

**Hybrid Identities and Reversed Stereotypes:
Exploring Identity in Nnedi Okorafor's Nigerian-American Speculative Fiction**

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Table of contents

Introduction	5
<i>Theoretical Framework</i>	5
<i>Belonging</i>	8
<i>Stereotyping</i>	13
<i>Speculative Fiction</i>	16
Chapter 1: Zahrah the Windseeker	21
<i>Identity</i>	23
<i>Belonging</i>	25
<i>Stereotyping</i>	29
<i>Conclusion</i>	35
Chapter 2: Who Fears Death	38
<i>Identity</i>	41
<i>Belonging</i>	44
<i>Stereotyping</i>	48
<i>Conclusion</i>	52
Chapter 3: Akata Witch	54
<i>Identity</i>	55
<i>Belonging</i>	59
<i>Stereotyping</i>	61

<i>Conclusion</i>	63
Chapter 4: Lagoon	65
<i>Identity</i>	67
<i>Belonging</i>	70
<i>Stereotyping</i>	72
<i>Conclusion</i>	75
Conclusion	77
Works Cited	81

Introduction

The main concern of this study is to examine the notion of identity, specifically African American¹ identity, through the analysis of speculative fiction. A project like this is too extensive to fully explore in the scope of a MA thesis. Therefore I choose to focus on two subthemes, namely belonging and stereotyping, which make up at least a considerable part of the debates considering diasporic identity. In the sections on belonging, I will explore how the case studies respond to and position themselves within the discussion by Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy on the double nature or hybridity of diasporic identity which started with W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of 'double consciousness'. In the sections on stereotyping, I examine how the case studies treat stereotypes and possibly try to reverse them. To explore this, I use theory by Stuart Hall on representation and Mineke Schipper's *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging* (1999). The content of these debates will be explored in the theoretical framework below.

Through close reading, I examine how four novels by Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor explore the debates on the construction of diasporic identity. In this process, it is not only important what position they take but also *how* they do this and what this may say about the potential of speculative fiction, a genre which includes all fiction set in a space or time different from its present and in an alternative universe. This study therefore not only explores African American identity, but also the genre of speculative fiction and most importantly the link between the two.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on a theoretical framework and a set of concepts and assumptions which I explore here before discussing and analyzing the case studies.

¹ I am aware that this term cannot be used neutrally, but that no other term is completely neutral either. I use this term to refer to citizens of the United States of African descent.

Issues of race and ethnicity are still present even, or maybe especially, in these times of multiculturalism and globalization. Identity remains an important issue when boundaries are crossed and lost, or are supposed to be, for *multiculturalism* does not directly mean the hybridization of culture but more often the simultaneous presence of multiple cultures. Race and ethnicity, whatever they may still mean or are, keep playing an important role in the process of defining these cultures and identities. Stereotyping is also not something of the past, but still present when “the discursive apparatus of colonialism remains available to members of the [Western] host nation as a means by which diaspora people can be represented” (McLeod 262).

A basic assumption on which my thesis is built is that, following Jeffrey Alexander and Ron Eyerman, what can be called ‘African American identity’ is founded on collective memory. This collective memory is based on a collective trauma shared by all, or most, African Americans, which resulted from the experience of slavery. Eyerman writes that “the notion of a unique African American identity emerged in the post-Civil War period, after slavery had been abolished” (1). This identity was therefore built on the memory of slavery, a cultural trauma. What is important to my study is the premise that a group can construct a shared identity (for example an African American identity) founded on a collective memory of a trauma that is likewise constructed. This is what Jeffrey Alexander shows with his theory about shared trauma which lies at the basis of Eyerman’s work.

According to Alexander, a collective identity is based on a collective memory of a shared trauma. The traumatic event is not inherently traumatic, but becomes so through representation and imagination. Ron Eyerman states something similar when he notes that collective memory is socially constructed and functions to create social solidarity in the present (6). Alexander writes:

Identity involves a cultural reference. Only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves. (10)

It is of importance to note here that Alexander is speaking specifically about *collective* trauma and that this might not count for individual trauma, just as I focus on researching collective identity in this MA thesis.

Alexander explains how, for a group's collective memory to be influenced by an event, it must reach into the group's identity, not just let the members experience pain. Social pain becomes "a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from and where they want to go" (Alexander 10). Not an entire group can make such decisions, but it is a group of agents, or "carrier groups" in Max Weber's terms (mentioned by Alexander), that do so. They "broadcast symbolic representations ... of ongoing social events, past, present, and future" (11). Amongst others, authors of both fiction and non-fiction belong to this group. They help shape the imagining and representation of events which can then become traumatic and help define the group's cultural identity.

This general theory of trauma as outlined by Alexander is applied to the African American case by Ron Eyerman. I already mentioned that according to Eyerman, a collective identity is forged out of the remembrance of slavery, which makes it traumatic in retrospect (Eyerman 2). This trauma can cause several responses in those involved, who try to work through this trauma. Eyerman describes some of these responses, but I will solely focus on those responses that have to do with belonging and/or stereotyping.

Belonging

The theme of belonging raises many questions. Where does someone with an African American identity belong to, geographically and culturally? Is this person African, American or both? How does that work and what are the consequences? If s/he is both, does that mean that s/he is a combination of both or something entirely new? These and similar questions are explored from an African American perspective in this MA thesis.

One response to this issue takes the form of the concept of ‘double-consciousness,’ which was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois and later developed by other scholars. This idea focuses on belonging simultaneously to multiple cultural groups. In Du Bois’ own words from *The Souls of Black Folk*:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, -- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wished neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to

make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American ... (3-4)

Du Bois describes double consciousness as a two-ness, being simultaneously American and 'Negro'. Neither of the two sides of the African American should be neglected because both have their own particular value. It should be possible to simultaneously be both, but how that is to be realized seems unclear to Du Bois. Whether we agree with the idea of double consciousness or not, literature can offer multiple solutions to identity dilemmas through imagination. Exploring options through cultural imagination may initiate a real life solution or at least a change in patterns of thinking. Present images can be countered by new images, in which questions regarding identity (belonging and stereotyping) are (partly) solved.

Questions of belonging often deal with racism, which is "the belief in the superiority of one's own race as against other races, with the intention of gaining privileges and the right of domination" (Schipper 6). For example, Du Bois mentions how the Self versus Other dichotomy is important to the concept of double consciousness. African Americans deal with a self image formed by looking at the Self through the eyes of others. Mineke Schipper mentions three responses to racism which all deal with belonging, namely thinking in terms of equality; thinking in terms of difference and thinking in terms of diversity or hybridity (6). These positions resemble the questions, points of discussion, that surround this theme of belonging in the African American experience.

An emphasis on equality, "meant to show that Africans or people of African descent had no less contributed to culture than white people," can be linked to an attitude which emphasizes African Americans' right to reside in the United States while at the same time embracing, not neglecting, their African heritage (Schipper 6). A second attitude towards racism emphasizes difference, "claiming a culture of their own, a history of their own, aesthetics of their own, all based on an essence of their own,

free from and independent of the Other” (Schipper 6). This is related to an attitude which emphasizes an enduring connection with the African continent. Related to this perspective are movements such as Panafricanism, Black Renaissance, Negritude and Black Consciousness, consisting of “writers and scholars in search of their roots” (Schipper 6). Black norms and values are celebrated while white standards and the dominant canon are rejected. Both of these responses to racism and belonging emphasize and embrace the connection with the African continent but the degrees and ways in which they do so differ. Even though W.E.B. Du Bois’ involvement with the Panafrican movement may suggest his perspective as belonging to the second category, I think his concept of double consciousness could best be placed as fitting in the first perspective because it includes belonging at two places at once and trying to embrace both simultaneously.

The third response to racism as mentioned by Schipper is an abandonment of binary oppositions such as black and white and insider and outsider (7). This last option rejects the construction of a collective identity and celebrates hybridity and individualism instead. Whereas double consciousness includes belonging to two cultural groups and possibly also two geographical locations at once, I would like to introduce a second idea here, namely Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘border lives’, which also addresses belonging but emphasizes belonging at neither of the two places but somewhere in-between. When two or more cultures interact in this third space, it becomes an ambiguous area of discourse where the dominant narrative of nationalism can be criticized. I shall return to this later.

These different responses as defined by Schipper point to an important theoretical debate in thinking about diaspora identity. Just as Schipper implies, there is a division between two groups who find the basis on which the diaspora as a category is built somewhere else. The first group points to a common homeland and the longing for and loss of the African continent as a source of unification for the diaspora. This can, for example, be found in Robin Cohen’s description of ‘diaspora’ as communities

of people who “acknowledge that ‘the old country’ -- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore -- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (qtd. in McLeod 237). Stuart Hall also refers to it when he mentions two ways of defining ‘cultural identity’, of which the first is a position which emphasizes “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (*Cultural Identity* 223). It is also present in Eyerman’s and Alexander’s theory on shared trauma. The second group, however, seeks the basis of diasporic identity in its hybridity. This celebration of fluidity and change recalls Schipper’s third response to racism. Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy have explored this idea in their works. Bhabha’s concept of ‘border lives’ is closely related to Hall’s idea of ‘new ethnicities’.

In his *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha explores the ambivalent character of the border and embraces it as a space where dominant modes of thinking and representation can be reconsidered. Migrants - and members of the diaspora also - stand at this imaginative, sometimes also physical, border, and can therefore be the intervening group in-between two cultures. Bhabha refers to the process in which this figure has access to and can change knowledge as “restaging the past”: introducing “other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process arranges any access to an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition” (2). This implies that the identities of members of the diaspora, if they reside in-between cultures, are formed through hybridity and fluidity, which goes against the idea of a pure and stable identity. These “border subjectivities” no longer rely “on fixed notions of home and identity to anchor them to a singular sense of self. Rather, the loss of these fixed ideas has been transformed into a hopeful new paradigm where motion, multiplicity, errancy, unpredictability, hybridity and impurity are gleefully welcomed” (McLeod 254). Members of the diaspora can challenge the dominant discourse through this hybrid characteristic. By showing that there

is something in-between possible, they have the power to disrupt binary oppositions.

Like Bhabha, Stuart Hall mentions a concept of diasporic identity which embraces fluidity. This returns both in his “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” and in “New Ethnicities”. As I mentioned above, Hall mentions two positions in defining cultural identity, of which the first emphasized a collective true self. The second position, however, “recognizes that, as well as many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather ... ‘what we have become’” (*Cultural Identity* 225). It is their shared experience of difference which unites members of the diaspora. This does not imply a common origin as the first position does but a shared experience of being different, which also brings to mind Eyerman’s and Alexander’s theory of shared trauma. Hall mentions something similar in “New Ethnicities” which I shall elaborate on in the next section on stereotyping.

The question *how* a community is formed based on difference can be answered with Paul Gilroy’s concept of the ‘Black Atlantic’. This Black Atlantic consists of descendants of the African slaves in the US, the Caribbean and Britain, who form a heterogeneous community. He explores the connections and tensions in an effort to oppose ideas of fixedness and purity, for example by showing that black thinkers influenced Western modernity. He distinguishes between a ‘black’ and a ‘white’ community (which are both characterized by difference), but these cannot really be separated because they are transnationally interconnected. His symbol for this new type of community is the ship: “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (Gilroy 4). This image promotes motion, the idea that identities are fluid and ever-changing, but also recalls the ships used in the transatlantic slave trade. Gilroy emphasizes *routes* instead of *roots* as the basis on which black identity builds (McLeod 266).

The “‘defining tension’ between loss and hope” which I described above, the division between

two groups who either emphasize a common origin or a celebration of difference as common ground for diasporic identity, “has proven to be remarkably fertile” (McLeod 249). The space in-between is a space for creativity and exploration, which is not in the least created through literature. This study explores if and how speculative fiction, specifically the work of the Nigerian American Nnedi Okorafor, addresses hybrid spaces and what the genre has to offer in this respect.

Stereotyping

A second subtheme of identity explored in this MA thesis is stereotyping, by which is meant that people are “reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics” (Hall, *Representation* 249). Stereotyping is closely related to racism and influences diasporic identity. In this section, I look at Mineke Schipper’s theory again but also introduce a new theory by Stuart Hall.

The previously mentioned responses to racism as defined by Schipper can be linked to responses to stereotyping as defined by Hall. Any paradigm, therefore also racist discourse, can be contested because meaning is never fully fixed. Hall mentions three possible strategies of ‘trans-coding’, which he defines as “taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings”, as possibilities in this process of contesting racist images: reversing stereotypes, substituting positive for negative images and contesting from within (Hall 270). I shall briefly elaborate on these strategies.

Reversing stereotypes, which is the first counter-strategy to stereotyping, involves escaping a stereotype by replacing it with another. The stereotype of the poor, lazy black man, for example, is replaced with an image of a rich black man. This strategy does not really escape the process of stereotyping because this new figure is just as much a stereotype as the first was, only now it probably becomes that of the black man who is only motivated by money and who loves to boss others around (Hall 272). Going from one stereotype to the next does not overturn or subvert the previous stereotype.

The change may be a welcome one because the new stereotype is at least a new perspective and also a more positive image than the first. However, in the end this strategy does not escape binary oppositions and it therefore does not really escape dichotomous ways of thinking which lie at the basis of stereotyping.

Substituting “a range of ‘positive’ images of black people, black life and culture for the ‘negative’ imagery which continues to dominate popular representation”, Hall’s second counter-strategy, expresses a celebration or at least an acceptance of difference (Hall 272). It inverts the binary opposition, thereby changing the negative trait into a positive counterpart, which then makes the ‘negative’ image a privileged one. It challenges earlier stereotypes’ tendency to reduce the people involved to just a simple set of a few characteristics by showing that the person stereotyped is more complex than the image claims. The problem with this strategy is that it adds positive imagery but does not really combat its negative counterparts. It just increases the repertoire (Hall 274). This strategy tries to challenge the dichotomy but does not deconstruct it.

