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The Persistence of the Past into the Future: Indigenous Futurism and Future Slave Narratives as Transformative Resistance in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*

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The Persistence of the Past into the Future: Indigenous Futurism and Future Slave Narratives as
Transformative Resistance in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

by

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of authors have written science fiction works that express the concerns and experiences of marginalized people groups, including those in postcolonial societies, Indigenous/First Nations peoples, and other racial minorities. These works provide counter narratives to that of much canonical science fiction, which developed from narrative forms that often explicitly and implicitly supported colonial ideologies, and still often includes these ideologies today. This thesis analyzes the way *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) by the Nigerian-American speculative fiction author Nnedi Okorafor uses a combination of the forms of Indigenous futurism and what Isiah Lavender terms meta-slavery narratives in order to challenge the hegemonic ideologies of Western science fiction. Through the fictional LifeGen Technologies, Okorafor draws attention to the continuation of the racist ideologies that informed slavery and colonialism into today's systems, thus highlighting the modern exploitation of people of color. The character of Phoenix provides an example of ways to resist hegemonic ideologies, such as community, self-definition, and non-Western ways of viewing the world.

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Introduction

The work of Nnedi Okorafor, a Naijamerican speculative fiction author, has begun to attract much attention among fans of speculative fiction, literary theorists, and the wider public. Her novels and short stories appeal to a variety of audiences, drawing as they do on many different genres and traditions such as science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, postcolonial literature, young adult fiction, Afrofuturism, feminism, folklore, and more. She is one of a growing number of authors who use speculative fiction to resist racist ideologies that are present both in speculative fiction and the real world by imagining futures and alternative worlds that are infused with a postcolonial perspective. Postcolonial literature is written by those who were formerly under European imperial control and explores issues facing postcolonial peoples in the aftermath of colonization and the process of decolonization, such as identity, hybridity, cultural values, and continued neocolonial influence. The “post” in postcolonial is somewhat misleading, as many nations are still controlled to an extent by Western economic and cultural power. The outright military control of colonies has been replaced by neocolonialism, or control of a developing country through the use of capitalism, globalization, and cultural imperialism, and hegemony, or control by means of the ruling class making the status quo that benefits them seem natural and beneficial to all classes. Hegemony functions by winning consensus, not by overt force. In order to gain popular consent, hegemony “cannot be constructed or sustained on *one* front of struggle alone (for example, the economic)” (Hall “Gramsci’s Relevance” 424). It must instead create a “system of alliances” by gaining consent in multiple arenas (425). Stuart Hall points out that “[p]opular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged...It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (“Deconstructing” 453). Thus, popular forms such as speculative fiction are one of the sites where battles over politics, power, identity, meaning, and representation are being fought.

Speculative fiction is particularly well-suited as a site of counterhegemonic discourse for three reasons. First, Western/white speculative fiction's long history (and sometimes present) of reinforcing hegemonic colonial/racist ideologies means that many generic elements that have been used to support colonialism, such as the colonization of other planets and the treatment of artificial humans (as discussed by John Rieder, Isiah Lavender, Paul David Lee, and others) can be subverted and transformed to portray post-colonial ideologies. Second, the defamiliarization caused by fantastic elements allows speculative fiction authors to re-envision common social issues. For example, *Kiln People* (2002) by David Brin is set in a future with disposable clay "dittos" that are short-lived duplicates of their creators, used for menial jobs, sexual pleasures, or anything else their creators desire. Brin uses what Darko Suvin terms the "cognitive estrangement" caused by this setting to create an unfamiliar fictional category of beings as stand-ins for a real-life group. Readers can thus find themselves sympathizing with an oppressed group without the intervening filter of prejudice. Third, the fantastic elements of speculative fiction are sometimes a better way of describing the lived experiences of people of color than the conventions of realist literature allow. For example, some authors use science fiction tropes such as aliens and cyborgs as the most emotionally truthful representation of their experiences of alienation, hybridity, and otherness.

Science fiction (sf) in particular has a history of complicity in colonial ideologies. Western sf arose from a number of different narrative forms (such as utopian and satirical fantasies, generally told as imaginary voyages; future war stories; and disaster stories), many of which were used to celebrate scientific and technological progress, explicitly or implicitly arguing for the superiority of Western civilization and supporting British colonialism, such as the lost race adventure novels by Sir H. Rider Haggard. These themes carried forward into much sf through the motif of colonization, both the colonization of other planets by humans and the

colonization of humans by aliens, and through artificial humans functioning as racial metaphors, as analyzed by John Rieder, Isiah Lavender, and others. Given the strong association of canonical sf with colonialism, its use by postcolonial authors runs the risk of being seen as implicitly supporting colonialism. Author Nalo Hopkinson describes being confronted with this question in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming* (2004) when a friend asks her thoughts on Audre Lorde's argument that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 112, emphasis removed). Hopkinson relates, "Much of the folklore on which I draw is European. Even the form in which I write is European...To be a person of color writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization" (7). After reflecting on her rewrite of "Little Red Riding Hood" in a Jamaican setting, she decides that in her hands, "massa's tools don't dismantle massa's house...they build [her] a house of [her] own" (8). Thus, Hopkinson calls for "stories that take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things" (9). This is a strategy discussed by Bill Ashcroft in *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001). Ashcroft argues that oppositional resistance merely reverses the binary myth of colonialism that posits an inherent, essential difference between colonizer and colonized, the civilized and uncivilized, white and black, Western and non-Western. On the other hand, transformative resistance, such as that employed by Hopkinson and Okorafor, avoids reinforcing the binary myth by "taking the array of influences exerted by the dominating power, and altering them into tools for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being" (20). What Hopkinson calls for are stories that enact transformative resistance in the genre of sf, using a tool of the dominating power to express

a postcolonial identity. Okorafor performs this transformative resistance by writing sf that centers the voices and experiences of people of color and critiques the racism present in much canonical sf and in real-world systems.

One of the reasons sf is particularly suited to be a site of transformative resistance is its ability to envision possibilities. Sf imagines possible futures, different possible pasts, even possible parallel dimensions. The infinite possibilities available in sf are why it “speaks most clearly to those who are dissatisfied with the way things are,” according to Walter Mosley. How can one advocate for change unless one can imagine things being different? Mosley writes, “Science fiction...[has] been a main artery for recasting our imagination.” It is a genre “made to rail against the status quo,” a genre that “can tear down the walls and windows, the artifice and laws by changing the logic, empowering the disenfranchised, or simply by asking, What if?” (Mosley). The extrapolative aspect of sf is part of the cognitive estrangement created by the genre. Carl Freedman explains the term estrangement as “refer[ring] to the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the latter” (16-17). This “estranging critical interrogation” is how sf challenges hegemonic ideologies. The cognitive essence of the estrangement comes from sf’s ability to “account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections” between it and our reality (Freedman 17). Though fantasy and some other genres create estrangement, they lack the cognitive aspect of science fiction, which attempts to extrapolate logically from our reality. Genres such as supernatural fiction or magical realism function through radical breaks with reality, and are thus less overtly connected to real-world problems such as racism or misogyny. In science fiction, “the mundane status quo shared by author and reader is contrasted, while also connected, to a potential future that is indeed historically determinate (at least in literary effect)” (Freedman 54).

Thus, science fiction, by allowing us to conceptualize alternatives to the way things are that are nevertheless grounded to an extent in reality, can expose problems, advocate for social change, and inspire readers to make real changes.

Another way sf resists hegemonic ideologies is by providing a way to convey the emotional reality of experiences of alienation and oppression. Okorafor argues that sf is at times “the most accurate way of describing reality” (“Organic Fantasy” 279). Referencing a time when she visited a marketplace in the predominantly Muslim city of Abuja wearing baggy, knee-length shorts that were shocking to some of the men, Okorafor says, “When I record this incident on paper, I become an alien wearing attire that has the ability to stun civilians senseless and knock them off their feet...To describe myself as an actual alien in this Abuja market incident is to most clearly and honestly portray how I experienced it” (278). The expanded possibilities of sf enable authors to more fully express the extent of their emotional and mental experiences of othering than allowed by the conventions of mimetic fiction.

Okorafor’s fiction takes advantage of the counterhegemonic possibilities of speculative fiction, using elements of fantasy, science fiction, Afrofuturism, folklore, and more to give a voice to marginalized perspectives and critique hegemonic ideologies. In particular, *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) successfully enacts the transformative resistance described by Ashcroft on the genre of science fiction through a combination of the forms of Indigenous futurism and what Isiah Lavender terms meta-slavery narratives. In doing so, Okorafor draws attention to the continuity of the racial exploitation of slavery and colonialism in new forms such as medical abuses, the prison industrial complex, and the neocolonial control of multinational corporations. Her portrayal of a heroine who practices transformative resistance offers an alternative to the hegemonic narratives of canonical science fiction. Her work is a part of a significant group of authors (such as N.K. Jemisin, Nisi Shawl, Nalo Hopkinson, Andrea Hairston, Tananarive Due,

and others) who are increasing the representation of people of color and resisting the erasure of colonized peoples' voices in sf.

The first chapter of this thesis examines how *The Book of Phoenix* transformatively resists racism in science fiction through its combination of elements from Indigenous futurism and meta-slavery narratives. It begins by examining the presence of colonial ideologies in Western science fiction from its prehistory to current times, drawing on the work of John Rieder and Isiah Lavender. It then discusses how *The Book of Phoenix* enacts transformative resistance to colonialism in science fiction through the techniques of Indigenous futurism and the strategies of meta-slavery narratives, a concept developed by Lavender. The second chapter examines how Okorafor juxtaposes exploitative practices from different historical eras in the fictional LifeGen Technologies to draw attention to the fact that the oppression of antebellum slavery and colonialism continues in different forms today through neocolonialism, the prison industrial complex, and discriminatory medical practices. The near-future setting serves as a warning that these harmful practices will continue unless something is done to resist them. The final chapter explores the character of Phoenix as a model for resisting exploitation. Phoenix constructs a self-definition that rejects the controlling images of her that LifeGen attempts to force on her. Her self-definition, formed in the context of loving relationships and Igbo religion, allows her to fight back against LifeGen without fulfilling their design for her as a mere tool to be used. The apocalypse caused by Phoenix, especially read in combination with Okorafor's post-apocalyptic novels *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), emphasizes Okorafor's view that massive change on a global scale is needed to make meaningful progress against the current racially exploitative world order. Due to the scope of the project, his thesis is not a complete analysis of *The Book of Phoenix*. It touches very lightly, or not at all, on important themes such as gender issues, religious symbolism, Afrofuturism, and other aspects of the novel.

