feral feminisms
The General Issue
issue 12 · fall 2023

Transformative Feminist Futures in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death?*

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Nnedi Okorafor's 2010 novel Who Fears Death? *is a post-apocalyptic feminist critique of weaponized rape and forms of racist rhetoric that, even in Sudan's far future, engender war and genocide. This article brings the critical perspectives of pleasure activism and transformative justice to analyze how a coalition of five young people imagine and enable a different feminist future within the novel. Ultimately, I argue that radical honesty, consent, and pleasure become pillars through which this coalition organizes their work and provides both salves to heal from and tools to repair the inherited legacies of racialized and gendered violence.*

> Practice pleasure like your life depends on it.
> – Alana Devich Cyril

Introduction

The first time that Onyesonwu and Mwita have sex, Onyesonwu "felt only pleasure" (Okorafor 2010, 129). The juju from her Eleventh Rite clitoridectomy was broken and now every "part of [her] body was a sharp point of bliss. It was the most beautiful sensation [she'd] ever felt" (129). Both Onyesonwu and Mwita are "Ewu"—an abject and slippery term that connotes both children born of rape and mixed race intimacies. Ewus are feared to reproduce the cycle of violence they are supposedly born from, the story of their life foreclosed by the story of their conception. In radical response to that reductive cultural script, Onyesonwu's intimate life with Mwita is filled with pleasure. In fact, Onye says that not "even the end of the world" could have prevented them from having sex (173). That Onyesonwu is only twenty years-old when she claims her body's right to sexual pleasure must not be overlooked. What is at stake in this representation of irrefutable bodily autonomy and eroticism?

In Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Who Fears Death* (2010), five young people organize toward collective and transformative action rooted in feminism. Pleasure becomes a salve to heal from and tool to repair inherited legacies of racialized and gendered violence, breaking the cycle. My analysis of the novel's transformative and coalitional feminist social change practices is especially indebted to adrienne maree brown, Ejeris Dixon, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. brown's 2019 edited collection *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* repeatedly argues that "pleasure is a measure of freedom" (2019, 3). The pleasure activism lineage brown archives shows "just how many ways" there are to "collectively orient around pleasure and longing" to make harm "impossible in the future" (6, 3, 11). Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's 2020 edited collection *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories*

from the Transformative Justice Movement documents the "stories and strategies" of ordinary people trying community-led responses to harm and violence (10). It's important to both collections to offer "practical knowledge," since for Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha "[t]heory without practice can be irresponsible" (Dixon 2020, 10, 9). Instead, they "want to show the messy, beautiful, and unromanticized aspects of this [transformative justice] movement" (10).

Fiction too can be instructive, writing characters who experiment with social justice values and practices. In Walidah Imarisha's introduction to *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,* she argues that speculative fiction can help activists "build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane" (2015, 3). In Okorafor's *Who Fears Death?* (2010), young people are imagining alternative social structures beyond what their parents and elders conceive as possible, and strive to center pleasure, radical honesty, and consent in their organizing with each other. Sex and pleasure could easily be trivialized as less important than the advanced magic and war games their elders must engage in to survive. But, I argue, Okorafor's characters develop a pleasure politics to interrupt and heal from this cycle of conflict they were born into, a politics which transforms even the land around them.

Who Fears Death? is a post-apocalyptic feminist critique of weaponized rape and forms of racist rhetoric that, even in Sudan's far future, engender war and genocide. Nuru extremists didactically enforce select traditions inscribed in the Great Book, a religious tome which rationalizes the Okeke people as enslaved. Protagonist Onyesonwu is born of this conflict directly. Her mother, Najeeba, is an Okeke woman sorceress who survived the extermination of her village and was deliberately impregnated by Daib, a Nuru general who hoped to conceive a powerful foretold son. Instead, Najeeba disrupts this ethnocultural lineage by giving birth to a daughter whose destiny is to upend, rather than fortify, this violence by re-writing the oppressive doctrine of the Great Book. Onyesonwu's name translates to the novel's title—*Who Fears Death?*—in recognition of her defiant insistence on being born despite the genocidal conditions which make up the circumstances of her birth. Onyesonwu cannot rely on "destiny" or "fate" alone, but must work in coalition with young people who also operate largely outside of social sexual expectations and actively express desire amidst the trauma they otherwise experience and witness. The process through which Onyesonwu organizes and acts with her peers is essential; they practice the just world on feminist terms they strive to activate. Her immediate circle of change agents include: her companion Mwita, who is also "Ewu," but born of consensual Nuru-Okeke love; the community of women Onye underwent her clitoridectomy with, including Binta, Luyu, and Diti; and Fanasi, Diti's fiancé. I see this coalition amplifying three main priorities in their work together: radical honesty, space to consent or refuse, and a politics of gender parity that centers pleasure. Ultimately, I see the turn toward knowledge and centering of pleasure that Okorafor's characters embrace as providing an index for wide-spread social transformation.