The last strategy actually manages to do so. Binaries are contested from within by emphasizing the complexities and ambiguous character of representation. This strategy aims to make stereotypes and the modes of representation they use work against themselves, to de-familiarize the gaze, and thereby deconstruct these images. Hall describes it as being more concerned with the form of representation than with introducing new content: “It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories” (Hall 274).

As stated before, these strategies can be related to Schipper’s responses to racism. The first two responses she mentions, namely emphasizing either equality or difference, also remain stuck in dichotomous ways of thinking. However, both scholars mention a third strategy or attitude which

accepts and celebrates difference and aims at deconstructing racist dichotomies from that perspective.

A way of linking the issues of belonging and hybridity to the strategies of stereotype neutralization mentioned above is through Hall's theory in "New Ethnicities", in which he explores how the diaspora has represented itself in response to its marginalization. In doing so, he identifies two phases of which the first unites people from a different background through the notion of blackness. This representation of a common black community enabled, amongst others, "the stereotypical and derogatory representations of black people at large to be contested by positive images of the black community" (McLeod 258). In the second phase, however, this idea of a common black community is addressed and criticized by that community itself and hybridity becomes the way by which to define the Self. In "New Ethnicities", Hall does not privilege any of the two but actually demonstrates that these two reactions to being part of a diaspora can exist simultaneously (McLeod 259). Even if we want to challenge the dominant paradigm, the creation of a unified black community may serve a political purpose, like stereotype reversal. The two phases mentioned in Hall's article recall the two positions regarding diasporic identity and hybridity (common origin versus shared difference) but also show how these relate to stereotyping.

Paul Gilroy's answer to how the unity of blackness and celebration of difference can go together in practice lies in "the ways in which different cultural practices circulate in the black Atlantic between groups in different locations, creating *contingent* transnational forms of community" (McLeod 266-7). Through the circulation of cultural production, a sense of collectivity is promoted without falling prey to the notion of a stable, common origin. This sense of collectivity emphasizes both unity and difference and unites them.

Speculative fiction

The fiction explored in this work cannot simply be defined as either fantasy, science fiction or (Afro)futurism. The case studies contain elements which are either not always present in these genres, or precisely all at the same time, or just remain too ambiguous. Nnedi Okorafor's writings are often in between these genres or cross their boundaries, thereby forming unique hybrid forms which in themselves already seem to exemplify the issues explored above. This hybridity also returns in the way that Okorafor addresses themes of technology and magic. According to Lisa Yaszek, "Contemporary Afrofuturists ... update the classic character of the black genius by connecting that character to both Eurowestern science and African or Afrodiasporic 'magic'" (65). Okorafor certainly takes part in this phenomenon, using elements of both science and magic, sometimes making them interchangeable or intertwining them. "[B]y telling tales that merge Eurowestern and African ways of knowing the world, Afrofuturists prove SF luminary Arthur C. Clarke's famous claim that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'" (Yaszek 66).

This is why I chose to define Okorafor's works as "speculative fiction", which includes every type of fiction speculating about either an alternative past, present or future and thereby is in itself is a broad genre. The novels in this genre can therefore still be either fantasy, futurism or science fiction but also a hybrid form of these (or other) genres. A broad genre definition was needed to cover all the case studies. In general, the use of a more strict genre would be preferred, but since the works of one author are explored, the boundaries of the set of case studies can remain firm despite the genre's broad definition. This, however, does not explain my choice for these case studies, but I will elaborate on that below.

African American speculative fiction is not a new phenomenon. Most is written on the subgenre science fiction, but those observations are often also interesting for the study of speculative fiction as a

whole. Most scholars define the publication of George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) or the works of Samuel Delany from the 1960s as the starting point of the genre, but Delany himself has defined the starting point to be as early as 1857 when Martin Delany's (no family relation) *Blake, or The Huts of America* was published (Delany 383). Lisa Yaszek also defines this as the start of the genre of Afrofuturism (a subgenre of black speculative fiction which is most practiced) because all the major elements of the genre appear in this novel: reclaiming American history, drawing on the historic experience of diasporic people and the figure of a black genius (58-9). Despite the genre's history, however, speculative fiction has not been thoroughly examined by scholars. Exceptions are the works of well-known authors such as Octavia Butler and Delany, which have gained considerable attention in the academic world. In the last five to ten years, projects involving African American speculative fiction or science fiction were initiated, but most of these focus on short fiction or do not focus on the work of recent authors such as Okorafor. Also, the research on African American speculative fiction that has been done before this thesis has not focused on identity, belonging or stereotyping in the way that I do, except for my own bachelor thesis written in 2013. The studies on the subject often remain theoretical but do not close read case studies. I will therefore close read novels focusing on identity, because the genre is able to examine well-explored themes (such as identity) in new ways, but if this is realized in contemporary works remains to be seen.

Speculative fiction may offer new strategies and perspectives in the examination of African American identity. As Lisa Yaszek points out, African American authors "called for new modes of speculative fiction that emphasized the soft sciences over their hard counterparts and that engaged politically charged and previously taboo subjects" (63). This potential of speculative fiction is also acknowledged by De Witt Douglas Kilgore, who argues that social realism is not the best mode to capture the texture and meaning of the black experience, when exploring the works of amongst others

Okorafor (then Okorafor-Mbachu). He therefore considers science fiction, fantasy and horror as fitting genres to explore the black experience (119). In their “Protocols for Experiments in African Science Fiction,” Delphi Carstens and Mer Roberts describe what they consider the value of this genre to African literature. Even though they focus on literature from the African continent and only briefly mention African American writing, their observations can be considered here as well. The attraction of science fiction for them lies (at least partly) in the way in which the genre

articulates the “crossing of thresholds” between worlds and is ... *at ease with the fluid and ambiguous*. Already situated within a marginalized literary genre, the writers, readers and critics of SF are *comfortable with notions of hybridity, transformation and non-linearity*. (Carstens and Roberts 80, my emphases)

Addressing hybridity works at least just as well for African American fiction as for African literature because the aspects mentioned, such as crossing boundaries between worlds and marginalization, are, as I noted before, also applicable to diaspora identity formation. Science fiction, or speculative fiction, offers “the hope of bridging cultural divides” in a time in which this becomes an issue not only for those in between cultures or part of multiple cultures but also to those whose identities seemed more stable and fixed before globalization (Carstens and Roberts 80). Concerns such as belonging become important to all now, worldwide, not just for those who already were or felt displaced. This asks for new strategies to explore such themes and, though the genre itself may not be new, the exploration of these themes as addressed by this genre is. Also, exploring identity through this genre may help to look forward instead of looking back.

In 2009, Carstens and Roberts pointed out the importance of this genre to the African continent

and argued that it would simultaneously fit in with the existing literary traditions and the new, global experience. The recognition of the potential of the genre for the African continent is rather recent. Carstens and Roberts' article is the first that calls attention to this hidden potential. However, their argument remains very theoretical, even though they do seem to acknowledge (but do not explicitly state) that African American fiction can be a motivation and inspiration to African authors. I opt for exploring what has already been written, because that may actually display this hidden potential. African American and African fiction may not be the same, but when considering Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, we could say that at least some elements of African fiction can be located in at least a part of African American fiction. Similarities are very much possible. Okorafor herself has also stated that she believes herself to be both American and African (Okorafor "Of Course People Can Fly" 131), which makes it, for me, worthwhile to consider her work in the project of exploring speculative fiction's potential to African writing. I explore identity through the subthemes of belonging and stereotyping in African American speculative fiction, but because of the link with African fiction, I shall also explore if my research can define the potential more specifically than Carstens and Roberts do. What remains to be explored here is the potential of speculative fiction for addressing belonging and stereotyping.

In speculative fiction, everything is possible because everything can be re-imagined. Walter Mosley states that "the genre speaks most clearly to those who are dissatisfied with the way things are" which is precisely because those things can be redefined in speculative fiction (405). Belonging and stereotyping are often addressed out of dissatisfaction, as the strategies and attitudes defined by Schipper and Hall mentioned above indicate. This is likewise mentioned by other scholars. Charles R. Saunders, for example, notes that this is "a genre that purport[s] to transcend convention and stereotype" (398).

However, even though other academics have noted this potential, actually exploring these themes in the genre through the analyses of case studies seems neglected. The strategies and perspectives

defined by Hall and Schipper can certainly also be found in speculative fiction and the case studies may even shed new light on them. Exploring whether they do so is one of the aims of my study. I shall need to clarify Nnedi Okorafor's works as well. A number of considerations underlie this choice.

First, Okorafor's works are published relatively recently, by which I mean in the last ten years, and she is still producing new fiction 'as we speak'. The oldest case study discussed here was published in 2005, the newest in 2014. Discussing recent works is important because it makes the attitudes found in them through close reading as relevant as possible to the current situation. I do not discuss attitudes of the past but those of the present (and maybe even those of the future!), which requires case studies as recent as possible.

Second, Okorafor's works have not yet gained broad scholarly attention. Only limited references to her writing have been made by scholars. I have found no detailed analyses of her work, making it possible for this thesis to explore unknown territory.

I have chosen to merely focus on Okorafor's novels and to exclude her (collections of) short stories, because the scope of this thesis requires a limited set of case studies. Moreover, the character development in novels is much more comprehensive in novels than in short stories, which makes them more interesting when exploring belonging and stereotyping, or identity in general. Last of all, some of Okorafor's short stories have already been analyzed by other scholars.

I shall discuss one novel per chapter in a chronological order. Each chapter starts with a plot summary and will follow with a close reading of both content and style.

Chapter 1: *Zahrah the Windseeker*

Zahrah the Windseeker (2005), Nnedi Okorafor's first novel, was aimed at a young adult readership.

The novel tells the story of the protagonist, thirteen-year-old Zahrah Tsami, who lives in the Ooni kingdom on the planet Ginen. Apart from being the protagonist, she is also the narrative's focalizer and autodiegetic narrator. This is confirmed at the beginning of the novel, when Zahrah writes a note to the reader declaring that the following narrative is her story and later on through the novel's narrative strategy: it is told from the perspective of an 'I' which corresponds with Zahrah (Okorafor, *Zahrah* vi). This perspective is maintained throughout the entire novel, which influences the reader's view of the events in the narrative because the perspective offered is one-dimensional. The perspective of other characters in the novel is not offered to the reader.

Earth is mentioned in the story, but mostly as being nothing more than a myth. Earth is considered real only at the end of the narrative. Therefore, it can be concluded that the story is set on a different planet than Earth, possibly (although this is not explicitly mentioned) in the future. The citizens of the Ooni kingdom live in peace with nature, which is reflected in their technology. Computers grow out of so-called CPU seeds, 'light bulbs' are literally flower bulbs which grow into light plants and even hospital equipment is natural and grows in or from the hospital's walls. In this image of the future, technology and ecology seem to have become one. Even though they seem very connected to nature, the people in the Ooni kingdom do not seek to get to know the world outside their kingdom and still prefer culture over nature. Their biggest source of fear and mystery is the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, which symbolizes nature in its purest form. People choose to stay away from it, to remain ignorant of what lies in and beyond the jungle. This recalls the binary opposition of civilization versus savagery, in which civilization is the dominant side of the dichotomy. This opposition was also used by the colonists and the colonial subject was considered 'close to nature' and underdeveloped. As Stuart Hall describes

it:

There is the powerful opposition between ‘civilization’ (white) and ‘savagery’ (black). ... There are the rich distinctions which cluster around the supposed link, on the one hand, between the white ‘races’ and intellectual development ... and on the other hand, the link between the black ‘races’ and whatever is instinctual. (*Representation* 243)

A similar attitude can be found to the protagonist Zahrah, who is what the Ooni call ‘dada’. This means that Zahrah’s hair grows in seven thick locks in which vines grow. Being dada makes her an outcast and an object of mockery and teasing. Dada people are believed to bring bad luck, even though the older stories describe them as wise people.

Zahrah’s only friend and helper is Dari, who persuades her again and again to break the rules and patterns of thought of the Ooni kingdom. Zahrah decides to visit the Dark Market where she meets Nsibidi, who is also dada despite cutting her hair. When Zahrah discovers her ability to float (and eventually fly), she confides in Dari and Nsibidi. Together with Dari, she decides to venture into the Greeny Jungle because both of them, especially Dari, are curious, but also because Zahrah can practice her ability to float there. On one of their trips, Dari is bitten by a war snake and falls into a coma. The only cure for this coma can be found in the Forbidden Jungle, namely in the form of an unfertilized egg from an elgort, one of the forest’s most ferocious beasts. Zahrah secretly leaves town to search for this egg. In a three-week-long journey in the jungle, she encounters many dangerous and/or impressive beasts, some of which are helpers and some opponents (like huge spiders, talking panthers, speculating frogs and friendly gorillas). She has to fight for her life and get to know and rely upon herself in order to survive. The initial problem which leads her into the jungle is Dari’s illness and finding the cure is her goal but eventually she also learns to deal with her status as an outcast here, which can therefore be defined as a second problem which is solved in the course of the narrative. I shall elaborate on this later.

Zahrah manages to steal the egg from the elgort's nest and escapes by - finally - being able to fly. She brings the egg to Dari, who is treated with it and gets to live owing to his friend's courage.

Identity

The novel is a Bildungsroman, which tells the process of Zahrah's growing up and searching for the Self. She is thirteen years old and a preadolescent girl. For example, her first menstruation is an important part of the story because it initiates her ability to fly, to which I will return later.

