A Study of Afrofuturistic Storytelling in Selected Post-Apocalyptic Graphic Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to dissect three graphic narratives—*LaGuardia* by Nnedi Okorafor, *Ironheart* by Eve Ewing and *Genius* by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman, with the objective of underscoring futuristic representation of the conventional Black womanhood. It is intriguing to view the instrumental interface between race as well as gender and the amalgamation of past, present, future to develop a Black counter-narrative. Mark Dery in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* elucidates the term Afrofuturism as a speculative fiction that dwells upon African-American themes and life in the twentieth century world. These comic books critique the Black future while emphasizing on the making and remaking of Black female bodies. The alternate reality that these works create, alleviates the marginalized from the status of marionettes to the masters of their own (Black) narratives. The extraterrestrial presence and intelligence is crucial to discuss as the alien, Letme Live, in *LaGuardia* becomes a force unsettling the oppressive superstructure. Lauren Olamina's 'hyperempathy' in the doubly dehumanized world of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (set between 2024 and 2027) provides a contextual ground for the paper. The conventional apocalyptic scenarios are excluded as societal collapse and dystopian reality are highlighted in association with the themes of displacement, migration, resistance and identity. The counter-narratives established by these

texts have global resonance, as the normative is re-worked by re-imagining Black identity in a speculative framework.

KEYWORDS

Afrofuturism, Graphic narrative, hyperempathy, identity, post-apocalyptic

> Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.
>
> — Gloria Anzaldúa

> Reality, after all, is merely something that resounds in minds already trained to recognize it as such.
>
> —Wahneema Lubiano

Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993) considered the "racial ideologies" (16) as the source of (mis)interpretation of Black characters in American literature. The Black characters are diminished to the status of fetish; history and critical thinking being eliminated to accommodate qualities that enhance the image of the white characters. Donald Bogle in *Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, deals with the stereotype of stereotyping Black characters and evoking a sense of terror in the apparently sophisticated society. This paper studies the future of Black womanhood and the (im)balance of race and representation in dystopian graphic fictions. Patricia Hill Collins in "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" talks about the unique nature of the Black women's concern as they "experience a different world than those who are not Black and female" (747).

RACE, GENDER AND RESISTANCE IN AFROFUTURISTIC STORYTELLING

Mark Dery considers Afrofuturistic texts as a parallel to the twentieth-century techno culture; defining it as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture, and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future." (180) The heteronormative ideology in black representational practices perpetuates the marginalization of black women. Afrofuturism goes beyond the Eurocentric perspective and presents the Black female subject as an integral component of Black future. *Genius* (2014) by Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman, *LaGuardia* (2019) by Nnedi Okorafor, and *Ironheart* (2023) by Eve Ewing provide an intriguing view of the interface between race as well as gender and the amalgamation of past, present, future to develop a Black counter-narrative with the objective of underscoring futuristic representation of the conventional Black womanhood.

The alternate reality generated by the graphic narratives are marred by prejudices of the author. Afrofuturistic texts can be produced only by Black authors, specifically those who do not seek the white validation. Afrofuturism is a means to repossess the lost history and create a counter-narrative. Nigerian American writer, Nnedi Okorafor, developed the concept of Africanfuturism, similar to Afrofuturism, entirely situated in African history and representation breaking away from the white gaze.

Afrofuturism is the "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Yaszek 2006, 45) however, the science fictions of America present an absence of race equilibrium as they are incapable of comprehending and underscoring the future of various communities in America and the authors mirror their present prejudices on the future that is to develop into a dystopia.

It follows a non-sequential approach, thereby destabilizing the present and regenerating the future. There is an amalgamation of speculative future and racial studies in Afrofuturism. This leads to a "…reclamation of race that reflects ideologies of Blackness. There is a power in taking and claiming the 'original' framework then deploying it in new ways." (Nelson 2002, 9)

The Post-Soul culture extends the meaning of Blackness, providing transformed Black identity and multiplicity of narrative, with recognition and representation in an ever evolving political, economic, social and cultural space. The rise of Post-Soul culture changed the traditional tropes associated with Black women's representation. Afrofuturism provides a strong sense of black autonomy and disregard for predetermined gender roles. It negates the white gaze; Black females and their representation is transformed by female authors who present a post-apocalyptic picture of the African world filling in the hitherto unbridgeable gulfs in history.

