Deliberately derivative: levels of decolonisation in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*

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ABSTRACT

Having written science fiction works such as *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Binti*, Nnedi Okorafor is at the forefront of Africanfuturism. *Akata Witch* falls within the realm of Africanfuturism in offering a version of Africa outside of the stereotypical Western imagination. However, being set in present day Nigeria (and the spirit world), it is more fantasy than it is futuristic. While Okorafor takes umbrage at *Akata Witch* being branded the 'Nigerian *Harry Potter*', the parallels in plot and fantastical setting between the two stories are undeniable and go far deeper than is initially apparent (2020b). The level of correlation might even lead to *Akata Witch* being perceived as derivative of a Western literary phenomenon; nothing more than *Harry Potter* in an African setting. This article sets out to prove the opposite by exploring how, and more importantly, why, Okorafor made the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, by using the *Harry Potter* universe as starting point to tap deeply into Nigerian folklore and African indigenous knowledges. I further posit that *Akata Witch* can be divided into two distinct parts: the first, a mild but very effective form of decolonisation where Okorafor showcases Nigerian folklore and makes what is Western accessible to an African audience; and the other, a direct challenge in the face of the coloniser, touting not only the uniqueness, but also the superiority of Africa and African myth unchained.

Keywords: Nnedi Okorafor; *Akata Witch*; Africanfuturism; Africanjujuism; decolonising fiction; speculative fiction; decolonisation.

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Decolonising Speculative Fiction

Like many things African, African-oriented speculative fiction has received little critical recognition in spite of the constant presence of quality work in the field. Recently, though, Afrofuturism and 'African-oriented speculative fiction' have become 'part of mainstream popular culture' (Droney 2021:27). While the genre's profile has definitely increased, it still faces a level of exclusion. Even as a fringe genre, within speculative fiction, there is always the 'the process of inclusion or exclusion by which social groups are represented or not represented in the exercise of power' (Guillory 1987:483). It also has to be remembered that 'decolonial speculative fiction' focuses on 'social scenes specific to decolonial concerns' (Choksey [sa]) with the full understanding that colonisation cannot simply be undone or magically reversed by adding 'the innocuous-seeming prefix de' (Salami 2021:58).

In contrast to the long tradition of African diasporic authors producing speculative fiction, Joshua Burnett (2015:136) argues that the writing of 'the current generation of African and African diasporic writers such as Okorafor' is different in that their work 'is being explicitly labeled and marketed as speculative or science fiction' and 'critics inside and outside the academy are increasingly recognising the significance of black and postcolonial speculative fiction as discrete genres'.[1] In spite of an increasing spotlight on works by African diasporic writers' speculative fiction and subsequently a perceived levelling of the playing field, it is often the case that African-oriented post-colonial speculative fiction can offer distorted views of Africa and/or often finds itself built on Western foundations. A counter-argument, when not taking into account the aim of decolonisation, could be that fantasy is, after all, fantasy, and that it should not be expected to mirror reality. Speculative works, however, do represent ideas that are turned into representation, and into 'legitimated cultural norm[s]' (Vu 2017:274). It is this, which, according to Droney (2021:31), causes such works, even of fantasy, to be 'neither unitary nor politically innocent' in spite of their African focus. Citing *Black Panther*, a much-touted example of Afrofuturism, Droney (2021:31) claims that it remains a Hollywood work based on an American comic book, which can only, at best, provide flawed 'historical and contemporary representations of Africa'. While seen as a decolonising tool, there is the danger of 'African-oriented speculative fiction' not so much subverting, but 'reaffirming […] the hierarchical codes of race, class, and gender on which it comments' (Droney 2021:31).

One function of decolonising speculative fiction would be to introduce a narrative that differs from the hegemonic Western ones. This is supported by Droney (2021:27), who says the aim should be to counter 'the misrecognitions guiding the Western imagination of Black life on the continent'. He points out that this could be attained

through 'speculative thinking, fantasies grounded in counterrealities to pathological projections of the African future' (Droney 2021:27).

It is not only the possible contribution of speculative fiction to decolonisation that is being scrutinised. The vehicle through which speculative fiction is often delivered, namely the novel, is also under question. When it comes to depictions of Africa, and to novels of African origin, Eileen Julien (2018:371) fears that the novel as written expression is at 'a Eurocentric dead-end', and that all African novels can only ever be patterned on a Western 'genre of artistic expression'. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, on the other hand, allows for the novel as implement of decolonisation, thereby validating the existence of articles such as this one. He feels 'the racial, national, and class origins of the novel' are not what matters, but rather 'its development and the uses to which it is continually being put' (Ngũgĩ 1986:69). Since Julien's argument would make this article, which is based on the analysis of a novel, moot, I subscribe to Ngũgĩ's approach, allowing the form of the novel to adapt and be put to use as a tool of decolonisation.

