Womack 101). Afrofuturist artists create work that is deemed uncategorizable. This is reflected by the ways in which Afrofuturists, and Afrofuturist women in particular, develop new norms that are not based on stereotypes. In *Who Fears Death,* this mission of dismantling stereotypes is reflected in Onyesonwu. With a close-reading analysis of her character on the level of both story and narrative, I will analyse in what ways *Who Fears Death* challenges existing gender stereotypes and norms.

Inclusion of Marginalized Topics

Who Fears Death engages with issues of gender, sexism and sexual violence in various ways. It includes topics that are not often depicted together in fiction, and particularly not in speculative fiction. The character and characterization of Onyesonwu play an important part in the discussion these subjects. She includes controversial and at times painful topics in her narrative. She discusses genital mutilation and its consequences in her account the female circumcision ritual known as the Eleventh Rite. There are various incidents of sexual violence, including the rape of Onyesonwu's mother, the abuse Onyesonwu's friend Binta has to endure from her father, and the sexual harassment that Onyesonwu experiences herself because she is an *Ewu* woman and finds herself in a city where all *Ewu* women are prostitutes. She also often refers to her period, her body, and sexual pleasure. This is remarkable in a novel: there is an incorporation of topics that are not often included in a text. These issues are specific to women, and specific to women in African countries. The topics mentioned are

included in Onyesonwu's narrative because they are important parts of her everyday life and the world she lives in. With this, Okorafor not only highlights the connection to the African continent that Afrofuturists share, she also manages to tell a story that is able to move beyond existing norms and boundaries of what can and cannot be represented in speculative fiction. In creating a complex and multi-faceted representation of the life of an African woman, Okorafor represents being a young woman in Africa in a new way. With an emphasis on the supernatural that is rooted in African traditions and history, Okorafor emphasizes the novel's African roots. With this, Okorafor can address issues that African women in the past and present encounter, such as female circumcision or sexual violence. She does not glorify the future country she presents, rather displaying sexism, racism, violence, and injustice. Okorafor does not provide a post-racial, post-feminist utopia. Because she includes characters from the margins she is able to address these issues (other than making them undiscussable by only including white male characters). With the introduction of characters of color, issues of racism and sexism become a part of the narrative. In what follows, the different techniques Okorafor uses to represent these issues will be discussed.

Gender, Sexism, and Stereotypes

Before elaborating on issues of gender, sexism, and stereotyping in *Who Fears Death,* it is important to shortly discuss the difference between sex and gender, and race and ethnicity. There is a distinction to be made between gender and sex. Generally speaking, sex refers to a person's biological characteristics, i.e. whether he or she is male or female. Gender encompasses the ways in which social, institutional and individual structures have masculine or feminine connotations (Buikema and Van der Tuin 2). Gender is socially constructed, whereas sex is biologically determined. In a similar vein, race refers to physical characteristics, whereas ethnicity indicates a common nationality or shared cultural traits. It is

worth mentioning that both the concepts of sex and gender, and of race and ethnicity have been discussed, debated and redefined many times. The interpretations explained above will be used as working definitions in this thesis.

In discussing the way in which the novel engages with gender stereotypes, it is important to take a closer look at the way the novel engages with sex and gender. Sex is something static in the novel, something that not even Onyesonwu's supernatural abilities can change. While Onyesonwu can do incredible things with her magic, such as reversing the results of a circumcision ritual or impregnating herself (and with that an entire city), she can never change her sex. Onyesonwu is *Eshu*, which means she can shapeshift into different creatures. However, she is only able to change into the female variant of this creature (69). In biological terms, there is a strict binary opposition in the story. *Eshu* shapeshifters are, regardless of their magical powers or abilities, born either male or female. Sex is not something that can be changed. Onyesonwu's attitude towards this restriction is indifferent: "No matter what I changed into, I could only become the female version of it. This was a rule of my ability that always seemed trivial to me" (69). Being female is not something Onyesonwu experiences as problematic or dangerous, but as she grows up she inevitably learns that many characters, and society at large, do not share this view. She learns of sexism from other women, and experiences the oppression of women and discrimination first-hand.