The coming of age process, Zahrah's identity formation and her search for the Self does not only have to do with her age. It also has to do with her being *dada*, and therefore her status as an outcast, as someone different. Zahrah's hair is different from regular hair, which is a source of confusion and insecurity to her. Her unconventional appearance has such an influence over her because of the importance the northern Ooni people assign to their appearance. Zahrah describes it as follows:

A large part of the culture in the northern Ooni Kingdom where I live is to look "*civilized*." That's northern slang for stylish. There's no way the typical northerner would go outside without wearing his or her most *civilized clothes* and looking clean and nice. Not even for a second. We all carry mirrors in our pockets, and we take them out every so often to inspect our reflection and make sure we look good. On top of that, our clothes click with tiny style mirrors embedded into the collars and hems. ... My people love to use mirrors everywhere, actually. ... Some like to say that northerners are arrogant and vain. But it's just our culture. (Okorafor, *Zahrah ix*, my emphases)

The division between culture and nature returns here. The Ooni are obsessed with their appearance by which they get to define themselves as 'civilized'. This obsession is reflected in their fascination with

mirrors. Zahrah states here that it's just "part of culture", which is intended to justify arrogant and vain behavior. This way, treating Zahrah differently based on her looks is also justified. Zahrah goes along with this pattern of thinking, because she lets her looks make her feel insecure and define her self-image and her identity. This changes when she goes on her quest. Whereas she still cares about her looks in the beginning of the journey, exemplified by her remark that she looks repulsive when she looks at herself in a mirror, which is one of the only things she has brought (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 130), she also points out that her obsession started leaving her as soon as she left town:

I was from the north, and that meant that I was used to tidy, clean, and civilized attire. Back home, I went through great pains every morning to make myself look just so. My hair had to be neat, my clothes perfectly matched, my shoes scuff free. It's just something you learn as you grow up, like the slang of your community. Still, my habit of obsessing over my appearance started leaving me the minute I began my journey. (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 151)

Zahrah does not let go caring about her looks all of a sudden, but throughout her journey her idea of what is important changes. "I was sure that I smelled strongly of sweat, mud and leaves; the jungle. But I didn't care," Zahrah observes later (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 271). At this point, she has undergone a complete transformation, which remains when she is back among other Ooni. "Neither of us [Dari and Zahrah] wore the civilized clothes of the day, but neither of us really cared about that anymore. It was just another way that we would always be different from the northerners around us" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 300). She will always be different and she accepts this now instead of trying to adjust to the standards set by the Ooni. However, society's view has not changed. Zahrah's acceptance can be seen as a process of appropriating the negative connotation of her *dada* status into something more positive. This is

comparable to Stuart Hall's second strategy of contesting a racialized regime, namely by substituting a negative image for a more positive image. This strategy is "underpinned by an acceptance -- indeed, a celebration -- of difference" (Hall 272). This acceptance and a new celebration of being different is prevalent in Zahrah's attitude at the end of the narrative, although it is a change only she (and arguably also Dari) makes.

Belonging

Zahrah's process of identity formation and change partly focuses on belonging. She has lived her entire life in the Ooni kingdom and, like many other citizens, has never seen anything outside of it. Most Ooni even believe that nothing exists outside of the kingdom. This exclusivist attitude reminds of cultural ethnocentricity. The Ooni choose not to explore what lies outside of their kingdom, thereby developing the idea that nothing else exists at all which then justifies that they focus solely on themselves. Despite the fact that this is obviously the place where Zahrah belongs (at least geographically) by birth, she does not fit in because of her awkward appearance. Her hair makes her an outcast: "my dada hair was like a big red badge on my forehead that said, 'I don't fit in and never will'" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* xii). The gap between Zahrah and the other Ooni citizens appears and feels fixed to her: she does not belong here and *never will*. This causes anxiety: "... I'd given up on being accepted and just wanted to be left alone. I wanted to blend in so I wouldn't be noticed" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* xii). Zahrah gives up on being accepted, probably because she assumes that no change is possible, but her wish to belong and to blend in remains. The impossibility of this change which she so desperately wants is also acknowledged by other characters, for example by village chief Papa Grip: "Blend in?! Bah, you should never wish for things you'll never have" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 1).

Because the community in which Zahrah is born is ignorant about the existence of any other

possible communities, it is understandable that Zahrah feels a sense of longing. She knows of just one community and she does not belong there. It is therefore also logical that she feels drawn to the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, despite the scary stories and uncertainty, because it is the only other possibility of which she knows. Zahrah draws comparisons between herself and the jungle: “It [never fitting in] kind of made me like the forbidden jungle” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* xii). Her best friend Dari acknowledges this comparison: “Look at you ... You’re as strange and misunderstood as the jungle. It’ll welcome you, I’m sure of it” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 97). Because Zahrah does not belong in the Ooni kingdom, both she and Dari expect that she might belong in a place which is as outcast as she is.

This seems to be partly true, because Zahrah travels in the forest all alone to search for the elgort egg and survives, while most adventurers are said not to return alive or sane from the jungle. The jungle seems to favor Zahrah at least a little because she turns out to be the first to explore it and return unharmed and she knows how to handle what happens there. Zahrah has a connection with the jungle, which is also noticeable in the impact it has on her self-image. Whereas the town has almost only negative impact, the forest seems to immediately change Zahrah’s image of herself in a positive way. The first time she enters the jungle, she reflects that:

Nothing really happened - nothing outside of myself, at least. Inside me, however, I felt something shift. Something change. At the time it reminded me of what a snake must feel like after it has shed its first skin -- wet, new, strong, and vulnerable. Different. (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 97)

Going into the jungle for the first time helps Zahrah to lose her ‘first skin’, her first negative view of herself and the identity of someone who does not belong. This process continues when Zahrah spends

more time in the jungle. It continues during later visits, but especially during her quest for the elgort's egg. Despite her connection with the jungle, Zahrah is frightened to go into the jungle on her own for what may be a very long time. Therefore, she needs a way to relax at the beginning of this trip. What she does is visualizing that she belongs where she is: "I imagined myself as just another creature whose home was the Greeny Jungle. I was just going about my business. *I belong here just like any dormouse or elgort* I thought" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 128, original emphasis). This strategy has a positive effect: "I was proud of myself ... I had not completely panicked" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 129). Not only has Zahrah not panicked, imagining herself as belonging to the surroundings also has a positive influence on her self-image, because it makes her proud.

However, the change is not simple. Positive changes go together with lingering insecurity. Zahrah finally learns to trust her instincts (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 138 & 183), however, which indicates that she feels more confident about her own judgment. But she remains insecure as well, mostly when confronted with judgment by other creatures or when she compares herself with others.

What is important here, however, is the influence that the change of surroundings has on Zahrah. This becomes most apparent when she has returned 'home' in town and is confronted with the community again. For example, Zahrah claims that "They [Dari's parents] stared at me as if I were from another world. I didn't mind because I felt I was" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 280). Zahrah does not mind the distance between her and most others in the community anymore. This has not changed because she suddenly fits in now, which may prove to be just as impossible as Zahrah believed it was at the beginning of the novel. However, she can acknowledge that she does not belong to the Ooni society because she has been elsewhere. She has experienced that there are more places to see instead of having to put up with the idea that the town and the kingdom are all there is. Even if the jungle might not be the place where she completely belongs either, it did offer a different perspective on the world and its

possibilities. This gives hope. Zahrah can accept that others feel as if she comes from a different world because she feels that way herself also, which is stimulated by her hope of finding this place. This returns in the fact that Zahrah misses the jungle. Even though it was a dangerous place, this place had something which the Ooni society lacks: opportunity. Zahrah mentions that she misses the jungle's unpredictability (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 284), probably because it is this quality of the jungle which makes everything possible and that is what she needs to have in order to have hope.

Zahrah misses the jungle because being there had such an impact on her. It changed her perspective of who she is. She claims that it was in the jungle that she finally *became* Zahrah the Windseeker (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 295). Even though she had already discovered her ability to float and the term 'Windseeker' before she left for the jungle, it was only through her journey that she could really become one. Even though the quest has changed her sense of identity, the jungle is not the place where she fully belongs and she has not found anywhere else when the narrative is concluded. But then, maybe, there is no such place. Maybe Zahrah belongs nowhere, or everywhere at once, as Nsibidi implies when she reflects on Windseekers (she is one herself as well): "... once a Windseeker learns to fly, he or she is plagued by wanderlust. Rarely do we stay where we were born and raised" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 305). Zahrah is a Windseeker, which may mean that her place of belonging is the sky. The sky is everywhere but simultaneously nowhere, a place which is always in motion. This recalls Paul Gilroy's symbol of the ship which is of a similar nature. Zahrah ultimately belongs there.

The Windseeker can be considered a figure without one geographical place of belonging. The ability to fly defines Windseekers as hybrid bodies which can cross boundaries easily or abide in fluid spaces like the sky, 'borders' in Bhabha's term. The consequence of this is that the Windseeker cannot belong in a geographically fixed space, a 'home' according to conventional ideas, which can be a source of anxiety but can also become a creative place where everything is possible. Discovering this idea is the

change which Zahrah has gone through.

Stereotyping

Zahrah is dada, which makes her a victim of stereotyping. Two dada stereotypes are present in the novel. One of these is predominantly negative whereas the other is more positive, but still remains a stereotype.

The negative stereotype depicts dada people as mysterious beings and a source of bad luck.

Zahrah reflects on this herself:

To many, to be dada meant you were born with strange powers. That you could walk into a room and a mysterious wind would knock things over or clocks would automatically stop; that your mere presence would cause flowers to grow underneath the soil instead of above. That you caused things to rebel or that you would grow up to be rebellious yourself! (Okorafor, *Zahrah* viii)

She claims that this is the view shared by many, which probably makes this the dominant view. The Ooni's idea is that dada are born with these characteristics. This is a strategy of naturalization, which is a characteristic of all stereotypes as defined by Hall. He argues that stereotyping is the process by which a person becomes "reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics" (Hall, *Representation* 249).

Zahrah also reflects on the second stereotype:

Thankfully, when I was born, my parents were open-minded, well educated, and familiar with some of the older stories about dada people. These stories said that the dada-born were destined to be wise beings, not necessarily rebels. (Okorafor, *Zahrah* viii)

This image is based on old stories depicting dada people as sources of wisdom. Even though this is a

more positive view, which attributes a positive trait to dada people, it remains a stereotype. The dichotomy of dada versus ‘normal people’ is kept intact and dada people remain reduced to one homogenous body of wise people whose identity is fixed by this characteristic. The opposition which lies at the base of these stereotypes is ‘rebellious’ versus ‘wise’. This implies that to rebel is deemed unwise behavior, which subsequently implies that accepting the given situation would be wise. If this opposition rules common thinking among the Ooni, ‘wise’ being the positive counterpart of ‘rebellious’, that pattern of thinking strengthens this dominant paradigm because it tries to keep the people from rebelling against it (for that would not be wise). This dichotomy is a construction, not inherently true, but its consequences are real nonetheless, making the people prefer ignorance over reflecting critically on their pattern of thought.

In the two previous quotes, Zahrah reflects on the stereotypes that others have of her. She gives a one-dimensional perspective, because it is only the view of the “victim”. However, this view is confirmed when we take into account other characters’ utterances. Other female students at Zahrah’s school, for example, tease her with chants like “Vine head, vine head, how long will it grooo-ooooow! ... Go live in the trees ... That way, you won’t be around us, causing all that bad luck!” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 2) and “Don’t get too close to her. Who knows what bad luck will rub off on you” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 50). Not only do these girls link being dada to causing bad luck, but also a colonial stereotype based on the culture (or civilization) versus nature (savagery) dichotomy returns. One of the recurring themes in racist representations is an emphasis on the subject’s “innate ‘primitivism’, simplicity and lack of culture, which made [him/her] genetically incapable of ‘civilized’ refinements” (Hall, *Representation* 244). By howling that Zahrah must go live in the trees, in nature, the students make a reference to this racist idea.

The stereotype of the wise dada is also present in the speech of other characters, but with a

negative twist. After Zahrah's return to town, one of the newspaper's headlines is "Wise Dada Girl Makes Tragic Unwise Decision" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 277). Here, the article's author plays with the seemingly positive stereotype. This gives it a negative rather than positive connotation. Turning the 'positive' stereotype around makes it an even stronger negative image than one that was already negative to begin with because the change focuses extra attention on the negative connotation. This shows how tricky stereotypes can be, and how easily they can be changed by a majority.

But this stereotype is also acknowledged by Zahrah's mother in a more positive way. Zahrah already mentioned that her parents believe dada people to be wise, which is confirmed by her mother: "I always viewed flying people as symbols of freedom that storytellers liked to use. To fly means you are able to go wherever you want, really. Or maybe to fly, to travel, makes you wise. Like one born dada" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 278-9). The idea that Windseekers are hybrid creatures that are able to cross boundaries is implied here also through the notion of freedom.

Especially the first stereotype, which is negative in a more direct way than the second one, has a noticeable effect on Zahrah's self-image and identity. For example, looking at herself in the mirror makes her think of all the horrible names she is called when teased (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 5). When weird things start happening right before she discovers her ability to fly, she "was scared that maybe all the bad rumors about being dada were coming true!" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 9). Even though Zahrah defines these images as rumors, they still influence her thinking and therefore her view of herself. Before Zahrah goes on her quest in the jungle, the image she has of herself is predominantly negative. She describes her dadalocks as "a blemish to [her] appearance", for example (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 18). But it reaches further than just her opinion on her physical appearance.

When Zahrah is running errands at the market, she points out, "I loved being by myself in the market ... It was almost like being someone else, someone who was capable of anything" (Okorafor,

Zahrah 22). This implies that, at that moment, Zahrah loves the idea of being someone else, which also implies a negative view of herself as incapable. Something similar comes up when she claims that “... when Dari planted his personal pepper seeds, they never grew. I guess Dari already had enough personal spice. I suspected that the results would be different if I tried to grow them” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 24). Dari is a socially accepted young man with a good reputation, something Zahrah lacks due to her appearance. Therefore she would suspect personal pepper seeds to grow if she plants them, because they are intended to add more ‘spice’ to the planter’s social life, which Zahrah apparently needs.