Chapter One: A Book of Many Genres: Elements of Science Fiction, Postcolonialism, and Slave Narratives in *The Book of Phoenix*

Nnedi Okorafor's novel *The Book of Phoenix* (2016) is a narrative that fits Nalo Hopkinson's call for stories that use the genre of science fiction (sf) in a counterhegemonic way. Okorafor performs this counterhegemonic use of sf by writing a novel that both embraces the genre through its use of sf elements such as a futuristic setting with technological advancements and challenges it by using elements of Indigenous futurism and meta-slavery narratives. Many recent genre theorists believe that "genres first and foremost provide frameworks within which texts are produced and interpreted" (Chandler 5), so examining the generic elements of *The Book of Phoenix* will clarify the novel's relationship to the different generic frameworks in which it was produced and will be interpreted. Also, as Chandler points out, "a genre...can be seen as embodying certain values and ideological assumptions [and] may also help to shape such values" (4, emphasis removed). Okorafor's novel employs generally accepted elements of sf, postcolonial and Indigenous literature, and slave narratives. These are not the only genre elements present in *The Book of Phoenix*, but they exert the most influence on the narrative. As the following chapters analyze ways in which Okorafor uses these genres to critique neocolonial powers and the continued exploitation of people of color (Chapter Two) and to explore methods of resisting this oppression (Chapter Three), this discussion provides a broad overview of relevant elements of these genres and locates the novel within these frameworks.

To begin, I will give a brief overview of sf's history of embodying colonialist values and ideologies in order to establish what is being resisted in Okorafor's challenges of the genre. Examples of colonial ideologies in sf will be drawn from the scholarship of John Rieder and Isiah Lavender. Okorafor joins other authors in writing postcolonial sf that appropriates genre tropes to give voice to the experiences of the colonized and post-colonize, particularly through

the position of Indigenous futurism discussed by Lynette James. *The Book of Phoenix* also uses elements of slave narratives in order to create what Lavender terms a meta-slavery narrative that critiques racism in sf and current neocolonial powers. Okorafor's combination of an Indigenous postcolonial perspective with an African America perspective results in a science fiction narrative that addresses issues important to both Africans and members of the diaspora.

SCIENCE FICTION, COLONIALISM, AND POSTCOLONIAL RESISTANCE

Sf's complicity in colonialism makes it a problematic genre for writers of color. Colonialism "is part of the genre's texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable" (Rieder 15). Many of the genre's tropes are based in "the fantastic appropriation and rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth in the homeland and in the colonies, the racist ideologies that enabled colonialist exploitation, and the cognitive impact of radical cultural differences on the home culture" (Rieder 20-21). Sf's connection to colonialism is widely recognized, but examining "precisely how and to what extent the stories engage colonialism" is vital for understanding sf's role in contributing to hegemonic ideologies (3). In order to understand how Okorafor transforms colonialist sf tropes into an expression of postcolonial identity, we must first delve into the specifics of the colonialist tropes that are being transformed. The colonialist sf tropes that Okorafor engages with in *The Book of Phoenix* are connected to the colonial gaze, scientific racism, exploitation, and the question of what it means to be human.

In postcolonial theory, the colonial gaze refers to the way colonizers view other peoples through the lens of European superiority and centrality. The colonized were represented by the colonial powers through sensationalized first-person travel stories, illustrations and documentary photographs, world fairs and museums, cartography, and other methods. These contained

distorted, stereotyped representations of native populations and positioned the colonized as objects to be observed and understood by the rational, scientifically-minded Europeans. The colonial gaze, Rieder writes, “distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at” (7). This strongly influenced many of the narrative forms that are part of sf’s prehistory. Rieder uses the example of lost-race fiction to illustrate this. Most lost-race fiction includes one or more of three scientific features: “maps, ethnographies, and the gathering of specimens” (54). These features place “the reader in a position of command over the history and expanse of the territory being explored” (56). The scientific narrators of these tales approach the natives from a standpoint of being able to understand and explain their society better than the natives can, due to their superior scientific knowledge and civilized background. The presence of maps, ethnographies, and observing or collecting specimens continue forward into sf, where they occur on different planets rather than isolated locations on Earth. Sf heroes are often scientists or members of the military (or both) exploring new worlds, looking for colonizable planets or usable resources. They are positioned as being able to categorize, define, and understand the places and peoples they come across due to their rational, scientific, Eurocentric mindset. These heroes are most often white and/or Western, or, if people of color, only nominally connected to any sort of ethnic identity, which reinforces the Eurocentrism of colonial ideology.

The colonial gaze is intertwined with scientific racism, which is the view that race is a biological construction and that different races fit into a hierarchy of superiority. In *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (2017), Curtis Keim and Carolyn Somerville point to “the Enlightenment, the scientific and industrial revolutions, and the resulting global revolutions in trade and conquest” as contributing to racist views in the West (42). These shifted European attitudes towards “domination rather than conversion or

understanding” of other cultures (42). Scientific discourse and theories of evolution led Westerners to believe “that if humans had evolved, presumably from apes, some humans had evolved more than others,” and that “white, upper-class, northern European males” were the most evolved (45). As such, Africans were viewed as primitive, either living precursors to the more evolved whites or a race on a different evolutionary line that had not evolved as much as that of the whites. Rieder links this to the presence of anachronism in lost-race fiction, such as humans and dinosaurs coexisting, which he calls the narrative form’s “strongest influence on the emergence of science fiction” (52). Through anachronisms, “the living anthropological traces of the past that are thought to remain visible in colonial settings bring to life the geological ones as well” (52-53). Lost-race fiction thus “makes explicit the paradigmatic basis of colonial expeditionary science in general by viewing the [lost race] primarily as a living record of ‘our’ own past” (58), positioning European societies as more advanced and civilized, thereby giving them the “right” or “burden” of attempting to “civilize” the “backward” colonies. This attitude carries forward into sf in visions of the future of human evolution. For example, in *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by H.G. Wells, the Martians are explicitly compared to the European colonization of Tasmania. Rieder points out that this comparison works “not just because [the Martians] are arrogant colonialists invading a technologically inferior civilization, but also because, with their hypertrophied brains and prosthetic machines, they are a version of the human race’s own future” (5).

The colonial gaze and scientific racism were used to justify and support the exploitation of colonized subjects. They positioned the colonized as objects to be used and as backwards, savage, remnants of Europeans’ evolutionary history. This ideology let Europeans “behave under the assumption that the [racial] other is a grotesque parody of humankind” (Rieder 30). Europeans thus argued that they had the right, the duty, even the burden, of using the resources

of these “subhumans” and bringing civilization to them. This encouraged the exploitation of natural resources, supported by the “trope of inexhaustible natural abundance that is so basic to colonial ideology...[and] the peculiar colonial opportunity to get something from virtually nothing” (Rieder 50). This shows up in narrative tropes of lost-race fiction, in which explorers are able to gain staggering wealth from the “enormous mineral wealth” of the lost lands because the natives “have not yet been integrated into the European system of commodity exchange” (50), a situation based on the reality of contact between real European colonizers and indigenous populations. These tropes carry forward into sf tales of exploitation, displaced onto different planets and different species. A common theme in sf is the search for new habitable planets to be colonized after the resources of Earth (or, if the colonizers are aliens, their home world) have been exhausted. Some of these stories position the colonizers as brave heroes struggling against a frightening wilderness in order to provide for those who sent them, a common view of European colonizers. And while some Western authors do use these tropes to critique colonialism, they most often still write from a Eurocentric viewpoint that positions European beliefs as superior.

Another way the positioning of colonized subjects as subhuman and thus acceptable to exploit influences sf is in the common sf theme of exploring what makes one a human. This question in sf most often comes from the combination of humans and technology rather than the racial genesis of the question in colonial discourse. Rieder points out that the concept of race functions to “[naturalize] the division between civilization and savagery” (110). In sf, the division is created by the motif of artificial humans (111). Though Rieder touches on this motif, Isiah Lavender’s *Race in American Science Fiction* covers it more extensively and draws on more recent works. In the chapter “Technologically Derived Ethnicities,” Lavender explains that “the integration of various technologies with humanity...produces new ethnic forms out of men, women, and machines, i.e. artificial people and post-humans” (189). He categorizes artificial

people as AIs, robots, and androids; and post-humans as cyborgs and clones (191). The fears and prejudices surrounding artificial people and post-humans in science fiction are analogous to those relating to race and ethnicity. Such people are a new kind of “Other,” ones who may have goals and desires different from, perhaps even hostile to, “regular” humans. Many sf stories feature artificial people or post-humans being used as the equivalent of slaves. Lavender especially compares androids, who are often believed to be mere machines without souls, to historical views of “African slaves who were thought not to have souls” (200). For example, part of the racist ideology surrounding slavery was the view of black bodies as “natural machines” (Lavender 54). The experience of slavery involved alienation, dehumanization, and control. These real experiences can be “imagined in technological forms of bondage or captivity” in sf (54). For example, Lavender argues that with his three laws of robotics, Isaac Asimov “is refashioning the slave codes that subjugated blacks while he serves a progressive philosophy based on the assumption that technological consciousness can be denied free will because it is inherently inferior,” an assumption that resembles the historical “sense that African slaves did not possess wills and were therefore not human” (61). Lavender also points out that Asimov’s view of robots as the perfect servants resembles “the antebellum South’s myth of a happy darkie—a primitive, childlike worker without a soul, incapable of much thought—cared for by the benevolent and wise master” (62). As such, racist ideology that justifies the exploitation of people of color is reinforced and normalized through Asimov’s stories, and others like them, that treat artificial humans and post-humans as a type of racial others that exist to serve “regular” humans and can be a threat if not controlled. Similarly, many sf stories also include fears of artificial people or post-humans passing as “regular” humans, which “raises issues of racial purity reminiscent of miscegenation, passing, and the one-drop rule” (201). Though many sf authors envision a future in which racial differences are no longer a subject of prejudice, their

visions of the future nevertheless reinscribe “aspects of ethnicity or race...on instances of difference in a technologized and superscience future” despite there being “no reason for this reinscription beyond our apparent need or weakness for ethnic mapping as a basis of hierarchical relationships” (190). Thus, even authors who attempt to combat racism through the creation of future societies that are no longer racist often end up reinforcing racist ideologies through their treatment of artificial humans and post-humans.

Despite the presence of racist ideologies in sf from its prehistory through today, Okorafor and a number of other authors, from the giants of twentieth century black sf, Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, to more recent authors such as Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemison, Tobias Buckell, Nisi Shawl, and others, are able use sf to express marginalized identities and to critique racist and neocolonialist ideologies. These authors reverse the colonial gaze in a much more meaningful way than many authors, such as H.G. Wells, Kim Stanley Robinson, and others, who attempt to critique colonialism but nevertheless write from a Western perspective that. Okorafor’s *The Book of Phoenix* is a recent example of this method of using sf in a counterhegemonic way. Phoenix, who narrates her own tale, brings a postcolonial perspective to the novel. She was made by LifeGen Technologies as a military experiment from the DNA of multiple Africans. Her genetic make-up aligns her in multiple ways with colonized people, as she is biologically descended from people groups who were colonized and, like many African Americans, has ancestors from various places in Africa rather than being connected to a specific people group. She struggles with the postcolonial experience of alterity, having been treated by LifeGen as a tool rather than a person. Her status as a speciMen gives her a combination of human and non-human characteristics, a hybridity that causes her to have difficulty identifying with unmodified humans. By making Phoenix the narrator, Okorafor combats the erasure of colonized peoples’ voices in Eurocentric sf. Phoenix gives an inside view of the experiences of

those “on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere” (Hopkinson 7), an inside view informed by Okorafor’s personal experiences as a Nigerian-American. Okorafor also counters Western sf’s common view of scientific knowledge as the most important, perhaps even only, way to understand the world by including fantastic elements that cannot be explained scientifically. Phoenix realizes the limits to LifeGen’s understanding when she reads the records about her origin, which do not mention anything about her growing wings. “They didn’t predict that,” she says to herself. “They hadn’t really predicted anything. They just let themselves think they did” (147). Though Phoenix was created by scientists, she has abilities beyond what they intended or imagined. Okorafor shows that traditional scientific knowledge, often upheld in Western societies as the most complete and rational way of knowing, is not perfect. The presence of magical elements emphasizes the limitations of science and includes alternative, indigenous ways of knowing. This mixing of genres is “especially useful for the expression of postcolonial concerns because...it allows [authors] to morph [sf] into something new that beautifully represents the real-life hybridity that these authors experience and want to portray” (Lee 24).