The fact that Onyesonwu is female is used by male sorcerers as a justification for excluding her from certain knowledge of magic. This leads to confrontations in which gender stereotypes and expectations are addressed directly. Especially the characters of Mwita and Aro struggle when Onyesonwu expresses her desire to be educated in the 'Mystic Points', which is the most powerful knowledge of magic a sorcerer can have. Initially, Onyesonwu overhears two boys speaking of the Mystic Points, arguing that Mwita ("the *Ewu* boy") is the only one suited for this knowledge because of his sex (67). Onyesonwu reacts: "I had no idea

what these Mystic Points were but they were being held from me and I wanted to know them now" (68). Although Onyesonwu learns of the Mystic Points eventually, the tension between what she wants and needs and what she is 'supposed' to want and need is a recurring theme in the novel. As she states further in the story, during her travels through the desert: "Those old beliefs about the worth and fate of men and women, that was the only thing I didn't like about Mwita. Who was he to think that he was entitled to be the center of things just because he was male? This had been a problem with us since we met" (275) This tension between old, masculinist beliefs and what Onyesonwu herself feels and believes, is most palpable in her confrontations with the sorcerer Aro and his reluctance to accept her as a student, and in Onyesonwu's relationship with Mwita. Onyesonwu addresses these expectations, prejudices, and stereotypes directly, thereby emphasizing the essentializing and fixed nature of stereotypes. The fact that this issue remains unresolved mirrors Hall's statement that when using the third strategy of trans-coding, "there can never be any final victories" (Hall 274). The stereotypical viewpoints of the male characters in the novel are addressed and challenged, but ultimately not resolved.

Mwita is the first person to help Onyesonwu master and control her magical abilities. He becomes her friend, her lover, and the father of her child. Because Onyesonwu's birth father Daib poses an increasingly great threat to both Onyesonwu herself and the Okeke community at large, Onyesonwu wants to be taught by Aro. However, this is more difficult than she expected, since, as Mwita explains: "He won't teach you because you're a girl, a *woman!* […] You can bring life, and when you get old, that ability becomes something even greater, more dangerous and unstable!" (68). For the first time, Onyesonwu is excluded because she is a woman; having access to knowledge of magic is only a possibility for men. In *Who Fears Death*, it is not uncommon for women to be able to perform magic. However, a woman is supposed to be a healer, assisting the male sorcerer rather than being the one who

holds all the power (274). This gendered role division is institutionalized and internalized by the characters, as Mwita explains that "that's how it's always been between a man and a woman!" (274). Language is simultaneously illustrative and constitutive of the problem, as the characters are unable to place Onyesonwu in the male category of 'sorcerer'. Against her wishes, Onyesonwu is referred to as a 'sorceress' and even as a 'she-wizard'. Onyesonwu reacts incredulously to this: "*She-wizard?* I thought. *What kind of title is that?*" (279). Onyesonwu is the first woman to explicitly challenge the title of 'sorceress' and express the desire to be included in the category of 'sorcerer'. The prevalence of gendered categorization and the time it takes to affect change is illustrated when other characters continually refer to Onyesonwu as 'sorceress'. This situation remains unresolved in the end of the novel.

The Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity

Who Fears Death does not just directly address sexism. With Onyesonwu's character at its heart, the novel stresses that gender oppression or sexism never function separately. They intersect with racist prejudices based on Onyesonwu's ethnicity. People who are *Ewu* are outcasts: *Ewu* children are born of violence and are therefore seen as poisonous (21). It is believed that *Ewu* eventually become destructive and dangerous, as the violent act of their conception can only lead to more violence (21). Onyesonwu rejects the label of *Ewu,* as it is what makes her an outsider who is associated with violence. She is *Ewu*, but "not in the way the word means" (109). The discrimination and exclusion from the knowledge of magic that Onyesonwu faces is based on both gender and ethnicity. Aro refers to this particular combination in his initial refusal to teach Onyesonwu. He exclaims: "Your father was Nuru, a foul dirty people. The Great Mysic Points are an Okeke art only for the pure of spirit" (71). When Onyesonwu points out that Mwita is Aro's student despite being *Ewu*, Aro argues: "He's male. You can't measure up. Even in… the gentler skills. […] And furthermore, you're

