

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE VIÇOSA

**Women in Dystopian Sands: Violence and Subjectivities in Who Fears Death,
by Nnedi Okorafor**

Maria Isabel Branco Pinheiro
Magister Scientiae

**VIÇOSA - MINAS GERAIS
2025**

MARIA ISABEL BRANCO PINHEIRO

**Women in Dystopian Sands: Violence and Subjectivities in Who Fears Death,
by Nnedi Okorafor**

Dissertation submitted to the Letters
(Languages) Graduate Program of the
Universidade Federal de Viçosa in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of *Magister Scientiae*.

Adviser: Natalia Fontes de Oliveira

**VIÇOSA - MINAS GERAIS
2025**

**Ficha catalográfica elaborada pela Biblioteca Central da Universidade
Federal de Viçosa - Campus Viçosa**

T

P654w
2025
Pinheiro, Maria Isabel Branco, 1997-
Women in dystopian sands: violence and subjectivities in
Who Fears Death, by Nnedi Okorafor / Maria Isabel Branco
Pinheiro. – Viçosa, MG, 2025.
1 dissertação eletrônica (93 f.): il. (algumas color.).

Texto em inglês.

Orientador: Natália Fontes de Oliveira.

Dissertação (mestrado) - Universidade Federal de Viçosa,
Departamento de Letras, 2025.

Referências bibliográficas: f. 89-93.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47328/ufvbbt.2026.002>

Modo de acesso: World Wide Web.

1. Ficção nigeriana. 2. Literatura nigeriana (Inglês) -
História e crítica. 3. Literatura americana - História e crítica.
4. Okorafor, Nnedi, 1974- - Crítica e interpretação.
5. Ecofeminismo. 6. Feminismo na literatura. 7. Racismo na
literatura. 8. Movimentos antiimperialistas. 9. Distopias na
literatura. I. Oliveira, Natália Fontes de, 1985-. II. Universidade
Federal de Viçosa. Departamento de Letras. Programa de
Pós-Graduação em Letras. III. Título.

CDD 22. ed. Ni823

MARIA ISABEL BRANCO PINHEIRO

**Women in Dystopian Sands: Violence and Subjectivities in Who Fears Death,
by Nnedi Okorafor**

Dissertation submitted to the Letters
(Languages) Graduate Program of the
Universidade Federal de Viçosa in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Magister Scientiae.

APPROVED: December 19, 2025.

Assent:

Maria Isabel Branco Pinheiro
Author

Natalia Fontes de Oliveira
Adviser

Essa dissertação foi assinada digitalmente pela autora em 06/01/2026 às 09:51:19 e pela orientadora em 06/01/2026 às 10:17:29. As assinaturas têm validade legal, conforme o disposto na Medida Provisória 2.200-2/2001 e na Resolução nº 37/2012 do CONARQ. Para conferir a autenticidade, acesse <https://siadoc.ufv.br/validar-documento>. No campo 'Código de registro', informe o código **Z5OW.PA7O.OO6V** e clique no botão 'Validar documento'.

Às minhas avós: Jandyra, do povo da mata, e Deusa, até no nome.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Agradeço a todas e todos que vieram antes de mim.

Agradeço aos meus professores favoritos: a minha mãe Adriana, das artes e do axé, e meu pai Luiz, da batalha e do afeto. Tudo que sou, são vocês.

Aos meus irmãos, Gabriel e Pedro, que caminham comigo e me ensinam, desde o nosso berço de Araras, que a vida é bem melhor quando vivida na fraternidade.

A toda a minha família, de sangue, suor e escolha.

Aos meus avôs Zico, só que do Botafogo, e Pinheiro, da Rua do Encanto.

Ao meu amor, Fernando, pelo companheirismo incondicional, e por ter trazido junto de si mais uma família para eu amar. Que sorte a minha! Obrigada, Letícia, Helena, Ângela e Jorge que vieram para também encher meu coração.

Aos amigos de vida. Ana Luiza com suas conversas, revisões e olhares humanizados. Rafael, sorridente e inspirador até depois de um dia longo. Paloma, parceira de crescimento pessoal e acadêmico desde minhas aventuras calouras pela Floresta e que, mesmo longe, sempre está perto de mim. A tantos outros que me apoiam, que torcem por mim, que agregam e me ensinam.

Aos professores que transmitem tão precioso conhecimento para minha carreira e vida. Minha orientadora, Natália Fontes de Oliveira, que topou ser guia da maior escalada que já fiz e que fez segurança até nos trechos mais espinhosos. À professora Sirlei Santos Dudalski, que sempre acreditou em mim e me ensinou a amar as literaturas. Ao professor Adelcio de Sousa Cruz, por inspirar arte. A todas as outras e outros cuja sala de aula eu já tive a honra de frequentar.

Ao meu caro Departamento de Letras e Artes, minha segunda casa de Viçosa. Aos funcionários e alunos que lá frequentam e que me saúdam diariamente com carinho.

This work has been sponsored by the following Brazilian research agencies: Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES; Financing code 001), Minas Gerais State Foundation for Research Aid (FAPEMIG) and National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

“Que a fé tá na mulher
A fé tá na cobra coral
Ô, num pedaço de pão
A fé tá na maré
Na lâmina de um punhal
Ô, na luz, na escuridão
Andar com fé eu vou
Que a fé não costuma faiar”
(Gilberto Gil)

ABSTRACT

PINHEIRO, Maria Isabel Branco, M.Sc., Universidade Federal de Viçosa, December, 2025. **Women in Dystopian Sands: Violence and Subjectivities in *Who Fears Death*, by Nnedi Okorafor.** Adviser: Natalia Fontes de Oliveira.

Set in a post-apocalyptic Africa marked by ethno-racial hierarchies, gendered and class violence, the dystopia *Who Fears Death*, by Naijamerican writer Nnedi Okorafor, constitutes the corpus of this dissertation. The narrative follows Onyesonwu, an *Ewu*—a child born of weaponized rape in a context of war—whose body becomes a site upon which colonial power, patriarchy, and racialization are inscribed. The central problem of this research revolves around the way violence operates not only as physical aggression but also as a structuring principle of bodies, subjectivities, memories, languages, and cosmologies. The novel presents violence as colonial, racial, gendered, symbolic, structural, and epistemological, articulating individual trauma with the historical legacy of domination. The hypothesis guiding this study is that the female characters in *Who Fears Death* are traversed by overlapping layers of these violences, yet they develop strategies of resistance that transform the meanings of their beings. Methodologically, the dissertation adopts an ecofeminist approach articulated with decolonial thought and with africanfuturism, a concept coined by Okorafor that envisions a futurity rooted in Africa. The dissertation is organized into four chapters. The first chapter, “Goat-Skins and Scars: *Ewu*,” presents the theoretical foundation on body, violence, and the concept of *Ewu*, a metaphor created by the author and grounded in real conflicts. The second chapter, “Womb of Sand, Wounds of Song: Najeeba,” focuses on the figure of the mother of an *Ewu* being, engaging themes such as rape as a weapon of war, voice, and motherhood. The third chapter, “Skin the Shade of Sand, Body the Color of Exile: Onyesonwu,” investigates the violences inflicted upon the protagonist and her strategies of both survival and resistance. Finally, the fourth chapter, “*Umunne* Bound by Blood: Onye, Diti, Luyu and Binta,” discusses the Eleventh Year Rite, one that involves genital cutting, as well as the relationships among the group of young women. It is expected that this work contributes to a critical reflection on the ways literature can both expose and resist systems of domination, amplifying voices and opening paths toward alternative epistemologies and worldmaking practices.

Keywords: africanfuturism; decoloniality; dystopian literature; ecofeminism; women's writing

RESUMO

PINHEIRO, Maria Isabel Branco, M.Sc., Universidade Federal de Viçosa, dezembro de 2025. **Mulheres em Areias Distópicas: Violências e Subjetividades em *Who Fears Death*, de Nnedi Okorafor**. Orientadora: Natalia Fontes de Oliveira.

Ambientada em uma África pós-apocalíptica atravessada por hierarquias étnico-raciais, violência de gênero e classe, a distopia *Who Fears Death*, da escritora nigeriano-americana Nnedi Okorafor, constitui o corpus desta dissertação. A narrativa acompanha Onyesonwu, uma *Ewu*, isto é, uma criança filha de estupro como arma em contexto de guerra, cujo corpo se torna um espaço de inscrição do poder colonial, do patriarcado e da racialização. O problema central desta pesquisa gira em torno da forma como a violência opera não apenas como agressão física, mas como princípio estruturante de corpos, subjetividades, memórias, linguagens e cosmologias. A obra apresenta a violência como colonial, racial, de gênero, simbólica, estrutural e epistemológica, articulando trauma individual e herança histórica da dominação. A hipótese que orienta este estudo é a de que as personagens femininas de *Who Fears Death* são atravessadas por camadas sobrepostas dessas violências, mas desenvolvem estratégias de resistência que transformam os sentidos de suas existências. Como método, adota-se uma abordagem ecofeminista articulada ao pensamento decolonial e ao africanofuturismo, conceito cunhado por Okorafor que compreende uma futuridade enraizada em África. A dissertação organiza-se em quatro capítulos. O primeiro capítulo, intitulado “Goat-Skins and Scars: *Ewu*”, apresenta a base teórica sobre corpo, violência e o conceito de *Ewu*, metáfora criada pela autora ancorada em conflitos reais. O segundo capítulo, “Womb of Sand, Wounds of Song: Najeeba”, volta-se para a figura da mãe do ser *Ewu*, encontrando temas do estupro como arma de guerra, voz e a maternidade. O terceiro capítulo, “Skin the Shade of Sand, Body the Color of Exile: Onyesonwu”, investiga as violências sofridas pela protagonista e suas estratégias tanto de sobrevivência quanto de resistência. Por fim, o quarto capítulo, denominado “*Umunne Bound by Blood: Onye, Diti, Luyu and Binta*”, discute o rito dos 11 anos que envolve mutilação genital, bem como a relação entre o grupo de jovens mulheres. Espera-se que este trabalho contribua para uma reflexão crítica sobre as maneiras pelas quais a literatura pode tanto expor quanto resistir a sistemas de dominação, ampliando vozes e abrindo caminhos para epistemologias alternativas e novas práticas de construção de mundos.

Palavras-chave: africanofuturismo; decolonialidade; literatura distópica;
ecofeminismo; autoria feminina

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 10 |
| CHAPTER 1: <i>GOAT-SKINS AND SCARS: EWU</i> | 25 |
| CHAPTER 2: <i>WOMB OF SAND, WOUNDS OF SONG: NAJEEBA</i> | 39 |
| CHAPTER 3: <i>SKIN THE SHADE OF SAND, BODY THE COLOR OF EXILE: ONYESONWU</i> | 52 |
| CHAPTER 4: <i>ỤMỤNNĒ BOUND BY BLOOD: ONYE, DITI, LUYU AND BINTA</i> | 72 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 85 |
| WORKS CITED | 89 |

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary woman carries the restlessness of her time and place. She is not only traversed by profuse geopolitical conflicts, the cyclical and increasingly accelerated crises (or triumphs) of capitalism, the effects of pandemics, the recurrent violations of human rights, the imminent climate collapse, and many other disruptions, but also by the continuous need to reflect upon her social role in society. Bombarded with functions, gazes, expectations, and contestations, she moves through the troubled world of the now carrying the open wounds of a bloody past in the face of a present that also does not cease to bleed.

“In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior” (Lorde, 2020, p. 114). Within this scenario of multiple violences and reductionist polarizations that Audre Lorde denounces in *Sister Outsider*—where certain subjects and bodies are systematically oppressed to sustain a logic of profit and domination—stands the place of the woman.

Nnedi Okorafor, prominent contemporary writer who holds a PhD in Literature, fervently engages in ongoing dialogue with acute present-day issues: the social marginalization of racialized bodies; colonial violence and its contemporary reverberations; ancestral wisdom as a form of agency; the tension between tradition and modernity; the conflict between nature and technology; and the possibilities of new epistemologies distanced from categorical, dichotomous, and Western worldviews. Her characters often navigate other universes, languages, and ways of being, challenging fixed categories of identity. Daughter of Igbo parents—an ethnic group concentrated in southeastern Nigeria and akin to the concept of nation, according to Chinua Achebe’s *Home and Exile* (2000, p. 5)—Okorafor grounds her narratives in African cosmogonies that carry a vehement presence of Igbo tradition, language and culture and also tend to blend with their neighboring African ethnicities’. The Nigerian American writer, who prefers to adopt the term *Naijamerican*¹, has received several awards such as the World Fantasy (2011), Hugo (2016, 2018, 2023), Nebula (2016), Nommo (2016), and Locus (2019). Notably, she also won the Wole Soyinka Prize for

¹ According to Nnedi Okorafor’s blog, “*naija* is slang for *Nigerian* or *Nigeria*” (Okorafor, “Born Naijamerican”, 2011).

Literature in Africa (2008)², which honored her debut novel, *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), for its significant contributions to pan-African literature³. Many of her other works have been critically acclaimed as well: *Long Juju Man* (2009); *Lagoon* (2014); the *Nsibidi Script* trilogy (2011, 2017, 2022); and the *Binti* trilogy (2015, 2017, 2018).

The dystopian novel *Who Fears Death* (2010), this thesis' object of study, emerges as a notable narrative amongst Okorafor's works, one that radicalizes such postmodern tensions by imagining a post-apocalyptic Africa deeply marked by ethnic, gender, and spiritual conflicts, as well as colonial legacies. The story follows Onyesonwu, a young *Ewu*, who is a mixed-race child born of weaponized rape during wartime between the oppressive Nuru and the subjugated Okeke. Since her birth in an isolated desert, Onyesonwu faces the marginalization imposed by her condition, but she discovers magical abilities that lead her to question her destiny and challenge the brutal structures of society. The protagonist embarks on a spiritual, political, and social journey mainly set on rich desert sands that make the reader question their Western imaginaries. Along the way, she encounters explicitly violent episodes, such as genital cutting and multiple forms of harassment, and yet learns to control her power. Three other books set in Onyesonwu's universe have later been published: *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), prequel situated long before Onyesonwu's odyssey, and two novellas from the "She Who Knows" trilogy, which follows Onyesonwu's mother, Najeeba. The first book of the trilogy, its namesake, was published in 2024 and the second book, *One Way Witch*, was published in 2025. The final book of the trilogy, *The Daughter Who Remains*, is to be published in 2026.

This dissertation, therefore, departs from the hypothesis that the multiple forms of violence depicted in *Who Fears Death*, such as colonial, ethnic, gendered, spiritual, and epistemological, influence the subjectivities of its female characters, who, in turn, devise strategies of resistance that reconfigure their experiences and challenge systems of domination. The main objective is to analyze how these representations of violence intersect with questions of survival, spirituality, embodiment, and language in the context of the women characters of the novel. To achieve this, the study employs

² The Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa is named after the first African writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. It is considered the African Nobel Prize in Literature (The Lumina Foundation).

³ "A belief that people from Africa and their descendants should be united, or a movement to achieve such unity" (Cambridge Dictionary). Pan-African literature, therefore, considers both African authors and themes in the continent as well as the ones in the Diaspora.

an ecofeminist methodology, combined with decolonial and africanfuturist frameworks, in order to foreground how the novel articulates critiques of anthropocentrism, androcentrism, and colonial epistemologies while imagining alternative modes of existence through the dystopian genre.

It is in utmost attentive diligence that *Who Fears Death* is here delineated as a dystopian novel. Anne Cranny-Francis defines dystopia as “the textual representation of a society apparently worse than the writer/reader’s own” (1990, p. 125). In this succinct definition, each term carries deep implications intrinsic to literary production. Yet what appears most prominent is the depiction of a social construction—with its norms and established mechanisms—understood as *worse* than reality itself. The dystopian literature shocks with its dark atmosphere. It inverts the motif of the dream, the ideal, and the good, parodying binary absolutisms in a concreteness shaped by anguish. Its impact is not produced by its internal structure alone. As Margaret Atwood states in her essay to *The New York Times*, “If I was to create an imaginary garden I wanted the toads in it to be real⁴” (Atwood, 2017). The dystopia, this imaginary garden conceived through hopelessness, where fear permeates all social relations, has at its core tangible elements that relentlessly pester a raw and exposed reality.

Beyond the traditional conception of dystopia, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan define the notion of *critical dystopia*, a theoretical category that allows us to see these texts not only as projections of undesirable futures but also as spaces of resistance: “we read critical dystopias as texts that maintain a utopian impulse” (Baccolini; Moylan, 2003, p. 7). There is a hopeful tone, generally created by ambiguity and mostly demonstrated by an open ending, that hovers both inside and outside the book, reaching the reader’s concrete reality as well as the character’s universe. Such ambiguity appears emphatically in *Who Fears Death* throughout a narrative that constructs polysemous imaginaries, as well as in its bifurcate possible endings. Likewise, Ildney Cavalcanti expands the concept by articulating the notion of feminist critical dystopia, highlighting three fundamental and interrelated aspects: a negative critique, driven by the dystopian principle, aimed both at patriarchy and at certain feminist practices and theories; a textual self-awareness of itself as both dystopian and utopian genre; and a transformative potential comparable to a critical mass capable of provoking impact and forming a critical community of feminist readers (Cavalcanti,

⁴ This line also resonates with Marianne Moore’s poem entitled “Poetry”, where she writes that poetry is “imaginary gardens with real toads in them”.

2003, p. 48). It concerns a literature that not only displays what can be understood as a bad place for women and draws on the institution of gender-based oppression, but also aligns with the utopian principle and takes it to the sphere of possible social activism. In this way, *Who Fears Death* can be read as a feminist critical dystopia that mobilizes both social diagnosis and insurgent imagination anchored in the principles of utopia.

However, in approaching *Who Fears Death*, it is necessary to adopt a respectful stance that acknowledges the multiplicity of readings the text invites. While I choose to examine the novel through the lens of dystopian fiction, it is important to note that there are other reading possibilities, for Okorafor herself remarks when sharing Neth Space's review on her blog: "*Who Fears Death* both fits in no category and fits in many" (Okorafor, "Neth Space"). Rooted in fantasy, the narrative resists confinement to a single niche or plot. As the review points out, the work could be situated within numerous subgenres (African fantasy, African magical realism, epic fantasy, young adult, world fantasy, among others), each revealing different facets of its thematic and stylistic richness. This finds resonance with the concept of genre blurring, intrinsic to critical dystopias, for they "resist genre purity in favor of an impure or hybrid text that renovates dystopian sf [science fiction] by making it formally and politically oppositional" (Baccolini; Moylan, 2003, p. 7). Such versatility demands an analytical approach attentive to the novel's hybrid nature, its negotiation of genre boundaries, and the cultural specificities that shape its storytelling. At the same time, reading *Who Fears Death* as a feminist critical dystopia offers significant analytical advantages for the subgenre often departs from the closed, totalizing structures of classical dystopian fiction, and allows space for resistance, hope, and the reimagining of social relations. Okorafor's novel actively dialogues with this array by not only depicting systemic violence, gendered oppression, and racial hierarchies, but also by envisioning transformative possibilities through the agency of its female characters. This perspective enables a layered reading that engages with the narrative's chaotic sociopolitical dimensions while foregrounding the embodied experiences of women within such oppressive systems. In this sense, reading *Who Fears Death* as a feminist critical dystopia is not a reduction of its hybridity, but a strategic interpretative choice that highlights its engagement with gendered violence and its potential for imagining alternative futures.

It is also worth noting that “dystopias may not only exist right now, but they have also formed the reality of different groups throughout history”, as Vittorio Talone observes in *Distopias presentes, passadas e futuras* (2018, p. 370, my trans.⁵). Upon reading the novel, one perceives an indeterminate time frame that opens possibilities for readings attuned to fluid temporalities—pre-, post-, inter-, and intra-apocalyptic contexts. This opposes the anachronism and causal nexus of the Western vision:

We can no longer afford conceptions of history that stress linear development or Hegelian transcendence, any more than we can accept geographical or territorial assumptions that assign centrality to the Atlantic world and congenital and even delinquent peripherality to non-Western regions (Said, 1994, p. 317).

This anti-imperialist logic that Edward Said proposes invites the destabilization of universalizing categories and totalizing Western narratives. By shifting the gaze and rejecting the linear historical model culminating in a supposed Eurocentric rationality, it creates a broadening space to consider other, multiple experiences marginalized by colonial discourse.

If time in *Who Fears Death* refuses a single, linear axis, space likewise resists cartographic absoluteness. Okorafor mobilizes language itself to sketch an Africa that is at once located and dispersed, an internal diaspora rendered through names, idioms, and cultural markers. The onomastics of the novel are particularly revealing, as Okorafor states and explains on her blog. Onyesonwu, whose name in Igbo means “Who fears death?”, brings into the narrative a question that will permeate the protagonist’s journey and guide the reader who shall discover the polymorphic significances of such locution. Ogundimu and Osugbo summon Yoruba worlds—Ogundimu evoking Ogun, deity of iron and war, and Osugbo referring to an ancestral society of elders. Najeeba, from Sudanese Arabic, carries the meaning of “noble.” Binta (Sierra Leonean, “with God”), Mwita (from Kenya, “the one who calls”), ada (Igbo, first daughter), and yeye (remarkably meaning “great mother” in Yoruba, but also resonant with Nigerian Pidgin usage, one that is pejorative and means useless) (Okorafor, “Meanings and Pronunciations”, 2010), each open a door to distinct yet interconnected African linguistic and cultural geographies. The result is that the

⁵ distopias podem não só existir nesse exato momento, como formaram a realidade de diferentes grupos ao longo da história” (Talone, 2018, p. 370).

characters' very names operate as coordinates of an intra-continental dispersion: instead of Europe-to-Africa or Africa-to-diaspora routes, Okorafor foregrounds routes within Africa itself, mapping a movement of peoples, languages, and spiritualities that exceeds colonial borders.

In this sense, the novel's spatiality is less about pinpointing a single nation-state than about foregrounding Africa as a dense, relational field of meanings. Although one of the final pages explicitly states that "the Seven Rivers Kingdom [...] used to be part of the Kingdom of Sudan" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 381), the narrative has, by then, already invited the reader to inhabit a cartography where borders blur into one another. The constellation of Igbo, Yoruba, Sudanese, Sierra Leonean, Kenyan, and Nigerian Pidgin resonances allows the story's "where" to be simultaneously Sudan and elsewhere. It could be Nigeria, Togo, Benin, Ghana, Sierra Leone, or Kenya once its texture is composed of overlapping African epistemologies rather than a single national script. Concrete territories gain the veil of fiction in an amalgam of new meanings, being recognizable in their fragments, but deliberately folded into a dystopian/utopian geography that refuses the colonial map. By stitching together this African semantic fabric, Okorafor both reflects and reimagines the history of displacement on the continent. The signs index histories of trade, war, community and tradition that long predate and exceed the colonial partition of Africa. Thus, space, like time, is rendered as a palimpsest: layers of Africa written over Africa, where precolonial, colonial, and speculative futures coexist.