Okorafor’s postcolonial sf aligns with an intersectional approach termed Indigenous futurism, described by Lynette James in “Children of Change, Not Doom: Indigenous Futurist Heroines in YA” as an approach that “share[s] elements with YA dystopia, postcolonial sf and Afrofuturism” but “incorporates Native/Indigenous concepts of community, power, and responsibility” (James 151). Though *The Book of Phoenix* is more adult fiction than YA, its relationship to sf and mainstream dystopias is comparable to the relationship discussed by James. James argues that the intersectional position of Indigenous futurism provides alternative narrative options that include the perspectives of people of color, in contrast to mainstream YA dystopias that “tend to imagine ethnically and culturally monolithic landscapes of bewildered

have-nots with no recourse to changing their station beyond massive, almost arbitrary violence that dismantles what few (if unequal) social structures remain” (151). *The Book of Phoenix*, like other Indigenous futurist novels, shares many features of mainstream YA dystopias, but often uses them in transformatively resistant ways that arise from the author’s Indigenous perspective. For example, most YA dystopias feature a “single, close-perspective narrator with a distinct or ‘unusual’ name” (157). Indigenous futurist novels use this narrative voice (such as Phoenix), but in doing so with ethnic protagonists, they also subvert the genre expectations of a white/Western protagonist. This resists the history of erasure of Indigenous voices both in the real world and in fiction. Indigenous futurism also combats the history of entire cultures being silenced by subverting the YA dystopia convention of focusing on characters living in the aftermath of some type of disaster “without much regard for the history they are inheriting, or the reasons they must inherit it” (158-9). James points out that, in contrast, the heroines of Indigenous futurist dystopias “cannot be casually ignorant of the circumstances that led to the collapse of major governmental, social, or environmental systems and created the worlds they inhabit” because Indigenous peoples do not “have the privilege to ignore” the historical forces that continue to affect their lives (159). These stories acknowledge the fact that society must remember and understand its past in order to make real progress. *The Book of Phoenix* reveals exactly what the circumstances of the global collapse are. Phoenix causes the apocalypse that leads to the dystopian, post-apocalyptic settings of *The Shadow Speaker* and *Who Fears Death*, and the reader is made privy to the specific reasons she causes this global destruction. Phoenix, whose name signifies life coming from death, explicitly frames her actions as a means of “wiping the slate clean” so that society can rebuild with the opportunity to do better. This cyclical view of time, of endings also being beginnings, rather than the linear view of Western cultures, aligns with many Indigenous cultures’ understanding of time. Thus, the endings of Indigenous futurist

novels are also new beginnings: “Life continues, connected to both the past and the future, complicated by old rivalries and fears, and bolstered by the hope of more deliberate action. Communities *are* relationships, problematic as well as healthy, and are only static when they are no more” (172).

THE BOOK OF PHOENIX AND META-SLAVERY NARRATIVES

The Book of Phoenix also functions as a counterhegemonic sf story through its status as what Isiah Lavender terms a meta-slavery narrative. These types of tales combine science fiction with the tradition of slave narratives, which were written to reveal the terrible nature of slavery and illustrate the humanity of the narrators, and neo-slave narratives, which are more modern novels that use speculative fiction elements to convey the full truth and lasting ramifications of slavery. This combination provides an alternative vision of the future from that of dominant sf conventions and expands the definition of slavery to include other forms of exploitation and control. Okorafor’s use of meta-slavery narrative elements adds an African diasporic perspective to the Indigenous and postcolonial perspective explored above. The novel critiques both neocolonialism and racism in the United States through this combination. To more deeply understand how *The Book of Phoenix* functions as a meta-slavery narrative, it is important to situate it in relation to the history of slave and neo-slave narratives.

Some of the earliest slave narratives were written by freemen who had been born in Africa, were enslaved, and later achieved freedom. These narratives chronicled the narrators’ lives prior to enslavement and their subsequent captivity, using the contrast between the two times to highlight the narrators’ common humanity with the white audience and the horrors of slavery. By the mid nineteenth century, the number of African-born narrators had significantly decreased due to the abolition of the African slave trade in 1807. Unfortunately, this did not

cause a decline in slavery, since those born to slave mothers were deemed slaves from birth. Thus, slave narratives continued to be written, shifting to narrators who were born into slavery in America and escaped to freedom. These antebellum narratives developed into a highly formulaic genre as they had the same goals and operated under the same constraints. James Olney, describing slave narratives, writes, “The theme is the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it; the content is a series of events and descriptions that will make the reader see and feel the realities of slavery; and the form is a chronological, episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion” (53).

To convince readers of “the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it,” the narratives first had to convince readers of the truth of the narrative. This was done through the inclusion of engraved portraits, claims that the narrative was “written by himself,” testimonials or introductions written by a white friend or editor that assert the narrative is the “unvarnished” truth, and documents such as bills of sale, newspaper items, etc. (Olney 50-51). Toni Morrison points out that the writers also had “to appear as objective as possible – not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names” (87). The narratives were subject to attacks that they were exaggerated accounts being used as propaganda, so methods of attesting to the true, objective nature of the narratives were essential.

Though the genre of slave narratives gave voice to the experiences of enslaved persons, the necessity of having to appeal to white sponsors and a white audience hampered the ability of the narrators to fully express themselves. Olney explains that, while a few of the narratives truly were written by the ex-slaves themselves, most of them were highly influenced by or even outright written by white editors or amanuenses, as evidenced by rhetorical features of the texts. For example, referring to the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, Olney writes, “And indeed for every fact there are pages of self-conscious, self-gratifying, self-congratulatory philosophizing

by Charles Stearns, so that if there is any life here at all it is the life of that man expressed in his very own overheated and foolish prose” (58). The voice of the ex-slave narrators was thus sometimes almost completely hidden by white voices that took control of the narrative. Another factor constraining the narration of ex-slaves was the necessity of “shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it” (Morrison 91). Because of these constraints, “they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe” (91). Though the narratives were intended to convince readers of the truly awful nature of slavery, the writers were unable to express the full extent of the realities of slavery, as that would offend the sensibilities of the readers. After the abolition of slavery, new types of autobiographical accounts were written by blacks. Though these had different purposes, they were highly indebted to slave narratives. Since they no longer needed to argue for the abolition of slavery, autobiographies written after the Civil War and into the early twentieth century instead “argued for full participation of black Americans in the new postwar society and therefore downplayed the past horrors of slavery” (Scott 7). Despite being written with more freedom than earlier slave narratives, these nevertheless were still largely aimed at a white audience, which kept them from fully relating the experiences of slavery.

The emergence of neo-slave narratives such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986) in the second half of the twentieth century occurred due to the “uncertain prospects confronting black racial politics in the post-Civil Rights period” (Dubey 781) and the recognition of the circumscribed nature of slave narratives caused by the need to appeal to a white audience. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3). Just as the early postbellum

narratives underwent changes from the older slave narrative forms, the neo-slave narratives were written with different purposes and in different social contexts. Neo-slave narratives seek to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” (Morrison 91), and to give voice to the full extent of the horrors of slavery. While many neo-slave narratives “remain committed to [the] task of historical restitution as they reinvent the lives of actual enslaved women who appear merely as passing references or footnotes in historical documents” (Dubey 782), others move from historical fiction to speculative fiction. By using fantastical elements, these narratives “overtly situate themselves against history, suggesting that we can best comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing” (784). These narratives connect the time of slavery with later times through devices such as time travel, supernatural possession, and hauntings, “obviously intend[ing] to reveal the persistence of the past in the present” (791). They challenge any notion that racial equality was fully achieved by the Civil Rights movement, using the juxtaposition of antebellum times with the late twentieth century to show the continuation of racial prejudice.

The combination of speculative fiction elements with slave narratives that occurs in neo-slave narratives occurs in a more future-oriented manner in what Isiah Lavender terms meta-slavery narratives. Sherryl Vint writes, “As much as realism is insufficient for representing African-American experience of the past, the dominant conventions of sf are insufficient for representing an African-American vision of the future” (246). Meta-slavery narratives imagine futures that expand the term “slavery” to “a range of abusive socioeconomic arrangements, including unpaid manual labor, sexual trafficking, reproductive exploitation, indentured servitude, and debt bondage” (Dubey 798). Some of the most well-known examples are *Parable of the Sower* (1992) and the Xenogenesis trilogy by Octavia Butler and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) by Samuel R. Delany. These narratives use the sf genre (as well as other

speculative fiction genres) to explore “notions of disempowerment, unconscious reflections of racism, and also direct confrontations of racist attitudes displayed in sf” (Lavender 88). Like neo-slave narratives, these works use conventions of slave narratives to comment on the present day. However, instead of the fictional historical accounts of neo-slave narratives, meta-slavery narratives critique the present day by “extrapolat[ing] and magnify[ing] current trends that are fostering novel practices of enslavement” (Dubey 799). Meta-slavery narratives take advantage of the cognitive estrangement of sf that allows writers to “[distance] our cultural memory of slavery by providing a reappraisal of the peculiar institution’s legacy through the future” (Lavender 56). The sf setting is a useful way to bypass readers’ knee-jerk reactions to topics such as racism and slavery. Sf also allows writers to meet “the challenge of imagining possible futures unbound by the racial scripts of the past” (Dubey 802).

The Book of Phoenix functions as a meta-slavery narrative by using sf to extrapolate from and critique current systems that can be compared to slavery such as neocolonialism, discriminatory medical practices, and the prison industrial complex. The novel contains many features of slave narratives. Lavender explains that “[m]eta-slavery cannot be understood without a historical understanding of slavery and its literature, because meta-slavery takes slavery’s conventions, such as violence, human chattel, and identity, as its subjects and goes beyond them by changing our understanding of them” (58). Phoenix’s narrative is paired with a frame story set far in the future, the narrator of which is a white man who testifies to the truth of Phoenix’s existence. The novel begins a poetic epigraph, aligning with slave narrative conventions. Just as slave narratives specified that they were “written by himself,” Phoenix begins her narrative saying, “I will create [a book about me] myself,” also asserting “[i]t is reliable” (6). Though Phoenix’s first sentence does not start with “I was born ...” like most slave narratives, she relates that she “was mixed, grown and finally birthed here on the 28th floor” (9) within the first few

pages, following the tradition of “specifying a place but not a date of birth” (Olney 50). Her account of her parentage is of necessity “sketchy” (Olney 50), as she was “constructed ... with materials of over ten Africans ... [and] DNA from Lucy the Mitochondrial Eve” (147). In place of descriptions of cruel slave owners and whippings, Phoenix tells of scientists conducting experiments on her. Instead of slave auctions separating families, there is LifeGen Technologies forcibly taking family members to their towers. Phoenix’s story involves multiple escapes of varying success. Her first attempt to escape is largely inspired by the supposed death of her lover Saeed, following the slave narrative convention of “the narrator’s decision to escape [being precipitated by] some sort of personal crisis, such as the sale of a loved one” (Andrews). She often escapes for a time but is eventually found by LifeGen. She takes a new last name while in Ghana, one given to her by the Ghanaians, who do not know her name. Just as the ex-slaves kept their “first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity” (Olney 51), Phoenix does not replace her name with the one given to her in Ghana, instead keeping her original name while recognizing her “new social identity as a free [wo]man” (Olney 51).