When Zahrah is in the jungle, her view of herself changes. This positive change already starts after Zahrah’s ability to float (later fly) manifests itself for the first time and she is learning how to control it. “As I grew a little more used to being able to float, I realized that I didn’t feel as bad at school when Ciwanke and her entourage of friends gathered around me in the hallway and talked their nonsense” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 44-5). Her new skill gives her a boost of confidence but these words uttered by others probably still hurt, because she feels “not as bad” which implies an improvement but not a complete switch. Her insecurity does not immediately disappear when she ventures into the jungle: “*Am I not a wise woman? I thought. Or at least a wise girl? Whatever. It’s supposed to be in my blood... well, that’s what I’ve been told, anyway*” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 123, original emphasis). This insecurity is mainly caused by her reconsidering the stereotypical image of the wise *dada* person. Because Zahrah considers this image as an image that she may have used to define herself, she needs to reconsider herself as well when she starts to doubt the image. This insecurity is a symptom of a bigger, positive change.

The change is visible best when Zahrah returns to town. She is on her way back when she is confronted with her Self by the speculating frog, which is the most intelligent creature of the jungle. Zahrah compares this moment with the day when Papa Grip pushed her in front of a mirror to tell him

what she was (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 264). Her self-image was very negative then. Now, however, she says that she has learned much about herself, that she knows what she is capable of and that she is stronger than she expected (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 264). This is repeated when Zahrah stands in front of the door of her parents' house:

The door that another version of me had run in and out of so many times. I was no longer the Zahrah who was afraid of the world around her, who kept her head down, afraid of confrontation. I could almost see my old self coming out the door, my chin to my chest, ashamed of what I was, all too concerned with my clothes being civilized and making my hair less noticeable. (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 273)

Only now, when she is confronted with 'home', does Zahrah fully acknowledge the change she has gone through. By acknowledging that her old Self was ashamed of what she was (or, probably, what others expected her to be like) and that she tried to make her hair less noticeable, she implies that this has changed now and that she does not care about these things anymore, or at least not as much. When she looks into the mirror now, she smiles (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 277). When she is confronted with journalists who ask her if she will now "finally cut [her] horrible dada hair", she cries (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 292). However, she cries not because of the image she has of herself but because of the others' ignorance: "By the time we got into the car, I was crying. All the questions. *How do they know so much but yet so little?*" (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 292, original emphasis). It is the group which represents and their ignorance, rather than the people represented, who are commented upon here.

Zahrah can be more confident now because of her own actions and change of mind. The change has happened in the individual, but not in the community, as Zahrah reflects: "I'd felt that way since I

returned from the Greeny Jungle. As if nothing was what it seemed anymore. ‘And the strangest thing about it is that it seems as if no one else is aware of it at all.’ ‘No one is, really,’ Dari said” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 308).

The stereotypes themselves have not changed. Not only is that already predicted earlier in the novel when the Ooni people’s preference for ignorance is mentioned multiple times (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 12, 61, 80-81, 122, 147), but the attitude to dada people is also represented as fixed. For example, Nsibidi claims that “People will *always* be difficult when it comes to being dada” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 35, my emphasis). Through the repetition of the biased attitude of the Ooni against dada after Zahrah’s journey, the novel emphasizes that the change in Zahrah’s confidence is the result of a change in her own viewpoint rather than due to a change in the community. Zahrah reflects that “Old habits are hard to break” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 297). Even though Zahrah herself has been able to make a change and turn the negative connotation of being dada into something positive, this does not end stereotyping. However, she did not need these habits to be broken in order to feel better about herself. She just needed to break them for herself: “The people of Ooni all lived in a very small part of Ginen. They *were* very limited. They *were* living in ignorance. *I* had been living in ignorance” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 147, original emphasis). Nsibidi, who is also dada, remarks skeptically that “It’s funny, the attitude Ooni people have. I’ve never seen such a fear of the unknown” (Okorafor, *Zahrah* 304).

Even though the stereotype in Ooni society is not broken, the novel in itself does deconstruct the opposition of culture versus nature through the figure of the Windseeker. As I noted before, the Windseeker can be read as a hybrid figure able to cross boundaries. Because of this, the Windseeker can be simultaneously part of civilization (Ooni society) and nature (the jungle), as Zahrah has shown. She does not belong in any of the two exclusively but can cross between them, thereby contesting the dichotomous habits of thought.

Conclusion

The novel focuses on identity in several ways, which is interesting for a comparison with the theory on identity, hybridity and stereotyping. These are the aspects discussed below.

First of all, the novel deals with people's obsession with outward appearance. Because this aspect of the Ooni people is greatly emphasized and thereby exaggerated, it is made very explicit and confronting. It focuses on our obsession with outward appearance and the importance that is attributed to it. By exaggerating this habit in the novel, the novel criticizes it. Addressing our society directly might have been too explicit or confronting, but it is made possible in this work because it concerns an ethnic group which does not really exist on a planet which is likewise imaginary and therefore no one is addressed directly. However, the link between the Ooni's focus on physical appearance and the one in contemporary society cannot be disregarded whereas the distance created with this strategy makes it possible to recognize something present in the reader's own society and comment on it without restrictions.

The Ooni's fascination with appearance, for example reflected in their obsession with mirrors, plays a large part in their discrimination of Zahrah. This fascination is continuously present in the representation of the Ooni people and the novel in this way comments critically on this behavior as well as on the discrimination which is a consequence of this mode of thinking and on the contemporary situation outside of the novel. It indirectly refers to the reader's contemporary society in which looks are overly important. By showing the consequences of this stress on perfect looks and judgment on the ground of outward appearance for Zahrah, the novel explores consequences of this type of thinking on those who are discriminated against because of it.

As shown, the prejudices Ooni people have of Zahrah because of her dadalocks influence her feelings of belonging and her self image. The foundation for her sense of not belonging in the

community in which she is born lies at least partly in the way she is treated there, which is influenced by her looks. The same is true for stereotyping: the images with which Zahrah has to deal and which influence her self image are based on her outward appearance.

How Zahrah deals with this can be read as a possible strategy for African Americans. At the end of the narrative, Zahrah has made significant improvement. She does not seem to have found her place of belonging, but has found a sense of hope. She has accepted the situation as it is and looks forward to the future. Also the possibility of not belonging anywhere specifically and therefore being part of nothing or actually everything at once, is mentioned. The hope which Zahrah radiates is a possible attitude to the problem of double consciousness as described by W.E.B. Du Bois: the idea that one belongs to multiple cultures and places, just as the African American belongs to both America and Africa according to Du Bois. Both of these sides have value and neither should be lost, but how this should be achieved is still uncertain in Du Bois' view. Zahrah's experiences in the narrative utter a sense of hope. Although she has not found one place in which she belongs, possibly because there is no such place for her as a Windkeeper, this can be exploited also and can be a space where creativity can rule because anything is possible.

Also Zahrah's attitude to the dada stereotypes provides a perspective on African American identity. At first, she lets these images rule her self-image. Both the overtly negative images (dada bring bad luck) and the less explicitly negative (dada are destined to be wise) have this influence. Both images reduce her to one or a few characteristics which supposedly unite all dada. Trying to substitute the negative image for a more positive one apparently does not work, because it does not help in escaping the dichotomy and the consequential hierarchy. Because Zahrah takes distance from her community when she goes on her quest, she has the opportunity to take distance from the stereotypes as well. The novel does not give a solution for reversing or eliminating stereotypes in the discourse of a community,

but Zahrah accepts that old ways are hard to break and therefore changes her own viewpoint.

Chapter 2: *Who Fears Death*

Who Fears Death, Nnedi Okorafor's first adult novel, was published in 2010. The novel tells the story of protagonist Onyesonwu (also called Onye), who is 'Ewu', which means that she is a light-skinned person conceived through rape. All Ewu are conceived through rape and share similar physical characteristics of which their light skin is the most prevalent. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic Africa, whose inhabitants are divided into two groups: the Nuru and the Okeke. They differ not only in skin color but also in social status. This is explained in the novel through a creation story, which is the first story of the so-called "Great Book" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 92-3). This story tells how Ani made the world and slept before creating sunshine. While she was asleep, the Okeke sprang from the rivers and spread over the lands for centuries. They consumed and multiplied, bent and twisted the land, took the creatures and changed them. When Ani woke up to produce sunshine, she was horrified of what was happening. She reached into the stars and pulled the sun to the land, from which the Nuru came. The Okeke were destined to be the Nuru's slaves from then on. Most of what the Okeke built crumbled, but some of it, mainly technology such as computers, is left.

Nuru and Okeke differ from each other in looks which is also explained through the creation story and is mentioned directly at the beginning of the narrative:

'Okeke' means 'the created ones'. The Okeke people have skin the color of the night because they were created before the day. They were the first. Later, after much had happened, the Nuru arrived. They came from the stars and that's why their skin is the color of the sun. (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 16)

The book draws a close parallel here with the transatlantic slave trade and the racism that gave rise to it.

This racism was founded on “so-called scientific and ethnological ‘evidence’, the basis of a new kind of ‘scientific racism’. Contrary to Biblical evidence, it was asserted, blacks/whites had been created at different times - according to the theory of ‘polygenesis’” (Hall, *Representation* 243). In the novel, the same idea of polygenesis is used as a theory to justify racism, but it is presented as Biblical evidence (“The Great Book” can be seen as symbolizing the Bible). In this way the idea of scientific evidence is combined with racism based on religious convictions, namely the story of the curse of Ham’s sons. According to the Bible, Ham’s son Canaan was cursed by Noah, supposedly for an act of mischief by Ham. The result of this curse was black skin color. What act, and why Canaan was punished instead of Ham, remains subject of discussion, but in colonial times it was interpreted as an explanation for black skin and a justification of slavery. The hierarchy between the Nuru and Okeke is one which is reflected on extensively throughout the novel. I shall return to this later.

The novel mainly focuses on the protagonist Onyesonwu, because she is the first-person narrator telling her life story to someone who will preserve it after her death. Onye was conceived when her mother, an Okeke, was raped by a Nuru man. Her mother wandered into the desert, where she gave birth and raised Onye for multiple years. Eventually, they settle in a city called Jwahir where Onye then grows up. When she turns eleven, Onye decides to take part in a circumcision rite, hoping that it change her social status as an outcast: “... at eleven, I still had hopes. 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” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 33). This hope turns out to be vain, but Onye does meet her friends Diti, Luyu and Binta here. They become friends because they share this experience. Their friendship turns out to be very important to Onye because they help her reach her goal.

Later, Onye meets Mwita, a male Ewu with whom she engages in a romantic relationship. It is

through Mwita that Onye discovers sorcery, although she had discovered her shape-shifting ability before. Eventually, Mwita's teacher Aro decides to also teach Onye. She becomes more and more powerful and she and her friends who are also her helpers (Mwita, Diti, Binta, Luyu and Diti's husband Fanasi) eventually leave town for three reasons. First, Onye's biological father, the Nuru who raped her mother, turns out to be the powerful sorcerer Daib who is behind the Okeke massacres going on in the west. Onye wishes to seek him out and kill him, to avenge her mother and herself as well as the murdered Okeke. Daib is Onye's opponent. Secondly, Onye has shown a vision of her mother's rape to the townspeople because they chose to stay ignorant about the massacres. She wants to make them aware of what is happening and therefore uses sorcery to show them the horrible images of her mother's suffering. If she does not leave town, she will be made to leave. The last reason is a prophecy which predicted the coming of an Ewu girl who would rewrite the Great Book, who probably is Onye. The seer who has prophesized this lives in Nuru area and Onye needs to find him in order to discover if she is the chosen one and if so, to rewrite the book. All three of these reasons to go out on the quest can be seen as Onye's, the hero's, goals in the narrative, but especially the last one is important.

During their travels, the fellowship, consisting of Onye and her friends, passes by multiple towns and meets different people. Some of these are helpers and some of these are opponents. No easy distinction between Okeke and Nuru can be made, because during one of the events during their travels, Binta is violently killed when a mob of Okeke attacks Onye and Mwita because they are Ewu.

The most important meeting during the travels is the one with the Red People, who were considered a myth until then. This group is neither Okeke nor Nuru, but are nomads who live inside of a travelling sand storm. They do not exist in the Great Book or the creation myth which forms the basis of the discrimination against Okeke. They are ignored and shoved aside as 'nonexistent', which is possible because they are a travelling people who do not seek contact with most people. They can be seen as

representing Amerindians, a group of people who likewise deconstruct the black-white dichotomy merely by existing. I shall return to this aspect of the Red People later.

The Red People are helpers: they are very friendly and welcoming to the fellowship. During their stay with the Red People, Diti and Fanasi decide to go back home and leave the group. From here, the three venture out into the desert again to the city of Durfa, where Daib resides. Eventually, Daib is attacked (although not killed, just severely injured) by Onye and Mwita, who dies as a consequence of the attack. In an act of fury and grief, Onye uses sorcery to impregnate herself with some of Mwita's sperm still left inside her body.

From there, Luyu and Onye travel to the seer who had prophesized the rewriting of the Great Book. Because Luyu sacrifices herself to the angry mob following them, Onye succeeds in rewriting the book by connecting with it and healing it as if it were sick. Eventually, she has to let herself be stoned to death so as to make the rewriting work. The book ends with "Chapter 1 Rewritten": the rewriting has succeeded. According to this chapter, Onye survives and gives birth to her child. Daib sees that she is successful in opposing him. A big step towards equality has been made, although the "wave of change" has not reached all places yet (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 386). Which of these two chapters is the real ending, or if both are in some way true, remains unclear.

As in the previous chapter, the following sections focus on exploring the protagonist's identity formation throughout the story. The Nuru-Okeke distinction, however, is also discussed because it lies at the core of Onye's identity.

Identity

Just as in *Zahrah the Windseeker*, this novel can be named a Bildungsroman because the protagonist Onyesonwu goes through a process of identity formation as a young girl. This process may partly be

related to her age, because Onye is a girl in her puberty throughout the entire novel. But just as in the case of Zahrah, her status as an outcast should be considered as an influence on this process also. I shall elaborate on this later when exploring the subthemes. Here, I explore the novel's critical reflection on racism.

Onye is Ewu and therefore neither just Okeke nor Nuru. She is an outcast and treated as such by both groups. Nevertheless she still sympathizes with the Okeke because her mother is Okeke and so is the community in which she spends most of her childhood. Not only is Onye discriminated against by both groups, but racism is also present in her life because it lies at the basis of her existence. Racism was the reason why Daib raped Onye's mother and consequently the reason why she was born Ewu.