Moreover, the political dimension is also inseparable from dystopian settings. As Talone observes, "the common thread would be to think of a place (world, country, state, region [...]) bad for a given group, in the sense of being invariably threatened, hunted, prohibited, oppressed [...] something normally caused by a political regime" (2018, p. 370, my trans.⁶). It is within this hostile space, shaped by an ethnic conflict and justified by a sacred book, in consonance with religious wars that intertwine with state policies, that Okorafor's dystopia is structured. The constant threat to existence is not a futuristic abstraction but a narrative exposure of a historical and collective reality.

⁶ "o fio condutor seria pensar um lugar (mundo, país, estado, região, [...]) ruim para determinado grupo, no sentido de este estar invariavelmente ameaçado, caçado, proibido, oprimido, [...] algo normalmente provocado por um regime político" (Talone, 2018, p. 370).

For plenty are the contradictions unfolding in the daily life of the contemporary woman. While she gains some basic rights in society, ceasing to be property and becoming a citizen, domesticity and care for the home are still expected of her. Assertiveness is due, but so is delicacy. It is assumed that women have the freedom to belong to new places and institutions, but they still lack the tools to move between them. It is assumed that women have the possibility of being seen by society through other lenses, but they do not have the means to construct their subjectivity in a truly free and spontaneous way. They must make choices in the face of these antagonistic bombardments, constant stigmas that are attached to them.

Stigma here appears in great significance. One of the sociological explanations for this panorama is listed by the process of degradation of the individual's social image, where the focus on stigma overdetermines the conditions of human interactions, an element intrinsic to the construction of subjectivity (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). In a society built on an androcentric foundation, with normative patterns pre-established by those in power, women fall into stigma, one that accumulates according to each physical, social, cultural, and economic aspect that a woman experiences. Not only is the male/female binary a determining factor in stigma, but so are factors such as white/non-white, Western/non-Western, heterosexual/homosexual, rich/poor, thin/fat, cisgender/transgender, young/old.

The possibility of confrontation to such logics for stigmatized populations is based on self-organization, generally seen through institutionalization, such as the fight for rights. With the union of individuals as equals—that is, equals because of the stigmas associated with them—minorities concentrate to promote a movement within the social wheel, confronting the societal patterns that reproduce such stigmas and instigating a process of transformation (Goffman, 1963, p. 123). In this chaotic, almost apocalyptic context, full of uncertainties, violence, prejudices, and anxieties, women converse, research, and organize themselves, given an urgent need for reflection on the issues that afflict them.

The self-organization of minorities, duly concentrated from the accumulation of the stigmas associated with them, has proven to be prominent and exponential in the literature. Contemporary times are pulsating and driving the recovery of historically silenced voices in a movement that promotes increased representation of these minorities in their multifaceted contexts. Hence, in this grim scenario marked by violence, stigma, and anxiety, women writers have found in dystopia a tool for reflection

and critique. Although the dystopian canon has been historically established by male authors with “male heroes, ‘universal stories’ and a critical or poorly developed female presence” (Dornelles, 2022, p. 228, my trans.⁷), modern and contemporary women writers have been subverting these structures. Canadian author Margaret Atwood publishes *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and alongside Octavia Butler, author of *Kindred* (1979), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and its sequel *Parable of the Talents* (1998), they promote a genuine shift of dystopian literature by making the world acknowledge women’s perspectives and experiences taking the center of their narratives. While it is already acute to observe such growth of dystopian literature authored by women, it is even more remarkable to realize that recently published women speak different languages, illustrate different situations, and address different themes. Bringing with them their ancestries, points of view, and traditions, it is with these particular experiences that they reach those who also see themselves in that context, those who are now represented, in addition to enriching literature as a whole. By way of example, Argentinean writer Angélica Gorodischer publishes *Kalpa Imperial* (1983) and Jamaican-Canadian Nalo Hopkinson is awarded for *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998). Also part of this panorama of dystopian works are Japanese author Yoko Ogawa with *The Memory Police* (1994); Vandana Singh, from India, with *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet* (2008); and Naijamerican Tomi Adeyemi with *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). Women authors around the world have been publishing their speculative universes and disseminating dystopian literature.

This authorial shift is understood as a response to social, political, cultural, and environmental crises, as well as a form of protest against injustice and a claim for space for women’s voices in literature and popular culture. As issues of gender, equality, and representation gain more visibility, women writers create spaces in which they can question, challenge, and rewrite the world.

Moreover, this shift not only challenges the conventions of the genre but also promotes a critical review of the literary canon itself. It is important to stress the arbitrariness of the literary canon as established by androcentric power relations, in which “what is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice” (Bernikow, 1974, p. 3). In a context where, since the

⁷ “heróis masculinos, ‘histórias universais’ e uma presença feminina crítica ou mal trabalhada” (Dornelles, 2022, p. 228).

very origins of literature and theory, homogeneous subjects—those who have left their legacies—have prevailed, it is crucial to spotlight the possibility of re-evaluating literary works. Even today, white, heterosexual, Western, cisgender men retain the legitimacy of their discourses; it is their visions that are deemed valid. A particular type of individual is privileged, and a particular type of literature is valued. Even while acknowledging the individuality of the artistic self, the cultural and social perceptions of those who established the foundational concepts for literature are understood as analogous in form.

In this context, feminist literary criticism plays a fundamental role in recognizing and analyzing how these literary productions make historically marginalized subjects visible and enable intersectional⁸ approaches, broadening the scope of contemporary discussions. Specifically, Black women writers, drawing on their experiences of multiple oppressions, have made incisive contributions to both literature and society:

Black feminist women writers, particularly due to their specific experiences with social marginalization, are sources of pointed examinations of society whose purview can contribute guidance on redressing social inequality. Therefore, the importance behind amplifying Black women's feminist writing is that they serve as perpetual indicators of the conditions of our sociological issues and the maltreatment of those who are consistently affected (Leonfils, 217, p. 8).

Thus, investigating a dystopia authored by a black woman, such as *Who Fears Death*, is not only to acknowledge the literary and sociopolitical value of her writing but also to respond to the urgent need to hear and amplify silenced and marginalized voices. In this regard, the lack of research on the novel in Brazil is noteworthy. Although Nnedi Okorafor, the Naijamerican author, has achieved international recognition and made significant contributions to literary criticism as a whole, her work remains underexplored in literary studies, especially in the Brazilian context. An initial bibliographic survey reveals the scarcity of works that address the many relevant themes of the novel, making the investigation of the subjectivities of its female characters unprecedented in Brazilian scholarship.

⁸ Intersectionality, concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw between 1989 and 1991, initially enrooted in US Black Feminism background suggesting overlapping factors that traverse an individual or a group: gender, race and class. Such aspects are seen as interrelated and ought not to be scrutinized separately, creating a framework to understand and analyze complex structures of oppression and privilege. The concept has then expanded to comprehend multiple spheres of subjectivity in society.

Given such interest, this research consistently attempts to embrace the Okorafian principles of multiple hybridities rooted in the complexity of subjectivity. By incorporating African oral traditions, non-Western epistemologies, and ancestral spiritualities, Okorafor dismantles the dominant parameters of Western fiction, proposing new ways of imagining and narrating the future, present, past. Going further, when dissatisfied with the labels imposed on her work and with the imprecise readings they encouraged, Okorafor coined the terms that more accurately describe her creative production, terms that have since been applied to other authors as well. “I am an africanfuturist and an africanjujuist,” she explains, once more, on her blog. “Africanfuturism is a sub-category of science fiction. Africanjujuism is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (Okorafor “Africanfuturism Defined”, 2019). Okorafor further defines africanfuturism as

similar to ‘afrofuturism’ in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the black diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West (Okorafor, “Africanfuturism Defined”, 2019).

This distinction from afrofuturism, prominent in recent cultural debates and artistic movements, marks a significant contribution to both literature and literary criticism, positioning africanfuturism as a framework that centers Africa as the narrative and imaginative locus while resisting the gravitational pull of Western paradigms. Unlike ongoing movements that engage in retroactive trajectories, such as reclaiming histories, aesthetics, or narratives that were erased by colonialism—significant and valuable as these are—Okorafor’s approach is not about *reclaiming*. Instead, it begins by being rooted in Africa from the outset, with the narrative unfolding outward from that foundation. Once grounded in Africa, it “branches out to embrace all blacks of the Diaspora,” affirming its all-encompassing nature. In this sense, africanfuturism “is not a wall, it’s a bridge” (Okorafor, “Africanfuturism Defined”, 2019).

As Okorafor further defines, africanfuturism

is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first

and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with "what could have been" and more concerned with "what is and can/will be". It acknowledges, grapples with and carries "what has been" (Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined", 2019).

This forward-oriented yet historically conscious approach dialogues with the critical dystopia's capacity to refuse absolute separations between utopian and dystopian principles. Like the feminist critical dystopia, africanfuturism sustains a dialectical relationship between the past, present, and future; it recognizes the enduring weight of the tempestuous history, confronts their manifestations in the contemporary moment, and simultaneously articulates alternative possibilities that are neither bound by romanticized idealism nor confined to despair. Okorafor draws on a technological and yet traditional Africa replete with antinomies that sustain each other, bringing lively, rich, powerful and dangerous desert sands to the center stage of her plot. By distorting what is westerly understood as good or bad, by refusing a metaphysical arrangement of time and space, Okorafor navigates the grey areas of subjectivity and builds whole new meanings for both fictional and concrete narratives.

That's very much a part of my identity, and it's also very much a reason why I think I ended up writing science fiction and fantasy—because I live on these borders, and these borders allow me to see from multiple perspectives and kind of take things in and then process certain ideas and certain stories in a very unique way. And that has led me to write this strange fiction that I write, which really isn't that strange if you really look at it through a sort of skewed lens (Okorafor, "Hugo Nominee", 2016).

The author acknowledges that the novel avoids conservative forms and contents, highlighting her standing on geographic, social or idealistic borders. Furthermore, not only skewed lenses are necessary to read *Who Fears Death*, but also a strong stomach. In the adult novel, violence—especially the one imposed upon women—is poured into the reader's eyes, permeating the entire narrative and occupying a significant place in the characters' trajectories. There is a considerable number of complex representations of direct physical violence—rapes, mutilations, harassment, assaults, segregation—while other, more covert forms of violence also manifest. Within the scope of dystopian literature, it is of interest to consider how this multiplicity of violences reveals that systems of domination do not operate in isolation but in interconnected ways, deeply affecting the characters' experiences. This thesis

therefore investigates how violence in its manifold manifestations—physical, symbolic, and epistemic—constitutes the central axis of the female characters' subjectivity in *Who Fears Death*, while also serving as the catalyst for their acts and forms of resistance.

The social critique proposed by the author finds resonance in Frantz Fanon's reflections, as he understands colonialism as an essentially violent regime, not only in the seizure of territories but also in the production of inferiorized subjectivities. As Fanon states in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state" (1963, p. 61). In *Who Fears Death*, the suggestion is that this founding violence has not been overcome; it persists in other forms, reproduced in institutions, beliefs, spiritual practices, and social relations.

By incorporating elements of African tradition, critiques of coloniality, and contemporary discussions on gender, in *Who Fears Death*, Nnedi Okorafor offers a complex vision of female subjectivity. Violence, being multiple, structural, and persistent, not only functions as a backdrop, outlining the contours of the characters' existence, but also points to possible paths for its re-signification. This underscores the need for attentive consideration of the plurality and complexity of human subjectivity. Once the dichotomous system employed to describe social expressions is demystified, feminism—as emphasized by the third wave—highlights the necessity of particularizing the question of womanhood, recognizing that the individual is shaped not only by gender, but also by social, ethnic-racial, economic, cultural, and geographical circumstances.

"It is a particular academic arrogance to initiate any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians" (Lorde, 2021, p. 110). The significance and expressiveness these writings offer—both to literary theory and to society—allow for the recognition of the social body as structurally racist, a fundamental premise for any discussion aimed at social transformation, especially within feminism. Contemporary society, by perpetuating ethno-racial inequalities—forms of violence—through institutions and social practices, reinforces the need for a feminism that is, above all, antiracist. As bell hooks affirms in *Feminism is for Everybody*, "we knew that there could be no real sisterhood between white women and non-white women if white women were not able to divest of white supremacy, if the

feminist movement was not fundamentally antiracist” (hooks, 2000, p. 58). This reflects the urgency for feminism—particularly when practiced by white women—to actively recognize and combat the racist structures that permeate both society and the movement itself.

In this context, the role of a white researcher in the antiracist and feminist fight must be marked by a reflective, critical stance, recognizing both the privileges inherent to whiteness and the historical and contemporary divergences between the experiences of white and black women. The inclusion of white researchers in the antiracist struggle requires a commitment to dismantling white supremacy and promoting a genuine and solidary alliance with non-white women, respecting their lived experiences and leadership.

Methodologically, ecofeminism enlightens foundational concepts for this research, providing a critical lens through which to read *Who Fears Death*, particularly in relation to the ways the novel engages with body, violence, and its setting—the environment. As Natália Fontes de Oliveira notes, this perspective seeks to “expose the imbalances of these value systems”, particularly the metaphorical construction that associates women with nature, a relation that sustains and legitimizes multiple forms of domination (2021, p. 4–5).

Val Plumwood, one of the central figures of philosophical ecofeminism, proposes a radical reformulation of the dualistic thought underpinning these systems of domination in the seminal work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. She argues that it is essential to integrate nature as a fourth category of feminist analysis, alongside class, race, and gender (1993, p. 1–2). Plumwood further identifies how women’s experiences have been structured through a dualistic rationality that strips them of agency:

As dualised nature, conceived as inert, passive, non-subjects, women have offered a fertile field for such control and manipulation by a rationality which structures women’s experience of reproduction in two Cartesian halves: the suffering body deprived of agency, and the mastering, external rational agent (Plumwood, 1993, p. 38).

This model of dualized oppression, which separates and hierarchizes reason and body, culture and nature, man and woman, is also challenged by Wangarĩ Maathai, Kenyan activist and theorist of ecology. She underscores the inseparable relation

between environmental degradation and human suffering, offering insights into how violence against the earth mirrors violence against people:

The physical destruction of the earth extends to humanity, too. If we live in an environment that's wounded [...] it hurts us, chipping away at our health and creating injuries at a physical, psychological, and spiritual level. In degrading the environment, therefore, we degrade ourselves and all humankind. The opposite is also true. In the process of helping the earth to heal, we help ourselves (Maathai, 2010, p. 17).

These formulations underscore a central dimension of contemporary ecofeminism: the recognition that the environmental crisis cannot be separated from the structures of oppression based on gender, race, and class. Methodologically, this study employs ecofeminism to illuminate how *Who Fears Death* represents the interdependencies between the human and the non-human, foregrounding how the degradation of the environment is tied to gendered and racialized violence. In this way, the novel will be read through a framework that acknowledges, following Plumwood and Maathai, that healing requires dismantling both ecological and social hierarchies.

From these premises, this research returns to its proposal of investigating violence as a constitutive category of the experience and subjectivity of the women characters in *Who Fears Death*. To this end, the dissertation will be structured into four chapters. The first chapter, "Goat-Skins and Scars: *Ewu*", presents the theoretical foundation on body, violence, and the concept of *Ewu*, a metaphor created by the author and grounded in real conflicts. The second chapter, "Womb of Sand, Wounds of Song: Najeeba," focuses on the figure of the mother of an *Ewu* being, engaging themes such as weaponized rape, voice, and motherhood. The third chapter, "Skin the Shade of Sand, Body the Color of Exile: Onyesonwu," investigates the violences suffered by the protagonist and her strategies of both survival and resistance. Finally, the fourth chapter, "*Umunnē* Bound by Blood: Onye, Diti, Luyu and Binta," discusses the eleven-year-old ritual, one that involves genital cutting, as well as the relationships among the group of young women. By examining the novel, besides mainly aiming to analyze how manifold forms of violence influence the subjectivities of the female characters and influence their ways of resistance, this thesis further seeks to understand how pan-African dystopian fiction offers alternative readings and critiques to Western and colonial modes of narrating the world. In this sense, *Who Fears Death* becomes not only a literary object of analysis but also a site of theoretical elaboration,

where categories such as gender, race, ecology, and futurity intersect. Reading the novel through ecofeminist, decolonial, and africanfuturist frameworks enables a critical reflection on the ways literature can both reproduce and resist systems of domination, opening paths toward alternative epistemologies and worldmaking practices.

CHAPTER 1: GOAT-SKINS AND SCARS: EWU

In the market, men tried to grab me but I was always quicker and
I knew how to scratch. I'd learned from the desert cats
(Okorafor, 2020, p. 10)

From the very outset of *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu's child-voice delivers a compressed testimony: terse sentences that both disclose and withhold, that name assaulting gestures while sparing the reader an explicit catalogue of injury. Upon recalling her first encounter with her stepfather, Ogundimu, she "feared that he might find my ugly features strangely delightful, too" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 10).

This thesis' chapter interrogates Okorafor's introductory grounds for imagining and creating the *Ewu* being, while also establishing the theoretical territory that lies on body and violence. The opening lines are here employed as a chapter epigraph for at least four converging reasons. Firstly, it hints at men's habits of gazing and attacking Onyesonwu since early childhood. Being succinct and straightforward, Okorafor verbalizes only few words such as "men tried to grab me" and "men find me delightful" as a rhetorical strategy: by articulating violence in bare, almost prosaic terms, the writer displaces voyeuristic spectacle and instead forces the reader into the labor of inference. She, after all, describes gruesome behaviors inflicted upon a mere child. Secondly, she introduces Onyesonwu as a fierce, instinct-driven, savage-like creature in readiness for protecting herself from predatory men. It gestures toward survival techniques learned in a world where bodily autonomy is precarious from the earliest age, where her violence is anticipatory, a repertoire of defenses learned before formal rites of social being. Thirdly, Okorafor highlights the desert's everlasting presence and significance in the text, a formative geography. All begins in the desert. It is the place where Onye learns how to scratch and, in the narrative's bigger picture, a locus of conception, birth, growth, endurance and death. Lastly, Onyesonwu describes her physical features as strange, depicting how she is seen amongst her fellow villagers and by herself. Standing out from the ones around her, she is *Ewu*.

Ewu is the word chosen by Okorafor to characterize Onyesonwu's racial configuration. In Igbo, the word literally translates as "goat", while also being

derogatory in metaphorical use, meaning a foolish person both in Igbo and in Naijá⁹ (Nkōwa okwu). An *Ewu* is a mixed-race¹⁰ child, born from an Okeke and a Nuru parent, the fictional peoples in Okorafor's universe. An *Ewu*'s physical appearance is neither Okeke's, who "had dark brown skin, wide nostrils, thick lips, and thick black hair like the hide of a sheep", nor Nuru's, who "had yellow-brown skin, narrow noses, thin lips, and brown or black hair that was like a well-groomed horse's mane". Obviously divergent from both peoples, an *Ewu*'s "skin and hair color were the odd shade of the sand", looking "more like desert spirits" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 25). Knowing the *Ewu* body stands out at first glance, Najeeba, Onye's mother, "covered every inch of me [...]. She'd have made me wear a veil over my face but she didn't have the heart" (*Ibid*, p. 9). Najeeba shows not only maternal tenderness but a political act of sheltering, a recognition that the visible body is itself a warrant for stigma, exclusion, and bodily violation. The novel, simultaneously, establishes *Ewu*-ness as not merely phenotypic difference, but more importantly, as a social inscription that places the body as a reflection of violence. "Such children are not children of the forbidden love between a Nuru and an Okeke, nor are they Noahs, Okekes born without color. The *Ewu* are children of violence" (*Ibid*, p. 20).

To fully grasp the impact of this inscription on *Ewu* existence, one must attend to the specific necropolitical mechanics through which they come into being. Born from violence, *Ewu* are conceived within a highly regulated regime of weaponized rape, that is, where rape becomes a weapon of war. Once "it was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the Nuru" (*Ibid*, p. 16)—an ancient interpretation of the *Great Book* which held the cosmogonies and power hierarchies of the Seven Rivers Kingdom—, Nuru dominance operates through what Achille Mbembe theorizes as necropolitics. As the Cameroonian historian argues, "the ultimate expression of

⁹ Also known as Nigerian Pidgin, Naijá is defined as "a language of wider communication that originated in Nigeria. It is an English-based creole and used primarily as a second language. It is not known to be taught in schools" (Ethnologue).

¹⁰ I here employ the term "race" because of the biological context of an *Ewu* child as a breeding result, as well as Okorafor's own use of the term when writing, on her blog, that "Onyesonwu is of mixed race" ("Get it straight", 2010). Yet, more recently, its denotation is viewed as a social construct based on physicality. The novel constantly stresses the characters' physical traits and how they highly influence both the fictional society and characters' actions and perspectives. In a broader context, moreover, Nuru and Okeke can also be understood as different ethnicities, for each ethnic group shares cultural characteristics such as language, beliefs and values (Little and McGivern, *Introduction to Sociology*). However, as Okekes and Nurus are fictional and have not been sociologically described, for this dissertation I prefer to adopt the term "peoples", the one that Okorafor employs throughout the novel as well.

sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (*Necropolitics*, 2019, p. 66), thus an explicit scenario of rendering population disposable can be observed. Such a theory accounts for

the various ways in which [...] weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead (Mbembe, 2019, p. 92).

Weaponized rape stands as a necropolitical—far from chaotic, a very organized, directional, systematic and, paradoxically productive—tool during wartime against the Okeke, not only inflicting direct damage onto the rape victims, but also strategically facilitating Okeke erasure altogether. Aware that an “Okeke woman will *never* kill a child kindled inside of her,” and that “custom dictates that a child is the child of her father” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 20), Nuru men “planted poison” in Okeke wombs, seeking to “destroy Okeke families at the very root” (*Ibid*, p. 21). *Ewu*, viewed as the fool, unwise, imprudent and deceiver goats of the Seven Rivers Kingdom society, therefore, are “born of pain. [...] People believe the *Ewu*-born eventually become violent. They think that an act of violence can only beget more violence” (*Ibid*, p. 31). To violate women is to attack, through the body, the possibility of future social continuity. The womb is a necropolitical battlefield.