Within the context of the discussion so far, this article aims to investigate whether *Akata Witch* (hereafter *AW* 2011), as a specific example of Nnedi Okorafor's African-centered speculative fiction, can truly be considered decolonising in nature, or whether it, due to its resemblances to JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, simply adds to the 'misrecognitions' created by African-centered works with Western roots (Droney 2021:27). In order to determine whether *Akata Witch* can be considered decolonising in nature, or even fall within the genre of 'decolonial speculative fiction' (Choksey 2021), I will consider not only a close reading of the texts, but also Okorafor's statement of intent. I will further point out instances where independent interpretation of the text might prove contrary to her statements, and discuss the implications of such examples.

An early indicator of what to expect can be found in the manner that Okorafor distances herself from the genre of Afrofuturism.[2] She specifically coined 'Africanfuturism' as a reaction to Afrofuturism, saying:

> Africanfuturism is 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 directed rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point of view as it then branches into the black diaspora. It does not privilege or center the west (Okorafor 2020).

Here Okorafor acknowledges how Afrofuturism, while Africa-centered, might still fail Africa. This is not about coining a new term, but more about creating a space

on the page and on the screen for the type of speculative fiction that does not simply add to Western misconceptions regarding Africa. From this finely nuanced deliberation of Okorafor's, it could be assumed that elements of decolonisation in her work would be deliberate and well-considered. Whether her intent translates into success remains to be shown by the analysis.

Making the differentiation between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism serves to contextualise Okorafor's oeuvre in the wider field of speculative fiction, and to identify her possible intent in terms of decolonisation. Articles such as Ewa Drab's 'Teenage identity in the face of the other in Nnedi Okorafor's organic fantasy' and Emily Davis's 'Decolonizing knowledge in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy' do provide a nuanced and compelling case for decolonisation in Okorafor's work in general, but these either do not pertain to *Akata Witch* specifically or address different aspects of the novel than those I focus on. This article will, however, focus solely on *Akata Witch*, which, based on setting alone, can further be considered to be 'africanjujuism', another term coined by Okorafor (2020).

While widely recognised as an author of speculative fiction, Okorafor (2009:276) refers to her own writing as 'organic fantasy'. She claims her writing 'all started where most things do: in Africa' (Okorafor 2009:276). Similarly to Ben Okri (1996:17), she argues that story is inherent to Africa, and that there is a natural 'mysticism' to those stories. The 'magic, mysticism and weirdness burst forth from [her] stories like wildflowers and spawning beasts' (Okorafor 2009:276). Brian Attebery (1980:3) refers to fantasy as not only allowing impossible things to happen, but as making familiar things feel novel. In fantasy, thus, Drab (2021:130) claims that otherness or difference refer

> not only to the contradiction of what is deemed plausible in the extra-literary
> reality, but also to the familiar, which is transformed and processed in such a
> way so as to show the unusual element in what seems to be common.

This does not necessarily mean the addition of a magical element, but could include something as simple as a new use or a new context for a familiar object.

While Okorafor (2009:277) says that she cannot 'honestly say [she is] following the path of [her] favorite fantasy authors', I argue that the manner in which *Akata Witch* mirrors *Harry Potter* (to the point of its being known as the 'Nigerian *Harry Potter*', Amazon 2011) is, indeed, Okorafor following Rowling's path. In her own words, Okorafor makes 'something familiar strange' and I argue that Harry, in this case, is the starting point. She uses the same principle on many different levels of her work, something she herself refers to as 'a combination of the familiar and the strange' (Okorafor 2009:279).[3]

On the surface there are obvious similarities between *Akata Witch* and the *Harry Potter* series: an outsider child discovering their magical abilities and being inducted into a parallel new magical world where they have to overcome all kinds of odds, with the help of close friends, to save the magical world and the non-magical world from an evil wizard with ties to their past (this pattern is seen in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Ston*e, hereafter *Philosopher* 1997; *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, hereafter *Chamber* 1998; *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,* hereafter *Prisoner* 1999; *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, hereafter *Goblet* 2000; *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, hereafter *Phoenix* 2003; *Harry Potter and the Halfblood Prince*, hereafter *Halfblood* 2006; *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, hereafter *Hallows* 2007).

JK Rowling herself built on a number of literary tropes, not least the plot of a boy discovering magical powers and going to a special school to develop his powers, which she borrowed from Ursula K le Guin's *Earthsea Trilogy* (1969-1972). There are diverse views on intertextuality and literary allusion, and '[p]utting aside the obvious examples of Shakespeare, Grim, Austen, and other classic writers […] entire genres of contemporary fiction like mystery and romance might be wiped out were there legal structures against using another's idea' (Fialkoff 2002:100). Nnedi Okorafor has publicly taken exception to *Akata Witch* being called the 'Nigerian *Harry Potter*', claiming the comparison is 'doing a disservice to [her] hard work'.[4] There is, however, no scholarly article as yet that precisely examines the similarities between *Akata Witch* and *Harry Potter*. For this discussion to be grounded in textual evidence, such similarities have to be examined in order to establish whether *Akata Witch* is influenced by Harry Potter or not. This article will show that these are undeniable and go far deeper than mere surface level. While I will later demonstrate how these similarities in no way negate Okorafor's vision of decolonising her fiction, the obvious similarities must serve as starting point. Without going into every single example, I will point out the most striking correlations between the two worlds.