filthy with woman blood as we speak" (71). It is not just that Onyesonwu is *Ewu* that makes her unfit for the knowledge of the Great Mystic Points. It is her simultaneously being *Ewu* and a woman that Aro sees as problematic. It is indicative of Onyesonwu's character that she only later realizes what Aro means by this: "I only blinked, not knowing what he was talking about. Later I would realize he was referring to the fact that I was having my monthly. I had about a month to go, shedding mere drops of blood. He'd spoken as if I were awash in it" (71). Onyesonwu does not reverse the expectation that she, being *Ewu*, will undoubtedly react with violence. After Aro has rejected her for three years, she yells at him: "TEACH ME! WHY WON'T YOU TEACH ME? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? WHAT IS WRONG WITH *EVERYONE*?" (113). Onyesonwu lashes out at the sorcerer and almost kills him. She reacts instinctually with violence, which reaffirms the image of the violent *Ewu* her community has. Onyesonwu confirms the *Ewu* stereotype, and the assumption that as a woman, she is dangerous and unstable and therefore cannot be trusted with magic. However, when taking the intersection between gender and ethnicity into account, her reactions can be seen as a form of trans-coding a gender stereotype. In reacting with violence, taking charge and, ultimately, getting what she wants, Onyesonwu stands in stark contrast with the stereotypical way of representing female characters as soft, docile or in service to the male characters. This can be read in relation to Hall's first way of trans-coding, in which a negative stereotype is replaced with a more positive one (Hall 272). However, in reversing a gender stereotype, Onyesonwu reaffirms a stereotype that stems from racism in the novel. Onyesonwu is expected to react with violence, and affirms this stereotype by doing exactly that. She replaces one stereotype with the other, substituting the obedient female character with a character that can be related to the stereotype of the 'angry black woman'.

Onyesonwu's birth father Daib wants to kill Onyesonwu because of her 'failure' to be born a boy (124). When Daib and Onyesonwu finally come face to face, Daib declares: "I

enjoyed [your mother]. I didn't want to kill her. She should have given me a great, great son. Why are you a girl?" (395). Similarly, when Aro explains why Daib wants to kill Onyesonwu, he states: "Because you're a failure […] You were supposed to be a boy" (118). However, unlike Daib and Aro think, Onyesonwu's sex is neither an accident nor something that prevents her from fulfilling her destiny: "Your mother knew exactly what she was doing when she asked you to be a sorceress once you were born and a girl. It was her revenge" (333). Sex is used as a weapon here, and Onyesonwu is able to fulfil the prophecy and save her people because of it. If Onyesonwu had been born a boy, she would have been linked to her father rather than her mother. She was always going to be a sorcerer, but by a stronger connection to her father, she would have been an oppressor rather than a savior (144). Her mother asked for her child to be born a daughter, knowing the dangers this would bring her in a sexist society. Just before she leaves Jwahir to fight Daib, Onyesonwu is told that by the sorcerers Sola and Aro that the prophecy refers to an *Ewu* woman rather than to a Nuru man (174). The seer Rana was told to look for an *Ewu* woman when he first heard the prophecy, but because of societal gender expectations neither he nor Aro and Sola accepted this at first. This is why Rana shares the messages of the prophecy as if it refers to a Nuru man. It is because she has been born a girl that Onyesonwu can be the sorcerer the prophecy refers to and change what is written in the Great Book. Furthermore, because she was born a girl, she is linked to her mother rather than to her father (Burnett 144). If she had been born a man, Onyesonwu would have been an evil sorcerer like her father. As a girl, she can defeat him and bring peace to her country as the prophecy has predicted. Initially, Onyesonwu finds it difficult to accept this burdensome truth, since it goes against the gender roles of her world to accept that 'the chosen one' can be a female sorcerer. Regardless of this initial hesitancy, Onyesonwu learns to accept her fate and manages to rewrite what is written in the Great Book and thereby fulfil the prophecy. Onyesonwu is able to do this because of her gender, and not in spite of it.