Moreover, “the dominant racial order sustains itself by using the broken memory of traumatized others and the denial accompanying perpetration to encourage forgetting on a cultural level” (Griffiths, 2009, p. 54). Such racialized, gendered politics based on violence finds means to sustain itself also through inducted trauma. Broken memory becomes a tool of erasing bodies, existences, entire cultures.

Okorafor’s own testimony about the novel’s genesis confirms the historical stakes of this fictionalization, mirroring Atwood’s garden toads. In the acknowledgements section of *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor states: “to the 2004 AP news story by Emily Wax titled, ‘We want to make a light baby.’ This article about weaponized rape in the Sudan created the passageway through which Onyesonwu slipped into my world” (Okorafor, 2020, 387). She also shares that the article showed her why Onyesonwu was so troubled and disliked by the town’s people (Okorafor, “The writing”, 2010), being her reading of the article an important milestone for *Who Fears Death*’s creative and writing process.

The explicit acknowledgment of Wax's article as the novel's point of departure directs the reader toward the atrocities of the Darfur conflict. In Wax's reporting, recounted in the harrowing words of survivors, a woman victim describes the horrors of the conflict: "They grabbed my donkey and my straw and said, 'Black girl, you are too dark. You are like a dog. We want to make a light baby'" (Wax, 2004). This acute statement, the namesake of Wax's headline, summarizes the employment of weaponized rape while also hinting the many spheres of gendered, ethnical, colonial violence. The verbal use of "making" lighter offspring adds a biopolitical sphere to sexual violation, one that seeks to rewrite lineage itself. Maria Lugones's analysis of gender coloniality, where the colonized woman is not simply dominated but rendered non-human, helps us see how such acts both animalize and annihilate the subject (Lugones, 2019, p. 372).

In regard of the Darfur conflict's conjecture, reports compiled by Human Rights Watch introduce: "Since early 2003, Sudanese government forces and government-backed ethnic militias known as 'Janjaweed' have committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and 'ethnic cleansing' in the Darfur region of Sudan" (HRW, 2005 p. 1). The document describes in harrowing detail how women and girls, particularly those from African ethnic groups, were subjected to abduction, beating and rape by Janjaweed militia and government forces. These attacks, carried out both within and beyond refugee camps, deliberately targeted women's bodies as extensions of ethnic and communal identity. Thus, the 2005 briefing paper emphasizes how such sexual violence was not isolated, but programmatic: "these incidents of rape clearly aimed to subjugate, humiliate and terrorize the entire community, not just the women and girls raped by the militias" (HRW, 2005, p. 5). Moreover, the report thoroughly describes the complex consequences of weaponized rape in Sudan, a domino effect where each outcome contributed to accentuate worse and worse conditions. I here highlight a) a collapse in reproductive and medical infrastructure with consequent spikes in diseases with a dangerously increased rate of STIs' dissemination, including HIV; b) coerced migration, stressing a deep territorial insecurity and sense of despair driven by a siege strategy that left no safe place to go; and c) a profound distress of societal structures already inflected by misogyny, such that raped women are deemed unmarriageable and, while being carriers of the enemy's offspring, their pregnancies become grounds for social exile.

The materiality of these outcomes maps onto Okorafor's fictional topography, where the *Ewu* child is not merely a metaphor for mixed heritage, but also a living indicator of the necropolitical policy that treats certain bodies as dispensable or, alternately, as instruments for the enactment of ethnic replacement. In *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller's seminal formulation of rape as a political act clarifies that while rape "does not need a sophisticated political motivation beyond a general disregard for the bodily integrity of women," it assumes a particularly sinister function in warfare, where it "has a military effect as well as an impulse. And the effect is indubitably one of intimidation and demoralization for the victims' side" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 37). This understanding of rape as both impulse and strategy is visible in Okorafor's rendering of Nuru practices. The text, therefore, compels the reader to understand sexual violence not only as private suffering but as a public, state-adjacent policy.

It is known that raped women suffer the most terrible consequences under weaponized rape regime. Okorafor further questions about the children, the planted seeds of such praxis. Conceived in rape, their bodies become permanent markers of domination. By bearing the indelible sign of violence, the *Ewu* body and existence function as living testaments to the subjugation of the Okeke people, while simultaneously embodying the stigma of impurity. When describing a villager's behavior toward her as a 6-year-old and hinting the general treatment she received, Onyesonwu states: he "hated me and he let me know this by sneering with disgust whenever he saw me, as if I were a diseased wild animal" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 10). The representation of the *Ewu* being, after all, threatens the territorial and cultural continuity of a people as whole.

Simultaneously, Okorafor's narrative technique amplifies this notion on specificity as political pedagogy. When "speaking in terms of millions can turn into a statistic, while thinking in terms of a 'mass' would make us lose the immediate/urgent dimension of the terror", the individualized perspective emphasizes gravity (Talone, 2018, p. 374, my trans.¹¹). This underscores the moral necessity of the particular. The testimony of individual victims, as Wax and Human Rights Watch demonstrate, resists abstraction and recovers affective immediacy. By sharing the names of the victims, they approximate the reader to the nightmarish terrors of reality. Here lies an important

¹¹ falar em milhões pode traduzir-se em estatística, pensar em "massa" nos faria perder a dimensão imediata/urgente do terror (Talone, 2018, p. 374).

aspect of dystopian literature, one that is restrained to its characters, one that is intimate. The result is a novel that privileges particular experience over sweeping generalization, thereby enabling readers to encounter atrocity not as a remote fact while sitting on their armchairs but as a proximate reality.

Okorafor's novel does not merely stage individualized violence for narrative effect, rather mobilizes dystopian devices to articulate a multi-layered critique. In this sense, Cavalcanti's theorization of the feminist critical dystopia dialogues to the *Ewu* being in the tripartite way she addresses critique. The third layer she proposes curiously emerges in the effect the novel may produce in its readership. Cavalcanti suggests that feminist critical dystopias may catalyze the formation of a feminist public sphere, igniting critical awareness through narrative (Cavalcanti, 2003, p. 48). In the case of *Who Fears Death*, this potential is heightened by Okorafor's refusal to universalize experience, focusing on Onyesonwu's *Ewu*-ness. The novel demands that its readers, whether African, diasporic or even Western, reckon with the interwoven structures of gender, race, and colonial legacies. It thus operates as an explosive reaction in the cultural field, from interior to exterior, destabilizing comfortable imaginaries and compelling an acknowledgment of the embodied consequences of systemic violence.

Cavalcanti's second sense of "critical" lies in textual self-awareness, dialoguing with Tom Moylan's conception of textual self-criticism in *Demand the Impossible* (Moylan, 1986, p. 10). It regards an interrogation of genre conventions and the politics of imagining utopian "elsewheres" (Cavalcanti, 2003, p. 48). Okorafor constructs the *Ewu* being as an ambiguous creature, capable of both destruction and salvation. On the one hand, Onyesonwu constantly senses an urge for violence:

I felt it inside me, too. Like a demon buried under my skin since my conception. A gift from my father, from his corrupted genetics. The potential and taste for amazing cruelty. It was in my bones, firm, stable, unmoving. Oh, I had to find and kill this man (Okorafor, 2020, p. 151).

On the other hand, she learns she is destined to bring peace and harmony to the Seven Rivers Kingdom. When examining the prophecy held by the Seer, Rana, Onyesonwu's heroine archetype is confirmed: "He wasn't advised to look out for a Nuru man. It was an *Ewu* woman" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 161). In a wide-encompassing view, both the

dystopian “bad” and the utopian “good” can be acknowledged in Onye’s development: “If I knew how to give life, I knew how to take it” (*Ibid*, p. 213).

The first sense of “critical,” as Cavalcanti suggests, is the negative critique enacted by the dystopian form (Cavalcanti, 2003, p. 48). *Who Fears Death* performs this function by exposing patriarchal systems of control over women’s bodies, while also engaging critically with feminist praxis. When it comes to the *Ewu* conception, by foregrounding rape as both individual trauma and systemic weapon, the novel resists sanitized or universalized feminist discourses that neglect the racial and geopolitical particularities of violence in African contexts.

Importantly, the novel’s inscription of the *Ewu* body as “born of pain” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 31) further dramatizes the entanglement of metaphor and materiality in dystopian fiction. The scars and goat-skin connotations of Onyesonwu’s figure are both literal and symbolic, collapsing distinctions between the physical and the discursive. In this sense, this doubleness compels a theorization that begins, in this chapter, with the question of how gendered, racialized bodies are understood.

Judith Butler’s work provides a productive point of departure because it suggests that bodies are not pre-given natural facts, but a performative site of meaning. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Butler demonstrates that “the body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic” (Butler, 1988, p. 521). The body, then, is not reducible to matter, nor is it a neutral given. Rather, it is a stage on which social norms are continually dramatized, performed, and reproduced. Butler radicalizes Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that the body is a “historical situation,” arguing that it becomes intelligible only as a “manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation” (Butler, 1988, p. 521). In this sense, the body is not a passive surface onto which gender or race is inscribed but an active process of materialization: “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (*Ibid*, p. 523). What appears as the natural fact of sex or corporeality is revealed instead as “the legacy of sedimented performances” (*Ibid*, p. 523), materialized through repetition and regulation.

Such insight is significant when turning to the African female body in contexts of both literary and historical representation. If, as Butler argues, the body emerges through repeated acts that sediment into conception, then one must ask what kinds of acts have historically constituted the female body. bell hooks offers a direct response

to this question by foregrounding the politics of sexuality in both feminist and black feminist thought. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, hooks argues that

contrary to the image the mass media presented to the world, a feminist movement starting with women burning bras at a Miss America pageant and then later images of women seeking abortions, one of the first issues which served as a catalyst for the formation of the movement was sexuality—the issue being the rights of women to choose when and with whom they would be sexual (hooks, 2000, p. 25).

Here, hooks exposes the concrete political concerns that incited feminist early mobilizations. Hence, sexual autonomy is not a peripheral issue but a foundational site of struggle, precisely because it is through sexuality that women's bodies have been most forcefully policed, regulated, and violated.

For black women in particular, hooks notes in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* that “representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism and which still shape perceptions today” (hooks, 1992, p. 62). Furthermore, when exemplifying the “civilized” European man and his fascination toward the black female body, hooks argues that:

Objectified in a manner similar to that of black female slaves who stood on auction blocks while owners and overseers described their important, salable parts, the black women whose naked bodies were displayed for whites at social functions had no presence. They were reduced to mere spectacle. Little is known of their lives, their motivations. Their body parts were offered as evidence to support racist notions that black people were more akin to animals than other humans (hooks, 1992, p. 62).

It is possible to perceive that the inscription of the black female body as fragmentary and spectacular is not merely a historical aberration but an ongoing process that reproduces racialized gender hierarchies. This point is expanded by Ayo A. Coly in *Postcolonial Hauntologies*, where the African female body is analyzed regarding its instrumentalization by colonial discourses. Drawing on Ann Laura Stoler, Coly argues that

the African female body was a foundational and structural element of the co-invention of Europe and its others. The pornotropics¹² and the African female body served the function of exiling and safely confining the immorality of 'perverse' sexuality outside the frontiers of Europe" (Coly, 2019, p. 20).

The black female body here becomes a geography of difference, constructed through contrast and embodying the necessary negative to the positive, European, good, civil morality. "The deviant African female body in colonial discourses became a privileged space of enunciation of European moral superiority and leadership" (Coly, 2019, p. 20). This colonial invention of the African female body, where the body is seen as aberrant, was, in addition, both spatial and temporal. Coly further analyzes that

the juxtaposed projection of past and future temporalities onto the African female body and the displacement of the body from present temporalities participate in what McClintock describes as the colonial invention of the African female body as 'anachronistic space'" (Coly, 2019, p. 21).

In this formulation, the African female body is denied contemporaneity, trapped instead between a mythologized "primitive" past and a speculative, civilizing future. The dystopian resonance of this displacement is perceptible where the body becomes a chronotope of exclusion, at once overdetermined by past violence. This anticipatory logic continues to haunt contemporary imaginaries of black womanhood, including in Okorafor's fictional world, where the *Ewu* body is marked as both the product of ancestral violence and the harbinger of feared futures.

At the same time, it is precisely because the body is performatively constituted that it holds the potential for reconstitution. In the context of *Who Fears Death*, this means that even as the *Ewu* body is marked as a site of violence, it also becomes the stage on which new acts, whether of resistance, rewriting, or survival can be dramatized. If the body is an inscription, then re-inscription is possible: alternative practices that are to be here analyzed, such as naming, scratching, singing, healing, and loving, for instance, can contest the inscriptions imposed by colonial-patriarchal regimes.

¹² Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), essays on the *porno-tropic* as an imperial discourse in which the indigenous, colonized female body is hypersexualized and fetishized by the European colonizer.

In order to conclude this theoretical framework on body and, at the same time, bring it into harmony with the centrality of Igbo culture in Okorafor's world-building, Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere, an Igbo anthropologist, offers a crucial, groundbreaking study on Igbo women. Her work allows this chapter to embrace a critical lens that also listens to the categories through which Igbo people themselves conceptualize personhood, highlighting the African root of africanfuturism. This foregrounds an autochthonous grammar of the body that underlies much of Okorafor's reimagining of violence, gender, motherhood, and spirituality.

By observing the dialogue between tradition and modernity, Agbasiere contributes with a rich, gendered, and anthropological description of Igbo society that complicates any easy translation of the body as a universal category. In consonance with Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's observations on language, Agbasiere stresses that precise definitions of Igbo signs cannot be fully translated without loss, although their understandings can be somehow grasped under careful examination. In the matter of the Igbo idea of person, her account begins from a single ontological statement, noting that Igbo personhood is first and foremost animated by a vital force, the *ume*. This *ume* (vital-breath or life-force) is what separates the living from the non-living. "It is believed to be located in the limbs, muscles, blood and fat" (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 65). The linguistic term for a human being, *mmadu* (from *mma*, beauty, plus *ndu*, life), "means 'beauty and goodness of life', implying the acme of existence" (*Ibid*, p. 65). There is intrinsic meaning and value, therefore, in embodied vitality.

Agbasiere then maps a finely articulated anatomy of that living body. A person's material nature (*ahu*), is dissected into broad, locally meaningful zones: *isi* (head, upper extremity), *afo* (centre, trunk), and *ukwu la aka* (end, lower extremity). This tripartite schema corresponds to indigenous taxonomies derived from animal anatomy and carries social meanings: "It is inferred that the *isi* category of elements stands for the adult man within the kinship unit, while its counterparts, the *afo* and *ukwu la aka*, denote the group's women and minors respectively" (*Ibid*, p. 68). Agbasiere then argues that this can be illustrated by the mode of ritual meat distribution, where male leaders are given *isi* carcass and adult women the *afo* parts. This highlights an all-encompassing, intrinsic link to body and society, hinting that there is no life, neither individual nor collective, without the counterparts. Likewise, reproductive notions, where "it is commonly held that the man contributes semen and the woman contributes

blood” (*Ibid*, p. 65), are not merely biological facts but semiotic, cosmological understandings.

Agbasiere pays special attention to the way emotions and personal traits are organ-localized, a practice that clarifies how affective life is made legible in material terms. She says “The heart is usually also credited with positive emotions: kindness, respect and so on, in contrast to the gall-bladder, which is associated with their negative counterparts. The loins and hip muscles, on the other hand, are associated with sexual emotions” (*Ibid*, p. 67). Yet, Agbasiere is very careful to emphasize the system’s plasticity, for emotions can be located in different organs beyond their canonical attribution, highlighting a multiplicity of roles that dialogue both with flesh and with feeling. The umbilical cord, treated ritually by being buried on family land, is a particularly potent material symbol because it is read as the channel for ancestral and reincarnatory traits (*Ibid*, p. 67). The cord literalizes the way lineage, land, and bodily identity are materially and ritually intertwined.

Agbasiere’s account of the body’s non-material dimension (*mmuo*) is essential for appreciating how the Igbo do not treat body and spirit as separable domains. While the *mmuo* mirrors the body in also being animated by *ndu* (life), it is conceived as a set of regulating forces, endowments that orient a person’s activities beyond the psychological (*Ibid*, p. 69). It is an ambiguous relation between one’s journey and one’s spirit.

Agbasiere’s study furnishes a powerful recourse to atomized Western models of embodiment, noting how bodies are simultaneously biological, social, and cosmological artifacts. Applied to narratives of violence and survival, Agbasiere’s schema encourages us to read wounds, scars, and social practices not as isolated symptoms but as a holistic living body-system whose meanings are negotiated within a shared cosmology.

To move to a rigorous treatment of the violences that mark the body, it is necessary to draw on a multidisciplinary definition of violence and a taxonomy that differentiates types without fragmenting the phenomenon. As previously stated, Fanon’s understanding of colonialism as “violence in its natural state” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 61) heads this theorization, being a precise diagnosis of a regime in which violence is neither accident nor deviation, but the organizing principle of political, economic, and psychic life, the means by which colonial order is produced and reproduced. It is also fruitful and necessary to explore further definitions and contexts

in conformity with *Who Fears Death's* complexity of themes. The World Health Organization offers a useful starting point: violence is

the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (WHO, p. 3).

Three features of this definition are prominent to this study. First, it emphasizes intentionality, suggesting the presence of someone or something with a deliberate, articulated motive. Second, it isolates physical force from power, implying that the employment of power itself—in this case, the power of the colonizer—can be as violent as the explicit physicality. Thirdly, following this logic, it widens harm beyond immediate bodily injuries to include psychological harm, maldevelopment, and deprivation, terms that capture the slow and accumulative effects of oppression. This signals that violence includes both physical injury and broader harms to wellbeing. Thus, it is a frame that allows us to hold together bodily harm and long-term social damage, opening space to perceive how Okorafor's world links blatantly violent events to the quieter erosions of life that persist long after the visible bruises vanish.

It is precisely this bigger-picture perspective that Johan Galtung makes analytically sharp in his foundational essay "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." Galtung distinguishes direct violence from the structural one and insists that the latter is no less real for lacking a visible aggressor. Direct violence appears when we can identify an actor and an act, the "violence with a clear subject-object relation" that is "manifest because it is visible as *action*" (Galtung, 1969, p. 171). A beating, a rape, a stoning, a burning: these are scenes where the hand that harms and the body that suffers are clearly linked, as clear as the canonical syntax of subject-verb-object, "with both subject and object being persons" (*Ibid*, p. 171). On the other hand, "violence without this relation is structural" (*Ibid*, p. 171). Also damaging, therefore, is structural violence where social, economic, and political arrangements systematically shorten lives, limit possibilities, or corrode dignity. Such structures have no specific face and do not require an agent. Rather, they appear in institutions, policies, social regulations that dictate and maintain a system that regards peoples. While Galtung illustrates direct violence with the example of a husband beating his wife, structural violence is "when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance" or even in a society

“where life expectancy is twice as high in the upper as in the lower classes” (*Ibid*, p. 171). No reading attentive to bodies, therefore, can ignore the (infra)structures that silently arrange which bodies are exposed and which are shielded.

Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* contextualizes such structural violence in the colonial sphere, adding another layer by centering the psychic inscription of violence in the colonized subject. His formulation that colonized peoples are those “in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” (Fanon, 2008, p. 9) foregrounds how structural violence forges the body and mind as affect. What Galtung describes as violence without a visible subject is, in the colonial situation Fanon describes, a whole network of institutions, values, and representations that systematically devalue the colonized, presenting their culture as primitive, their language as inferior, and their bodies as deviant. The colonized subject, Fanon writes,

lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation (Fanon, 2008, p. 74).

Hereby, structural violence is not only what is done to the body but what is made to grow within it, in the sense that such violence produces physical harm, social oppression and inequality, and also lasting psychic wounds that become constitutive of how subjects in colonial situation inhabit their own bodies. It is the fact that housing, law, education, work, landscape, are organized in such a way that the colonized is continually destituted of possibility, physically and socially dislocated in a system that promotes one’s dispensability, if not complete erasure in dialogue with Mbembe’s necropolitics. In Fanon’s perspective, such violence is inseparable from the production and perpetuation of racial hierarchies, for it does not only injure and limit, but also installs in the colonized a painful psychological state, one that allows the perpetuation of such structure.

Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* further refines this layered understanding of violence by naming a form of domination that is neither overtly physical nor easily localized in a single act, but is instead woven into the taken-for-granted categories through which people perceive the social world. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “the gentle, invisible form of violence”, one that

“cannot fail to be seen as the most economical mode of domination” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 192). It stands as the *naturalization* of hierarchy through language and culture, where the dominated adopt as “natural” the very classifications that justify their domination. Such cheap phenomenon both silently cultivates and sustains a power-system between oppressor and oppressed, and also prepares the ground on which other forms of violence can be enacted with little resistance or moral disturbance. It sustains itself under a general imaginary, one that may make some bodies appear more credible, beautiful, even more worthy than others. This clarifies how stigma and everyday deprecation are not mere attitudes but technologies that reproduce subordination.

In summary, I operationalize the concept of bodily violence in a layered way, proposing four intrinsic definitions of bodily violence that will guide the following close readings. At the most immediate level, direct corporeal violence refers to physical assaults that scar the female body and define many pivotal moments in the novel. Beyond these acts, biopolitical and necropolitical violence registers when sexual assault, forced reproduction, and mass displacement are mobilized as instruments of war, as in the Nuru’s campaign to annihilate the Okeke. A further layer is structural bodily violence, which manifests less visibly in institutional arrangements that deprive people of care, exile them to hostile conditions, or normalize their exclusion, thereby shortening lives without a single blow being struck. Finally, symbolic and epistemic violence falls upon the body when discursive practices—naming, animalization, public shaming—deny subjecthood and prepare the ground for physical aggression. These overlapping registers reveal that bodily violence in Okorafor’s dystopia is not reducible to episodic events but constitutes a continuum, ranging from spectacular acts of cruelty to the slow and unseen erosions of life. In *Who Fears Death*, goat-skins and scars are not mere metaphors but the raw material of a necessary sociopolitical reading of futurities.

CHAPTER 2: *WOMB OF SAND, WOUNDS OF SONG: NAJEEBA*

The Nurus made a wide circle around them,
herding them back together like wild camels
(Okorafor, 2020, p. 18).

The Nuru people come as shepherds who ride scooters and technological, expensive regimentals, demonstrating that besides the terror of imminent physical domination, this display of absolute force is also encompassed by ecological and socio-economical spheres. The Nuru are the ones who possess the capital to purchase the technology that protects them from the discomforts of the desert sun—a technology that allows them to fully exert their military power. Najeeba “remembered how her husband had always wanted weather gel for his clothes when he worked up in the palm trees. He could never afford it” (Okorafor, 2020, 18). The Nuru corral the Okeke women who stand as animalized creatures being forcibly conducted to the center, trapped physical and mentally.