Hagrid, the larger-than-life 'giant of a man' who towers over other people, serves as Harry's guide into the new world of magic (*Philosopher* 39), whereas Anatov, 'the tallest man she had ever seen' (*AW* 47) is the one to initiate Sunny into the world of the Leopard People. In Rowling's work, non-magic people are 'Muggles' (*Philosopher* 43), while Okorafor refers to 'people who have no juju' as 'lambs' (*AW* 64). The magical worlds exist in parallel to the non-magical worlds in both works.

One of Harry's first encounters in the world of wizardry is when Hagrid 'taps on a brick' with his wand and they gain entrance into 'Diagon Alley', part of a wizarding 'town' with shops, banks, restaurants and the like (*Philosopher* 56). In *Akata Witch*,

Orlu steps 'up to a large rock that sat in front of the bridge, […] rubbed its smooth black surface with the palm of his hand' and there, '[b]eyond the mist is the entrance to Leopard Knocks' (*AW* 45), a magical 'town' with 'juju powder' shops (*AW* 73), 'Bola's Store for Books' and various eateries (*AW* 75). Inside Bola's, there is a section marked 'ENTER AND BUY AT YOUR OWN RISK' (*AW* 75), which recalls the 'Restricted Section' of the Hogwarts library (*Philosopher* 151).

Harry's new magical world has bronze, silver and gold coins called 'Galleons', 'Sickles' and 'Knots' (*Philosopher* 58). Sunny, on the other hand, is introduced to the magical currency 'chittim', which come in 'copper, bronze, silver and gold' (*AW* 38). There are differences in the manner in which the currency is obtained in the two stories, and in the copper 'chittim' being more valuable than the gold. Harry 'didn't know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money and [could] buy what he want[ed] in Diagon Alley' (*Philosopher* 59) and Sunny, when she enters Leopard Knocks, does so with 'over a hundred *chittim*' in her purse' (*AW* 72) allowing her, like Harry, to enjoy the novelties offered by the magical shops and restaurants.

Diagon Alley has its opposite in Nocturn Alley, 'a dingy alleyway that seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts' (*Chamber* 53). Leopard Knocks, on the other hand, has its seedy part in 'Leopard Spots', an area which, according to Orlu, might as well be stamped 'as prohibited for the amount of illegal juju that goes on there' (*AW* 158).

Harry goes to Ollivander's to buy his wand, although, in Mr Ollivander's words, 'it's really the wand that chooses the wizard' (*Philosopher* 63). Sunny does not use a wand, but she uses a juju knife, which also 'picked [her] fair and square' in the Junk Man's shop (*AW* 218–219). Like Harry's wand, which is described as 'curious […] very curious' by Mr. Olivander (*Philosopher* 65), Sunny's juju knife is described by the Junk Man and by her friends as '[f]unny', '[w]eird' and 'different' (*AW* 219).

Wizards in Harry's world have to pass certain examinations, such as OWLs (*Chamber* 46) and NEWTs (*Phoenix* 232) in order gain access to higher levels of magic. Leopard People go through 'Ekpiri' (*AW* 79) and 'Ndibu' (*AW* 56). Progressing through the levels afford both wizards and Leopard People access to different modes of transport. Sasha '[c]an't wait' to pass his 'Ndibu' so he'll 'never have to use a goddamn plane again' (*AW* 56), which is reminiscent of Fred and George Weasley apparating 'every few feet' just because they have passed the examination and received a licence to apparate (*Phoenix* 84).

The '*Monster Book of Monsters*', prescribed by Hagrid for Harry and his classmates, 'flipped onto its edge and scuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab'

(*Prisoner* 13). Sunny's new book, when thrown across the room in frustration, grew 'tiny black legs' which 'suctioned to themselves to the floor […] walked back to her bed, climbed up the side, and plopped itself near her pillow' (*AW* 97–98).

Other magical creatures from the two stories are also rather similar. The hippogriffs Harry and his friends are introduced to 'had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes' (*Prisoner* 113–114). In preparation for riding Buckbeak the hippogriff, Hagrid explains that 'Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move … It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him' (*Prisoner* 115). The Mirri Bird in *Akata Witch* is also a 'bird the size of a horse' (*AW* 162) which 'clicked its beak, cocked its head, and eyed them' until Orlu figures out that to get a ride on the bird they have to 'introduce [them]selves' and, like Harry, 'politely' ask (*AW* 165).