Onyesonwu's willful defiance and insistence on changing the entrenched violence of her time mark her among a lineage of unforgettable African-based heroines who are uncompromising in their anti-colonial feminist ideology and praxis. I'm reminded of Tsitsi Dangarembga's Tambu, who opens *Nervous Conditions,* which includes what still might be the most iconic feminist line in literature: "I was not sorry when my brother died" (1988, 1).[1] With added indignation, Nawal El Saadawi's Firdaus begins *Woman at Point Zero* by saying that "[a]ll the men I did get to know, every single man of them, have filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face" (1983, 13–14).[2] These heroines are fettered by empire and its legacy in oppressive neocolonial governments and socially ingrained anti-woman ideology. Tambu is at first naïve, but always discerning and eventually uncompromising in her rejection of ideological dominance, be it Christian missionary racism, colonial education, or

compulsory heteronormativity that limit what her life may accomplish. Incarcerated Firdaus was forced into and then chose sex work as the only liberatory means available to earn money and independence; she is sentenced to death after she kills her pimp and humiliates a rich prince, who calls the police on her to reassert his power. I read Onyesonwu's urgency, anger, and resolution from within this constellation of postcolonial, feminist heroines who are imbedded into our stories and public imagination. Much of Okorafor's work speculates what it might take to stop the physical and intellectual wars that seek to dehumanize outsiders.[3] From within realistic fiction, Tambu and Firdaus are never able to completely achieve bodily and intellectual freedom. But science fiction offers genre tools to make the conditions of social injustice appear strange (a deconstructive queering of the present), and to speculate what alternative, counterhegemonic futures might look like. In *Octavia's Brood,* Imarisha links science fiction to social change by arguing that "all organizing is science fiction" (2015, 3). In *Pleasure Activism,* brown says pleasure activists invite "people to the pleasures we have constructed from dreams and thin air" precisely because pleasure is liberatory (2019, 4).

Indicative of the genre, what sets Onyesonwu apart is her ability to engender a different imagined future. Onyesonwu discovers her magical ability during the Eleventh Rite ritual, since the pain of her clitoridectomy prompts her to go invisible. In time she learns to shape shift, manipulate matter, and alternate between spiritual and physical worlds. Onyesonwu is a healer, and by the novel's end she will have transformed the desert into lush green landscapes and very literally reimagined and rewritten fate.

Priority 1: Developing Radical Honesty[4]

Onyesonwu's ideology of social change is founded on an uncompromising obligation to radical honesty, showing how important unfiltered access to and acceptance of even difficult truths and forms of historical knowledge are to cultivating ethical social change. But, moving from theory to practice is tricky, as Onyesonwu frequently confronts the line distinguishing truths that traumatize from those that mobilize. While the direct action Onyesonwu leads is rewriting the Great Book, she must also inspire a collective will to resist. Others must consent to the future she imagines is possible, or she risks replacing the Great Book with another dogmatic doctrine. But, the Okeke have become demoralized, and even the elders lead from a risk and change-averse position. Widespread rape and violence denialism has become ordinary—a socially permissible coping strategy for those not yet directly impacted by enslavement and physical harm. Onyesonwu regrets that the "Okeke people didn't want to know the truth" (Okorafor 2010, 28). Rather than inspiring resistance, information about the genocide immobilizes. It is from within her home community of Jwahir that Onyesonwu begins developing her social change consciousness and witnesses the power of truth- and storytelling to cultivate small pockets of feminist social change.