Spatially, the Nuru siege functions in both macro and microframes. The herding of the Okeke women mirrors the encirclement that resulted in the village’s destruction: the “village had been an easy conquest, off guard, vulnerable, unaware, in denial¹³” (*Ibid*, p. 22). There is no place to run, neither in the village nor outside the scooter’s loop. In a spatial, military movement, both the herd of Okeke women and their village are pushed to the center stage of destruction, deprived of action. Violence is staged as spectacle since the beginning of the invasion.

The raids, therefore, where “the Nuru soldiers took the strongest Okeke men, tied them up, doused them with kerosene, and set them afire” (*Ibid*, p. 22), form the macroframe of such siege, a parade of power. They initially aim for the strongest Okeke men and publicly execute them in flaunting fire, declaring there is no protection or refuge. Simultaneously, the herding and raping of the women Holding Conversation in the desert, more specifically Najeeba’s, whose perspective is closely narrated, is the microcosm, where such acts repeat and embody the siege. Not even nature, that is seen as a hiding refuge, can provide shelter any more. Neither the village “hidden by

¹³ The use of “in denial” here is referencing the Okeke tendency to ignore the real danger the Nuru promote, for they are not palpable enough. Okorafor makes clear that some Okeke people turn a blind eye to invasion stories and reports, discrediting them, once the conflicts take place far from the villagers and hence do not affect them directly.

lazy palm trees” nor where women “had their heads in the sand” (*Ibid*, p. 18), praying. The text’s references to the burnt strong Okeke men and the destroyed village make visible the wider arrangement that renders women’s bodies available for targeting. Thus, the economic and political architecture that enables rape is not necessarily private, but structural.

The psychological terror the trapped Okeke are inducted to feel is not only due to the material, physical displays of power. “She was an Okeke. What business did she have being hopeful?” (*Ibid*, p. 23). Cosmogony beliefs unfold another layer of understanding the gruesome attack and their effects: “It was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the Nuru. Long ago, during the Old Africa Era, they had done something terrible causing Ani to put this duty on their backs. It is written in the Great Book” (*Ibid*, p. 16). Not only there was no physical way of fighting back, the Okeke *could not* fight back, restrained by a sacred belief. This resonates with Fanon’s inferiority complex, although it carries even a deeper layer, for both colonizer and colonized share the same cosmogony, one that diminishes the Okeke. The inferiority complex is not injected, but innate. Nurus are, in the context their cultural belief implies, rightfully claiming the land, bodies, spirits.

The blood of the Okeke runs like water
 We take their goods and shame their forefathers.
 We beat them with a heavy hand
 Then take what they call their land.
 The power of Ani belongs to us
 And so we will slay you to dust
 Ugly filthy slaves, Ani has finally killed you! (Okorafor, 2020, p. 18-19)

Song becomes a ceremonial utterance of obliteration, yet another form of violence, one that is vocalized while portraying heinous epithets. Its function is not merely taunt but inscription: to sing is to claim. “They sang in the common language of Sipo, so that the Okeke women could understand” (*Ibid*, p. 18), a movement that, through recognizable, discernible sound-waves spreading across the air, forcibly included the Okeke as part of the singing ritual. They could close their eyes, but they couldn’t cover their ears. It is through sound, the same spoken-orality that carries knowledge, stories, fears and hopes throughout small eons, that the Nuru position the Okeke women in

time and space¹⁴, affirming a legitimate—although created—past and drawing on a conquered future: a conquered land with conquered people.

Nuru women also participated. “The Nuru women who’d come along laughed, pointed, and sang, too” (*Ibid*, p. 18). Their presence complicates any neat binary of male perpetrator/female victim by revealing the gendered, communal orchestration of humiliation. Women’s voices are echoed to mark other women as inferior, and this echo unfolds the peculiar cruelty of colonial situations—racist, classicist and patriarchal—where women are led¹⁵, through the ideological structures that shape their privileged existence, to enact the subjugation of other women. Nuru women, at the bottom of a twofold-gendered hierarchy, actively help dig a deeper bottom to there throw Okeke women. Harriet Jacobs reminds us in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) of the antagonist behaviors her mistress directed onto the enslaved woman’s body and spirit, driven by a continuous need for self-affirmation and power, for Mrs. Flint also lacked it. By bringing the Nuru women to the scene, Okorafor here raises an important critique on feminist theories that not only failed to include black women, third-world women and poor women, but actively and consciously excluded them, stepping on them to make their voices the ones that were heard and legitimate. Audre Lorde, when criticizing white feminism in academia to illustrate the dynamics of racialized exclusion, reminds us that

the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (Lorde, 2021, p. 112).

Lorde warns against relying on dominant, exclusionary forms of power, the master’s tools, to fight those very same systems. The complicity of privileged women in sustaining oppression is visible when they refuse to center or even recognize the needs and voices of women who “stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women” (Lorde, 2021, p. 112).

¹⁴ Julian Treasure, in *Sound Affects* (2025), discusses how sound affects people’s perception of space and time. He suggests that sound not only shapes our experience of space (through environment, echoes, distance) but also provides the main medium through which we experience time, allowing a sense of before/after, duration and rhythm.

¹⁵ I here opt for a construction that implies conduction not to lessen any accountability or to martyrize, but to recognize that all subjects are prone to the socio-economical system of racialized patriarchy and are susceptible to its cyclical, self-sustaining consequences.

Likewise, Najeeba's dreams shows that women are not always aligned by their oppression but sometimes positioned to enforce it. After the nightmarish attack, Najeeba's nightmares are populated not by the Nuru men but by the women. "At night when she lay down in her tent, she'd hear Nuru women's voices laughing and singing outside. [...] 'I'll tear off your breasts!' she said. 'I'll drink your blood and it'll nourish the one who grows inside me!'" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 23-24). The novel insists on the layered racial, ethnic, colonial hierarchies that modulate how women relate to one another. This supports our understanding of the ways intra-gender aggressions enable and accelerate violence, a different register of violation: it is the recognition that those who, by gendered experience, could have acknowledged her pain, instead chose to magnify it, to laugh and sing while her body was defiled. Najeeba's dreams indicate toward a wound inflicted less by the brute fact of male violence and more by the collapse of solidarity. This leads to the extremity of Najeeba's desire to destroy them. It is not simply hatred in the reductive sense Lorde warns against, as "the fury of those who do not share our goals" (2021, p. 129), but the grief of having expected recognition, even minimally, from those whose bodies, like hers, are also vulnerable within patriarchal structures.

For Najeeba, then, anger is a necessary register of truth: the dream's violent imagery clarifies the depth of the wound and refuses to romanticize sisterhood. Yet, as Lorde reminds us, anger must not calcify into hatred, which seeks only destruction. Anger, in Lorde's formulation, is a resource: "its object is change" (2021, p. 129). The work of feminist criticism, then, is not to smooth over this antagonism, but to read it as an index of distorted relations among women under colonial and racialized patriarchy. What Okorafor exposes here is not a failure of Najeeba's character but the success of an oppressive system in manipulating differences to fragment potential alliances. Najeeba's dream asks us to see how violence breeds the desire to more violence, and how that desire signals both pain and the need for transformation. While the violence she fantasizes is grotesque, it also names a wish for transmutation: nourishment. Through Najeeba's angry threat, Onyesonwu can be seen as an inheritor of rage redirected into survival and growth.

The novel thus becomes a cautionary parable against universalist feminisms that is taught to view difference "as causes for separation and suspicion" (Lorde, 2021, p. 112), or even that advocate "the mere tolerance of difference between women", which is "the grossest reformism" (*Ibid*, p. 111). Lorde insists that "divide and conquer,

in our world must become define and empower” (*Ibid*, p. 112). Difference must not be read as threat but as dialect.

To proceed with the analysis of violence staged as spectacle, let us return to the fact that Nuru women sing with Nuru men and observe what other layers of terror are inflicted during the ritual of song. Najeeba’s rapist “started singing, stabbing his knife into the sand next to Najeeba’s head” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 19). There is, in addition to the violence of song, an obvious menace by the weapon positioned right beside her body, a weapon that pierces sand. It is a warning that positions the violent display inflicted upon the environment as parallel to Najeeba. When he stabs desert sands that were once a locus of protection, exerting total power over them, he positions Najeeba in that very same logic, one that “sustains and legitimizes multiple forms of domination (Fontes de Oliveira, 2021, p. 4–5). Once nature and women are associated, the exploitation of nature justifies women’s, being the opposite also true.

And yet, there is another important form of violence that concludes the examination of the Nuru-promoted spectacle. “Its tiny black camera eye rose up, making a clicking and whirring sound as it began to record” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 19). Besides promoting a deeper physical and psychological humiliation, Nuru attackers are documenting evidence of a conquest that can circulate beyond such event. The recording shifts the act from the private domain of bodily violation to the public sphere of images and memory. The camera eye functions as both witness and weapon, producing a narrative of conquest that is detached from the victim’s experience and instead oriented toward power affirmation. In this sense, the technological gaze compounds the brutality of the rape, inscribing it into a continuum of domination that extends across time. What is at stake here is not only the act of violation but the production of history: a deliberate attempt to script subjugation as permanent record, a future-oriented act that seeks to naturalize hierarchy by turning suffering into evidence of inferiority.

He records and sings and “despite the song’s words, his voice was beautiful” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 20). The paradox that something beautiful might be the vehicle of terrible harm refuses moral simplicity. Beauty does not redeem, and voice, which might otherwise be the instrument of song and communal belonging, again appears as an instrument of domination. Indeed, the novel stages this wrenching ambivalence in multiple registers: the perpetrators’ songs are both weapon and revel while the women’s laughter becomes a chorus of humiliation. However, what appears to be most

prominent in the beauty of the rapist's voice is that Najeeba was able to perceive it while subjected to everything that vehemently opposed positive significations. She could see beauty during her own horrifying rape, while "his veil covered his face but not his rage" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 19). Rape, as an instrument of domination, "is the quintessential act by which a male demonstrates to a female that she is conquered—vanquished—by his superior strength and power" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 49). It is meant to reduce the victim to pure objecthood, to strip away her capacity of existing, of interpreting, of owning subjectivity. As Bibi Bakare-Yusuf argues in *The Economy of Violence*, dialoguing with Elaine Scarry, "the body in pain is not able to participate fully in civic life, because pain destroys the capacity of language; the body is denied the facilities that make subjectivity possible" (1999, p. 315). Yet Najeeba sees it. This is not admiration, naturally, but subversion. It is precisely in the act of perception, in the noticing that the world is not reducible to brutality, that resistance germinates. Najeeba continues to produce meaning, positive meaning, in the very moment designed to erase her capacity for meaning. In this sense, perceiving beauty becomes survival when reaffirming subjectivity, a fissure in the machinery of annihilation. The self maintains its right to exist, even when forced into silence and pain. This observation, therefore, inaugurates the analysis of Najeeba's adopted forms of resistance.

There is a clear centrality to voice in *Who Fears Death*, a high-esteemed matter in the field of feminist, post-colonial studies and, naturally, africanfuturist studies. The novel also contributes with an insight of its lack. Once Najeeba sees the Nuru people, she "screamed so loudly that all the air left her lungs and she felt something give from deep in her throat. She'd later realize that this was her voice leaving her forever" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 18). She screams, instinctively communicating terror, warning others. However, physically and socially, she becomes voiceless. That loss is not just a physiological response but a reconfiguration of her capacity to speak, argue, announce, claim, and consequently, to be heard as a subject. Such capacity depends on a network of listeners and on a public sphere willing to treat a particular testimony as valid. Reading Najeeba's loss of voice through this lens clarifies that the silenced person is not only suffering private injury. She becomes socio-politically buried. When Najeeba loses voice, Okorafor emphasizes how language and political subjectivity are co-constituted. A voice that cannot be summoned cannot fully claim rights, cannot make demands, cannot call others, cannot protect their body. In the act of screaming,

Najeeba loses her first battle, the one against Nuru's imposed songs and presence. Her body mirrors her aghast spirit.

Yet, in the novel, the understanding of silence uncorks other bottles, lenses of interpretation. To maintain one single perspective that Najeeba is "voiceless" in a diminishing way would be to miss the different modalities of speech Okorafor stages. If the oppressor's song is a public performance that legitimizes domination, Najeeba's "ability to silence pain and observe" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 20) pushes her into an alternative, private "monologue"—or being—that defiles. "Najeeba went cold, then numb, then quiet. [...] She'd always been like this to an extent. [...] Najeeba's peculiar behavior used to anger her father whenever she misbehaved and was beaten. No matter how hard the slap, she wouldn't make a sound" (*Ibid*, p. 19-20). Her *Alusi* now emerges as a deliberate and complex tactic of survival.

When describing Igbo cosmology, Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere discusses the *umummuo* (children of the spirit world), a category of metaphysical beings that she addresses as "minor divinities". Such deities manifest power through habitation of nature, where female *umummuo* inhabit earth and water and male divinities inhabit fire and air. A further distinction of the category introduces the *alusi*, or *arusi*, categorized by their usefulness and "regarded as 'serviceable' in the sense of being a 'productive or powerful divinity'. The implication being that the divinity is worth soliciting" (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 57). Wide-ranging, this definition that points toward something positive dialogues with the conception that *Alusi* "embody specific attributes or domains of nature, such as fertility, rivers, forests, war, and justice" (Odike), quotidian domains, and that *Alusi* in Igbo cosmology are manifold, branching in various spheres of life and beliefs.

Okorafor gifts Najeeba with the essence of a divinity invoked for goodness, for protection. In the fictional narrative, she *is* an *Alusi*: "she became the *Alusi* that her father said had always lived in her; the desert spirit who loved to wander off to distant places" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 23). And it is with this powerful spirit that is embodied in Najeeba, one that comes from the desert—from the earth element and thus being a female deity—that she is able to reconstitute narrative memory. "Her mind recorded events like the man's device. Every detail" (*Ibid*, p. 20). In registering her own rape within her own self, Najeeba reclaims authorship of an event that would otherwise be narrated exclusively through the perspective of her rapist and his people. It is an active, epistemological, defying, heroic, humanly and non-humanly holy act, producing a

counter-archive that destabilizes the hegemonic view of knowledge built on women's violated silence. To know is to carry, to hold within, to bind memory to spirit and body. There is a reorientation of identity in Najeeba when she embodies the Alusi that reassigns authority to noncolonial, nonpatriarchal ontologies.

At this point, it is important to note that resistance in Okorafor's world is rarely solitary. Amaka emerges in shout and order, an emblem that portrays how individual action incite communal defiance:

'Stand up!' Amaka was twenty years Najeeba's senior. She was strong and often a voice for the women of her village. 'Stand up, all of you!' Amaka said, stumbling. 'Get up!' She went to each woman and kicked her. 'We're dead but we won't die out here, those of us still breathing' (Okorafor, 2020, p. 20).

Here, her act is less dramatic than a heroic reversal, being a quotidian, tiresome, necessary refusal to be effaced, one that traverses the woman read through the lenses of racialized, classicist patriarchy. When Amaka stands, she performs two political acts simultaneously: as she refuses the oppressor's narrative of women as passive objects, she also models a visible possibility for others that physicality and agency can co-exist post-violation. Such politics of standing is also performative, a public refusal to let the spectacle of humiliation define the community's present identity. Where the Nuru staged a performance of domination, Amaka stages a counter-performance to reclaim the narrative of what it means to exist after violence. This is a small-scale but essential insurgency, opening up spaces for future collective repair.

Amaka cultivates authoritarian courage, kicking the fallen women's bodies. She demonstrates a willingness, a power that they too should mirror, offering her hand in a both literal and symbolic gesture:

When Amaka got to her, it took only one kick to get Najeeba coughing. 'You don't fool me, Najeeba. Get up,' Amaka said. The left side of Amaka's face was blue-purple. Her left eye was swollen shut. 'Why?' Najeeba said in her new voiceless voice. 'Because that's what we do.' Amaka held out a hand (Okorafor, 2020, p. 21).

There is substantial implicit meaning on the reason given to the women to stand up. It names both a duty and a refusal. It is a duty formed by historical exposure to predation (economic precarity, racialized gendered violence, necropolitical policies), and a

refusal to allow spectacle and humiliation to become identity. Most importantly, it is impossible not to hear the echo of racially and economically marginalized women also vocalizing such sentence. Patricia Hill Collins's work on Black feminist epistemology helps us push forward the political and pedagogical implications of Amaka's statement. "Living life as Black women requires wisdom since knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women's survival" (Collins, 1989, p. 758). Wisdom, that is, in a wide-encompassing social, cultural, historical awareness, shall orient survival. Getting up and getting other women up is what Amaka does, for she knows. Her stumbled, bruised assertion is both a statement and pedagogy, a teaching that remains legible to those who share the same history of exposure.

Amaka's presence can be interestingly deepened under Igbo cultural observation, starting from the remark that names in Okorafor's fiction are not incidental. As she herself explains: "Names are always important to me, every name that you find in anything that I write, there is a reason" (Okorafor "Between the Covers"). The Igbo common expression *nne amaka*, which would translate as "motherhood is beautiful or excellent" (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 86), points to the same beauty that describes the human being while also aligning with the understandings of motherhood, one that may be perceived in Amaka's actions. Although excessive analysis of nomenclature might be seen as unproductive in contemporary literary criticism, Okorafor's practice of careful naming converts discrete, curious meaning into a narrative engine.

Amaka, in verbalized speech, also suggests that the living women are dead (Okorafor, 2020, p. 20), a rich word-play that reinforces Okorafor's ambivalent, africanfuturist, decolonial take on meaning. Such statement resonates with Najeeba's experience and perception post-immediate-trauma, "Ani had killed Najeeba and left her still alive" (*Ibid*, p. 22). Although there is an implication here of a symbolic death, a cultural, spiritual, collective one, there is also materiality, the longing for the physical manifestation of death: "She closed her eyes, wishing Ani would strike her dead right there" (*Ibid*, p. 22). Interestingly, it is said as well that "because she was already dead, she wasn't afraid" (*Ibid*, p. 23). Critically, it is necessary to resist romanticizing this both survival and anti-survival strategy for dealing with trauma as noble self-sacrifice. It is a strategy forged in structural failure, where we can also see it as a diagnosis, a signal that the social fabric is so ruptured that those who survive are compelled to cultivate an interior politics of absolute exclusion, even from oneself. Moreover,

Traumatic memory exists in two distinct forms: the relentlessly recurring image, stereotyped and static, and the unconscious bodily response to conditions that bear psychic resemblance to the original experience. Recovery requires a reintegration of fractured memory forms. This reintegration occurs when the original trauma survivor processes the story with a willing witness who assists the survivor in understanding the connections between the actual event and its impact on her life (Griffiths, 2009, p. 47-48).

What is most important about Jennifer L. Griffiths' remark in *Traumatic Possessions* is that recovery demands a reintegration of fractured memory forms through a witness, one that will help the survivor rewrite their narrative. This evokes Najeeba's initial process of healing right after Onyesonwu's birth:

Najeeba cradled her and watched in horror as she, herself, bled and bled. Images of lying in the sand with semen seeping out of her kept trying to creep into her mind. Now that she was human again, she was no longer immune to these memories. She forced the memories away and focused on the angry child in her arms (Okorafor, 2020, p. 25).

Two points emerge here. First, Okorafor implies that "she was human again" after giving birth. Birth and motherhood suggest to mark a return to humanness in the sense of Najeeba's insistence on being already dead. This layers another possible reading of Okorafor's illustration of death, one that is connected with one's being in human or non-human. Second, it is possible to observe how her own daughter Onyesonwu functions as the "willing witness" in Griffiths's sense. The newborn does not yet speak, yet she forces the mother to confront memories that had been locked away by her protecting Alusi-ness. By the presence of the child, the very same child who embodies complicity in survival, Najeeba is at once recalling the original violation and displacing its meaning onto a new narrative, one of kinship. Mother and daughter together reconfigure memory into a form that is survivable.

Onyesonwu, however, is a witness as well as a physical reminder. The complexity of motherhood here intensifies when Najeeba gazes upon Onyesonwu's features:

She had Najeeba's thick lips and high cheekbones but she had the narrow straight nose of someone Najeeba didn't know. And her eyes, oh, her eyes. They were that gold brown, his eyes. It was as if he were peering at her through the child (Okorafor, 2020, p. 25).

Hence, Onyesonwu's presence can be seen as a double sign: a witness who allows traumatic memory to re-enter narrative and a living, continuous remembrance of its enduring wound, a reminder of violence, of the rapist. Najeeba is sentenced to a Sisyphean existence mediated by her child's eyes, perpetually carrying the rock of her trauma. Memory is fractured between the bodily resemblance that recalls the trauma and the maternal bond that reworks it. The "willing witness", in this case, is paradoxical: the child is both wound and cure, both rupture and possibility.

Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere notes that, in Igbo society, "the importance of the mother in social life is stressed through many idioms and proverbs. The most common is *nne bu ihe ukwu*, literally 'motherhood is a very significant thing'" (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 86). Motherhood is simultaneously exalted and burdened, for the mother is charged with transmitting etiquette and social behavior to all her children. Yet, as Agbasiere observes, "if the children do not measure up to expectations, the mother is usually blamed. However, she is hardly ever given due credit for a child's good behaviour, which is attributed to the father" (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 86). This description, besides explicating gendered oppression, also enlightens the fruitful analysis of how the mother of an *Ewu* child is perceived by society.

"She was barely raised at all, remember?" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 150), says a woman villager to an older Onyesonwu in a common day at the market, transferring the accusatory focus onto Najeeba who is not even present in the scene. Indirect and yet unmistakable, the recrimination that comes from other women points to the mother of an *Ewu* child being charged of deficiency in the sense of morality. A woman whose body, the community suggests, failed to secure purity is an *unnatural* mother who therefore cannot raise a child properly. By extension, Najeeba's motherhood itself is framed as polluted, shifting the stigma onto her maternal role so that the trauma is reinscribed socially, beyond the original violation and reaching absolute alienation to other ethnical, colonial spheres.

'Whose child is that, Mama?' a young man of about eighteen asked. [...]
 'That baby is Nuru!' someone said. [...]
 'Nuru concubine! Tffya! Go find your husband!'
 'Slave!'
 'Ewu carrier!' (Okorafor, 2020, p. 27-28)

The scene ultimately crystallizes the layered violence of Okorafor's world, where women's bodies become contested sites for anxieties, alienation, humiliation. In Igbo

culture, as noted before, an *ewu* is a goat, a creature associated with stigma, deceiving and uselessness, while, in the novel, *Ewu*-ness becomes a category of disgrace projected onto mixed-race children born of weaponized rape. The vocalized insult of “*Ewu* carrier” marks Najeeba permanently as the vessel of a cursed child. The stoning that follows literalizes the weight of this complex stigma, yet another spectacle staged by men who believe that their voices and actions are legitimate. In addition to being weapons of violence, the stones are also symbolic echoes of the “stones” of memory: “When the second hit her thigh, she had flashbacks of a year ago, when she died. When instead of stones, a man’s body had slammed against her” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 28). The stoning reactivates the rape, however the presence of Onyesonwu in her arms produces a different outcome: this time, she runs. Motherhood propels her body into survival, not only for herself but for the *Ewu* she refuses to relinquish.