Through this connection between Phoenix and the subjects of slave narratives, Okorafor “allows readers to experience slavery and examine the painful social divisions it has created in our culture” and “help[s] us realize how and why racisms rip and tear the fabric of society” (Lavender 60). Through Phoenix, readers who have experienced the continuation of racism and oppression from slavery to the present see their struggle reflected in a character who fights back. Readers who have not experienced similar forms of oppression gain insight into how the painful process of racial oppression works and are alerted to the real-life racist systems that function today. The science-fictional elements of *The Book of Phoenix* create a cognitive estrangement that can help readers approach these issues with more open minds and that can help readers comprehend reality in ways that mimetic fiction cannot.

CONCLUSION

Using the strategy described by Bill Ashcroft as transformative resistance and by Nalo Hopkinson as using massa's tools to build one's own house, Okorafor has written a novel that, through the combination of Indigenous futurism and meta-slavery narratives, gives voice to historically silenced viewpoints and critiques systems that oppress people of color. This novel melds the progression of science fiction to include more diverse voices and the progression of slavery narratives to include speculative fiction elements, creating a narrative that takes advantage of cognitive estrangement of science fiction and the counterhegemonic discourse of African American and Indigenous literature. This combination allows *The Book of Phoenix* to appeal to a wide variety of audiences, from those who tend to read mostly science fiction, to those who tend to read mostly African American or postcolonial fiction, and others in between. The novel meaningfully reimagines the experiences of both African Americans who face the legacy of slavery and current racism in the United States, to the experiences of people in postcolonial Africa who must contend with the aftermath of colonization and current neocolonial and hegemonic influence of their nations, to the experiences of members of the diaspora who face aspects of both situations, providing a narrative that critiques the systems of oppression faced by these various groups, creates a space for marginalized perspectives to be heard, and portrays a powerful, resistant heroine to represent the strength and agency of oppressed groups.

Chapter Two -- “Modern Day Slavers!”: LifeGen Technologies as a Critique of Current Racist and Neocolonial Practices

In *The Book of Phoenix*, Nnedi Okorafor uses LifeGen Technologies to draw attention to and critique neocolonial corporate capitalist powers that exist today and their historical basis in slavery, racism in the United States, and colonialism. This is one of the techniques of Indigenous futurism, that of “connected history” (James 158). In contrast to mainstream YA dystopias, which often gloss over the exact nature of how the dystopian society came to be, Indigenous futurist dystopias feature characters who are aware of what caused the collapse that led to the dystopia they inhabit. James attributes this to the authors’ identity as ethnic minorities, writing, “The legacy of events and attitudes that created the very concepts of minority cultures and diasporas are never realities they have the privilege to ignore, as they continue to be part of their everyday lived experience” (159). She contrasts this to Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s description of sf as “lack[ing] the gravity of history, because it lacks the gravity of lived experience” (83). While Csicsery-Ronay Jr. argues that sf’s “represented futures incur no obligations” (83), James counters that Indigenous futurist stories “acknowledge difficult issues that impact contemporary readers even now, the ‘future history’ in the process of being written” (159). Based as they are in historical and present realities, the imagined futures of Indigenous dystopias *do* incur obligations for their readers, obligations to be aware of the historical processes that created the situations faced by people of color today and to be accountable for creating the future. Okorafor uses the layered historical parallels of LifeGen Technologies to reveal and critique the continuation of the racial exploitation of slavery and colonialism through contemporary unethical medical practices, the prison industrial complex, and neocolonialism.

MODERN DAY SLAVERS

Okorafor illustrates that the exploitative practices of modern global corporations are based in the same racist ideologies of slavery by linking LifeGen Technologies to multiple ways racism has functioned in society, beginning with slavery and colonialism. The most explicit linking of LifeGen to slavery is made by Vera, the woman chosen by LifeGen to give birth to Phoenix. Though Vera is not Phoenix's biological mother, she cares for Phoenix like a mother for the brief time they are together after Phoenix's birth. Two days after Phoenix was born, LifeGen took her away "without even allowing [Vera] to kiss [her] goodbye" (203). The separation causes Vera to go insane, and she is forced to go to the Triple Towers Correctional Facility. When Phoenix visits her, Vera rallies enough to talk to Phoenix briefly. She explains that she gave Phoenix her name and says, "I *held* you. They come back when they knew it was safe. Took you from me! They'd promised me I could raise you! That you'd be mine...They classified you as a 'dangerous non-human person'. That's how they justified taking you from me like that" (206-7). Vera makes the connection to slave auctions explicit when she calls LifeGen "[m]odern day slavers" (206). Olney lists an "account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them" as one of the firmly established conventions of slave narratives (51). LifeGen's classification of Phoenix as non-human is used as justification for treating her as property to be exploited and has roots in the dehumanization of people of color through the colonial gaze and scientific racism which justified the enslavement of Africans. LifeGen also references the international slave trade through their practice of abducting people to turn into speciMen, mostly from Africa: Saeed from Cairo, Mmuo from Nigeria, Kofi's family and others from Wulugu, Ghana, HeLa from India, and doubtless many, many more. They treat these people as property to be used however they want, not as people with rights. Like slavers, LifeGen rips people away from their families and

homelands in the name of progress and profits. Slavers changed free people into human chattel used as labor to make money for their owners. LifeGen changes regular humans into speciMen used as experiments to make money for the corporation. The explicit connection to slavery emphasizes the fact that racial exploitation has not disappeared. Through LifeGen, Okorafor shows that the capitalistic desire for profit that drove slavery continues in the exploitative practices of corporations today.

LifeGen's treatment of the speciMen recalls the harsh treatment of slaves and the practice of slave narratives relating the cruelty of slavery. For example, after Mmuo is abducted by LifeGen from Nigeria, they "peeled away all of his already special skin, injected it with some sort of sentient molecular shifting compound and then grafted it back on...without anesthesia" (145), a process which has striking similarities to historical accounts of slaves' skin being shredded by whippings. Phoenix learns from LifeGen's records that Kofi's father, sister, and brother "all died in Tower 1 of lead poisoning when the Big Eye tried to fuse their nerves with cybernetic limbs" (219). His mother was also taken to Tower 1 and died, though the records do not explain how. The apparently high death rate of the speciMen evokes the high death rate of the Middle Passage and the harsh conditions of plantation life. Phoenix also suffers repeated violent experiments at the hands of LifeGen. She remembers that "they would place me in a heated room and watch me sweat and wheeze for hours. In my second year of life, they started burning me. With hot needles, then larger broader instruments. On my face, belly, legs, arms, they burned every part of me. I knew the smell, sound and sight of my cooking flesh" (66). Phoenix's familiarity with "the smell, sound and sight of [her] cooking flesh" resembles slaves' familiarity with the smell, sound, and sight of harsh physical punishments.

These instances also have parallels with the use of slaves as subjects in medical experimentation. For example, LifeGen's experiments on Phoenix are strikingly similar to those

conducted on John Brown by Doctor Hamilton, who, in a search for a remedy for heat stroke, forced Brown to sit in a heated pit until he passed out. Hamilton found that cayenne-pepper tea worked best and made a large profit from selling pills that were to be dissolved in the tea as a remedy. Hamilton performed other experiment on Brown as well, such as blistering him in an attempt to find out how deep his black skin went (Brown 33-34). LifeGen's refusal to give Phoenix and Mmuo anesthesia recalls the experimental surgeries conducted by J. Marion Sims on female slaves without anesthesia (Spettel and White 2424). These two examples were not exceptional cases; many other exploitative experiments conducted on slaves have been documented. Through these parallels, Okorafor emphasizes that more recent examples of medical exploitation are based on the same racist ideologies that justified slavery.

BLACK PEOPLE DON'T GET ORGANS, THEY GIVE ORGANS

Okorafor critiques the persistence of racial exploitation in the more recent past and the present by connecting LifeGen to racist medical practices and the modern industrial prison complex. The speciMen created by LifeGen Technologies are based on centuries of unethical experimentation that has been done, and is still being done, on the bodies of people of color. The history and current reality of these experiments and discriminatory practices have been documented by a number of writers, including Harriet A. Washington in her extensively researched *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2007). The imprisonment of the speciMen in the towers and the use of their bodies for profit are based on the current high rates of incarceration of people of color and the forced labor of prisoners discussed in the essays "Racialized Mass Incarceration: Poverty, Prejudice, and Punishment" by Lawrence D. Bobo and Victor Thompson and "The Prison

Industrial Complex: A Modern Justification for African Enslavement?” by Chris Weaver and Will Purcell.

Okorafor explicitly connects LifeGen to a specific instance of medical exploitation through the character LifeGen named HeLa, who is housed in Tower 4. Much of LifeGen’s profit comes from her blood, which can make humans immortal. Without her consent, LifeGen has sold her blood to seven billionaires. HeLa tells Phoenix that she is “named...after Henrietta Lacks’ immortal cells” (186). These cells, labelled HeLa for the first two letters of Lacks’ first and last name, were taken from Lacks without her knowledge or consent during treatment for cervical cancer and were a huge breakthrough for research as they did not die after a set number of cell divisions like most other cells. Lacks’ family did not know about the continued existence of her cells for many years or receive any of the massive profits generated by the commercialization of the cells. As is true of Henrietta Lacks’ cells, the blood of HeLa that is sold by LifeGen without her consent does not benefit the owner of the blood or her family. Instead, HeLa’s blood is exploited to enrich LifeGen and those wealthy enough to afford her blood. Through this parallel, Okorafor emphasizes LifeGen’s desire to push boundaries and profit from discoveries as well as LifeGen’s disregard for the agency and wellbeing of those it exploits. The parallel also serves to emphasize that LifeGen’s practices are extrapolated from real-life examples, not an extreme projection of a future radically different from our present.