The extent to which the Okeke turn away from the truth of the rape-genocide leaves them increasingly vulnerable and hostile. In one key example, documentary photographer Ababuo arrives in Jwahir having witnessed and photographed the genocide elsewhere. He seeks to warn and mobilize Jwahir. Instead, he is incarcerated and thrown out. Onyesonwu contextualizes: "To these people, the murder of Okekes in the West was more story than fact. … These people didn't want to know the truth" (Okorafor 2010, 28). But, people do accept Ababuo's evidence. They "vomited, cried, screamed; nobody disputed what they saw" (72). They are traumatized by the violence they hear about and witness, and look to community leaders for

guidance. But, even the most powerful of Jwahir's elders lead from "fearful imaginations" (brown 2019, 10). Onyesonwu's mother Najeeba immediately undermines Ababuo's credibility through misplaced respectability politics. She describes him as a "mad photographer" who "was all dirty and windblown" and who "came to the market straight from the desert. Didn't even try to clean up first!" (Okorafor 2010, 71). Elder Oyo the Ponderer steps in as Jwahir's decision-maker, imposing a false sense of security and comfort which leads to collective inaction. He says: "I have considered probability, margin of error, unlikeness. Though the plight of our people in the West is tragic, it is unlikely that this hardship will affect us. Pray to Ani for better things. But there is no need to pack your things" (73). Aro offers to train people in combat, while dismissing fear as "for the weak;" while Dika the Seer declares that faith will carry Jwahir through this hysteria (73). First panic and then denial, prayer, and ultimately immobilization, rather than action, is the stance that Jwahir takes officially.

What begins as a more recognizable form of victim blaming—a single person's story is discredited by discrediting the person—grows into entrenched refusal. These are intellectual, trained, elder men and powerful sorcerers; they have the capacity to strategize active survival. But, they recuse themselves from responsibility and give up their power, consciously leading the people of Jwahir through inaction. These cultural discourses of denial lead to systemic biases that maintain the status quo and limit in advance who is capable of changing the world. Esther L. Jones points out that even "Rana, the Nuru seer who prophesies the end of the war between the Nuru and Okeke, changes both the gender and ethnicity of the prophesied warrior sorcerer from an Ewu girl to a Nuru boy" (Okorafor 2010, 87). Refusing to see feminist futures almost causes Rana to miss that Onyesonwu is this foretold warrior sorceress. While cultural discourses of denial do—temporarily—protect the Okeke psychologically from the shock of trauma, it leaves the larger community of Okeke people fragmented and Jwahir unprepared to face the genocide.

brown argues that long-term harm reduction and survival requires us to "increase our collective tolerance for truth" (2017, n.p.). As an organizing strategy, she believes the truth becomes heavier and more "undeniable as more people believe it" (n.p.). In Jwahir, the comfort of the status quo lulls elders to cling to their social privilege in the present. But, Onyesonwu has never experienced the promise of security, and this social location better prepares her to ask whether *"our safety is really the point"* (italics in original Okorafor 2010, 73).[5] Ababuo's honesty about the violence, his photographs and stories, stirs her, and she begins imagining what new strategies for long-term survival could look like. Lisa Dowdall sees Onyesonwu's identity as an "inbetweener—between childhood and womanhood, between Okeke and Nuru" as powerful; through this social position Onyesonwu negotiates and lays bare the "flawed foundations" of "practices and beliefs that repress" (2013, 8). As a fellow outsider, Onyesonwu gravitates toward Ababuo who becomes proof of possibility that one can witness, accept, and organize against even systemic and historical harm.

I trace the beginnings of Onyesonwu's consciousness as a revolutionary here. By decentering her personal safety, she reimagines a connection to her Igbo namesake, striving to move forward collectively even in times of uncertainty. Being able to hear and accept difficult truths leads Onyesonwu to a series of different imagined futures and grounds her transnational pleasure politics. Developing radical honesty as a social change priority builds a foundation from which she and her peers can trust one another. In time, social justice storytelling[6] becomes an indispensable tool for building truth tolerance and making the truth undeniable.