And yet Najeeba, when previously confronted, answered to the epithets: “She’s mine! No one else’s” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 27), refusing to let popular negative believe extend to her daughter, denying—by ironic claiming—the community’s attempt to name her child as abject property and product of weaponized rape. This claim is crucial in the sense that it dialogues with the centrality of voice, one that is physically fractured, for “her vocal cords were straining and she could taste blood” (*Ibid*, p. 28), evidencing Najeeba’s visceral, crimson agency. At the same time, it also emphasizes the opposite parallel of the Nuru song. After the naming of Onyesonwu, which is her first claim post-Nuru attack, this can be observed as Najeeba’s first public—as in human to human—and essential inscription. She is the one who possesses the child as a daughter whose existence is only tied to maternal love. Thus, Najeeba reframes the “carrier” role as an active bearer of kinship, responsibility on the child’s social education, and active choice. She stands contrary to the Okeke policy of social and physical death of both child and mother as disclosed by an Okeke man much later in the novel during Onyesonwu’s journey, as if he was doing the right thing: “Later I learned my wife was carrying one of them. One of you. I killed her and the evil thing growing inside her. The thing in her looked wrong even in death” (*Ibid*, p. 340). Such moment exposes the extremities of stigma, where femicide and infanticide are enacted under the guise of moral duty. The man who brags about the murder of his wife and child embodies a lethal convergence of patriarchal regime and racialized hatred. Therefore, if “motherhood is a very significant thing” (Agbasiere, 2020, p. 86), then Najeeba’s significance lies in her persistence to mother under erasure.

Ultimately, in order to install this chapter's final movement, let us return to the scene where Najeeba runs from the men throwing stones. "She ran until she burst from the market into the safety of the desert. Only after scaling the third sand dune did she slow down. They probably thought they'd driven her to her death. As if woman and child couldn't survive alone in the desert" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 28). The desert in Okorafor's narrative, in alignment with her previously-discussed africanfuturistic frame, is not a single-valence setting. Far from being a locus of desolation subjected to Western imaginaries of draught and absence of life, it works as an ambiguous geography: limits and resources, wound-site and refuge, witness and agent. Ecocriticism reminds us that landscapes are not passive stages but co-agents in human histories. The desert in Okorafor's text is a living memory that holds traces of past actions and offers the possibility of alternative futures. Crucially, resisting in the desert is interdependence, for survival requires knowledge-sharing and an ethics of solidarity that binds all living and unliving creatures, human and non-human beings as parts of a major ecosystem.

For Najeeba, the desert stands as the setting for her suffering, at the same time that interestingly offers concealment and protection from it upon failed human institutions. It provides a different spatial-temporality in which the rhythms of spirit, nurturing, weather and survival structure. "In her memory, she saw the sun move across the sky, set, and come up again" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 20) during her rape. In the novel, it also functions as a space in which non-human presences are more perceptible, a place where alternative ontologies can emerge and where mother and daughter, surrounded—and not sieged— by the desert sands, can flourish. "The human world is harsh,' Najeeba said. 'But the desert is lovely. Alusi, mmuo, all spirits can live here in peace. When you come, you will love it here, too'" (*Ibid*, p. 24). The desert's paradox is precisely what makes it a productive ground for both trauma and regeneration. The Okorafian desert invites us to look for resistance in a song unsung, a spirit embodied, a woman standing, a child nurtured, and to recognize those acts as the inscriptions of a westerly-divergent epistemic order. Najeeba's trajectory—from scream to silence to claim, from the "already dead" to the practices of her motherhood—writes a political grammar of survival that is rooted in sand.

**CHAPTER 3: SKIN THE SHADE OF SAND, BODY THE COLOR OF
EXILE: ONYESONWU**

‘But her skin,’ they would say to each other, never directly to me. ‘It’s so smooth and delicate. It looks almost like camel’s milk.

‘And her hair is oddly bushy, like a cloud of dried grass.’

‘Her eyes are like a desert cat’s.’

‘Ani makes strange beauty from ugliness.’

‘She might be beautiful by the time she goes through her Eleventh Rite.’

‘What’s the point of her going through it? No one will marry her.’ Then laughter.

(Okorafor, 2020, p. 9)

Okorafor introduces Onyesonwu’s body as something to be looked at, measured and judged before it is ever listened to: an exotic spectacle. On the first pages of the novel, women villagers speak about the *Ewu* child as if she were not present. A presence so disregarded, the pedestrian tone infers a distant, insignificant object rather than a standing person. Nature metaphors mediate the gaze, appearing as the vocabulary through which the villagers translate Onyesonwu’s difference. On one level, ironically, they naturalize the child in a timbre of awe. There’s a fleeting nuance of admiration which, for one instant, may sound like a compliment. Whatever beauty appears on this body, however, is rapidly addressed as a kind of mistake or excess granted by Ani.

Onyesonwu’s “skin the odd shade of sand” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 25) is both intimately tied to the land—something that is not necessarily frowned upon throughout the novel in consonance with Okorafor’s commitment to ambiguity—and exiled from the human community that inhabits it. The very same metaphors that link Onye to nature, in the speaker’s perspective, signal monstrosity: an almost-animal, almost-human child. The image of Onyesonwu is a hybrid built thought the fixation on body parts in order to suggest and justify animalization, evoking hooks’ analysis on the black female body (2000, p. 62). Skin, hair, eyes, none resemble or approximate those of the women gossipmongers who conclude the perverse exhibition by laughing at Onyesonwu’s unmarriageability, an internal joke that reinforces distance. The child is then evaluated as future waste, anticipating her exclusion from the normative pathways of womanhood in the community. From the outset, then, what is at stake is not merely that Onyesonwu is “different,” but that her difference disqualifies her from belonging to

the most basic social institutions that structure communal life: marriage, kinship, the Eleventh Rite as the pivot between girlhood and social membership.

This logic later recurs in the narrative with striking familiarity. At an older age, Onyesonwu encounters a group of women evaluating her, again performing a violent spectacle: “Look at her,’ I heard one of them say. ‘Too ghastly to marry’” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 150). The phrase resurrects the earlier, mean whispers from her childhood, revealing that the initial judgments stood as more than village gossip, but a durable grammar through which an *Ewu* woman’s body is socially produced. From early speculation to diagnosis, there appears a demonstration that the community’s violent acts have been so crystallized with time that it reaches the point of normality in the sense of Bourdieu’s symbolism. From aesthetics to ontology, there “ghastly” casts Onyesonwu beyond the sphere of beauty lack, rather as something that should not exist, a kind of apparition or aberration whose presence disturbs the social field.

Importantly, even those who share her shade of skin—the Noahs, who had two Okeke parents, skin the color of sand, red eyes and sensitivity to sunshine (Okorafor, 2020, p. 30)—do not share her position. Onyesonwu notes: “And Noahs looked at me with the same fear and disgust as Okekes of a darker shade. Even to them, I was other” (*Ibid*, p. 30). Forced to the margins of the margins, the *Ewu*, as an acutely racialized body that carries a whole context of impurity, is a figure cast in a radical otherness that surpasses mere matter. Okorafor’s rendering suggests that *Ewu*-ness has a quality that destabilizes all established categories in Okeke and Nuru societies. At the same time, Noahs, who are themselves marked by color disparity, still recognize and reproduce the boundary that separates them from an *Ewu*. Again, like women who trample over other women, who metaphorically dig deeper holes to there throw them, stigma is not merely a hierarchy between dominant and dominated. Rather, it replicates like a network, with nodes of exclusion within excluded communities where the oppressed reproduce the logic of domination.

“And that aside from their skin color, Noahs basically *looked* Okeke” (*Ibid*, p. 30). Look, look. So far, the presented arguments have been organized around this key-verb, both in the sense of visual examination and in appearance of what seems to be. The gaze, the exhibit, later turn into whisper which will later turn into shout and bodily worse. Thus, such violences are an anticipation, a preparation for what is to come, an

overture act of a whole opera¹⁶ of horrors that is not marked by a single crescendo, but by recurring, intrinsic motifs that grow louder with each repetition. I here propose that such opera stands on three acts: gaze, language and bodily action. Violence, however, is amalgamated, for the narrative refuses to isolate any single form as sufficient to explain the punishment of *Ewu* existence.

Plenty are, then, the violent episodes directed to *Ewu* beings along the narrative. If the *Ewu* body first appears as spectacle, it also becomes framed through a fully developed language of contamination, Act II—the rightfully largest act of this chapter’s opera of horrors. Fanon emphasizes how language plays an important role in the production of inferiorized, racialized subjects: “in the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality” (Fanon, 2008, p. 149). Racialization is then a social mechanism that comprehends a psychic infrastructure, one costlessly sustained and naturalized through language. In the foreword of the edition, Ziauddin Sardar, the British-Pakistani writer, further demonstrates:

Even the dictionary definition of white means clean and pure. We can find, in *Roget’s Thesaurus*, over 134 synonyms for whiteness, most with positive connotations. In contrast, *Roget’s Thesaurus* tells us black means dirty, prohibited and funereal. It provides 120 synonyms for black and blackness, none with positive connotation (Sardar, 2008, p. xiii).

As a simple, naturalized engine, words supply the scaffold for social truth. Stigma stops being an opinion and starts to read like fact, dialoguing with Bourdieu’s symbolic violence. In the novel, if *Ewu* were in a Thesaurus—whether written by Nuru or Okeke—there would be an explicit ideology of dirt, filth and evil associated to it. “‘Eeeeewuuuuuu,’ an Okeke man shouted in a deep deep voice. ‘Eeeewuuuuuu!’” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 239), he choruses in the opera, needing only the word to signal danger, to denounce the unwanted presence of Onyesonwu. *Ewu* is a cussword. As a result, persecution is habitual and pre-established: “‘We should have stoned her to death after she tried to kill Aro.’ / ‘My daughter already has nightmares about her every night. [...]’ / ‘The faster she’s ashes, the better’” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 108). In this scenario, a complex mechanism of language is what mostly justifies the exiling, threatening behavior. Interestingly, upon careful examination, it can be noticed that

¹⁶ I choose to call it an opera, a theatrical play given in acts and song, as an illustration both because of the centrality of voice in the novel and because of the ongoingly present tone of performance.

Okorafor decides to employ this particular language by binding body parts to such negative imaginary.

From interior to exterior, as a primary demonstration, lies a syntax directed to the spirit: “You *Ewu* come to this world with soiled souls” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 119), says Aro, Onyesonwu’s teacher—who embodies a very sharp critique of gendered racism even in a position built on spiritual, ancestral wisdom. The soul, the non-material *mmuo*, which points toward interiority, an essence of the self, is rendered materially stained in a movement that epistemically justifies exclusion. Choice matters little to the process of corruption, standing as an absolute verdict regardless of any action. Born this way, *Ewus* are denied free will, severing their possibility of “redemption.” No ritual, education, politeness, or even benevolence can reverse a stain so internal that it precedes birth and following life experience.

Blood next appears in the language of filth that Okorafor binds to the body: “It’s your dirty blood. You were born wrong. [...] Why would Ani give a child like you such gifts?” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 365). This time, it is the Nuru antagonist Daib, Mwita’s teacher, who taunts his *Ewu* former student. Here blood, beyond the rich imaginary of both crimson violence and life fuel, functions as condensed ancestry, lineage, and inheritance. Violence is directed not only at the present body, but at everything that body represents in terms of past and future. Additionally, *Ewu*’s blood viewed as filth reinforces the conversion of any personal achievement, or any positive action, into waste. Mwita *merits* no spiritual, healing gifts, for there is no plausible explanation to anything good coming from him.

Then, under great significance, skin stands as another bodily part inserted into the language of dirt: “Still he was *Ewu* and so every so often, I’d hear people mention his ‘unhealthy’ skin and ‘foul’ odor and how no matter how many books he read, he’d only amount to something bad” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 56). Skin is the first and fastest key through which the *Ewu* is read. As Alan Burns observes, “colour is the most obvious outward manifestation of race” (qtd. in Fanon, 2008, p. 89). Given that, skin color becomes a shortcut to interpretation and people do not mind asking who someone is and start assuming what they are—an extremely accelerated process of erasure of subjectivity. Under colonial situations, this shortcut hardens into what Burns calls color prejudice, which “is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another” (qtd. in Fanon, 2008, p. 89).

Such understanding of hatred firstly fueled by skin color, results in the psychological rearrangement of the racialized subject regarding what their self-perception of what is like to be in their own body, under their own skin. That is, the Black subject becomes conscious of his/herself as racialized precisely in the moment when skin becomes the central code by which others read and fix his/her being. Fanon names that reorganization as the collapse of the “corporeal schema”—the pre-reflective sense of being a bodily subject who moves and acts unconsciously—and its replacement by a “racial epidermal schema.” This schema displaces that first-person habit: while overly aware of skin because of society’s insistence of negative disparity, the body is more than body, but a whole historical system of stereotyped accusations: “tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships” (Fanon, 2008, p. 84-85). Entire cultural, racist inscriptions attach themselves to the *skin*.

In the novel’s case, the language of contamination persists, now indicating disease as if *Ewu* skin were a symptom of something deeper and incurable. Moreover, it adds a cruel sensory layer for stigmatization. Once smell does not operate through sight, invading space without permission, it crosses boundaries. Disgust becomes spatially sensorial and the *Ewu* subject is imagined as something that spreads. Avoidance is framed as hygiene and rejection acquires the appearance of self-protection, contributing to the deep isolation of the *Ewu* subject under plausible excuse. More than that, a duty.

It is necessary, however, to emphasize what Aníbal Quijano seminally demonstrates in *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, where he argues that race is a colonial invention and its intrinsic meaning only functions within the very society that invents it (Quijano, 2000, p. 534-535). One of the many reasons why Okorafor positions the Vah people on the main stage is precisely in order to confirm so. Secluded and adopting nomadic habit, the Vah do not share the same history, language and values, and therefore “they had no issue with *Ewu* people. They embraced Mwita like one of their own. They gave him hugs and handshakes, patted him on the back, let their children hang around him. He was wholly welcome (Okorafor, 2020, p. 272). Evidently, the Vah see Onye and Mwita’s different skin. They simply do not see them as *Ewu*, for the word has no meaning to them.

Finally, in order to conclude the argument about how Okorafor constructs *Ewu*-ness through a language of scorn attached to corporeality, there appears the body

itself in the lines of Mwita: “‘Onyesonwu,’ he said. ‘He won’t teach you. You were born in the wrong body’” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 63). Again, the idea of ontological wrongness echoes. Mary Douglas suggests in *Purity and Danger* that what counts as dirt or pollution is not intrinsic to a substance or body, but is defined by what the social order deems “out of place”, as a shoe that can’t be on a dining table (Douglas, 2001, p. 37). The language of dirt continues to cling to Onyesonwu for no matter where she is, what she does, she inhabits the wrong place, the wrong body. The violence done to the mother becomes the pollution assigned to the child. While the rapist vanishes from moral visibility, the offspring becomes the site where sin is stored. In this fictional society that draws from reality, if one carefully examines the sewing threads of the social fabric, it is what it is. *Ewu* people are hated because they are *Ewu*, and they are *Ewu* because they are hated. The novel refuses to let the reader forget how stubbornly stigma permeates and this is how the opera of horrors sustains itself, a structural violence that stacks with psychological collapse, inferiorization, verbal, social, epistemological violences. The narrative of filth writes the script *in advance* and every bodily blow that will follow becomes rehearsed, previously justified and expected.

However, critically and in a very weightily manner, Mwita’s lines about Onye being born in the wrong body are mostly directed to the context of her gender, harsh words coming from a character who is her romantic companion. “Aro refused you because you were an *Ewu* female” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 161), Mwita later adds. It is through the *Ewu*-ness of both Onye and Mwita, who diverge in gender, origin, ability, thought and destiny, that Okorafor draws ongoing critique on complex social hierarchies. The violence she faces is intimate, brutal and cruel in a way that Mwita’s is not. Although they are bound by their *Ewu*-ness and their similar bodies and features, they are still distantly positioned from one another. Reading this passage through Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality is crucial to understand what is at stake here. Crenshaw shows how women who are racialized, marked by class, sexuality and social position are not simply oppressed “as women” plus “as racialized,” for instance, but occupy a specific site where multiple axes of power converge to produce unique vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Onyesonwu’s “wrong body”—and extended subjectivity—condenses, at least, four axes, which will now guide our analysis: she is the visibly mixed child of a Nuru rapist and an Okeke woman, she is a woman, she is a sorcerer and she was born in the desert. Her race, her gender, ability and origin, all converge both inventive and gruesome forms of stigmatization.

Gendered wrongness again appears in the scene where Aro reacts to Onyesonwu's menstruation: "And furthermore, you're filthy with woman blood as we speak, [...] How dare you come here in this state" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 66). It is not only filthy, *Ewu* blood, but filthy, *Ewu woman* blood, one that flows from interior to exterior, private to public in an intentional transgression, as Aro frames. Anthropological discussions of menstruation demonstrate that menstrual blood is rarely treated as a neutral matter. Across cultures, it is surrounded by rituals and symbolism. Mary Douglas argues that in some belief systems, "contact with it or with a menstruating woman will, in the absence of appropriate counter-magic, sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, 'kill' his blood" (Douglas, 2001, p. 148). In this view, women's blood disturbs for its presence sickens, attacks the blood of the male. However, when, "in some [societies], menstrual pollution is feared as a lethal danger; in others not at all" (Douglas, 2001, p. 122). Expressed through language, it is meaning that is culturally produced, consequently, that defines what counts as clean, sacred, or contaminating. Drawing from Igbo culture, Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere explains that

the specific Igbo term for menses is *iso ezi* or *asomezi*, literally 'avoiding association with the external part of the compound'. The period of seclusion serves mainly as a means for an intensive education of the girls. It involves serious initiation into the 'female secrets' of married life in general and formal lessons in wifhood and motherhood in particular, and it offers an opportunity to give maidens a traditional form of marriage guidance and counselling (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 99).

Primarily, there appears the sense of seclusion, but one directed to transition and collective education of the young woman in the sphere of social productive life: marriage—which we have already established that has been denied to Onye. Since she seeks no such type of education, no womanly natural path, rather spiritual, restricted, male-centric knowledge, her blood serves as another piece of evidence of abjection, transgressing the boundary of spirituality and the sacred. Essentially, she and her *Ewu*, woman, filthy blood are again and always in the wrong place, evoking Douglas' though on dirt as matter out of place (2001, p. 37).

Yet, it is important to notice that traditions around menstrual seclusion and spiritual restriction—though deeply problematic when used to exclude or stigmatize—do not necessarily stem from outright hatred or misogyny, but often from worldviews that conceptualize menstruation as spiritually potent (dangerous), rather than sinful per

se. In some strands of Igbo cosmology, as in other African traditions, menstrual blood is believed to carry the capacity to “neutralize spiritual energies, charms, totems, or potent objects” (Oma’s Garden, “The Complex Role”). Within such contexts, menstruation is a condition requiring, above all, respect and carefulness. For many women, the period of seclusion functioned historically as a transitional time, one of rest and reflection, although contemporary perspectives promote ongoing dialogue and reinterpretation of such traditions (Oma’s Garden, “The Complex Role”). In the case of Onyesonwu, however, the problem is that traditions intersect with racialized, gendered hierarchies of dirt, something that converts and reinforces menstruation as a symbol of permanent impurity.

If the presence of dangerous, dirty blood marks the *Ewu* female body as spatially alien, the discourse on emotion radicalizes that displacement at the level of subjectivity itself when Mwita explains Aro’s constant refusal to teach Onyesonwu: “Precisely why he won’t teach you! You act like a woman. You run on emotions. You’re dangerous” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 74). The accusation folds three operations into a single judgment: first, it naturalizes emotion as essentially female; second, it opposes emotion to knowledge; and third, it frames emotionality as a form of danger. Val Plumwood’s critique of the dualized structure of Western rationality inaugurates this train of thought. Plumwood shows that dominant models of the human elevate reason as the defining feature of true humanity, while systematically excluding “those aspects associated with the body, sexuality, reproduction, affectivity, emotionality, the senses and dependence on the natural world” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 71). These domains, precisely because they are shared with animals and with nature, are relegated to a lower ontological order. To be emotional is to fall back into the sphere of the natural, the animal, the unpredictable, and therefore into what must be controlled or barred from rational knowledge. Plumwood further argues that this exclusion is historically gendered. The feminine is persistently aligned with the lower order of being, while reason and philosophy, androcentric and anthropocentric as they are, are construed as practices opposed to and *purified* of this lower realm (1993, p. 77). The feminine becomes a series of lacks: it lacks reason, control, stability, legitimacy.

Okorafor’s feminist architecture does not award Onye with reason to surplus her emotions, but once more chooses the clever path of resignification, exposing how such Western determinism is built on fragile, poor meaning. Onyesonwu is filled with emotions. Positive, negative, neutral, dangerous, powerful emotions. If, in the spiritual

context, women's emotions lead to threat, then it becomes something that power actively seeks to suppress because it contains a force that cannot be fully governed. "You . . . you won't teach girls or women because you're afraid of us! Y-y-you fear our emotions" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 105), Onye insights to Aro—in emotional pause and stutter—during another failed attempt to become his student.

A powerful threat then is she, a powerful, *angry* threat. "Najeeba could have sworn the child was shrieking even before it came out. So angry. From the moment the child was born, Najeeba understood that it would dislike surprises and have little patience" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 24). Anger is positioned as an innate trait, a destiny of unconformity. Lorde's theory reappears to offer a significant vocabulary for understanding that anger is not opposed to knowledge or reason; it is instead "loaded with information and energy" (2021, p. 127). In this sense, "every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (*Ibid*, p. 127). The child's anger is not interpreted in the language of negative connotation, but as an early sign that she will resist what cannot be tolerated, that she will promote transformation.