The dystopic future is a reflection of the present living condition of the Blacks which is marked by class, race and gender related issues. The white perception produces distorted judgements based on racist ideologies which Judith Butler in "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia" (1993) deliberated over, she writes-

> …racist interpretive framework to construe King [Black man] as the agent of violence, one whose agency is phantasmatically implied as the narrative precedent and antecedent to the frames that are shown. Watching King, the white paranoiac forms a sequence of narrative intelligibility that consolidates the racist figure of the black man: 'He had threatened them, and now he is being justifiably restrained.' 'If they cease hitting him, he will release his violence, and now is being justifiably restrained.' …his palm turned away from his body, held above his own head, is read not as self-protection but as the incipient

moments of a physical threat. (16)

The repeated and ritualistic production of blackness is a concern raised by Frantz Fanon in "The Fact of Blackness" (1967)—

> In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table. The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly. And all of these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world-which seems to be the schema. . . . Below the corporeal schema I had sketched [there is] a historico-racial schema. The elements I had used had been provided for me . . . by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories. I thought that what I had in hand was to . . . construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localize sensations, and here I was called on for more. (111)

Fanon demonstrates further that the command to 'look' is associated with both the act of seeing and pointing out what is to be seen. This is an integral component of powerful superstructure and the racist episteme—" 'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. 'Look, a Negro!' It was true. It amused me." (112)

The power of visual language is underscored in the selected texts to comprehend the lived experiences of the African-Americans as well as Africans because their realities appear as dystopic. The Black

writers create texts that reflects their reality and critiques the bleak future that it reflects. Isiah Lavender in *Race in American Science Fiction* speaks about the systematic erasure of Blackness from several narratives and yet the lingering threat from the Black (in absentia) being implicitly indicated. Adilifu Nama, similarly, in her work *Black Space* (2008) has commented on "structured absence" (2) of Black female bodies in speculative post-apocalyptic fictions.

The Post-depression and Post-World War America saw a steep rise in comics, newspaper cartoons and graphic fiction which seamlessly integrated itself into the fabric of a disillusioned American society seeking hope, escape and entertainment. Comics became an instrument of propaganda, using allegory to reflect politics, illustrating the binary of good versus evil. Superheroes represented the concept of American exceptionalism which was considered worthy of emulation. These comics simultaneously provided a broad arena for the unvarnished representation of Black females' debilitation. Comics based on Black girlhood and womanhood was brought to the forefront by Jackie Ormes in her work *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem* (1937), where the central protagonist was seen in voguish costumes (there were several additional costumes provided with the Torchy paper doll). She migrated to New York and became independent, she worked at a Dance Club to sustain herself, thereby dismantling and highlighting the misogynistic attitude of society. The exigencies of having Black female artists' involvement are highlighted by the absence or skewed rendition of black female bodies by White artists in the post-apocalyptic future. The innate anti-Black and anti-woman stance vitiates their existence.

The attitude of American pulp fiction writers in the 1930s considered Blackness and race associated concerns as contagious. The term 'zombie' gained prominence during the same time and its origin can be traced to West African languages; ndzumbi means corpse, in the Mitsongo language. The black bodies were equated to zombies (walking corpses) ascribable to the Haitian folklore of

Vaudou witnessed by White imperialists during America's occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. Vaudou became a site of resistance and a means of identity preservation to counter the exploitative masters' coercion. The skin tone associated with civilization is white, giving it a sense of absolute superiority through an antagonistic representation of black.

SOUSVEILLANCE AND THE MARGINALIZED GAZE

In Marc Bernardin and Adam Freeman's *Genius,* the role of a female black as a leader of her community is highlighted. The graphic narrative presents a dystopian future where Black girlhood evolves into womanhood. The parochial patriarchal superstructure pushes the protagonist, Destiny a seventeen-year-old girl, to the fringes, "Towards an Interdisciplinary Field of Black Girlhood Studies", vehemently states—"black girls are largely presumed to be illegible at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age". (Owens 2017, 118) *Genius* employs the concept of sousveillance, a term coined by Steve Mann, which contradicts the idea of surveillance. In her instrumental work *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne elucidates, "'veillance' is a neutral form of watching, while surveillance is about power". (8)