When the darker side of magic, in the form of the Dementors, make Harry weak, Professor Lupin gives him a 'piece of chocolate' to eat. The moment he eats it, Harry feels 'warmth spread suddenly to the tips of his fingers and toes' (*Prisoner* 86). Sunny, similarly, is shaken by her initiation into magic until Sasha gives her 'a fresh chewing stick', which is mint-flavoured and which immediately makes her 'feel better' (*AW* 57). In *Harry Potter*, there is the 'unbreakable vow' (*Halfblood* 21) while Sunny and her friends form a 'trust knot' (*AW* 34). The purpose of both is to keep the participants from breaking their word.

Modes of transport in the two worlds also show similarities. On their way to their teacher Anatov's house, Sunny and her friends catch the 'funky train' (*AW* 108), which is very similar to the 'Knight Bus' which transports Harry in his hour of need (*Prisoner* 33). Both vehicles are only available to magic people, and both mysteriously suit the exact needs of the traveller (by providing either a 'brass bedstead' for Harry (*Prisoner* 35) or a 'throne-like' chair specially for Antonov (*AW* 209) or by pumping out 'loud hip-hop' (*AW* 108) or reggae (the reggae only appears in the movie version of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*).

Sasha uses a 'powder' to draw a 'vévé' which gets the friends from one place to another while pronouncing the destination 'loud and clear' (*AW* 122). When Harry and the Weasley family travel through the floo network, a 'pinch of glittering powder' and instructions to 'speak clearly' when saying the destination out loud are also key (*Chamber* 47-48). When Harry needs to leave his dormitory at night, he uses an 'invisibility cloak', which makes him 'invisible' (*Philosopher* 148). Sunny performs

a juju spell, which makes her 'invisible' (*AW* 106) so she can leave her house at night. Night Runner Forest (*AW* 122) is a deadly forest through which Sunny and her friends have to travel at night. It holds similar dangers to Hogwarts' 'Forbidden Forest', which Harry and his friends have to enter at night (*Philosopher* 89).

Sunny gets into a fight at school and shows her 'spirit face' to her non-magic adversary (*AW* 178), which is forbidden in the Leopard world. She is picked up by a car, nearly instantaneously, 'to be taken to the Obi Library for punishment' (*AW* 179). She gets told by Sugar Cream that the 'council *always* knows when something like this happens, when prime rules are broken' (*AW* 185) (original emphasis). The same thing happens to Harry on the occasions that he uses magic in front of Muggles. Within seconds of Dobby dropping a pudding on Mrs. Mason (*Chamber* 20), and again, immediately after saving Dudley from the Dementors (*Phoenix* 27), he gets near-instant notice from the apparently all-knowing Ministry of Magic's 'Improper Use of Magic Office' (*Chamber* 21). Harry feared his punishment might entail ending up in 'wizard prison', while Sunny also thinks she will be thrown 'in jail or something' (*AW* 180; *Chamber* 21).

There are also similarities in methods of communication. Every morning an owl delivers the magical *Daily Prophet* newspaper to Harry in his bedroom (*Phoenix* 8). Chichi signs Sunny up 'for a *Leopard Knocks Daily* subscription' (*AW* 146), which is delivered magically to her bedroom every day. The Death Eaters in *Harry Potter* are branded on their forearms with Voldemort's indelible mark, which also serves as summoning device (*Goblet* 545), as the evil wizard Black Hat Otokoto's 'known symbol' is drawn on his victims' 'right arm with a dye that doctors are finding impossible to remove' (*AW* 146). Announcements at the Quidditch World Cup are made by Ludo Bagman, who 'whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said 'Sonorus!' and then spoke over the roar of sound […]; his voice […] booming into every corner of the stands (*Goblet* 102). At the Zuma Festival, Mballa 'brought out her juju knife' and 'dragged it across her throat' to speak over the huge audience 'in a highly amplified voice' (*AW* 232).

The level, depth and persistence of similarity is undeniable. It is, in fact, difficult to understand Okorafor's objections to the 'Nigerian *Harry Potter*' label once the similarities are set out as clearly as they are here. It is particularly puzzling in light of her previously established, clearly defined attitude toward decolonisation. Could it be that what irks her about her work being compared to Rowling's is not that the work is being compared, but that people get stuck on the similarities themselves, instead of on the *differences* in the similarities? These similarities undeniably exist, and while Okorafor may deny their existence, and while they could easily be

considered damning, I would argue that it is the manner in which Okorafor makes the similarities different that is key. She does not simply 'make them strange'; she makes them uniquely and deeply African, steeped in African tradition and myth. This works on two levels, as I will now demonstrate.