Priority 2: Developing Fully Informed Consent

Cultural discourses of denial lead elder men to develop fearful imaginations which prevents them from building collective truth tolerance. Elder women are complicit in these oppressive structures, co-creating fear-based social norms which control young people's bodies and autonomy. Withholding and manipulating knowledge about gender, violence, and the body leads to systemic bias and is ultimately leveraged as a tool to deny consent. The Eleventh Rite clitoridectomy ritual that the elder women oversee, interpolates young women into this social conformist position. And it's through experiencing this very ritual that Onyesonwu begins developing her critical consciousness about bodily autonomy, pleasure, and fully informed consent. It's important for my reading of this key textual example that the Eleventh Rite offers young women a nonjudgmental space to speak their histories of sexuality and heal from the stigma of sexual trauma. In many ways, the ritual resembles a restorative justice healing circle; sharing their truths within this women-only space builds trust and offers repair. Lisa Dowdall argues that "Okorafor takes pains to emphasize the complex intersection of traditions, beliefs, and motivations behind" female circumcision "without granting license to its practitioners" (2013, 7). In time, Onyesonwu learns to reverse the clitoridectomy that she and her friends did consent to at age eleven, but choose to undo at age twenty—using magic to meet the demands for new physical embodiments and healing. They learn that fully informed consent was withheld from them, and juju helps them reclaim their autonomy and right to pleasure. Through the Eleventh Rite, readers see the importance of knowledge, consent, and pleasure merge—all which become pillars of their transformative action.

On the surface, the Eleventh Rite ritual that Onyesonwu consents to seems to contradict many of her social change values and practices. For instance, Onye learns that "no one really remembered *why*" the two-thousand-year-old tradition was done (Okorafor 2010, 33). But since it "was an old practice" it was "was accepted, anticipated, and performed" (33). It is simpler to continue, rather than question or improve, inherited traditions. Onyesonwu's mother too "felt the practice was primitive and useless"—echoing the common Western critique which brands it as "mutilation" and a backward relic of bygone patriarchal communities (32). But, Onyesonwu is clear and emphatic when she affirms that she "certainly wasn't one to do anything for the sake of tradition" (33). She weighed her options carefully and without compromise. "In Jwahir, to be uncircumcised past eleven brought bad luck and shame to your family" (33). While Onyesonwu wasn't concerned about luck, she was serious about shame. She felt that she "brought dishonor to [her] mother by existing" as an Ewu person and "scandal to [her] Papa by entering his life" (33). The Eleventh Rite is therefore of unavoidable importance and a rare opportunity to consent to a different future on her terms.

Being offered a space filled entirely with women to speak about one's history with sex and violence teaches Onyesonwu, Luyu, Diti, and Binta the power of radical truth telling; and they develop a bond that becomes the foundation for Onyesonwu's feminist led revolution. We learn that Onyesonwu had never "been touched;" that Diti had been touched by, but never had sex with her partner Fanasi; Luyu had sex "many times" with Wokike, but when pressed to answer "why," she lowers her gaze saying she didn't know (Okorafor 2010, 36–37). Binta is asked to tell her story last, but in place of words she communicates through shoulders curled over with hard tears. Elder Ada tells Binta that she's "safe here," and the six women elders of the Eleventh Rite chant "you are safe, you are safe, you are safe here" (37). Nana the Wise moves forward and professes that: "'After tonight, all in this room will be bound.' … 'You, Diti, Onyesonwu, and Luyu will protect each other, even after marriage. And we, the Old Ones, will protect you all. But truth

is the only thing that will secure this bond tonight'" (37–38). From this space of feminist connection and radical honesty, Binta responds to the question of 'who' by verifying: "My Father" (38). And when Nana the Wise asked how many times, Binta answers "Many" (38).

It is seven *years* before Onyesonwu discovers that the scalpel Ada used to make the excision was bewitched. Ada's scalpel was treated by Aro, her husband and the youngest elder sorcerer in Jwahir, without even her knowing—continuing the troubling pattern of powerful men making decisions on other people's behalf and without their consent. In time, Ada agrees to use the treated scalpel, magically binding eleven-year-old girls to chastity until marriage. The juju worked by causing excruciating pain when a woman was "too aroused" (Okorafor 2010, 76). The sexuality of young girls is precluded by the logic of men and with the complicity of women elders. Through magic, young women are bound to modesty, and a kind of perverse understanding of arousal as excruciatingly painful. What becomes of the sexuality of young girls who are never told that their bodily response to pleasure and arousal is forced upon them? How does forced chastity alter their perception of coercion or their capacity to experience pleasure? Fearless and proud Luyu is furious: "we're tricked into thinking our husbands are gods," simply because they are the first men who haven't caused pain (80). This betrayal happens in an all-women's protective space that obliges young girls to be vulnerable, while elder women withhold and manipulate the truth.