Destiny does not accept the position of a victim, rather uses her marginalized status as an advantage. She counters the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) surveillance on the Black community by employing guerrilla techniques thereby re-writing the connotations of Black female empowerment and resistance. The hitherto inaudible and invisible girl becomes a capable leader of her community. The Black gaze is seen as transformative and emancipating. A text as potent as *Genius* is Octavia Butler's (a Black female writer) *Parable of the Sower* which delineates the life of a teenage black girl, Lauren Olamina. She develops her own belief system called Earthseed. This philosophy is the upshot of economic disparity, climate crisis and

gender segregation created by a hyperempath or sharer, Lauren. She believes that every animate and inanimate existence on this Earth are seeds that can be planted on other planets and extend life in the post-apocalyptic world. She believes "God is change" (Butler 1993, 73) and "change is part of life" (Butler 1993, 25); transformation, therefore is the only constant force in her narrative set in 2020s wrecked American society.

Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy in the doubly dehumanized world of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (set between 2024 and 2027) provides a contextual ground for the paper. The conventional apocalyptic scenarios are excluded as societal collapse and dystopian reality are highlighted in association with the themes of displacement, migration, resistance and identity. Hyperempathy is a situation that both Destiny and Lauren suffer from; this makes their position as female leaders precarious. Black girl's leadership is beautifully integrated into these narratives from a post-black and Afrofuturistic perspective. Destiny becomes the leader of the revolution however; it is intriguing to witness how she holds her position and wields her power within the boundaries of patriarchal hegemony as well as racist supremacy.

The South-Central Siege conducted by Destiny was an act of resistance that operated on sousveillance, which is considered as unethical and a villainous plot. She comprehends the way surveillance functions and then attacks the existing loopholes. Destiny's sousveillance becomes "a form of reflectionism, which uses technology to confront bureaucratic organizations." (Mann 2002, 333) Reflectionism is an instrumental component of appropriating the hegemonic tools to create a sense of chaos in the superstructure. Blackness, therefore, "exists as a site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and enacted. Surveillance is an act of anti-Blackness." (Browne 2015, 53) The amalgamation of racial stereotypes with surveillance (disciplinary actions become a necessary concomitant) generates inordinate injustices. Destiny retaliates with

force against the Los Angeles Police Department, as she had witnessed the atrocities performed by them on her neighbors. She secures the lives of her community members by getting involved (she has to put herself as a bait, and become the gang leader's girlfriend) with a menacing gang to consolidate their forces in her struggle against the bureaucratic forces. She kills the officers who tried to trespass into their space, this is her fierce response to the perpetration of systematic violence on her neighbors. The first volume of *Genius* raises a question —"What if the greatest military mind of our generation was born to a people who are already supremely conditioned to wage war, who know nothing but violence from birth and must continually adapt to new predators in order to survive?" (1)—the answer to this question lies in the creation of Destiny.

Destiny is equally subjected to surveillance however; she outplays her oppressors. Her status as an orphan and a girl makes it difficult for her to unify the oppressed community, with her assertive and acerbic attitude she is able to become the substitute leader (after killing the gang leader who was her boyfriend). This ascendancy of good over evil ensures that she initiates the sousveillance however, it is significant to realize that our understanding of Destiny and her destiny comes from the surveillance conducted by the authority. Her image is a controlled representation of her existence never underscoring her potential. When we read the text, we unravel the nuances of her personality which is otherwise varnished or tarnished as per the requirements of officers. The anonymity of Suspect Zero is created to present a gender-neutral space however, the constant use of the pronoun 'he' nullifies the efforts. Destiny is not suspected as the Los Angeles Police Department assumed that they were in the search of a male culprit, because of the stereotype of stereotyping, violence and power are naturally being associated with a man.

Bernardin and Freeman employ the gendered racialized clichés to Destiny's advantage. This is an explicit case of racialized surveillance which is influenced by gender role performance. The technology and

the cogs (Agent Grey and Los Angeles' Police force) in the wheel of the hegemonic system erase the existence of a Black girl or woman as a leader. This occurs due to their pre-conceived notion which defines "what is in or out of place." (Browne 2015, 16)

The internalization of gender norms is evident in Agent Grey's response to a woman (Destiny who is perceived as a rebel) dressed in formal suit. He cannot fathom her courage and resourcefulness in disguising as an IAD agent to retrieve some information. Her scabrous palm becomes the sole clue that Agent Grey gets to recognize her real identity. Grey, as a representative of hierarchical structures underlines the incapacious attitude of society which sets the extremities that women are supposed to conform to. The Black female body is further strangled due to race segregation and Destiny becomes a disconcerting element as she cannot be accommodated within the acceptable representation of Black womanhood.