From filthily blooded, to emotional, to sexualized. In the Thesaurus for the *Ewu* woman, so far, we have found words such as ghastly, soiled, filthy, dirty, wrong, dangerous. *Whore* also makes the list. The association between *Ewu*-ness and sexual availability appears explicitly when Onye hears: "I thought *Ewu* women preferred to wear nothing at all [...] That you and the sun are siblings" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 203). The first remark immediately sexualizes the *Ewu* female body as naturally, willingly naked, and therefore sexually accessible. The second links her skin to the sun, inscribing her body into a field of exposure. Beyond eroticization, there is a racialized, gendered and ecophobic¹⁷ logic in which *Ewu* women are imagined as bodies without boundaries, bodies permanently offered to the gaze and to use.

Syntactically devastating, two sentences only are required to explain the scenario: "In Jwahir, *Ewu* people were outcast. In Banza, *Ewu* women were prostitutes" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 204). Thus, to be an *Ewu* woman is either to be removed from the

¹⁷ Misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia are all terms that point towards hate and prejudice against a specific sphere of identity. In ecocriticism, since nature is also a category of dualization that culminates in oppression, ecophobia stands as the term to assign such intolerance (Estok "Ecocriticism and Ecophobia", 2009).

social field or absorbed into it only through the sexualization of the body, in profitable use in terms of labor. In Banza, during a scene of sexual harassment, Onyesonwu claims: “I’m a holy woman. I entertain no one. I am and will remain untouched.” The gruesome, nauseating response, however, is that men “respect that”, immediately, casually saying that “you can use your mouth and let us touch your breasts. We’ll pay you well” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 204). Since respect is given as a rhetoric, refusal is then reinterpreted as negotiation and consent is linguistically emptied. This echoes what bell hooks identifies as the historical construction of Black female bodies where they are understood through fragmented, salable parts—mouth, breasts—rather than through subjectivity. Likewise, as Coly has shown, the African female body in colonial discourse functions as a site for projecting Western deviant sexuality. Okorafor’s *Ewu* women inherit this violent genealogy in a dystopian register once they are made to carry the anxiety of sexualization.

The last negative words that are stated in Onye’s glossary written by her society concerns her origin: animal, wild. The desert where she was born also does not resonate well to other, “civilized” people. Upon a somewhat pettish plea in favor of going to town, the civil grounds, Diti mocks Onye, saying she is “used to living like an animal in the sand” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 193). There is an important hierarchy of space built around Diti’s mean tone. The desert is figured as a zone of animality, unconsciousness and deprivation, while the town stands as the site of order, culture, bountifulness and refinement, a place where they can find “some real food [...] instead of weird tasting spicy cactus” (*Ibid*, p. 192). By extension, for bodies and landscapes are co-produced through hierarchizing discourses, Diti too positions herself, as a woman born and raised in township, in a higher position than this animalized Onyesonwu, born and raised in sand.

So intrinsic and holistic are the categories that inscribe stigma into the *Ewu* person, that Mwita also feels this dialectic affecting him. “Imagine being marked in this way. No matter where she and I go, that nonsense Diti spewed about Onyesonwu being used to ‘living like an animal,’ that kind of thought is on everyone’s mind, Okeke or Nuru. We’re as hated as the desert” (*Ibid*, p. 194). Marked, he says, as the mark of Cain that evidences the sin of his very existence. Moreover, when vocalizing this intimate secret, one that appears in form of sober discharge and carries a tone of psychological exhaustion, Mwita hints an earnest sense of collectiveness. Although

neither him, Onye nor the desert are the same, they are nonetheless folded, at least in some levels, into the same structure of rejection.

“But look at them! They’re filthy and... wild” (*Ibid*, p. 198), Luyu protests against the camels that decide to join the group. The vocabulary is quite familiar, mirroring almost exactly the language previously attached to *Ewu* bodies. Onyesonwu’s striking response refuses both the hierarchy and the insult. Rather than denying the desert, she articulates a full ethics that emerges from it:

When you’re in the desert, you have to *be* in the desert. You accept sand in your clothes but not your hair. You don’t mind bathing outside in the open. You leave a bucket of excess station water for other creatures who might want some. And when people, *any* kind of people, want to travel with you, you don’t reject them unless they’re cruel” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 198).

Here, desert life is not defined by savagery, but by adjustment, restraint, interdependence, and hospitality. In a new translation, civility is reframed not as architectural, social polish, but as an ethics of shared survival, one that horizontalizes even human and non-human beings. This Okorafian twist once more exposes how “civilization,” in the pre-conceived, almost empty meaning, operates less as a moral condition than as a *narrative* of power that is allowed to dictate who is good or bad, superior or inferior.

Up to this point in Act II of this dystopian opera of horrors, I have demonstrated how a language of filth and negativity preestablishes and projects Onye’s body and role in her society, taking into account the multiple identities she carries: a desert-born, *Ewu* woman sorceress. I have slightly indicated, as well, small hints of resistance, which shall now take the center stage.

‘Listen, *Ewu* girl,’ she said.
I looked up. ‘Please, Ada-m, don’t call me that.’
‘And why not? Isn’t that what you are?’
‘I hate that word.’
‘*Ewu* or girl?’
‘*Ewu*, of course.’
‘Is that not what you are?’
‘No,’ I said. ‘Not in the way the word means’ (Okorafor, 2020, p. 101).

Indeed, she is *Ewu*, for Onyesonwu’s last words do not reject her being. What Onye expressively rejects is its semantic violence, a linguistic resistance before a physical

one. If meaning is socially produced, it is in a position to be, at least, contestable. Her refusal is modest in form, yet radical in implication. While she does not challenge the speaker's authority directly—the motif of respect is very much present throughout the narrative—, neither does she attempt to replace the term with another. By employing a syntax of denial, built on negative repetition, she yet has not stated what she is, rather what she is not.

Angry drop by angry drop, this further develops into another form of self-articulation later in the Okorafian text, when Onyesonwu confronts one of the cores of the stigma attached to her existence: “I’m not evil! I shouted, waving my fists in the air. ‘Understand that about me, if not anything else’. I gritted my teeth and pounded my fist against my chest, as Mwita often did when he was angry” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 117). Once her teeth, fists and chest enter the act of speech, language and embodiment collapse into one another. Thus far, Onyesonwu’s discourse continues to be embroidered exclusively around negation, until she adds: “I am what I am but I am not EVIL!” (*Ibid*, p. 117). There is now tension being held between the syntax of denial and identity. While the second clause emphasizes what she is not, with Okorafor even employing full capitalization of the word, the first clause starts to portray an idea that Onyesonwu—although not pleading innocence and defending simple humanity over morality—does not need to explain, dilute, ornate or justify her being. Onyesonwu’s struggle, then, is not yet to destroy the world that names her, but to survive its naming without internalizing its verdict. In this sense, speech becomes a protective ground, for, if violence is most excruciatingly present in language, then language is the only available tool to fight it. Between the two scenes, moreover, there is also an affective shift. In the earlier dialogue, resistance is hesitant, defensive. In the later outcry, it is urgent, embodied, public and capitalized. Such progression suggests that linguistic resistance, much like language learning, is a process. It is hesitant at first, as a baby discovering the sounds their mouth can produce. Then, increasingly, after careful eyeing of oneself and one’s surroundings, after traveling interiorly and exteriorly to the past and future, one can slowly engage in sewing whole new ontologies and epistemologies.

Onye finds her child voice, which would later be the protagonist of her resignification, from two pillars. Firstly, because of her mother Najeeba:

For six years, she raised Onyesonwu alone in the desert. Onyesonwu grew into a strong feisty child. She loved the sand, winds, and desert creatures. Though Najeeba could only whisper, she laughed and smiled whenever Onyesonwu shouted. When Onyesonwu shouted the words Najeeba taught her, Najeeba kissed and hugged her. This was how Onyesonwu learned to use her voice without having ever heard one (Okorafor, 2020, p. 28-29).

Genuine love transmitted in smile and kiss, through gaze and body, is what teaches Onye how to be vocal. From this point on, it is established that Onye's voice, carrying the significance of its maternal motive, will function as a primary site of world-making. Moreover, it is not accidental that Onye's most distinctive linguistic faculty is beyond speech.

The second teaching pillar is nature itself, showing Onye voice in song: "and a lovely voice Onyesonwu had. She learned to sing by listening to the wind. She often stood facing the wide open land and sang to it" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 29). If language has thus far appeared mostly as an instrument that wounds, fixes, and humiliates, Okorafor reminds us that song rooted in orality and ancestralism is also a counter-practice. Having the wind as her music teacher and the whole desert as the audience, Onyesonwu's voice emerges from non-human relations in addition to Najeeba's love. "This was the first sign Najeeba had that her daughter was not just *Ewu* but very special, unusual" (*Ibid*, p. 29). Precisely, "not *just Ewu*", for song is only the first layer that points toward a cumulative grammar rather than one of lack.

Later in the novel, singing becomes explicitly identified as a communicative faculty, both in dystopian—as in Najeeba's rape— and utopian—as in Onye's songs. For the latter context, Aro reaches this conclusion when he explains the four Points and tells her: "And now that I think of it, you have one to work the third. You can sing. Communication" (*Ibid*, p. 143). As a tool in a sorcerer's toolbox, their Bushcraft (*Ibid*, p. 145), singing is placed on the same level as the faculties required for a sacred, powerful spirituality.

Onye, then, exercises communication within herself and the beings around her. "I quickly started singing the song of the desert on a cool night. Owls are nocturnal. This was a song they'd like. As I sang, it filled me with joy, a rare emotion for me" (*Ibid*, p. 182). Several things unfold simultaneously in this performative scene. First, singing is named as a specific repertoire from the landscape, reinforcing that her voice carries geography, memory, rhythm. Second, it produces an internal effect before it produces

a social one: joy appears in her before it appears in her surroundings. More than joy, but corporeal soothe: “The remnants of my headache finally left me. I stood up and raised my voice higher, spreading my arms and closing my eyes” (*Ibid*, p. 182). Song thus reorganizes her body in space. Posture, breath, vision, and balance shift as the voice rises. As the inverse of the earlier scene where speech is given by clenched teeth and pounding fists (*Ibid*, p. 117), the song of the desert allows expansion. From interior to exterior, only after this wholly bodily transformation does the social effect appear: “I heard the flap of wings. My friends gasped, giggled, and sighed” (*Ibid*, p. 182). The community’s response epitomizes a simple, happy moment in Onye’s life. Once she sings, she is not read or deemed as exiled. Even the ironic scatological ending—when a pleased owl spectator “left a dollop of feces on Binta’s tent” (*Ibid*, p. 182)—does not collapse the enchanted atmosphere into repugnance.

Onyesonwu is then filled with joy and with no more headache. Shortly after the episode, the bridge between song and restoration is made explicit, as in a declaration given by Mwita: “Your voice heals you. You look... better now” (*Ibid*, p. 184). There is no metaphor here. Voice is not a representation neither a symbol of goodness. It states it as a direct function, a cure to her exhausted, exiled, oppressed body and being. Within this scenario, what injures through language has the possibility of being sutured through Onye’s desert song.

Importantly, the novel thus constructs a sustained opposition between two modes of verbal power. Primarily, as Aro reminds us during a magic lesson: “Names, names, names,’ he said with a wave of his hands. ‘They don’t always equal up’ (*Ibid*, p. 144). Henceforth, naming, in the sense of overdetermining, lies as domination, arresting identity into a repeated, public verdict. On the other hand, voice can be seen as survival. The subject returns to herself through vibration, breath, rhythm and genuine meaning. Yet, what distinguishes these two regimes is not simply who speaks but how speech operates. Naming moves vertically, descending upon the subject from a social height and establishing her beneath it. Contrarily, voice moves horizontally, traveling across whole bodies, species and spaces.

Such emphasis is rightfully given to Onye’s song, that it appears as her tool for rewriting. It is justified that the Nuru subdue the Okeke for what it is written in *The Great Book* and because of that, Onye comes into existence. She sings to the sacred text, which is “full of hate” (*Ibid*, p. 376), as if a mother sings a lullaby to a child. “I don’t hate you,’ [...] Then I began to sing. I sang the song that I had made up when I was four

years old and living with my mother in the desert. During the happiest time of my life. I had sung this song to the desert when it was content, at peace, settled” (*Ibid*, p. 376). She evokes what long precedes the text that authored her suffering: a song from the desert, composed in innocence, love, and belonging.

Closing the curtains of Act II, there lies *èkwùrùlò* (see Fig. 1), the Igbo peacock, who allows resignification to turn into reinscription. The final movement of this act pivots toward a different linguistic technology, one that does not only refuse scornful meanings but writes new ones into being. In the introduction to this thesis, I have argued that Nnedi Okorafor mobilizes African languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Arabic and Nigerian Pidgin, as a way of staging the African diaspora withing Africa itself, weaving a linguistic texture capable of resisting colonial and Eurocentric epistemologies, something that mirrors her self-declared africanfuturist commitments. Yet, Okorafor does not settle at the level of spoken language, turning to an older, indigenous semiotic system to offer her heroine a script beyond imposed naming: Nsibidi.

As explained by the Nkọwa okwu project,


Nsibidi is proto-writing script originating from the southeastern region of Nigeria with a rich history. First associated with the Ekpe society, the script has grown to be associated with the Igbo language. Today, Nsibidi is commonly used for stylistic purposes in pop-culture but was originally used in judicial processes (Nkọwa okwu, “Nsibidi”).

Unlike alphabetic scripts tied to spoken languages, Nsibidi communicates entire ideas, actions, statuses, judgments. In that sense, it predates colonial impositions, and carries with it an authority not derived from Eurocentric, Latin letters but from ancestral and indigenous tradition. What would require several sentences to convey in the ABCs and still risk flawed communication, takes one single ideograph.

And among the uncountable Nsibidịs, Onyesonwu chooses *èkwùrùlò*:

Fig 1. Nkọwa okwu. Nsibidi 0917

NSIBIDI UNIFIED IDEOGRAPH 0917

| NSIBIDI | PRONUNCIATION | UNICODE | DEFINITIONS |
|---|---------------|---------|--------------|
|  | ékwùrú | é羞 | singing bird |
|  | èkwùrù | 羞 | peacock |

Source: <https://nkowaokwu.com/nsibidi/0917>

Up to this point, Onye's fight has been primarily phonetic, a struggle over names, insults, denials, and the reclamation of voice through singing and shouting. The peacock now surpasses this logic and makes room for a whole new form of communication, one that is visual and durable, a material reinscription that, at the same time, keeps its centrality pointed toward song—a singing bird. “The proud peacock. The symbol was complaint. Argument. Insistence” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 384). Onye's final struggle was also linguistic, chiefly against Okorafor's very lines, for there are two endings to the narrative. Refusing the dystopian, pessimistic portrayal of an ending, an essential tragedy, Onye marks the peacock in the dirt of her cell (*Ibid*, p. 383) in a metalinguistic movement, symbolically trespassing the page's limits.

And it is here that the final hinge toward Act III emerges, for in Nsibidi tradition: “This symbol is scribbled by a sorcerer who believes he has been wronged. Once in a while, it is scribbled by a sorceress, too. It means, ‘one is going to take action’” (*Ibid*, p. 383). From mean gaze, to dirty language, now to visceral action, Act III opens on the body as the vital battleground. Where Act II examined how language overdetermines and humiliates, the third act confronts what happens after such language allows bodily violence: how speech translates into touch, and how touch becomes the ultimate instrument of power. The answers that Okorafor stages to such arrangement are interwoven and intentionally uncomfortable.

In order to verify that, let us return to Banza, where *Ewu* women are prostitutes and men hypersexualize and actively harass Onyesonwu, falsely and ironically claiming they “respect her” (*Ibid*, p. 204):

The tall one grabbed me. There was too much noise inside the tavern and the breath was knocked out of me before I could shout. I punched, scratched, and kicked. I was rewarded with grunts and curses as I made contact. But there were four of them. The one with the braids grabbed my thick braid and I fell backward. Then they started dragging me away from the door. [...] I anxiously looked around, holding my braid. (Okorafor 204).

The violence is choreographed, yet another performance of domination. The attackers operate as a coordinated cast, for when one grunts from Onye's defense, another secures and another drags. Each one has a role and they put it into practice with no hesitation, but with rightfulness. Okorafor gathers forced silence both through the attack itself, which withdrew her breath, and through excessive, background noise. Together, they swallow her shout. Importantly, they also grab Onye's braid—such an essential part of one's body and mind in political, social and spiritual spheres¹⁸—as if they were taming a horse. It is the body part she instinctively protects.

'Eh!' I shouted at a woman just standing there staring. 'Help! Help me, o!'"
But she didn't. There were several people doing the same, just standing there watching. In this lovely town of art and culture, people did nothing when an *Ewu* women was dragged into a dark alley and raped (Okorafor, 2020, p. 204).

No one helps, and the audience serves only as this: an audience who, because of their passive presence and mere gaze, configures a spectacle. Passive, yet not ignorant, for when a woman screams for help, being dragged away by men, omission grows into deliberate choice. By deciding to look and remain still, by turning norm into spectacle, the town's onlookers shift an individual crime into social policy. The town's onlookers, not as single individuals, but as a whole public mass, turn into a body of accomplices, complying and stating the hierarchies of certain bodies being expandable. "*This is what happened to my mother, I thought. And Bintu. And countless other Okeke women. Women. [...] I began to get very very angry*" (*Ibid*, p. 205). Onyesonwu realizes the attack as inherited, as patterns of rape and humiliation that replicate across time and bodies. Such recognition links personal trauma to communal trauma, where the scene is not merely one attack but a chapter in a larger history of gendered, sexualized

¹⁸ Okorafor repeatedly employs hair as a crucial thematic thread throughout the novel. She ongoingly asserts rich descriptiveness towards this motif, conveying, besides the sociopolitical, spiritual spheres attached to hair, also an interesting sense of passage of time.

subjugation. The memory of previous victims, some being survivors, others not, renders current violence legible as repetition rather than isolated fact.

What distinguishes Onyesonwu's experience, however, is her Eshu, spiritual response: the gathering of the wind, "gray and black," shaped into a funnel she wished to thrust into the attackers "as each had wanted to thrust his penis into me" (*Ibid*, p. 205). Onyesonwu weaponizes what is exceptionally stronger than man-power: nature, by all means, powered by the Uwa point, the physical world. She mirrors, reverses, and *exceeds* the phallic action, stating that she has long crossed the line of self-defense and survival and is now in territory of offense. Onye takes control of the scene, but it comes through an act that reflects the attackers' own intent. Thus, Okorafor denies the reader any narrative catharsis, resisting easy moral closure precisely because Onye's violence emerges from the same well of simplicity she names: "when I'm filled with violence, all things are easy and simple" (*Ibid*, p. 205).

Nature again appears as a weapon and menace to the body in another occasion, however this time in the hands of the oppressor who is not anymore represented by a few men, but by an entire mass. Current is the antagonism between Onyesonwu and the general public, stressing her deep exile in terms of her against the world. Stoning, already familiar to Okorafian violent scenarios, reveals itself as the means to Onye's death. In the vision of her initiation, she is dragged toward a hole in the desert while the crowd keeps a measured distance, "as if some invisible force kept them twenty feet from the hole" (*Ibid*, p. 126). The choreography of violence reappears, but now with a sacred, ritualistic precision. There is a hole, a pile of sand, tools, distance, spectatorship. Execution is a civic event to be performed.

The burial immobilizes Onye not by hands, but by earth itself. Poetically, this echoes her birth in the desert, for one who was born from sand is now swallowed by it and the earth that once offered origin now gives enclosure. In African cosmologies where land is ancestor, womb, and grave¹⁹, this reversal marks Onye's forced confrontation with mortality, lineage, and the body's vulnerability. The violence that follows takes on a distinctly biblical association when a man asks "who will throw the first stone at this problem?" (*Ibid*, p. 127). That single word crystallizes the way Onye's

¹⁹ Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere argues that in Igbo culture "the earth (*a/a*) is identified with the foundation of all existence and in this sense has quasi-mystical significance; hence the symbolic rites identified with the major rites of passage, especially birth and death" (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 53). She further explains the rite of burying a newborn's umbilical cord, an ancestral practice widely present and disseminated.

society reads her and her body. It is not even an insult anymore, but an absolute diagnosis that names what *Ewu* existence represents to the dominant culture. Since she is a violent problem, her existence must be violently solved.

Once the first stone lands, the scene accelerates into collective violence. Onye is struck again and again, and Okorafor draws precise attention to where the blows land: the head. “A rock destroyed my nose, bloodied my ear, buried itself in my cheek” (*Ibid*, p. 128), an emphasis that carries layered cosmological meaning. From an Igbo perspective, the head (*isi*) is the center of sensory and perceptual life. As Agbasiere explains, “The *isi* and the *ukwu la aka* elements are responsible for generating the sense of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and the physical head is considered the pivot of such activities” (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 67). To damage the head is to disrupt the very organs through which a person knows and navigates the world. In this sense, the mob is attacking Onye’s capacity to perceive, to witness, to interpret by attacking the foundations of her consciousness. From a Yoruba perspective, on the other hand, the physical head (*ori ode*) is also symbolic. As Babasehinde Ademuleya notes, “To the Yoruba the physical ‘*ori*’ is but a symbol – a symbol of the ‘inner head’ or the ‘inner person’, the *ori-inu*” (Ademuleya, 2007, p. 214). Striking the head, then, becomes a direct assault on identity and subjectivity, an attempt to shatter a person’s spiritual core, not just the body’s surface.

However, the arc of Act III does not end with the public’s desire and action to kill her. It ends with a different public, one that finally calls her by name. “Oooooonyesonwuuuuuuu! [...] She is here, o! [...] Come and see, come and see! Oooooonyesonwuuuuuuu!!! *Ewu, Ewu, Ewu!*” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 339). For the first time in the novel, a crowd—although only after advocacy and power demonstration—does not recoil or attack her *Ewu*-ness; they declare it in acclamation, shouting in recognition and hopefulness. The word that had marked her as a filthy, evil, violent problem elsewhere is here under an inverted perspective. The bottom-line difference is not that the crowd is suddenly good, but that they now operate under a divergent social script, one rooted in Najeeba’s own actions. “‘My mother!’ [...] My mother was going *alu*, sending herself here and telling the Okeke about me, to expect me and be glad” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 341). Najeeba, through a verbal, oralized dissemination directed to the collective, reframes Onye’s *Ewu* identity as prophetic hope, a threat not to the community but to the General—the representation of oppression itself.

Najeeba's maternal love, protection and activism direct our eyes in order to notice that, all throughout the novel, whenever Onye is scarred, her healing comes from those who love her: Mwita's hands apply oils and potions drawn from the natural world, her mother feeds her to restore strength, the camel Sandi follows and protects. Care keeps returning to her through touch, through food, through earth-based remedies and nature life itself, those being a quiet counterforce to every act of violence she endures. These small reparations prepare the ground for the larger recognition that finally arrives in the desert.