As I discussed above, the distinction between and hierarchy of Nuru and Okeke is defined through a creation tale with is part of the Great Book. The Nuru use this story to justify their acts of violence against the Okeke, in a way that is similar to how colonists used the story of the curse of Canaan as a justification of slavery. For example, Daib, when addressing a group of Nurus, claims: "We're doing what must be done. We're following the Book. We have always been a pious loyal people" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 178). The foundation for this racism consists of two assumptions, which also constitute the basis on which Ewu are defined as different.

The first assumption is that outward appearance defines one's identity and thereby who and what one is. Onye states that "Just by looking at me, everyone can see that I am a child of rape" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 7). Just by looking at someone, we can tell what this person is. This does not only count for Onye, but for Nuru and Okeke as well. The second assumption is that this fate caused by outward appearance is fixed. "Most abided by the old saying, 'A snake is foolish if it dreams of being a lizard'" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 17). One should not hope for something that s/he will never become. This idea seems to not only live in the minds of the Nuru, who benefit from this idea, but is also

shared by at least a significant share of Okeke. For example, Onye's mother mentions that "... she was an Okeke. What business did she have being hopeful?" by which she indicates that there is no hope as an Okeke, thereby confirming the dominant pattern of thought (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 23). A similar attitude is noticed by Luyu when she is among Okeke slaves in Durfa: "That woman [another Okeke, a slave] will raise an alarm if I just leave. I don't know what it is with these Okeke" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 360). It is probably not that these Okeke agree with the Nurus' superiority, but the power of the Great Book is too strong, making them succumb to it and eventually that influences their own self image and behavior. What this illustrates is that racism goes further than only defining and treating a subject as different, as Hall notes: "It is one thing to position a subject or set of people as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge'" (*Cultural Identity* 226). Through the imposition of so-called 'knowledge' (like the scientific evidence of polygenesis or the story of Canaan), the colonizer attempts to change the subject's image of the Self, which reinforces the paradigm.

This is challenged by Onyesonwu. She is the prophesized one who manages to rewrite the Great Book, thereby challenging these ideas which seem so fixed. Before rewriting the book, she notes that "This book was full of hate and that was what caused its sickness", thereby comparing racism and hate to a sickness which can be cured (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 376). These ideas are therefore thus not inherently true but created and changeable. Eventually Onye tells the reader: "... this kingdom, it will change after today. Read it in your Great Book. You won't notice that it has been rewritten. Not yet. But it has. Everything has. The curse of the Okeke is lifted. It never existed, *sha*" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 378, original emphasis). Onye states that the curse of the Okeke, condemning them to be slaves, never existed because it is a myth. The story on which this idea was based was really just that: a story, not a truth. Similarly, in the last chapter of the novel ("Chapter 1 Rewritten") it is stated that "what they

[Mwita and Onyesonwu] shared was enough to shift fate” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 385). The idea of shifting fate is a paradox and is therefore a powerful image: the Okeke’s status was seen as fate, as fixed, but it turns out it is not.

Through Onye’s actions, racism and the effects it can have on identity are laid bare. The novel shows that racism is constructed, not inherently truthful, like the creation myth in the Great Book. It does not suggest that the entire Great Book needs to be dismissed, but at least the racist parts can be rewritten, which can be seen as a critical reflection on interpreting the Bible. The novel shows that the categories and hierarchy which make up racist discourse claim to be fixed, but actually are not. Even though Onye reflects that “change takes time”, and not all people have changed by the end of the narrative, *Who Fears Death* still offers a future view of the possibility to eliminate racism (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 378).

Belonging

As mentioned before, despite Onyesonwu’s stronger connection with the Okeke than with the Nuru, she does not belong to either of the groups. The Ewu are described and represented as a category on its own, also by Onye herself. One simple way in which Okorafor does this is through continuous emphasis on her Ewuness and never calling her either Okeke or Nuru. Sometimes this is literal, for example when Onye writes “they stared at my *Ewu* body” instead of just stating ‘they stared at my body’ (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 40, original emphasis). This emphasis is not only to be found in Onye’s descriptions but also when other people address her, for example when an old man says “Do you know where you are, *Ewu* girl?” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 97, original emphasis). Onye reflects that “people always had to remind me of what I was” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 97). It also occurs less directly, for example through the emphasis on Onye’s skin color. When she is described as “her [mother’s] sand

colored daughter” instead of just being defined as ‘her daughter’ is an example (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 29).

Onye’s lack of belonging to either group is also apparent because she is treated as different and is discriminated against among both groups. When Onye’s mother, an Okeke, visits a town for the first time with her daughter, she is threatened by other Okeke because of her daughter and eventually she has to flee because they attack her. When Onye and her company travel in Nuru territory, they are warned when wanting to enter Durfa: “They’ll [the Nuru] see your *Ewu* faces and kill you in seconds” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 350, original emphasis). Not everywhere *Ewu* are met with physical violence, but their difference from the group is always emphasized. In Jwahir for example, there is an ambiguous response to Onye:

It was odd. Mostly, people shunned me because I was *Ewu*. But sometimes women crowded around me. “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.” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 9, original emphasis)

Most people shun her, some are fascinated, but she is always treated as different. Just like the Nuru-Okeke distinction, all of this is based on outward appearance. The difference in looks is made explicit in the novel:

The Nuru people had yellow-brown skin, narrow noses, thin lips, and brown or black hair that was like a well-groomed horse’s mane. The Okeke had dark brown skin, wide nostrils, thick lips, and

thick black hair like the hide of a sheep. No one knows why *Ewu* children always look the way they do. They look neither Okeke nor Nuru, more like desert spirits. (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 25, original emphasis)

However, the discrimination goes further than just skin color. Albinos, or ‘Noahs’ as they are called in the novel, are socially accepted and not discriminated against. Not only is this another reference to the Bible and the story of Canaan (who was cursed by Noah), but it also reflects that the novel turns away from our reality, in which albinos are often discriminated against in many African countries. This turn is a narrative strategy by which the novel emphasizes its distance from the reader’s reality, but also a way to emphasize once more that stereotypes and discrimination are arbitrary. Even to Noahs, the *Ewu* are different:

Noah had two Okeke parents, yet they were the color of sand. ... Noahs basically *looked* Okeke. I ignored the fact that ... Noahs had no problem making friends with “normal looking” children. They weren’t outcast as I [Onyesonwu] was. And Noahs looked at me with the same fear and disgust as Okekes of a darker shade. Even to *them*, I was other. (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 30, original emphases)

The *Ewu* are treated as they are because they are something unfamiliar. They do not fit in the categories of Nuru and Okeke, or are not allowed in either category, because of the way they are conceived. They transcend the set boundaries which causes fear and even hate. This idea is mentioned by at least two characters, who are both considered wise. Nana the Wise explains to Onye that “People hate what they don’t understand” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 100) and Aro tells her that “People fear the unknown”

(Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 155).

Thus, Onye does not belong to either of the groups. This, however, does not mean that there is no place for her. Earlier, Ewu were already described as looking “more like desert spirits” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 25). This is an indication of where Onye can find her sense of home. She says this herself explicitly only once, namely when Onye tells Eyess, one of the Red People: “I was raised in Jwahir ... but I’m from the desert. That’s my home” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 265).

The desert is not only a place *literally* in between the Nuru and the Okeke, but also symbolically because it welcomes those who do not fit into these categories. When Onye and her friends are joined by wild camels and not everyone is positive about this, Onye tells her travel companions: “When you’re in the desert, you have to *be* in the desert. ... When people, *any* kind of people, want to travel with you, you don’t reject them unless they’re cruel” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 198). Unless people can be rejected because of their own actions, one should not reject them in the desert. Prejudice, race, ethnicity or any other physical characteristic or aspect of identity does not count as a viable reason for rejection. There is no racism. This makes the desert a sort of third space or a border area in Bhabha’s terms, where one can be everything and nothing and where not belonging is no longer a source of anxiety.

That the desert is a third space open to those who do not fit elsewhere also becomes clear if we look at the group which clearly belongs there: the Red People. Just like the Ewu, the Red People are “a tribe of people who are neither Okeke nor Nuru” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 60). However, they are considered a “myth” by most people, probably because they seem a threat to the existing categories and ideas. This is probably why they do not exist in the creation story in the Great Book, which they, if only by merely existing, dismiss: an indication of the possibility of rewriting. The desert is their home, where they belong and are allowed. Just like the Red People themselves, their way of life exceeds set boundaries. They are nomads travelling inside a giant sand storm and they define Ssolu, their town, as a

“moving village” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 253). The Red People belong anywhere and nowhere, both geographically and socially. They are a new category in themselves, rejecting the Nuru-Okeke dichotomy. This is probably why they welcome the Ewu, which Onye also notes: “... I loved these people. I was welcome here” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 271).

The Red People are free of judgment and racism, just like the desert where they belong. Sola, one of the wise sorcerers in the narrative, even observes that “Nuru and Okeke are so like their ancestors. If I could wipe this land of you all and let the Red People roam and multiply, I would” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 316).

The Red People really are what they are promised to be in the myths and their home is the desert. This space is a solution to those who do not fit into a category or are not accepted as part of one of them. This view can be dismissed as romanticizing the Red People, who can be seen as symbolizing Amerindians, but it can also be seen as an example of a celebration of hybridity and fluidity. Bhabha opts for a positive view of borders as a spaces from where dominant paradigms can be challenged. Whereas Gilroy uses the ship as a symbol of motion, in *Who Fears Death* the desert becomes such a space, where movement and change are preferred over conventional thinking which portrays its ideas as fixed. Those who dwell in the desert are agents of this change.

Stereotyping

It was already mentioned above that Ewu are discriminated against by both Nuru and Okeke. To this discrimination belong stereotypes which affect Onyesonwu, and they will be examined here.

The stereotype which is most prevalent is that of the violent Ewu. “People believe the *Ewu*-born eventually become violent. They think that an act of violence can only beget more violence,” Onye’s mother tells her daughter (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 31). Along with this idea comes the image of the

Ewu as bringing bad luck and being evil. For example, Onye says that Mwita that “was *Ewu* and 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, *Who Fears Death* 56). According to the stereotype, Ewu cannot do anything against their ‘bad’ nature. Thereby, the stereotype tries to set the characteristics of Ewus and portray them as a homogenous group. This is mentioned by Mwita also when Onye has taken part in the circumcision rite, hoping for social acceptance as a result: “They’ll still think you’re evil ... they *will* always see us as evil. Even if you have yourself... cut” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 50). Mwita is aware of the power of stereotypes. He states that the Ewu-born will *always* be seen as evil and he is therefore pessimistic about the effect of going against these images. His self image does not seem to suffer because of it, although Mwita is never a focalizer so it is hard for the reader to judge. Onyesonwu’s self image and vision of what ‘Ewu’ means, however, is affected by the stereotype. She reflects often on her negative vision, for example:

- “I was trouble from the moment I was conceived. I was a black stain. A poison” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 14)
- “I was poison. I had no right” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 30)
- “My existence is shame!” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 45)
- “Would she [Onye’s mother] really have wanted to know of *another* result of violence?” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 48, my emphasis)
- “I am awful. I am evil. I am filth. I should not be!” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 55)

The worst of these perspectives on the Self are uttered by Onye before she discovers she is Eshu, a shape-shifter. Discovering this ability has a positive effect on Onye’s self image because she discovers a previously unknown talent. Besides, changing bodies makes it possible for her to literally escape from

her physical Ewuness, even if it is only temporarily: “For the first time in my life, I could escape. When things felt too tight, too close, I could retreat to the sky” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 58). Not only does shape-shifting offer Onye a way to escape, but also a way to discover herself. She describes shape-shifting as still being herself, but from a different perspective (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 57). This skill gives her the opportunity to look at herself without the Ewu stereotype’s shadow lingering and therefore to develop a new point of view. This new perspective is not just temporarily, but at least part of it remains because she retains the knowledge of what she has turned into (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 57). However, the human form is still described as the Self by Onye (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 298) and changing into something else does therefore never completely change her self image:

As a vulture, the vulture that was Aro, my mind was singular, sharp, and confident. I knew that if I focused and was audacious I could defeat Daib. I understood that I was extremely powerful now, that I could do more than the impossible. But as Onyesonwu the Ewu Sorceress shaped by Ani herself, all I could think about was the thrashing Daib had given me. (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 324)

Even though Onye has a positive image of herself when she has changed into a vulture, this self image does not remain when she is back to being Onye. The human form also needs to fight against the stereotype in order to achieve change, although the shape-shifting does help in the process.