I see Okorafor making two claims about Onyesonwu's participation in the Eleventh Rite. First, that she made the decision to participate as freely as she could, with the best access to information she had at the time, and with the most understandable intent: to heal from her inherited history of trauma and stigma. Second, that information was consciously and institutionally withheld from her and all the young women who participated in the ritual. This withholding negates the control that Onyesonwu hoped to gain over her body, transforming the Eleventh Rite into a delayed form of gender coercion—one that binds young women to specific sexual practices later without their knowing. Here Okorafor uses juju as a rhetorical tool to literalize and metaphorize. In Samuel R. Delany's iconic essay "About 5,750 Words" (1977, he conjures an image of a "winged dog" to represent the literal and literary possibilities of science fiction. Delany theorizes that winged dogs are of course "meaningless" in "naturalistic fiction" (Delany 2009, 12). But, in science fiction winged dogs have the dual capacity to literalize and metaphorize. Joshua Yu Burnett sees Delany's winged dog as representative of SF's power to move from "aspirational ideal to lived reality" (Burnett 2015, 139). The imaginative provides an index for mapping social change in the present. Okorafor uses juju rhetorically to visibilize the impact that social prohibitions around female sexuality and pleasure take. She exacerbates and literalizes the restrictions placed on women in order to make plain the effects of social sexual taboos. Elder men use juju to violently remove female bodily autonomy with elder women's complicity. But, the young women who participated in the Eleventh Rite have become powerful, as the ritual taught them to unlink sex and stigma. Juju is used again here, literally and literarily, as Onyesonwu uses magic to break the spell. She undoes the violence that had been done to their bodies and enables freedom of sexual expression.

Teaching young women to speak and believe deeply personal truths arms them to provide repair to one another and take on communities steeped in rape and violence denialism. When this community of initiates assembles around Onyesonwu's leadership and joins her quest to rewrite the Great Book, it's imperative they exercise fully informed consent. Each of their lives

are at risk—and before the journey's end Binta, Luyu, Mwita, and even Onyesonwu will die. To insure these deaths do not occur under coercive circumstances, knowledge of the genocide they are hoping to interrupt and repair must sink in. Onyesonwu uses her magical abilities to project a vision, showing the genocidal circumstances of her birth in which Daib rapes her mother as a weapon of war. "I want to go with you" Binta affirms (Okorafor 2010, 157). "I want to go, too" Luyu quickly follows. "I'll go, too" Diti joins. All of these women had formed a bond that was predicted to be inseparable. However, Diti's fiancé Fanasi isn't moved by Onyesonwu's story. This is the first significant moment of group conflict. Rather than honor the messy growth and hard work required of their transformative process, Onyesonwu weaponizes the truth. Fanasi justifies that he will inherit his father's bread shop—that he has a good life planned in Jwahir. Onyesonwu's impatience only sharpens. She wants to "shout at him, 'Then the Nurus will come and tear you apart, rape your wife, and create another like me! You're a fool!'" (158–159). When at last Diti suggests that Onyesonwu conjure the scene again, she shows the memory "for the third time" (159). Fanasi is first filled with grief, until it "was replaced with anger. Raging anger" (159). And Onyesonwu experiences the washing of relief that comes with being believed when the evidence is so overwhelming. "Will you come," Onyesonwu finally asks Fanasi. "He nodded. And then there were six" (159).

This scene serves as another initiation. While the young women had already been bound by the Eleventh Rite, Fanasi is new to the constellation of change agents. As a monoracial male, he is the only one awarded any substantial social privilege. Looking back on this scene, it is notable that Fanasi does not verbally affirm his dedication to the journey, rather nods—almost acquiescing to the trauma he witnessed. Fanasi later regrets his decision, relinquishes accountability, and argues that Onyesonwu manipulated his allegiance. Diti too claims that Onyesonwu coerced their participation—a very serious charge given what is at stake—through having them bear witness to graphic violent documentation. "You showed us!" Diti shouts at Onyesonwu. "You showed us the West. Who could just sit there after seeing that?" (Okorafor 2010, 225). It is through this narrative of coercion that Diti and Fanasi justify their departure from the quest, leaving only a note behind. They are afraid to die for a cause they feel unconnected to still. How are readers supposed to interpret this leaving—this place where radical honesty and informed consent diverge. Onyesonwu feels betrayed. But, Diti and Fanasi share in their note that the "journey has changed [them] forever, for the better" (313). They will "take news" back to Jwahir and "hope to hear great stories" in return (313). They find roles in the movement as social justice storytellers, helping to make the weight of truth undeniable.