On the first level, Okorafor simply makes a story more accessible to an African audience. It is important to keep in mind that 'storyworlds' (James 2015:1) are often not aligned 'with readers' preconceived notions of what an environment looks and feels like' (James 2015:1). When storyworlds and settings that look like their worlds are scarce or non-existent, it must surely impact on readers' enjoyment of or understanding of narratives, or, at least on their identification of self (James 2015:1; Goméz 2016:22). Melissa Ames (2013:3) also refers to the manner in which speculative fiction for young adults offers 'a safe space to reflect upon the political and social issues' that confronts them in their own realities. In Okorafor's (2009:285) own words,

> black children very much want to see themselves reflected in these types of books. They want to go on the adventures and perform the magic, too. They want to imagine. Non-black readers also enjoy the ride and new setting. I am happy that my strange stories are adding some plump drops to this near-empty bucket.

Okorafor (2009:285) is surely successful in her first aim, namely to provide stories in which African children can 'see themselves reflected'. On this level, though, she leaves herself open to criticism, as it could be argued that *Akata Witch*, based on a deluge of dependency on an established Western text, cannot be conceived as decolonising in nature (Droney 2021:31). This potential weakness is, however, overcome by Okorafor's (2009:285) stated deeper goal when she says: 'I also hope that as children (and adults) read my works, they will eventually follow the roots that extend deep and firmly into the rich African soil and sand and learn a thing or two about this potent part of the earth'. This is not simply Okorafor expressing a vague hope. The 'roots' she lays down are deep enough to lead readers beyond the similarities between the two works, beyond the *differences* (superficially based on continent, gender and skin colour) to a rich tapestry of African lore, myth and tradition, thereby introducing a new and more powerful level of decolonisation.

A clear example of this deeper level is the use of 'chittim' as magical currency in the Leopard World (*AW* 38) in the place of Harry's magical 'Galleons', 'Sickles' and 'Knots' (*Philosopher* 58). Okorafor models 'chittim' on an actual historical currency, a manilla, which is a 'horse-shoe shaped' object made of brass, used extensively in West Africa from as early as the fifteenth century (British Museum 2021). On a surface level, that would already be considered an interesting nod to

African history. Like most of Okorafor's choices, though, it goes further: 'During the Transatlantic slave trade manillas were a frequent medium of exchange for slaves' (British Museum 2021). Okorafor thus not only 'Africanises' the magical money system, but her specific choice of historical currency (even if not directly addressed in the text) is an acknowledgement of slavery and the colonial past. This is in line with Salami's (2021:58) call for recognition of colonial ravages in order to move toward decolonisation.

Another telling example, which shows that Okorafor did not simply transplant Harry onto Nigerian soil, is her choice in calling her magical people 'Leopard People' (*AW* 36). This could first be seen as a typically African animal symbol, allowing Okorafor to 'Africanise' Harry Potter. On a slightly deeper level, throughout history, 'leopard-men societies' actually 'existed in several parts of Africa' (van Bockhaven 2009:79) and still operate in Nigeria as Ekpe, with the function of maintaining social justice, 'laws and orders' (Bassey & Ekpo 2019:10). This historical grounding is an effective way to weave African lore deeply into *Akata Witch*.

The true decolonising value of Okorafor's choice, however, lies in how the historical leopard societies, such as the Ekpe and Anyoto, depicted by Western sources as barbaric, actually functioned as a force for pre-colonial 'nation-building' (Bassey & Ekpo 2019:9) and as 'reaction against colonial oppression' (Van Bockhaven 2009:81). Rumours of cannibalism and cruelty surrounding the historical leopard societies are, according to Van Bockhaven (2009:82), tinged with 'elements of colonial imagination' and were fueled by depictions of such societies in popular fiction[5] as the 'evil adversary' to the white protagonist (Van Bockhaven 2009:83). This narrative of 'dehumanization and demonization of the leopard-men has, until recently, precluded their recognition as an anti-colonial movement' which carried out orchestrated 'acts of political emancipation and empowerment with reference to the colonial society' (Van Bockhaven 2009:89). In Nigeria, the Ekpe 'wielded both judicial and legislative powers' (Bassey & Ekpo 2009:13) and were well on their way to forming a 'single political orbit or confederation' in Southern Nigeria; a process which was derailed due to 'obstruction by colonial forces' (Bassey & Ekpo 2019:15).

By making the historically subversive Leopard people her protagonist group, Okorafor makes a clear statement regarding the decolonising intention of her fiction. Her choice is African, acknowledges a hidden part of African history, exposes how such histories are misrepresented in the Western mind, and spotlights subversion of colonial power in Africa's past.

Considering the above examples, it is clear that in spite of numerous and obvious correlations to Harry Potter, *Akata Witch* is far more than a 'Nigerian *Harry Potter*'.