Trans-coding and Self-representation

The world of *Who Fears Death* is not free of sexism or gender oppression. It is epitomized by sexual violence, predetermined gender roles, and the objectification of women. These oppressive and restricting aspects are addressed and challenged through the character of Onyesonwu. Because of Onyesonwu's characterization as a strong and complex character, common stereotypical depictions of African diasporic women are challenged and altered, both through her words and her actions. Although Onyesonwu does not see her sex as problematic or of particular importance, it is ultimately being a woman that enables her to be the hero of this story and change the world for the better. Because Onyesonwu is born a girl, she can be the sorcerer the prophecy refers to. Daib wanted to have a son, a sorcerer who would stand by his side to eliminate all Okeke (395). However, because Onyesonwu was a girl and her mother decided to keep her, she can defeat her father, rewrite the Great Book and thereby change her country for the better. At the end of the novel, the Okeke are no longer enslaved and there is no longer any justification for racism, structural rape or other forms of violence against the Okeke.

It is because of her relation to her gender that Onyesonwu does not feel the need to exclude certain aspects of being a woman from her narrative. Onyesonwu speaks unapologetically about her body, her sexuality and the different ways in which she engages with gender roles, prejudice and oppression. Onyesonwu is not perfect, and she is complicit in the circularity of power that is harmful to her. Rather than being reduced to a few fixed characteristics, as is common with stereotypical ways of representation, Onyesonwu is depicted complexly. She represents herself as she tells her story to the Nuru guard, stating: "It's a long story. But I'll tell you … I'll tell you. You're a fool if you believe what others say about me. I tell you my story to avert all those lies" (6). With this direct address of the guard,

Onyesonwu emphasizes that she is in charge of her own narrative. She wants to tell her story from her perspective and she is in control over how this story gets told. In short, she has the power over her own representation. It is in this self-representation that Onyesonwu's narrative can be seen as an example of Stuart Hall's third strategy of trans-coding a stereotype. This method emphasizes the way representations can focus not on presenting an alternative to a stereotype but rather on trans-coding the stereotype from within the artwork itself. In *Who Fears Death,* this is done on two different levels. On the level of story, Onyesonwu directly addresses gender stereotypes and the challenges she faces because she is a woman. On the level of narrative discourse, Onyesonwu's story is a clear example of self-representation. She is able to tell her own story and present herself and her character on her own terms. This gives her an agency that women, and particularly non-white women, have traditionally been denied. *Who Fears Death* challenges and indeed undermines the binary opposition between men and women and their 'natural' characteristics. While not pretending to offer solutions or prevent a way out of the circularity of power that is described by Hall, it emphasizes the complexity of representation through its characterization of Onyesonwu.

Rewriting the Past, the Present, and the Future

The character of Onyesonwu challenges gender and racial stereotypes in several ways. Firstly, she is represented as an African woman in a speculative fiction novel. In a genre that is traditionally populated by white male authors, this is an inclusion that is not seen often (although increasingly more). Furthermore, because of the way the story is told and the narrative is structured, Onyesonwu is very much at the heart of the novel. Her character and journey are what the story revolves around. She is not a marginal, unimportant character, but the protagonist and hero of her own story. In her narration Onyesonwu includes topics that are not often included in speculative fiction, or in fiction in general. She addresses issues that are

specific (although not exclusive) to the marginalized community of African women, and speaks of female genital mutilation, sexual violence, but also of female friendship and the liberation that agency and magic can bring. The novel discusses the gender stereotypes that arise head-on. Onyesonwu becomes a site of resistance to gender prejudice, gender oppression and actively fights to change her country for the better.