THE TERRESTRIAL OTHER AND THE 'EXTRA'TERRESTRIAL

In Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia*, the binaries of Black/White, human/non-human, Our/Other, civilized/uncivilized among others, becomes extremely crucial. There is extraterrestrial presence and intelligence used in the text as the alien, Letme Live, becomes a force unsettling the oppressive superstructure. This presence highlights the idea that, Zakiyyah Iman-Jackson elucidates upon in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Anti-Black World* (2020), Blackness is not necessarily included in 'the human' thereby shattering the Eurocentric opinion of humanity. A sense of anchorage is established as the other (extraterrestrial being) comes in contact with the other (Black woman). Their interface lacks the presence of the supreme human, the white men, yet they navigate this hybrid existence in the dystopic speculative future with grace.

Black woman and the extraterrestrial being are dismantling the normative structure in *LaGuardia*. The space is threatened by a

probable (re)colonization by the Florals. The co-existence and confrontation of the alien species, Floral and the female protagonist, Future demonstrates the alien identity and space they adapt to. Future deals with citizenship issues in the United States of America due to her Nigerian origin and a baby (who is partially an alien).

Race in American Science Fiction attempts to explicate the relationship between the two 'others':

> While otherhood is not exactly a new term, its meaning for science fiction is innovative because it attempts to change how racial difference is viewed by exposing the history and practice of discrimination operating inside and outside the genre simultaneously while also studying ways writers have used science fiction to expose and combat racism. . . . Otherhood begins with thinking about race along the black/white binary. With this type of thinking, we can locate the historical consciousness embedded in science fiction in imagined events juxtaposed with real events in the space-time continuum. . . . These relationships express meanings of otherhood that map racial discourse in science fiction and that can represent a variety of differences in relation to science, technology, and culture. Otherhood is capable of creating a cultural fluidity, a flexibility of insight, between historical reference and imagination of the future of race. With concepts of otherhood, we can examine degrees of black marginalization in science fiction (i.e., blackground). (Lavender 2011, 8)

The alien others and racial others negotiate with the civilized white. Nnedi Okorafor's works have a nuanced understanding of the racialized gender hierarchy and the strategies of subversion that she employs is aimed at unraveling the entrenched disparity in society. Her view of history, is influenced by the Western perspective, as a process of evolution that determines the conditions of the past out

of which the present grows and future gets built. This provides the foundation for her speculative post-apocalyptic fiction.

The superstructure of patriarchy contained, consumed, commodified as well as calumniated women and they were peripheralized in the social, political and economic matters. The binary of domesticated/demonized (i.e. Eve/Lilith, lamb/hyena) is pervasive in the text. The hierarchical nature of race and gender, that has remained unquestioned is indicative of the acceptance of male domination as the status quo. Okorafor adds the question of national identity as well. "It would seem, then, that continual encounters and struggles with the 'other' are the hallmark of true Western experience." (Lavender 2011, 8)

Future is carrying a partially alien child and the space she inhabits becomes crucial for her survival; therefore, she decides to leave Nigeria and moves to USA. She believes that citizenship laws would protect her. There is a strong xenophobic attitude in the Nigerian society and Citizen (Future's husband) is consumed by it. A peculiar yet scientifically validated event occurs when Citizen is exposed to Floral species pollens through an exposed wound, when he bought a new flower, these pollens transform his DNA and when Future is impregnated by him there is an amalgamation of human and non-human DNAs creating an alien baby. Future gives birth to a hybrid child and the process of otherization becomes twofold, her position as a black woman and a mother to an extraterrestrial being. This amalgamation puts Future in a precarious position. The Floral that transformed the human DNA named itself Letme Live as all through the narrative it is trying to survive in the foreign space.

Nnedi Okorafor in the comic draws from true events that have happened at the LaGuardia Airport—"It was literally the airport. I just had multiple incidents there where I felt very alien [...] I felt rage many times in the LaGuardia airport. In a row. I travel a lot, and there was a time where I came through that airport multiple times, and a similar incident kept happening, especially with my hair, that was really frustrating." (Riesman 2019)

HYPERSEXUALIZED REPRESENTATION AND SPECULATIVE RESISTANCE

Riri Williams, the eponymous protagonist in Eve Ewing's *Ironheart* is an archetypal black girl who is shaped by Ewing's personal experiences. Marvel comics have played an influential role in framing perspective towards Black girlhood/ womanhood. The depiction of a Black girl written by a Black woman who has been through near circumstances ensures that her defiance is manifested in her protagonist's refractory disposition.