The story is marbled with and grounded in African history, indigenous knowledges and traditions. With references to 'juju' (*AW* 35), 'masquerades' (*AW* 62, 278), 'ancestors' (*AW* 65), 'bush souls' (*AW* 127), 'Ekwenu' who is 'what Satan is to the Christians […] [b]ut more real, more tangible' (*AW* 311) woven through the story, Okorafor crafts a love story to African spirituality and tradition, which goes far deeper than simply holding an African mirror to *Harry Potter*.

That having been established, the next level on which Okorafor challenges stereotypes and takes actual steps toward decolonising speculative fiction is in how she depicts Africa. Okorafor presents Nigeria as a vivid, multicultural country '*full of groups, circles, cultures*' such as '*Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio, Fulani, Ogoni, Tiv, Nupe, Kanure, Ijaw, Annang*' (*AW* 18, original emphasis). She describes a 'typical Nigerian cab', which 'reeked of dried fish, *egusi* seeds, and exhaust' (*AW* 42) (original emphasis). There is nothing romanticised about her depiction of the country, nor is it a depiction of abjection so often found in Western writing (Droney 2021:27).[6] The Africa that Okorafor presents is centred in a globalised world. Sunny herself had 'traveled to Jos in Northern Nigeria […]. She'd been to Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, too. She'd been to Amsterdam, Rome, Brazzaville, Dubai' and considered herself a 'seasoned' traveller (*AW* 71). Books in 'Bola's Store for Books' are in Hausa, Urdu, Yoruba, Arabic, Efik, German, Igbo, Egyptian hieroglyphs, [and] Sanskrit' (*AW* 75). This acknowledgement of diversity, which situates Africa as equal to the rest of the world, is also present in the parallel world of magic. Chichi explains to Sunny that in Nigeria they are 'Leopard People', but that magical communities have 'always been around, all over the world' with different names in different countries: 'witches, sorcerers, shamans, wizards' (*AW* 78).

In her depiction of Africa, Okorafor does not shy away from relevant African issues, thereby adding a different aspect to her decolonial intentions. Sunny, for example, is hesitant to make the blood vow needed for the 'truth knot' as 'AIDS, hepatitis and any other disease she'd ever learnt about in school' are actual factors for her to consider (*AW* 32). There are references to societal abandonment of children with deformities (*AW* 187) and also to 'child witches' (*AW* 78).

Witchcraft, the premise of *Akata Witch*, is a multi-faceted, widespread phenomenon in Africa (Sleap 2011) and ranges from harmless 'juju' to having deadly implications for those accused of it.[7] In Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, the practice of witchcraft is a criminal offence (Sleap 2011:13, 15, 23). In Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania, legislation criminalises the practice of witchcraft, but it is also illegal to accuse any person of practising witchcraft (Sleap 2011:18, 24, 26) to avoid the accused being killed. Mostly those accused of witchcraft or killed for allegedly

practicing witchcraft are the 'most discriminated against and marginalised in society' (Sleap 2011:5). Witchcraft-related killings can be politically motivated, too. During South Africa's post-apartheid transition in the early 1990s, 'many hundreds of people' were 'seized by mobs and burned as witches' (Meek & Yankah 2004:1031). While the novel does not explicitly address any of these issues, the fact that Okorafor makes a taboo topic central to her work demonstrates her willingness to deal with African issues that people often prefer not to talk about.[8]

Central to *Akata Witch* is albinism, another social issue particularly relevant to Africa. In Western literature, albinos are often represented as 'grotesque and fantastic' villains with supernatural powers (Baker 2008:2). While this focus on abnormality makes things worse for people who suffer from the condition, the problem intensifies in Africa, mostly for two reasons. Firstly, there is the issue of whiteness in a predominantly black society. Much research concerning albinism in Africa focuses on whiteness and on 'the enigmatic location of white skin on 'Black' features' (Baker 2008:115). The main reason, however, that albinism in Africa is different from albinism in, for example the United Kingdom, is closely tied in with the premise of *Akata Witch*: the connection to the spirit world.

The spirit world is central to the cultural practices and religious beliefs of many sub-Saharan African countries (Benyah 2017:161) and '[t]he physical realm and the realm of the spirit are not separate from each other' (Gifford 2015:13). It is a commonly held belief that albino body parts 'bring fortune and good health' and help to 'ward off evil' (Benyah 2017:165). The ostracising and killing of albinos in many African countries, often in service of interaction with the spirit world, is well documented (Benyah 2017; Gifford 2015; Ter Haar 2011).

While projects like Albinism Awareness Day have done much toward bringing the plight of albino people to the fore and changing public perceptions of their medical condition (United Nations 2021), there remains the tendency, especially in fiction, 'to focus purely on the symbolic potential of albinism and to write over the reality of living with the condition' (Baker 2008:119–120).