Though the example of Henrietta Lacks is widely known, many more abuses have occurred that are less recognized, both publicly and within the medical profession itself. *Medical Apartheid* (2006) by Harriet A. Washington gives an extensive history of the medical abuses suffered by African Americans beyond the infamous few. The introduction summarizes some of these:

These subjects were given experimental vaccines known to have unacceptably high lethality, were enrolled in experiments without their consent or knowledge, were

subjected to surreptitious surgical and medical procedures while unconscious, injected with toxic substances, deliberately monitored rather than treated from deadly ailments, excluded from lifesaving treatments, or secretly farmed for sera or tissue that were used to perfect technologies such as infectious-disease tests. (6)

The methods used by LifeGen to create speciMen reflect this history. The speciMen do not consent to the procedures done to them, and many of them do not survive the experiments. Even after being turned into speciMen, they are subjected to further experimentation, as illustrated by Phoenix's experience mentioned above (66). Another explicit connection is LifeGen's Tower 4. In Tower 4, there are several African children whose body parts grow back after being removed. These children's "organs [are] continually harvested and sent to whoever could pay the highest amount" (198). Phoenix wonders, "How many Americans walked around with fresh young organs harvested or grown from the cells of these children who could regenerate what was taken from them?" (198). This mirrors real disparities in medical treatments between races. An illustrative example is that Washington describes noticing the difference in treatment plans for two men suffering kidney failure. One man's records documented "reams of tests and assessments entailed in finding him a matching kidney for transplant" (14). The other man's file noted that he was black on "[n]early every page" and "indicated that the medical staff's plans for him were not to secure a transplant but to help him 'prepare for his imminent demise'" (14). Washington mentioned her concerns that the difference in treatment was related to race to an acquaintance who was an African American nephrology unit ward clerk. The acquaintance told her, "Girl, black people don't *get* organs; they *give* organs," and listed "instance after instance of overt bias" in that particular hospital (15). Okorafor's depiction of similar abuses in the near future highlights that these abuses have not disappeared, that the medical field is still operating with racial bias, and suggests that such discriminatory practices are likely to continue.

As the genesis of the idea for *The Book of Phoenix* makes clear, the novel also functions as a critique of the modern prison industrial complex and its grounding in racism. The incident

that gave Nnedi Okorafor the idea for *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) illustrates how it intersects with the history of racism in the United States. One of her black students from Chicago State University, Jermaine Reed, had grown up in “one of Chicago’s most infamous ‘projects’” (“Writing Rage” 21), but did not have a police record, unlike many others from the same area. Unfortunately, Jermaine “got into an altercation with an ex-friend” and “was beaten bloody in front of a crowd who did not help” (22). Nearby law enforcement did not step in, either. Jermaine tried run away but was caught and strangled. He finally used his gun to defend himself, non-fatally shooting his attacker. This altercation landed him in jail, where Okorafor visited him. After talking to him, Okorafor “left that room angry. He’d managed to survive the projects, gotten through his B.A., was on his way to a master’s and somehow the system and his own upbringing had still gotten him” (23). She was worried about his future, writing that “[t]here is nothing rehabilitative about the American prison system. When one is jailed, the purpose is to destroy that person, not rehabilitate him or her. And most of those people are black and male” (23). This experience, Okorafor explains, was the genesis of *The Book of Phoenix*:

As for me, weeks after that night, I began to imagine an American city in the very near future. Maybe fifty years from now. In the downtown area of this big city was a tower (one that was similar to the Cook County Jail downtown, near the Sears Tower).

This future tower was full of people who’d been genetically created, born or raised there, and were watched closely by military security called the Big Eyes. The genetically created people in the tower did not know what freedom was because they had never been free. These people were not feared. Most of them were black, all of them were being used, and some of them were dangerous.

And one of the most dangerous was about to decide to seek freedom. (24)

In an act of transformative resistance, Okorafor uses science fiction to reimagine the narrative of her student in a way that provides him with more power than his real-life situation affords him. This both resists the lack of diversity in sf and resists readers’ perceptions by taking advantage of the defamiliarization provided by the sf setting. Okorafor’s decision to make the protagonist

female, unlike her male student, warrants further analysis, but that is beyond the focus of my analysis.

At the start of her narrative, Phoenix explains that Tower 7 is “a prison” that contains “many...manipulated, enhanced, deformed, crippled people...from parts of Africa” (7; 40). The facility Vera is sent to by LifeGen is described by Phoenix as “[t]he largest jail in the world. Where you were not just a patient, you were an inmate” (203). Extrapolating from the current disproportionate incarceration rates for racial minorities, ninety percent of this facility’s inmates are African American. In 2007, “black males constituted roughly 39 percent of incarcerated males in state, federal, and local prisons or jails, though representing only 12 percent of the total adult male population” (Bobo and Thompson 327-328). Bobo and Thompson point out that “[a]t a minimum it is essential to recognize that any evidence of differential black involvement with crime reflects the interplay of key economic, political, and cultural factors” (330). Also, often the rates of crimes are very similar for blacks and white, such the use of illegal drugs, but the incarceration rates are much higher for African Americans (333). The high rates of incarceration for blacks combined with the rise of private prisons and the use of convict labor combines to make “a continuation of the legacy of slavery and the exploitation of African people in America” (Weaver and Purcell 353).

As *The Book of Phoenix* makes clear, “[r]acism and the underlying profit motive are the reoccurring themes in most forms of forced labor in America” (Weaver and Purcell 354). As with the novel’s connections to the history of medical abuse and exploitation, LifeGen’s connections to the industrial prison complex highlight that the inequality of our current system. Exposing the exploitation of medical and prison systems and their appalling racism, the novel forces the reader to become aware of the necessity for further progress towards equality.

LOOTING AFRICA

Thus far I have mostly focused on racism and exploitation in the U.S., but *The Book of Phoenix* also critiques the effects of colonialism on Africa through LifeGen and Mmuo's life in Nigeria before he became a speciMen. LifeGen has similarities to both European colonial powers and modern global corporations that have used the people and resources of Africa for their own gain. Patrick Bond lists some examples of exploitation in his book *Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation*:

trade by force dating back centuries; slavery that uprooted and dispossessed around 12 million Africans; land grabs; vicious taxation schemes; precious metals spirited away; [...] the nineteenth-century emergence of racist ideologies to justify colonialism; [...] wars catalysed by mineral searches and offshoot violence such as witnessed in blood diamonds and coltan (colombo-tantelite, a crucial component of cell phones and computer chips); [...] societies used as guinea pigs in the latest corporate pharmaceutical test...and the list could continue. (2)

LifeGen's abduction of Africans to make speciMen and their framing of speciMen as sub-human, as has already been discussed, has significant parallels to slavery and colonialism. The medical experiments done on the speciMen connect not just to experiments done on African Americans, but to pharmaceutical exploitation of African societies as well. LifeGen's employees who come to Wulugu, Ghana, "swagger about the village, buying produce, purchasing the best bicycles," and taking advantage of girls from poor families who put up with being mistreated for a little bit of money (70). They are there because of an alien seed that affects the people and plants in the town, searching for unique people to turn into speciMen or buying the exceptional shea products. Like colonizers and modern corporations who take the best for themselves and destabilize communities, LifeGen uses the small village as a source for their gain, creating conflict and tension in the village. Through this parallel, the novel highlights the fact that postcolonial societies are still influenced by neocolonialism. Independence from outright political control by foreign countries did not lead to a completely postcolonial situation. LifeGen

emphasizes the fact that Western nations and multinational corporations still exploit African nations.

Mmuo's tale of his life in Nigeria also calls attention to the exploitative practices of modern corporations and governments. Mmuo tells Phoenix about the Anansi Droids 419, "digital android killer soldiers...the size of dogs [that] looked like shiny silver spiders" (118). The Nigerian government developed them to prevent citizens from siphoning oil out of pipelines. Despite Nigeria being "one of the world's last leading producers of crude oil" the country had a "shortage of kerosene and vehicle fuel" (117). The Anansi Droids, funded by "Chevron, Shell and a few other oil companies" (118), guard the pipelines and tear apart anyone who even touches a pipeline. This situation is similar to what happened in Africa during the colonial period and continues to happen in today's neocolonial system. Walter Rodney describes how European colonialism took raw materials from African nations but restricted any sort of processing. Instead, raw materials were exported, and Africans had to import processed goods: "Sudanese and Ugandans grew cotton but imported manufactured cotton goods, Ivory Coast grew cocoa and imported tinned cocoa and chocolate" (443). This disparity has continued, as "African countries account[ed] for just 1% of global manufacturing" according to the 2013 report from the UN Conference on Trade and Development, despite having abundant natural resources (Obinyeluaku). Okorafor extrapolates the continuation of this issue with the Anansi Droids guarding the exportation of crude oil in a country running short on fuel. The Anansi Droids are another symbol of the corruption of corporations and government that put profits above the needs of citizens, a logical extrapolation of current oppressive policies that maim, poison, and kill Nigerians to the profit of multi-national oil companies.

By connecting LifeGen and other aspects of her world to historical systems of oppression, Okorafor is fulfilling what Grace L. Dillon, describing Indigenous futurism,

identifies as the “need to speak out and uncover situated historical moments...as a means of chronicling real events and of encouraging accountability” (223). The layered historical parallels of LifeGen’s practices reveal that the exploitation of people of color for profit that occurred in slavery and colonialism continued after abolition and the end of the colonial period in different forms that persist today. Through LifeGen, she makes it clear that the drive for progress and profit by any means results in racist systems that use humans as disposable resources. In doing so, she enacts a transformative resistance of science fiction, using the genre to critique the racist ideologies often implicitly supported by much Western sf and to provide a narrative that gives voice to the experiences of the people who have suffered from these exploitative systems.

THE BIG EYE IS WATCHING YOU: METHODS OF CONTROL IN *THE BOOK OF PHOENIX*

The various forms of racial exploitation discussed above are all maintained by similar methods of control: interpellation and physical force. Interpellation is an ideological process through which people are encouraged to accept the roles society envisions for them. Racial exploitation is made possible in part by dominant powers interpellating people of color as inferior. When this ideological method of control fails, dominant powers are quick to use physical violence to maintain exploitative systems. Okorafor depicts LifeGen Technologies as using these two techniques to control the speciMen. In doing so, she highlights the ways real-world systems function and extrapolates how technological progress might enhance the ability of dominant powers to exert control.

One of the main ways LifeGen interpellates the speciMen is referenced by the name the speciMen use for LifeGen: the Big Eye. The technology available to LifeGen allows them to constantly watch their creations through video surveillance, diagnostic chips, and tracking nanobots. Surveillance has been used as a method of control in a variety of situations, as

mentioned in the previous chapter. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault discusses the way power is exerted through Bentham's Panopticon design, a building designed to keep inhabitants in separate chambers that are constantly in view of a central tower. Foucault explains that the effect of this design is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). The inmates must be aware that they are continuously being watched, or at least be aware that they could be observed at any moment and have no way of knowing whether they are or not. The Panopticon functions not only as a way to observe those within it but can also "be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals. To experiment with medicines and monitor their effects. To try out different punishments on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the more effective ones" (203). This design can be adapted for prisons, hospitals, schools, workplaces, and more. It exerts power over the inhabitants by allowing almost anyone to operate the "machine" for a variety of purposes, by reducing the number of people required to keep control over the inhabitants, and by the constant surveillance creating pressure on the inhabitants even before acts are committed (206). Surveillance was utilized for colonial domination as well. Bill Ashcroft explains in *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001): "surveillance, or observation...implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point, it suggests the power to process and understand that which is seen, and it objectifies, and interpellates, the colonized subject in a way that fixes its identity in relation to the surveyor" (141). The colonial gaze established by surveillance positions the viewed as Other and without power.