After discovering her shape-shifting ability, Onye’s self image seems to become more positive, although it is still influenced by the stereotype. For example, when Nana the Wise addresses her with “*Ewu* girl,” Onye tells her not to call her that because she is not Ewu “... in the way the word means” (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 100, original emphasis). She has taken a step away from defining herself

through others' eyes. Similarly, when she is asked what she is by the sorcerer Sola, she answers with "human" and "Eshu" but not with 'Ewu' (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 125). In her own opinion, the stereotypical image is not part of her identity anymore. Also, she starts to treat it with humor: "I laughed ... I suspected that I'd be more infamous than famous" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 133). But a sense of insecurity and doubt remains, especially when hurtful words come from friends (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 196). Also, some things seem positive but actually aren't. "Luyu, Diti, and Binta had never heard me sing. They were amazed and, for once, I was proud," says Onye for example (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 142). Being proud of her own talent seems a positive development, but that she mentions that she feels proud *for once* shows that there is still resentment left as well. This is caused by what Onye describes as follows: "I felt it inside me ... Like a demon buried under my skin since my conception. A gift from my father, from his corrupted genetics" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 151). The negative side of herself, caused by her mother's rapist, is defined as part of the Self. However, instead of letting this negative side of herself rule her self image and give in to the stereotypes, she acknowledges this part of herself but does not simply accept it. Together with Mwita, Onye fights against it. Mwita helps her remember that she is not what people think and expect of her and that she should not give in. "Remember," he shouted. "This is not what we are. No violence! It's what sets us apart!" (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 205). Still, it is hard for Onye not to give in because the stereotype itself and the attitude that comes with it seem to ask for violence in order to conquer it:

I felt a wave of anger. To be something abnormal meant that you were to serve the normal. And if you refused, they hated you ... and often the normal hated you even when you *did* serve them. ... It was reality. I was *Ewu*, who would listen to me without the threat of violence? ... They hadn't heard me until they feared me. (Okorafor, *Who Fears Death* 218)

However, this paradox becomes a source of power for Onye later on. Because people expect her to be like the image they have of her and therefore expect violence from her, they are already scared. When Onye learns to control herself, she heals a prejudiced man instead of attacking him. She is fighting the stereotype by giving the prejudiced exactly the opposite of what they expect. She uses the stereotype as a tool to prove them wrong. This recalls Hall's third strategy of stereotype reversal, namely contesting from within. Onye does not simply try to replace the negative content of the stereotype with a new one, but she works with the stereotype in order to change the dominant view. She is aware of people's expectations and deconstructs these by behaving exactly the other way around while simultaneously acknowledging the stereotypes. She does not simply dismiss or ignore the negative images, but acknowledges them in order to be able to change them from within. However, just as Hall suggests, because this strategy builds on the shifting nature of meaning, Onye is aware of the impossibility of final victory for any of the two sides.

Conclusion

Just as in *Zahrah the Windseeker*, aspects of identity in *Who Fears Death* can be interesting for a comparison with African American identity.

First of all, the novel remembers the transatlantic slave trade and recreates the black-white dichotomy through the Nuru-Okeke dichotomy. By making the protagonist someone who belongs to neither group, a similar position as that of African Americans can be said to be created when the Nuru-Okeke hierarchy in the novel is seen as symbolizing the colonial hierarchy of 'black' as opposed to 'white'. The novel treats this as a position in-between, being neither Okeke nor Nuru, which is also a possible solution to Du Bois' problem of double consciousness. The Ewu belongs to neither group but is

simultaneously formed through sexual intercourse between members of the two different groups and is therefore, biologically seen, both. This two-ness is what makes Onye, socially seen, part of neither and an object of discrimination. The solution offered in the novel is that of finding the border, in this case the desert, which is a space in which difference is welcomed. Precisely because Onye knows of this space, not belonging fully in Jwahir or the Okeke society in general might not be a significant problem for her. It is the same solution as defined by Bhabha when he speaks of 'border lives', realized here by letting the subject reside in a geographical position in-between.

Chapter 3: *Akata Witch*

Akata Witch, Nnedi Okorafor's second young adult novel, was published in 2011. The novel tells the story of twelve-year-old protagonist Sunny. She is the protagonist and main focalizer, although only in the prologue is she the first-person narrator. From the first chapter on, a third-person narrator takes over, although Sunny remains the focalizer. Sunny introduces herself as the storyteller to the reader and then continues to tell the story as a third person narrative.

Sunny is albino and was born in North America. She moved with her parents and brothers 'back' to Nigeria when she was nine, three years before the narrative is set. Both her albinism and her African American identity are what makes her different from the society in which she resides now and make her an object of teasing.

Sunny's special powers are already introduced in the prologue, which mentions the incident in which Sunny sees an apocalypse-like image of the future when staring in a candle's flame. Sunny befriends Orlu and Chichi, who turn out to be what they define as "Leopard People", people with magical abilities. They introduce this new world to Sunny because she proves to be Leopard as well, only she is a free agent instead of someone who has known this part of her identity from birth through family, like Orlu and Chichi. They introduce Sunny to their mentor Anatov, who then introduces Sasha, an African American boy visiting Nigeria, to the group. The four work on their magical abilities together. They turn out to be an Oha coven, "a group of mystical combination, set up to defend against something bad" (Okorafor, *Akata* 84). The evil which this group is set up to defeat is a serial killer called Black Hat Otokoto, who has been killing and mutilating children as part of a ritual to call up Ekwensu, who is described as "what Satan is to the Christians ... But more real, more tangible. She's not a metaphor or symbol. She's one of the most powerful masquerades in the wilderness" (Okorafor, *Akata* 311-2). Her return is what Sunny had seen in the candle's flame.

Through the combination of their skills and abilities, the four defeat Otokoto and can withstand Ekwensu's return to the physical world. The three other children can therefore be described as Sunny's helpers in achieving this mutual goal. Not only do they defeat Otokoto together, but Sunny's friends are also helpers in the process of developing and exploring her identity, which can be defined as Sunny's second, less direct but nonetheless important, goal throughout the narrative.

The following sections all explore Sunny's identity in the same way as the previous chapters did with the other novel's protagonists. Issues that lie at the core of Sunny's identity, although they may not only apply to her, are likewise explored.

Identity

The most prominent way in which identity is explored in the novel is through the multiple ways in which the protagonist is distanced from other characters. Both in the 'normal' world and in the Leopard society, others find features in Sunny by which they can define her as different and which are also (or therefore) a source of confusion to herself. These are three characteristics, which I shall introduce here shortly but will elaborate on later in this chapter.

First, Sunny is born in North America, making her officially American. Her parents and brothers, however, are Igbo (Nigerian). By descent, Sunny can be called Igbo, but she remains American by birth. This problem of two-ness, which is found in the concept of double consciousness as defined by Du Bois, comes up here. The question which arises again is whether the subject is African, American, both or neither.

This is a source of confusion both to Sunny and other characters around her. It is the first characteristic by which she introduces herself to the reader in the prologue:

My name is Sunny Nwazue and I confuse people. ... I was born in the city of New York. ... We're Igbo - that's an ethnic group from Nigeria - so I'm American and Igbo, I guess. You see why I confuse people? I'm Nigerian by blood, American by birth, and Nigerian again because I live here. (Okorafor, *Akata* 3)

This confusion is also present in the way Sunny presents herself to other characters. It is found in her speech, for example. She has to make an effort to pronounce words with a Nigerian accent (Okorafor, *Akata* 13), but meanwhile she acknowledges that her Igbo sounds different because of her American accent (Okorafor, *Akata* 16). I will elaborate on this characteristic further in the section on belonging.

The second feature which makes Sunny different from others is her albinism. Just like the issue of nationality, this characteristic influences her status in both the 'normal' and the Leopard world. It is her albinism that she foregrounds when she introduces herself to the reader:

I have West African features, like my mother, but while the rest of my family is dark brown, I've got light yellow hair, skin the color of 'sour milk' (or so stupid people like to tell me), and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right color. I'm albino. (Okorafor, *Akata* 3)

Her albinism is a source of teasing and stereotyping in the normal world, but is a source of power in the Leopard World. In Leopard society it is still a feature which distances her from others around her, but it is given a positive twist. I shall elaborate on this feature in the section on stereotyping.

The third and last feature which differentiates Sunny from her surroundings is that she is a "free agent", a Leopard person who has not inherited his or her abilities directly from his or her parents. The description given in the novel, which Sunny gets from a book about free agents and is therefore the view

of this book's author, is: "A free agent is one who isn't privileged with even one pure Leopard spirit line from the survivors of the Great Attempt. She or he is a random of nature, a result of mixed-up and confused spiritual genetics" (Okorafor, *Akata* 96). This description gives an indication of the status of free agents in Leopard society: there are exceptions to the rule, but Leopard people tend to view free agents in a racist fashion.

Free agents are considered lacking a 'pure' bloodline. This brings issues of purity and essentialism to mind and a racist hierarchy based on the idea that those who are different by descent (or skin color) are impure. With free agents, this quality is not visible in physical appearance but they are discriminated against on similar ground as blacks were in colonial times in both Africa and America, but Leopard people speak of "spiritual genetics" being mixed-up. Because of this, the free agent is addressed in degrading ways: "You're like an infant. You will be dumbfounded and disoriented" (Okorafor, *Akata* 96). This way of addressing also recalls racist thinking, especially the idea that the subject is childlike, and in need of education from the civilized colonizer. As Hall points out: "During slavery, the white slave master often exercised his authority over the black male slave, by depriving him of all the attributes of responsibility, paternal and familial authority, treating him as a child. This 'infantilization' of difference is a common representational strategy for both men and women" (*Representation* 262). It is both a way to force 'help' upon a people, thereby attempting to mask the power that is exercised over the group, and a way to deprive men who threaten to go against this power of their masculinity: "Infantilization can ... be understood as a way of symbolically 'castrating' the black man" (Hall, *Representation* 262).

Sunny's status as a free agent is something which only appears sporadically in the novel and she rejects the negative images relatively easily through her actions. She is a fast learner (despite her late start she eventually seems to be able to act on the same level as her fellow Oha coven members) and she

has a strong natural ability to make herself invisible, indicating that her lack of 'pure' bloodline does not make her any less powerful. Because the first two characteristics are explored more depth in the novel, I chose to do so too in this analysis and therefore this third characteristic will not be examined here any further.

These three features which make up, amongst others (for I do not address gender issues considering the length of this MA thesis, for example), Sunny's identity, make her an almost extreme example of hybridity. She is African American, in itself possibly a hybrid category if we follow Paul Gilroy's and Stuart Hall's arguments. On top of that, she is albino, which makes her look as ambiguous as her nationality. She is a combination of black and white, neither one nor the other. Sasha defines Sunny therefore as being "outside in ... Black on the inside but white on the outside" (Okorafor, *Akata* 83). This definition of her hybrid status combines her nationality and physical aspects, although neither her outward appearance nor her identity prove to be just black or white but transgress these categories and their boundaries. And even this is not all, for Sunny is also a Leopard person, distancing her from the 'normal' world, and even among Leopard people she is different because she is a free agent. As Anatov explains, "Just as it's rare for a pure Igbo girl to have skin and hair the color of washed-out paper, so it is for one to be a free agent" (Okorafor, *Akata* 51).

This extreme case of hybridity is possible in this novel, which itself is at least just as hybrid in its genre. It combines aspects of fantasy and science fiction with aspects of traditional African storytelling. In realist fiction, the combination of so many hybrid features in one character would distract from the narrative; however, as part of this fluid combination of genres it fits well. This special status of the protagonist is also a characteristic of the hero in epic tales, which may have been a source of inspiration to the author.

Belonging

In this section, I shall focus on the novel's remarks considering belonging, which mainly appear through Sunny's nationality.

As mentioned before, Sunny was born in North America but is Igbo by blood. This feature returns throughout the narrative as a source of confusion to herself and others. As explained earlier, this already begins in the prologue, when Sunny introduces herself to the reader. Sunny acknowledges both sides, because she speaks Igbo and English with a Nigerian accent but simultaneously refers to her "Americanness" (Okorafor, *Akata* 212). She herself does not seem to have problems with the doubleness of her identity, but the problem lies in others' perspectives which shows when Sunny's utterances are close read and read in the context of the novel. Returning to the quote used before, we read that Sunny refers to herself as confusing *other* people (Okorafor, *Akata* 3). There is no noticeable negative influence, however, on her own self image. She embraces both sides by acknowledging them and is hurt when others do not. For example, the other girls at school call Sunny names for being African American. She is called *Akata* which means "'bush animal' and was used to refer to black Americans or foreign-born blacks. A very, very rude word" (Okorafor, *Akata* 11). Of course, the rudeness of the word hurts her but also the fact that it defines her by only one of the aspects that make up her complex identity. She is reduced to being *akata*, to being that which can be mocked. In a different context, it might have been her Africanness which would attract the negative attention. Sunny's attitude can be related to Schipper's third response to racism, namely an emphasis on equality. She belongs in both places and wants others to acknowledge that.

A sense of relief can therefore be noticed when her duality is finally acknowledged by someone else also:

“You American?” Junk Man asked. Suddenly, he was right next to her. She jumped.

“Um - yeah, sort of. I was born there and lived there for nine years before we came back.” ...

“Your parents born here?” ...

“Yeah.”

“Then you from here *and* there. Dual thing, you know?” ...

“So what’s that make me, then?” ...

“Who cares?” ...

She nodded, grinning. She liked Junk Man very much. (Okorafor, *Akata* 217-8)

Junk Man, a vendor at the Abuja market, defines exactly what characterizes Sunny’s attitude to this theme from now on: she no longer cares about how others define her. She comes from two places, belongs in these two places, and refuses any label. This is evident, for example, when she enrolls in a soccer match:

“... I was born in America, but both my parents are Nigerian and I’ve lived in Nigeria since I was nine...”

“So you’re Nigerian?” Goodwin said, frowning, unsure what to write down.

“No,” Sasha said. “American.”

“Whatever you want to put,” she said. (Okorafor, *Akata* 253)

While others worry about how to define Sunny, she does not care and lets them decide for themselves, making the issue less of a problem, at least for herself. She lets hybridity be something by which she defines herself instead of it being a problem for which she needs to find a solution. This, again, recalls

Bhabha's and Hall's theory on belonging and hybridity in which they opt for a celebration of difference as part of diasporic identity. Sunny is not displaced in Nigeria, the place in which the narrative is set, or looking for a new space which is geographically in-between multiple places, as the other protagonists in the previous novels were. Sunny accepts her two-ness instantly, without going through an anxious process first. She is part of both worlds, not of just one or none at all, and therefore does not need to find a new space. Her surroundings, however, do not seem to mirror this view.

Stereotyping

The second characteristic I mentioned which distinguishes Sunny from the people around her is her albinism. Unlike her ambivalent nationality, this feature actually does influence her self image. This is probably because her albinism is met with stereotypes, whereas her dual nationality causes uncertainty but is not met with stereotype images. Her albinism is also (literally) more visible, which makes it a more confronting aspect of difference.