In Toni Morrison's 2015 essay "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear," she honors the necessary role that artists play "in times of dread," arguing that: "We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal" (n.p.). Although Fanasi and Diti leave their peers, they leave changed and believing that new ways of being in the world are possible. I have to see Fanasi's and Diti's transformation, the change they affirm they experience, as evidence that Onyesonwu's collectivist project is working. In the background, her mother Najeeba too is helping "civilizations heal" (Morrison 2015, n.p.). She is traveling across the Seven Kingdoms "whispering the news" about an "*Ewu* sorceress" who "will end their suffering," reigniting an energy to hope that had long been shaken (Okorafor 2010, 341). Truth and hope and storytelling ignite small cultural shifts in attitude and affect that are just outside of Onyesonwu's view, which is rightly and directly aimed at Durfa and Daib. But it is important, just as important, that grassroots, collectivist change has already begun to bloom.

Priority 3: Transnational Pleasure Practices

I began this essay by emphasizing the surprising centrality of pleasure in a novel that imagines alternative futures to weaponized rape-genocide. While the emphasis on pleasure is present quietly amidst the scenes I have analyzed, it is during their journey to the Seven Kingdoms and stay with the Red People that the possibilities and futures that Onyesonwu can imagine flourish. The Red People's gender equity, consensual polyamory, and focus on indulgence, rather than abstinence, inspire Onyesonwu. Their intimate entanglements provide her with, for the first time, a wholly different life than the one she has known. I read her stay with the Red People as her first immersive experience with pleasure politics. Onyesonwu becomes a transnational bricoleur who gathers lessons from the social worlds around her and uses them practically to build her radical imagination.

The Red People, or the Vah, reside in Ssolu, a traveling village which remains protected by a juju conjured dust storm. The leaders, Chieftess Sessa and Chief Usson, are not married to each other, but lead on equal terms and have separate families and children by multiple partners. Juju is normalized even for the most ordinary tasks. Onyesonwu says they "were the most beautiful people" she had ever seen and their food was "the most delicious" (Okorafor 2010, 256, 262). In complete contrast to Jwahir's culture of abstinence, deception, and control, the people of Ssolu value and practice indulgence. As one young man, Ssun, clarifies: "[i]n Ssolu, we follow our urges" (270). The casualness of sex among the Vah disrupts Onyesonwu's socialized morals. "*What kind of norms and rules do these people have?*" she initially wonders (italics in original, 270). "Everyone seemed to be having intercourse with everyone. Even Eyess wasn't of Chieftess Sessa's husband's blood" (270). Onyesonwu finds calm with the Vah. She says that "[l]iving with the Vah people was odd," but that she "loved these people. [She] was welcome here" (271). She even wonders: "*What would I have been like if I grew up here?*" (italics in original, 272).

While the Red People "weren't perfect," they valued mutual accountability as part of their egalitarian commitments (Okorafor 2010, 316). Even young female sorceress Ting was instructed to correct her mentor Ssaiku when he misspoke from a place of bias—demonstrating a commitment to societal change, rather than stagnation, that cannot be overstated. Readers see what this looks like in practice when Ssaiku first meets Onyesonwu, who he openly admits was not who he pictured was capable of changing the world. "You're both so strange to look at" he plainly tells Onyesonwu and Mwita (263). "I know Nuru and I know Okeke. The *Ewu*-born make no sense to my eyes" (263). But Ting laughs at Ssaiku, a subtle form of social censure, and tells him that he's "doing it again" (263). Although Ssaiku is "annoyed," he admits that his "student is right," modeling accountability (263). Ting tells Onyesonwu that while the men are old, "it's changing" (319). There is a fluidity here, a form of intergenerational mentorship across gender that travels both top-down and bottom-up.