In making her protagonist an albino girl, Okorafor normalises albinism and contributes significantly to awareness-raising around the condition and the serious obstacles albino people might face, particularly in some African countries. Depicting Sunny as a normal child with no villanous or abnormal qualities allows for a move away from the stereotypical depiction of albino people (often misunderstood as only of African descent (Baker 2008:115)). Okorafor's normalising topics such as witchcraft and albinism adds a uniquely African layer to her story, and further demonstrates

the decolonising value of the novel. It is slightly problematic that Okorafor specifically chooses to give the albino girl, Sunny, magical qualities because the traditional beliefs so beautifully showcased by Okorafor are what often contribute to the othering of people like Sunny.

A topic that is central to the current understanding of decolonisation is the recognition (or lack thereof) of African 'ways of knowing':

> At its simplest, failure to embrace and inquire into systems of knowledge alternative to that of the dominant results in a canonical epistemological knowledge base that ignores ways of knowing utilised in large sections of the world. At it's [sic] worst, this supposed primacy of Western scientific knowledge production works largely to maintain the cultural arrogance that perpetuates inexcusable social, ecological and globally exploitative practices (Hickey & Austin 2011:84).

'Ways of knowing' are also addressed in *Akata Witch*. Anatov implores the children to '[l]earn how to *learn*', adding that they (the Leopard People) 'don't teach as the Lambs do' (*AW* 112). He criticises an eminent Leopard scholar, saying '[k]nowledge does not always evolve into wisdom' (*AW* 113). In the same conversation, he refers to the learning difficulties children like Sasha, Chichi and Orlu may have with people thinking them 'disrespectful, uncouth children' only 'destined to be criminals and streetwalkers' in need of 'Ritalin for their ADD' (*AW* 114). As Leopard Children, however (where they are privy to a different way of learning), 'they're destined for great, great things' (*AW* 115). Learning to value different ways of knowing are 'lessons [… which] must be embraced if any knowledge system is to hope for relevance and meaning. To know is to know contextually, according to cultural, social, symbolic and material encounters' (Hickey & Austen 2011:85). Okorafor's handling of this issue, which is intrinsically related to the debate, is in keeping with her effort at decolonisation.[9]

So far the discussion has touched on different levels of decolonisation implemented by Okorafor in *Akata Witch*. On a surface level, she 'Africanises' a significant number of aspects of the *Harry Potter* series to create (with apology to her preferences) a 'Nigerian *Harry Potter*'. Not only does this make her work accessible to African children, but Okorafor's choices regarding which particular African symbols or traditions to use in the process are shown to add another level of decoloniality to her fiction. The manner in which she directly incorporates African social issues and topics pertinent to decolonisation into a representative depiction of Africa adds even more depth. In his analysis of Okorafor's *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), Joshua Burnett (2015:134) finds that her work 'shows postcolonial speculative fiction's potential as a site for counterhegemonic discourse, as a space for examining possibilities that are not available within mainstream realist

literature'. *Akata Witch* differs from the novels discussed by Burnett in being set in current-day, real-world Nigeria rather than in a postapocalyptic Africa, but my analysis so far has made a case for *Akata Witch* being crafted by Okorafor as 'a site for counterhegemonic discourse' (Burnett 2015:134).

By first establishing the similarities and then the differences between *Akata Witch* and *Harry Potter*, I have been able to present two layers of decolonisation in *Akata Witch*. I would also argue for the existence of a third level. When listing similarities between *Akata Witch* and Rowling's work, there is a definitive turning point: two-thirds into the novel everything suddenly changes, both in the story and also in Okorafor's approach to decolonisation. At the Zuma Festival, Mbala introduces two warriors who will fight to the death: Sayé from Burkino Faso and Miknikstic from Mali. Mbala says '[t]hese two warriors are the greatest West Africa has to offer [….] Kind, generous, loving, loyal, both of these men would give their lives for Africa without a thought. Both of these men know when one must stand up and fight. They are what Western society fears most' (*AW* 232–233). These men, as 'the greatest West Africa has to offer' are '*what Western society fears most*' (*AW* 233 (emphasis added). Okorafor explicitly depicts the two warriors as representing Africa, and she explicitly states that they (in their representation of Africa), stand in opposition to a hegemonic West. Starting with an African fairy tale (albeit with decolonising intention), Okorafor moves to presenting a challenge from Africa to Western society and the still hegemonic Western way of knowing and doing.

In support of my argument that Okorafor is moving to a new level, this is the exact point in the novel where all the correlations to the *Harry Potter* novels stop abruptly. Considering, both, how many similarities were pointed out earlier in this article and also Okorafor's demonstrable deliberation in her choices regarding Africa, this cannot possibly be considered mere coincidence. I would argue that the levels of decolonisation found in *Akata Witch* up to this point, albeit superbly crafted, act as a sugared pill used by Okorafor to deliver the avenging barbs of an openly decolonising agenda.