The stereotype with which Sunny is confronted is an image of albinos as ghost people. Chichi describes it as follows: "People say stuff about people like you. That you're all ghost, or a half and half, one foot in this world and one foot in another" (Okorafor, *Akata* 23). Sunny responds to this by thinking "*So cliché. Everyone thinks the old old lady, the hunchback, the crazy man and the albino have magical evil powers*" (Okorafor, *Akata* 23, original emphases). This is reminiscent of the superstitious views of albinos which we find outside of fiction on the African continent. Andres Cruz-Inigo, Barry Ladizinski and Aisha Sethi note that the prejudices with which African albinos have to deal are, amongst others, the ideas that albinos are housed by ghosts of European colonists and that they possess magical superpowers or that their body parts are necessary ingredients for magical amulets made by witch doctors (80). In Tanzania, where most albinos on the continent are born, they are ridiculed and called names, amongst

which 'zeru', meaning 'ghost' in Kiswahili, is common (Cruz-Inigo, Ladizinski and Sethi 80). The stereotypical image of the albino in the novel is one in which hybridity is emphasized, for albinos are believed to be crossing boundaries between the physical world and the place where ghosts reside. Not only the idea that she is connected to the ghost world is a source of anxiety here. Hybridity in itself also causes anxiety, as Jessica Langer explains: "The hybrid is terrifying because it is uncannily both us and not-us" (107).

The negativity surrounding her albinism is something which influences Sunny's self image. When she already feels insecure for some reason, her doubts grow only more because of her appearance: "Suddenly, Sunny was very aware of her albinism. What must she have looked like, all bleached-looking and asking for something that sounded straight out of a black magic cookbook?" (Okorafor, *Akata* 101).

Sunny does not seem take any active measures against the stereotype. Something crosses her path, however, which helps her in dealing with it. This involves the discovery of her nature as a Leopard person. Along with it, she discovers her natural ability to make herself invisible. This ability, which is linked to her albinism by other Leopard people, helps her in dealing with the stereotype because both are based on the same idea. According to Leopard people, Sunny, or Leopard albinos in general, have "one foot set in the physical world and one foot in the wilderness - that's what [they] call the spirit world" (Okorafor, *Akata* 116). This recalls the stereotypical image of the albino in the 'normal' world, but the big difference is that this second view has a positive connotation. It implies a gift, which is positive, instead of a curse. Already before this is explained to Sunny, she takes emotional strength from discovering the ability. This indicates that it is not only other people's views that influence her self image but also her own abilities. When she manages to make herself invisible for the first time and sneaks out of her house at night, she explains it to her friends stating that "I'm albino. I'm practically a

ghost? What ghost can't sneak out of a house?" (Okorafor, *Akata* 111). She uses the stereotype sarcastically, adapts it to joke and play with prejudice, indicating her ability to take emotional distance from it. Because her albinism has received a positive connotation for Sunny, she can deal with it. This reminds of Hall's second strategy of stereotype reversal: the positive connotation given to her albinism helps in inverting the binary opposition, at least in Sunny's perspective.

However, giving a positive twist to the image is only possible for Sunny because she cannot let people who are not Leopard know of her ability. And if she could, it probably would not have a positive effect because of the prejudices in that society. This makes it a failed strategy for deconstructing the process of stereotyping. This strategy would not have been completely effective anyway, because substituting a positive image for a negative image does not let one escape the process of stereotyping. It is a step in the good direction, especially for Sunny herself, but it is certainly not successful in reversing the stereotype in the 'regular', non-Leopard society.

This rather pessimistic idea, that nothing can be done against stereotypes and that only the image of the self can be influenced and improved, was seen before in previous novels. Sunny can help herself, but society's image of her will not change so easily.

Conclusion

The themes explored in *Akata Witch* relate to the larger project of this thesis through exploring the doubleness of nationality with which Sunny is confronted which closely relates to Du Bois' idea of double consciousness. As Du Bois's concept describes, Sunny experiences the two-ness of belonging both in Africa and in North America. The attitude to this 'problem' that is propagated by the novel is one in which hybridity is celebrated, which recalls Bhabha's and Hall's ideas on the subject. Sunny accepts that her cultural identity cannot easily be defined by referring to one place but that it consists of

multiple places. Her identity is fluid and transgresses boundaries of fixed categories of nationality and by accepting this, she deconstructs the conventional pattern of thinking. An important idea of this paradigm is the idea that nations are fixed. Benedict Anderson commented upon this idea with his concept of “imagined communities”, which defines nations as socially constructed communities.

Sunny’s fluid cultural identity deconstructs the idea of a fixed nation and confirms Anderson’s concept of the imagined community. However, most other people in the novel seem to remain stuck in thinking in categories because they keep defining her by either her Igbo or her American descent and the effect of the deconstruction can therefore be said to be very limited. Something similar happens in Sunny’s dealing with albino stereotypes. As shown, she inverts the binary for herself but the stereotypical image remains present in the dominant paradigm. Also, the positive twist given to the stereotype does not change the fact that the image remains a stereotype.

Chapter 4: *Lagoon*

Lagoon, Nnedi Okorafor's second adult novel, was published in 2014. It tells the story of an alien invasion in Lagos, Nigeria, in 2010. The narrative is told from multiple perspectives and has multiple focalizers. Some of these are more prevalent than others. I shall explore the most important ones here.

One focalizer who is present often is Adaora, a female scientist living in Lagos. She and two others, the soldier Agu and the Ghanaian rapper Anthony, are the first to come into contact with alien life. They meet the alien's ambassador (whom they name Ayodele, for she has and needs no name among her own people) when the three of them are at the beach in Lagos. Adaora is the focalizer for a significant part of the novel. Agu and Anthony also take up this role but certainly not as regularly as Adaora. Ayodele can be named the protagonist and heroine of the story, whose goal is to unite the aliens and the humans. Adaora, Agu and Anthony are her helpers in reaching this goal and their experiences are often related to the readership. What is interesting is that Ayodele is never a focalizer, which probably has to do with the nature of the narrator, who is a figure from traditional African storytelling and does not know the aliens' perspectives. I will return to this later.

Besides this group, there is a set of younger citizens of Lagos whose experiences and perspectives also make up a significant part of the narrative. These are the friends Moziz, Jacobs, Tolu and Troy and Moziz' girlfriend Philomena. Especially Moziz and Jacobs function as focalizers. They think of capturing Ayodele and using her abilities for their own gain, namely by letting her fabricate money for them. They expect Ayodele to be able to do this because she is a shape-shifter. Adaora investigates some of her DNA and concludes that these aliens are capable of shape-shifting because their skin is not cellular but made of tiny, metal-like balls which are not fixed as human cells are (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 25). Not only can these aliens change themselves, they also have the ability to change others around them.

Along with these two focalization groups, there are multiple individual focalizers who give even more perspectives on the events. These are for example a young mute orphan boy and Fisayo, a young woman who makes money by seducing American businessmen but changes into a religious fanatic during the aliens' attack.

All these focalizers are in some way connected. Philomena is Adaora's children's nanny and it is in that capacity that she discovers Ayodele. She shares this news with her boyfriend Moziz who then plans to kidnap the alien with his friends. Fisayo and the orphan boy are both present, although from a distance, when Ayodele first emerges from the water and meets Adaora, Agu and Anthony. The characters also meet each other in the chaos that erupts later and Fisayo eventually becomes a psychopath and kills the orphan boy.

Despite being told from several perspectives, the story is told by one third-person, omniscient narrator who is intrusive. One of the instances in which he is very present is chapter 44, titled "Narrator's Welcome", in which the narrator addresses and welcomes the reader and introduces himself (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 228). The narrator is Udide, "the story weaver, the Great Spider" who is a figure from traditional Igbo storytelling who returns in several of Okorafor's works. He was also present in *Akata Witch* as a strong Leopard person. This way, Okorafor includes elements from the African literary tradition in her works, making them even more hybrid. Udide distances himself from the aliens by implying he is an earthly being, which may explain the absence of aliens as focalizers.

The narrative starts with the arrival of a group of aliens which settle in the ocean off the coast with Lagos, Nigeria. They do not arrive with aggressive purposes in mind, but because they are threatened by the majority of humans, they defend themselves and chaos eventually erupts in the city. The president of Nigeria meets with Ayodele because Adaora, Agu and Anthony bring her to him and, eventually, this entire group visits the Elders of the aliens. While the president is in a meeting with them,

the others explore their connection with the sea and the aliens.

Adaora, Agu and Anthony are human, but still feature mystical skills which help them connect with the aliens. Adaora was born with webbing between her fingers and toes, has always been able to swim and is transformed into a half fish/half human hybrid creature when visiting the world under water. Agu shows exceptional strength and Anthony has a spiritual connection with the Elders helping him to connect with and influence others around him. Back on land, Ayodele sacrifices herself for the greater good. She lets herself explode in a way so that at least all people in Nigeria are affected by it, namely by letting miniscule parts of herself infiltrate others, literally becoming part of them. From then on, everyone is at least a bit alien. From this moment on, the president promotes cooperation with the aliens. It is no longer oil that is Nigeria's commodity, but the technology of the aliens, to which humans now also have access, is. This will be the start of a new Nigeria without corruption. Here, no one is a pure human being anymore. Ayodele's goal is reached.

Since this novel addresses identity differently from the previous novels, the following sections shall likewise address belonging and stereotyping differently. Because this novel is less aimed at narrating one individual's experience but that of many, I have tried to also give an overview of how the novel addresses the themes of identity, hybridity and stereotyping instead of focusing on one character's perspective.

Identity

An important identity-related theme in *Lagoon* is the new dichotomy which is formed with the arrival and presence of alien life. A new Us versus Them discourse takes shape in which the distinction is based on humanity and alienness. This is a well known trope in postcolonial science fiction: alien life invades human society, making humans unite as one against these evil invaders, thereby erasing differences

among the humans. This dichotomy is often linked to (post)colonial ideas. The aliens can be seen as symbolizing either the colonists when they are the invading group or the colonized when humans invade an alien society. Jessica Langer points out that “[s]everal studies have addressed the parallelism between historical and science-fictional ‘alien’ encounters” and that a parallel with colonialism can be drawn (3). Rather than shying away from colonial tropes, postcolonial science fiction uses and hybridizes them to start a confronting discussion (4). Aliens are literally outside of earth in science fiction, but can be seen as symbolizing earthly “aliens” such as people of other nationalities or races and migrants.

How aliens are described explains the image that those who represent them have of these figures. The first time Ayodele is described, she² is referred to as a “creature” which is “not human” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 13). As the narrator suggests, “All his [the orphan boy’s] mind would register was the word ‘smoke’” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 13). Fisayo also watches the creature “and she, too, thought the word ‘smoke’, but also thought ‘shape-shifter’” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 14). This is something which characterizes the representation of aliens throughout the novel. Both smoke and shape-shifting indicate the changing of form, flexibility and the crossing or changing of boundaries. Because of this quality of the aliens, it is hard for humans to describe them based on outward appearance. The aliens do not have a distinct feature by which to define their otherness, like the stereotype alien green skin or antennae. They do not have a fixed appearance at all. Aliens can choose to look like humans but do not have to, which confuses the human beings around them.

This confusion can be found in the irregularity of descriptions of aliens. Sometimes they are referred to as ‘it’, sometimes as ‘he’ or ‘she’. Sometimes their otherness is emphasized while at other times their humanity. Of course, this changes with each focalizer, according to the different sentiments they harbor considering the aliens. But the uncertainty can also be found within the scope of one

² I refer to Ayodele as ‘she’ because this figure predominantly takes the form of a female human being, but I am aware of the fact that this figure lacks a fixed gender

perspective, thereby indicating that the origin of this ambivalent addressing lies not only in sentiments. Adaora, for example, often reflects on Ayodele's being. The alienness in her identity makes Adaora uncomfortable, as is indicated when she reflects that "If there was any strong hint of the alien in Ayodele's appearance, it was in her eyes. When Adaora looked into them, she felt unsure... of everything" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 37). Adaora is therefore surprised when Ayodele's hand feels remarkably human (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 53). Ambiguous feelings considering Ayodele's being remain present in Adaora's perspective even though they have a positive relationship. "The warm curious *being* that Ayodele had been was gone. The eyes Adaora looked into now were those of an angry bitter old *woman*" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 138, my emphases). In two sequential sentences, Adaora describes Ayodele as an undefined 'being' and a gendered human. She does not seem to be sure how to represent and define the alien, despite their close connection. A same ambiguity can be found in descriptions of aliens from other perspectives. Examples are descriptions of aliens as "man-thing" (180) or "woman-thing" (86), "person/thing/whatever" (68) or "the woman he knew wasn't a woman" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 121).

This attitude of humans to the new creatures around them shows their need for categories. They try to deal with the extraterrestrials by calling them 'aliens', thereby putting them in a category which is then opposed to humans. They remain stuck in the habit of thinking in dichotomies, which is even more prominent because they put these beings in a new category and then still try to define them in human terms. This happens also partly because these beings can take any possible shape and can therefore be said to be at least *partly* human, but they still remain different. Through their shape-shifting quality, these aliens transcend all boundaries and therefore all categories. They cannot be put in any fixed group, but in the way they are described it becomes evident that humans still try to do so. A result of this is chaos, because the continuous effort to make sense of the new creatures does not work out when the people who do so are stuck in a thought pattern which has no terms in which to define the new creatures.

Anthony reflects on this when he tells Adaora's husband that he should start thinking "outside the box" (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 141). He refers to the fact that to understand and accept the situation, people should first accept that there is no way to understand it without getting out of the old paradigm. I shall examine the solution to this problem in the next section.