By constantly monitoring the speciMen, LifeGen exerts power over them and attempts to fix their identity as non-human tools whose every action is the subject of research. The speciMen in Tower 7 know they are constantly being watched, which acts as a deterrent for them to do anything against LifeGen's wishes. Also, they are being watched not just to prevent actions

LifeGen deems unacceptable but also as research. Phoenix realizes that they observe every book she reads, and they placed a plant in her room to observe her effect on it, not out of any sense of kindness. The awareness that they are always under observation “induces ... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power,” as explained by Foucault. The speciMen have no privacy, no space not observed by LifeGen. Even their bodies are always monitored through their implanted diagnostic chips. In this way, LifeGen positions the speciMen as powerless objects whose only purpose is to provide information to the scientists that experiment on them. This discourages the speciMen from seeing themselves as having the ability to resist LifeGen, as evidenced by Phoenix’s complete lack of desire for rebellion for the first two years of her life. LifeGen teaches the speciMen to view themselves as mere specimen in a lab, constrained by the power of those who use observation to interpellate them.

Surveillance, then, creates “controlling images” of the speciMen, a concept described by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000). Collins describes a variety of “controlling images” used in contemporary society to justify the exploitation and oppression of Black women. These images function to situate Black women as “the ‘Others’ of society who can never really belong,” making them “strangers [who] threaten the moral and social order” (77). Though the specific controlling images LifeGen uses to control the speciMen are different from those Collins describes, they function in a similar way. LifeGen teaches Phoenix that she is an “abomination” and “dangerous” (7-8). She understands that the purpose of Tower 7, her home, is to create and contain abominations. Because of this, Phoenix initially does not want to leave the tower. Saeed expresses a wish to be normal, or even one of the “mild speciMen,” who can pass for regular people. Phoenix responds, “Mild speciMen aren’t special... That’s why the Big Eye release them out there. I’d never want that, I like who I am” (10). Phoenix accepts LifeGen’s controlling image of her as a dangerous, yet special, object that belongs to the Big

Eye, as that is all she has ever known. In doing so, she accepts her status as an “Other” who would threaten society if free, and therefore does not seek freedom. By interpellating Phoenix as an abomination, a non-human, a weapon, an object of research, LifeGen uses ideological control to supplement its use of physical violence.

Though ideological control is powerful, there are times when it is not enough to subdue resistance. At those times, like slavers, colonial powers, and prison guards, LifeGen uses outright violence to control the speciMen. For example, when Phoenix’s body heats up enough to destroy the diagnostics chip implanted under her fingernail, armed guards reach her within twenty seconds. Bumi, one of the doctors assigned to Phoenix, shoots her in the leg even though she is just standing there. Phoenix reflects, “I hadn’t been fighting. I wasn’t as dangerous as some of the other speciMen became when in some kind of distress. I wasn’t doing anything but standing there in confusion thinking about the fact that I was off the grid. Yet, she’d shot me” (17). This instance calls to mind inhumane punishments administered by slavers as well as police brutality and the murder of Africans and African Americans in colonies and modern-day America. When Phoenix escapes from her room, she is pursued by armed guards, who shoot her to death before she can leave the tower. When LifeGen finds her again in Ghana, they are willing to use violence on the innocent villagers in order to get her back, killing Kofi. The soldiers would have shot the angry villagers as well had Phoenix not convinced the villagers not to resist her capture. In the end, after Phoenix, Mmuo, and Saeed rescue the children from Tower 4, LifeGen finds them and kills Mmuo and the children, even though the children do not represent a threat to them. Like slavers, colonizers, modern-day police and military forces, and multi-national corporations, LifeGen is willing and capable of using deadly force to control or punish its “property.”

CONCLUSION

The Book of Phoenix depicts a combination of forms of exploitation and methods of control from different historical periods in the practices of LifeGen Technologies, using the distancing effect of a futuristic setting to reveal the persistence of the past into the present. Through LifeGen's amalgamation of varying types of exploitation and control, Okorafor argues that though the methods may vary, the underlying racist ideology behind slavery, colonialism, medical abuses, the prison industrial complex, and other types of exploitation is the same. Madhu Dubey writes that speculative fiction neo-slave narratives such as *Kindred* (1976) by Octavia Butler, *Stigmata* (1998) by Phyllis Alesia Perry, and *Blood Brothers* (1996) by Stephen Barnes "reveal the persistence of the past in the present" through their "temporal doublings...their gestures of simultaneous identification and dislocation" (791). *The Book of Phoenix* shows the current practices of the United States and global corporations are in fact still corrupted by systemic racism, still function under racist ideologies that serve to dehumanize and exploit people of color for profit.

Chapter Three: From the Ashes: Identity and Resistance in *The Book of Phoenix*

While the plot, setting, and characterizations of her novel expose racism in modern global corporations, the medical establishment, and legal systems, Okorafor also provides a resistant heroine who illustrates the power and agency of those living in oppressive systems. Phoenix resists LifeGen's attempts to interpellate her as a non-human weapon for their use. The apocalypse caused by Phoenix supports Okorafor's use of post-apocalyptic settings in *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010) to envision a postcolonial future. First, I examine how Phoenix overcomes LifeGen's attempts to interpellate her through the creation of a self-definition through loving relationships. This process exemplifies one of the marks of Indigenous futurism identified by James: "Indigenous recognition of the protagonists as whole persons can only happen within community, *in relationship* to other persons" (167, emphasis in original). Phoenix's ability to resurrect like the mythical phoenix was intended by LifeGen to be weaponized. Much of Phoenix's struggle comes from the attempt to embrace the full extent of her nature without accepting LifeGen's interpretation of her. I then examine how Phoenix draws on Igbo mythology, specifically the earth goddess Ani and the concept of abomination, in her creation of self-definition. She weaves Indigenous beliefs in with the scientific origin of her person, exemplifying a postcolonial hybridity and the Indigenous futurist characteristic of seeing "spiritual or supernatural power [as not] excluding the use of understanding of conventionally recognized sf technology" (James 166). Finally, I analyze the motif of apocalypse in *The Book of Phoenix* in relation to Okorafor's two post-apocalyptic novels, through which Okorafor highlights the extent of change necessary for a truly postcolonial world order to be achieved.

THE SELF IN RELATIONSHIP: COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE

Phoenix's journey towards a self-definition that is not based on LifeGen's definition of her is supported by her significant relationships. As James argues in her study of Indigenous futurism, positioning the protagonists "as not *only* girls learning to navigate [a crush] but also as daughters, older sisters, and community members asks readers to imagine identity-anchoring relationships as not always those of romantic love" (167). Romantic relationships are also a part of Indigenous futurism, but the relationships are not there just to cause drama. The romantic partner is "an additional person working toward the ultimate good of the heroine's community, someone else who shares her vision and can help support her purpose" (168). Phoenix's relationships with her lovers and her surrogate family members are strong influences on her self-definition and her purpose. Okorafor's inclusion of these relationships reflects the common practice of Black women writers treating "relationships within family and community, between men and women, and among women...as complex and significant" (Collins 115). Black feminist thought holds that "[s]elf is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from other. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community...Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions" (Collins 124-5). Phoenix exemplifies this Black feminist understanding of the self in community by drawing on her close relationships to inform her self-definition rather than seeing herself in terms of opposition to LifeGen.

For the first two years of her life, Phoenix views herself as "an abomination" whose home is Tower 7. LifeGen Technologies (referred to by Phoenix as the Big Eye) created Phoenix as one of their experiments to be a weapon, planning to study her and use her if possible. They did not treat her as human, instead raising her "like an android" (147). Saeed, her closest friend and lover, expresses a wish to be normal, or even one of the "mild speciMen," who are able to

pass for regular people. Phoenix responds, “Mild speciMen aren’t special... That’s why the Big Eye release them out there. I’d never want that, I like who I am” (10). Phoenix accepts her status as a dangerous, yet special, object that belongs to LifeGen, as that is all she has ever known. In doing so, she accepts her status as an “Other” who would threaten society if free.

It takes Saeed’s prompting for her to fully realize she is a prisoner, a slave. He asks her, “why don’t you feel rebellion in your heart? Don’t you ever dream of getting out of here? Away from all the Big Eye?” (10). Though Phoenix is confused by his questions at first, later that night she realizes, “I *did* wish to get out of the tower and see the world, be away from the Big Eye. I *did* want to see those things that I saw in all the books I read” (11). This desire fully blossoms after Phoenix is told that Saeed is dead. She thinks, “I wanted to go outside. Saeed had escaped by dying. I wanted to escape, too. If he wasn’t happy here, then neither was I” (14). (Her seeing Saeed’s death as an escape calls to mind the Africans who jumped ship during the Middle Passage, choosing to die rather than face enslavement, and the view of some slaves that saw “the grave/ [as] The only refuge for the slave, / Who mourns for liberty” (Horton)). Phoenix reaches the first and second phases of slave narratives identified by identified by Frances Smith Foster, awareness of what it means to be a slave and the desire to be free, through a combination of books (recalling the immense value placed on literacy by slave narratives) and her relationship with Saeed. She realizes that she is in effect a slave and rejects LifeGen’s definition of her as something that must be contained and kept separate from the rest of the world. Phoenix must begin to define herself, relying on her own understanding and the help of supportive relationships, rather than accept how LifeGen sees her in order to challenge their power and control, but once she does, she moves to the third phase – escape.

Though Phoenix escapes from LifeGen’s physical custody twice, she must also escape its pernicious influence on her identity. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes “the importance of self-

definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind” and explains that “constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important” (123; 110-11). As mentioned, her escape from Tower 7 is precipitated by her refusal to accept their view of her as simply an object for study. However, “decolonizing the mind” is more difficult than a single decision. The effects of the dehumanization caused by slavery and colonialism are insidious and take time and effort to remove. An essential part of this struggle to create a self-definition that resist the controlling definition of a colonizing power is community. Patricia Hill Collins explains that “[s]elf is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community” (124). This feminist approach allows one to avoid “defining self in opposition to others,” instead using “the connectedness among individuals [to provide] ... deeper, more meaningful self-definitions” (125). If Phoenix merely defines herself in opposition to LifeGen, she will still be profoundly influenced by them, just as the oppositional resistance discussed by Bill Ashcroft remains within the colonial binary. By focusing on her relationship to others, especially Saeed, Kofi, Mmuo, Seven, and Vera, Phoenix is able to create a richer self-definition, one that helps her fully embrace her whole self. LifeGen sees Phoenix as a non-human weapon, but her fuller self-definition also embraces her connection to humanity and her connection to rebirth.

Phoenix’s struggle to see herself as part of humanity is crucial, since otherwise she would be only a tool for LifeGen’s use, an object, not a person. For example, when Phoenix is flying above the ship on the way to Tower 4 on the Virgin Islands, she finds that “it [is] easy to be that which was separate from anything alive” (159). She has to keep reminding herself to stay with the ship because she had “become Other up there” (160), a feeling based on the historical othering of people of color that occurred in slavery and colonialism, and the motif in science

fiction of artificial humans acting as racial metaphors. It is difficult for her to retain a sense of agency and purpose when she feels separate from humanity. When she feels disconnected, she becomes tempted to drift away, to stop resisting what LifeGen is doing. Her relationship with Mmuo and the reminder of community is what helps her come back to the purpose she has chosen for herself. Mmuo speaking to her through the nanomites he puts in her body “always manage[s] to bring [her] back to [her]self,” and once she lands on the ship, “the general smell that human beings give off when in a community [reminds her of] the burning, rolling, vibrating ball of heat inside [her]” that is her drive for justice against LifeGen (160). Her abilities to slip through time and space and to regenerate from death would most likely allow her to continue to escape from LifeGen, but she is not the only person affected by the corporation. LifeGen’s practices affect everyone on the planet, in various degrees. Phoenix’s transformative resistance to LifeGen flows from her connection to the others harmed by LifeGen, and she is able to remain focused on her purpose when she is reminded of that connection.