Onyesonwu and her comrades stay with the Vah for three weeks—the longest they join any community beyond Jwahir. It is while with the Vah that Onyesonwu completes her initiation as a sorceress and discovers yet another new world. Onyesonwu is prompted into the Wilderness by a masquerade and flies to a lush, verdant, vastness by her mother who has shape shifted into a Kponyungo, a fire spitter. For the first time, she experiences a place that "[f]rom horizon to horizon" had ground that "was alive with dense high leafy trees" (Okorafor 2010, 286). Onyesonwu marvels: "*Is this even possible? … Does this place really exist?*" (italics in original, 286). Onyesonwu "drink[s] in the beauty" of the scene, in accordance with Cyril's instructions for developing a pleasure practice, which instills in her a "deep sense of hope" (287). If "a forest" in the middle of desert "still existed someplace, even if it was very very far away, then all would not

end badly. It meant there was life *outside*" the stories found in "*the Great Book*" (italics in original, 287). Onyesonwu is constantly coming to the edges of her radical imagination and unlearning the social indoctrination of the Great Book. Seeing this luxe builds her confidence that new ways of living were possible and that even the land around her can heal and transform.

The entire novel is a speculation on what it takes to eradicate the perceivably irreparable and inherited harm of ethnic conflict and gender violence. How does one transform hatred that has become entrenched? Training with the Vah arms Onyesonwu with literal and figurative growth. Not only does she complete her magical initiation in Ssolu, but I believe the way the Vah are with each other provides her with an index for what mutual accountability, space to consent or refuse, and the right to experience pleasure can look like in practice. Onyesonwu and her comrades ethically face the violence they know is occurring. They allow, even force, themselves to accept this truth. And while there is enormous pain in their work, staying with the Vah shows Onyesonwu that pleasure too can exist—may even be the purpose they have been striving to ignite.

Conclusion

Nearly four hundred pages build toward the moment when, on an island, in a hut, in front of a "thin but tough" book, Onyesonwu places her hands on a page that "felt hotter than the rest" and revised the "sick[ness]" that had been inscribed (Okorafor 2010, 376). The Nsibidi script Ting etched into Onyesonwu's hand "drippled down into the book" as Onyesonwu sang (376). The creativity and talents of two female sorceresses provide repair. This is a beautifully transformative image that shows the potential even for "sick books" to be repaired (376). Fanasi and Diti have already left to Jwahir. Binta dies by stoning and impromptu mob violence. Mwita dies protecting Onyesonwu, as was foretold and through his fully informed consent. Luyu—who is "the only one who could make" Onyesonwu laugh, signaling the centrality of pleasure and joy in their relationship—is with her until the end and given a kind of hero's death (289). Without magical abilities, Luyu learns to be resourceful and a bricoleur herself. She protects Onyesonwu with the only tools she has: her unquestioned beauty and impudence. A mob of men who are under Daib's spell try to prevent Onyesonwu from healing the Great Book, and Luyu protects both Onyesonwu and the possibilities of a different future on feminist terms. Onyesonwu observes that "Luyu was beautiful and strong. I think I heard her laugh and say, 'Come on, then!'" (376). Luyu's brazenness prompts a reader to sit in awe, rather than pity, of Luyu during the scene of violence that unfolds—a vital detail for ethically representing violence against women in African contexts especially. Ultimately, she is "torn apart" by a hoard of men while still assuring Onyesonwu that she'll "hold them off" (375). With equal impudence, having trained to not fear death and accept even impossible truths, Onyesonwu simply gets to work, saying: "I don't recall hearing her scream. I was busy" (376).

Onyesonwu remains a surprising, uncompromising feminist warrior capable of enacting change outside the scripts available. But, she must train her imagination in order to even conceive feminist futures as possible. This isn't work she is capable of doing in isolation. She acts in coalition with young people who also live just outside the script of social norms and expectations, which prepares them to challenge, rather than reproduce, the status quo. Lisa Dowdall argues that "[t]he conclusion of *Who Fears Death?* is ambiguous" (2013, 13). And while Okorafor does present two different consecutive endings, it would be a mistake to read them as unclear. In the first, all that Onyesonwu had been fated to achieve and experience comes true.

She is captured on the island after having repaired the Great Book, incarcerated, and dies by stoning. In this version, she reflects that "[c]hange takes time and [she'd] run out of it" (Okorafor 2010, 378). The men who dragged her to prison were "too blind to see what had begun to happen"—small shifts all around (378). Onyesonwu says that: "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*" (378).