Through the character of Riri, Ewing has raised questions against the prejudice of society about the ageing of women, this is a move aimed at thrusting and stifling the women into parental roles to ensure their gradual dissociation from education and empowerment. The construction of the black female superhero image can be understood through Black iconicity. Black iconicity aims to underline the heterogeneity of Black experiences which thereby leads to the reduction of their marginalized and criminalized existence. The gaze on Black women is manipulated by Ewing and this inaugurates a sense of Black autonomy. The presence of masculine tropes, protective and possessive, in a female disrupts the system making them susceptible to violence and incarceration.

Riri appears as both vengeful and vulnerable. She is diametrically opposed to the collective expectations of being docile, virtuous and shaped according to man's will, therefore becomes an embodiment of the transgressor who is a misfit in the misogynistic society. In her actions and passions, she resembles a woman who strives to be the equal of man. She is bold and authoritative, does not accept being deprived of an identity, alienated from history and relegated to tradition. She cannot be diminished to a passive object who is always acted upon and never acting for herself.

Ewing has been considered misogynistic due to the reluctance to take radical positions on the egalitarian feminist politics of

contemporary times and some critics considered her work as a commitment to individualism and resistance to feminist collectivity. This is subverted in a way because Ewing ensures that her black female protagonist outmaneuvered those who could possibly subjugate her. There is certain misogyny in the way Riri is construed and perceived by the audience and there is an inherent contradiction of women's own participation in the oppressive structure.

Riri Williams' first appearance was in *Invincible Ironman Vol. 2* created by two white male artists-Brian Michael Bendis and Mike Deodato. She possesses extraordinary intellectual power especially as manifested in the creation of her own armor implying similitude with Tony Stark (Iron Man). The image of Riri Williams and eventually Ironheart was hyper-sexualized, this is the product of the male-dominated simulated world. The sexist representation of women, which re-enforces R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, as hypersexualized being with disproportionate anatomy and revealing costumes (bare midriff, swelling breast, extended torso) is assigned to the stereotype of stereotyping women.

The commodification of women's bodies is a result of the male gaze which borders on voyeurism; the influence of the skewed gender dynamics being disseminated from this visual representation could be comprehended from G. Gerbner's "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview" which is instrumental in the study of Cultivation Theory. The use of visual language possesses significant potential to influence the readers' or viewers' perception. George Gerbner in Cultivation Theory underscores the reflection of the virtual world on the real life. The media derived content promotes hypermasculinity and parochial perspectives as justifiable relegating women to the margins invisible and inaudible; visibility of certain women conveniently coerces them into the space of exploitation and commercialization.

The *Ironheart* comics are designed with a narrative and the visual language becomes the means of expressing the narrative,

however, it is intriguing to witness that a significant portion of this narrative caters to the chauvinistic hyper-masculine male audience by exhibiting muscular men armed with ammunitions while women are at several places amortized as mere catalysts, aides (precisely a sidekick) or damsels in distress. This foregrounds how the graphic narrative conditions the youth to internalize conventional gendered ideology and their straitened view of gender role, performance and behavior. It is imperative to examine these contents to ensure that the perspective of the black female central protagonist is brought into consideration. There has been a steady acceleration in inclusive and representative portrayals of black female characters. There are several realistic representations that interrogates and resists her sexualized status.

CONCLUSION

The Post-apocalyptic speculative science fictions are an apparatus that stimulate the subversion of normative structures. African-American themes and life in the twentieth century world in these comic books critique the Black future while emphasizing on the making and remaking of Black female bodies. The counter-narratives established by these texts have global resonance, as the normative is re-worked by re-imagining Black identity in a speculative framework.

The Post-Soul Aesthetic, is seamlessly integrated with Afrofuturism, as it embraces the diversity (thereby the authenticity) of Black identity. The futuristic representation of the conventional Black womanhood in visual language is intriguing due to the intricate interface between race as well as gender and the amalgamation of past, present, future to develop a Black counter-narrative. The alternate reality that these works create, alleviates the marginalized from the status of marionettes to the masters of their own (Black) narratives.

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