The acceptance of others helps Phoenix see her connection to humanity despite her unusual aspects. In Ghana, Phoenix becomes part of a community for the first time. Whereas LifeGen saw her only as a specimen for research, a means to an end, the people of Wulugu see her as a person. Phoenix returns the alien seed given to her by The Backbone (a giant, alien, sentient tree grown in Tower 7 that remained after the destruction of the tower) to Wulugu. The seed increases the health and growth of the plants in the village, bringing prosperity. Though the villagers do not know exactly what causes the growth, they understand that Phoenix has something to do with it, and in return, they build her a house, help her grow a garden, and include her in “meetings, marriages, parties, and burials” (62). This mutually-beneficial relationship stands in stark contrast to the exploitative relationship LifeGen has with the speciMen. Within this context, Kofi, whom Phoenix loves, helps her see herself as something

other than an unnatural non-human. After LifeGen destroys her home, Phoenix focuses on her difference from others: “I had no family. I was created in a lab. I was an ABO, an ‘accelerated biological organism’...I had no history” (77). But when talking to Kofi soon after, he tells her that wings are “so natural” and they “belong” on her, also describing her as “a work of art” and “God’s creature” (80). His words and his acceptance and even admiration of her difference lead her to realize “that [she], too, was an earthling. That [she] belonged here. [She] belonged” (81). Far from being a non-human tool of LifeGen, Phoenix is a part of humanity, connected to others despite her differences. She can be accepted into a community as a member, not as a subject for experiments or as a tool.

Phoenix and Saeed’s mutual love is another critical influence in her self-definition as connected to life and humanity. He sees her as beautiful and good, countering the image from LifeGen of her being an abomination. He tells Phoenix, “When they made you...[s]omething good was touching their minds” (122). Swimming with Saeed in the ocean at the Virgin Islands, Phoenix thinks, “It was the happiest moment in my life. There was sunshine pouring through me. Sunshine of the morning, not sunset. Life, not death” (173). With Saeed, Phoenix sees herself as more than a specimen made to be a weapon. Though like the mythical phoenix she is strongly connected to death, she is connected to life as well. Death leads to new life. This is symbolized in the vision Phoenix has when she and Saeed make love in the ocean. During an act that can lead to new life, Phoenix sees “the night on fire” and feels that “the whole world around [her] was aflame” (173), foreshadowing her later decision to destroy the world being based largely on her love for others and anger at what LifeGen has done to them.

In addition to her lovers and her brother, Phoenix finds parental figures to replace LifeGen, following the trope of problematic parentage in postcolonial literature, in which “the genealogical bloodlines of transmission are frequently delegitimized by multiple ancestral

legacies, usually but not always initiated by imperialism” (Thieme 8). LifeGen, like the colonizer father in many postcolonial texts, attempts to interpellate Phoenix into the image it desires her to bear. Thus, Phoenix must “claim a space for herself...through affiliative impulse rather than filiative acceptance” (Thieme 11). After Phoenix frees Seven from the tower, he acts as a sort of father figure to Phoenix, protecting her from LifeGen on multiple occasions and teaching her more about her abilities. She describes his voice as fatherly on one occasion (105), and she later wonders if the feelings of relief and safety he brings are “what having a ‘father’ felt like” (150). Seven encourages her to embrace both the life and death in her nature, telling her “You can live and die to live and die again. You are speciMen, beacon, and reaper, life and death, hope and redemption” (95). The nature of a phoenix emphasizes the connection between life and death. Rather than being binary opposites, they are inextricably intertwined. The death of a phoenix leads to new life. He also tells her, “You are change, Phoenix. Wherever you go, you bring revolution” (180). His death has a strong impact on Phoenix, who sees the televised coverage of a mob killing him in order to reach The Backbone to cut it down. She “[feels] something break in [her]” as she watches (197). She describes the event as “the death of humanity... the slaughter of an angel” (197). His death reinforces her understanding of the corrupting effects LifeGen has on humanity.

The other parental figure Phoenix claims is the woman who bore her. Though they are not biologically related, Phoenix chooses to embrace Vera as her mother rather than the scientists who created and raised her, rejecting the scientists’ intentions behind her creation—for her to be a tool exploited for profit. By identifying with Vera, Phoenix reinforces her humanity. Phoenix visits Vera at a crucial juncture in the story, after the events at Tower 4. She has just been considering the extent of LifeGen’s corrupt influence, from the “many Americans walk[ing] around with fresh young organs harvested or grown from the cells of these children who could

regenerate what was stolen from them” and who have lost the ability to speak (198), to the “filthy world riddled with the drinkers of HeLa’s blood; these people would live forever, infecting the world to its very soul” (199). This depiction of abusive medical procedures and immortality coming from a vampiric stealing of blood emphasizes the parasitic nature of LifeGen and racial exploitation. She is struggling to find her place between the poles of life and death, trying “to focus on life” (199), but feeling a strong urge to “[k]ill everything...Let it all start from the beginning. In the right way” (199). It is in this mindset that she goes to see Vera. Though Vera did not conceive Phoenix, she “pushed [her] into the world,” “was willing to die for [her],” and Phoenix claims her as her mother (205). She finds out that, contrary to what she had been told, Vera was the one who named her Phoenix, not LifeGen. Lynette James writes, “In Indigenous futurism naming is an expression of power and solidarity, the claiming of the rights and responsibilities that help make characters heroines in the first place” (161). Discovering that her name did not come from LifeGen encourages Phoenix to embrace her nature and the rights and responsibilities that come from who she is. She is further spurred to embrace the destructive aspect of a phoenix by the death of Vera, who succumbs to the cancer she contracted from bearing the radioactive Phoenix, and Phoenix’s subsequent discovery that people from LifeGen captured Saeed and killed Mmuo and the children from Tower 4. Phoenix thinks, “This would always happen. I couldn’t save my own mother. All I could bring her was death. Harbinger. Reaper. It was in my DNA” (214). Phoenix finally enacts the nature of a phoenix, that of rebirth from destruction, on a global scale. Her passion for justice, born from her love for others, erupts. True to the nature recognized by her mother, that of a phoenix whose death brings life, she scorches the earth and boils away the oceans in order to “wipe the slate clean” and “[l]et that which had been written all be rewritten” (221). This apocalypse is further analyzed in the following sections.

PURIFICATION BY FIRE: ANI, *NSO ALA*, AND LIFE GEN

Another way Okorafor adds to the portrayal of Phoenix as a transformative heroine is her use of Igbo cosmology, specifically the earth goddess Ani (also call Ala). Phoenix embraces Indigenous ways of knowing as a means to understand herself and LifeGen. Phoenix describes her decision to destroy the world as doing Ani's will. She explains, "When I look deep into my DNA, I see that I know [Ani's] story. I simply have to speak it from my heart and soul" (219). The story she tells is that Ani looked at the world of "sand and dry trees" and created water, which is life (219). Ani then decided to rest for many years before creating sunshine. While she rested, humans advanced to the point where they "built juju-working machines. They fought and invented amongst themselves. They bent and twisted Ani's sand, water, sky, and air. They took her creatures and changed them. They sought to make themselves just like Ani: immortal, all powerful manipulators of earth's lands" (220). When Ani finished resting, she turned over and saw what the humans had done and was horrified. She then "reached into the stars and pulled a sun to the land" (220). Phoenix says, "I am that sun. I am Ani's soldier. I do her will. Ani has asked me to wipe the slate clean" (220). Far from choosing to fulfil LifeGen's design for her as a weapon, Phoenix connects her abilities with her African heritage to resist what LifeGen is doing.

Phoenix's linking of herself to Ani/Ala specifically is significant to her understanding of LifeGen's abominations. In traditional Igbo religion, "the earth and its abstract form which they call *ala* represent the fundamental source of identity and solidarity...[E]very stage of community autonomy, identity, and solidarity in this sociocultural set up is based on certain allegiance to *ala* as the meaning of group existence" (Aguwa 540). Because of the connection between the earth and the community, the earth goddess, Ani or Ala, "inspires, shapes, and fosters group identity especially through ethical determinations and pollution avoidances" (Aguwa 541). In other words, Ani is the Igbo deity most closely connected to morality. Serious moral offenses affect

the individual who committed the offense, the community as a whole, and the community's relationship with Ani. The most serious moral offenses are termed *nso ala* or *nso ani*, meaning "what Earth abhors" (Okafor 107). These are seen as abominations that are "an offence against the Earth-force" (Okafor 107) and will bring Ani's wrath on the community unless the proper sacrifices are made. Those who commit *nso ani* are "universally regarded as unfit to continue to share the Earth's benefits, and thereby the company of his fellow-men. He [is] therefore executed, with the unanimous approval of his community including his closest relations, as the only possible propitiation in such circumstances" (107). Ikenga-Metuh describes abominations as being of three different types of instances: "serious personal and moral crimes according to Igbo morality," such as incest, murder, suicide, and abortion; "abnormal and unnatural behaviour by human beings," such as bearing twins and death from certain diseases; and "abnormal and unnatural acts of animals," such as animals only bearing one young (8). Aguwa explains that for certain abominations, "the rite of purification involves the elimination of the offending subject" (541). In these cases, "the agents have not conformed themselves to the pattern being natural to them. Their elimination is a check against possible escalation of irregularities and disorder" (542).

The Igbo concept of abomination is used to describe everything LifeGen does. LifeGen creates the SpeciMen through "advanced and aggressive genetic manipulation and cloning" (Okorafor 8) as well as through melding humans with machines. Some, like Phoenix, are designed before birth. Others, like Saeed, are brought in and altered. Phoenix explains that the inventions of LifeGen, even those such as methods of combating climate change and a cure for AIDS, come from abomination. LifeGen received a great deal of funding after their first success, a girl they named Lucy. They believed she "was a traceable direct descendant of 'Mitochondrial Eve' and thus carried the complete genetic blueprint of the entire human race" (Okorafor 97).

They cloned her and attempted to make her immortal by “reprogramming her DNA to not age” (97). They used the funding to make some good things, but their main drive was “[w]eapons, the quest for immortality, how far could [they] go” (98). When freeing the speciMen in Tower 4, Phoenix learns “there were seven filthy rich, corrupt LifeGen investors who’d made themselves immortal by blending HeLa’s blood with theirs” (188). LifeGen’s entire way of operating is *nso ani*. They do not hesitate to kill in pursuit of their goals, and, perhaps more seriously, they exploit and abuse humans, forcing their bodies to change in unnatural ways. Though the fictional experiments and creations of LifeGen are not specifically categorized as abominations in traditional Igbo religion, which has no concept of such futuristic possibilities, the Igbo understanding of abomination is that which is unnatural, abnormal, and immoral. LifeGen’s exploitation of people is immoral, and their experiments on people create speciMen, who have characteristics and abilities that do not naturally occur in humans.