But, there is another ending—an imaginative rewriting beyond even what has been foretold. Sola, Aro, and Najeeba narrate "Chapter 1 Rewritten" together, signaling a move away from Jwahir's social isolationist stance rooted in fear toward a collectivist future rooted in revision. Here, proud, feminist Onyesonwu emphatically declares that "she was *not* a sacrifice to be made," contesting the reductive cultural scripts which limit women only to motherhood and martyrdom (italics in original Okorafor 2010, 385). "She was Onyesonwu. She had rewritten the Great Book. All was done" (385). Sola comments cheekily and directly: "Is it not understandable that she'd want to *live* in the very world she helped remake? That indeed is a more logical destiny;" but "something must be written before it can be *rewritten*" (383).

Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha document the "stories and strategies" of ordinary people trying community-led responses to harm and violence so that we can learn practical lessons and make transformative justice accessible (Okorafor 2010, 10). Although Nnedi Okorafor isn't restrained by the practical, she still offers lessons for ending cycles of violence which have become ordinary. Speculative fiction can activate our imaginations to dream feminist futures, rather than limit ourselves to what may feel already scripted. *Who Fears Death?* concludes with Sola, Aro, and Najeeba rehearsing a common wisdom that had been told to Onyesonwu as a child: all "things are fixed;" even fate "is fixed like brittle crystal in the dark" (Okorafor 2010, 56). It's a curious saying—landing almost like a riddle. I argue that readers are lured into believing that Onyesonwu's fate had been fixed. She was foretold to upend the conflict, and the quest narrative invites readers to witness her adventure. But, that isn't the lesson. "Chapter 1 Rewritten" showcases social change processes as revision, by re-writing a future possibility beyond what even Onyesonwu "knew." Depicting social change as a second draft may feel more possible during those times of dread during which radical imaginations are intentionally weakened as a weapon of war. It's a next step, an edit. It honors the work of ancestors and elders, not through statically clinging to their vision, but by participating in revising that vision to fit the present. In fact, as the elders envision Onyesonwu flying to the green lands as a Kponyungo, they revise the aphorism: "Ah, but fate was cold and brittle" (385). Onyesonwu has broken what had always been fragile. Hers is not an Africanist feminism tasked with forsaking tradition, but rather with activating a collective power that can reshape traditions. Onyesonwu frees herself, while allowing people time to adapt to "the wave of change" to occur (386).

Notes

1. At the 45th annual meeting of the African Literature Association, Tsitsi Dangarembga describes this famous first line as the first symptom of Tambu's "nervous condition," since she prioritizes individual achievement over community and family. I list it here still to honor the tension that lies at the heart of Tambu's feminist, anticolonial struggle.

2. Ouida Book's Nigerian edition of Who Fears Death? also includes a front cover endorsement from Nawal El Saadawi, further linking Okorafor and el Saadawi as part of a shared imagined community of writers.

3. In "Nnedi Okorafor on Her Personal Apocalypse and Why She Writes About Abnormalities," Okorafor relishes in the rehumanization she ascribes outsiders. She confirms: "Outcasts, freaks, the disfigured, the grotesquely enhanced [...] I write their narratives" (2011, n.p.).

4. In *Pleasure Activism,* brown describes radical honesty as "learning to speak from our root systems about how we feel and what we want" (2019, 61). Her 2017 blog post, "living through the unveiling," links radical honesty to transformative social action. She urges readers to "increase our collective tolerance for truth. this means we must learn how to hold the full breadth of emotions we feel upon hearing the truth, and to keep listening, changing, taking action, learning. we must be willing to look at what actually needs to happen to address the truth" (n.p.).

5. At just four months old, bi-ethnic Onyesonwu was stoned by a mob who went to great lengths to extinguish verification of the conflict. While in the Okeke town of Diliza to buy medicine, Najeeba "found herself facing a wall of people. Mostly men" (2010, 27). The mob called her a "Nuru concubine" and an "Ewu carrier" before accosting her and Onyesonwu (28).

6. In *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century,* editor and disability justice scholar and advocate, Alice Wong, argues that storytelling "can become a movement for social change" (2020, xviii). Social justice storytelling is distinct from "storytelling" in that it clearly links a story to social action.

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