Most importantly, Onyesonwu is in charge of her own story. She is telling her tale, and no outside racist or sexist perspective is affecting her narrative. She tells her story as a way to rewrite the preconceptions and prejudices of others, to "avert all those lies" (Okorafor 6). With her narration, Onyesonwu rewrites the lies that have been told about her, and the sexist and racist perspectives they are informed by. This rewriting also occurs on the level of story in the novel. The story concludes with Onyesonwu's rewriting of the Great Book, with which she has changed the Seven Rivers Kingdom and the lives of its people forever. Onyesonwu states: "But this place you know, this kingdom, it will change after today. Read it in your Great Book. You won't notice that it has been rewritten. Not yet. But it has. Everything has" (410). With her writing, Onyesonwu has managed to change the lives of the Okeke people. Rewriting is presented as a powerful act that can change lives and the world for the better. On a narrative level, Onyesonwu's rewriting of her own story changes the perspectives the other people in the novel have of her. Furthermore, Onyesonwu's way of representing herself can be seen as a third way of rewriting. With her self-representation, Onyesonwu rewrites the way African women have traditionally been written. With an inclusive approach to controversial topics and a direct address of gender stereotypes, Onyesonwu's self-representation in *Who Fears Death* is a rewriting of stereotypical modes of representation of women of color in the genre of speculative fiction. A fourth level of rewriting can be found in the broader context of Afrofuturism; as an Afrofuturist novel, *Who Fears Death* is part of a movement that challenges stereotypes of gender and ethnicity, and

pushes the generical boundaries of speculative fiction. Literature is particularly useful in this, as it can provide an inside perspective –in the case of *Who Fears Death* that of a young African woman- that has been overlooked before. With an inclusion of often-marginalized topics, the self-representation of an African woman, and the direct address of the stereotypes and prejudice, *Who Fears Death* is an example of an Afrofuturist novel that rewrites the past and the future in order to critique and change the present.

Conclusion

Who Fears Death is a novel that stands out in speculative fiction. It offers a perspective that is not often seen in the genre: that of a young African woman, written by an African-American female author. Within the context of Afrofuturism, the novel uses a possible future filled with magic to offer critique on sexual and racial prejudice. The character of Onyesonwu is the point in which the trans-coding of stereotypes is centralized. Her character challenges stereotypes in various ways. In her first-person narration, Onyesonwu includes topics that are specific to African women, directly addresses and reacts to instances of stereotyping, sexual violence, and objectification of women. Furthermore, consistent with Stuart Hall's third strategy of trans-coding, the stereotypes African women face both in and outside of the storyworld of *Who Fears Death* are discussed explicitly but never fully resolved. *Who Fears Death* is an example of the way speculative fiction and imaginations of the future can be used to critique and re-envision the future. Within the genre, Afrofuturism offers a place for artists and scholars of color to (re)claim a position and have control over their own creative voice. Especially for women, Afrofuturism can be a field from which women of color, an often-marginalized group in speculative fiction, remain in control over their own work and create new forms of self-representation that are not restricted by masculinist or racist perspectives. *Who Fears Death* is an example of this: with the way it pushes against the norms of speculative fiction, and the representation of women of color in general, the novel can be seen as a step in a new direction, where artists regardless of their color or sex can self-express and create a place for themselves in past, present, and future.

This thesis has focused on the ways in which *Who Fears Death,* as an Afrofuturist novel, employs the different strategies of challenging stereotypes as defined by Stuart Hall. The analysis of the novel focused on the character of Onyesonwu and the way she engaged with gender stereotypes on the levels of story and narrative discourse. I have outlined how

Onyesonwu reacts to the expectations and limitations she faces because she is a woman. Because of the focus of this thesis on the intersection of gender and ethnicity, there has been relatively little attention paid to matters of sexuality in the novel. Female circumcision and female sexual pleasure are important themes in the novel, but were not discussed at length in this thesis. Furthermore, although Onyesonwu is the protagonist of *Who Fears Death*, she is not the only woman who encounters and reacts to expressions of gender prejudice or sexual violence. Onyesonwu's mother Najeeba and her three friends Luyu, Diti and Binta, are all affected by their society's gender roles, expectations, and prejudices and manage them in different ways. In addition, further research could be devoted to the representation of magic and African cultures and heritage in the novel, as that is particularly important from the perspective of Afrofuturism and its focus on empowerment and questions of (self)representation. It would be interesting to apply Hall's strategies of trans-coding onto other Afrofuturist artworks. Although Afrofuturist is part of an older tradition of African-American and African diasporic artists of speculative fiction, the movement itself has only recently gained more popularity and visibility in both academic research and in the arts. As the movement grows and develops further, Afrofuturist writers will undoubtedly explore different ways of representing previously marginalized perspectives and different ways in which to engage with and challenge stereotypes. With that, Afrofuturist artists and researchers will be able to continue rewriting the past, the present, and the future.

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