Phoenix’s positioning of herself as doing Ani’s will helps explain her decision to cause an apocalypse. Though part of her decision is her pain over losing those close to her because of LifeGen, it also comes from her understanding of the harm LifeGen does globally. Earlier, Phoenix tells the others, “What they are doing in the towers will be the end of humanity if it is not stopped. We are living in darkness and, I swear to you, one day the Author of All Things will pull a star to this planet to burn all the evil away, taking all the good with it...But if we bring down the towers, maybe this will not happen” (108). (The Author of All Things is how Saeed refers to God. Later, Phoenix tells Saeed that Ani is the sister of the Author of All Things). Shortly after this, Saeed explains that he and Mmuo had been planning to escape Tower 7 and do something about the towers before his supposed death. He says, “The towers have changed *life*. Not just in the States but all over the world, I suspect. You know this more than me, but I sense it. All the cures, inventions and enhancements have changed so much” (127). Seven also speaks

to this when he asks Phoenix why she wants to destroy the towers before she, Saeed, and Mmuo go to Tower 4. He tells her, “All things are a part of The Whole...All things can heal. All things have a spirit...But the towers are violating all that is natural, they are endangering life on earth in its totality—animal, plant, soil, sand, iron, stone, and sky” (152). This reflects the Indigenous futurist inclusion of Indigenous practices that “reenergize the natural environment while improving the interconnected relationships among all persons (animal, human, spirit, and even machine)” (Dillon, qtd. in James 168). Seven, in line with Indigenous perspectives that recognize the rights of non-human persons, includes the earth itself as an entity that is affected by LifeGen.

Ani is deeply connected to the health of the people as a community. LifeGen is not only affecting particular people’s lives, but also causing changes in the very nature of society and life. Phoenix realizes as well that the existence of seven immortal men will end up having profound effects on society. These men were already wealthy and powerful enough to spend billions on HeLa’s blood and still have billions left. That wealth and power combined with immortality will allow them to control the world. And true to Igbo religious requirements, the purification of the world involves the removal of the abomination. Phoenix’s act of worldwide destruction is largely to remove the abominations perpetuated by LifeGen and to prevent further corruption.

TO WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN

At various times throughout the novel, Phoenix describes herself as a villain. The apocalypse she causes seems to support this self-description, as heroes and heroines typically fight to save the world from destruction. However, though Phoenix’s action has catastrophic effects, I do not think the label “villain” accurately captures the complexity of her decision.

Phoenix understands that the only way to deal with LifeGen’s oppression is the massive violence of an apocalypse. The previous chapter explored in detail the pervasiveness of LifeGen’s

exploitation and its basis in historical and current systems. As mentioned above in this chapter, Phoenix comes to realize that LifeGen's influence has already affected society and will continue to corrupt the world. The systems represented by LifeGen do not offer any avenue to a meaningful freedom, as can be seen by analyzing the figure of the fugitive in slave narratives, represented by Phoenix and the other escaped speciMen in this novel. The fugitive "reveals that the freedom of the politically recognized subject is a freedom conditioned and determined to be in accordance with the being of such a subject" (Kawash 56). Kawash turns to the fugitive to find hints of another kind of freedom, one that is not limited. However, fugitivity does not provide an alternative freedom; rather, it disrupts the modern, liberal idea of freedom. Fugitivity cannot provide an alternative since it is an unsustainable space, as the "possible ends...are death, captivity, or freedom" (81). Though the fugitive is no longer the property of another, he or she is not yet a person, "but the price of occupying this (non)place between master and slave is silence, invisibility, and placelessness" (50). Whereas slaves were viewed to be unfit for freedom on account of their race, the speciMen are viewed as property on account of the modifications made to their bodies by LifeGen. Many of the speciMen were once people seen as subjects by the law, but LifeGen removed them from the authority of the law by bringing them into LifeGen's control. LifeGen has enough power and money that they are able to operate outside the law. Once made speciMen, they have no route to regain personhood. While slaves could escape to a free land and/or purchase their freedom, the novel gives no hint of a method by which speciMen can obtain their freedom. LifeGen has a global reach, so there is no geographical location to which speciMen can escape. There is no way for speciMen to buy their freedom, nor for anyone to buy it for them. Plus, many of them have visible physical modifications that would make it impossible for them to blend in with unmodified humans. Thus, speciMen must either remain like slaves or become permanent fugitives, which, as Kawash revealed, is an unsustainable state.

Phoenix learns this through her own experience as a fugitive who is recaptured by LifeGen and through her realization that LifeGen's influence, which will only grow due to the men made immortal by HeLa's blood, has irrevocably altered society. LifeGen's reach is so pervasive that there is no avenue to even the limited freedom of modern, liberal subject for speciMen. Remaining a fugitive is not an option, as it entails a restriction and silencing of one's voice. Rather than remain silent, and to create a chance for a truer freedom, Phoenix causes an apocalypse that will destroy the systems of oppression and allow society to begin anew.

Phoenix's reasoning supports Okorafor's view of apocalypse in her two post-apocalyptic novels in the same universe, *The Shadow Speaker* and *Who Fears Death*. In discussing *The Shadow Speaker*, Joshua Yu Burnett writes, "This new Niger is postcolonial in reality, not just aspiration, and is also post-apocalyptic in the sense that its new and radically changed reality has been created by, and could only be created by, some cataclysmic event in the past that destroyed the old order" (139). Okorafor's view seems to be that the current systemic oppression cannot be overcome except through catastrophic change. The radical disruption caused by the apocalypse is what allows for a chance at a truly postcolonial society. As Yu Burnett points out, though, Okorafor does not suggest that a post-apocalyptic world is automatically free from oppression. They are locations "where African nations are politically and culturally independent in meaningful ways" (134), there is still danger and prejudice in the societies of *The Shadow Speaker* and *Who Fears Death*. Okorafor thus does not present violence as a final solution. Through these two post-apocalyptic novels, Okorafor argues that "violence alone cannot accomplish these things. Ideological transformation must accompany violence" (Yu Burnett 141). Like Phoenix who dies and resurrects more powerful than before, the systems of the past and present must be removed in order for the world to make meaningful progress.

CONCLUSION

Thus, though Phoenix does fulfill her design as a weapon created by LifeGen, she goes beyond its purpose for her. She takes the abilities given to her by LifeGen and repurposes them for her own goals. In her words, “They made me a villain. But these people whom I love, they help me to make myself more. I have purpose. I go beyond that which I was made for” (109). In the end, her solution to the problem of LifeGen and the immortal men comes from her affirmation of herself as Phoenix, a force for both death and resurrection. She forges this self-definition through her relationships with others and through a connection to Ani. Phoenix’s destruction of the world comes from her love for others and the pain brought by their loss as well as her desire for justice. Collins points out the connection between love and justice in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s work, which “suggest[s] that love is active, dynamic, and determined and generates the motive and drive for justice” (186). Phoenix’s love of those harmed by LifeGen drives her towards justice, towards wiping the slate clean of the wrongs they have perpetuated. By removing the colonizing power of LifeGen and the immortal men, she reaches the fourth stage of slave narratives identified by Frances Smith Foster, freedom obtained, and clears the way for the possibility of social change.

Through Phoenix, Okorafor suggests principles for resisting the exploitation and oppression occurring today. One cannot go it alone, concentrating only on fighting the other side. Loving relationships with others are essential to fully resisting systemic injustice. Disconnecting from community would be an acceptance of the dehumanizing effects of racism and neocolonialism. Within community, however, one can find a definition that embraces one’s whole self as well as a drive for justice. There must be a recognition of which systems are too broken to fix and must be destroyed to clear the way for a new beginning, and that recognition cannot come from dominant Western ideology alone. The ideologies represented by LifeGen,

those of racial exploitation as a means to the end of “progress” and profit, are upheld by numerous Western systems. The perspectives of those represented by Phoenix are vital for acknowledging the flaws in systems and envisioning a way forward. Okorafor uses the cognitive estrangement of science fiction, combined with the counterhegemonic discourse of Indigenous futurism and meta-slavery narratives, to tell a story that imagines a future that critiques our present.

Conclusion

Ambelin Kwaymullina writes that she “walk[s] in many worlds” that are each “shaped by stories, including the worlds of the things that have been and those of the things that are yet to be” (“Walking”). Stories are more than an entertaining way to pass the time; they are intimately involved in every aspect of life, influencing what we believe, how we feel, how we act, from individuals to institutions. Celu Amberstone writes that Indigenous speculative fiction “is alive with new possibilities inspired by our cultural heritage, fiction that can offer new insights to our troubled world. As Indigenous peoples, we understand that the spectres of colonialism and corporate greed still haunt Earth’s future. It is our responsibility to offer humanity a new vision of the universe” (qtd. in Kwaymullina “Guest of Honor”).

The Book of Phoenix by Nnedi Okorafor highlights these specters haunting Earth’s future and offers a story of resistance. This story challenges hegemonic ideologies that support the erasure and exploitation of people of color, ideologies going back to colonialism and slavery and continuing to today in the forms of medical exploitation and inequality, the modern industrial prison complex, neocolonial control by global corporations. These ideologies have been supported by popular culture’s poor representation of people of color, both by its overall lack of representation and its reinforcement of stereotypes. *The Book of Phoenix* uses Indigenous futurism and meta-slavery narrative forms in order to transformatively resist these ideologies and their presence in science fiction. Science fiction developed from narrative forms that often explicitly and implicitly supported colonial ideologies, and the presence of these ideologies remains in much of present-day sf. Okorafor uses science fiction as “an excellent vehicle for approaching taboo and socially-relevant yet overdone topics in new ways” (Okorafor “African Science Fiction”), writing against the erasure of marginalized voices in sf and oppressive ideologies. Through the fictional LifeGen Technologies, Okorafor draws attention to the

continuation of the racist ideologies that informed slavery and colonialism into today's systems, thus highlighting the modern exploitation of people of color. The character of Phoenix provides an example of ways to resist hegemonic ideologies, such as community, self-definition, and non-Western ways of viewing the world. In the end, though, Okorafor argues that these may not be enough. The pervasiveness and strength of exploitative systems requires a complete removal of those systems in order to allow for the chance at progress. Phoenix recognizes this and chooses to "wipe the slate clean" in order to secure the possibility of a new, more just world order. I do not believe Okorafor is calling for a literal apocalypse like the one Phoenix causes. Instead, Okorafor is showing the scale of change that would be necessary to disrupt the current systemic problems within our institutional power structures. The systems we have now, like LifeGen Technologies, are too corrupt to be rehabilitated. Okorafor is calling for the destruction of corrupt systems so that new life, a new way of doing things, can take hold. The frame story of *The Book of Phoenix*, though, makes it clear that even a completely clean slate will not guarantee more equality. The world after Phoenix's apocalypse still has oppression. It takes much struggle and demanding work to create a better world.

My analysis of *The Book of Phoenix* is by no means exhaustive. Much more study remains to be done on themes, symbolism, connections to other works by Okorafor, and the influence of postcolonialism, feminism, and other literary traditions on the novel. Okorafor's work is also a significant contribution to the growing number of authors writing postcolonial speculative fiction. These authors are creating powerful stories that do serious ideological work. Much more critical work is needed to analyze and understand the counterhegemonic techniques and models being constructed by all of these authors, so that we may better "create the futures of our dreams and not our nightmares" (Kwaymullina "Guest of Honor")

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