While there are no such instances earlier in the novel, from this point forward there are numerous scenes in *Akata Witch* that openly challenge perceived Western superiority as being merely a perception. At the wrestling match, Miknistic 'didn't prance about talking trash as Muhammad Ali did […] nor did he spit, gesticulate, taunt, beat his chest, or laugh, as they did in pro wrestling' (*AW* 235–236). Instead, he stood over his opponent, 'waiting for him to get up or call it a match' (*AW* 236). What comes out of Africa is depicted as superior, echoing Mbala's words and showing the sport of 'Western society' as ridiculous in the face of African superiority (*AW* 233).

When Sunny is on the self-propelled 'funky train', she wonders why the 'Leopard People didn't share this technology with the rest of the world. It would solve some serious environmental problems' (*AW* 299). Okorafor has already displayed a many-layered approach to decolonisation, and this criticism of Western technologies and ecological policies (implying that Africa and African knowledges might hold environmental solutions), again serves as point of entry to a deeper issue.

During their meeting in the Obi Library, the children are introduced to a 'Middle-Eastern-looking man' who 'scoffed' when the meeting takes place in English because of Sasha being American (*AW* 303). The man does not back down when Sasha takes exception. He attacks Americans, saying '[t]hey don't teach them to understand others, they teach them to expect *others* to understand *them*' (*AW* 303). This could be seen as a negligible slight, but the man goes further to say 'You *are* deaf. Dumb and blind, too! Now *shut up*!' Offering to 'open [Sasha's] ears, mind, and eyes', the man then launches a deliberate attack, implying that 'the United States of America', which he calls Sasha's 'beloved country', was involved in unethical oil deals, which made the villain, Black Hat Otokoto, 'economically wealthy enough to push his plan forward' (*AW* 304–308). True to the increasingly dense pattern of decolonisation woven by Okorafor, this accusation is not random. According to Global Transparency (2019), '[f]oreign actors play a significant role in fuelling and perpetuating corruption in Africa' and much has been written about 'illicit financial flows' between the United States of America specifically and oil rich African countries (Shepard 2015). Bribes from oil-investing countries, like America and China, often serve to line the pockets of politicians, leading to what is known as 'the resource curse' in countries like Nigeria (Shaxson 2007:1123). Obviously, the gloves are off. What starts as a subtle hint regarding environmental policies becomes an open rebuke from Okorafor to America's neo-colonial contribution to poverty and corruption in Africa.

To conclude: *Akata Witch* has a startling number of similarities to Rowling's work, which could be interpreted as Okorafor's novel being derivative and 'beholden to (or writing back to) the empire' (Julien 2018:374). This article, however, demonstrates that, in spite of the numerous similarities and indisputable correlation between the two stories, referring to *Akata Witch* merely as 'the Nigerian *Harry Potter*' is an insult to Okorafor's work, particularly to her decolonising work.

In *Akata Witch*, Okorafor takes the familiar and makes it strange, but it is far more than simply giving *Harry Potter* an African twist. Her effort to make *Akata Witch* 'a site for counterhegemonic discourse' (Burnett 2015:134) is successful on more than one level: from deeply tapping into African tradition and lore (much of it subversive) and focusing on 'social scenes specific to decolonial concerns', to address pressing

social issues particular to Africa (Choksey [sa]), to directly calling out Western practices and hegemony. In *Akata Witch*, Okorafor starts out with a mild, but effective form of decolonisation, in which she uses Harry Potter as starting point, but then moves quite clearly and deliberately, to throw down the gauntlet in the face of the coloniser, touting not only the uniqueness, but also the superiority of Africa and African ways of knowing.

Notes

1. Authors such as Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Pauline Hopkins and others come to mind.

2. A term coined by Mark Dery (1994:183).

3. The term 'estrangement' could refer to how Western fantasy makes ordinary things strange by using magic, but context suggests that Okorafor is using it to refer to how, in genres such as science fiction and speculative fiction, ordinary things are moved into settings that are not necessarily real, thereby allowing for the examination of issues that would normally be avoided in the 'real' world.

4. Okorafor, X (formerly known as *Twitter*) post, February 18, 2020, 4:51 p.m.

5. For example, in *Tarzan and the Leopard Me*n by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1935).

6. See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009).

7. While Rowling's presentation of magic and the wizarding world was metaphorical, the widespread banning of the *Harry Potter* books in school libraries and even the burning of those books by some Christian groups demonstrate that there is still strong elements of belief in witchraft, even in the supposedly science-centric West (Flanagan Knapp 2003:78).

8. It could be argued that this representation of the cultural practice of witchcraft is also consonant with the genre of magical realism insofar as it presents magic as unproblematically coterminous with reality.

9. Upon entering the wizarding world, Harry Potter also learns many new things, but the new things he learns remain steeped in Western tradition, and for the most part do not depart from Western ways of knowledge-making.

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