And "isn't that what the woman said? That Onyesonwu would come and we would see the truest love? What can be truer than two *Ewu* who can love each other? Who are able to love?" (*Ibid*, p. 339) The advocate woman articulates the assumption that has haunted the *Ewu* identity since the novel first opened its page-curtains: that children of violence cannot feel or express love. To name *Ewu* love as "the truest love" directly counters the ideology that defines them as embodiments of violence. In this final turn, Okorafor reframes love itself as *act* of resistance, a force that contradicts every expectation built into the *Great Book*. It is not sentimental or romanticized, neither it is abstract. It is practical, embodied, and political: something closer to *eros* in *Ifunanya*, Mwita's love, *philia* in relation, *storge* in Najeeba's claim. Motherhood, partnership, and kinship, in every form it takes, love becomes the counter-script to the social story that has tried to define what *Ewu* are allowed to be.

CHAPTER 4: *UMÛNNĒ BOUND BY BLOOD: ONYE, DITI, LUYU AND BINTA*

I was a trapped animal. Not trapped by the women, the house, or tradition. I was trapped by life. Like I had been a free spirit for millennia and then one day something snatched me up, something violent and angry and vengeful, and I was pulled into the body that I now resided in. Held at its mercy, by its rules
(Okorafor, 2020, p. 40).

Upon the imminence of her cutting, Onyesonwu feels metaphorically trapped, an animal whose first instinct is to flee from the cage restraining it. The figure of speech reveals, at the very least, two dimensions simultaneously. First, it marks a sudden contraction of freedom. It is an entrapment not imposed by other, specific subjects, but by embodiment itself, an early recognition that the woman's body, within this world, is a site of expectation, surveillance, and vulnerability. Second, the passage frames the cage as the culmination of a longer process of socialization, backpedaling to small eons of existence. In Okorafian lines, the body is never neutral, both denouncing what has already been inscribed by patriarchal, classicist, colonial rules and punishments and proposing not one, but multiple possibilities of reinscription.

Given that Okorafor's universe unceasingly draws on themes of collectiveness, this thesis' final chapter turns toward this unneutral, woman's body within a context of community. More specifically, toward Onye's small community built throughout the narrative. Hence, we seek to center on two interconnected aspects: the Eleventh Year Rite, a ceremony that involves genital cutting, amongst other spheres of social traditions and perspectives; and the volatile forms of relationship among the young women who undergo the rite together.

Hence, *umÛnnĒ*—although not directly written in the novel—is the Igbo word conscientiously chosen to inaugurate this analysis, a term whose semantic field profoundly enriches the interpretive frame through which this chapter reads. According to Nkōwa okwu, *umÛnnĒ* denotes either “siblings; people who have both or one parent in common”, or “relatives”, or it is, in slang, “a word used to refer to people one holds dear (dearies); special loved ones” (Nkōwa okwu). Agbasiere contributes to the definition by bringing its etymology. She situates *umÛnnĒ* within the collective form²⁰

²⁰ Interestingly, Agbasiere does not mention the word “plural”, rather adopting the structure “*nwanne* (collectively *umunne*)” (2000, p. 83).

of *nwanne*. “Structurally, *nwanne* is a semantic unit comprising the terms *nwa* (collectively *umu*) ‘child’ and *nne*, ‘mother’”, forming a kinship category applied mostly to siblings and also cousins (Agbasiere, 2000, p. 83). Crucially, she notes that *nwanne* applies not only to biological siblings but “is also applied to any person or groups of persons with whom Ego²¹ interacts on a warm basis. In a conflict situation even a stranger would be termed *nwanne*, if he or she has succeeded in helping to resolve the conflict” (*Ibid*, p. 83). In this sense, *umùnnē*, the collective form of *nwanne*, names not merely a set of relations but a principle of belonging, a mode of social recognition that binds people together. Put simply: *nwanne di na mba*, that is, even in strange land, a sibling can be found.

It is through this lens that this chapter approaches Onye, Diti, Luyu, and Binta. Their bond is neither biologically given nor culturally guaranteed. Through their interactions—sometimes supportive, sometimes conflictual—the novel essays on how collectiveness is not inherently benign, an absolute positive sign. It is shaped by power, hierarchy, and the incessant negotiation of values. The Eleventh Year Rite, then, becomes a vital element through which this *umùnnē* relation is first formed.

To begin the analysis of the Eleventh Year Rite, it is necessary to highlight the structural centrality of rites within Okorafor’s fictional society. Rites, in this world, besides marking transitions, are more importantly performed in order to *produce* social subjects. Whether to determine who is respectable, worthy or even marriageable, rites stand as a paramount part of any society, Western or non-Western. Marriageability, the latter exemplified determination, is implied as a function of the fictional Eleventh Year Rite²². Onyesonwu further explains that “after a girl goes through her Eleventh Rite, she’s worthy of being spoken to as an adult. [...] So the ages between eleven and sixteen are happiest for a girl because she’s both child and adult” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 32), revealing that adulthood is not merely chronological but also ritualistic, formalizing a young woman’s presence within communal structure. Onyesonwu, along with her exiled *Ewu*-ness, concluded “no more shame would befall my parents. Not because I was eleven and uncircumcised, at least (*Ibid*, p. 42). Besides, aware of her “oddity”

²¹ Term adopted by Agbasiere to refer to “any person” (2000, p. 77).

²² In an Okorafian observation of the complex mechanism of tradition, she hints in the novel and explicitly states in her blog that “the *mythos* behind the practice has been forgotten but a girl is still expected to have the cliterectomy done” (Okorafor “The Witch”, 2010). This can be observed in the mentioning of the *talembe etanou* stone tradition, where it is stated that “[Onyesonwu’s] mother approved of this tradition, though its purpose had also long been forgotten” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 42). Okorafor portrays a world where tradition often persists even when its meanings fade from memory, showing how the weight of cultural inheritance can rest in repetition.

that did not resemble the ones around her and bent on even a slightest form of belonging, “I believed that I could be normal. That I could be made normal. The Eleventh Rite was old and it was respected. It was powerful. The rite would put a stop to the strangeness happening to me” (*Ibid*, p. 33). Onye thus consciously resolves to take part in the tradition.

Okorafor stresses the rite is a girl’s choice, as well that clean medical tools are used and that they “receive proper medical care afterwards” (Okorafor “The Witch”, 2010), some of the many threads she carefully and unapologetically sews into the complex fabric of the fictional rite, a quarrelsome theme. In the preface essay “Windows and Doors”, published in the 10th anniversary edition, the author states that after the book publishing, she “faced some interesting backlash. [...] African scholars came after me [...] accusing me of airing my people’s dirty laundry. [...] Later, it also came from white feminists who accused me of supporting female genital mutilation” (Okorafor, 2020, p. ix). Both Okorafor and many African feminists have underscored how debates over genital cutting become quickly entangled with colonial discourse, Western rescue narratives and reductive portrayals of African cultures as primitive and pathological. Fuambai Ahmadu has critically commented on the external pressures that shape discussions of genital cutting in “Rites and Wrongs”, arguing that Western frameworks often strip the practice of its internal meanings, collapsing it into a singular narrative of harm (2000, p. 283). Given these observations, Okorafor addresses in her blog that the fictional rite is “not some simpleminded diatribe against female circumcision and African cultures as a whole” (Okorafor “The Witch”, 2010), nor is it an uncritical defense of the practice. Instead, she insists on the fluidity of culture, as “a shape-shifting octopus” whose practices evolve, deteriorate, or are incorporated over time. This statement anchors the ethical stance of the chapter: the aim is not to add value—neither positive or negative—to the practice, but to understand its mechanisms and outcomes related to the *umụnnē* women characters.

Sexuality is the first self-evident theme that emerges from the narrated rite. Succeeding due introductions, the primary question the Ada asks is “Who comes here untouched?” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 36) and Onye learns only she does so. The politics of sexual restraint is made categorial once the Ada announces that “after tonight, you’ll refrain until you’re married. After tonight, you should know better” (*Ibid*, p. 37), inferring a girl ought to embrace abstinence as a moral choice.

The Eleventh Year Rite also operates through a set of material artifacts that accompany the girls long after the moment of cutting has passed. Firstly and accordingly affirmed as ancestral traditions during the rite, Okorafor critically reveals another facet of these fictional objects over the novel as possible extensions of the rite's disciplinary reach. They are worn, carried, or held inside the body, standing as portable and bodily technologies of society's guidelines that promote belonging. Once clasped, the artifacts are embodied into the wearer's identity.

"We were each given a belly chain made of thin delicate gold that we would wear forever" (*Ibid*, p. 42), Onye explains the first object. When the elders raise their own shirts to display the same chains at their waists, they demonstrate the concept of continuity, inviting the young women into a lineage that predates them and will outlive them. "They've been blessed in the seventh of the Seven Rivers," the Ada explains. "They'll live long after we've died" (*Ibid*, p. 42). The belly chain, therefore, inscribes each girl into a long genealogy of womanhood, one that is physically worn on the body and presented as both blessing and inheritance. Its placement on the belly, a site already charged with associations of ancestry and reproduction, is quite significant. In Yoruba tradition, according to Dayo Akanmu in "Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀' (Beads)", "any virgin girl that is worth her sort was expected to wear beads²³ around the waist and the beads were supposed to remain intact until she is married. The concept of 'intact waist beads' for virgin girls symbolized purity, virginity and by extension, integrity" (Akanmu, 2022, p. 112). Although Dayo Akanmu's observation concerns Yoruba waist beads rather than the fictional belly chain Okorafor creates, the parallel is thought-provoking: both are bodily artifacts linked to ideas of purity, sexuality and womanhood. However, Okorafor makes one critical alteration. Unlike Yoruba waist beads, which are often displayed proudly for they are an item of embellishment, the belly chain in the novel must remain hidden. In one scene, Aro reprimands Onyesonwu: "He pointed at my waist, disgusted, 'And that is only for your husband to see'" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 66). Okorafor's chain is an intimate, regulated reminder that womanhood must be lived modestly and carefully, always policing how one's body moves. If not, people would react in disgust. Thus, while the belly chain echoes African traditions, Okorafor shifts its meaning to fit the world she is building. The object carries pride and continuity, yes, but it also absorbs

²³ Beads (*ilẹ̀kẹ̀*), traditionally essential in Yoruba culture, occupied a central role not only symbolically and spiritually, but also economically, sustaining the local bead trade and guaranteeing the livelihood of thousands of artisans (Akanmu, 2022, p. 112).

the weight of control and surveillance. It ties the girls to their mothers and grandmothers, while reminding them that the society they inhabit grants womanhood only to those who follow the established rules.

The second object, the *talembe etanou* stone²⁴, operates at an even more hidden level, for it is worn under the tongue. “My mother approved of this tradition [...] One was only to take it out when eating or sleeping. And one had to be careful at first not to swallow it. To do so was bad luck. Briefly I wondered how my mother hadn’t swallowed hers when I was conceived” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 42-43). Onye’s observation can be unfolded onto three dimensions. First, it points towards Najeeba’s standing on the practice. Although she endorses the *talembe etanou* tradition, Najeeba laments her daughter underwent the Eleventh Year Rite, saying: “In my village, no woman was expected to be cut like that [...] What kind of barbaric . . . [...] My own daughter!” (*Ibid*, p. 45). Such sociopolitical position is an Okorafian strategy to portray how peoples from different territories, even when in sharing of an ethnicity and history—for Jwahir and Najeeba’s village were both Okeke—, can diverge in beliefs and perspectives.

Najeeba does carry a stone in her mouth, however, which points to the second sphere of this argument. She kept the stone even when giving birth, even when enduring the appalling events that gravitate around Onye’s origin. This reveals how these material, physical inscriptions—and also the symbols they carry—become entangled with identity, a part of one’s own, new body. Onyesonwu as well is not immune to this logic. Her socially produced physical body is so intrinsic to her being that, once she is reborn into an uncut body in her initiation, she unconsciously cuts it yet again: “Aro implied that I had grown my clitoris back during initiation and removed it afterward [...]. I wondered why I’d done that, removed it again? Jwahir’s customs were under my skin more than I realized (*Ibid*, p. 140). In this sense, the novel pushes us to perceive that the deeper struggle of liberation is not just physical, but psychological, for it lies in disentangling identity from the very cultural inscriptions that once promised belonging.

²⁴ Okorafor’s description emphasizes that *talembe etanou* stones are not uniform across Okeke communities: “The stones vary with each Okeke group”. Najeeba’s stone, for instance, “was a very small, smooth orange”, while the girls’ stones were diamonds and “looked like smooth ovals of ice” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 42). The term *talembe etanou* itself may draw inspiration from a real-world practice among the Kaka people of the French Cameroons, where women traditionally carry small stones beneath the tongue, which are called “‘Talembe Etanou’ in the Kaka language” (Driberg, 1933, p. 9).

Third and lastly lies the fact that the stone should be handled with care, constantly in the mouth, yet invisible to the public eye. In a world where speech and silence are heavily regulated by gender, ethnicity, and social standing, placing a stone beneath the tongue subtly, with no turmoil, transforms the mouth—the very site of voice—into a locus of discipline. This is later confirmed by Aro, who advises Onyesonwu to “take that cursed stone from your mouth. It’s meant to keep you grounded. It’s useless to you” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 111). The stone is then framed as cursed, perhaps even embedded with juju, as Onye suspects (*Ibid*, p. 229), shaping the body’s relationship to speech without announcing itself as coercion. Aro’s words imply that now that Onye is in a context of studying spiritual knowledge, this shifts her social position within structures of power. She now needs her voice and cannot be kept grounded anymore. Other women, however, any other woman who has not been deemed worthy of spiritual training, he implies, can make “useful” use of the cursed stone.

With Okorafor still promenading in border lands of interpretation, each woman character is given the choice whether to bear, endorse, keep, reject or adapt the objects and traditions when they grow older. In the treatment of the *talembe etanou* stone, “Luyu spit hers in her hand and put it in a fold in her rapa. Diti spit hers into the dark,” and Binta decided not to spit hers out” at all (*Ibid*, p. 229). Okorafor also allows these objects to become narrative opportunities of playful negotiation. This is especially evident in the moment when Onyesonwu and Mwita share their first kiss:

He reached forward and touched my belly chain that had come out as he’d fumbled with my top. Aro’s words flew through my head. ‘That is for your husband to see,’ he’d said. I shivered. Mwita reached into his mouth and handed me my diamond. I smiled weakly as I took it and put it back under my tongue (Okorafor, 2020, p. 76).

The belly chain that came out and the stone that went right into Mwita’s mouth, once introduced as instruments of grounding, are here folded into teenage awkwardness, desire, and experimentation. Irony is easily perceived, for the very tools meant to discipline her body now become entangled in her first act of youthful sexual agency. Okorafor stages the moment without moralizing it, emphasizing that once the objects enter the young women’s lives, it is the objects that move with them, and not the other way around. The artifacts do not shape the girls once the girls reshape the objects.

However, in utter importance, there is another dimension that the first kiss episode denotes, one that is not playful at all. “I ached between my legs, a sharp desperate ache. So sharp that my body jumped. [...] It hurt so badly that areas of my vision were going dark. Tears ran down my face (*Ibid*, p. 75-76). Onyesonwu here physically grasps the painful outcome of the rite performed years ago. As a sad and sexually frustrated Mwita explains, “The scalpel that they use is treated by Aro. There’s juju on it that makes it so that a woman feels pain whenever she is too aroused... until she’s married” (*Ibid*, p. 76). This detail shifts the axis of the rite from a physical alteration to a cosmologically mediated practice, one where the body is beyond an anatomical change. Not only the rite hinders the women characters from feeling full pleasure, but it genders physical pain if they slightly prompt doing so. It is a pedagogical move, one they had not agreed on, for they did not receive such disclosure when they were 11 years old. The motif of consent trembles, problematized in the veiled action of the wise elder women. The girls, however, are not passive recipients of this pedagogy, for they interpret, question, and resist it. Once the young women learn of this, Luyu concludes: “Ugh... We’re tricked into thinking our husbands are gods” (*Ibid*, p. 80). The juju then binds pleasure to marriage, structuring how they read desire itself. In Luyu’s understanding, the ritual implicitly elevates the husband figure, making him the only socially sanctioned source of sexual fulfillment, something that, according to her tone and lexis, does not resonate well at all.

Ayo A. Coly explains that African female sexuality is often represented through narratives of endurance or lack. She identifies a pattern in African feminist scholarship whereby narratives of genital cutting and sexual violence dominate representations of African womanhood. Although these narratives are a direct response to colonial fantasies of African women as hypersexualized, the porno-tropics (McClintock, 1995), Coly argues that the corrective has produced its own distortion, a desexualized sexuality:

In this reactive African feminist script of the African female body, African women don’t enjoy sex. African women endure sex, and sex is something done to them. Through these representational choices and politics of representation, African feminist scholarship has installed a counterhegemonic regime of representation for the African female body, albeit one that refuses to claim sexual agency for the African female body (Coly, 2019, p. 61).

In this *representational* landscape, Coly concludes that African women appear as subjects acted upon—enduring sex—rather than subjects who might want, initiate, or enjoy it. Given these lenses, the representation of African women’s sexuality would stand only at two extremes: either as sexually lacking, emptied of pleasure, or as excessively sexual, reduced to the colonial fantasy. Both poles deny them the space and spectrum to articulate their own sexual agency. Returning to hooks’ views, moreover, let us recapitulate that sexuality has been a central matter to feminism precisely because the body is one of the primary sites where women are regulated. Deciding when, with whom and under what conditions one would engage in sexual activity is political, a key demand in resisting these historical structures (hooks, 2000, p. 25).

Given the importance of the theme and the problem of representation argued by Coly, Okorafor offers a common ground. When navigating adulthood, Onye, Diti, Luyu and Binta, all four African women elect to reverse the clitoridectomy. In Onye’s case, since she has power over matter, the regrowing, healing act comes with ease: “That tiny piece of flesh made all the difference. Growing it back hadn’t been hard and it pleased me that for once in my life obtaining something of importance was easy” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 130). The regeneration is quick, casual. There is no grand announcement, no dramatic revelation, no guilt. Instead, it is nothing but a naturalized assertion, a matter-of-fact reclaiming of a bodily part. It is intriguing to perceive, however, that in doing so, Onye’s sexuality becomes intertwined with the very capacity that defines her prophetic journey: the power to transform what has been imposed into something claimed by her own terms.

The girls’ case is not so straightforward for they do not share Onye’s magical abilities. The rite they perform in the desert is similar to the Eleventh Year Rite through structure. The girls remove their rapas one at a time and face once again the exposure, fear, and pain that had marked their first rite. “Diti was whimpering. Then crying. Then screaming. I held on, my eyes closed, though I could feel the same burning, tearing, knitting between my legs” (*Ibid*, p. 230). Pain becomes the medium through which the procedure happens again. And yet, this new rite *mirrors* the original one, a mirror of reflected inversion:

‘Who wants to go first?’ I asked. [...] ‘Why not do it in the order of our rite?’ Luyu said.

‘Binta, you, then Diti?’ I said.
 ‘Let’s do it the other way around this time,’ Binta insisted (Okorafor, 2020, p. 229).

The inverted order stands for an inverted purpose and meaning. From removal to returning, the reclaiming of flesh—a flesh specifically made for pleasure—recasts the body as a site of agency rather than endurance. Furthermore, it is possible to find an additional, decisive contrast between the two rites. While the Eleventh Year Rite was performed in front of every woman there present, as a circle of collectiveness, in the improvised ceremony held in the dark quiet of the desert, each girl had their own, personal, somewhat private interval carved *outside* of the group. That shift from shared experience to individuality reshapes and complicates the dynamics of relations between the young *umùnnē*. Even though they share the experience of the rite, “there is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist” (Lorde, 2021, p. 116), that is, the language of sisterhood often masks unequal positions within the group. Though the young women undergo the same rite, they do not inhabit it in the same way. Once they grow and *re-grow*, standing against the original cutting, they must again renegotiate the meanings of the bond born in blood.

The elder woman’s words at the original rite are blunt and foretelling: “Nana the Wise put her hand on Binta’s cheek. ‘After tonight, all in this room will be bound,’ she says. ‘You, Diti, Onyesonwu, and Luyu will protect each other, even after marriage. And we, the Old Ones, will protect you all” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 37). Nana the Wise frames the bond as a safeguard, where protection flows in two directions, among the young women and from the elders toward them. The ceremony also establishes a micro-community with its own social mechanisms that shall be preserved even after marriage, that is, for their lifetimes. This does not imply that such bond is harmonious, neither that it should be taken in romanticized lenses. The novel complicates sisterhood by staging it as sometimes conflictual and uneven rather than naturally nurturing. As bell hooks explains:

We all knew firsthand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred. Sexist thinking made us judge each other without compassion and punish one another harshly (hooks, 2000, p. 14).

Women are trained by patriarchal socialization to mistrust, compete with, and police one another and the microcosm of four is not immune to this systemic logic which orchestrally operates through class, ethnicity, and internalized stigma. “I don’t hate you... but I hate what you are,” Diti confesses to Onye. “Eleven years of believing that *Ewu* people are dirty, lowly, violent people. Then we met you and then Mwita” (Okorafor, 2020, p. 226). Her fear is cultural, learned, and maintained through years of hearing a single story, of being given one resolved interpretation. Her sense of civility and superiority also surfaces repeatedly: “I’m used to good meals, fresh hot bread, and spiced chicken not stewed desert hare and camel milk!” (*Ibid*, p. 225), ignoring the fact that Onyesonwu too misses the warm amenities. Diti believes she deserves a better life than her fellow “sister”, that she is civilized while others are not, that others orbit below.

On the other hand, Luyu is introduced in clothing “made from the finest textiles [...] they’d never been washed”. She “came from money” (*Ibid*, p. 37). Carrying the imprints of class privilege, she moves with the confidence of someone who has never needed permission to take up space. Her affair with Fanasi, Diti’s fiancé, is, besides a plot complication, an extended realm of entitlement and a sharp critique of pseudo-feminist ideas that, when promoting sexual autonomy, neglects and harms other women. These attitudes reveal the fractures within the so-called binding, for the girls carry with them very well-established hierarchies that precede them.

Also Onye is shaped by these tensions. Her rage, sharpened by years of stigma, erupts when she punches Diti and further declares: “you deserved your beating” (*Ibid*, p. 225). The moment strips away any fantasy of pure victimhood. She too can reproduce the same logic that has always been used against her, that is, the belief that violence can restore order, that domination is justified when one is “much taller, bigger, and much angrier” (*Ibid*, p. 225), as she is. Exposing the contradictions of her role, she is both victim and wielder, vulnerable and feared, excluded and central to the group’s survival.