Belonging

The novel refers to issues of belonging by means of exploring hybridity, just as the other case studies have proven to do. More specifically, *Lagoon* explores the anxiety present in humans when confronted with a hybrid figure, in this case a completely new and extraterrestrial race. This anxiety is caused by the aliens being simultaneously us and not-us (Langer 107). The members of this race can take any form but choose to look human because "human beings have a hard time relating to that which does not resemble them," as Ayodele reflects (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 67). This refers to the humans' inability to think 'outside the box'. Aliens choose to adapt to that human flaw. However, they do not hide their shape-shifting abilities and this expression of difference and fluidity still causes chaos. This chaos is due to humans' inability to accept anything which or anyone who transgresses the categories by which a society defines its members. The tendency to describe this new species in their own, familiar terms is what limits humans. Not only through the ambiguous ways in which human beings refer to aliens, but also in their speculations does the narrative comment on this behavior. Instead of accepting that an alien society has chosen to visit Lagos, humans keep suspecting them of being terrorists (27-8, 128, 202) other groups of humans whom they already wanted to blame, like the British (the former colonists of Nigeria) or 419 scammers (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 61-2). The humans try to put the aliens in a fixed, familiar category through speculation, thereby finding something or someone to blame.

A solution offered in the novel to this problem of being stuck in category thinking is defining the

aliens (or a similarly hybrid group) through the concept of “change”. Ayodele defines herself and her people as being “change” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 39 & 112). Adaora confirms this by saying that “they [aliens] can be anything and are nothing” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 28). They have no fixed being, but can simultaneously be anything they want: they are change itself. This notion covers exactly the only thing that the aliens are for sure.

Change and fluidity, or hybridity, as defining characteristic is also present in the theory on diaspora discussed earlier. It is part of the second way of thinking about ‘cultural identity’ as defined by Stuart Hall: it is not the sense of a common homeland which unites a diaspora but a shared sense of hybridity and difference. Cultural identity is also constituted out of points of difference, according to Hall (225). Focusing on diaspora, Hall argues that “ruptures and discontinuities ... constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’” (225). This idea embraces the poststructuralist idea of constructed identities, making the diaspora a prime example. The aliens in *Lagoon* are closely related to this idea because they, too, can be characterized by fluidity. They can therefore be said to be allegorically representing the diaspora and the responses to them can be explored as exemplifying responses to that diaspora.

The narrative ends with a feeling of hope regarding the acceptance of “change” as a category without boundaries and fluidity as the characteristic by which identity can be formed. This hope returns in the hope for a ‘New Nigeria’ and the rebirth of Lagos:

For the first time since we cast off the shackles of colonialism, over a half-century ago, since we rolled through decades of corruption and internal struggle, we have reached the tipping point.

And here in Lagos, we have passed it. ... Last night, Lagos burned. But like a phoenix, it will rise

from the ashes -- a greater creature than ever before. (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 227)

This rebirth is also thought of with the history of colonialism in mind and can therefore be read as a critique of the Eurowestern world and thinking in hierarchies. Part of the new Nigeria is a new sense of companionship: “There are others amongst us here in Lagos. ... They have fresh ideas that we can combine with our own. ... People of Lagos, especially, look at your neighbor. See his race, tribe, or his alien blood. And call him brother,” the president orders (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 278). A hybrid community as a space of possibility is welcomed here. However, the novel ends at this point, where it is only hope which is uttered but no real change is perceived. As the president observes, “old outdated ways of thinking don’t die easily, and sometimes they don’t die at all” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 278). He refers to his own prejudices here. Thus, even those who believe in and hope for a hybrid community may have trouble realizing it.

However, that the aliens chose Lagos as their new home does give hope. They resided in the sea before, which can be seen as the hybrid space in this novel, referring to Gilroy’s image of the ship. Lagos may be the new space where similar creativity is possible as in hybrid spaces such as Bhabha’s border.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping in *Lagoon* plays a different role than in the previous case studies, where a protagonist was subject to one or more stereotypes. In this narrative, stereotyping is explored less individually and more from a group perspective. The two groups that can be said to be stereotyped, albeit on two different levels, are aliens and Nigerians.

Aliens are subjected to prejudices that live in Lagos’ society. The images people have in the first

place are mostly based on popular culture, as becomes clear when Fisayo exclaims, “They’re taking people! Maybe eating them or something! ... Like in that old American movie... I forget the name. When are aliens ever *not* evil?” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 75, original emphasis). It also characterizes the response of corporal Benson, Agu’s superior in the army, when Agu and Adaora inform him about Ayodele:

“Is it green?”

Agu frowned. “Well, sir, she’s - “

“Slimy? Does it have antennae and those big *yanfuyanfu* eyes?” Benson asked, a smirk on his face.

“They’re not evil like the ones in all the movies,” Adaora added. (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 80, original emphasis)

Benson does not seem to take Agu and Adaora seriously and jokes with stereotypes. Behind these jokes lies a serious prejudice, though, which is that these aliens are expected to be evil. This idea is so strong that it ultimately defines the way many humans respond to the alien, who are aggressive and threaten the newcomers. Their response can even be called xenophobic.

This, however, says more about the humans than the aliens. The novel makes very clear that the aliens are not inherently evil because Ayodele and her three helpers Adaora, Agu and Anthony get many opportunities to express their thoughts and perspectives. Through their reflections, the reader is also offered a different perspective on the aliens which seems more reasonable. The four emphasize that the aliens did not have the intention to hurt anyone. Adaora, for example, insists that “These aliens had come in *peace*. Had come. *Had*” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 137, original emphases). It is because of the human reaction, not open but prejudiced instead, that the aliens eventually act violently in response. It is like a

self-fulfilling prophecy. Because the novel reflects on this clearly and often, the stereotypical image of aliens does not need to be reversed any further. Offering the alien's perspective and that of more open humans already shows that the stereotype is deemed untrue by the narrator.

The second group dealing with stereotyping are the Nigerians, who respond to the aliens. They are not stereotyped by other characters in the novel, but mostly by the narrator. They are thus stereotyped at a different level.

This is not to say that all Nigerians or Lagosians are stereotyped. Ayodele's helpers, for example, are exceptions. But a large part of the society as depicted consists of types which can be seen as stereotypical images of Nigerian society. These images all, in some way, involve hypocrisy and corruption. There is, for example, a priest who is depicted as greedy and egoistic, taking advantage of his high position in the church. Then there are the youngsters whom I mentioned earlier, Moziz et al., who do not want to work for their money but instead plan to kidnap Ayodele. Others are depicted as equally lazy and corrupt because they are portrayed as 419 scammers who even continue their scam while Lagos is on fire outside the internet café. They are described as follows:

The Lagos internet café was full of the usual suspects. There was the owner, Nonso Daouda, who sat behind his counter doing a poor job of not seeing what his customers did with his computers and internet connections. Then there were about twenty men between the ages of nineteen and forty -- all were in the process of emailing, texting, chatting, researching. Some were legit, most were up to some sort of 419. ... There was not one person here who had not been here yesterday doing the exact same thing. (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 111)

To make a change, these people need the aliens, who *are* “change”. It is through intervention from the aliens that a transformation is possible -- not in the least literally by way of Ayodele’s sacrifice. At the end of the novel, the president proclaims that this is the first time he does not feel powerless against Nigeria’s “soul-crushing corruption” (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 275). This expression emphasizes the power corruption has on a person, which is so significant that it can crush a soul. The president himself, on his own, could not bring about change. Along with the aliens, possibly owing to the aliens, he can declare corruption dead in Nigeria (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 279).

This, however, does not say anything about reversing the process of stereotyping. The novel does not seem to bother itself with it and only uses stereotypes to draw an extreme, therefore painful, picture of corruption in Nigeria to draw attention to the subject. The stereotypes of aliens are used to strengthen the image the narrative gives of the ridiculousness of its users. It does, however, indirectly criticize on the ways in which representation works.

Conclusion

Identity is represented differently in *Lagoon*. It explores belonging mainly by looking at hybridity as the other novels do, but stereotyping seems only to be used as a tool in addressing corruption and is not explored as process in itself.

What also makes *Lagoon* different from the other case studies is that it is the only one which deals with a completely non-human race. The human-alien dichotomy and gradations of humanity as a representational strategy can therefore be explored. This hierarchy of humans versus aliens reminds of the Civilization versus Nature opposition which I mentioned earlier and which was part of colonial (racist) discourse. Subjects of racism were referred to as closer to nature and animals, therefore less developed and in need of (forced) education. The colonists were considered more civilized than the

colonial subject, thereby justifying the hierarchy. This stereotype of the underdeveloped African is for example referred to in the novel when the fanatic and corrupt Father Oke refers to Ayodele as “a blank slate, untilled alien soil”, as if she needs education and humans can inscribe anything upon her (Okorafor, *Lagoon* 47). By showing that it is actually the humans who have to change and making this change only possible through intervention by the aliens and Ayodele’s sacrifice, the stereotype’s claims are turned around and thereby disproved. When seen as allegories of the Civilization/Colonist versus Nature/Subject dichotomies, they can be said to be disproved also.

Conclusion

In this MA thesis, I explored how the speculative fiction by Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor addresses issues of identity, specifically belonging and stereotyping. The first chapter elaborates on the theoretical framework on the basis of which these issues are explored and is followed by four chapters which all focused on the analysis of specific case studies. From these analyses, we can extract a set of aspects which return in most works. Taking a closer look at these aspects may say something about the potential of the genre in addressing identity.

The theory on belonging which is discussed in the theoretical framework focuses on two-ness and hybridity as part of identity. This often returns in Okorafor's works through protagonists who are inherently hybrid figures. These figures are not just culturally, racially or geographically hybrid. Humanity as a fluid element is considered also by incorporating creatures such as shape-shifters and extraterrestrials. The hybrid figures and spaces in these novels embody what the theories by Homi Bhabha on 'border lives', Stuart Hall on 'new ethnicities' and Paul Gilroy on the Black Atlantic opt for, namely a celebration of difference as a fruitful part of identity and a search for spaces equally in motion as these identities.

Zahrah (in *Zahrah the Windseeker*) is a windseeker, which means that she can fly and belongs in the sky. The sky can be defined as a hybrid space for it is nowhere and everywhere at once. It crosses boundaries. As figures who belong here, windseekers can be defined as equally hybrid. This space recalls Bhabha's border space or Gilroy's image of the ship as spaces where hybridity can become a source of creativity instead of anxiety.

Who Fears Death shows a similar pattern. Onyesonwu can be defined as hybrid because she is Ewu, half Nuru and half Okeke, and therefore deals with two-ness. Furthermore, she is a shape-shifter, making it possible for her to change her exterior. This fluidity is her second hybrid characteristic. The

space which she calls home is the desert, which is geographically in-between Nuru and Okeke. However, it is also symbolically in-between because it is the home to the Red People who also constitute a hybrid group, like the Ewu. However, instead of being hybrid because of being in-between the Nuru and the Okeke, they are hybrid because they are neither. The desert in this novel is a second example of a hybrid space.

Sunny, the protagonist in *Akata Witch*, is an almost extreme example of hybridity. She has a dual nationality, is albino (which makes her both ‘black’ and ‘white’ or something in-between), can make herself invisible (which makes her both present and not present) and a free agent. Unlike the previous figures, she does not explore a hybrid space like the sky or the desert, but is simultaneously at home in both the United States and Nigeria. Her hybridity is therefore not a source of anxiety for her, although possibly for others, but belonging in both spaces at the same time is celebrated instead.

The hybrid characters in *Lagoon* are the aliens, specifically represented by Ayodele, who are shape-shifters. Like Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*, they are able to be everything and nothing at once. They are therefore defined as being “change”. The aliens are fluid figures without a fixed identity or outward appearance. The hybrid space in which they reside is the sea, which has the same characteristics as the sky in *Zahrah the Windseeker* and the desert in *Who Fears Death*. It is a border space, but simultaneously a borderless space. It symbolizes hybridity and motion. The aliens change location to Lagos, thereby exploring Nigeria (or the continent of Africa) as a space where this hybridity may be welcomed. The novel expresses hope for its possibilities at the end.

These characters in all four novels all deal with stereotypes. In most case studies, the process of stereotyping is not deconstructed successfully because the images are not erased from the respective societies. I have shown this by linking the content of the novels to the strategies of stereotype reversal as defined by Stuart Hall. However, almost all figures take strength from their hybridity as described above

in order to deal with these negative images. Whether it is through retreating to the sky, changing into a new figure or disappearing into nothingness, all figures, at least at the end of the narratives, use their fluidity as a source of strength. Even though the specific stereotypes in the novels are thereby not deconstructed because they are repeatedly shown to survive in the minds of the members of society, the characters do deconstruct the idea of fixed identity and categorization which lie at the core of stereotyping. In order for a dichotomy or hierarchy to work, categories must be constructed which put a society's members into boxes. And exactly this is what all novels show: the categories are mere *constructions* and not natural. Their consequences, such as stereotyping, can thereby also be disproved.

This is also emphasized by the nature of the societies and stereotypes, of which the reader knows that they are imaginary because of the genre in which the novels can be placed. The settings and characters in the novels are vastly different from the reader's reality. Not only does this emphasize the constructedness of culture and patterns of thinking, it also creates a distance from the reader which makes it possible to address issues which may otherwise be too confronting. I repeatedly linked a novel's content to a racist dichotomy or notion which it can be seen to symbolize, but never addresses directly. This way, the novels can be said to indirectly address themes which are of importance to an African American audience.

These works of speculative fiction use similar strategies as realist fiction, for the theory discussed in the theoretical framework returns repeatedly in the case studies. The genre does not offer any striking new insights in that respect, but what I would define as the genre's most prominent potential lies in the way it addresses the issues. Speculative fiction has an ability to foreground issues without making them too confronting and therefore too painful. Concepts such as belonging or hybridity and stereotyping can be addressed in almost grotesque forms because the characters and events the novel describes are experienced as highly unreal. The potential of the genre therefore comes from its

possibility to invent an entire culture and society in which a narrative is set, and therefore also the discourse or dominant paradigm present in this setting. This makes it possible to explore themes in new, more prominent, ways. The content of these novels' insights may not be strikingly new, but the ways in which they do allows for a distancing and therefore also an exaggeration which may prove productive.

In my introduction, I suggested that the emerging works in speculative fiction and its subgenres from the African continent may profit by looking at the writings from the diaspora. Okorafor's strategies in creating hybrid figures and spaces, through which she gives shape to the theory explored, may prove fruitful in addressing problems and themes such as belonging and stereotyping that are equally delicate for the diaspora.

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