And then, there is Binta. She who “was first, her rite most urgent” (*Ibid*, p. 39). I here argue that her trajectory exposes the most brutal mechanism of patriarchal violence in Okorafor’s novel, one that is constructed under multiple layers of dystopian horror. If Diti and Luyu can reveal how class privilege and internalized hierarchies of gender and race infiltrate the group, Binta embodies the violence that precedes and

exceeds all bonds, one that fortunately the girls do not fully grasp: violence rendered intimate, routinized, and normalized through kinship itself. She “always had her eyes downcast and spoke little when around others. Her father’s abuse cut deep” (*Ibid*, p. 49) copiously, comprehending degrees of the physical, psychological, social, historical, political, a truly twisted amalgam of crushing oppression. Patriarchal brutality is then somatic.

Not only her home failed her, but multiple spheres of society have as well. To be “so lovely even her father couldn’t resist her (*Ibid*, p. 157)” is an obscene formulation given in everyday talk, one that collapses violence into desire and thereby relocates blame onto her body. And “there was already a growing competition for her among the young men because of this” (*Ibid*, p. 157), as if sexual violence had rendered her more desirable. Patriarchy transforms her trauma into social currency, her vulnerability into market value. More than an exposure of cruelty, this diagnoses how intimate harm is socialized and sustained. In the novel, Binta exposes a culture where a woman’s, a girl’s suffering is normalized, where her father’s crime is folded into the fabric of everyday life and where the burden of violence is placed on the woman rather than on the rapist perpetrator. Elder women do attempt to intervene when Binta is young, offering solutions mainly sustained by counter-violence. They whip him (*Ibid*, p. 47) and they trust the pain of the juju will “protect” her (*Ibid*, p. 79). Neither the physical punishment, nor his own daughter’s pain stop the rapist man, and if anything, it only made Binta’s suffering worse. In the end, the response is more than insufficient and the community that kept chanting “You are safe, you are safe, you are safe here” (*Ibid*, p. 37) during Binta’s initiation, deeply fails her as well. “Even after the interventions, Binta’s father still couldn’t control himself” (*Ibid*, p. 157).

A public mass is the last social sphere that does her wrong. Binta’s death stands as the stark culmination of the violence that has shaped her life from the beginning. The description is devastating in its specificity: “she was dead. They’d smashed her skull, punctured her chest, crushed her neck and her legs” (*Ibid*, p. 240), turning visible the scale of systemic harm embedded in the world she inhabits, exposing the misogynistic logic that structures her social and political landscape. In this context, such lethal injuries are not shocking exceptions, but the predictable, calculated outcome of a system designed to fail—and ultimately kill—women like her. The novel urges the reader to move past sympathy and instead map accountability, examining who gains from her silence, who turns her suffering into value, who profits from her

objectification and which everyday practices make her abuse appear ordinary. What seems horrific in isolation becomes, when placed within this network—which only disconnects—of complicity and abandonment, brutality is not an exception that happens only to the poor, unlucky other, but the very expected endpoint of patriarchal systems.

And yet, once Onye learns of the whipping of Binta's father, she thinks that "they should have done more than that" (*Ibid*, p. 47). Binta does so. The poisoning of her father with the "slow acting heart root extract" (*Ibid*, p. 167) is far from theatrical vengeance, but a tactic chosen because every legal, moral, and communal system had failed her. Binta is the one who keeps her eyes down, who, since she was a child, carries the heaviest scars made by her own father in silence. In this perspective, one would assume she is the least likely to resist. Yet she is the one who calmly takes action when no one else will. "He had it coming" (*Ibid*, p. 167), she lightheartedly declares in the voice of someone who has already understood that justice will not arrive from elders, rituals, counseling, or community discipline, for she is the one whose childhood was denied, who was thrown into the fragilities and atrocities of the world too soon. Subtly, with no spectacle, she responds accordingly to it in agency.

So far, I have traced the differences and frictions that shape the relationship between Onye, Diti, Luyu and Binta, women who are marked by distinctive backgrounds, worldviews, class positions and, in Onye's case, racial difference. While these distinctions produce tension and hierarchy within the group, they also reveal uneven exposure to violence and exile. However, "The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference" (Lorde, 2021, p. 123). None of the woman characters is solitary, for they do not walk alone. On a daily basis, they negotiate their very relationship and decide to navigate their troublesome society in union. "And then there were six" (Okorafor, 2020, p. 159) who were going on a journey to rewrite the world. And four of these, were women.

During the rite that bound them, as stated before, the Ada's primary concern is to know who comes there untouched (*Ibid*, p. 36). Noticing Binta's hesitation, Nana the Wise remarks that "truth is the only thing that will secure this bond tonight" (*Ibid*, p. 37). Such statement about truth carries deep implication, pointing toward at least two dimensions. The most immediate interpretation revolves around a circle of secrets that

only they share. Once a group of strangers in unfamiliar lands of womanhood, the young women find in truth an early sense of sisterhood:

It was now definitely the four of us. Any friends Luyu, Binta, and Diti had before were no longer important. I had no friends to drop. Most girls who went through their Eleventh Rite together, though they were “bound,” didn’t remain so afterward. But the change was natural for us. We already had secrets. And those were just the beginning (Okorafor, 2020, 47).

Onye notes that, in most cases, girls who undergo the Eleventh Year Rite together drift apart soon after, so the formal “binding” functions more as symbolic protocol than as enduring kinship. Their bond becomes less about the ritual obligation and more about the world they inhabit together, a universe of four shaped by intimate, somber and openhearted revelations to each other, being Binta’s the most grievous one. They share the weight of knowledge, one that is given from and within violence.

As the story progresses, however, truth acquires new layers of meaning, growing to encompass the brutal realities structuring their world, that is, the violent, dystopian, multifaceted conflict between Okeke and Nuru. “These people didn’t want to know the truth” (*Ibid*, p. 28). It is a truth overlooked, ignored by those who are not close to it, standing as a powerful critique on the contemporary world who keeps relying on negationist, dangerous discourses that comply to multiple expressions of violence. Yet, “you showed us!” Diti says to Onye. “You showed us the West. Who could just sit there after seeing that? I couldn’t just live my happy life with Fanasi. You changed all that” (*Ibid*, p. 225). As the narrative widens from personal trauma to collective catastrophe, truth acquires a political dimension.

In this sense, the girls’ relationship moves toward a feminist sisterhood, which bell hooks explains that it “is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes (2000, p.15). The truth they hold is then double-edged: it names what was done to their bodies and what must be confronted in their world. The historical wound of their world, alongside the collective activism of confronting it, is thus what ultimately bounds the *umùnnē*. Their bond, once forged in the blood of an ancestral rite, is now reinscribed by the blood of war they must fight to end.

CONCLUSIONS

Nnedi Okorafor is a border-walker and a storyteller who seeks—and accomplishes—a re-rooting futurity in African soil. The Naijamerican, africanfuturist writer, situates her creativity firmly in African histories, cosmologies and languages. She makes of her deserts, songs and names a theatre for both ruin and repair. Africanfuturism, as Okorafor herself defines and practices, stakes a claim to futures that are first rooted in Africa's material and spiritual present and past, being a speculative posture that “acknowledges, grapples with and carries ‘what has been’” (Okorafor “Africanfuturism Defined”), while imagining technological, cosmological and political possibilities that do not require Western scaffolding. It is therefore both aesthetic and ethical, both epistemological and philosophical. Okorafor's project of marrying ancestral cosmologies with speculative devices thus creates a critical space where technology, tradition and ecology coexist both in tension and in harmony. Past and future are braided rather than opposed.

Drawing on Cranny-Francis's foundational concept of dystopia and on Atwood's perspective that an “imaginary garden” has real toads in it (Atwood, 2017), the thesis reads Okorafor's world as “worse than” (Cranny-Francis, 1990, p. 125), yet tangible. Importantly, this reading aligns with Baccolini and Moylan's formulation of the critical dystopia, where the text exposes a nightmarish scenario while retaining a “utopian impulse” (2003, p. 7), that is, an open, ambivalent possibility of change rather than total annihilation. Within that critical dystopian frame, the idea of a feminist critical dystopia, articulated by Cavalcanti, becomes central in the way that the novel is understood. She defines that a feminist critical dystopia comprises three entwined axes: a critique of patriarchy and self-critique of feminism itself; an explicit textual self-awareness about genre and possibility, standing between the utopian goodness and dystopian badness; and an impulse toward collective transformation, that is, the formation of a “critical mass” of readers and actors who might rework social imaginaries (Cavalcanti, 2003, p. 48). The novel therefore functions aesthetically, diagnostically and pedagogically, inviting readers into a political reading-community.

Val Plumwood's critique, an essential methodological frame, adds “nature” to the familiar triad of race, class, and gender (1993, p. 1-2). She exposes the machinery that keeps these categories hierarchically arranged in the first place by a dismantling of dualisms: mind/body, culture/nature, masculine/feminine, master/slave

reason/emotion. Through Plumwood's lens, the violence done to land, to women, to colonized bodies, and to those marked as socially disposable are explained within such logics of dualisms, one that associates women to nature and irrationality. The dismantling of this logics however, stands in the resignification of such associations. Women in the novel are not just closer to nature, nor is nature simply feminized. Instead, Okorafor places them in a shifting relation which are sometimes mirrored, sometimes estranged, sometimes bound by shared vulnerability. As Wangari Maathai reminds us, to injure the earth is to injure human life and the opposite is also true (2010, p. 17), not because women are nature, but because oppressive systems rarely limit their reach to a single target. Ecofeminism, in this arrangement, becomes a method for tracing those crossings of harm and renewal.

Given the complex, multiple threads—that sometimes seemed to be knotted in 10 pointy ends, each—that Okorafor used in order to sew a colorful quilted cloth that warms and harms the reader, this research examined the manifold forms of violence that traverse the women characters in the novel. *Who fears death* becomes a literary laboratory for understanding how violence can operate on and through bodies, rituals, environments, kinship systems, and social narratives. More importantly, we are interested in the women characters. Interested in seeking the comprehension of who they are, where they come from, who they talk to, what they talk about. Each question may have various answers. By tracing these operations across the chapters, this research argues that the *Ewu* body, the desert landscape, and the female kinship of the story become key sites where violence is simultaneously inscribed, contested, and reimagined.

The *Ewu* are marked by their origin in weaponized rape, being socially produced as a caste of otherness, feared and despised through layered forms of direct, structural, symbolic and epistemic violence. Dystopian lenses reveal the concreteness of these systems. Today, daily news cover—and oftentimes *uncover*—the atrocities that man is capable of doing to the ones around him, to the world he lives in and too to himself. The Darfur conflict, declared thread of Okorafor's patched cloth (Okorafor, 2020, p. 387), is nothing but one of the almost uncountable events that has violently taken place in the name of the motif of destruction and obliteration of the other. The *Ewu* being, the by-product of such dystopian scenarios, are but a metaphor concerning the epitome of violence, a reminder that the production of "abnormality", the other, is always a sociopolitical act with material consequences.

The analysis demonstrated that violence in the novel functions as a structural grammar—one that is incisively prescriptive and normative, leaving no room for variables—which organizes both the narrative world and the subjectivities within it. In any moment is violence treated in isolation, as in a deviation. This leads to how Okorafor arranges sexual, ethno-racial, ecological, and epistemic violences as mutually reinforcing forces that articulate how power is produced, circulated, and more importantly, naturalized. Given that, this study has perceived that these violences are staged through performance, a spectacular performance, where brutality is drawn as ritual that is collectively witnessed. Hence, this thesis has found a systemic mechanism where racialized women's bodies operate as the terrain upon which patriarchal and colonial rules are inscribed, living archives of a technology of domination. Such inscription has been found to be sustained by a recurrent language of filth and contaminating disease that actively seeks to produce vulnerable subjects both internally and externally by binding them to their bodies as sites of shame, of danger, and ultimately, of disposability.

To talk about violence without succumbing to abstraction requires confronting the fact that violence is woven into daily life not only through extraordinary, shocking events but through ordinary structures: access to food, mobility, housing, health, education. Societies teach us who is disposable, who must serve, who is suspect, who deserves protection, who must justify their existence at every turn. Such lessons are absorbed so early, and repeated so often, that they become difficult to recognize as teachings at all. Much of the harm that structures contemporary life, particularly for women, racialized communities, and other marginalized groups, operates precisely through this pedagogical normalization. Women, in particular, learn to inhabit fear as a mode of being. They live in fear of leaving their houses and not coming back, whether physically or psychologically. They leave in fear of staying in their houses too, for the home—one occupied by a subject who profits from her erasure—is no synonym of harbor. Violence thus persists in the conditions that shape what kinds of lives can be lived, sustained or imagined.

And yet and most importantly, the study argued that resistance emerges not as a direct inversion of violence but as a reconfiguration of the very meanings through which subjectivity and community are imagined. Onye's arc exemplifies how agency is generated within, rather than outside of, the conditions of subjugation: her transformations intervene in the systems that sought to determine her life as

disposable. Moreover, the analysis highlighted that resistance operates through distributed practices, genuine activism: the voice that claims, the silence that registers and produces one's own history, the ecological awareness of mutual respect and coexistence, the genuine love that heals. These findings show that Okorafor constructs resistance as a process of epistemic and material reworlding, in which characters destabilize the logics that bind violence to subjectivity. In this sense, the novel theorizes resistance as iterative, embodied, and world-making, not as heroic exception but as a sustained counter-structural practice that opens the possibility of alternative futures.

WORKS CITED

- ACHEBE, Chinua. **Home and Exile**. New York, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- ADEMULEYA, Babasehinde A. The concept of Ori in the traditional Yoruba visual representation of human figures. **Nordic Journal of African Studies**, vol. 16, no. 2, 2007, pp. 212–220.
- AGBASIERE, Joseph Thérèse. **Women in Igbo Life and Thought**. London and New York, Routledge, 2000.
- AHMADU, Fuumbai. Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outsider Reflects on Power and Excision. **Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change**, edited by Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000, pp. 283–312.
- AKANMU, Dayo. Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀ (Beads): A Sociocultural Appraisal of an Ornament of Beauty among Contemporary Yorùbá Women. **Language Review: International Journal of Linguistics**, Maiden edition, Sep. 2022.
- ATWOOD, Margaret. Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump. **The New York Times**, 10 Mar. 2017. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html>. Accessed on: 21 Jun. 2024.
- BACCOLINI, Raffaella; MOYLAN, Tom, editors. **Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination**. New York, Routledge, 2003.
- BAKARE-YUSUF, Bibi. The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror. **Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader**, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 311–323.
- BERNIKOW, Louise. **The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552–1950**. New York, Vintage Books, 1974.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. **Outline of a Theory of Practice**. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- BROWNMILLER, Susan. **Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape**. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1975.
- BUTLER, Judith. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. **Theatre Journal**, vol. 40, no. 4, Dec. 1988, pp. 519–531.
- CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY. “Pan-Africanism.” **Cambridge Dictionary**, Cambridge University Press. Available at:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/pan-africanism>. Accessed on: 10 Dec. 2024.

CAVALCANTI, Ildney. The Writing of Utopia and the Feminist Critical Dystopia: Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast Series*. **Dark Horizons**, edited by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 47–63.

COLLINS, Patricia Hill. The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought. **Signs**, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 745–773.

COLY, Ayo A. **Postcolonial Hauntologies: African Women's Discourses of the Female Body**. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

CRANNY-FRANCIS, Anne. **Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction**. St. Martin's Press, 1990.

CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. **University of Chicago Legal Forum**, vol. 1989: no. 1, Article 8.

———. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. **Stanford Law Review**, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

DORNELLES, Danielle. Tempos de Mulheres: utopias e distopias feministas na literatura e história. [Women Times: feminist utopias and dystopias in literature and history] **Revista de Literatura, História e Memória**, vol. 17, no. 30, 2022, pp. 223–235. Available at: <https://e-revista.unioeste.br/index.php/rlhm/article/view/28000>. Accessed on: 2 set. 2024.

DOUGLAS, Mary. **Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo**. New York, Routledge, 2001.

DRIBERG, J. H. Divination by Pebbles. *Man*, vol. 33, Jan. 1933, pp. 7–9. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. **JSTOR**. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/2789948. Accessed on: 25 Sep. 2025.

ETHNOLOGUE. "Nigerian Pidgin." **Ethnologue**. Available at: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/pcm>. Accessed on: 4 Sep. 2025.

FANON, Frantz. **Black Skin, White Masks**. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London, Pluto Press, 2008.

———. **The Wretched of the Earth**. New York, Grove Press, 1963.

FONTES DE OLIVEIRA, Natália. Women and Nature? Nature Writing in the Dystopian World: Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. **Interfaces Brasil/Canadá**, vol. 21, 2021, pp. 1–20. Available at: <https://periodicos.ufpel.edu.br/index.php/interfaces/article/view/21721>. Accessed on: 5 mar 2025.

GALTUNG, Johan. Violence, Peace, and Peace Research. **Journal of Peace Research**, vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167–191.

GOFFMAN, Erving. **Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity**. N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1963.

GRIFFITHS, Jennifer L. **Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance**. Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2009.

HOOKS, bell. **Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics**. Cambridge, South End Press, 2000.

———. **Black Looks: Race and Representation**. Boston, South End Press, 1992.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. **Sexual Violence and Its Consequences among Displaced Persons in Darfur and Chad: A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper**, 12 Apr. 2005. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/08/202108africa_sudan_displaced.pdf. Accessed on: 12 Set. 2025.

JACOBS, Harriet. **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**. Boston, 1861.

LEONFILS, Marah H. **Literary Activism and the Black Feminist Woman Writer: A Study of Alice Walker and Carolina Maria de Jesus**. Marian University, 2017. Master's thesis.

LITTLE, William; MCGIVERN, Ron. Chapter 11: Race and Ethnicity. **Introduction to Sociology**, BCcampus. Available at: <https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontosociology/chapter/chapter11-race-and-ethnicity/#section11.1>. Accessed on: 4 Set. 2025.

LORDE, Audre. **Sister Outsider**. Triangle Classics, PDF Adapted for IB English Use, 2020-2021.

LUGONES, María. Rumo a um feminismo decolonial. In: **Pensamento Feminista: Conceitos Fundamentais**, Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (ed.). Rio de Janeiro, Bazar do Tempo, 2019, pp. 356–377.

LUMINA FOUNDATION. Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. **The Lumina Foundation**. Available at: <https://www.luminafoundationsoyinkaprize.com/>. Accessed on: 15 Jul. 2024.

MAATHAI, Wangarĩ. **Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World**. New York: Doubleday, 2010.

MCCLINTOCK, Anne. **Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest**. Routledge, 1995.

MBEMBE, Achille. **Necropolitics**. Translated by Steven Corcora. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019.

NKỌWA OKWU. “Ewu.” **Nkọwa Okwu**. Available at: <https://nkowaokwu.com/word?word=ewu>. Accessed on: 18 Apr. 2025.

———. “Nsịdịbị” **Nkọwa Okwu**. Available at: <https://nkowaokwu.com/nsibidi/>. Accessed on: 18 Apr. 2025.

———. “Nsịdịbị Unified Ideograph 0917” **Nkọwa Okwu**. Available at: <https://nkowaokwu.com/nsibidi/0917>. Accessed on: 18 Apr. 2025.

ODIKE, Chuka. Alusi in Igboland. **Ozi Ikoro**. Available at: <https://ozikoro.com/alusi-in-igboland/>. Accessed on: 4 Sep. 2025.

OKORAFOR, Nnedi. Africanfuturism Defined. **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, 19 Oct. 2019. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>. Accessed on: 5 Dec. 2024.

———. Between the Covers: Nnedi Okorafor Interview (Transcript). **Tin House**. Available at: <https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-nnedi-okorafor-interview/>. Accessed on: 5 Dec. 2024.

———. Born Naijamerican. **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, Nov. 2011. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2011/11/born-naijamerican.html>. Accessed on: 5 Dec. 2024.

———. Get It Straight. **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, Aug. 2010. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2010/08/get-it-straight.html>. Accessed on: 10 Dec. 2024.

———. Hugo Nominee Nnedi Okorafor: ‘I Love Stories — And So I Write Them’. **NPR**, 20 Aug. 2016. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/20/490771640/hugo-nominee-nnedi-okorafor-breaks-down-her-sci-fi-writing>. Accessed on: 13 Dec. 2024.

———. Meanings and Pronunciations. **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, June. 2010. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2013/11/penguin-books-blog-meanings-and.html>. Accessed on: 10 Dec. 2024.

———. NETH Space Gives *Who Fears Death* 9/10. **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, May 2010. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2010/05/neth-space-gives-who-fears-death-910.html>. Accessed on: 10 Dec. 2024.

———. The Witch Strike Back **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, Jun. 2010. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2010/06/witch-speaks.html?q=mutilation>. Accessed on: 22 Nov. 2025.

———. The Writing of *Who Fears Death*. **Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog**, May 2010. Available at: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2010/05/writing-of-who-fears-death.html>. Accessed on: 13 Dec. 2024.

———. **Who Fears Death**. New York, 10th anniversary trade paperback ed., DAW Books, 2020.

OMA, Sloane Angelou. The Complex Role of Menstrual Blood in Igbo Spirituality. **Oma's Garden**. Available at: <https://sloaneangelou.blog/journal/the-complex-role-of-menstrual-blood-in-igbo-spirituality>. Accessed on: 14 Nov. 2025.

OYEWUMI, Oyèrónké. **The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses**. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Plumwood, Val. **Feminism and the Mastery of Nature**. London and New York, Routledge, 1993.

QUIJANO, Aníbal. Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. **Nepantla: Views from the South**, 2000, vol. 1, n. 3, pp. 533–580.

SAID, Edward W. **Culture and Imperialism**. New York, Vintage, 1994.

SARDAR, Ziauddin. Foreword. **Black Skin, White Masks**, by Frantz Fanon. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London, Pluto Press, 2008, pp vi-xx.

TALONE, Vittorio da Gamma. Distopias presentes, passadas e futuras: os monstros da sociedade. [Present, past, and future dystopias: society's monsters] **Sociologias**, no. 49, 2018, pp. 368–380.

WAX, Emily. We Want to Make a Light Baby: Arab Militiamen in Sudan Said to Use Rape as Weapon of Ethnic Cleansing. **The Washington Post**, 30 jun. 2004. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/06/30/we-want-to-make-a-light-baby/20ee1d7e-9183-4350-ac3b-0f55039bbfba/>. Accessed on: 22 May 2024.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. **World report on violence and health**. WHO. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/5fd19662-24e0-40bb-a976-187553aca4c9/content>. Accessed on: 10 Set. 2025.